Murder in the Cathedral

INTRODUCTION

Murder in the Cathedral is divided into two parts, with an interlude separating them. The play begins with the thoughts of the Chorus, a group of common women of Canterbury. They say that Archbishop Thomas Becket has been away from his Canterbury congregation (of which they’re members) for seven years. Becket has been away because of religious and political conflicts he came to have with King Henry II. While they miss his presence, the Chorus does not wish for Becket to come back, as they fear his return would stir up old conflicts which might get him killed. Three priests who served the Archbishop in the past then enter the scene, as well as a herald who informs them and the Chorus that Becket is in England, back from France. The Chorus is dismayed, worried that Becket’s return will lead to his death, and therefore their own religious turmoil (they’ll lose their spiritual leader). The priests, on the other hand, readily welcome Becket back to Canterbury.

Becket enters the scene, and is shortly accosted by four “tempters”—four people who, one-by-one, try to persuade or tempt Becket into adopting certain views on how he should balance his religious power as Archbishop with its associated political power—political power which could either supplement his religious authority or replace it altogether. Becket discounts all the tempters’ proposals, thinking that none of their visions for his future are sourced in the higher, spiritual dimension of fate or God’s plan. He decides that martyrdom—sacrificing his life in devotion to God—is his fate, and refuses to be tempted by other, more earthly pursuits of political power or worldly, secular desires.

In the interlude, Becket gives a sermon to the congregation of Canterbury Cathedral. He asks his audience to think about sainthood from a divine perspective and reconsider the conventional, human understanding of saintliness as pure, peaceful and gained without torturous hardship, adding that Jesus’s disciples became saints only after experiencing great suffering. He ends the sermon by saying that it may be the last time he stands before the congregation, foreshadowing his martyrdom.

In the second part of the play, four knights serving Henry II arrive at Canterbury Cathedral and accost Becket, calling him a traitor to the crown. Before Becket left, the king appointed him to be the Chancellor of England as well as Archbishop. After initially accepting both positions, however, Becket immediately dropped the chancellorship. Further, the knights say Becket then began to abandon all the king’s policies which he had formerly supported. Claiming they’ve been sent by the king, the knights ask Becket if he’ll agree to appear before Henry II and speak for his actions. Becket responds by saying that, if the king has ordered such an appearance, then the public ought to be allowed to know Henry II’s charges against him and personally witness his defense against them. The knights disregard this response and move to attack Becket, but the priests and some attendants enter the scene before they get a chance to. The knights leave, promising to return for Becket.
Knowing that the knights will be returning to murder the Archbishop, the priests try to persuade him to go into hiding, but Becket refuses, fully committed to his martyrdom. When the knights come back to the cathedral, the priests bar its front doors, preventing them from entering. Becket, however, demands that the priests open the doors, thereby offering his life up to the swords of the knights and to his own martyrdom, saying it’s against the Church’s policy to exclude anyone from entering one of its cathedrals. The priests unbar the doors, and the knights enter and kill Becket.

Devastated by Becket’s death, the Chorus cries out in painful desperation that the sky and air be cleansed of the death newly sprung upon Canterbury. The priests, however, conclude that Becket’s death was a manifestation of fate, and that the Church is stronger for it. The four knights then turn towards the audience and offer arguments in defense of their decision to murder Becket. They describe why they think he was a traitor to the king and also largely responsible for his own death. The play ends with the Chorus asking God to forgive them and have mercy on them for not seeing—at first—Becket’s martyrdom as having incredible spiritual significance beyond their own personal concerns. Following the priests, the Chorus evolves to see Becket’s death as something caused by a divine source which they cannot understand but which nonetheless merits their faith and devotion.
PART:1

The play begins in the Archbishop’s Hall of Canterbury Cathedral; the date is December 29, 1170. The members of the Chorus—made up of common women of Canterbury—are the first to speak. They say that it’s been seven years since Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has left them, and that—despite his kindness as a spiritual leader—it would be best that he not return, though they do not explain why. The Chorus says that they have suffered since he’s left, but that they are nonetheless content if they are left alone, “to their own devices,” and unbothered by the wealthier members of society (barons, merchants, the king) who can lord their power over the Chorus in a coercive fashion.

Ultimately, the Chorus conveys a sense of powerlessness as they say that they expect some “malady” to fall upon them. They can only wait in anticipation, since destiny is controlled by God, and—as the poor folk of Canterbury—they have no power to change their lives through the world of politics and commerce. They truly are left to themselves—to their own inventiveness and, ultimately, their faith.

After the Chorus’s opening monologue, three priests enter the scene and discuss a feud which occurred between Archbishop Becket and the king some time ago, before Becket’s departure. The second priest wonders what the Archbishop does now that he’s abroad in France, with the English and the French king being caught up in a political battle of “ceaseless intrigue.” The third priest comments that he sees nothing “conclusive”—nothing effective, dignified, or merited—in “temporal” (everyday and earthly) political (versus religious) government. He adds that the only law which the keepers of temporal power uphold is that of seizing and maintaining a greedy, lustful power.

After the priests’ brief discussion, a herald enters the scene, and announces that Becket, the Archbishop, is in England. The first priest asks if the feud between Becket and the king has been resolved or not—whether Becket comes in war or in peace. The herald replies by saying that Becket’s return, even though it may seem cheerful and potentially peaceful at first, is really just the beginning of more turmoil.

The priests respond to the herald’s message. The first priest says he fears for the Archbishop and the Church, adding that he always thought Becket was out of place in the world of political power (Becket was formerly both Archbishop and Chancellor). The second priest develops this, saying that, with the spiritual leadership of Becket back in Canterbury, they can feel confident that they will be guided through whatever political problems the king, barons, and landholders may throw at them, and concludes
that they therefore have cause to rejoice. The third priest, more philosophically, says that they must “let the wheel turn” for good or bad—they must let the passage of time and the unfolding of fate operate however it will, and with whatever consequences it brings for their lives, since the nature of good and evil cannot be totally comprehended.

After the priests’ discussion about Becket’s return to Canterbury, the Chorus weighs in. They say they want the Archbishop to go back to France, thinking his presence in Canterbury will spell only doom. “Living and partly living” for seven years, the Chorus describes their time living apart from the Archbishop as troubling, but at least tolerable. But Becket’s return imposes a “great fear” upon them (the possibility of his death—of losing their spiritual leader). They therefore plea that Becket go back to France. The second priest, hearing the Chorus’s reluctance about Becket’s return, condescends to them, calling them “foolish, immodest and babbling women.” He tells them to put aside whatever unmerited, personal fears they have, and give Becket a “hearty welcome.”

Becket enters the scene, and tells the second priest that the Chorus is not being foolish, but that they “speak better than they know, and beyond your [the second priest’s] understanding.” He then gives a philosophical description of the relationship between acting and suffering, saying that both are interdependent, “fixed / in an eternal action,” and constitute a fundamental pattern to existence. Becket then likens this pattern to a wheel that turns and yet is still at the same time.

The second priest apologizes for the poor welcome Becket received, as Becket walked in on the Chorus saying they didn’t want him to return. The second priest regrets that he and the other priests were unable to prepare an adequate welcome for Becket, since he arrived with such short notice, but the Archbishop says he is more than grateful for whatever accommodations the priest will provide, adding that these are small concerns compared to the greater distresses facing Canterbury.

Becket informs the priests that he evaded being killed on the way to Canterbury, because “rebellious bishops” who would have sent spies after him failed to intercept letters he’d sent—letters describing where he’d be going once he left France. In response, the first priest asks Becket if anyone might be following him, and his answer is unusual: Becket describes his enemies like a “hungry hawk” preying on him, but does not make any conclusive statement about whether he feels safe or not. Instead, he says the “end will be simple, sudden,” and “God-given,” though whether he intends this “end” to be the death of his enemies or himself is unclear.

The first tempter, a former friend of both Becket and the king, enters the scene. He says he hopes that, despite the seriousness of Becket’s current situation, Becket will nonetheless excuse him for the cheeriness and comparably trivial nature of the topic he wants to discuss. The tempter tries to get Becket to remember when he and the king
were good friends, and says that friendship shouldn’t let itself be undone by the passage of time. He also thinks that Becket should drop his problems with the king, claiming that mending their relationship will have a trickle-down effect on solving the problems of the Church.

When Becket concedes that the first tempter is discussing a past worth remembering, the tempter says he’s also talking about the “new season”—about the joys of the incoming spring. But Becket replies that neither he nor anyone else knows about the future, and further, that whatever has happened in the past cannot happen again.

The first tempter gives up trying to convince Becket, saying he’ll leave the Archbishop to the pleasures of his “higher vices,” mocking Becket’s religion. Still, he leaves Becket on relatively friendly terms, saying that if Becket will think of him during prayer, he’ll think of Becket “at kissing-time below the stairs.”

The second tempter enters the scene, and reminds Becket of how they met many years ago. He says that Becket made a mistake when he resigned from the office of Chancellor, to which Henry II appointed him along with the role of Archbishop. This tempter says that the power of the Chancellor is much greater, and more real, than that of the Archbishop. While the power of the Chancellorship is in the present, he says, the holiness of the Archbishop is “hereafter.” Becket responds by calling the Chancellorship a “punier power” compared to his own as Archbishop, and says that those who have faith in political, worldly orders not controlled by God only “breed fatal disease.” The second tempter leaves, calling Becket a sinner.

The third tempter appears, and introduces himself to Becket as a “country-keeping lord” and a “rough straightforward Englishman,” and not a trifler or politician. He says that country lords like himself are the people who truly know England and its needs. He then starts his proposal to Becket by claiming that, once real friendship ends, it can never be recovered, so there’s no hope for Becket to reconcile with the king. But other “friends,” the tempter says, can be found in Becket’s situation: the country lords like himself—the English barons. He then proposes that Becket help him in a plot to overthrow King Henry II—that Becket procure the Pope’s blessing for a coalition of the country-lord middle class, formed with the aim of ending the king’s “tyrannous jurisdiction.”

Becket rejects the third tempter’s proposal, saying that he’d never betray a king. The tempter leaves, and tells Becket that he hopes the king will one day show more regard for Becket’s loyalty.

The fourth tempter enters the scene, and commends the strength of Becket’s will in rejecting the other tempters’ proposals. He says that kingly rule, and all other political power beneath the king, pales in comparison to spiritual power, and affirms the
magnitude of Becket’s power as Archbishop, saying that “the course of temporal power” leads only to destruction, instability, and falsity. He further points out the futility and impermanence of kingly rule, since kings just keep dying and replacing one another, implementing new reigns that will never last. The saint and the martyr, however, rule from the grave, the tempter says—and he asks Becket to think about such glory after death.

Ultimately, the fourth tempter tells Becket to follow the path of martyrdom—to make himself “the lowest / On earth, to be high in heaven.” But Becket is repulsed. He acknowledges that the fourth tempter tempts Becket with his actual, personal desires, while the others have only been concerned with the temporal, worldly order of things—things he actively shuns.

Ashamed that this fourth tempter has revealed his innermost desires, Becket wonders if it is even possible to escape damnation on account of pride (such as his desire for glory and renown because of martyrdom). In response, the tempter repeats the same speech about the relationship between acting and suffering (using the image of the wheel) which Becket gave to the priests before.

After the fourth tempter finishes his proposal, all four tempters, in unison, proclaim that human life “is a cheat and a disappointment,” and that everything, for humankind, is either “unreal or disappointing.” They say that humans only pass from unrealities to further unrealities, “intent / On self-destruction,” and that humankind is the enemy of itself and of its own society.

After the tempters give their opinion about the nature of humankind, the priests all plead, in unison, for Becket to not enter a fight he can’t win—to not “fight the intractable tide” or “sail the irresistible wind.” They want Becket to hold off on immediately implementing his own religious agenda in Canterbury, and wait for the political conflict bred by his presence to cool down.

The Chorus addresses their Lord, Becket, and says that they are not ignorant or idealistic; they say they know what to expect and what not to, and that they are intimately familiar with political coercion and personal/physical hardships. Yet God always gave them some hope, they say, whereas now a new fear haunts them—a fear which they cannot avoid. They say that God is leaving them, and beg Becket to save them by saving himself, for if their Archbishop is destroyed, then they will be destroyed themselves.

The first part of the play ends with a monologue by Becket. He’s now certain of his fated path, and proclaims that he will never again feel temptation in so overwhelming a manner as the fourth tempter’s proposal. The fourth tempter encouraged Becket “to do
the right deed for the wrong reason”—to sacrifice himself through martyrdom not for a sheer love of, and faith in, God, but rather a selfish desire for spiritual glory and power.

Becket goes on to recount how, in his youth, he sought pleasure in all the wrong, superfluously secular ways, through such means as philosophy, music, and chess. He also reveals that he never wanted to become a servant of God, and says that God’s servants risk committing greater sin and experiencing more sorrow than someone who serves a king.

Becket concludes by acknowledging that most people will view his commitment to God and martyrdom as fanatical, but he nevertheless commits himself to his divine cause, and asks an Angel of God to protect him from getting caught in the human divide between suffering and action.

In the interlude, Becket gives a sermon on Christmas morning at Canterbury Cathedral, six days after he’s arrived in Canterbury. He explains that there is a deep mystery behind Christmas Day—that celebrating the birth of Christ also means remembering his death, such that one must both rejoice and mourn at the same time. Becket says that, from an ordinary, worldly (vs. divine) perspective, this mixture of rejoicing and mourning can appear to be strange, and that Christian experience is unique for having such mysteries at its heart.

Becket then asks his audience to consider what ‘peace’ means. He draws a contrast between a worldly conception of peace and a divine one, asking the congregation to remember that the peace which Jesus said he gave to his disciples was “not as the world gives.” Jesus’s disciples, he points out, knew no such thing as worldly peace—they were constantly facing hardships and pain.

Becket turns the congregation’s attention to the concept of martyrdom, noting that, the day after Christmas, the Church celebrates the martyrdom of Stephen, the Lord’s first martyr. He says that celebrating Stephen’s martyrdom involves the same mixture of rejoicing and mourning as the celebration of Christ’s birth. He emphasizes that martyrs shouldn’t be thought of simply as good Christians who’ve been murdered for being Christians, for this would only involve mourning; nor should they be thought of as good Christians who’ve been raised to the status of sainthood, since this would only involve rejoicing, “and neither our mourning nor our rejoicing is as the world’s is.” Further, he emphasizes that martyrs are “made by the design of God,” and that martyrdom is not something brought about by the human will or conscious intention. Martyrdom involves total submission to the will of God.

Becket ends his sermon by telling his congregation that he doesn’t think he will ever preach to them again. He says that, in not too long a time, they may have another martyr.
PART: 2

The second part of the play starts in the Archbishop’s Hall, on December 29th, 1170. The Chorus begins by lamenting the fact that their suffering seems to be never-ending, and there are very few signs of hope. They say that peace in the world is uncertain, unless humankind remains connected with the peace of God, and also that human warfare defiles the world, while “death in the Lord renews” the world. They end by saying they are still waiting for change, but that “time is short” while “waiting is long.”

The four knights enter the scene, and tell the first priest that they have urgent business: by the king’s command, they must speak with the Archbishop. The priest invites them to have dinner with the Archbishop before they attend to more serious matters, but the knights insist that they do their business with Becket immediately. Becket then enters the scene, and welcomes the knights, saying to the priests that moments which we foresee can arrive at unexpected times. He tells the priests that on his desk they will find his papers and documents signed and in order. The knights tell the priests to go away so that they can speak with Becket alone.

The knights accuse Becket of betraying the king. They say that, as Archbishop, his duty is to carry out the orders of the king, and that he is fundamentally a servant of the king. But Becket, they say, has cheated the king and lied to him, overstepping the bounds of his authority.

Becket says that the knights’ charges are untrue, and claims to be the king’s most loyal and faithful subject in the land. He then asks what the real business is which the knights said they had, or if they just came to scold him. They admit that they have something to say, and Becket responds that their message should be announced in public since it was ordered by the king. He says that if they make any charges, he will refute them publicly. The knights then try to attack Becket, but the priests and attendants return before they can do it privately.

The knights then begin to elaborate their charges against Becket. The first knight accuses Becket of fleeing England to stir up trouble in France by soiling Henry II’s reputation in the eyes of the French king and the Pope. The second knight adds that the king, out of charity, offered clemency despite all of this, and the fourth knight says that Becket showed his “gratitude” only with further dissent, by refusing to acknowledge the legality of the coronation of Henry’s son.

Becket replies by saying it was never his wish to dishonor the king; he says he admires the king and the role of the crown, and that he was only ever following the orders of the Pope—orders he does not have the power to change.
The first knight accepts Becket’s explanation, but says that, regardless, the king’s orders are that Becket and his servants depart from England. Becket rejects this, saying that he will never again be separated from his congregation. The first knight then says that Becket is insulting the king by refusing his command, but Becket claims he’s not the one personally insulting the king—it’s rather a power higher than himself and the king: the Law of Christ’s Church and the judgment of Rome. Becket says that if the knights kill him, he’ll rise from his tomb and submit his cause before God’s throne. Before they leave, the knights threaten to kill the priests and attendants if Becket is not at the Cathedral when they return.

After the knights exit, the Chorus gives a long account about how they’ve sensed death in the natural world around them, claiming that their senses have been enhanced by the looming threat of Becket’s death. They tell Becket that they have consented to the unfolding of fate, realizing that its forces are beyond their control. They therefore consent to Becket’s martyrdom, and ask him to forgive their prior ignorance and desire for him to stay out of England.

The four knights arrive at the Archbishop’s Hall, and start to break in. The priests barricade the doors and try to force Becket into hiding, but Becket resists; he says that all his life he has been waiting for this moment. The priests ask Becket what would become of them if he died, but he has no answer—he just says that the outcome is “another theme” to be unfolded in time’s patterning, and that the only way he can defend God’s Law is to “meet death gladly.” Disregarding Becket’s command, the priests drag him off to hide him from the knights.

The Chorus then laments that Becket’s death will bring them face to face with a spiritual reality which he had previously helped with to deal with and, to an extent, diverted them from. The Chorus fears that their souls will be unmasked, nothing preventing the “soul from seeing itself, foully united forever, nothing with nothing.” They pray to God to help them face Becket’s death.

After the Chorus speaks, the scene changes to the Cathedral, where Becket is with the priests. The priests bar the door, but Becket commands them to throw the doors open, saying that the church should stay open, even to its enemies. The priests argue, however, that the knights are not like ordinary men; rather, they’re beasts with no respect for the sanctuary, and just like the doors would be barred against the lion or the wolf, so they should be barred against these knights.

Becket orders them again to unbar the door, and accuses the priests of thinking about this situation in too worldly a manner, shirking a more divine view of the relationship between good and evil. He then says that his decision to commit himself to his martyrdom is something that happened outside of time, and not in the worldly order
of events. He concludes that the only legitimate way to conquer his enemy is by suffering in the name of the Cross, and again orders the priests to open the doors.

The doors are opened, and the knights enter, a bit tipsy from drinking. The priests still try to force Becket into hiding, and the knights command that Becket show himself. The Archbishop appears, and declares he is ready to give his blood to pay for the death of Christ, to give his own life for His. The knights tell Becket to absolve everyone he’s excommunicated, resign his powers, give the king back all the money he’s taken, and become obedient to the crown again. In response, Becket again affirms his readiness to die; the knights all shout at him, calling Becket a traitor, and then kill him.

The Chorus cries out that the air and the sky be cleaned, and say that they wanted to avoid this outcome—they didn’t want anything to happen, but just to continue their old way of life. They say that their suffering was limited and clearly defined before, but now the despair they feel after Becket’s death seems out of life, out of time, and is “an instant eternity of evil and wrong.”

After the Chorus speaks, the knights, having killed Becket, turn to address the audience. The first knight, Reginald Fitz Urse, says that the other knights are going to give arguments in defense of their decision to murder Becket, and that he’ll introduce each one. The second knight, William de Traci, says that the knights had absolutely no incentive to kill Becket in terms of personal gain. Murdering Becket was simply part of their duty to the king; the knights even had to work themselves up to the task, drinking to ease their consciences. De Traci’s main point is that the audience should realize the knights were totally disinterested in killing Becket.

The third knight, Hugh de Morville, argues that Becket utterly lied to the king and betrayed the power he was given. The king had appointed Becket to be both the Chancellor and Archbishop, thinking Becket to be exceptionally qualified. And, if Becket had acted according to the king’s wishes, there would have been a nearly ideal state where spiritual and temporal administration were united. But Becket cheated the king, almost immediately resigning from the Chancellorship when he got it, going against all the kings’ policies which he formerly supported, and becoming radically devoted to a spiritual order higher than that of the crown, saying that the two orders were somehow incompatible. He ends by saying that the knights have served the interests of the people and therefore merit applause.

The fourth knight, Richard Brito, argues that Becket was fundamentally responsible for his own death. He says that Becket essentially went mad and lost his connection to reason, proving himself to be indifferent to the fate of the country and obsessed with himself. Further, Becket did everything he could to bring his martyrdom about—he had determined he would die a martyr and wanted the knights to make it happen. He actively
insisted that he be put in the path of their swords by demanding that the doors of the church be unbarred. Brito ends by saying that it would be charitable to Becket’s memory to say he committed suicide due to “Unsound Mind,” since in the past he had proven himself to be a great man who did good for England.

The knights exit, and the priests speak. The first priest says that the Church has been damaged by Becket’s death, while the third priest claims that the Church has actually grown stronger because of the Archbishop’s martyrdom. He goes on to address the knights (even though they’ve departed), and tells them to leave England, saying that they will spend the rest of their lives endlessly trying to justify their actions to themselves, “pacing forever in the hell of make-believe.” Yet, interestingly, he also says that—though their actions are unjustifiable—this was all somehow part of the knights’ fate. The third priest concludes by thanking God for giving them another Saint.

The Chorus ends the play by praising God, saying that He is reflected and affirmed by everything that exists, and that man must constantly acknowledge Him in thought and in action. Further, they thank God for making Canterbury into holy ground through Becket’s martyrdom. The Chorus then asks God for forgiveness, admitting their fear of the surrender which faith in God requires, and the fear of God’s love itself. They end the play by asking the Lord to have mercy on them and for Becket to pray for them.