Poetic Drama /Verse Drama of Modern age

Poetic Drama

Eliot's plays attempt to revitalize verse drama and usually treat the same themes as in his poetry. They include *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), dealing with the final hours of Thomas Ã Becket; *The Family Reunion* (1939); *The Cocktail Party* (1950); *The Confidential Clerk* (1954); and *The Elder Statesman* (1959)..(1) Indeed, Eliot hoped that the study and critical reception of early modern verse drama would shape the production of modernist verse drama. In the 1924 essay "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," Eliot calls for the study of Elizabethan drama to have a "revolutionary influence on the future of drama."(2) Yet, in his later writings as a verse dramatist, Eliot always keeps an arm's length between himself and the early modern dramatic poets, especially Shakespeare, whom he saw as his strongest precursors in the development of a modernist English verse drama. In the 1951 piece "Poetry and Drama," on the matter of verse style in his own first major poetic drama, *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot writes, "As for the versification, I was only aware at this stage that the essential was to avoid any echo of Shakespeare.… Therefore what I kept in mind was the versification of *Everyman*."(3) Elsewhere, he is keenly aware of the challenges of writing verse drama for a modernist theatre: "The difficulty of the author is also the difficulty of the audience. Both have to be trained; both need to be conscious of many things which neither an Elizabethan dramatist, nor an Elizabethan audience, had any need to know."(4) Eliot finds his whip for training his **[p. 105]** audience and himself, as dramatist, less in the examples Shakespeare and his contemporaries provide than in the works their medieval predecessors left behind. This essay examines Eliot's status as a medieval modernist. The periodicity of Eliot's Middle Ages, problematic as it is, represents the convergence of his animus against modernity and liberalism with his desire for a religiosity that is not marginal, fragmented, and "compartmentalized" but rather central to the activity of everyday life in a culture and society best characterized by the words *unity*, *integration*, and *order*—the ideological language of conservatism. In part, the concept of Eliot as "medieval modernist" is indebted to Michael T. Saler's work on visual modernism, the English avant-garde, and the London Underground transport system. What Saler describes in terms of medieval modernism is very much a stance or attitude towards the relationship between aesthetic production (imagination) and the utility of consumption (reception) grounded in a social functionalism thought to have its origins in the medieval. I should be quick to point out that Saler is rather ambivalent on the point with regard to Eliot himself: "While T. S. Eliot might be called a medieval modernist because of his admiration for the organic and spiritual community of the Middle Ages together with his "impersonal" conception of art, his elitist and formalist views isolate him from several of the central terms of the tradition as I have defined it.Eliot's ambivalence towards the early modern and repeated turns to the medieval evidence a contradiction between Eliot's life-long desire for a clearly articulated unity, integration, and order in all aspects of everyday life, including writing and religion, and his fetishization of an early modern period he imagines in terms of anarchy, disorder, and decay. Eliot repeatedly mystifies the early modern period. In his introduction to G. Wilson Knight's *The Wheel of Fire*, Eliot

gives voice to a vision of the early modern past as a period of phantasmagoric peril, uncertainty, even unknowability: "But with Shakespeare, we seem to be moving in an air of Cimmerian darkness. The conditions of his life, the conditions under which dramatic art was then possible, seem even more remote from us than those of Dante

Verse drama is any drama written as verse to be spoken; another possible general term is **poetic drama**. For a very long period verse drama was the dominant form of drama in Europe (and was also important in non-European cultures). Greek tragedy and Racine's plays are written in verse, as is almost all of Shakespeare's drama, and Goethe's *Faust*.

Verse drama is particularly associated with the seriousness of tragedy, providing an artistic reason to write in this form, as well as the practical one that verse lines are easier for the actors to memorize exactly. In the second half of the twentieth century verse drama fell almost completely out of fashion with dramatists writing in English (the plays of Christopher Fry and T. S. Eliot being possibly the end of a long tradition).

As Eliot sank ever more deeply into his Anglo-Catholic schtick and he no longer had Pound around to cut the fat and grain filler out of his work, he turned to writing verse drama. He wanted to *reach* people. He probably wanted to be Shakespeare.
Murder in the Cathedral was the first of these verse dramas, and the only one I can even begin to tolerate. The title is intended to evoke a whodunnit; it may be a ponderous Eliotian attempt at a "witticism". The joke, such as it is, is that the murderee is Archbishop St. Thomas à Becket, the killers are some of Henry II's knights, and the scene of the crime is Canterbury Cathedral, *anno domini* 1170. If you happened to be hanging around Canterbury in 1935, this was a big win because Canterbury Cathedral is where the thing was first performed. (If you were hanging around Canterbury in 1170, call me; we should talk).
The background: King Henry II's wanted to gain influence over the Church in England. He appointed Becket as Archbishop of Canterbury to that end because Becket was his boy. Once in office, Becket's loyalty shifted to the Church. The two came into conflict over the practice of trying clergy in ecclesiastical courts for civil offenses, and Becket fled to France. While in France he continued to defy Henry, going so far as to excommunicate some of Henry's more loyal bishops.
At the beginning of the play, Becket returns from his seven-year exile in France. He goes straight to Canterbury, arriving in time for Act I. Four Tempters tempt him. Meanwhile, Henry has put on his John Stanfa hat and made an offhand remark to some of his knights about how convenient it would be if Becket weren't around any more. The knights draw the obvious conclusion about what he means, and they depart for Canterbury. When they arrive, Becket explains that he is loyal to a higher power than the king. They reply that they aren't, and they kill him at the altar.
The bloodshed is followed by a flourish of self-exculpatory forensic rhetoric from the knights: They argue persuasively that they've done the right thing, but not *too* persuasively because the author doesn't agree. Exeunt knights; some priests pray at each other and asperse the audience; good night, good night.
Historically, Henry disavowed the whole thing, the knights fell into disgrace, and Becket was canonized.
The whole thing suffers from Late Eliot Syndrome: No tack is left unsledgehammered. He lectures us about his points rather than demonstrating or illustrating them, and the writing is

often less than inspired. Still, it's better than his other verse dramas: The form and the language are at least appropriate to the material, and the material holds up under the weight of the Message. Eliot later attempted to pile similar Messages onto midcentury English bourgeois melodrama -- in verse! It didn't work.

At the height of his powers, Eliot might have done something really interesting with *Murder in the Cathedral*.

Christopher Fry, who has died, aged 97, was, with TS Eliot, the leading figure in the revival of poetic drama that took place in Britain in the late 1940s. His most popular play, The Lady's Not For Burning, ran for nine months in the West End in 1949. But although Fry was a sacrificial victim of the theatrical revolution of 1956, he bore his fall from fashion with the stoic grace of a Christian humanist and increasingly turned his attention to writing epic films, most notably Ben Hur (1959). The Lady remains Fry's most popular play: the leading role of Thomas Mendip has attracted actors as various as Richard Chamberlain, Derek Jacobi and Kenneth Branagh. Today, one is struck by the way in which Fry's euphuistic language - at one point, the hero describes himself as a "perambulating vegetable patched with inconsequential hair" - overtakes the dramatic action. But in a postwar theatre that had little room for realism, Fry's medieval setting, rich verbal conceits and self-puncturing irony delighted audiences, and the play became the flagship for the revival of poetic drama. At the same time, Eliot's The Cocktail Party enjoyed a West End vogue, and a new movement was born. Though less of a public theorist than Eliot, Fry still believed passionately in the validity of poetic drama. As he wrote in the magazine, Adam: "In prose, we convey the eccentricity of things, in poetry their concentricity, the sense of relationship between them: a belief that all things express the same identity and are all contained in one discipline of revelation." For a period in the late 1940s and early 50s, Fry helped to revive English verse drama, to which he brought colour, movement and a stoic gaiety. How many of his plays will survive, only time can tell. But, at his best, he brought an undeniable, spiritual elan to the drab world of postwar British theatre. He certainly deserves to be remembered as something more than the inspiration for Margaret Thatcher's famous remark, "The lady's not for turning".

For many centuries from the Greeks onwards verse was, throughout Europe, the natural and almost exclusive medium for the composition and presentation of dramatic works with any pretensions to «seriousness» or the status of «art». Western drama's twin origins, in the Greek Festivals and in the rituals of the medieval church, naturally predisposed it to the use of verse. For tragedy verse long remained the only «proper» vehicle. In comedy the use of prose became increasingly common - giving rise, for example, to such interesting cases as Ariosto's *I suppositi*, written in prose in 1509 and reworked twenty years later in verse. (*La cassaria* also exists in both prose and verse). Shakespeare's use of prose in comic scenes, especially those of «low life», and for effective contrast in certain scenes of the tragedies and history plays, shows an increasing awareness of the possibilities of the medium and perhaps already contains an implicit association

between prose and «realism». Verse continued to be the dominant medium of tragedy throughout the seventeenth century - even domestic tragedies such as *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (Anon., 1608) or Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed With Kindness* (1603) were composed in blank verse. For all the continuing use of verse it is hard to escape the feeling that by the end of the seventeenth century it had largely ceased to be a genuinely living medium for dramatists. Increasingly the prevailing idioms of dramatic verse became decidedly literary, owing more to the work of earlier dramatists than to any real relationship with the language of its own time. By 1731 George Lillo's *The London Merchant, or The History of George Barnwell*, for all its clumsiness and limitations, in its presentation of a middle-class tragedy in generally effective prose archieved a theatrical liveliness and plausibility largely absent from contemporary verse tragedies - from Addison's *Cato* (1713), Thomson's *Sophonisba* (1730) and *Agamemnon* (1738), or Johnson's *Irene* (1749). The example of Racine was vital to such plays, but it was not one that proved very fertile. Lillo was praised in France by Diderot and Marmontel, in Germany by Lessing and Goethe. It is not unreasonable to see Lillo's work as an early and clumsy anticipation of Ibsen's. *The London Merchant* constitutes one indication of the effective «death» of verse drama. Others are not far to seek. In France, Houdar de La Motte was also writing prose tragedies in the 1720's, and Stendhal, in the 1820's was insistent that prose was now the only possible medium for a viable tragedy. Ibsen largely abandoned verse after *Peer Gynt* (1867), in favour of prose plays more directly and realistically concerned with contemporary issues. A well-known letter to Lucie Wolf (25 May 1883) proclaims that «Verse has been most injurious to the art of drama... It is improbable that verse will be employed to any extent worth mentioning in the drama of the immediate future since the aims of the dramatists of the future are almost certain to be incompatible with it».

Against the background of such a pattern of development, later dramatic works in verse have often seemed eccentric or academic; this should not blind us, however, to the considerable achievements of modern verse drama and to the importance of the testimony they bear to an idea of drama often radically different from the prevailing modern conceptions. A genre which has given rise to some of the most interesting work of D'Annunzio and Hofmannsthal, Yeats and Eliot, is surely not a negligible one.

In the English context, the verse dramas of the Romantics and the Victorians already constituted a kind of «revival» part of a conscious effort to bring poetry back to the theatre. For the Romantics there was still a potential audience with some sense that verse was the proper

medium for tragedy. The theatrical inexperience of the poets, however, made them ill-equipped for real dramatic achievement. The efforts of Wordsworth (*The Borderers*), 1795-6), Coleridge (eg. *Remorse*, 1813), and Keats (*Otho the Great*, 1819) remain of only antiquarian interest, judged as works for the theatre, though all have much to tell about their makers, and the *Borderers*, at least, is a work of considerable poetic substance. Perhaps slightly more praise might be extended to some of Byron's verse dramas (eg. *Manfred*, 1817; *Marino Faliero*, 1820; *Sardanapalus*, 1821) and Shelley's *Cenci* (1818) contains some scenes of considerable power. For most of the English romantics, however, the shadow of Shakespeare proved oppressive; admiration, or rather reverence, for his example produced in their own work a poetic and theatrical idiom lacking all freshness and contemporaneity. It was in the work of other lands and languages that the example of Shakespeare could work more positively. In Germany, for example, there emerged a rich new tradition of verse drama in the works of Lessing (eg. *Nathan Der Weise*, 1779), Goethe, Schiller, Werner, Kleist (notably in *Penthesilea*, 1808, and *Der Prinz von Homburg*, 1821) and others. In Italy the early plays of Manzoni (*Il Conte di Carmagnola*, 1820; *Adelchi*, 1822) provided en example which only a few poet-dramatists endeavoured to follow, while others -such as Niccolini - were more concerned with an attempt to revive Greek models of tragedy. (In Italy verse drama could often not escape from the shadow of the operatic tradition). In America too, verse drama was being attempted by dramatists such as John Howard Payne (eg. *Brutus*, 1818), Robert Mongomery Bird (*The Gladiator*, 1831) and, a work of some quality, George Henry Boker's *Francesca da Rimini* (1855). In 1827-8 the English troupe made its famous visit to Paris, performing, amongst other works, all four of Shakespeare's major tragedies. The impact was enormous. One of those most affected and impressed was the young Victor Hugo. In Hugo's plays, much influenced by Shakespeare, romanticism found far more effective expression in verse drama than it had ever found in England. In plays such as *Hernani* (1830), *Le roi s'amuse* (1832), *Ruy Blas* (1838) and *Les Burgraves* (1843), Hugo creates a verse idiom of immense vigour which articulates visions of concentrated and extreme human emotion. At his best Hugo's discrimination of character, if crude, is also striking. Other succesful verse-dramas later in the century included Francois Coppée's *Severo Torelli* (1883) *Les Jacobites* (1885) and *Pour la couronne* (1895), as well as Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897). Certainly it is in the work of French and German poets (in plays by Hebbel, Grillparzer and Grabbe as well as those of the poets mentioned earlier) and in the early verse plays of Ibsen - notably *Brand* (1866) and *Peer Gynt* (1867) - that something like the full potential of verse drama is expressed. In England nothing of similar power exists in the nineteenth century. The

plays of James Sheridan Knowles (1784-1862) - such as *William Tell* (1825) and *The Love Chase* (1837) - provided effective roles for the great actor-manager Macready, but have little now to offer. Macready also acted in Lytton's *The Lady of Lyons* (1838) and *Richelieu* (1839), both of which had considerable theatrical success, and are not entirely without enduring merits. Poets such as Tennyson (eg. *Queen Mary*, 1876; *Harold*, 1876; *Becket*, 1879) and Browning (eg. *Strafford*, 1837; *A Blot in the Scutcheon*, 1843) also wrote for the theatre but displayed very little sense of the genuinely theatrical (Tennyson assumed that he could leave it to Irving to «fit» *Becket* for the stage). Other poets wrote *closet dramas* never intended for performance - Sir Henry Taylor's enormous *Philip Van Artevelde* (1834) is an archetypal example of the genre, a work which, its author readily confessed «was not intended for the stage» and was «properly an Historical Romance, cast in dramatic and rythmical form». Much the same might be said of two later and finer works: Swinburne's *Bothwell* (1874) of which Edmund Gosse rightly observes that «in bulk [it] one of the five-act Jidai-Mono or classic plays of eighteenth-century Japan, and it could only be performed, like an oriental drama, on successive nights», and *The Dynasts* (1903-8) of Thomas Hardy, the text of which occupies some 600 pages and which is described in its subtitle as «An Epic-Drama of the War of Napoleon in Three Parts, Nineteen Acts, and One Hundred and Thirty Scenes». The requirements and possibilities of practical theatre have clearly been left far behind; the divorce of the poet from the performers seems complete. Yet there were others who sought to maintain the relationship between poetry and theatre. The plays of Stephen Phillips, for example (eg. *Herod*, 1901; *Ulysses*, 1902; *Paolo and Francesca*, 1902; *The King*, 1912) have neither the psychological perception of Swinburne nor the historical insight of Hardy, but they did hold the stage with considerable success. Phillips had plenty of theatrical experience, having been an actor in the theatrical company of his cousin, Frank Benson. Phillips' verse plays were produced by Beerbohm Tree, and they display a sophisticated command of theatrical effect and a wide-ranging, if almost wholly derivative, verse rhetoric which has, very occasionally, genuinely poetic moments. Elsewhere in the early years of the century there is to be found worthwhile work by a multitude of minor figures. Lawrence Binyon's *Attila* (1907) and *Ayuli* (1923); Gordon Bottomley's *King Lear's Wife* (1915) and *Gruach* (1923); John Masefield's *Good Friday* (1917), *Esther* (1922) and *Tristan and Isolt* (1927); John Drinkwater's *Cophetua* (1911) and *Rebellion* (1914); Arthur Symons' *The Death of Agrippina* and *Cleopatra in Judea* (1916); T.Sturge Moore's *Daimonissa* (1930) - are all of interest and substance, but none can be said to make an overwhelming case for the genre, and all are, in varying degrees unable to escape from the long shadow of Shakespeare, especially as reinterpreted by the nineteenth-

century.

Under fresh influences - French Symbolism and Japanese Noh theatre in particular - verse drama began to explore new possibilities. Gordon Bottomley's later works - such as *Fire at Callart* (1939) showed an awareness of the possibilities offered by the model of the Noh. Yeats, of course, had more fully explored such possibilities in works such as *At the Hawks' Well, The Only Jealousy of Emer, The Dreaming of the Bones* and *Calvary* (composed c.1915-20), insofar as they were the means of liberation from the obligations of a naturalistic theatre. Verse, music, ritual and dance were woven into a complementary whole. (Irish successors to yeats include Austin Clarke, whose verse plays have been performed by the Abbey Theatre, the Cambridge festival Theatre and others). In later plays such as *The Herne's Egg* (1935) and *Purgatory* (1938) evolves a personal and convincing idiom (both verbally and theatrically) for verse drama. These are superficially simple, but metaphysically profound works, both verbally exciting and theatrically striking. Elsewhere in Europe, the work of Gabriele D'Annunzio (eg. *La città morta*, 1898; *Francesca da Rimini*, 1901; *La figlia di Iorio*, 1904) and Hugo von Hofmannsthal (eg. *Jedermann*, 1912; *Das grosse Salzburger Welttheater*, 1922) was bearing eloquent testimony to the continuing potential of the genre. In France Claudel was creating a series of verse plays upon religious and philosophical themes, whose intense lyricism and startling imagery for long went without full appreciation (eg. *Partage de midi*, 1906; *Le pain dur*, 1918; *Le Soulier de satin*, 1928-9). Other French twentieth-century verse-dramas include works by Char, Césaire and Cocteau, but the poetic qualities which characterise much that has been most striking in modern French drama have more generally found expression in prose plays rather than verse plays - as, for example, in the work of Giradoux, Anouilh, Beckett, Ionesco and Vian. In Spain, Lorca mixes verse and prose in his plays.

In Britain the 1930's saw a new generation of poets whose experiments did much to broaden the range - in terms both of form and content - of verse drama. *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1936) and *The Ascent of F.6* (1937) were collaborations by W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood which brought a fresh wit and intellectuality, a new radicalism of social comment and contemporary relevance, to the genre. T.S.Eliot's plays - notably *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and *The Family Reunion* (1939) offered persuasive instances of how verse might, for the dramatist, be the means by which one could «get at the permanent and universal» rather than the merely ephemeral and naturalistic. *Murder in the Cathedral* was written for performance in Canterbury Cathedral, while *The Family Reunion* was composed for the commercial theatre. The

idioms of the two plays are, therefore, necessarily very different; taken together the two offer a promise not wholly fulfilled by Eliot's later plays, such as *The Cocktail Party* (1950), *The Confidential Clerk* (1953) and *The Elder Statesman* (1958). In these later plays the verse lacks the confidence to be genuinely poetic - the linguistic intensity of the pre-war plays gives way to something far more prosaic. *Murder in the Cathedral* is, in part, striking for its mixture of verse forms and idioms; the Auden and Isherwood collaborations drew on the techniques of the music hall, the pantomime and the revue.

From the 1930's onwards verse dramas have continued to be composed in Britain (and America), many of them works of considerable distinction. Most have been composed for performance outside the commercial theatre - for churches and cathedrals, for universities or drama schools, or for some theatrical groups devoted to verse drama. In London, for example, the Mercury Theatre in Notting Hill Gate, holding no more than 150, was opened by Ashley Dukes in 1933 and was home to E.Martin Browne's Pilgrim Players. Browne was central to the revival of verse drama in the middle years of the century. He directed all of Eliot's plays, including the first performance of *Murder in the Cathedral*. In the 1940's he directed, at the Mercury, several important verse plays - both religious (eg. Ronald Duncan's *This Way to the Tomb*, 1945; Anne Ridler's *The Shadow Factory*, 1945) and comic (eg. Christopher Fry's *A Phoenix too Frequent*, 1946; Donagh MacDonagh's *Happy as Larry*, 1947). Browne was also associated with the remarkable religious plays by Charles Williams (eg.*Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*, 1936; *Seed of Adam*, 1937; *The House of the Octopus*, 1945). Indeed, the variety of the verse drama produced in these years was very considerable. It includes the grave beauty of Williams' plays and the fantastic gaiety of *Happy as Larry*, its language informed at every turn by the ballads of Dublin and the idiosyncrasies of colloquial «Irish». In the plays of Christopher Fry there is a substantial body of work characterised, at its best, by both a vivacity (even exuberance) of language and a well-developed theatricality. Plays such as *The Lady's Not for Burning* (1948)), *Venus Observed* (1950), *A Sleep of Prisoners* (1951) and *Curtmantle* (1961) display a considerable range. Fry can be funny and moving, dazzling and beautiful. He can also be verbose and sentimental. Immensely successful - critically and commercially - at the beginning of his career, Fry's reputation has suffered since. His best plays are both intelligent and entertaining, and will surely continue to find admirers. There is much that is rewarding, too, in the work of Ronald Duncan - in *Our Lady's Tumbler* (1950), which has some fine choric writing, or in *Don Juan* (1953); Stephen Spender's *Trial of a Judge* (1938) is an intriguing experiment, with some highly effective moments. Louis MacNeice's *The Dark Tower* (1946) is a rich and

mysterious «radio parable play» in verse. The tradition of verse drama has continued to attract writers, and they have continued to produce interesting plays; such plays have, however, largely been seen (or read) only by specialised audiences. Few have found their way on to the commercial stage. Robert Gittings' *Out of this Wood* (1955); Jonathan Griffin's *The Hidden King* (1955); John Heath-Stubbs' *Helen in Egypt*, (1958); Patric Dickinson's *A Durable Fire* (1962) - the list might be extended considerably. More recent years have seen the production (or publication) of significant verse plays by, amongst others, Peter Dale (*The Cell*, 1975; *Sephe*, 1981), Tony Harrison (eg. *The Misanthrope*, 1973; *Phaedra Britannica*, 1975; *The Oresteia*, 1981; *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, 1990), Seamus Heaney (*The Cure at Troy*, 1990) and Francis Warner (eg. *Moving Reflections*, 1982; *Living Creation*, 1985; *Byzantium*, 1990). In America the tradition begun in the nineteenth century and continued by dramatists such as Josephine Preston Peabody (eg. *Marlowe*, 1901) and William Vaughn Moody (eg. *The Fire-Bringer*, 1904), has had such later practitioners as Percy Mackaye (*The Mystery of Hamlet*, 1949), Maxwell Anderson (eg. *Elizabeth the Queen*, 1930; *Winterset*, 1935), Richard Eberhart (eg. *The Visionary Farms*, 1952; *The Mad Musician*, 1962) and Archibald MacLeish (eg. *J.B.*, 1958; *Herakles*, 1967). Modern verse-drama has extended the formal possibilities of the genre far beyond the traditions of blank-verse tragedy. A wide range of verse forms, of free-verse, and of experiments derived from the techniques of revue and music-hall have played their part in the evolution of new and striking theatrical forms.

Why have so many writers continued to be attracted to verse drama when, as Peter Dale observes, his chances of seeing his work performed are generally very slight? If, like Ibsen after *Peter Gynt*, the dramatist's aim is to write «the genuine, plain language spoken in real life» (letter of 25 May 1883 quoted above) he will not, presumably, be attracted to verse as a likely medium. If, on the other hand, he feels with Yeats that the post-Ibsen prose of Shaw's plays was devoid of «all emotional implication», or if he shares the sentiments expressed by T.S.Eliot in his 1950 lecture on «Poetry and Drama», it is more than probable that he will feel it necessary to turn to verse:

It seems to me that beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed towards action - the part of like which prose drama is wholly adequate to express - there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus ... This peculiar range of sensibility can be expressed by dramatic poetry, at its moments of greatest intensity. At such moments we

touch the border of those feelings which only music can express. We can never emulate music, because to arrive at the condition of music would be the annihilation of poetry, and especially of dramatic poetry. Never the less, I have before my eyes a kind of mirage of the perfection of verse drama, which would be a design of human action and words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and musical order ... To go as far in this direction as possible to go, without losing that contact with the ordinary everyday world with which drama must come to terms, seems to me the proper aim of dramatic poetry.

Such thoughts enable us to see modern verse drama as much more than that reaction against naturalism as which it has often been depicted. At its best verse drama is too positive an aspiration for it to be adequately understood merely as a reaction to the dominant idiom of the time. Much of what is best and most attractive in European theatre of the last 40 years might be described as post-naturalist, rather than merely anti-naturalist; verse-drama has made, and should continue to make, important and distinctive contributions to post-naturalism.

According to Francis Fergussan, a poetic drama is a drama in which you "feel" the characters are poetry and were poetry before they began to speak. Thus poetry and drama are inseparable. The playwright has to create a pattern to justify the poetic quality of the play and his poetry performs a double function. First, it is an action itself, so it must do what it says. Secondly, it makes explicit what is really happening. Eliot in his plays has solved the problem regarding language, content and versification.
In the twentieth century, the inter-war period was an age suited to the poetic drama. There was a revival and some of the poets like W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot tried their hands in writing of poetic plays. This was a reaction against prose plays of G. B. Shaw, Galsworthy and others because these plays showed a certain lack of emotional touch with the moral issue of the age. W. B. Yeats did not like this harsh criticism of the liberal idea of the nineteenth century at the hands of dramatists like G. B. Shaw. So he thought the drama of ideas was a failure to grasp the reality of the age. On the other hand, the drama of entertainment (artificial comedy) was becoming dry and uninteresting. It was under these circumstances that the modern playwrights like T. S. Eliot, J.M. Synge, W. B. Yeats, W. H. Auden, Stephen Spendor and so on have made the revival the poetic drama possible.

The Choruses.

A striking feature of "Murder in the Cathedral" is Eliot's use of poetic choruses like the choruses in ancient Greek drama. The producer must decide the method which will project most effectively in the theatre these recurring choral passages, spoken by the Women of Canterbury. There are eight poetic rhapsodies or choruses, comprising approximately one fifth of the text.

The poetry in the choruses invites all the imaginative enrichment which light, music and dance can give it.

The chorus commenced in Greek drama, originally as a group of singers or chanters. Later, a Greek playwright called Thespis introduced an actor on the stage who held a dialogue with the leader of the chorus. Playwrights like Aeschylus and Sophocles added a second and a third actor to interact with the chorus.

Finally, the chorus took on the role of participants in the action and interpreters of what is happening on stage. Eliot has based “Murder in the Cathedral” on the form of classic Greek tragedy. He uses the chorus to enhance the dramatic effect, to take part in the action of the play, and to perform the roles of observer and commentator. His chorus women represent the common people, who lead a life of hard work and struggles,

no matter who rules. It is only their faith in God that gives them the strength to endure. These women are uneducated, country folk, who live close to the earth. As a result, they are in tune with the changing seasons and the moods of nature. At present, they have an intuition of death and evil. They fear that the new year, instead of bringing new hope, will bring greater suffering. The three priests have three different reactions to Becket's arrival. The first reacts with the fear of a calamity.The second is a little bold and says that there can hardly be any peace between a king who is busy in intrigue and an archbishop who is an equally proud, self-righteous man. The third priest feels that the wheel of time always move ahead, for good or evil. He believes that a wise man, who cannot change the course of the wheel, lets it move at its own pace.

THE PLAY AS POETIC DRAMA

A poetic drama is one in which poetry and drama are fused. Since the dialogue between the characters is in verse, the play becomes a combination of music, imagery, and ritual. These factors create high intensity and dramatic effect