

ANALYSIS

Murder in the Cathedral (1935)



T. S. Eliot

(1888-1965)

“In A.D. 1170, Archbishop Thomas Becket returns to Canterbury from his seven-year exile in France. A women’s chorus represents the helpless attitude of the common people toward the schism between church and state, while the ecclesiastical party is represented by Becket’s priests, and the royal party is represented by the officers of Henry II. The archbishop, having established relations with the Pope and the king of France, is determined to bring the argument to a crisis, even though he realizes that his life is at stake.

Four Tempters show the inner conflict involved in his decision; his youthful love of pleasure, his later ambition for power, the demands of the feudal barons, and the desire for martyrdom. Rejecting all four, he is certain that he must give his life ‘to the Law of God above the Law of Man,’ and on Christmas morning delivers a sermon defending the position. Four days later the king’s knights arrive, insolent and self-assured, to murder him by royal command, and he refuses to attempt escape. After they stab him to death, the knights address the audience with a pompous, foolish defense of their deed. They withdraw, leaving the stage to the priests, who thank God for having ‘given us another Saint in Canterbury,’ and the chorus, which supplicates divine mercy.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-1983) 516

“Central to his mind is the doctrine of Incarnation, of God become man through the Savior, since Eliot holds that the nineteenth century substitution of Deification of man becoming God through his own potentialities, led ineluctably through hero worship to dictatorship. Eliot had not found a more solid basis for his politics, as he demonstrated in his play *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), where he contrasted Christian law with violent usurpation of the fascist kind. It was easy to say that Eliot’s religious poems were not widely representative of the age; but in a period of breakdown, moving into the shadow of war, they constituted some of the most sustained, if most somber, devotional poetry since the seventeenth century.”

“*Murder in the Cathedral*, like many of the morality plays, is a drama of temptation, but Becket as the great archbishop proves superior to his tempters. One of the most conspicuous technical triumphs in all Eliot’s poetry is in the choruses that were designed to be spoken by the working women of Canterbury. Here he carried further his experiments in finding verse forms suitable for ritualistic drama. He had no living stage tradition upon which to draw, but he believed that a chorus could still perform something of the same fundamental function that it had for the Greeks. It could ‘mediate between the action and the audience’; it could ‘intensify the action by projecting its emotional consequences, so that we as audience see it doubly, by seeing its effect on other people.’

Eliot’s women are there to watch and suffer, and their feelings are nearly all in the most sombre key. Their gamut is from nameless dread of foreboding to horror at the fact of Becket’s murder. Their lines are generally iambic, of greatly varying lengths, though...Eliot usually avoided the pentameter. He explored some of the possibilities of Hopkins’ sprung-rhythm, and carried it on occasion into a patterned prose, quickened by alliteration and internal rhyme. He was very dexterous throughout in organizing his speeches according to natural breath lengths.

His actors are also characterized by the verse they speak, so that there is a marked difference between the lilting cadences of the First Tempter, who tries to lure Becket by the memory of old pleasures, and the bluntness and force in the lines of those who tempt by power, either of the Chancellorship or of a new alliance with the barons against the King. The Fourth and last Tempter is at the top of a rising scale. For while the resumption of the role of Chancellor lay almost as remote from Becket’s present desires as did worldly pleasure, and while a coalition with the barons could stir him only momentarily, the Fourth Tempter alone is unexpected by Becket, and tempts him by his own deepest thoughts.... This had been Becket’s first speech in the play, reflecting on the lot of the Chorus, and the Fourth Tempter flings it back at him almost word for word. The firmness of its doctrine reveals how far Eliot has advanced in his possession of Dante’s conception of grace....

Eliot no longer dwells as he did earlier on ‘the eternal burden’ alone, but, in this subtle interweaving of suffering, striving, and acceptance, on the possibility of ‘the perpetual glory.’ But by making the Fourth Tempter penetrate to the same deep level of understanding, Eliot dramatizes Becket’s chief peril, the temptation to the proud mind to become so confident in its wisdom that it seeks—and takes for granted—a martyr’s crown as its reward: ‘The last temptation is the greatest treason: / To do the right deed for the wrong reason.’ In the meditation that closes the first act Becket wins through to the recognition that no man can will his way to martyrdom. ‘I shall no longer act or suffer to the sword’s end,’ he concludes, and submits his will to God’s.

In the sermon that serves for an interlude between the two acts, Becket reveals himself secure in this deeper reliance, and then, holding fast to his belief in the supremacy of God’s law above man’s law, he encounters the wrath of the Knights, who are the same as the four Tempters of the first act, and goes to his death unflinchingly. The blasphemy of the Knights’ deed is underscored by the fact that they advance to their bloodshed with phrases borrowed from spirituals and revival hymns just after the Chorus has voiced a despairing passage... The Knights then turn to the audience and in a passage of dramatic shock (which seemed too sudden in some performances, though highly effective in others) then drop into the prose of modern debate, and try to justify their act by all the rationalizations of expediency. But the ending belongs to the Priests and the Chorus mounting to a prayer of intercession to ‘blessed Thomas’...

[Eliot] was not writing a drama of disastrous pride like *Lear*, but a drama of pride overcome. His Becket, after resisting the tempters, is a ‘sanctified being,’ such as Eliot described in the epigraph to this chapter. Such an image, to be sure, greatly simplifies the actual figure concerning whom historians are still divided as to whether he fought at the last ‘for an idea’ or ‘for the humiliation’ of his opponent Henry II. In Eliot’s Anglo-Catholic belief Becket is a martyr, but the poet makes him a saint even in this life. He gives none of the flare-up of the natural man who was reported to have met Reginald FitzUrse, the leader of the

murderers, with the angry denunciation, 'you pander.' But if Eliot lost something of the human being in the ritualistic priest, even if his Becket, in the consciousness of his mission, barely escapes from 'the pride that apes humility,' Eliot managed to dramatize permanent issues.

He could do it since—as was not the case in *The Family Reunion*—he had grasped and interpreted a social context. He was aware that his conception of history ran contrary to that of a secular age, and one of his most striking passages is that in which Becket addresses the audience with a prophetic vision: 'I know / What yet remains to show you of my history / Will seem to most of you at best futility, / Senseless self-slaughter of a lunatic, / Arrogant passion of a fanatic.' The Fourth Tempter also looks ahead to the Reformation, when Becket's shrine will be pillaged...

One reason why Eliot could give an urgency to these reflections is that he was not writing about the past alone. As Becket went on to denounce indifference, oppression, and exploitation, as he gave his life 'to the Law of God above the Law of Man,' Eliot was writing also against the then rising menace of Fascism, when violent men comparable to Reginald FitzUrse took power into their own hands. Eliot bore out again thereby what he asserted about Pound's translations, that in possessing the past a poet could suggest the present. When he wrote 'The Waste Land,' he had also proved the reverse, but he could not do so in *The Family Reunion*. Perhaps his increasing sense of the degradation and decay of the modern world had gradually numbed him against any strong feeling for such immediate issues as Becket had faced. Although he wrote an essay about 'the idea of a Christian society,' when confronted with one of the sharpest-drawn crises of our own time, he replied to a questionnaire on loyalist Spain: 'While I am naturally sympathetic, I still feel convinced that it is best that at least a few men of letters should remain isolated, and take no part in these collective activities...'

Eliot could not contrive to endow his Eumenides with any of the collective significance that they possessed for the Greeks. It may also be argued that a mind as saturated with St. John's 'dark night of the soul' as Eliot has revealed himself to be in his *Quartets* may produce profound contemplative poetry, but it is unlikely to have sufficient closeness to human beings to present their conflicts concretely.... *Murder in the Cathedral*, including the sombre magnificence of its choruses, is the most sustained poetic drama in English since *Samson Agonistes* [by John Milton], and playable as that work was not designed to be. In spite of its stiffly restricted content, Eliot's drama is particularly impressive when set off against the dead background of the commercial theatre during the past decade.... Despite the long interruption of the war and the isolating rigors of Eliot's thought, it may be hoped that his play-writing is not yet a finished chapter.

Murder in the Cathedral was immensely successful for its immediate purpose in the chapter house at Canterbury. It demonstrated what Eliot meant by saying, in the final lines of his 'Dialogue': 'A continuous hour and a half of intense interest is what we need.' Despite the problem created by a chorus on the modern stage, the play demonstrated this again in a long run at the Mercury Theatre in London... It was one of the great successes of the WPA theatre in New York, where the Chorus was handled by dividing its lines among several individual speakers... In the spring after the liberation of France it scored a renewed triumph at the Vieux Colombier in a translation."

F. O. Matthiessen
The Achievement of T. S. Eliot
(1935, 1947; Oxford/Galaxy 1959) 162-65, 171-74

"Eliot's theory of poetic drama is that the play must be a 'musical pattern' which intensifies the action and the resultant emotion. He warns against allowing 'bursts of poetry' to be a substitute for action."

Lillian Herlands Hornstein, ed.
The Reader's Companion to World Literature
(New American Library/Mentor 1956) 147

"*Murder in the Cathedral* is the most important of Eliot's early plays. In form a verse tragedy, it takes for its subject the historical incident of the murder of the Archbishop Thomas Becket by followers of Henry II in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170 A.D. The form is rigidly classical, and a chorus is included in the

manner of the Greek tragedy. There is little action except for the murder itself; the play consists largely of a set of philosophical dialogues in which Thomas converses with his murderers and with others.

The central scene is the debate with four Tempters who symbolize the inner conflict in Thomas' mind: his youthful love of pleasure, his later ambition for power, the threat of the feudal barons, and his own egotistical desire for martyrdom. Rejecting all four temptations, Thomas goes on to deliver a masterful sermon in which he defines his own attitude toward the tragedy which is approaching him: 'The martyr no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of martyrdom.' When the king's knights arrive later to murder him he offers no resistance. After the deed the knights present a foolish and unconsciously ironic defense of their crime, and the drama ends as Thomas' priests thank God 'who has given us another Saint in Canterbury'."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 491

"A play in verse... This was Eliot's first completed drama and remains probably his most popular, although he himself expressed dissatisfaction with it. It is a work in the full tradition of the modern lyric theater, employing a herald, a lyric chorus, a cast of symbolical personages, and passages in unrestrained poetry alternating with others in prose. It was written for performance in a church and is a favorite work for amateur church theatrical groups. An operatic version, *Assassinio nella Cattedrale*, composed by Ildebrando Pissetti in 1958, was well received; an earlier film version (1952) was not.

The action of the drama depicts the last weeks in the life of Thomas a Becket; the quarrel between church and state is the main theme. Four Tempters, representing youthful love of pleasure, yearning for power, desire for the company of wealthy men, and pride as a longing for martyrdom, importune Becket, but he rejects all four and emphasizes his wish to serve the Law of God rather than the Law of Man. Four knights (perhaps reincarnations of the Four Temptations) carry out the assassination ordered by Henry II, justifying themselves in speeches.

Both Greek and medieval antecedents are observable in the play, but it remains thoroughly modern in tone and techniques and exhibits many of the rhythms and characteristic turns of speech of Eliot's lyric verse. Whereas in his later works for the stage, Eliot moved closer to the techniques of the Naturalistic theater, *Murder in the Cathedral* is drawn with an ideal simplicity, visually and poetically, that lends it great force and a classical somberness of movement. On the other hand, some critics have found it too argumentative, and too strongly appealing to the mind rather than the emotions."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 774

Michael Hollister (2016)