

UNIT 2 BACKGROUND, PRODUCTION AND PERFORMANCE HISTORY

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to acquaint you with the

- a) Historical background to the play.
- b) Production History of the play : and to provide
- c) Explanatory comments of the lines from the 1st Choric entrance upto Becket's arrival in Part I of the play.

2.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY

George Bell, Bishop of Chichester saw *The Rock* and admired it. He asked Eliot to write a play for the Canterbury festival of 1935. *Murder in the Cathedral* was a product thereof. The play premiered in 1935 and was directed by E. Martin Browne. Interestingly, it was the wife of Martin Browne who gave the play its present title. Eliot had considered calling the play *Fear in the Way*.

The play deals with the martyrdom of Thomas Becket-one of the greatest of English saints -who was the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1162-1170. He was murdered in his own Cathedral by knights who claimed to be loyal to the king.

For his historical source, Eliot used the eye witness accounts of eleven monks who wrote down their versions of the murder at Canterbury. Since *Murder in the Cathedral* is not a chronicle play, Eliot offers little about the constitutions of Clarendon or the coronation ceremony which created the rift between Henry II and Becket.

The year of the composition of the play (1935) is also important because in Europe there was a lot of tension building up which finally erupted in World War II.

2.2 GENERAL SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

CHARACTERS : A Chorus of Women of Canterbury
Three Priests of the Cathedral
A messenger
Archbishop Thomas Becket
Four Tempters
Four Knights
Attendants

SETTING: The first scene is the Archbishop's Hall, on December 2, 1170. The second scene is in the Cathedral, on Dec. 29, 1170.

GENERAL SUMMARY : The play begins in early December, 1170 with the Chorus, which comprises of the poor women of Canterbury. They fear something terrible is going to happen with the return of Thomas Becket - Archbishop of Canterbury - from exile. The Archbishop was returning after seven years of exile in France (1164-1171). Disagreements with his friend and King, Henry II over the authority of the church vis-à-vis the state had led Becket to his exile. Earlier, as Chancellor, Becket was on the King's side. However, when he was also made into an Archbishop by King Henry II (in the hope that the church and state could function together under the king's control), Becket made it known to the king that his loyalties were first to God and only then to the King.

The priests are confused about the way the state is run without the guidance of the Archbishop's authority. A messenger arrives and states that Becket is returning from France. The priests get curious about the terms of his return. They feel that even if Becket's return is a "patched up affair" with the king it is better for the people than his absence for the past seven years.

Becket enters in a peaceful way yet aware of the dangers involved in his return to Canterbury. Soon four tempters come to tempt him. The first tempter, tempts Becket with the time in his past when he was friends with the king. He tells him to go back to those days and forget about his spiritual intensity. Becket overcomes this temptation, which he considers as no temptation because it comes "twenty years too late." The second tempter comes and tempts Becket with the time when he was the Chancellor to the king and enjoyed secular and political powers. He tells Becket that real power is in this world and not in the next. Becket turns away from him too. The third tempter is a little different. He tells Becket to team up with the Church and the Barons against monarchy. Becket overcomes this temptation saying, "no one shall say that I betrayed a King." Becket finds the temptation of the fourth tempter most difficult to overcome. He is an unexpected visitor. He tempts Becket with his own pride the pride of achieving martyrdom. Thomas tells him "who are you tempting with my own desires?" It is after this last temptation that Becket almost sinks into despair: "Is there no way, in my soul's sickness, / Does not lead to damnation in pride?"

The Chorus in part I reflects the sick nature of the state. The tempters talk about the unreality of human kind and even the priests begin to fear Becket's strong position. Part I ends with Becket rising above it all. He places himself in God's hands and becomes more clear about the nature of his struggle and what he should do.

The Christmas sermon, is a prose interlude. In it Archbishop Becket talks of Christian paradoxes relating to birth and death and sets the stage for his own martyrdom.

Part II begins with the Chorus in a more optimistic mood. The priests are still waiting for the eternal pattern to emerge. The four knights come from France claiming that they have urgent business with the King. They accuse Becket of ingratitude to King Henry II who made him the Archbishop. This ingratitude is expressed in Becket insisting on the power of the church over the state. Becket politely defends himself against these accusations arguing that loyalty to God does not imply disloyalty to the King. The knights ask Becket to leave England but he refuses saying that he has the sanction of the Pope in Rome.

Becket leaves and the Chorus talks about the church / state conflict and the tragedy that will ensue. The priests request Becket to hide in the Cathedral in case the knights return again. Becket refuses but the priests drag him in. The Chorus prays for him. The knights return in a drunken state and accuse Becket of treason, disobedience and embezzlement of funds among other issues. The priests try to block their entrance but Becket states that God will protect him. The knights murder Becket and the Chorus laments along with the priests. But they feel that the church is strengthened by Becket's martyrdom. The knights address the audience arguing that their loyalty to the king made them implement their act. The priests dismiss the knights as "lost souls" and the Chorus praises God for making them understand the divine pattern of action through Becket's martyrdom. They ask for forgiveness for not submitting their will to God earlier. They ask for the mercy of God and Christ and for the prayers of Becket who is now Saint Thomas.

2.3 PRODUCTION HISTORY OF ELIOT'S *MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL*

The play premiered on 15 June, 1935 at Canterbury's fourteenth century Chapter House. This was about fifty yards from the spot where Thomas Becket was killed in 1170. There were seven performances. The Canterbury productions were community affairs, with local businesses, schools, and Cathedral personnel all taking part.

Robert Speaight, who starred as Becket, describes the Chapter House : "The building has a certain Gothic bleakness, which was suitable enough to the play but which somehow forbade enjoyment" (Speaight, Robert. "Interpreting Becket and Other Parts." In *T.S. Eliot: A Symposium for His Seventeenth Birthday*. Ed. Neville Braybrooke. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries P, 1958: 70-80. This book recounts experiences of acting in Eliot's plays).

The play was directed by E. Martin Browne, who also played the fourth tempter and one of the knights. Browne revised Eliot's text slightly to enable the four tempters to double up as the four knights, for production reasons. George Bell, who had seen and admired *The Rock* commissioned the play for the Canterbury Festival of Music and Drama. This festival also produces other versions of Becket's martyrdom: Laurence Binyon's *The Young King* which depicts the reign of Henry II after Becket's death and Tennyson's *Becket*.

Kenneth W. Pickering in *Drama in the Cathedral* examines the twenty year old tradition of Canterbury plays. The chapter on *Murder in the Cathedral* presents a basic overview of the play and details about its original performance. Other chapters examine the history and context of the play's sponsor, the Canterbury Festival and explores the background of Modern Christian drama.

Browne recalls decades later that to the theatre as it then was, the play was a non-event. It was religious and so no scout or manager came. "The only English theatre man interested was Ashley Dukes, owner of the tiny Mercury in Notting Hillgate."

Stella Mary Pearce, who had also worked on *The Rock* designed the costumes. Since the walls of the Canterbury Chapter House were painted in cold colours, strong designs for the costumes were used. They were not always historically accurate. The Chorus in sight for the whole play, was "given garments which provided for as much variety of appearance as possible. They had unshaped robes divided vertically into two shades of green and decorated with strong patterns in deep red and blue, giving the effect of figures of early stained glass." (E.Martin Browne *The Making of T.S.Eliot's Plays* Cambridge : CUP,1969).

The knights wore traditional medieval dress based on a reconstruction of the heraldry on the Black Prince's tomb of the actual murderers. Priests wore Benedictine habits and Becket wore a habit and a travelling dock. The tempters' costumes were dominated "by bright yellow colours and included a suggestion of a modern-day type of each temptation, combined with the necessary medieval flavours." (Browne,1969).

The Canterbury production was an abridged version of the text Faber & Faber first published in 1935. This was so because the original performance had to be limited to ninety minutes. The only stage property was a simple throne. The tempters entered from screens on both sides of the stage and all other entrances were through the audience from the large oak doors at the back of the Chapter House. After the murder Becket's body was carried out in a procession through the audience.

During World War II the play was quite popular in England and was presented in makeshift venues-- cathedrals and churches, schools and an air raid shelter. In 1959 Eliot stated that he wrote the play as "anti-nazi propaganda" expressive of "the desire to save the Christian world from the attacks of rival secular ideologies."

In 1970 Browne produced the play within the actual cathedral at Canterbury to mark the 800 year anniversary of Becket's martyrdom. Modern sound equipments made this possible.

Eliot wrote the screenplay for George Hoellering's 1952 film version of *Murder in the Cathedral* and spoke the role of the fourth tempter(as an off-screen presence).

The play's performance reviews were good. Conrad Aiken wrote about the Canterbury premiere under the pseudonym Samuel Jeake, Jr. in *The New Yorker* : [It is possibly] "a turning point in English drama-one felt that one was witnessing a play which had the quality of greatness... one's feeling was that here at last was the English language literally being used, itself becoming the stuff of drama, turning alive with its own natural poetry."

2.4 EXPLANATION AND CRITICAL COMMENTARY OF THE LINES FROM THE 1ST CHORIC ENTRANCE UPTO BECKET'S ARRIVAL IN PART I OF THE PLAY

PART I CHARACTERS

A Chorus of Women of Canterbury

Three Priests of the Cathedral

A Messenger

Archbishop Thomas Becket

Four Tempters

Attendants

SCENE

The Archbishop's Hall. December 2, 1170.

Chorus: The play begins with the Chorus standing near the Cathedral. They are very apprehensive about Becket's return from France. As poor women of Canterbury, they have already gone through a lot of suffering yet they don't feel safe. They feel that something ominous is about to happen and they have been forced against their will to bear witness.

With the passage of time from autumn to winter and the collecting and storing of apples, the New Year waits, whispering about the destiny awaiting Becket. It is almost seven years since Becket left them. He was very kind to the people and yet they feel that his return is not going to be a good sign. Whether the king rules, or the Barons rule, these women have gone through a lot of oppression. But in general they are left alone and they prefer it. They are content doing their domestic chores. Life goes on with the merchant making his money, the labourer toiling on earth. All prefer to be unobserved: With the arrival of Becket they fear disaster. Everything is going to be upset. They wait just as martyrs have also waited. God alone knows their destiny. They claim to have seen all that they know about the future in a "shaft of sunlight." All that they can do is to wait.

Critical Commentary on the First Choric Speech

The play opens at a critical moment with the unexpected arrival of Becket after seven years of exile in France. The Chorus which comprises a group of "poor women" of Canterbury and who also represent humanity in general, expresses "fear." One of the choric functions is to create the atmosphere of doom -akin to Greek tragedy. The original title of the play was *Fear in the Way*. The "fear" that the Chorus expresses in a sense also relates to the political moment of the play. Eliot wrote *Murder in the Cathedral* in 1935 when the tensions leading to World War II and Nazism was already strongly felt.

The Chorus who has gathered together like the congregation attending a Christian mass use the term "wait" in its opening speech in various ways. For example, the New Year waits, Martyrs wait and the Poor Women of Canterbury wait "Waiting" is an important concept in Christianity. The "Holy Spirit"-- which is part of the Holy Trinity of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit-- appears often in the form of a breeze. If you are prepared and ready and waiting, this breeze will have an impact on you. In a sense, these Women of Canterbury are waiting without preparation like the five foolish virgins in the Bible (Refer to the parable of the ten virgins in the Gospel of St. Matthew in the New Testament of the Bible). What draws these "poor women" to the Cathedral is physical safety rather than any spiritual ties.

Ironically, although these "poor women" of Canterbury keep saying that no one bothers about them, Thomas, does bother. The reason why the Chorus is forced to bear witness against its will is because it takes both parties to complete a sacrifice. The saint and those he saves. Those whom the martyrdom benefits must accept the fact. This is what the Chorus has to learn. They must not "deny their master." The second verse of the Chorus speech picks this up. Christ died for the sins of humanity, in order to save it. Unless human beings realize this, we are not saved and Christ's sacrifice has no meaning.

The reference to the seasons in verse 2 of the Chorus refers to the temporal dimension in which human beings live a meaningless existence without any relation to the "still point" that is God. The first draft of *Murder in the Cathedral* started with this line which paralleled the opening lines of *The Waste Land* ("April is the cruellest month....")

When the Chorus talks about remembering the martyrs and saints who wait and question as to who will acknowledge them, they are talking about the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels (All Hallows). When these feasts were celebrated did the

people of Canterbury really remember them?. Peter (One of Christ's twelve disciples) too denied his master, Christ. In the Gospel of St. Mark-- in the New Testament of the Bible-- we are told that Peter stretched out his hand on fire and denied Christ.

We are next given the historical background. The Archbishop is returning after seven years of exile in France (1164-1170) The Chorus' statements about being left alone to do its own things parallels *The Waste Land* where the characters do not want to be disturbed from their inertia by spring. Later, the attitude of the Chorus changes. It learns that spiritual regeneration involves sacrifice. It learns that the monotonous kind of life that they are living at the temporal level is going to be changed by Becket's martyrdom which will give their life a new meaning. Through out this choric speech we get the feeling that the "poor women" are living at the temporal level only. They follow the linear concept of time. Statements like "What shall we do in the heat of summer" refer to their emptiness. Yet the Chorus knows that "Destiny waits in the hand of God." It is God who controls everything and not the statesmen at the temporal level. The Chorus is also very prophetic. They state that death will come from the sea. The knights who killed Becket did come from the sea across France. Compare the intuition of the chorus of having seen things in a "shaft of sunlight" with Becket's statement that they speak better than they know.

Towards the end of their speech when they mention Christ and the notion of regeneration, they are comparing Becket with Christ. A Christ like figure has to perish in every age to save humanity.

By the end of the play the Chorus progresses from fear in the opening passage to glorifying God at the end. *The fluctuations of the Chorus are the true measure of Thomas' spiritual conquest.*

Conversation among the Three Priests and the Messenger following the Chorus' first speech.

The first Priest says that it is seven years since the Archbishop left England. The second Priest asks what the Archbishop and the Pope can do about the conflict and intrigues between King Henry II and the French King which have been discussed in endless meetings and deferred conferences? The third Priest comments on the state of temporal government which is full of duplicity and thrives on appropriation of wealth. The first Priest wonders why people cannot remember their God in heaven and forget such violence and duplicity. Soon a messenger enters and states that the Archbishop has arrived on the shores of England and that he had been sent to prepare the Priests to welcome him. The first priest asks the messenger if the feud between the King and Archbishop--two proud men, has ended. The third Priest wonders what peace can be expected between "the hammer and the anvil." The second Priest wants to know from the messenger if "old disputes" are at an end and whether it is "peace or war?" The first Priest is still not clear whether the Archbishop is coming with the consent of King Henry II or because of his spiritual support from the Pope in Rome and the love of the people in England. The messenger states that the Priests are right in asking these questions and that the Archbishop comes not with any consent from the king of England but with support from both the Pope in Rome and the king of France and most importantly, due to the "devotion of the people." Again, the first Priest inquires "Is it war or Peace?" and the messenger says that it is not peace but a "patched up affair." He also states that he has heard that when the Archbishop left France he told the French King "I leave you as a man / whom in this [life] I shall not see again." This does not augur well. The messenger exits after stating this.

The first Priest fears for the Archbishop and the Church. He says that he has seen the Archbishop as Chancellor working closely with the king. People loved him but he was "always isolated." His "pride" was "always feeding upon his own virtues." He had contempt for earthly power and wanted to be subject to God alone. He ends his

speech by saying that if King Henry II had been weaker or greater, perhaps things would have been different between him and Becket.

The second Priest states that whatever it is, the Archbishop has returned to his people who have been waiting for a long time for him. The Priest then goes on to say that the Archbishop who is at one with the Pope and the King of France would give them orders as to what should be done. He would give them all directions. Therefore, they should welcome and rejoice his coming. The third Priest says whether the outcome is good or bad it is better that the Archbishop is coming. At least the wheel is now turning.

Critical Commentary on the Passage Summarized Above.

The Priests are numbered and not named. This is significant in that they become representatives of a class. Ironically, even though the Priests stand for the Church, they lack the vision of the Chorus and discuss mundane state / church issues. Is Eliot trying to associate them with institutionalized religion? The speeches of the Priests (especially the second Priest) expose us to the historical situation in the play which is necessary for our understanding of the conflict between Henry II and Becket. However, since Eliot's play--unlike Anouilh's--focuses on Becket's martyrdom, the King does not appear in the play at all. Becket's "pride" is discussed by the Priests. This is important. One of the things that Becket has to shed in his move towards martyrdom is "pride." Thomas was not born a saint. He has to get rid of his pride. The last temptation is the most difficult one. When the first Priest talks about Becket's "isolation," we have to keep in mind Kierkegaard's category of the individual as the communicator of truth. The communicator of truth can only be an individual and it can be addressed only to the individual. For truth consists precisely in that conception on life which is expressed by the individual. The crown is "untruth." Truth is subjective. This could be one reason why Becket does not even listen to institutionalized religion as symbolized by the Priests. Even when the Priests shut the door against the Knights, Becket opens them. He must bear witness. He must validate his own truth even if it personally destroys him.

The messenger's description of the welcome that the Archbishop gets on arrival in England echoes Christ's triumphal entry in Jerusalem when people hailed him saying "alleluiah, King of the Jews," and strewed his path with palm leaves.

The messenger's remark that Becket told the French King that he would not meet him in this life again is close to the historical statement. *Eliot, like Shaw in St. Joan is careful to use words actually spoken by the historical character wherever possible.* Becket's other remark, "not if I were to be torn asunder, limb by limb would I relinquish this journey . . ." makes us realize that the third temptation is really no temptation because Becket is already willing to die for the cause of martyrdom and he knows what he is doing.

The second Priest's remark that we should rejoice in the Archbishop's arrival since "I am the Archbishop's man" echoes the four Knights, who murder Becket and claim to be the King's men. The second Priest is a little too optimistic. He has to learn that peace and security come through suffering. The third Priest is not so hopeful. Neither attitude is correct. Reconciliation involves conflict between good and evil.

The third Priest is important because he is the one who states the epitaph on the Knights, "Go, weak sad men, lost erring souls, homeless in earth or heaven." In the third Priest's speech the image of the wheel is also used. Unless man's will is in harmony with God's will, can the wheel turn smoothly around the still point. If this is not the case then the wheel is at a standstill. Eliot's theory of depersonalization in poetry explained in his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" fits in with the process of martyrdom in which one surrenders one's will to God.

The last few lines of the third Priest before the second choric entrance is a quotation from the Ecclesiastes, (Chapter 12, verses 3-4. Bible) which talks about the end of things.

Summary of the second Choric Speech

In this Choric speech, the Chorus tells Becket to return to France and leave it "to perish in quiet." It fears cataclysmic changes if Becket continues to stay in England. The time is not right as yet for Becket's return. The Chorus wants to continue to live the way it has in the past seven years. It has gone through ups and downs when crops have failed and droughts have occurred. However, it carried on with life observing the religious feasts and has seen "births, deaths and marriages." Even in these seven years these women of Canterbury have had fears of various kinds but nothing like the fear they now sense and can't face. It is a "final fear which none understands." They tell Becket that he is not aware of the implications of his return to England and its impact on their lives: "do you realise what it means/To the small folk drawn into the pattern of fate/the small/folk who live among small things."

They plead with the Archbishop to leave and say that he will be their Archbishop even in France.

Critical Commentary on the Chorus's second Speech

The Chorus begins its speech quoting from St. Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament: Chapter 13, Verse 14. Their speech is full of morbid images and colours "evil the wind," "grey the sky," "rotten the year" etc. In this speech the Chorus emerges as very selfish. It fears for itself. Later on it grows and learns to express concern for Thomas. The phrases "we do not wish anything to happen" and "Living and Partly living" echo Eliot's *The Waste Land*. These poor women-- who are so poor both economically and spiritually-- do not wish anything to happen. They never come to grips with their lives which makes for greatness. They are also not in communion with the still point which gives one identity. They live at the linear, temporal level of time. Christ had said that "man can't live by bread alone." This is precisely what these women are doing. The empty routine of their lives is recaptured as in "East Coker" of *The Four Quartets*. There is an inner emptiness, a death march: "Silent funeral nobody's funeral for there is no one to bury." As in "East Coker" here too the poor women of the Chorus have not lived at all. They have existed only on a superficial temporal level.

To the women of Canterbury "death" is frightening. This can only be so if death is not seen as part of a larger pattern. The Chorus has to learn the fact that Becket's death through martyrdom is necessary for their birth. What the Chorus fears is beyond their comprehension. In this second speech of the Chorus we see a change in it. It recognises its own guilt "tarnished frame of existence." When the Chorus states: "Archbishop, secure and assured of your fate," they have fear and no understanding of what is to befall them. It is important to note that the Chorus refers to itself as small folk who live among small things at the temporal plain and do not want to be drawn into the eternal pattern of fate.

The Chorus here is like the Chorus in Greek drama. Like the Chorus in Sophocles' Antigone which fears the conflict between state and the individual, act, inspired by divinity, here too the Chorus fear the church / state conflict.

Summary of Second Priest's Speech

The second priest chides the "poor women" of Canterbury for babbling foolishly. He tells them that the Archbishop is about to arrive at any moment and the crowds in the streets will be cheering. He tells the chorus not to "croak" like frogs and to put up

pleasant faces whatever their "craven apprehension" may be and to give a hearty welcome to the Archbishop.

Critical Commentary on Second Priest's Speech

The second Priest uses a lot of animal imagery when he scolds the "poor women" of Canterbury represented by the Chorus. This is significant. These women are leading an animal like existence away from the "still point" that is God. In the Christian hierarchy animals are lower down in the scale. Human beings are at the top of God's creation. Lower down are animals and still lower, is vegetation. The Chorus has to spiritually evolve into higher levels of existence to be one with the "Still Point."

2.5 EXERCISES

1. Outline the historical background of the play.
2. Critically comment on the importance of the first two choric speeches.
3. Discuss the significance of the conversation among the Priests between the first two choric speeches.
4. Is there any development in the first two speeches of the Chorus?