



Murder in the Cathedral

T.S. Eliot

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T. S. Eliot's verse dramatization of the murder of Thomas Becket at Canterbury, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature

The Archbishop Thomas Becket speaks fatal words before he is martyred in T. S. Eliot's best-known drama, based on the murder of the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1170. Praised for its poetically masterful handling of issues of faith, politics, and the common good, T. S. Eliot's play bolstered his reputation as the most significant poet of his time.

Murder in the Cathedral Details

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From Reader Review Murder in the Cathedral for online ebook

Jonfaith says

Human kind cannot bear very much reality.

The structure of this play is gripping. The use of the chorus was very effective, whereas the depiction of a conflicted Becket in dialogue with his temptations could've been explored further. The absence of Henry II makes matters more human and inchoate. The state is thus shorn of personality. The debate of ideas and sacrifice reminded me of the debate surrounding Edward Snowden. Unfortunately I began to ponder and compare the fixed points of liberty and security and my attention drifted.

Nick Gibson says

Aesthetically fantastic. Displays many the New Criticism's strengths. Eliot is concise, liberated from cliché, informed by historical consciousness, wary of strict rhyme and meter, yet not fully detached from the stream of Western poetry.

I know the theme is usually understood to be an individual's defiance of state power, but I read it differently. Becket's temptation and final choice is a case study in the need to maintain the detachment of the visible church as an institution in service of the invisible body of Christ despite the demands of class acceptance and social justice/reform.

Either way, there's plenty sharp, original language to enjoy here:

"Human kind cannot bear very much reality."

"You argue by results, / as this world does, / to settle if an act be good or bad."

Cbj says

Murder in the Cathedral was first staged in the 1930's when the importance of the church in the individual's life was on the decline. Moreover, the religious order and the Catholic Church were being persecuted in many countries across Europe, especially in Germany, Spain and Mexico. Writers such as James Joyce had already begun to express dissent against the Catholic Church through novels like *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In the novel, a young Stephen Dedalus begins to struggle with his suspicion for the doctrines of the church which he used to follow very rigidly.

So it must be remembered that the audience in the 1930's for a play like *Murder in the Cathedral* was almost certainly one which was getting used to the idea of subordination of church to the state. Such an audience would reject all kinds of superstitions and notions such as sacredness of the Catholic Church. *Murder in the Cathedral* is significant in this regard because T.S.Eliot tried to reimagine an important event that took place in the 12th century for a 20th century audience. Eliot is attempting to explain the concept of sacredness to a 20th century audience whose psyche has been ravaged by industrialization, war and materialism.

It must also be noted that fascism was on the rise across Europe in the 1930's when *Murder in the Cathedral* was first staged. The brutal murder of Becket by the four knights may represent the innate tendency of

fascists to commit heinous acts of violence and use propaganda to convince the public that there was no other way to solve the problem at hand. After the four knights murder Becket, they address the audience and try to rationalize and explain the horrible murder committed by them. This is one of the two instances in the play when Eliot uses prose. The First Knight tries to arouse patriotic sentiments among the audience by saying that as Englishmen they should follow the long-established principle of Trial by Jury. The Third Knight also tries to arouse patriotic sentiments by saying that he and his compatriots were four normal Englishmen who put their country first. The Second Knight justifies the use of violence to secure social justice. The Fourth Knight blames the murder on Beckett by saying that he invited the murder upon himself as he was determined upon a death by martyrdom. The speeches of the four knights may be compared to the propaganda spread by the Nazis in the 1930s which tried to arouse patriotic sentiments and also rationalize unspeakable acts of violence.

Murder in the Cathedral is a very significant play because it tried to explain the concept of sacredness of the Catholic Church to a 20th century audience while also making it relevant by comparing the four Knights to the Nazis who were creating havoc across Europe.

Luís C. says

Murder in the Cathedral by T.S. Eliot. A play based on the murder of Thomas Becket (Archbishop of Canterbury - in the 12th century) by knights loyal to King Henry II. Becket and Henry had been very close friends, some comparisons were established between this relationship and that of Henry VIII and Thomas More; both involve the conflict of the role of the state (secularism) versus the church (religion) in which they regulate human affairs.

The play begins with Thomas returning from exile in France. It is marked by the presence of priests and accompanied by a chorus of women whose anxieties for their safety, and their own well - being, increasing their disturbing intensity as the piece reaches its climax. Becket is tempted by four individuals, representing: worldly pleasures; temporal power against the king; temporal power against the king's enemies (the barons), and spiritual power and glory. He eloquently confronts each of them, in turn, almost succumbing, however, to the last of them, which he considered the greatest betrayal. Announcing his recent enlightenment, he triumphantly dies at the hands of knights-a true martyr; He did not actively seek his own death and glory, but submitted himself to a destiny ordained by God. The knights, echoing the characteristics of the four tempters, in an attempt to justify their actions, in which Eliot deftly represents.

Tracey says

This is a drama written by the poet and Nobel prize winner T S Eliot, concerning the murder of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Beckett in 1170.

Thomas Beckett was made Chancellor (a political position) by King Henry II of England and later he made him Archbishop of Canterbury (an ecclesiastical position) which is the major see of the church in England. Thomas had a battle of conscience because he recognised that church and state would now in law be joined. He decided in favour of his faith and God and renounced the chancellorship. King Henry wanted the church to be under the power of the state, or King, and in the ensuing disagreement, Thomas fled to France and was in exile for 7 years. The Pope put England and the King under excommunication and thus the King had to back down and allow Thomas to return as Archbishop. Obviously, the king was not a happy man about all this and is claimed to have said words to the effect of wanting someone to get rid of this man for him;

"Who will rid me of this meddling priest?"

Four knights stepped up to the challenge and the rest, as they say, is history.

<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/be...>

There are some wonderful lines in the drama where Thomas is tempted 4 times;

The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right thing for the wrong reason.

Interesting choice of word, treason; to act against one's nation or sovereign. But in this case Eliot means not merely King Henry II and the English people, who he wants to be faithful to, but his higher monarch of the Lord Jesus Christ and the church of God.

I am glad I took the time to read this short work.

Ariya says

Meanwhile in Thailand, where the law is violating the human's right and twisting the martyrdom into the sacred sacrifice, this book is a parallel for what surrealistically happened in country. It is exploring the execution of a person that is worthwhile for the so-called social justice, and the exhibit institution is maltreating people's belief.

Robert Clay says

I enjoyed this read, in large part because I just happened to read it in a cold and icy late December, which is the setting of the play. It's good winter fare; I particularly enjoyed the chorus of the Women of Canterbury; lots about the cyclical, mundane, and hard life of the common people, at the mercy of events swirling around them as they go about their daily labors. "For us, the poor, there is no action, But only to wait and to witness."

This is a verse play, and the first I've read of Eliot (other than a poem or two). I say I enjoyed it, though not being a dramatist or a profound thinker myself, I feel that there is a lot I missed. Is there an overall message Eliot wishes to convey? Is he on the side of Thomas, the resigned martyr, who, while recognizing that "The last temptation is the greatest treason, to do the right deed for the wrong reason," nevertheless seems no less prideful and bent on martyrdom as a means of triumph and glorification? Or does he sympathize with the knights, the assassins whose frank apologetics after the murder I found to be both reasoned and convincing? Perhaps Eliot wishes simply to convey the futility of all our stratagems in the face of the "turning of the wheel?" "Destiny waits in the hand of God, not the hands of statesmen."

Being a student of history, I found the following passage particularly well-placed:

(The Fourth Tempter speaking to Thomas)

"You have also thought, sometimes at your prayers,
Sometimes hesitating at the angles of stairs,
And between sleep and waking, early in the morning,
When the bird cries, have thought of further scorning.

That nothing lasts, but the wheel turns,
The nest is rifled, and the bird mourns;
That the shrine shall be pillaged and the gold spent,
The jewels gone for light ladies' ornament,
The sanctuary broken, and its stores
Swept into the laps of parasites and whores.
When miracles cease and the faithful desert you.
And men shall only do their best to forget you.
And later is worse, when men will not hate you
Enough to defame or to execrate you,
But pondering the qualities that you lacked
Will only try to find the historical fact.
When men shall declare that there was no mystery
About this man who played a certain part in history."

I think I'll be reading this one again.

Terry says

I would give this 3 1/2 stars if I could, and it was definitely trending toward 4 stars. I love Eliot's poetry, and even spent a semester in college studying it. This is written very poetically in structure and vocabulary. If you love history and great literature you will love this play. It is very Shakespearean in the way it reads. This play is also timely in that it deals with questions of when do you obey the government, when do you resist, when do you acquiesce to laws, and when you do fight to change them and the political structure. There are other great philosophical elements to this play as well. You should check it out!

Quill says

The Basics

An historical play written in verse that tells of the murder of the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1170.

My Thoughts

Talk about going outside of your comfort zone. I don't read a lot of poetry. I don't read a lot of plays. And I don't read a lot of historical fiction. That title, though. I couldn't resist that title. Also, T.S. Eliot is a famous poet, and I've read some of his more famous works, enough to make me intrigued when I see his name. In the end, what can I say? I enjoyed it.

There are some stories that, while the plot may be vaguely intriguing and you could cite only having somewhat of an interest in what goes on, the language makes it. The style and the poetry and the language are what makes this sing. Particularly the passages for the female chorus. I'm not saying the story isn't interesting, because it is. But it's also very basic. The Archbishop is in a bad position politically, he won't do what he's told by the higher-ups, so he dies. There are no surprises here, but the way Eliot chooses to tell the story, everything from word choices to the style of the play, makes up for a lot.

The one thing that felt like a completely bizarre choice on Eliot's part was a portion of the play when the

knights step forward to tell their tale. It seemed humorous to me, and I can't honestly tell if it was supposed to be funny. That's maybe its weakest spot, but it's a nitpick when really I was reading this play to experience some great poetry, and I received that.

Final Rating

4/5

David Withun says

One of T.S. Eliot's masterpieces, *Murder in the Cathedral* is a drama of the return to England and martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket. From the historical events, Eliot creates a piece of writing that is simultaneously, and in equal proportions, a prayer, a study in the psychology of both the murderer and the martyr, and a meditation upon the proper relationship between church and state. The result is one of the greatest works of 20th century literature in the English language.

Eliot begins shortly before Thomas's return to Canterbury following seven years in France. A feeling of trepidation is already in the air. The players, like the audience, know already what is going to happen.

Upon Thomas's return, he is haunted by four successive temptations. The first three are the obvious temptations of anyone in his position: power, ease, and treason. The fourth, however, comes as a surprise even to Thomas: the temptation to do the right thing, to embrace martyrdom, but for the wrong reasons. Thomas conquers each temptation in turn. The "Interlude," a homily by Thomas upon martyrdom, finally shows that he has conquered the fourth temptation.

After the murder of Thomas, the knights who have killed him each in turn step forward to justify themselves to the audience. Just as Thomas's homily revealed the mind of the martyr, the mind of the murderer is revealed in the defenses given by each knight for his actions. The audience is asked to decide who was in the right, if anyone. Perhaps, Eliot seems to indicate, both Henry and Thomas, as well as the knights, were doing their duty, however much the particular duty of each might bring them into conflict with the other.

The book concludes, as it ought, with a prayer to God as well as to St. Thomas, the martyr, not with an invocation of the king. "Blessed Thomas, pray for us."

Petruccio Hambasket IV says

Wonderful writing. Deals with the thoughts of Thomas Becket before he is confronted with his royal assassins. I don't have the slightest idea how this could ever be performed as a play however. The lines are too personal, too absorbed in the folds of their own meaning to be neatly expressed to a large group of festival onlookers (the original design of the work).

Eliot's writing is weighty as per usual and does not lose its touch from being written into theater. The strangest part of this entire work is the Knights behavior post-murder, since they decide that after their bloody deed the best course of action is to face the crowd and give a Ciceronian style oration one by one in defense of their actions. Either way a good read, and it doesn't get too religious on you.

They know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer.

They know and do not know, that acting is suffering
And suffering is 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, for the pattern is the action
And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still
Be forever still

Juliette says

I never liked T.S. Eliot. When I was a teenager, “The Waste Land” was agony. Now that I’m an adult, I see the truth in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” but that’s another review altogether. Nevertheless, I was weary of “Murder in the Cathedral.”

But I have a soft spot in my heart for Thomas Becket. Thomas worked for his education. While studying law, he was mocked by his peers because he didn’t come from a wealthy family and didn’t have the same experiences that they had. But then, he rose in the ranks of English society to become the second most powerful man in England — more accurately, he became the *other* most important man in England. Until. . .

Henry II tried to destroy the wall between the English church and the English state so that the state could control the church. If he had succeeded, Henry would have become *the* most powerful man in England. Thomas defied him.

Saint and Martyr rule from the tomb.

We meet Thomas in the final days of his defiance. Everyone knows what is coming, and an ominous cloak hangs over Canterbury.

I liked that Eliot personified the temptations that Thomas faced: his friendship with Henry, the chance for earthly power, the good of the English church, and the glory of martyrdom. The glory of martyrdom is the most seductive of all: “The last temptation is the greatest treason: / To do the right deed for the wrong reason.” The scenes with the temptations mirrored Christ’s agony in Gethsemane, except that Eliot gave voice to the thoughts that would have restrained Thomas. The Bible never takes that liberty.

Eliot breaks the rhythm of the poem to allow Thomas to preach to the audience. I loved that Eliot allows Thomas this opportunity. It gives lie to the idea that Thomas does the right deed for the wrong reason: “[T]he true martyr is he . . . who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr.”

Eliot’s Thomas has no self-service on his conscience.

Then there is the martyrdom.

I thought the play would have ended with Thomas’ death. Then, Eliot breaks down the fourth wall again. The soldiers address the audience. I liked that Eliot allows this, too. One of the soldiers speaks a truth that I had not considered: one generation earlier, the kingdom was divided by the Anarchy, and the rift between

Thomas and Henry threatened to divide it again. I had always seen the struggle between the men as a power struggle. Thomas' Third Temptation and the Second Knight say the nation itself was in jeopardy. The martyrdom unified the kingdom.

The play is not merely a hagiography. The play isn't Eliot aggrandizing himself. The play is bigger than either Thomas.

Thomas Eliot and Thomas Becket, together, are magic.

Christina says

I do much better when I can see a play rather than read it, and Murder in the Cathedral is one I definitely needed to see. In fact, Murder in the Cathedral was one of the harder plays for me to read, and I think it would have helped if I had at least listened to it on tape because then I could hear the different voices.

As is it, Murder in the Cathedral was hard to visualize, and I spent most of my time being lost in the language rather than the plot. I finished it and immediately asked, "okay...what happened?"

I guess it's just another play I need to see rather than read.

ladydusk says

Own.

I've never read any Eliot before and reading this does not dissuade me from reading more. I loved this.

I didn't get most or all of it, I'm sure, but the parts I did comprehend are good and true and beautiful.

All men seek peace. We seek peace wrongly, we seek wrong peace, we misunderstand the peace that is given in Christ. Eliot shows us glimpses of this as he looks at peace - temporal and eternal - through temptation and death. The hinge of Becket's Christmas Day sermon shows us this.

The first half - with the chorus awaiting his return after seven long years - reminds us that life is both static and dynamic. The seasons change and go on and work continues in its repetition. But going back for repetition of situation is not possible. The chorus is waiting for Becket almost as we wait for Jesus to return; almost, but not quite. I think we're supposed to consider that, though. Waiting is not the peace that is left for us.

The temptations are sent to destroy Becket's peace, even as Jesus was tempted in the desert. If the test fails - particularly the last tests - both would fail in the work they've been given. Becket's temptations - memory and nostalgia of a good life; secular power over the church; ecclesiastical power over the state; and the final, most spiritual battle with himself, when being humble is the highest virtue how does one avoid humility for gain?

You only offer
Dreams to damnation

and

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

and

To become servant of God was never my wish.
Servant of God has chance of greater sin
And sorrow, than the man who serves a king.
For those who serve the greater cause may make the cause serve them,

Becket defeats the temptation, not in the same way as Christ who used scripture against his tempter, but through reason. And so he can preach,

A martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways. It is never the design of man: for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr.

And then the knights arrive.

The second part goes quickly. It's action and violence, accusation and pulling away. Becket stands open to what is in store for him, refusing even to bar the church closed. His priests are afraid for him - pulling, hurrying, pleading, attempting to protect. They're rushing him from here to there to avoid the fate he's expecting. If the chorus was waiting for his return, he is expecting the events. What is the difference here between waiting and expectation? And which gives us peace? Which fear?

Thomas: Peace! be quiet! remember where you are, and what is happening;
No life here is sought for but mine,
And I am not in danger: only near to death.

Emphasis mine.

Becket is at peace because he is expecting the events to unfold as they do. He knows that the church stands not as the world does and that Christ's peace is not as the world gives. He demands the doors unbarred. He demands,

You think me reckless, desperate and mad.
You argue by results, as this world does,
To settle if an act be good or bad.
You defer to the fact. For every life and every act
Consequence of good and evil can be shown.

He knows that

Not to fight with beasts as men. We have fought the beast
And have conquered. We have only to conquer
Now, by suffering. This is the easier victory.
Now is the triumph of the Cross, now
Open the door! I command it. OPEN THE DOOR!

The knights kill him. The chorus grieves.

Then they return to their work, because time marches on and there's nothing they can do.

The knights return to try to excuse their complicity - with arguments of honour; loyalty and duty ("only following orders"); reason and law; and, finally, victim blaming. They leave with warnings of possible riots and the dire consequences thereof. They have not brought peace.

The priests return. They don't really understand, either. One waits for the potential consequence of atheism in the country. Another is not so fearful, but is certainly cynical about martyrdom and its cost. They have no peace.

Eliot weaves many themes - waiting and expectation, peace and fear, and the march of time together to create a whole. Eliot's time moves ever forward. It is inexorable. How will we use it? Will we, like the chorus wait, endlessly striving at vain work in fear? Or will we work in peace with expectation toward the Kingdom coming? What will tempt us away from patient expectation? Who will attack? Are we seeking peace, peace where there is no peace? or are we receiving from the Prince of Peace the peace that only He can give?

Edlira Dibrani says

A perfect book.

Review to come.

Scriptor Ignotus says

Even in this largely post-Christian era, the image of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, being

hacked to pieces by armored knights in front of a church altar carries an arresting level of symbolic and emotive power. We see a priest--a guardian of the sacred, transcendent, and traditional, servant of a truth not of this world--brutally cut down by the iron hand of secular power and its Machiavellian moral calculations. The history of the long feud between Becket and Henry II is a captivating one; and Eliot is right to frame its ghastly end, as I think he does, as a symbolic moment in which the conservative and medieval conception of a social order in which all utilitarian interests-- political, economic, social, or otherwise--are subordinated to, or embedded within, Christian morality, was usurped and upended by the secular and demotic interest, thus birthing the modern world.

The poem-drama begins with Becket's return to England from a long exile in northern France. He is approached by four Tempters, who tempt him with such things as wealth, power, and even the peculiar glory of sainthood. Becket rejects each of these temptations in turn, and the middle of the drama features an interlude in which he delivers a Christmas sermon reflecting on the close proximity of masses celebrating the birth of Jesus and the martyrdom of Saint Stephen on the liturgical calendar. Sensing that he will soon become a martyr himself, Becket suggests that the Christian way is to both mourn and celebrate martyrdom simultaneously. Even the martyrdom that will soon be his is a providential act of God to draw the world to repentance. Martyrdom is not something someone can wish for, and only those who have overcome every earthly temptation, including the desire to become a saint, are worthy of it.

Then, of course, the four knights arrive. After performing their deathly assignment, the drama takes on an almost satirical tone as each of the knights turns to the audience and attempts to justify himself. Their defenses are at least superficially reasonable, but do little to compensate for the profound sacrilege they have committed. So it is with the modern world, in which everyone seems to have a separate grievance with an indefinable "status-quo"; but these grievances serve as little more than self-justifications for doing what they want to do anyway.

Richard says

This is a very fine work which treats the murder of a twelfth century Archbishop so as to reflect on universal questions of morality concerning spiritual obligations and political expediency. Particularly powerful are the great statements of the Chorus which begin in fear and despair but end in hope.

The outer conflict is between Henry and Becket; the inner conflict is within Becket and the universal level is between the eternal/spiritual and temporal/material.

The chorus is wonderful. They are not mere commentators but crystallise very real concerns related to everyday life. They question the relevance to martyrdom in the world. They must deal with reality:

"Now I fear disturbance of the quiet seasons:
winter shall come bringing death from the sea,
Ruinous spring shall beat at our doors,
Root and shoot shall eat our eyes and our ears,
Disastrous summer burn up the beds of our streams
And the poor shall wait for another decayin October. "

The three priests are icons of belief approaches.
The first priest is basically pessimistic.

"Shall these things not end

Until the poor at the gate
Have forgotten their friend, their Father in God, have forgotten
That they had a friend?"

The second priest is politically conscious and willing to take an optimistic line.

"The Archbishop shall be at our head, dispelling dismay and doubt.
He will tell us what we are to do, he will give us orders, instruct us.
Our Lord is at one with the Pope, and also the King of France."

The third priest is the most spiritual and the least worldly; he has a deep sense of the mystery of destiny's great wheel:

"for good or ill, let the wheel turn.
The wheel has been still, these seven years and no good.
For ill or good, let the wheel turn.
for who knows the end of good or evil?
Until the grinders cease
And the door shall be shut in the street,
And all the daughters of music shall be brought low."

The speeches by the priests are followed by an extended chorus--one which tries to find peace by simply avoiding conflict and running away from the problem:

"O Thomas, Archbishop, leave us, leave us, leave sullen Dover, and set sail for France. . . set the white sail
between the grey sky and the bitter sea, leave us, leave us for France."

So even in these opening pages we get a striking dramatic rendering of the deep spiritual conflicts the play will explore.

These conflicts continue in the Temptations of Thomas which follow and which provide a series of attempts to outline the inner strengths and weaknesses of the Archbishop and which dramatise the significance of the coming martyrdom of Thomas and probe the deeper levels of the meaning of that act.

The second section is a sermon by Thomas which prepares for the final conflict and it is immediately followed by a splendid chorus opening of the final section. The chorus are now reacting to the message of the sermon of the Archbishop. The poetry clearly reveals a deepening awareness of the necessity of the sacrifice in the Lord that Thomas must make.

"The peace of this world is always uncertain, unless men keep the peace of God.
And war among men defiles this world, but death in the Lord renews it,
And the world must be cleaned in the winter, or we shall have only
A sour spring, a parched summer, an empty harvest."

The section with the three priests heightens the drama through references to Christ's sacrifice which will now be emulated by Thomas. We again note the deeper insights of the third Priest.

"Every day is the day we should fear from or hope from. One moment
Weighs like another. Only in retrospection, selection,
We say, that was the day. the critical moment
That is always now, and here. Even now, in sordid particulars
The eternal design may appear."

The murder focuses on the refusal of Thomas to recant, thereby remaining true to his spiritual values and loyalty to the Church and ultimately to God. Again Eliot gives wonderful powerful speeches filled with beauty and deep layers of psychological and spiritual significance to the Chorus.

The four knights turn to the audience and--in prose--give their justifications for the murder. Nothing they say links to the world of the Spirit. Instead they refer to the political situation. Thomas has made things uncomfortable. He has to be removed. Political expediency can justify anything--including murder.

"Unhappily, there are times when violence is the only way in which social justice can be secured."

Eliot clearly states that in the modern world the attitude that the secular state must always be more significant than the Church is still a dominant position. The audience must face the unpleasant truth that they are partners in the murder.

"We have been instrumental in bringing about the state of affairs that you approve. We have served your interests; we merit your applause; and if there is any guilt whatever in the matter, you must share it with us."

The Fourth Knight really accuses Thomas of rocking the boat rather than avoiding the problem. He insisted on standing up for Spiritual principles which the Secular State found annoying and brought his death on himself by advocating them to the point of death. And it was his own fault.

" . . . he could still have easily escaped; he could have kept himself from us long enough to allow our righteous anger to cool. That was just what he did not wish to happen; he insisted, while we were still inflamed with wrath, that the doors should be opened. Need I say more? I think, with those facts before you, you will unhesitatingly render a verdict of Suicide while of Unsound Mind. It is the only charitable verdict you can give, upon one who was, after all, a great man."

Much the same could be said of Christ.

But the Knights do not have the final word. Eliot returns to poetry and the play ends with the priests and the great final Chorus.

This is a magnificent, deeply spiritual drama probably the greatest of its genre since Milton's "Samson Agonistes".

Defying D says

Murder in the Cathedral brings into the account the life of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1100's who was eventually dedicated to his service-dedicated enough to refuse to pardon Henry II, the monarch who ruled during that era. King Henry and Thomas Beckett are good friends then, enough reason to appoint Beckett one of the highest position- as Archbishop of Canterbury. Beckett and the King had gone into several misunderstandings mostly about the king's failure to rule his kingdom responsibly and transparently. Their dispute eventually led to Beckett's murder-in the very cathedral where he was - by four of King Henry's noble knights. Every priest lamented for Becket's death-he was noble and just ruler and very few men of Canterbury know the fact.

The theme of the play is explained by the lines of Beckett,who in this particular scene,was defending his reason for refusing to give the king a pardon for his irresponsible acts(Lines 188-193,part II):

"It is not I who insulted the King,

And there is higher than I or the King, it is not I, Beckett from Cheapside,
It is not against me, Beckett, that you strive
It is not Beckett who pronounces doom,
But the law of Christ's Church, the judgement of Rome."

These lines clearly express Becket's devotion to his duties as an Archbishop. While Eliot is fond of focusing his subjects on man's expression of his fault, or even doubting the strength of man's faith in God, *Murder in the Cathedral* partly discusses that point, but Eliot implies through Beckett, that men should have the sense of dedication in doing his duties, and not letting anyone or anything interfere with it (in the play, Beckett didn't let his affinity with the King interfere with his duty as an Archbishop of Canterbury).

One of T.S. Eliot's masterpieces, *Murder in the Cathedral* is rich with allusions and symbols, deeper than the mere historical reference (that is Thomas Beckett, who was all well remembered in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, in which pilgrims pay homage to Beckett's inn), which is characteristic of most of Eliot's works. *Murder in the Cathedral* is definitely worth reading, as Eliot's style in writing his craft continuously puts the readers and critics in deep awe and appreciation.

Zanna says

I read this because I had heard it drew on the tradition of Greek drama when I was revising the source history with a student, and spotted it in my local charity bookshop.

The Greek drama aspects give the best scope for Eliot to experiment with Christian theology and imagery, which he does in quite a fresh and original way - to me though (I'm an atheist) this just emphasised how unappealing Catholic philosophy and oratory can be, full of references to violence, purity and corruption, the denigration of the body, submission and humiliation. Voiced by the chorus, these references sketch the relationship between the Church 'supreme as long as men will die for it' and the laypeople who 'know and do not know' (ie experience but are too stupid to intellectually grasp!) that 'action is suffering'

Manny says

A fabulous verse-drama about the martyrdom of Thomas Becket. Most of the action is in Thomas's head, as he rejects the easy solutions presented by his Tempters, and decides to stick to the course which inevitably leads to his death. My favorite lines are the following:

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

It sounds convincing, but I've never been able to decide if I agree. Given how uncertain people generally are about their motives, isn't what you do the most important thing? For example, when you read about the background to many great works of art, you'll often find that they were composed for the most trivial and ridiculous of reasons; impressing some random woman that the author was keen on, settling scores with a rival, winning a bet, or, most often, just paying an overdue bill. I don't think that makes any difference at all.

But Eliot's poetry is so compelling that you only think of this stuff afterwards... while reading it, I just find myself swept along by the verse. It's one of his best pieces, and surprisingly unknown compared to *Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*.

