

# INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

T. S. Eliot's  
**Murder in the Cathedral**



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*Modern Critical Interpretations*

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T. S. Eliot's

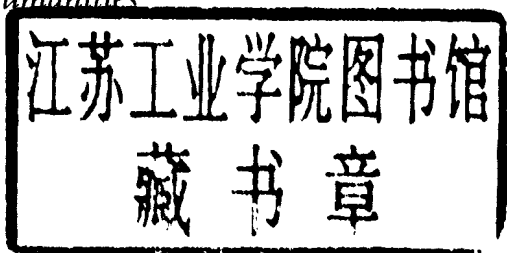
# Murder in the Cathedral

*Edited and with an introduction by*

Harold Bloom

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Modern Critical Interpretations  
T. S. Eliot's  
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## Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best critical interpretations of T. S. Eliot's drama *Murder in the Cathedral*. The critical essays here are reprinted in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Hillary Kelleher for her assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction expresses some polite reservations as to Eliot's success in having found dramatic embodiment for his spiritual intentions. Francis Fergusson begins the chronological sequence of criticism with his analysis of "the action-suffering, knowing-unknowing formula" of the play, after which the late Dame Helen Gardner wonders if "a more simple and conventional treatment" of Thomas would have been worthier of "the truth and grandeur of the choruses."

The eminent scholar of the mode of religiomeditative poetry, Louis L. Martz, compares two saints as tragic heroes, Eliot's Saint Thomas and Shaw's rather less orthodox Saint Joan. In a defense of Eliot's play, Carol H. Smith argues that its effectiveness is the result of "the new and less lateral conception of rhythm which Eliot used."

Katharine Worth finds theatrical originality in the play, while Michael Goldman traces in *Murder in the Cathedral's* design Eliot's central subject, self-loss and self-imprisonment. In David Ward's discussion, the emphasis is upon the drama's knowledge of the pain of Purgatory rather than its joy.

The poet Stephen Spender compares the play to Wagnerian opera, while Michael T. Beehler deconstructs *Murder in the Cathedral* as a "countersacramental" interplay of signs. In the reading of Robert W. Ayers, the drama is a liturgical act bordering upon the mode of apocalypse. Clifford Davidson concludes this volume by relating Eliot's work to the medieval tradition of saints' plays, and judging *Murder in the Cathedral* to have brought that past mode to life again.

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# Introduction

T. S. Eliot, for whom the *Essays* of Emerson were “already an encumbrance,” to cite his own testimony, was haunted by transcendence, very much in the mode of his Emersonian ancestors, rather than in the more severe and traditional mode, Anglo-Catholic and Counter-Reformation, towards which he aspired. Michael Goldman argues that the fear of being haunted by transcendence is the central design of Eliot’s dramas, including *Murder in the Cathedral*. Since *Murder in the Cathedral* was composed for the Canterbury Festival of June 1935, the play assumes that its audience will be at least ostensibly Christian. Francis Fergusson aptly applied to Eliot’s Canterbury drama Pascal’s analysis of the three discontinuous orders, nature, mind, charity, which Eliot had commended to “the modern world” in his introduction to the *Pensées*. On this reading, the Chorus are in the order of nature; Tempters, Knights and Priests belong to the order of mind; Thomas alone is in the transcendent order of charity.

Representing the order of divine love is, as all would agree, a rather difficult task, particularly upon a stage. Dante is the inevitable master here but no one would think of mounting a production of the *Paradiso*. *Sweeney Agonistes*, in my humble judgment, is by far Eliot’s finest dramatic work, easily surpassing *Murder in the Cathedral* and its successors. Dame Helen Gardner, who admired both Eliot’s poetry and his dogmatic convictions, admitted that the Canterbury drama lacked action and had an unconvincing hero, but found it “intensely moving and at times exciting when performed.” I have attended only one presentation of the play, somewhat reluctantly, but my reactions are to be distrusted, even by me, since I am not precisely the audience Eliot had in mind. Eliot remarked, in his “Thoughts after Lambeth,” that there could be no such thing as “a civilized non-Christian mentality.” I wonder always at a view of civilization and its discomforts that

excludes Freud as the representative instance of a civilized mentality in our era, but then Eliot's literary survival does not depend upon his ideological tractates.

How authentic a literary achievement is *Murder in the Cathedral*? Both Francis Fergusson and Stephen Spender have compared it to Wagner's operatic texts, and Eliot, who shared little else with Bernard Shaw, was as Wagnerian as Shaw. In some sense, *Murder in the Cathedral* mixes Wagner and Shaw, creating an amalgam of *Parsifal* and *Saint Joan*, unlikely composite. Since Baudelaire, Milton, and Sophocles are echoed also, sometimes gratuitously, one sometimes wonders why Eliot ransacks the tradition as he does in *Murder in the Cathedral*. He may have felt that he needed all the help he could get, since his multiple allusions give the effect of baroque elaboration, rather than that of fulfilling or transcending dramatic and literary tradition.

If Eliot's purpose had been essentially liturgical, then the triumph of *Murder in the Cathedral* would be unquestioned, since the drama, as doctrine, would have constituted a preaching to the supposedly converted. A saint's play is a hard matter in our time, and Shaw managed it, barely, by joining his *Joan* to the mode of Bunyan. Eliot commends *Everyman* as the unique play within the limits of art, but *Murder in the Cathedral* hardly sustains comparison to *Everyman*. Well, an admirer of Eliot might reply, *Saint Joan* is not exactly of the eminence of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, but then Bunyan's great narrative is not a stage drama. How well does Eliot do in the dramatic representation of Archbishop Thomas Becket? All that I ever can remember of what Eliot's Becket says is the first part of his climactic speech, after the Chorus implores him to save himself so that they too can survive, and just before he preaches his Christmas Morning sermon, which ends part 1 of the play. The Women of Canterbury fear the coming change, whether it be transcendence or the withdrawal of transcendence. Thomas ignores them, since he is interested only in the final Tempter, who offers what he desires, and appears to be his true self. Does he reject that true self, or Fourth Tempter?

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.  
 The natural vigour in the venial sin  
 Is the way in which our lives begin.

Thirty years ago, I searched all the ways  
 That lead to pleasure, advancement and praise.  
 Delight in sense, in learning and in thought,  
 Music and philosophy, curiosity,  
 The purple bullfinch in the lilac tree,  
 The tilt-yard skill, the strategy of chess,  
 Love in the garden, singing to the instrument,  
 Were all things equally desirable.  
 Ambition comes when early force is spent  
 And when we find no longer all things possible.  
 Ambition comes behind and unobservable.

But how can you represent, dramatically, a potential saint's refusal to yield to his own lust for martyrdom? Eliot did not know how to solve that dilemma, and evaded it, with some skill. There is epigrammatic force in Thomas's crucial couplet, but is there dramatic insight as well?

The last temptation is the greatest treason;  
 To do the right deed for the wrong reason.

Let us, wickedly, experiment with altering that neat couplet:

The last temptation is the greatest treason:  
 To write a Christian play for the wrong reason.

It is no accident that Thomas's speech takes its pathos from Eliot's literary and intellectual career, the movement from searching all the ways available to an authentic contemporary poetry, on to the spiritual ambition that came when early force was spent. It is also no accident that the imagery of the Chorus of the Women of Canterbury grows increasingly violent, until the poor ladies seem to have become victims of their own pathological fantasies:

I have smelt them, the death-bringers; now is too late  
 For action, too soon for contrition.  
 Nothing is possible but the shamed swoon  
 Of those consenting to the last humiliation.  
 I have consented, Lord Archbishop, have consented.  
 Am torn away, subdued, violated,  
 United to the spiritual flesh of nature,  
 Mastered by the animal powers of spirit,  
 Dominated by the lust of self-demolition,  
 By the final utter uttermost death of spirit,

By the final ecstasy of waste and shame,  
 O Lord Archbishop, O Thomas Archbishop, forgive us,  
                   forgive us, pray for us that we may pray for you, out  
                   of our shame.

There is an oxymoronic rapture in that chorus that amounts to having the right rape performed upon one for the wrong reason. Thomas replies by assuring the women that: "This is one moment, / But know that another / Shall pierce you with a sudden painful joy." Presumably he prophesies his own martyrdom, which they are bound to misapprehend. His rather odd attempt at consoling them ends with one of the most famous of Eliotic lines: "Human kind cannot bear very much reality." Freud says much the same, but by "reality" he meant the authentic consciousness of one's own mortality. Eliot meant the breaking in upon us of the order of charity. Between the Chorus of the Women of Canterbury and the sanctified Thomas, every reader and playgoer chooses the Chorus, who save Eliot's drama from having to bear too much of a transcendent reality that evades dramatic representation.

# *Murder in the Cathedral:* The Theological Scene

*Francis Fergusson*

*You know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer.  
You know and do not know, that acting is suffering,  
And suffering action. Neither does the actor suffer  
Nor the patient act. But both are fixed  
In an eternal action, an eternal patience  
To which all must consent that it may be willed  
And which all must suffer that they may will it,  
That the pattern may subsist, that the wheel may turn and still  
Be forever still.*

Thomas to the Women of Canterbury, and the  
Fourth Tempter to Thomas

*Murder in the Cathedral*, considered simply as a modern play, owes a great deal to continental theater-poetry, which I have sampled in the work of Pirandello, Cocteau, and Obey. It is most closely akin, in its dramaturgy and its formal sense, to *The Infernal Machine*: it has a similar coherence for the eye of the mind, a comparable esthetic intelligibility. It may be regarded as a work of art in the same way. But it is based upon a different idea of the theater; it seeks a different (and far more radical) basis in reality. It was written for the Canterbury Festival, June 1935, and it takes the audience as officially Christian. On this basis the play is a demonstration and expression of the “right reason” for martyrdom and, behind that, of the right doctrine of human life in general—orthodoxy. It is thus theology, a work of the intellect, as the continental plays are not. *The Infernal Machine* and *Noah* represent

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From *The Idea of a Theater: A Study of Ten Plays—The Art of Drama in Changing Perspective*. © 1949 by Princeton University Press.

myths; *Murder in the Cathedral* represents (by way of the story of Thomas à Becket) a type of *the* myth, the central, the basic myth of the whole culture. Only after its performance at the Canterbury Festival did it enjoy an after-life in the commercial theater in London, in our Federal Theater, and in the limbo of the academic theaters all over the world.

The continental plays came out of the theater, and Cocteau's phrase *poetry of the theater* applies to them accurately; but *Murder in the Cathedral* (in spite of its theatrical dexterity) did not. In this play Eliot is not so much a poet of the theater as a poet and theologian who uses the stage for his own purposes; and though he seems to have benefited from the Paris theater, he has no connection with any theatrical arts actually practiced in English. The play has some of the abstractness of *Everyman*, which Eliot has called the one play in English "within the limitations of art"; but he does not seek to reawaken this sense of drama, in the manner of Cocteau, for example, who with his "gloire classique," seeks to echo the not-quite-lost Baroque theatricality. In its conception, its thought, its considered invention of a whole idea of the theater, *Murder* is unique in our time; and it is therefore more important to investigate what kind of thing it is (and is not) than to reach any judgment of its ultimate value as drama.

The basic plot structure appears to be derived from the ritual form of ancient tragedy. The first part corresponds to the agon. The chief characters are the Chorus of Women of Canterbury, three Priests, four Tempters, and Thomas. The issue—whether and how Thomas is to suffer martyrdom for the authority of the Church—is most explicitly set forth in the scenes between Thomas and the Tempters, while the Priests worry about the physical security of the Church, and the Women suffer their premonitions of violation, a more metaphysical horror. The First Tempter, a courtier, offers pleasure, "kissing-time below the stairs." The Second, a Royalist politician, offers secular power, "rule for the good of the better cause." The Third, a baron, offers the snobbish comfort of acceptance by the best people, the security of the homogeneous class or tribe. These three echo motivations from Thomas's past, which he has completely transcended, and can now dismiss as "a cheat and a disappointment." But the Fourth Tempter offers Thomas the same formula ("You know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer") which Thomas had himself offered the Women when he first appeared; and he shows Thomas that his acted-suffered progress toward martyrdom is motivated by pride and aims at "general grasp of spiritual power." For the first time, Thomas nearly despairs:

"Is there no way, in my soul's sickness / Does not lead to damnation in pride?" he asks. There follows a chorus in four parts, triumphant Tempters, Priests, and Women, envisaging and suffering Thomas's danger in their various ways; after which Thomas sees his way clear, the "right reason" for suffering martyrdom. This is the climax and peripety of Thomas's drama and the dramatic center of the play; and I shall consider it in more detail below. It concludes the first part.

There follows an Interlude: Thomas's Christmas sermon addressed directly to the audience. He sets forth the timeless theory of the paradox of martyrdom: mourning and rejoicing, living and dying in one: the bloody seed of the Church. From the point of view of the dramatic form, it corresponds to the epiphany following the agon and the choral pathos of part 1. It is also another demonstration, in another mode of discourse and another theatrical convention (the sermon), of the basic idea of the play.

Part 2 is, from the point of view of Thomas's drama, merely the overt result, the more extended pathos and epiphany, of his agon with the Tempters: he merely suffers (and the audience sees in more literal terms) what he had foreseen at the end of part 1. This part of the play is in broad, spectacular effects of various kinds. First there is the procession of the Priests with banners commemorating three saints' days: those of St. Stephen, St. John the Apostle, and the Holy Innocents. The four Knights (who replace the Tempters of part 1 and, as a group, correspond to them) come to demand that Thomas yield to the King, and then they kill and sanctify him at once. The killing is enacted in several steps, including a chorus in English (one of the best in the play) while the *Dies Irae* is sung offstage in Latin. After the killing the Knights advance to the front of the stage and rationalize the murder in the best British common sense political style. The immediate effect of the Knights is farcical—but, if one is following the successive illustrations of the idea of the play, their rationalization immediately fits as another instance of wrong reason. If it is farce, it is like the farce of the Porter in *Macbeth*: it embodies another aspect of the subject of the play. Part 2 as a whole, corresponding to a Shakespearean last act and to the catastrophe with chorus and visual effects at the end of a Greek tragedy, is rhythmic, visual, exciting, and musical—contrasting with part 1 which is addressed essentially to the understanding.

Though the form of the play is derived from ritual tragedy, it is far more abstractly understood than any traditional ritual tragedy. It is based not only upon Dionysian but also upon Christian ritual, and

upon the resemblance between them. The human scene, or social focus, is generalized in the same way: the Cathedral is neither Canterbury in 1935 nor Canterbury in 1170 but a scheme referring to both, and also to a social order like that which Sophoclean tragedy reflects; a three-part order consisting of the people, individuals with responsible roles in church or state, and the shepherd of the flock who is responsible for the tribal religion. Hence the *dramatis personae* are, in their initial conception, not so much real individuals as roles in the life of the schematic community: there are resemblances between Knights and Tempters, and between both and the Priests, which deprive all of them of complete individuality and point to ideas which the stage figures represent. The peculiar qualities of the play—its great intellectual scope and distinction as well as its allegorical dramatic style—rest upon the abstractness of its basic conception, so unlike that of ritual drama in a living tradition. The best place to study the scheme, or the dramatic machinery of the play, is Thomas's peripety at the end of part 1.

The ways which Eliot finds to represent Thomas at the crucial moment of his career are entirely unlike those by which Obey presents his Noah. Obey makes-believe Noah as a real man and "God's world" as real. He then shows Noah living moment by moment, in the alternation of light and darkness, and in the palpable effort to obey his *Deus Absconditus*: he appeals to our direct perception and to analogies in our own experience. Eliot does not seek to grasp Thomas imaginatively as a person; he rather postulates such a man, and places him, not in God's world but in a theological scheme. He then indicates both the man and his real, i.e., theological, situation indirectly by means of the significant elements which he assembles: Tempters, Priests, and Chorus of Women.

The first three Tempters do not tempt Thomas, because he is completely beyond the temptations they offer. They set forth three forms of temptation which are not so much realized in human character as expressed in the varied music and imagery of their verse. The Fourth Tempter does not really tempt Thomas either: he reveals a temptation to which Thomas is in danger of succumbing; but as soon as Thomas sees it, it ceases to be a temptation and becomes the instrument of purgatorial suffering. From this suffering come Thomas's desperate questions or appeals, ending with "Can I neither act nor suffer / Without perdition?" To which the Fourth Tempter replies with the action-passion paradox which I have quoted. There follows a choral passage in four parts which, in its development, resembles what



Thomas must be undergoing. The four Tempters chant their triumphant despair: "Man's life is a cheat and a disappointment." The Priests utter their very secular fright: "Should we not wait for the sea to subside?" The Chorus, the Priests, and the Tempters in alternation present a vision of horror: "Death has a hundred hands and walks by a thousand ways." The Chorus then appeals to Thomas: "God gave us always some reason, some hope," they chant, "but now a new terror has soiled us"; and the passage concludes,

O Thomas Archbishop, save us, save us, save yourself that  
we may be saved;  
Destroy yourself and we are destroyed.

To which Thomas answers (though, it seems, not directly to the Chorus):

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.

He then thinks over his career as he now sees it: his deluded pursuit of worldly triumphs, pleasures, and powers—talking to himself or the audience rather than to any of the figures onstage.

The difficulty of this passage is in grasping Thomas's peripety (or conversion) dramatically; and this is a matter both of the action Eliot is imitating and of the means he uses.

The chief means is the four-part chorus. *Murder* is the only modern play in which the chorus is an essential part of the dramatic scheme, and here the chorus plays a role similar in several respects to that of the Sophoclean chorus: i.e., it expresses, in the music and imagery of verse, if not what Thomas suffers, at least the suffering (depraved or painful) which results from Thomas's peril—a suffering similar to his yet on a completely different level of awareness, as the suffering of the Sophoclean chorus, in its real but mysterious world, is not. This chorus also reveals to Thomas the "right reason" (charity) for his martyrdom; but here again it does so without understanding anything itself, whereas the Sophoclean chorus, dim though its awareness is, to some degree shares a sense of the final good of all. We must suppose that Thomas hears their chanted appeal, and sees thereby the will of God (as distinguished from his own ambitious or suicidal will) in his progress toward martyrdom. Thus Eliot has arranged the elements of his composition in such a way that we may (like Thomas himself) deduce both his