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The Truth of Thomas á Becket

Murder in the Cathedral, by T. S. Eliot, presents a dramatic account of the true story of Thomas á Becket's murder and the various beliefs and reasonings concerning the situation. Although the implied motives of Henry II, the logic used by the four Tempters, and the outspoken excuses of the four assassins all hold a sense of credibility, the integrity and nobility behind Becket's motives reflect the honest devotion that made him a saint, martyr, and hero to the Catholic people.

In their youth, Thomas á Becket and King Henry II were extremely good friends, and in 1162 the king even took Becket from the office of chancellor to the honorable position of archbishop of Canterbury. Becket thus became "the supreme [religious] power in England" (Sauder), second only to the Pope. Becket soon realized the importance of his position and turned away from his sinful past of partying with the king. He began to repudiate Henry II and his dishonest policies, and before long, the two men could not revive their once-vital camaraderie. They disputed over how clerical criminals should be tried, among other things, and mainly argued over the powers of the church and the powers of the state. When the conflict grew to its boiling point, Becket fled to France to protect himself. Becket returned to Canterbury approximately seven years later,

but the two enemies were still at odds. Becket had retained his beliefs and when he refused to succumb to the crown's wishes, Henry II had the archbishop assassinated in Canterbury Cathedral.

Many could certainly perceive Becket's sudden change from sin to clerical duty as being a hypocritical action. Many even claim that he used his power to make "promises he did not intend to keep, and sacrificed his principles to retain his power" (Sauder). In Christian belief, however, one can easily accept God into their lives, an action that can certainly turn a person's life around for the better. Becket obviously realized his importance in the Christian community, and he therefore accepted God and the duties of archbishop within one simple moment.

Within the play, Becket must face his temptations, which T. S. Eliot personifies as actual characters. The First Tempter urges Becket to remember "all the good time past" (Eliot 24), when he and the king were friends, reveling in sinful acts. Becket, however, easily declines this temptation saying, "You talk of seasons that are past" (Eliot 24). As he leaves, the tempter retorts that Becket was not "so hard on sinners when they were [his] friends" (Eliot 25), thus accusing him of being a hypocrite. Upon his arrival, the Second Tempter tries to persuade Becket to reclaim his office as chancellor, stating that he "should guide the state again" (Eliot 27). This temptation is feeble, however, because Becket is already the keeper of "the keys of Heaven and hell" (Eliot 30), thus meaning that he has no need for the lowly position of chancellorship. The Third Tempter encourages Becket to use his power to overthrow the king, arguing that "England

is a land for Norman sovereignty” (Eliot 33). This tempter is thus saying that since Becket is a Norman, he should and has the power to rule England. The archbishop brushes off this temptation as well, replying that no one will say that he betrayed a king (Eliot 34).

The Fourth Tempter, however, is unexpected and completely surprises Becket. This temptation is one in which Becket is urged to submit to his assassins without difficulty, and the result would be the honorable and desirable posthumous titles of saint and martyr. The tempter encourages him to be the lowest on earth in order to be high in Heaven (Eliot 39). As appealing as the temptation seems, Becket eventually overcomes his desires, concluding that “the last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason” (Eliot 44).

In the third set of challenges to Becket’s honesty, the archbishop has no chance to directly defend himself. This third challenge occurs immediately after Becket’s murder, when the assassins – four knights from Henry’s court – try to explain themselves to the people of Canterbury. The only knight to not make an argument concerning the murder is Reginald Fitz Urse, who simply introduces his fellow assassins within the play. Baron William de Traci, therefore, speaks first and explains that they murdered Becket “not out of their personal enmity, but for the good of their country” (Sauder). Sir Hugh de Morville then argues that Becket was murdered “because he did not support the king’s idea of uniting the power of the church and the state under the central government” (Sauder). Richard Brito,

however, provides the most convincing reasons for Becket's death. He claims that Becket had "evaded [their] questions and could still have easily escaped" (Eliot 83). Brito goes further to say that Becket "insisted [. . .] that the doors should be opened" (Eliot 84), and thus practically invited the knights to kill him. Brito, therefore, lays "a verdict of Suicide while of Unsound Mind" (Eliot 84) upon Becket. As credible as the knights' arguments may seem, their excuses are certainly an insubstantial amount to convince the people to turn against the archbishop. Becket, therefore, does not even need to be present to defend himself against the knights' reasonings, for the people would soon be honoring him with sainthood and martyrdom.

Both Eliot's play and Thomas á Becket's life serve as lessons in truth and integrity. Becket unfailingly refused King Henry's sinful offers and advances; he fought against his own temptations of personal gain; thus, his life inspires his supporters to ignore his assassins' excuses and to cherish his godly courage. Becket was never the enemy in the situation, but was only a victim of evil. The ultimate blessing, therefore, lies in the fact that through studying Becket's strong faith, we may realize that "the rewards of Heaven are higher than the rewards of earth" (Sauder).

Works Cited

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Sauder, Diane. Notes on Murder in the Cathedral. 28 October 2000 <<http://www.pinkmonkey.com/admin/monkeynotes2/pmMurder01.asp>>.