



History, Religion and Form in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*

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Abstract

Eliot reintroduced the element of the ritual that he found in Aristophanes and Greek drama in plays like *The Rock*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion*, and *The Cocktail Party*. Ritual in Eliot takes various forms. Purgation and renewal are also parts of Eliot's method of the ritual (Kojcky, 1971). Eliot's use of the Chorus also demonstrates the influence of Greek drama. He spiritualizes history. Thus *Murder in the Cathedral* is more of a monologue and many of the major characters do not appear on stage. The monologue acquaints the audience with the actual historical situation. The subject of Martyrdom is presented in a spiritual manner as happens in the medieval drama. This paper highlights those aspects of *Murder in the Cathedral* which make it an important landmark in the history of English drama.

Keywords: History, Poetic drama, chorus, religion

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I. Introduction

English poetic drama in the twentieth century arose as a reaction to the naturalistic prose plays of Ibsen, Shaw and Galsworthy. Its photographic realism failed to convey the tension and complexity of contemporary life. Eliot asserted that "no play should be written in verse for which prose is dramatically adequate." Clearly, the poetic drama needed to symbolise the emotional realities in contrary to the socioeconomic issues that constituted the naturalistic plays. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, he chose to retell the inner conflict of Becket to win over temptations and be a martyr by losing "his will in the will of God". This kind of writing technique makes the play a poetic drama.

2. Poetic drama

Poetic drama still needed a suitable verse form, as the Elizabethan blank verse became cliché in excessive use. *Murder in the Cathedral* marks the maturing stage of Eliot's experimentation with verse forms. The language of *Murder in the Cathedral* combines the metre of Morality Plays like *Everyman*. Eliot takes inspiration from the ancient Greek dramatists. At the same time the author follows Wordsworth's principle of 'a return to everyday speech.' It is almost like a mantra, incantatory and biblical. Some of the best poetry comes with the Chorus, as in Part I (Braybrooke, 1951):

"Here is no continuing city, here is no abiding stay.
Ill the wind, ill the time, uncertain the profit, certain the danger.
O late late, late is the time, late too late, and rotten the year;
Evil the wind, and bitter the sea, and grey the sky, grey greyness."

The choral songs attain splendour and stateliness appropriate to the lofty sentiment inherent in the spiritual theme – martyrdom.

The failure of the poetic drama in the bygone centuries chiefly rooted from its focus on outward decorations. Poetry must not be an embellishment to look at, but a medium to look through. Poetry in *Murder in the Cathedral* is not merely decorative (Brooker and Baltimore, 2014). It helps revealing the personae of the characters as the objective correlative of their minds. Its symbolism works out the thematic implications. The use of imagery contributes to it as in the Chorus's speech in Part II:

Clean the air! Clean the sky! wash the wind! Take stone from stone and wash them.
The land is foul, the water is foul, our beasts and ourselves defiled with blood.

A rain of blood has blinded my eyes

Eliot emphasised that instead of limiting the emotional range, the use of verse enlarges the appeal of the play, and can reach the most varied audience. *Murder in the Cathedral* unquestionably enjoys this wide range of possibilities. In addition to the theme of martyrdom the play presents the spiritual progress of the chorus. Thus *Murder in the Cathedral* becomes a great poetic drama of the modern age.

3. Chorus

In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot creates a series of equally interesting characters that each play a crucial role thought the play (Browne, 1969). The most unique role found within the play is the Women of Canterbury, or the Chorus. Throughout the piece, the Chorus delivers seven choral odes. These choral odes, when looked at as a collective work tell a story. They begin with brief foreshadowing of events that will occur later in the play, but then quickly jump into necessary storyline; one which summarizes the events of the pasts, and then immerses the audience into the common man's view of the events in the present.

The chorus commenced in Greek drama. Eliot has based *Murder in the Cathedral* on this 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.

At the same time, the Chorus portrays the awareness of martyrdom among the humanity in general (Cud and Baltimore, 2014). The women, like Thomas, have their moment of illumination. They develop in the course of the play to reach a point where they are able to praise and thank God for their involvement in the martyrdom. With the commencement of the second choral ode, the general mood shifts from confusion and waiting to fear. The fear of the second choral ode becomes a reality in the third. The fourth choral ode is more accepting, for the chorus knows that the death of Beckett is coming. As the fifth choral ode begins, the helplessness from the fourth choral ode carries over, but this time it is coupled with an air of guilt. The sixth choral ode is met with a shift from helplessness to intense distress as Archbishop Thomas Beckett has just been murdered. The final choral ode begins not with a grateful praise to an all powerful God. The entire choral ode reads like one long prayer of praise, thanks, and then contrition to a merciful God. In its beginning, they say, "We praise Thee, O God, for Thy glory displayed in all the creatures". Thus the chorus portrays a development towards spiritual realization.

Eliot has also enlarged the function of the Chorus by the beautiful poetry given to them (Eliot and Haughton, 2009). Some of the best poetry comes with the Chorus, as in Part I: "Here is no continuing city, here is no abiding stay.....heyear;Evil the wind, and bitter the sea, and grey the sky, grey greygrey." The poetry and the beautiful use of language makes the chorus one of the most important components of the play.

4. History

Murder in the Cathedral is a play based on the real-life historical conflict between King Henry II of England and Archbishop Thomas Becket. But Eliot deals neither with the personal conflict between Henry II and Thomas Beckett, nor he lay emphasis on the historical struggle between the church and the state, a conflict significant in the middle ages. Historical and political events are slashed to the minimum and the action of the play is confined to the days immediately before and after the crucial event of Becket's martyrdom. The reality was less a story of martyrdom—which Thomas in Eliot's play viewed suspiciously as a human weakness—than it is a story of a political assassination. But Eliot's play does not remain limited to that reality.

Henry decided to appoint his good friend and right-hand man, Thomas Becket, to the post of archbishop of Canterbury so that he would have an insider in the Church. But to everyone's surprise, Becket became a devout Catholic entirely devoted to Rome, which infuriated Henry. Becket refused to compromise on any issue; which allegedly prompted Henry to muse aloud, "Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?" This prompted four Knights of Henry to kill Beckett. But Eliot's play—and his view—is thus not just about the murder of Thomas à Becket. It is also about standing up for what is right in the face of the temptations of both power and glory. Henry expected Thomas to allow him to exploit his friendship and his church title in order to abuse the power of the Church for the benefit of the State. Thomas refused—a courageous display of not giving into power's pressures. Here, the right thing for the wrong reason!

Murder in the Cathedral is also a play in verse about the dangers of temptations on the way to sainthood or power. Thomas Becket resisted several temptations coupled with cajolery and threat (Huhn and Summer, 2012). He is offered a return to political power alongside King Henry while at the same time he is accused of disloyalty to the nation and his ecclesiastical office and threatened physically. He is tempted with a return to his halcyon youth with his friend Henry, and the concomitant danger of being forgotten by history.

Though tempted by sainthood and lured by power, Thomas sees martyrdom and pleasure as human weaknesses. To the tempters he responds with those famous words:

Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain;
Temptation shall not come in this kind again.
The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.

In this sense, the play becomes a story of martyrdom which portrays a surrender of the self to the will of the God. The progress of the chorus of women towards acceptance of Thomas's martyrdom also shows the spiritual nature of the play. The most important fact that does not allow the play to be called historical is the fact that Henry II is kept away from the play.

5. Religion

Eliot wrote *Murder in the Cathedral* for a religious occasion. He wrote the play for the Canterbury festival and intentionally chose the theme of religious martyrdom. During the course of the drama, Eliot reveals that a true martyr is God's humble servant who denies his own desires to follow Divine Will. In this sense a strong presence of religious sentiment can be easily traced in the play. At the same time, Eliot's protagonist Thomas Beckett had been canonized immediately after his murder. The play becomes a religious one because of this presence of a saint.

Written for a religious occasion, *Murder in the Cathedral* is saturated with biblical allusions and parallels to Christ's life. The description of Becket's arrival seems to be deliberately evocative of Christ's triumphant entry in Jerusalem. It was probably because Christ was subjected to three Temptations that Thomas says to the Fourth Tempter: "I expected Three visitors, not four." The Interlude seems to be a parallel to Christ's sermon following his Temptation in the wilderness. The second part of the play also seems to be modelled on a Christian mass. Thus the sermon of the Interlude is followed by the priests bearing banners. The allegations made by the Knights remind one of those made against Christ; and the proposed dinner with them is something like a grotesque parody of the Last Supper. In the predominant blood imagery in the choric ode, sung when Thomas is killed, there is a reminder of Pilate's attempts at freeing himself from the blood-guilt. The rain of blood also seems to suggest the darkness and earthquake that followed the crucifixion.

Murder in the Cathedral also rebuilds the atmosphere of the early stage of English drama performed in the church for religious instruction (McGill, 1980). The play edifies the audience about the true meaning of martyrdom. The play also invites the audience to celebrate the act of martyrdom as a sign of God's grace. However, *Murder in the Cathedral* is a religious play of Eliot's own type. Eliot tried to combine the religious interest with ordinary dramatic ones. Eliot tried to portray the impact of the spiritual principles on the lives of man in a realistic way. In *Murder in the Cathedral* the spiritual progress in the hero is reflected in the development of the chorus. In this way Eliot proves how religious drama can be both entertainment and an act of worship.

6. Martyrdom

Murder in the Cathedral explores the processes an individual must undergo if he is to give his life for his faith and how such a gift affects the martyr's world. The mental and spiritual processes leading to an acceptance of martyrdom and the means by which an individual gives himself completely to his faith are Eliot's concern here.

Thomas's interaction with the Four Tempters allows Eliot to dramatize the processes of denial and self-examination that a martyr must undergo (Misra, 1982). The First, Second, and Third Tempters are easily spurned by Thomas, who knows that their promises of temporal power and comfort are "puny" when compared to those offered by God. The fourth tempter forces on Thomas a crisis of self-examination. The Tempter tells him that "Saint and Martyr rule from the tomb". Thomas should "think of pilgrims, standing in line / Before the glittering jeweled shrine" and "Seek the way of martyrdom." But Thomas realizes that the Fourth Tempter has exposed his "own desires". Gradually it becomes evident that the fourth Tempter is not an external figure, but a part of Thomas himself. Finding no allure in physical pleasure and certainly no use for temporal government, Thomas can reject these ideas quite easily. This part of himself, however—the part of his soul that does, to some ambiguous degree, covet fame and glory—is more difficult to resist. If he is to be martyred, he must look deep within himself, listening to his own voice, in order to be sure that he is not the slave of vanity. Because of the Fourth Tempter's "friendly advice," Thomas is able to determine that "The last temptation is the greatest treason: 'To do the right deed for the wrong reason.'" What Thomas learns here from his own words being thrown back at him is that "action is suffering." He will "act" by allowing himself to "suffer" the presence and workings of God and act and suffer "to obey the will of God."

Thomas's newfound enlightenment is offered to his congregation when he preaches to them on Christmas Day. The sermon allows Eliot to demonstrate the depth of Thomas's understanding of the nature of

martyrdom. The true martyr has "lost his will in the will of God" and does not even desire "the glory of being a martyr." Part Two of the play presents the martyrdom that "Thomas awaits. Part Two examines the ways in which others may view and consider martyrdom. This is shown through the chorus developing right attitude towards martyrdom.

7. Conclusion

Although the original incident of the murder of Archbishop Thomas Beckett was more a political assassination, Eliot has used it as a spiritual examination of the nature of martyrdom. It becomes a part of Eliot continuous effort to kindle a sense spirituality in the humanity of twentieth century.

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