

## ON 'THE CHORUS' IN MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL

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### ÖZET

*Bu çalışma T.S.Eliot'ın ilk birkaç perdeli oyunu olan "Murder in the Cathedral"ın Haziran 1935 Canterbury Festivali'nde sahneye konmak üzere kısaltılmış versiyonu üzerine kurulmuştur. Oyuna canlılığını ve uluslararası geçerliliğini kazandıran en önemli özelliği şiir ve düz yazının birlikte kullanımudur. Aynı bir karakter olarak sunulan koro, izleyici ile oyun arasında bir bağlantı kurma amacına yöneliktir. Sonuçta bu oyun insanın yüreğine hitap eden şiir ile ( Koro'nun işlevi ) mantığına seslenen düz yazının son derece başarılı birlikteliğidir.*

*Anahtar sözcükler: şiir, düz yazı, tiyatro*

'Murder in the cathedral' is T.S.Eliot's first full length play to which The Chorus in the Greek tragedies was closely linked. It was commissioned for the Canterbury Cathedral Festival of 1935 with the only proviso that the play has some link with the city of Canterbury.

Eliot chose the story of the return Thomas Beckett to England and his martyrdom in Canterbury Cathedral. The first performance of the play was given in the Chapter House of Canterbury Cathedral 8In June 1935 which was close to the scene of the actual murder of Beckett.(1118-1170)

There is little physical action in the play, for Eliot's primary purpose is to define martyrdom and its meaning both at a specific time time and for all time.Martyrdom is seen as a sacrifice made in submission of the personal will to God's will and made for the redemption.of human sins.

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The First Act focuses on the various attitudes of the women, priests, and Thomas himself toward the imminent martyrdom. The play, like a Greek tragedy, opens with a Chorus. It begins on 2 Dec. 1170, the day of Thomas's return from his seven year exile. The Chorus, the poor women of Canterbury, feel the disturbance which will occur with Thomas's appearance. The immediate emphasis is obvious.

Are we drawn?

Is it knowledge of safety, that draws our feet towards the cathedral? (Act 1, p. 11).

The reader is aware at once that there is both danger and safety and the Chorus know that the danger only indirectly threatens them:

There is no danger

For us.

Twice that 'For us' is emphasized at the beginning of a line. The Chorus are initially presented merely as lookers-on and they put an accent on their own impotence by speaking of their limbs and organs as if these were their direct control.

Some presage of an act

Which our eyes are compelled to witness, has forced our feet

Towards the cathedral (Act 1, p. 119).

Quickly the atmosphere of strain and expectancy is evoked, a simple visual image being loaded from line to line with more and more significance:

While the labourer kicks off a muddy boot and stretches his hand to the fire

The new year waits, destiny waits for the coming

Who has stretched out his hand to the fire and remembered the

Saints at all

Hallows

Remembered the martyrs and saints who wait? And who shall stretch

Out his hand to the fire, and deny his master? (Act 1, p. 12)

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The interest shifts to Thomas. The reader is told that he 'was always kind to his people' but that 'it would not be well if he should return'(p.12).It becomes clear that it is he whom the danger threatens,and with this knowledge the position of the Chorus also clarifies.

At one level,they are simply the poor women of Canterbury,who are afraid that anything will occur to upset that routine of their lives.They prefer,like the labourers'to pass unobserved'.(p.12).It is in terms of the modification of this attitude,that much of the significance of the 'murder' is embodied and expressed.At another level, the Chorus are transparently more than their natural selves.Like their equivalents in Greek tragedy,they present a commentary on the action, they speak of moments of vision 'in a shaft of sunlight' by implying December:

Sthe Son of Man be born again in the litter of scorn?(Act1,p.13).

Meantime the Chorus fall silent-and the priests enter upon the stage.

For us,the poor,thereis no action,

But only to wait and to witness(Act1,p.13)

Almost at once the tone of the verse changes.This is emphasized by the First Priest's use of two of the Chorus' lines:

Seven years the summer is over.

Seven years since the Archbishop left us (Act1,p.13)

However,the next line of the Chorus 'He who was always kind to his people' is not given by the First Priest.And the Priests start discussing the temporaleffects of Thomas's return with the messenger.The Priests are presented as being capable of taking care of themselves.They know that the present is perilous and a change for the better is hardly possible:

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Ill the wind, ill the time, uncertain the profit, certain the danger (Act 1, p. 18)

They appeal to Thomas to return to France:

You come with applause, you come with rejoicing, but you come bringing death into Canterbury.

A doom on the house, a doom on yourself, a doom on the world. (Act 1, p. 19).

To them, who 'do not wish anything to happen,' who go on 'living and partly living' (p. 19)

Thomas's return seems only to presage catastrophe.

Thomas, entering, reproves him in turn and speaks of his crossing and its political significance. And at this stage, the last utterance of Thomas's speech 'All things prepare the event. Watch. (p. 23) The reader is prepared for the First Tempter, who enters at once. He is the first of three who offer sensual pleasures, the second and third Tempter, offer temporal power as chancellor and as an ally of the barons against the king. Since the temptations of these three offer only temporal and material benefits, Thomas finds it fairly easy to resist. They are introduced partly to show the truth of Thomas's saying:

The impossible is still temptation. (Act 1, p. 27)

The Fourth Tempter, entering with congratulations, is at once endowed with a more sinister import 'Who are you?' Thomas asks. 'I expected three visitors, not four. (p. 37)

Thomas meets with no answer more definite than 'I am always preceded by expectation' (p. 37)

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Thomas is forced to ask the question again since he is suspicious. The Fourth Tempter advises him to think of pilgrims:

Think of pilgrims, standing in line  
Before the glittering jewelled shrine (Act 1, p.40).

The Fourth Tempter after confusing Thomas with obliquities, of such kind, then his advice becomes more explicit.

Seek the way of martyrdom, make yourself the lowest  
On earth, to be high in heaven.  
And see far off below you, where gulf is fixed,  
Your persecutors, in timeless torment,  
Parched passion, beyond expiation. (Act 1, pp.41-42).

With this Thomas begins to see the temptation involves an ultimate vitiation of his martyrdom through hypocrisy – and he bursts out:

No!  
Who are you, tempting with my own desires?  
Others have come, temporal tempters  
....others offered real goods, worthless  
But real. You only offer  
Dreams to damnation (Act 1, p.42).

Tempter's answer is 'you have often dreamt them'. (p.42) makes the reader be aware of the fact that Thomas has indeed considered the following possibilities. His martyrdom will bring him eternal glory as a venerated saint, spiritual pleasure in being high in heaven, spiritual power over men who will worship him, and revenge on his enemies as well. Then, in an integral struggle which is not portrayed, he

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cleanses his soul of these impure motives,after a long period during which the other characters speak and he is silent,apparently scarching his conscience,he asserts:

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 thing for the  
wrong reason(Act I,p.47).

Thomas,his decision achieved,addresses the audience briefly with the following words implying his necessary purpose:

Now my good Angel,whom God appoints  
To be my guardian,hover over the swords' points(Act I,p.48).

And the curtain falls.By the end of Part I the play is virtually over.The fundamental implications of the action are now clearly before us and it only remains for the dramatist to show Thomas' visible death and its effects.

In the INTERLUDE that seperates Parts I and II,the reader finds an Archbishop preaching a sermon.This short scene is enriched by a sort of duality,Thomas' remarks being addressed both to a hypothetical congregation(the Chorus) and to the audience.His sermon insists briefly upon two appropriate fundamentals:1.The Christian conceptions of 'rejoicing' and 'peace',2.The idea of martyrdom.The relevance of the Crucifixion to any other martyrdom here becomes specific:

Just as me rejoice and mourn at once,in the Birth and in the Passion of our Lord,soalso in a

Smaller figure,me both rejoice and mourn in the death of martyrs(p.53).

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And the whole meaning of Thomas's self-abnegation, and of the fourth temptation is explained:

A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for Saints are not made by accident. Still less is

A Christian martyrdom the effect of a man's will to become a Saint, as a man by willing and

Contriving may become a ruler of men. 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 way... (p.53)

After this personal note, the scene comes to its conclusion.

Part II again opens with a Chorus. First, there is 'the sea-bird driven inland' (p.57) convenient symbol for the Chorus themselves, driven from their wonted security. Then, the mention of a Spring which is more like death than birth-(not a stir, not a shoot, not a breath)-an image for the context generally. There is insistence on naturalness of the season.

Longer and darker the day,

and on the sense of potentiality

But a wind is stored up in the East (Act II, p.57).

The crow and the owl supply two quick contributory effects. The reader hears the note of anxiety and mistrust:

Between Christmas and Easter what work shall be done?

And the Chorus anticipate:

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We wait, and the time is short  
But waiting is long (Act II, p. 57)

There follows (pp. 58-60) a passage, alternative to the Chorus (though not necessarily, but probably) to show the passage of time. The Priests are chanting phrases from the Epistle's for the feast days of St. Stephen, St. John the Apostle and the Holy Innocents; Perhaps these are appropriate to the situation at this point.

Then, with this interest fixed upon the fourth day after Christmas, the Knights enter for the first time, and this is the climax of events. The Knights, having been ordered to kill Thomas, describe the various political changes against him, and give a history of the conflict between the archbishop and the king. They leave with warnings that they will return to kill Thomas if he does not depart from this land' (p. 70) and the terrified Chorus cry out that death and corruption cover the earth. Thomas consoles them by saying that the pain of his death will later be transformed:

This is one moment,  
But know that another  
Shall pierce you with a sudden painful joy  
When the figure of God's purpose is made complete (Act II, p. 74).

The Knights return and murder him as the Chorus passionately describe the evil of the world. This intensely moving climax is followed by the prose speeches of the Knights who advance to the front they were disinterested agents, who will receive no personal pain; that the king had to restore order;

And that Thomas's death was really his own insane choice, a kind of suicide. After an affirmation by the third priest that the church has been strengthened



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rather than weakened by Thomas's martyrdom, the play closes with a Chorus praising God for the blessing of a new martyr whose blood has redemptive qualities:

We thank Thee for Thy mercies of blood, for  
Thy redemption by blood. For the blood of Thy  
Martyrs and saints/ Shall enrich the earth (Act II, p. 93).

As for the characters, Thomas is a heroic figure on the scale of leading characters in Greek tragedy. He is meant to be an extraordinary person-sensitive, intelligent, courageous, and committed irrevocably to God; these features and his martyrdom isolate him from the other characters. For these reasons he appears slightly remote, though not unconvincing. His awareness of and admission to the temptations of spiritual power and glory make him both more human and more admirable.

The Chorus are made up of definite characters, the poor women of Canterbury who represent the reaction of ordinary human beings to martyrdom. Their reactions change from fear to understanding to acceptance and thanksgiving. As the play progresses they become aware, not only of the sin and death in the world, but also of their part in it. Finally, they realize that they are recipients of the redeeming effects of his sacrifice. Their closing passage

Forgive us, O Lord, we acknowledge ourselves as  
Type of the common man... Blessed Thomas, pray us (Act II, p. 94).

Clearly presents their important discovery and the main point of the play—that mankind is sinful but that the blood of martyrs is shed for its redemption.

The Priests give necessary background information, attempt to protect Thomas from the Knights, and suggest varied reactions to his death. In Act I, they are individuals while in Act II they speak for the most part as a group.

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The first three Tempters convey facets of Thomas's past life while the fourth Tempter represents a present inner conflict of impure motives which Thomas overcomes before his death.

The Knights represent the animalistic, violent, and evil side of humanity. As several critics point out, they are the tempters of the audience.

Murder in the Cathedral, except The Rock, is the play in which Eliot attempts a mixture of verse and Prose. This, in the end, is what gives the play its energy and its surprising universality.

#### **ABSTRACT**

This analysis elaborates upon T.S. Eliot's full length play which was written for production in an abbreviated form at the Canterbury Festival, June 1935. The mixture of verse and prose which gives the play its energy and its surprisingly universality is the most dominant characteristics of it. The chorus, being presented as a character, aim at making a connection between audience and the play. Then, this play is celebrated as a very successful cooperation of the verse and prose. The first addresses the human heart – the function of the Chorus- and the latter to human conscious.

Key words: verse, prose, theater

#### **WORKS CITED**

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