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John Whittier-Ferguson  
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor  
[johnaw@umich.edu](mailto:johnaw@umich.edu)

**Mary's Play:  
T. S. Eliot, Emily Hale, and *The Family Reunion***

*This paper in its longer form began with a discussion of how archival revelations have forced us to revise our estimations of Stein, Pound, Woolf, and Joyce. It then turned to a distinction between lyric reference and dramatic reference—a distinction that Eliot tells us he first came fully to understand in 1938.<sup>1</sup>*

Lyndall Gordon informs us that this is the year when we find “comments by Emily Hale” on one of the play’s many working drafts, suggesting that the character of Mary—distant, younger cousin of Harry, Lord Monchensey, the play’s protagonist—needed to be developed further (Gordon, [Eliot](#), 553). For seven years now, Mary has ghosted around Wishwood, the almost empty country house to which Harry briefly returns (he’s gone again, even before the end of the play), “waiting, waiting, always waiting” (246) for some life she might claim to begin. Eliot presses her into service in his play as a wrong choice, a path for his elected, self-immolating hero to refuse, a “tame

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. his letter to Emily Hale, 23 Feb 1937: “That’s what I should like to get—a situation—not just one figure to which all the rest are merely foils.”

daughter-in-law” who, in an alternative, domesticated version of this cruel drama, would be summoned by Harry’s mother Amy to be a “housekeeper-companion for her and Harry” (245).<sup>2</sup> She makes fleeting appearances in Part II of this two-part play; her longest and only substantive speech in that second part confirms that she has been doomed to an unfulfilled life since long before the curtain rose on this particular “afternoon in late March” (225). She chides herself for having hoped that she might apply for a fellowship with her Aunt Agatha’s help (245), maybe even to get a job, like Agatha, as a teacher, even though her aunt has hardly found happiness in that role: “thirty years of solitude, / Alone, among women, in a women’s college, / Trying not to dislike women” (282). Mary turns bitterly against herself as Harry’s departure claims everyone’s attention:

Of course it was much too late

Then, for anything to come for me: I should have known it;

It was all over, I believe, before it began;

But I deceived myself. It takes so many years

To learn than one is dead! (285)

Imagine, for a moment, Hale reading drafts of this play in 1938; imagine Eliot soliciting her advice; imagine her suggesting that Mary might be given a more substantial part.

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<sup>2</sup> On 19 March 1938, Eliot writes to Martin Browne, “the Furies (for the Furies are divine instruments, not simply hell-hounds) come in the nick of time to warn him away from this evasion” (Browne, [Making](#), 107). I return to this letter toward the end of this essay.

My dismay here is rooted in what I felt as I read through the letters of the later 1930s. 1937, the year in which, on 31 March, Eliot first tells Hale about the new play he's writing—"There is a nice little part, which I shall probably enlarge in the second act, for you or [Edith Evans](#)"—marks, in my estimation, a melancholy shift in the key of this relationship. Though there remain plenty of assurances that they have "entered new and further stage[s] of nearness" (21 September), I find the letters more filled with formulae, Eliot's closings growing more distant. There's a good deal of back-and-forth about Hale's depression and what hope might be found in psychiatric help. There's an awkward, months-long exchange about whether Hale should join Eliot in Edinburgh as he is to be presented with an honorary degree. Codifying his repeated dissuasions and discouragements, this thread contains, on 7 July, Eliot's numbered list laying out why her accompanying him is not a good idea. There are admonitions in response to Hale's obvious frustrations at them not making progress as a couple. Following what has obviously been a powerful, emotionally complex letter from her, Eliot advises, on 26 July: "we have always to learn what is never completely learnt, to take the longest view of things—so far as one can, that helps to be patient." In this same letter, he informs her: "your spiritual temptation is most likely to be that of discouragement and even despair—and despair is perhaps the deadliest of the sins," after which he moves into his case, prosecuted with increasing frequency (and, I can't help

adding, tiresomeness and tactlessness) against Unitarianism (Hale was a Unitarian). This letter is signed “Your Tom.” After her return to Northampton, Massachusetts in the fall, Eliot assures her on 21 September that “It seems increasingly natural to have you here, and increasingly strange that you should be at such a distance. But it was a good summer! . . . I shall write more regularly this winter—and until we meet in the summer again. Your Tom”; a week later (24 September) he agrees with her that “our having breakfast together here was an experience that takes its important place”; and a week after this (1 October), an assertion of their connection concludes, for me at least, with a dying fall: “you do not know how grateful I am to you for your goodness and sweetness, and what a help you have been and continue to be. Your loving Tom.”

Critical discussions of this play have dwelt primarily on Harry and on his aunt Agatha and his mother Amy. Eliot himself contributes to this focus in his well-known criticism of his play in “[Poetry and Drama](#)” (1951), where he confesses to “not knowing whether to consider his play the tragedy of the mother or the salvation of the son. The two situations are not reconciled.” He famously adds that his “hero now strikes me as an insufferable [prig](#)” (601). But there are more than two “situations” in *The Family Reunion*; it is Mary’s story that the Archive has made more real, more captivating, more heartwrenching than anything else in this cold drama. It is hard to believe that Eliot seems in

this gloss, as in much of the play itself, to have forgotten her.<sup>3</sup> For me, the Hale archive has forever changed the proportions of this play that was written and rewritten during some of the most fraught years of the Eliot-Hale relationship (1934-1938)—bringing Mary to the center of my attention.<sup>4</sup> Gordon’s essential critical biography had already called Mary downstage, noting “It may be that Emily’s fate was sealed from the time that [Eliot] first conceived the play in 1934-35. . . It is a one-man show” (Gordon, [Eliot](#), 333). And yet I’d offer a small but I think important revision, too, to Gordon’s assertion that Mary is “barely a character” (Gordon, [Eliot](#), 333). This becomes true by the play’s end, but the scene that closes the first part<sup>5</sup> of the play, which was, Gordon tells us, “the first scene that [Eliot] worked out in any detail” (Gordon, [Eliot](#), 322), is not only the showcase for Mary but a point where the play almost turns against itself and its hero, almost complicates its simplistic moral and theological schema, almost becomes the first successful instance of a new kind of verse drama that it was Eliot’s ambition to write, almost allows Mary a second act.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In her important recent piece in *Twentieth Century Literature* on the Archive, “[May the Record Speak](#),” Frances Dickey notes that “the ominous resolution of this play does not seem to have bothered Hale” (452). Dickey also discusses the letter to Martin Browne (quoted in note 1 and below) where Eliot talks about Harry’s horror of sexual women and of Harry’s attraction to Mary in particular (452).

<sup>4</sup> I base my dates on Gordon, *Imperfect Life*, 322ff. and Appendix V, 551-53.

<sup>5</sup> I use “part” and “act” interchangeably, as does Eliot himself.

<sup>6</sup> Eliot articulates his aim to create a new kind of drama in “Poetry and Drama”: “What we have to do is to bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre; not to transport the audience into some imaginary world totally unlike its own, an unreal world in which poetry is tolerated. . . . I was determined, therefore, in my next play to take a theme of contemporary life, with characters of our own time living in our own world. The Family Reunion was the result. Here my first concern was the problem of the versification, to find a rhythm close to contemporary speech, in which the stresses could be made to come wherever we should naturally put them, in uttering the

Eliot is uncharacteristically but revealingly obtuse in his [criticism](#) of the play (from which I've already quoted), when he tells us that, in addition to having botched his characterization, he was also vexed by problems with structure: he had written a "good first act," he allows, but had "not left myself enough time, or provided myself with enough material, for developing it in action" (600). His audience, then, in act two, "finds itself treated to a further exploration of the background" (600). These are actually aspects of a single problem, and Mary lies at the center of both. The dialogue between Mary and Harry that closes Act I provides plenty of "material" for development in a second act. The problem for Eliot is that it's rooted in Mary's powerful assertion of life: she speaks with both affective and analytical power (a combination hard to come by in Eliot's dramatic writing); she's capable, it turns out, of expressing herself and of providing rigorous, startlingly critical analyses of Harry as well as tentative but promising expressions of redemptive love. It's easy to feel, reaching the end of Act I, that we're going to watch a struggle for Harry's love and for his soul unfold, with Mary pitted against the Furies. Eliot won't allow this stirring of new life to continue its course, however, since Mary's continued vitality in the second act would come at the expense of Harry's simpler story of sacrificial aggrandisement as his creator has conceived it ("I must follow the bright angels" [281]). Mary is forced to return in Act II only to tell us, in the lines I've already quoted, that she died

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particular phrase on the particular occasion" ("[Poetry and Drama](#)," 598).

long ago.

I do not have space here to study the scene between Mary and Harry or a fine reading of the scene by Giles Evans in his [Wishwood Revisited](#) (1991) in the detail both deserve. I'll only focus here on a small handful of moments that will, I hope, suggest something of Mary's resources, of the richness of this scene, and of its unrealized potential for development. Though capable of lyricism and nuanced rumination, Mary often commands our attention with her directness. Recalling her shared childhood with Harry, she's refreshingly open: "We were rather in awe of you— / At least, I was" (247). Turning then to the current state of her heart, her capacity for honesty becomes devastating: "But why should I talk about my commonplace troubles? / They must seem very trivial indeed to you. / It's just ordinary hopelessness" (248-49). Harry misses the spare force of her final assertion. He responds by agreeing that, indeed, her troubles are uninteresting when set beside the singular nature of his experience. He tells her, again and again, how far she remains from comprehending loss or anguish: "you cannot know" "you do not know" he insists, eight times over the next two pages of dialogue (249-50). Not only is his experience unique, he tells the humble Mary; even his perceptions set him apart.<sup>7</sup> In one of the oddest bits of conversation we're ever likely to stumble

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<sup>7</sup> Eliot established this unfortunate idea of singling out a character early in his dramatic career (this passage is from the Charles Eliot Norton lectures he delivered in the winter of 1932-33): "My intention was to have one character whose sensibility and intelligence should be on the

over in any drama anywhere, Harry informs us that, in the twilight of a world that's lost its "glow," "the dead stone is seen to be batrachian / The aphyllous branch ophidan" (249). Mary's response to this baroque absurdity—Eliot's character doing his best imitation of a caricature of T. S. Eliot—is simply to point out that his linguistic contortions obscure any reality outside Harry's overwrought mind: "You bring your own landscape / No more real than the other" (249). In an earlier draft of the scene (when "aphyllous branch" was still only a "dry tree") she adds: "you take yourself too seriously like many people / Who are highly sensitive" (Browne, [Making](#), 97).

In "The Three Voices of Poetry," Eliot allows that he "can't see . . . any way to make a character live except to have a profound sympathy with that character" ("[Three Voices](#)," 821). For at least the duration of this scene, Mary's vitality is sustained by her creator's sympathy. A few exchanges after her reasonable suggestion that Harry's manacles are mind-forged, she delivers her greatest speech. It opens modestly ("I am not a wise person") but quickly mounts an analysis of Harry's misdirected life that is worthy to be placed beside the magisterial rebuke from *Little Gidding*'s compound ghost: "You attach yourself to loathing / As others do to loving. . . . You deceive

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plane of the most sensitive and intelligent members of the audience; his speeches should be addressed to them as much as to the other personages in the play--or, rather, should be addressed to the latter, who were to be material, literal-minded and visionless, with the consciousness of being overheard by the former. There was to be an understanding between this protagonist and a small number of the audience, while the rest of the audience would share the responses of the other characters in the play" ([UPUC](#), 691)



yourself” (250-51).<sup>8</sup> Her speech ends with an earned certainty, born from her understanding of her own sufferings as well as her comprehension of Harry’s: “I know that this is true” (251). She receives, for a few minutes before the Furies reappear, Harry’s grudging, tentative assent: “Perhaps you are right, though I do not know / How you should know it” (251).

And yet Eliot’s director and producer Martin [Browne](#) and his wife Henzie, responding to a draft of the play in March of 1938, can write with perfect accuracy that Mary “fades out” after her scene at the end of act one (Browne, [Making](#), 103).<sup>9</sup> Eliot’s often-quoted response to the Brownes’ letter insists that it is Harry’s fleeting “attraction” for Mary (the first such attraction since his dead wife blighted and “partially desexed” her husband) that lies at the heart of the scene, and that Harry’s feeling for Mary “glimmers” as a delusion, a “way of escape” from his fated rendezvous with the bright-angel-furies.<sup>10</sup> “Mary understands nothing,” Eliot insists to the Brownes, echoing his protagonist’s defensive closing of the door on this other person who stands with him on stage: “You do not know, / You cannot know, you cannot understand” (Browne, [Making](#), 107; 250). The letters Eliot wrote to Emily Hale, the contours of their relationship, as we can perceive those

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<sup>8</sup> The astonishing development of Mary’s great speech is evident when compared to its draft in Browne, [Making](#), 119-20.

<sup>9</sup> Henzie Browne’s suggestions about Mary’s backstory and lines for development (see Browne, [Making](#), 103) come remarkably close to central aspects of the Tom, Vivienne, and Emily triad.

<sup>10</sup> The scene has its counterpart, then, in the second act, where we witness Harry’s “attraction, half of a son, half of a lover, to Agatha” (Browne, [Making](#), 107).

contours from this distance and from our positions as outsiders, unravel Eliot's own understanding of his play—a play that remains marred by “some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art” (“[Hamlet](#),” 125). Eliot himself recognizes that his first attempt at realistic drama in a contemporary setting contains elements from his life that make it unstable. In a letter to Hale in August of 1949 (which refers, incidentally, to “a new secretary, who will start in ten days time”), Eliot contrasts *The Cocktail Party* with *The Family Reunion*, noting that he's achieved, in this “comedy” of 1950 what he hadn't wholly mastered in 1939: “something pretty objective. I see no trace of myself, or of you, or of anybody else, in the characters” (31 August 1949).

*The Family Reunion* remains, I think, a failure, but it's differently fascinating, darker, and more complex after the opening of the Archive, with drama surprising us, off center—a drama of Mary's discernment and resistance, a struggle, of sorts, between this woman who cries out at the end of the play's first act: “Look at me. You can depend on me” (253) and her creator, who does her in.