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### The Concomitance of Asceticism and Valor in T. S. Eliot's Poetic Tragedy *Murder in the Cathedral*

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<b>Keywords:</b>  <i>poetic drama</i> <i>revive</i> <i>asceticism</i> <i>valor</i> <i>temptation</i> <i>murder</i> <i>knights</i> <i>self</i> <i>will</i>	<b>Abstract</b>  Despite the truth that some modern dramatists have serious endeavors to originate a fondness for poetic plays after a long time of absence, it is T. S. Eliot who is able to propound its theory and to found the tradition of this drama. His <i>Murder in the Cathedral</i> is the first poetic tragedy in the modern age that is structured in full-length. The recent research is an attempt to examine in depth the main character of this play, Thomas Beckett, and the aim is to investigate the inseparability between his asceticism and bravery that enables him to confront his self-will and then the tyrant king, Henry II. For being necessary to institute the proper background of the study, the reader is provided with the essential information concerning the development of drama in verse as well as Eliot's great efforts to revive it. In summing up the researcher concludes that expressing courage by the Archbishop comes to be the natural consequence of defying mundane affairs. Followed by a bibliography that encompasses the references, the endnotes come at the end of this treatise.
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## التلازم بين الزهد والشجاعة في تراجيديا تي أس أيليوت الشعرية جريمة في الكاثدرائية

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كلية التربية للبنات - قسم اللغة الإنكليزية - جامعة تكريت

الكلمات الدالة:-	الخلاصة:
المسرح الشعري	على الرغم من المحاولات الجدية التي قام بها بعض المسرحيين في
الزهد	العصر الحديث لخلق اقبال على المسرحيات الشعرية بعد فترة غياب
الشجاعة	طويلة انه تي اس ايليوت الذي تمكن من انعاش هذا النوع من
الإغواء	المسرحيات حيث كانت جريمة في الكاثدرائية نموذجاً لانتعاش المسرح
القتل	الشعري خاصة انها كتبت بنفس التركيب الذي كانت تكتب به
الفرسان	المسرحية في عصر النهضة. هدف البحث الحالي هو دراسة الشخصية
الإرادة الذاتية	الاهم في المسرحية المذكورة وهو توماس بيكيت وذلك لتسليط الضوء
معلومات البحث	على اهمية التلازم بين الزهد والشجاعة في تمكين بيكيت من مواجهة
تاريخ البحث:	رغبات نفسه الدنيوية اولا ومن ثم الطاغية هنري الثاني. لغرض
الاستلام: ٢٠٢٠/٧/١٢	تأسيس ارضية جيدة لهذه الدراسة تم تزويد القارئ ببعض المعلومات
القبول: ٢٠٢٠/٨/٢١	الاساسية عن تطور المسرح الشعري في العصر الحديث اضافة الى
التوفر على النت	جهود ايليوت العظيمة ومساهماته التي قادت الى انعاش هذا المسرح.

### Poetic Drama: An Introduction

The customary tradition that verse should be the standard medium of writing dramatic works has vanished with William Shakespeare and the coeval playwrights. After their age, the usual vehicle in play writing starts to be prose for "living in a scientific and prosaic age, and it is not surprising that plays dealing with contemporary life of ordinary men and women should be written in prose." <sup>1</sup>

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the contributions to the development of poetic drama are so little because the prevalent circumstances are unfavorable in spite of the exertions of the grand Victorian poets who cannot establish a specific tradition of this type of drama. Many indications of the rebirth of poetic drama appear by 1920, but they cannot go on successfully because the bent of most of the playwrights of this time is to

write realistic plays. The general "atmosphere in which realistic, naturalistic drama thrive is uncongenial to poetic drama."<sup>2</sup> Although the fact that the fashion of this brand cannot not be caught on, it is significant to mention that many endeavors at drama in verse have been carried out and that is why they are regarded by history of literature.

Day by day during the passing of time, Henrik Ibsen's followers begin to be overshadowed, Yeats and others make bids to reanimate poetic plays but they failed to do so. It is Eliot who steadily does it. He writes some plays that embrace the optimum dramatic poetry since the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Eliot's drama pattern, albeit not apparent, is in fact Greek drama. The vehicle is a peculiar sort of facial verse that is adjusted to fit the common speech. The main theme is expiation of guilt and the intent of the play is to convey religious dispatch. Although Eliot's plays are sophisticated, "the richness and subtlety of literary allusiveness may be enjoyable in reading."<sup>3</sup> The created characters are distinguished by having different grades of personality. In case that some characters are not adequately characterized, the reason is mainly that they are employed to be a means to communicate social or spiritual aims.

Eliot's participation to poetic drama can be described as opulent. According to him, this drama should not merely be an imitation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries plays. He is able to reach the conclusion that the actual poetic drama should come as an upshot to Modern Age problems and should mirror the present time spirit. Unlike Yeats and the other writers who chose to follow the traditional authors sternly and as a consequence be unsuccessful to generate a common relevance between the audience and their plays even though they are able to demonstrate that poetic language fits play writing, Eliot succeeds to offer a bridge between plays in verse and the audience. He believes that poetic drama should be written in a rhythm very adjacent to the rhythm of prose and everyday speech. This does not mean that he sets aside the precepts of the traditional drama, but it is a reflection of a significant truth that Eliot originates an innovation in poetic drama. He has always been attached to the aim of invigorating plays in verse and the relation between drama and poetry. Poetic drama, in accordance with his belief, "is not verse added to drama; it is the fusion of the poetic pattern and the dramatic pattern [and] that poetry is the natural and complete medium for drama; that the prose play is a kind of abstraction capable of giving you only a part of what the theatre can give."<sup>4</sup>

Eliot's fondness in the potentiality of drama in verse has constantly been profound. Being originally a poet prior to start writing plays, he writes four poetic plays of full-length; *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Cocktail*, *The Confidential*, and *The Family Reunion*. His expertness as a poet aids him to compose these dramas. As an experimenter, Eliot all the time craves grappling with obstacles to triumph over them. He writes many essays and the purpose is to illustrate his conception concerning this matter. "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama", "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry", "The Need for Poetic Drama", and "Poetry and Drama" are among the articles he has written to serve the mentioned target.

### **Murder in the Cathedral: The Concurrence of Asceticism and Courage**

Written in 1935, *Murder in the Cathedral* is a liturgical play that handles the assassination of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Beckett. It is mainly an evenhanded representation in which the dramatist succeeds to exhibit the murder and how Beckett's character is developed from a man of temporal authority into a different

one who spares no effort to defend the Church. The play is not a mere commemoration of Beckett's meritorious death, rather it is an advancement of the real gravity of asceticism and its affirmative aftermaths. As an ascetic, Beckett is not just a man who agrees to donate his own life for shielding a spiritual tenet, but he appears as a witness for the prosecution of one's ability to surmount his self-will.

*Murder in the Cathedral*, which obviously pertains to the medieval tradition of drama, is mostly composed using poetic language that has been modified to a considerable extent to be suitable for modern utilization. It represents stunning substantiation of "the mystery and spirituality of the drama of the medieval Church in the accent of the twentieth century."<sup>5</sup>

Before going to analyze *Murder in the Cathedral* for shedding light on the nature of the pertinence between asceticism and valor in Beckett's personality, it is very important to grant a general idea about these two terms. It is believed that a closer bond with the Almighty God can be realized through engaging in asceticism, an expression of spiritual context, etymologically derives from the old Greek term *askesis* which means training or practicing particularly in the sense of life-denial. It is used to describe a voluntary way of living humble life paying no attention to the worldly enjoyment. Including acts that can be considered ascetic such as fasting, living in seclusion, entire refrainment from inebriants, and celibacy, all of the main religions encompass among their teachings manners that empower an individual to reach a high rank of sacred connection with God.

Those who adopt asceticism to be their lifestyle are satisfied that it is the best practice to get more grandiose spirituality. They deem that any exercise which leads to purify the body assists, at the same time, to refine the soul and as a result to gain the finest state of internal peace. Deezia Burabari Sunday says that asceticism can be defined "as meritorious in general, leading to or ensuring a good result in this world or the next. Asceticism can also include the cultivation of moral qualities requiring self-restraint and discipline, such as patience and forbearance."<sup>6</sup> Isabelle Jonveaux states that it "is theoretically only a tool used in achieving the aim of a more perfect religious life. It is meant to control the body in order to make it be quit, so as not to disturb the contemplation of God."<sup>7</sup>

Valor, on the other hand, is simply one's ability to say and to do what he or she believes in. It is having the courage to decide to carry out an action and to work seriously to implement it without manifesting fear though it may finally cause death. In her article, *The Art of Bravery*, Soulaima Gourani points out that valor is, "showing mental or moral strength to face danger, fear or difficulty; having or showing courage."<sup>8</sup> She adds that fear generates no more than fear and fright itself is of greater malice than what we authentically fear. One has not to be terrified to be terrified for nothing good will ensue from fear. With self-confidence and courage everything is contingent according to Soulaima who compares bravery to a muscle which is always in need to be drilled. She believes that valor aids "us to act against those who threaten, or who act in a wrong way."<sup>9</sup>

Born in London in 1118, Beckett is the only boy of his family's four kids. After his parents' death, when he is of twenty years, he becomes a member of the office of Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury. In 1154, he is nominated the arc-deacon then, in 1155, the Archbishop aids him to be the chancellor of King Henry II with whom he is

able to develop friendship and to become the King's favorite. Therefore, Beckett lives a splendid life of extravagant tincture. In 1162, Theobald passes away. Planning to impose his authority upon Church matters, King Henry II, who accedes to the throne in 1154 when he is of 21 years and is gravitated to his chancellor for being a respected man of high education, immediately appoints Beckett the Archbishop of Canterbury. Beckett reluctantly gives his assent to consent the new occupation but he importunes to tender his resignation of the chancellorship clarifying that the two employments are discordant of them one is worldly and the other is religious.

As the recently designated Archbishop, Beckett earnestly initiates running his labor with strong enthusiasm and resolution. The chum of the king, who is before ambitious and sinful, becomes exceedingly credible man whose credibility arises from the faculty of the writer to blend "the man as he was and the man as he is." <sup>10</sup> Eliot is able to do so for he very well understands the lesson that is taught by some spiritual authors that the readers along with the audience may simply accept as true saintly men who are engaged in real combat for the goal of vindicating their faith.

Beckett evinces a great level of valor to challenge himself firstly and then to confront the king who is responsible for proposing him to reach this elevated spiritual position. Beckett can afford to forsake his old way of living in grand luxury to subsist a new life of rigorous asceticism and that is what disturbed Henry II and others. In the play, the third knight is not mendacious when he announces, "the moment that Beckett, at the king's instance, had been made Archbishop, he resigned the office of Chancellor, he became more priestly than the priests, he ostentatiously and offensively adopted an ascetic manner of life, he openly abandoned every policy that he had heretofore supported." <sup>11</sup>

Beckett is fervent about defending Church rights and doing his best to prevent the king from meddling in its cases. The goal is to protect the Church and to keep it autonomous far from the domination of the state. His integrity engenders in him the indispensable bravery to step aside of his exalted position and to stand as an individual's resistance against the political authority of the country. This unexpected alteration of Beckett's relational dynamics gives birth to an open struggle between the king and his resigned chancellor.

The nonexistence of correspondence is on many problems regarding the limits of responsibility of the state and the Church. Among the important controversy is that on the issue of the possibility of vicars' litigation in front of secular authority subsequent to a conviction pronounced by an ecclesiastical court. The Church, which has come to be extremely sturdy, has controlled the jurisdiction of criminal demeanor concerning the presbyters and defined that the utmost degree of punishment can be inflicted on the priest is to unfrock him. Considering the moment of laying down an end of such type of anomaly and to create a consolidated legal order for all classes of the society comprising the clergy who have already been accused of perpetrating an offense, in 1164, the king implements a code named The Constitution of Clarendon. It includes sixteen items that aim to confine "the ecclesiastical privileges" and to curb "the power of the church and the authority of the Pope in England." <sup>13</sup> The Archbishop is completely against the decision of the king. He rejects this code and influences the Pope leading him to condemn it later.

As a result of all the contentions, Beckett disguises and flees outside England, to France. In his new location, Beckett persists doing the function of the Archbishop of Canterbury. During this period of time, King Henry II determines to secure the crown to his eldest son by the Archbishop of York. In the view of the fact that the crowning of kings of England is among the privileges of Canterbury Archbishop, Beckett remonstrates alleging trespass on his own liabilities. Claiming that it infringes the Papal conventions, he does not hesitate to excommunicate the Archbishop of York and those who assist him, the Bishops of London and Salisbury and that is what makes the king feel a drastic anger. He says, "who will rid me of this low-born priest?"<sup>14</sup> As a consequence of their king's yelling, four of the barons, their incarnation in the events of the play is by the four knights, receive this hint as if it is an order that should be carried out.

Meanwhile, the king of France arranges an assembly between the litigants. After this meeting which accomplishes nothing but a type of truce, Beckett resolves to come back to England regardless of all the admonishments. As soon as he arrives to the Cathedral, he informs the priests who are excellently perceptive the reality of the coming strife that he very well knows that his foes are ambushing to pounce.

The fixed truth is that the Archbishop bravely chooses to get perpetual glory. He feels no fear because of his powerful enemy for he strongly believes that his "thoughts have more power than kings to compel [him]." (p. 31) He decides to go on divorcing his old course of life. His determination is to suffer and then to die. Beckett opts for his death rather than succumbing to the volition of potency which is not of God. He concentrates his faithfulness to be with the law of God for it is certainly higher than that of man according to all gauges. Breaking down the instruction of God is a fault and Beckett is not in the position to commit an iniquity for pleasing the manly command and that is why he becomes ready to scarify to protect his belief. In his book, *Tennyson and T. S. Eliot: A Comparative Study*, Rajni Singh says that Beckett who takes an elevated ethical tribunal "will not have God's law lowered to the level of man's. So he retains the supremacy of God's law above kings and above men and unbars the door."<sup>15</sup> The natural outcome that the Archbishop will get will be, of course, the great honor of being an everlasting martyr, a saint in Paradise. The Christian martyrdom, in conformity with his creed, "is not accident. Saints are not made by accident.... A martyr, a saint, is always made by the design of God." (p. 40)

Using the four tempters that emerge one following another on the stage enables the writer to interpret the different aspects of Beckett's personality and to discriminate between old Beckett who is lusting for potency and terrene enjoyments and new ascetic Beckett whose asceticism brings into existence a peculiar sort of valor that helps him to defy everything and everyone even the king and his men for the sake of getting the "general grasp of spiritual power." (P. 29) The novel location that he seeks to occupy "forever [is] in the presence of God" (p. 32)

The first three tempters try to entice the Archbishop to take up secular things. The first one, who aims to rescue Beckett's life, makes a bid to admonish him that the cost of his proud acuteness will be so expensive asking him to be flexible. This tempter states, "be easy, man! The easy man lives to eat the best dinners." (p. 18) Identifying himself as someone who has met Beckett some years earlier, the second tempter comes to lure the Archbishop and to propose the possibility of coming back to lead the state and then he can "set down the great, protect the poor." (p. 20) The second temptation

gives an idea about the opulence and the power that Beckett will acquire in case he accepts to keep step with the will of the king. The third tempter, who introduces himself as "a county-keeping lord who minds his own business" and "a rough straightforward Englishman," (p. 24) informs Beckett that peacemaking with the king is impossible. The tempter suggests that he and the barons are ready to support Beckett to defeat Henry II thinking that the connection of the Archbishop to Rome will provide them with the legality they need. The aim is to originate a combination under Beckett's command. The efforts of all of these tempters are in vain. Beckett goes on steady in his refusal of temptations. In vanquishing all the offered suggestions, the Archbishop demonstrates himself as a saint who is ready to die for the sake of the Church glory but not that of himself and he knows that the strife to achieve this end is exciting and with no doubt convincing.

The fourth tempter, a figure of mysterious nature who declares that he is not in need to have a name, urges the Archbishop to continue and to scarify on account of his new belief for the reason that the world of secular potency is ephemeral and unfixed. He points out:

"Fourth Tempter: Fare forward to the end.  
All other ways are closed to you  
Except the way already chosen."  
(p. 29 of 72)

As it is apparent in the following conversation, this tempter is employed to stand for Beckett's brave craving to continue with no fear towards his eternal glory paying no alertness to the passing power of the king.

"Fourth Tempter: Thomas, think of glory after death.  
When king is dead, there's another king.  
And one more king is another reign.  
King is forgotten, when another shall come:  
Saint and martyr rule from the tomb.  
Think, Thomas, think of enemies dismayed.  
Creeping in penance, frightened of a shade;  
Thomas Beckett: I have thought of these things."  
(pp. 30-31 of 72)

Early on the Christmas morning, the Archbishop preaches his sermon on peace which gives an expression concerning the self-knowledge that Beckett has obtained in the first part of the play. Four days later, on 29 December, 1170, after the Christmas celebration has elapsed, four knights arrive to the Cathedral to put a gruesome end for Beckett's life.

The second part of Murder in the Cathedral is an actual manifestation of Beckett's valor and immutability as mirrored by his encounters with the killers who start their initial confrontation to introduce themselves as king's men and then to refuse the hospitality offered to them. At the time that the Archbishop enters, they present some indictments concerning his disloyalty to the king to reach the conclusion that Beckett is the unfaithful man who has "betrayed his king." (p. 46)

Whilst he denies the accusation told by the murderers, Beckett does not fear to confirm the reality of suspending the Bishops of London, "this was done through me." (p. 50) Regarding their command, "depart from this land," (p. 50) the Archbishop, who has fled for seven years, answers that he will not leave England again for he does not like to commit the same mistake and to live on the charity of the others. He bravely tells the truth while he is "in danger of knife." (p. 51)

When the knights exit on condition that they will come back to carry out the murder, Beckett rejects the priests' adjuration for concealing himself or even sealing the gate of the Cathedral. He expresses an unmatched courage. He addresses the assassins saying:

"Thomas Beckett: Here, here, you shall find me ready, in the battle  
of the Lord.  
At whatsoever time you are ready to come.  
You will find me still more ready for  
martyrdom." (p. 52)

Then he informs his adherents that he is not in a situation to be fugitive and "to run from city to city." (p. 56) While he is about to be slayed, the Archbishop firmly points out, "for my Lord I am now ready to die" (p. 61)

There is no doubt that *Murder in the Cathedral* tackles the assassination of the Archbishop of Canterbury, but the essence of this play is not about the murder itself rather than about the tremendous worth of asceticism. Actually, the play is a treatise on the spiritual and philosophical attitudes of the impact of this manner of life in creating such strong personality, a man who does not vacillate to lose "his will in the will of God." And who "no longer desire anything for himself." (p. 41)

In drawing Beckett's character as an ascetic who can bridle his self-caprice, Eliot works in harmony with the Sufi saying, "nothing burns on hell but the self."<sup>16</sup> It means that one must not defy his responsibilities towards God to follow his self-desires otherwise his final destination will be hell. By time, Beckett, who has worked as a chancellor lusting for power, prestige, and delectation, becomes in the position to find that his genuine foe is his own self which has implicated him to look for gratifying material appetites. This knowledge enables him to attain the logical end that one who has the potentiality to conquer his self will be supreme for he will not plan to gain any personal things for himself, not even the honor of being a saint. His wish will be to incorporate his desire within the divine one and that is why the fair price for such sacrifice will be martyrdom that comes according to the volition of God but not of his own will.

The phenomenal circumstances of the Archbishop's grisly murder ensure him huge celebrity and sedateness far more than what he may reach in his life time. Based on his noble death, Pope Alexander III announces him a saint in 1173. As quoted in Milholland's article, "Thomas Beckett", Robert Scully marvelously describes Beckett. He says, "to his enemies he was a traitor who tempted death by trying to usurp royal authority and replace it with the dominance of the Church. To his admirers he was a man of great physical and spiritual courage who died a martyr while trying to protect the independence of the Church."<sup>17</sup>



## Conclusion

It is to conclude that asceticism adopted by the old sinful statesman, Thomas Beckett, is the real motive that provides him with the valor he needs to prevail over his self-wish and to start a new way of living. Hence-forth, his efforts are devoted to maintain the rights of the Church even if in front of the highest political authority, the king, his friend who has promoted him to be the Archbishop of Canterbury. Beckett does not act hesitantly to object Henry II who wants to diminish the role of the Church in England and that is what causes his death. He intends what is best for the spiritual authority and decides to carry out the requisite to defend it. It is really a presentation of great bravery. Beckett is valiant in dealing with a difficult conflict against his inner and external enemies. He deserves the grand reputation that comes after his dramatic assassination. He is nominated a saint and a martyr.

## Notes

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16. Megan Milholland, p. 3

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