

T. S. Eliot

Murder in the Cathedral

Summary ¹

Murder in the Cathedral is a verse drama by T. S. Eliot that portrays the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170, first performed in 1935. Eliot drew heavily on the writing of Edward Grim, a clerk who was an eyewitness to the event.

The play, dealing with an individual's opposition to authority, was written at the time of rising Fascism in Central Europe, and can be taken as a protest to individuals in affected countries to oppose the Nazi regime's subversion of the ideals of the Christian Church.

Some material that the producer asked Eliot to remove or replace during the writing was transformed into the poem *Burnt Norton*.

The action occurs between December 2 and December 29, 1170, chronicling the days leading up to the martyrdom of Thomas Becket following his absence of seven years in France. Becket's internal struggle is the main focus of the play. The play is divided into two parts separated by an interlude.

Part one takes place in the Archbishop's hall on December 2, 1170. The play begins with a Chorus singing, foreshadowing the coming violence. The Chorus is a key part of the drama, with its voice changing and developing during the play, offering comments about the action and providing a link between the audience and the characters and action, as in Greek drama. Three priests are present, and they reflect on the absence of Becket and the rise of temporal power. A herald announces Becket's arrival. Becket is immediately reflective about his coming martyrdom, which he embraces, and which is understood to be a sign of his own selfishness – his fatal weakness. The tempters arrive, three of whom parallel the Temptations of Christ. The first tempter offers the prospect of physical safety. The second offers power, riches and fame in serving the King. The third tempter suggests a coalition with the barons and a chance to resist the King. Finally, a fourth tempter urges him to seek the glory of martyrdom.

¹ "Murder in the Cathedral Summary", **Princeton University**,
www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Murder_in_the_Cathedral.html