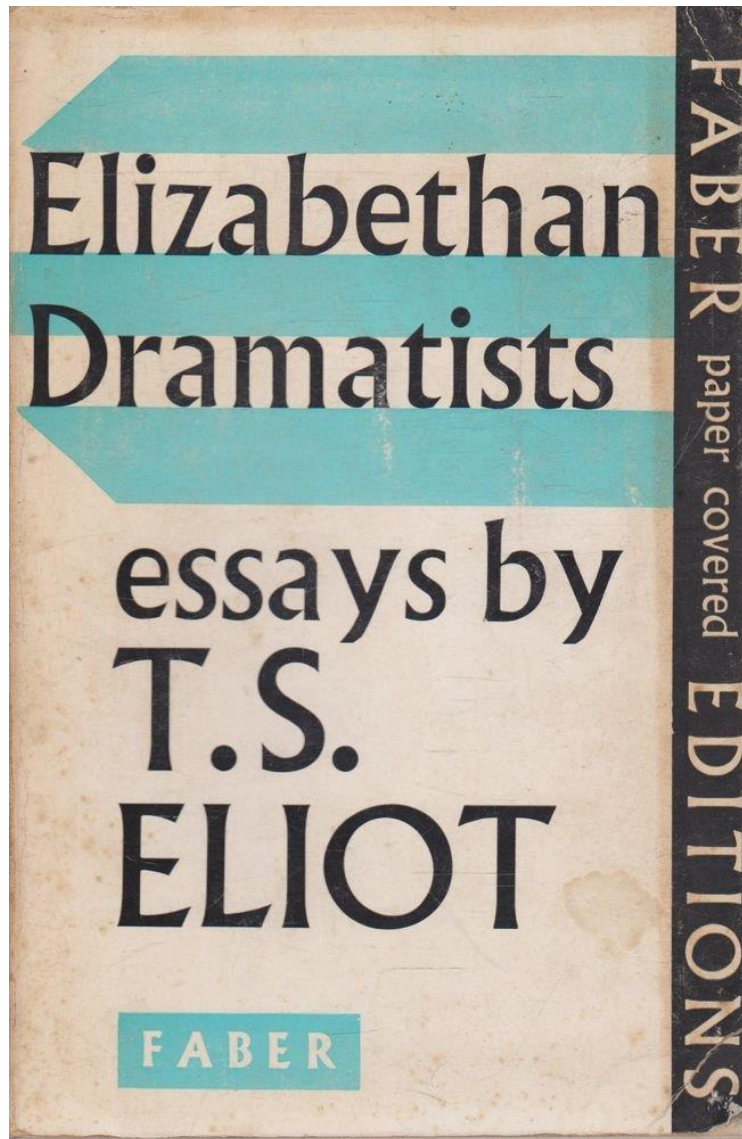


T. S. Eliot's "Four Elizabethan Dramatists": A Critical Study

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**Abstract**

Eliot's "Four Elizabethan Dramatists" is one of the substantial critiques on Elizabethan drama from a modernist perspective. The prominence laid on classical principles and realism, on the one hand and the interconnection between drama and poetry, on the other contribute to the inconsistency

of creativity rather than stationing an unswerving artistic form. While the modern dramatic tradition has improved upon the technical aspects, Elizabethans relied on the poetic brilliance. Eliot argues for a dramatic tradition that stably balances between realism, poetry and technique. This essay is an attempt to critically read Eliot's essay to locate his contribution to dramaturgy.

**Keywords:** T. S. Eliot, Elizabethan, modernist, realism, Charles Lamb, Willaim Archer

### ***Elizabethan Dramatists***

T. S. Eliot's "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," chiefly a response to William Archer's charges on Renaissance drama, offers a significant modernist perspective to Renaissance. It aims at illustrating the difference in point of view toward the Elizabethan drama during nineteenth-century. Eliot considers that the theatre had arrived at a juncture where a "revolution in principle" should be anticipated. Elizabethan drama's flaw can be found not only in the manner in which it endeavoured to appropriate realism and in their attempt to adopt classical principles but also in the artistic acquisitiveness they creatively encompassed. He yokes this predicament subtly with the plight of modern drama which underwent an existential struggle for survival. The modern outlook of Elizabethan drama rests on the distinction made between drama and poetry as two discrete entities. Both Elizabethan and modern drama suffers from a lack of convention, according to Eliot. Unlike classical dramas where the parts strengthen the whole and every style contributes to the wholeness of the play, Elizabethan and modern drama are not self-consistent. Elizabethan play is either too realistic or excessively abstract in its treatment, whatever literary technique or method it employs.

Eliot observes: "it is easier to present the effect of something in firm convention, than the effect of something which was aiming, blindly enough, at something else" (112). Therefore, to make the Elizabethan plays liable to be made modern is a difficult task. Elizabethan Drama attempts at realism and its lack of convention stay as the weakness to an otherwise a grand dramatic contribution. Eliot attempts to derive the relation between the method of acting and expression of emotions of actual life. He notes: "The art of Elizabethans is an impure art." This essay is an attempt to critically evaluate Eliot's modernist perspective on Elizabethan dramatists and to derive his contribution to dramaturgy.

### **The Four Elizabethan Dramatists**

The four Elizabethan dramatists Eliot refers to are John Webster (1580-1625), George Chapman (1559-1634), Thomas Middleton (1580-1627) and Cyril Tourneur (1575-1626). These four dramatists are variedly talented and their contribution to Renaissance drama is distinct. Webster, a contemporary of Shakespeare, is known for his tragedies that gave him the stature of being the prefigure of Gothic literature. His vision for humanity is dark and filled with blood and death. *The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi* are among the best known plays written by John Webster. In John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Eliot finds an exciting instance of how a "great literary and dramatic genius directed toward chaos" (Eliot 117). George Chapman, a poet and translator, left the legacy of being one of the earliest Homeric translators. Chapman, according to Eliot, is the greatest of these four playwrights, one who had classical mind and wrote drama with freedom in its form when it might appear formless with indifferent dramatic necessities. Thomas Middleton is one of the prolific Elizabethan playwrights who had the unique capability of writing successful comedies and tragedies. Cyril Tourneur, a lesser known Elizabethan, is known for *The Atheist's Tragedy*. In this essay, Eliot endeavours to "define and illustrate" a perspective on Elizabethan drama that treads a varied course from the nineteenth-century Elizabethan

criticism and to establish the existent diverse attitudes toward Elizabethan drama that are indistinguishable. Elizabethan drama, with its ingenuity, has had revolutionary influence on the future of drama. However, contemporary theatre, Eliot observes, anticipates revolution in its stance predicating an examination on the principles. Eliot's effort to distinguish between the Elizabethan drama with modern notion of drama and literature contrasts his contemporary critics only to assert his stance on the merits of modern literature. However, as one that seeks to discern the conventions of both the eras as if there were any, his essay attempt to deal with the considerations of the fragmented aspects of Elizabethan drama in the deliberation of each of these dramatists (Murphy 164). Eliot's essay, moreover, is an incomplete polemical interface to his *Elizabethan Essays*. The essay is a creative rejoinder to Archer's attacks on Elizabethan drama rather than elaborating on the four Elizabethan dramatists which Eliot initially proposes. Therefore, his claims are not validated by the achievements and the deficiencies of the proposed four Elizabethans rather contemplate sporadically on the essayist's intention to defend the modern drama against the splendour that is attributed to the Elizabethans.

### **Charles Lamb**

Charles Lamb's *Specimens* validated a stance toward Elizabethan drama by ascertaining the difference between poetic drama with that of modern drama that distinguishes between drama and literature. The difference between drama and literature was accentuated by the modernists who attempted to endorse closet dramas which were meant to be read and not performed on stage. Lamb presents an intense establishment of shift in the manner in which Elizabethan drama were seen beyond the theatre/performance which underwent severe scrutiny with the critics following Coleridge and Lamb. The need to shift underlines reading the drama as literature and also points to the presence of an audience who took drama beyond performance. *Specimens* through the poetic presentation of plays discounted the theatrical functions that are at effect on the stage only without an underestimation of the Elizabethans who stand tall through the performance rather than the arm chair reading. Modern estimation of Elizabethan drama, thus, rests on the proposition that drama and poetry are two segregate entities which can be synchronized only by an artist of outstanding ability. A play can be a good literature but a bad play and vice versa. Swinburne maintains that a play exists as literature and William Archer thinks a play need not be a literature. Both these Elizabethan critics elaborate on the distinction between poetry and drama and thus allowing "to entertain the belief that the difference between modern drama and Elizabethan drama is represented by a gain of dramatic technique and the loss of poetry" (Eliot 110). The debate, however, is not on the pre-eminence of dramatic technique over poetry and vice versa. The importance of creativity on the part of the creator to envelope both the dramatic techniques that help the actors to perform on stage without being detached from real life and the poetic art that caters to the audience who will carry though their comprehension the exquisiteness of a work of art both called for.

### **Eliot Concurr with Lamb**

Eliot concurs with Lamb in his critique of Shakespeare and his stance on the function of the stage. In fact, Eliot takes the cue for his essay from Lamb but finds vein in Archer's criticism to develop his perspective only to reiterate the critics'. Riehl observes that a

surprising number of essays on drama begin with reference to Lamb, and when Lamb's criticism is attacked in the first paragraph of an essay on drama, it is most often true that he is being used as a convenient scaffold upon which

some critical principle is to be sacrificed, and that the essay will say little or nothing about its original subject, Lamb's ideas. (77)

Eliot begins his essay with a reference to Lamb noting the "revolution in principles" in the Elizabethan criticism and then invokes Lamb for commencing an acknowledged view point on Elizabethan drama and the predisposition to treat plays as poetry by discarding its function on the stage. Eliot's invocation of Lamb is to establish the modernist perspective that clears the importance of literature. The modern perception that drama and poetry are two separate entities was opined by Lamb. Eliot's essay, thus, becomes more a response to Lamb than Archer and Swinburne, "each representing a side of the critical fault-line which he credits Lamb with creating" (Riehl 77). As a critic, Eliot loses his creativity of asserting a fresh perspective on the Elizabethans but only establishes Lamb and Archer through his substantiation of selective disapproval. Therefore, the essay is

something of a subterfuge. Lamb may be guilty as charged of shifting attention to the plays as poetry, as both Lewes and Strachey had remarked before Eliot, but according to Eliot, the real faults of English drama derive more from Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, than from Lamb. (Riehl 77-8).

### **A New Framework for Modern Drama**

However, Eliot envisages constructing a new framework for modern drama that is different from the established English drama. The new drama that Eliot envisages is removed from the parameters of realistic drama and is more simulated than ever in the history of English drama. Modern drama, as envisaged by Eliot, is closer to the reality of life than the creative Elizabethan realism that configured a mock reality detached from the ordinary life with its magnificence. Eliot calls for an existential undercurrent in the modern drama that takes literature closer to life and actuality than to performance. However,

Eliot's criticism is illuminating as to the nature of English drama, and prophetic as to its necessary development but his argument misapprehends Lamb, who also opposed slavish realism, and even created a category, "Artificial Comedy," in which to consider those dramas which were not to be taken as accurate representations of real life. (Riehl 78)

### ***The Old Drama and the New – Role of Realism***

In his invigorating book *The Old Drama and the New*, William Archer lays bare the dramatic defects of Elizabethan drama. Eliot observes, however, that Archer fails to identify the flaws of Elizabethan drama as their demerits. The key vice of English drama from Kyd to Galsworthy is its intent for boundless realism. In the modern theatre, the replica of actual life was not considered as an artistic advantage. Realism adds to the comprehension and lucidity of a work of art but in excess may exploit the language that contributes to the acceptability by setting pseudo standards. To aim beyond what could be achieved through words, realism becomes superficial.

As Sarkar maintains, "A truly significant literary creation seizes upon the essential humanity and strives to bring out in simple outline the 'universality' of things. Realism, however, is opposed to such an attitude" (54-5).

Eliot, though, does not completely detach himself from realism, he advocates that excess of realism without any restrictions on medium causes some elementary concerns of the discipline of art. Eliot

continually attacks sociological and psychological realism; at its best, art aims for universal truths, not particular representations or emotional stimulation. Harnessing art to social or emotive ends is an “impurity” that, in the case of Elizabethans sprang from their “unwillingness to accept any limitation. (Lamos 40)

### **Eliot’s Objection to Excessive Realism**

Habib maintains that in order to “understand Eliot’s complex reaction against realism, it needs to be recalled that realism is not just a literary technique but a vast historical phenomenon with economic, ideological, philosophy and religious ramifications” (188). Realism, in Eliot, has a strong philosophical undercurrent that searches for truth within the actuality of life. The individual search for truth through his senses encompasses a subjective art of incalculable entirety that could only be possible through the senses in Cartesian and Lockean terms. Therefore, the world of peripheral reality is unswerving and whole reaching the central proposition of epistemology that is grounded in truth and knowledge that is complex and controversial at once.

Thus, realism, “effectively reduced the world to an exact but unarticulated coincidence of appearance and reality, to an indefinite plurality of discrete, unrelated objects, whose only bulwark against chaos was convention.

It also reduced the self to an abstract, empty, atomistic unit, a *tabula rasa*” (190). Within the emphasis of rationality and efficacy, reality is nullified through praxiological stances those clear historical moments that recurs in the present and anticipates the future. Therefore, when “reality is emptied of its mystery, and subject to rational calculation even in the realm of the human psyche, can the concept of literary truth-telling and sober factuality come to the fore, as they did on a large scale in the nineteenth century” (190)

In Eliot’s judgment, *Everyman* is the only play that falls within the “limitations of art.” English drama, otherwise, conjures the spirit as it inflates and concludes its way in the wilderness of “exact likeness to the reality” which is recognized by the audience. Eliot elaborates:

The imitation of life is circumscribed, and the approaches to ordinary speech and withdrawals from ordinary speech are not without relation and effect upon each other. It is essential that a work of art should be self-consistent, that an artist should consciously or unconsciously draw a circle beyond which he does not trespass: on the one hand actual life is always the material, and on the other hand an abstraction from actual life a necessary condition to the creation of the work of art. (Eliot 111)

### **Life in Theatrics and Literature**

Life as comprehended within theatrics and literature were detached and devoid of mimetic nature of art that is restricted within the use of language and the metaphorical use. However, what Eliot envisions contained by the disconnected nature of the dramatic techniques is self-consistency. The playwright should create a boundary that can hold within

its boundary the actuality of life with a clear poise of abstraction that can necessitate a creative work of art. The audience were forced to take the “willing suspension of belief” stance to connect with the reality that is actualized in the performance. The audience here is pushed to the edge of a dialectics between denunciation and responsibility that narrowly find their manifestation in aesthetics.

Archer, according to Eliot, confounds faults with conventions of the Elizabethan dramatic tradition. Elizabethan plays have “faults of inconsistency, faults of incoherency, and faults of taste, there are nearly everywhere faults of carelessness” (Eliot 111). Shakespeare is no exception to these blemishes but in Aeschylus one may not find the distinction of literature and drama, every style of utterance leads an organic interconnection to the whole as the relation is dramatic in itself. Eliot totally avoided Shakespearean form of Dramatic art.

Rampaul observes that Eliot is being a

thorough opportunist, with a shrewd sense of what he could do, he was prepared to learn from any source that could be useful to him. He considered the possibility of adapting the Greek form. It was a period when various forms were being experimented with in the theatre but in Eliot’s case, the adoption of a particular form was always preceded by painstaking though. (Rampaul 165)

### **Impact and Precedents of Greek Drama**

Greek drama followed specific dramatic techniques. Eliot also was reminded of the fact that Greek drama included music and choral passages which gave the playwrights the freedom to express beyond the boundaries of the plot. For Eliot, what the ‘faults’ confirm is not that positive evolutionary development from Early Modern work to the contemporary which Archer finds but rather a continuity between the two, a continuity founded upon ‘a general philosophy of life,’ or ‘general attitude toward life,’ which the Early Modern writers based on Seneca and other influences” (Matthews 115).

### **Mimetic and Self-circumscribed**

Eliot’s intent is to accentuate that art as life is mimetic. However, this mimetic aptitude towards life and art is equally bound that the normal speech and the extraction from the normal speech are not fastened to the causal effect that inevitably fall upon each other. Any work of art, therefore, should be consistent within itself by creating self-circumscribed borders that the art does not infringe. Where the existential life is unavoidably configured by the material, the work of art necessitates an abstraction from the actual life as a creative condition from which the work of art essentially transpires. Eliot explains how Elizabethan drama might appear as to have formulated with in a conventional system. Convention does not include “any particular convention of subject matter, of treatment, of verse or of dramatic form, of general philosophy of life” or any other conventions that already existed. It could be fresh choice or scheme of rhyme that enforced the world of action.

Any play has to follow conventions of the stage and the actor. From this view point, “An actor is an Elizabethan play is either too realistic or too abstract in his treatment, whatever system of speech, of expression and of movement he adopts. The play is forever betraying him” (112). Though modern dramatic performance is different from an Elizabethan play, the performance of an Elizabethan play did not have the charisma of Aeschylus or

Sophocles. To reproduce such classical performances are complicated than performing to present something that is sheltered within conventions.

### **Complexity of Elizabethan Plays in Modern Times - Eliot and Archer**

On the other hand, the complexity “in presenting Elizabethan plays is that they are liable to be made too modern, or falsely archaic” (112).

In a reprimanding mood, Eliot responds to Archer: “A convention is not ridiculous: a subterfuge makes us extremely uncomfortable” (112). Thus, the Achilles’ heel of the Elizabethan drama is not its “defect of realism, but its attempt at realism; not its conventions, but its lack of conventions” (112). When an Elizabethan play is performed not only the modern method of acting becomes inadequate but the effort to articulate the emotions of actual life in which they essentially has to be expressed should equal a classic performance.

While offering a thorough critique of the “archaic traits that are chiefly ritualistic and conventional impeded the achievement of dramatic realism and verisimilitude” (Halpern 30), Archer anticipates to bring in a modernist perspective to Elizabethan drama only to reiterate the features of modern drama fixed against Elizabethan drama. The fault in Elizabethan drama is not that they have embraced or created bad conventions but they are deficient of a firm principle that might set an example to the posterity. The framework that Eliot intends is a modern trait emblematically fixed on the Elizabethan drama. The example Eliot posits is the way ghosts are incompatibly presented in Elizabethan dramas. Halpern maintains that his “relativist take on dramatic convention must be understood in light of Archer’s Eurocentric contempt for the “primitive,” and it seems clear that Eliot’s more tolerant view derives in part from his anthropological reading” (31).

The importance that Eliot adheres with convention can also be seen as a structuralist underpinning that emphatically laid its emphasis a framework within which creativity can be elaborated. Moreover, Halpern observes that Eliot treats “Elizabethan convention with exactly the same detachment and suspended judgment that modern ethnographers were attempting to apply to foreign societies” (31). The fault of conventions in Elizabethan drama delineates the manner in which Elizabethans inconsistently applied in their work of art rather than ritualized the conventions. Elizabethans as they were caught in the transition to modernity might have lost their affinity and bond with the conventions and forms.

When an attempt is made by an actor to recreate Shakespeare or other seventeenth-century plays, the actor is bestowed upon him an extraordinary deal that is beyond his competence but left to his own wits. He is put in a position where his personality embarks upon a process that the stage personality is drafted confronting with his real personality. The audience admire a “being who exists only during the performances, that it is a personality, a vital flame which appears from nowhere, disappears into nothing and is complete and sufficient in its appearance” (Eliot 113). The actor being a conventional being exists only in and for the work of art. However, a great actor in a stage is also the person who exists off the stage yet provisions the role which he performs with the actual personality which he is. Therefore, a great actor is distinguished by his personality that is impersonal and the inhuman force which becomes apparent through his acting skills that makes him an actor and a human being at once.

Eliot brings in the instances of Shakespeare and Henry Arthur Jones, “dramatists to be read rather than seen, because it is precisely in that drama which depends upon the interpretation of an actor of genius, that we ought to be on our guard against the actor” (114). The performance of a play depends not on the actor but the performance/acting of an actor like a ballet that depends upon the dancer for dancing who inspires life into the performance by masking the actor’s personality but expresses the “personality indirectly through concentrating upon a task which is a task in the same sense as the making of an efficient engine or the turning of a jug or a table-leg” (114).

“The art of the Elizabethans is an impure art,” maintains Eliot (114). He anticipates a direct relationship between the play and the audience as it is performed. The work of art should not be amended every time through the interpretation rather it should be performed by actors that can replicate realistically. When a play is constructed upon real life situations, the performance of that play challenges the actors of each generation. Moreover, a “character in the conventional play can never be as real as the character in a realistic play while the role is being enacted by a great actor who has made the part his own” through sacrifices (115). Eliot is ruthless in his attack on the best of the Elizabethans because of their failure to “invent or revive some “convention” within which their work could be contained” (Schneider 94). The source of any artist is the actual life but the removal from actuality necessitates in the creativity of a work of art which can only be supplied by the convention that “may govern either the subject matter or the technique” (94). On the hindsight, the convention is not systematically maintained as in the case of a composition and performance of a classical ballet where convention becomes core to the unravelling of a work of art.

### **Role of Conventions**

The fault of Elizabethan drama is not the conventions as Archer names it but “What is fundamentally objectionable is that in the Elizabethan drama there has been no firm principle of what is to be postulated as a convention and what is not. The fault is not with the ghost but with the presentation of a ghost on which he is inappropriate, and with the confusion between one kind of ghost and another” (Eliot 115-6). Elizabethans aspire to accomplish absolute realism without yielding any of the benefits which as artists they examined in unrealistic conventions. Santyana observes in his essay that “Even the philosophical basis, the general attitude toward life of the Elizabethans, is one of anarchism, of dissolution, of decay” (116). He observes artistic greediness in Elizabethans that defied limitations which only contributed in the history of literature both as a period of progress and descent.

### **To Conclude**

In conclusion, Eliot’s critical outlook on Elizabethan drama is different from that of the nineteenth century critics. His alternative critical attitude arises not out of any personal prejudice but vogue of his day. Critics who investigate Elizabethan drama in the same like had a foregone conclusion about the closet plays and were devoid of “historionic sensibility.” Archer fails mainly because of his inability to see that the faults of Elizabethan drama may be “due to simply the existence of different and non-naturalistic conventions, or more accurately, the unsettledness of Elizabethan conventions” (Higgins 24). Modern drama has improved upon the dramatic technique than the Elizabethan drama which solely rests on the poetic splendour. Drama, then for Eliot, should balance the literary and the technical aspects to present the unified sensibility.

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