

T S ELIOT SOCIETY

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Exchanges...

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This poster, Famous People 1930-1955, was produced for schools, and gives some indication of the public status Eliot shared in his later life. But how many of the other 'famous people' of the period can you still identify? Answers in Envoi on page 8.

Editorial

As I write this in mid-January, it is as if Christina Rossetti's 'In the bleak midwinter' is being acted out in the UK. After the wettest Autumn for years, we now have a midwinter freeze such as we haven't experienced for ages. Walking in the countryside, I find earth truly is 'hard as iron', and water 'like a stone'. Our poets record life for us, put into memorable words people's shared experiences, making poetry one of the great human arts.

The clarity and exactness of Rossetti's words in her moving hymn remind us of the strength of the Victorian poetic tradition, to which Eliot's verse is sometimes set up as some kind of reaction, or opposition. But it's not a hard task to find in his work clearly identifiable aspects of the poetic tradition which he might be assumed to have thrown off. For the individual talent is – as he wrote – always part of an ongoing tradition, by which it is shaped, and which in turn it helps to shape. That allusion to one of Eliot's most significant essays might, perhaps, act as a reminder to contributors to *Exchanges* that we welcome pieces not only on Eliot's poetry, but also on his criticism and drama.

The centre-piece of this edition is Paul Keers's fascinating and important article on 'The Elder Statesman', linking aspects of that last of Eliot's plays with his personal life. Paul - the Society's Chair – explores in what is an introductory piece on this subject (a full-length academic essay is to follow) the ways in which the attitudes and behaviour of characters in 'The Elder Statesman' may throw light on Eliot's long-standing relationship with Emily Hale and its abrupt, final end with his marriage to his secretary Valerie Fletcher.

This edition of *Exchanges* also includes a miscellany of brief notes and responses – thanks to Simon Kershaw and Karen Christensen, and to a very old friend of mine who is an enthusiastic follower of Robert Hollingworth's vocal ensemble 'I Fagiolini' – who produced back in 2021 a remarkable piece of work on 'The Waste Land' featuring the actor Tamsin Greig. But we close on a further wintry note as I offer some reflections – with the assistance of Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue in their wonderful annotated edition of *The Poems of T. S. Eliot* - on the first of Eliot's 'Ariel Poems', 'Journey of the Magi': a chilly, unsettling poem if ever there was one.

As this edition was being prepared, the winner of the T S Eliot Prize for poetry 2023 was announced - Jason Allen-Paisant for his second collection, *Self-Portrait as Othello*. My copy is ordered, and a review and comment will appear in Spring's *Exchanges*. Meanwhile, keep warm and dry, if you can!

John Caperon

Editor

Exchanges is the quarterly newsletter of the T.S. Eliot Society (UK). If you would like to contribute or if you have queries or suggestions please contact the Editor direct at Exchanges@tseliotssociety.uk

‘The Elder Statesman’ – A New Perspective



The letters from TS Eliot to Emily Hale, together with Eliot’s sealed Statement, provide a new biographical perspective on Eliot’s last significant work, ‘The Elder Statesman’. A play which has received relatively little attention could now, it seems, have been an acknowledgment of the author’s past, a profoundly personal expiation, and both a confession and a confirmation to his new wife.

TS Eliot began work on ‘The Elder Statesman’ in 1955. It was his fourth ‘drawing room play’, and was to be his last major creative work. He had become something of a ‘statesman’ himself, a public figure awarded both the Nobel Prize and the Order of Merit; much of his time was occupied as a figurehead of publishing, giving speeches, and representing British culture and the Anglican church both at home and abroad.

Eliot’s secretary, then Valerie Fletcher, typed his initial drafts of ‘The Elder Statesman’ in 1955. It is not known when their relationship became romantic, but Eliot was to propose in late 1956. They married, in great secrecy, in January 1957, and the play received its Edinburgh Festival premiere in August 1958.

Few people would have known of the Emily Hale correspondence at the time, let alone how the relationship they record echoes one within ‘The Elder Statesman’. But the issue of his letters was clearly in Eliot’s mind while he was writing the play. The exchanges with Emily regarding the sealing of his letters at Princeton date from precisely this time, and reveal his concerns about their content. ‘My God!’, he writes to Emily in November 1956, when the Princeton Librarian enthused about the ‘bulk and richness’ of her bequest, ‘does this mean that a complete stranger, a professional librarian, is already reading letters which were composed for your eye alone? I seem to have heard of dying travellers in a desert, with the vultures starting to dismember them before the end. I feel somewhat like that.’

The letters to Emily reveal how Eliot saw himself by this time as a significant public figure. He had already adopted a very statesmanlike position in his refusal to divorce Vivienne for Emily: ‘I have become, for a considerable number of persons that I do not know, a kind of symbol...’ he wrote to Emily, in somewhat grandiloquent terms. ‘I can say wholly without over-emphasising my importance that if I had a divorce it would be the greatest misfortune to the Anglican church since Newman went over to Rome’.

He subsequently made much of his public status. ‘There are so many people,’ he would write to Emily in 1953, ‘to whom one is either a myth or an omnipotent being’. And Emily complained to him that ‘...you long ago made me feel the necessity of regarding you as a Public Figure...’ The adoption of the role of a fictitious elder statesman seems entirely appropriate for Eliot at the time.

His play dramatises the last days of Lord Claverton, the elder statesman of the title, as he revisits his past and resolves his family relationships. In a key passage, he is visited by a woman from his past, Mrs Carghill. It emerges that, as a music-hall girl, Maisie, she had once been in a relationship with Claverton, and he would have married her, but for his father's disapproval; his father paid him not to marry her, and Claverton subsequently bought off Maisie in a breach of promise settlement. She believes that her silence has enabled his career— and it emerges that she has retained the statesman's old love letters to her. 'Have you forgotten that you wrote me letters?' she asks Lord Claverton. 'They would have figured at the trial, I suppose, if there had been a trial.'

The Hale letters reveal how Eliot could have laid himself open to a similar suit for breach of promise. When Vivienne died, Emily had every expectation that Eliot would act upon earlier declarations and marry her. Yet he reneged, writing to her that: 'I recoiled violently from the prospect of marriage, when I came to realise it as possible.' This could have constituted breach of promise – a claim of which would have significantly damaged Eliot's reputation.

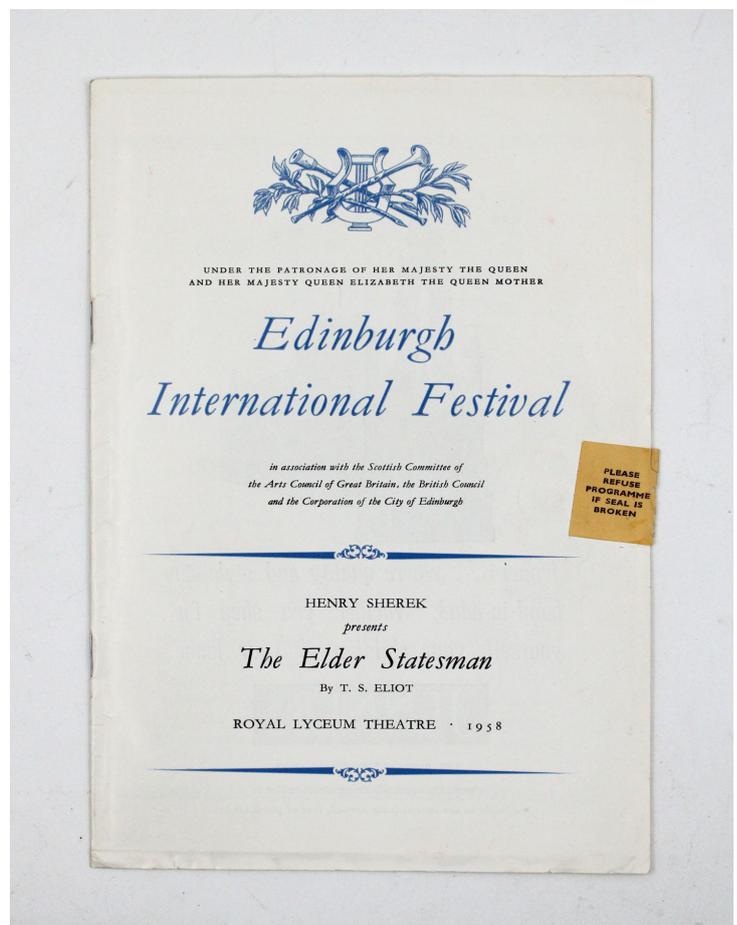
'Were they passionate?' Claverton asks about his letters. They were, Mrs Carghill reminds him, 'very loving'. And they are now in her lawyer's safe, as her 'shrewd' friend Effie had suggested that 'If he becomes a famous man and you should be in want, you could have those letters auctioned.' Mrs Carghill has retained photocopies of the letters for herself, which she reads 'every night'.

The play dramatises the prospect of blackening a public figure's reputation with misdemeanours emerging from his past. There is no suggestion that Emily Hale or indeed Princeton considered 'leaking' the content of Eliot's letters; or that, like Mrs Carghill, Emily might have kept photocopies of her deposited letters. But given Eliot's age, the mooted terms of the deposit made it conceivable that his letters to Emily Hale could be unsealed before Valerie died.

Eliot needed to confess his situation; not only to alleviate his own burden of guilt, as his new relationship developed, but to be honest with his fiancée about his previous relationship and behaviour, with the existence of the letters in mind. Can Eliot now be seen to be dramatising his own situation within the play?

Eliot also needed to reassure himself that he was not being pursued for his public status. The statesman's daughter in the play, Monica, has been seen as representative of the redemptive quality of true love. Eliot described the character in conversation as 'a peach of a girl...too good to be true'. Now, she can be seen clearly as Valerie. Eliot needed to know that Valerie was marrying him for himself and not just his self-perceived status as a 'kind of symbol' or 'myth'. As Claverton himself wonders, 'How could I be sure that she would love the actor, if she saw him, off the stage, without his costume and make-up?'

Eliot's personal Statement, to be unsealed at the same time as his letters to Emily Hale, is known



to have been seen by Valerie. In there lies one of the most overt echoes of ‘The Elder Statesman’. In the Statement, Eliot justifies his breach of promise by saying that ‘I came to see that my love for Emily was the love of a ghost for a ghost.’ In the play, Claverton says that only ‘the ghost of the man I was still clings to the ghost of the woman who was Maisie.’ Was the play, like the Statement, providing confirmation that he had ‘moved on’ from Emily?

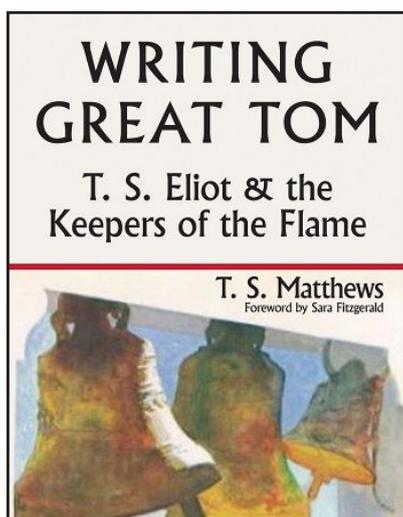
In the play, Monica eventually reassures her father that it is ‘the real you I love – the man you are, Not the man I thought you were’. Valerie evidently provided Eliot with the similar reassurance that he sought.

When the play opened, after their marriage, Kenneth Tynan noted in *The Observer* ‘The voice of a new Eliot, unexpectedly endorsing the merits of human love. It is a safe bet that the word ‘love’ occurs more often in the present play than in all the author’s previous work put together....’. And Eliot himself said in 1958: ‘I can only say that it is a very different play (and I believe a better one) for so much of it having been written during this last year, than it would have been if I had finished it before our marriage.’

When the play was published it was prefaced with the dedication, *To My Wife*, in which Eliot writes: ‘The words mean what they say, but some have a further meaning for you and me only.’ Perhaps some of those meanings might now have been revealed.

Paul Keers

Miscellany



Karen Christensen, CEO of Berkshire Publishing Group in the USA, has written about the background to *Writing Great Tom: TS Eliot and the Keepers of the Flame*. The book, with research by Sara Fitzgerald, is an edited version of the journal *TS Matthews* kept as he researched the first major biography of Eliot, *Great Tom: Notes Towards the Definition of TS Eliot* – a job that was far from easy. Christensen worked as assistant to Valerie Eliot, and is writing a biography of her. You can read the article here:

<https://mailchi.mp/biographersinternational/dectbc-5436722?e=b920b175ba>

Robert Hollingworth's vocal ensemble *I Fagiolini* produced back in 2021 a superb vocal/audio event focussing on ‘The Waste Land’ with the actor Tamsin Greig. You can read the review from ‘The Gramophone’ at <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/features/article/re-wilding-the-waste-land> to whet your appetite, and you can see the performance via YouTube via <https://www.ifagiolini.com/rewilding/>.

Simon Kershaw has helpfully pointed out, apropos our Autumn edition, that the photo of a very dishevelled Eliot in the company of a young woman wearing candles on her head may be explained by the feast of St Lucia (Lucia) on 13th December. Old custom in Sweden (where the photo was taken at the time of the Nobel award) prescribes the wearing of white gowns and candles in tribute to Lucia. Simon suggests looking at: <https://sweden.se/culture/celebrations/the-lucia-tradition> ; or <https://visitsweden.com/what-to-do/culture-history-and-art/swedish-traditions/christmas/lucia/>

‘Old Gentlemen Prefer Silken Girls’: another look at ‘Journey of the Magi’



T S Eliot’s re-naming of his ‘Journey of the Magi’ as ‘Old Gentlemen Prefer Silken Girls’ in John Hayward’s copy of an ‘ephemeral’ Cambridge publication, *Oasis 1*, is clearly part of an extended joke. In the same copy, he renames Yeats’s ‘For Anne Gregory’ as ‘Gentlemen Prefer Blondes’, and similarly humorous re-namings are given to the other poems in the short collection. Well, we all knew Eliot had a sense of humour. But was he being serious when he wrote to his old friend Conrad Aiken on 13th September 1927: ‘Thanks for your compliments about the Christmas poem. I have no illusions about it: I wrote it in three-quarters of an hour after church time and before lunch one Sunday morning, with the assistance of half a bottle of Booth’s gin.’ One wonders.

It’s initially the ‘Booths’ that makes me question Eliot’s account. A hundred and thirty years earlier, Coleridge had described how a ‘person from Porlock’ had interrupted the (probably) opium-induced trance in which he had written the first – and in the event the only – 54 lines of ‘Kubla Khan’. But this was simply an excuse for the unfinished poem, suggested Stevie Smith in her ‘Thoughts about the Person from Porlock’; though the poet’s own account of the process of composition is the one we all remember. And perhaps with ‘Journey of the Magi’ we remember Eliot’s forty-five minutes and the Booth’s gin. But the ‘Booth’s’ makes me wonder; it’s somehow too specific. Just ‘half a bottle of gin’ would have been sufficient, surely?

And the poem itself doesn’t somehow feel as if it just came to the poet, word-perfect, that Sunday morning. There’s something beautifully, very carefully, crafted about it. Take the first five lines, which Eliot places in quotation marks, and in the mouth of his narrator, one of the Magi:

‘A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.’

It isn’t in fact a quotation. Instead, it’s a very carefully edited version, a re-writing of a few lines from Lancelot Andrewes’ Christmas Sermon of 1622. Eliot re-casts Andrewes’ third person narrative as the first-person opening of his dramatic monologue; and deftly edits out Andrewes’ original infelicities of expression: ‘A cold coming they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey, and specially a long journey in. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off, *in solstitio brumali*, “the very dead of winter.”

Recognising and re-using the best of Andrewes’ account, Eliot has creatively re-appropriated

Andrewes. Was Andrewes' text beside him, or had the best phrases lodged in the poet's memory? Did – a facetious thought - the gin induce some kind of creative trance, as opium had for Coleridge?

The rest of the first verse paragraph is launched by those superb opening lines. Eliot creates a vivid series of images of the journey, and of the Eastern lands left behind and 'regretted' by the Magi. He notes the 'refractory' camels, the camel men 'cursing and grumbling/ And running away, and wanting their liquor and women.' But there are remembered images too of the 'summer palaces on slopes', 'the terraces'; and of 'the silken girls bringing sherbet'. Already, Eliot is evoking the ambivalence, the unease which becomes the theme of the whole poem.

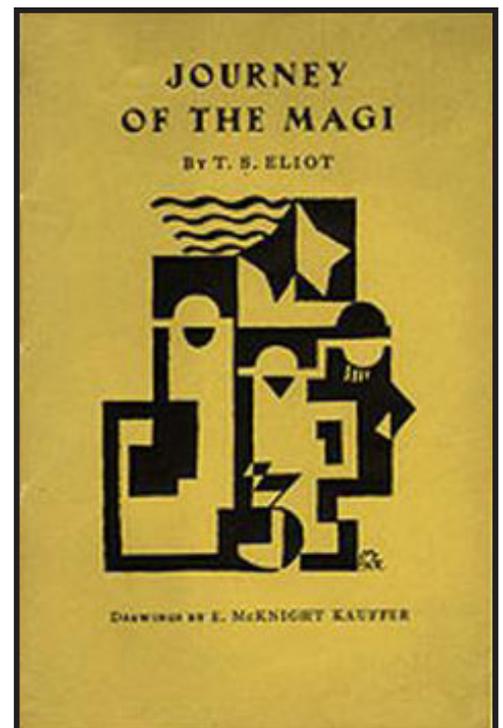
The mid-section of the poem, narrating the arrival of the Magi in 'a temperate valley', was critiqued by Eliot's correspondent Horace M Kallen for its geographical inaccuracy. In a remarkably restrained reply, Eliot wrote to him on 22nd October 1927 (ten days later): 'I am much interested to hear your criticism of my geographical ignorance. Theoretically I believe one ought to make verse as watertight as prose on such points. On the other hand, if I had bothered about the topography and archaeology of Asia Minor, I should have had to omit a good deal of detail which really is meant to be symbolical.'

'Certain images recur', wrote Eliot in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. This central section of the poem, with its 'water-mill beating the darkness', 'three trees on the low sky', the 'old white horse that galloped away in the meadow', the 'six hands dicing for pieces of silver', the 'empty wine-skins', seems to exemplify that comment perfectly. Images and recollections, which have a resonance for the poet but also echo with readers who recognise biblical allusion, abound here and offer a wider context for the narrative of the Magus than he could realise.

The poem's final, culminating section owes its unsettling impact to the close presence of 'Birth' and 'Death'. There has been no optimism in the poem; no hopeful searching; no following of a star. Instead, Eliot has focussed on the wholly discomfiting experience of the Magus in encountering the infant Christ; and it was, of course, earlier in the year that he had himself been received into the Church of England. We might conjecture that this huge personal step which Eliot took in 'converting' lies somewhere beneath or within the poem: the weariness of the Magus somehow echoing the struggles and uncertainties of Eliot himself?

However we read the poem, it remains remarkable in its power and resonance; a work of inspired genius. But all in forty-five minutes? Well, just possibly; but if so, it was years in the making.

And as for Booth's gin, we'd need to have a detailed account of Eliot's (considerable) drink habit to confirm Booths as the responsible potion. All in all, I'm inclined to see the account Eliot gave to Conrad Aiken of the composition of 'the Christmas poem' as a bit of self-deprecatory but rather creative fiction.



John Caperon

Envoi



From top left: King George VI, Winston Churchill, Clement Attlee, Field-Marshal Smuts, Lord Nuffield, Alexander Fleming, Field-Marshal Montgomery, Henry Moore, TS Eliot and Sir Anthony Eden