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Who Are the Real Tempters?

There are two—or sometimes more than two--sides to every story, of course. Educated, reasonable individuals always consider both sides. Even the knights in Murder in the Cathedral, who are often viewed in a negative light both historically and religiously, admit that examining all evidence is important (Eliot 78). However, when one examines opposing evidence, one should be careful not to rashly and prematurely abandon one's original conclusions in favor of new ones. To switch a position rashly in the name of fairness is an error in judgement almost as great as not considering both sides carefully from the beginning. Skepticism is the only protection. Using skepticism as a tool when reading Murder in the Cathedral leads one to the conclusion that the arguments of the knights are included, not because they represent the truth, but because they serve as a literary tool. Despite the arguments within the play that attempt to abate Thomas Becket's purity, the reasonable, thoughtful reader comes to the conclusion that these arguments are, in fact, only meant to tempt the audience into a comfortable self-delusion.

After finishing the passage that includes Becket's death, the reader's urge is to search for an escape from the reality presented by his death. Does true faithfulness to God require submitting oneself to violence? Is yielding completely to God's will the only way to salvation? Such questions about morality and spirituality run through the reader's mind at this point in the reading. Eliot intended just this, according to Willis E. McNelly, who believes that the play "resembles a medieval morality play whose purpose

is to enlighten as well as entertain” (1521). Most readers begin reading the arguments of the knights with a sense that Becket was right, even though the fact causes them to feel uncomfortable about their lives. Skepticism must be employed here to prevent switching sides based on what makes one most comfortable.

One argument presented by the knights is that Becket was becoming too powerful. This argument, however, is obviously a groundless attempt to appeal to the dislike of tyranny among the people. If Becket had been power hungry would he have rejected the Chancellorship twice? The knights try to convince the crowd that he was trying to go over the head of the King and to usurp the King’s powers using the church. This argument seems to hold merit until one looks at the historical facts behind the situation. According to these facts, Becket warned the King that he would not be an unworthy Archbishop or a tool of the crown if appointed to the position (“Saint Thomas Becket”). A power hungry man would not give his King such a warning if he planned to take power. Accordingly, the only reasonable conclusion to draw is that Becket was not trying to take the King’s or the people’s powers; he was merely trying to do the right thing, which he had at times failed to do as Chancellor.

The knights argue that Becket became obsessed with doing the right thing. The knights conclude that Becket was insanely determined to become a martyr (Eliot 83), yet they fail to present a cause for this insanity. Becket could have had everything he wanted; he had power, prestige, and money while he was Chancellor (“Saint Thomas Becket”). No man would have cause for insanity with such great comfort readily supplied. Quite the contrary, only rational devotion to an idea could cause Becket to give up his worldly desires. Furthermore, Becket proves that he is perfectly rational, when he,

too, recognizes his own desire to become a martyr. He soon dismisses his desire and submits completely to the will of his God (Eliot 40). Would an insane man question his own desires as frequently as does Becket? To answer this question in a literary sense, exploration of the play's most poignant line, which reads, "The last temptation is the greatest treason: / To do the right deed for the wrong reason" (44), is required. Would Eliot use his most poignant line at the point when Becket addresses his own desires if the larger intent of the play was to portray Becket as merely an insane man with an obsession?

The knights go further with their arguments for Becket's insanity. They state that not only was Becket determined to become a martyr for the glory (as the Fourth Tempter would have him do), but Becket was also so firm in his determination that he actually provoked the knights to kill him. This argument is perhaps the easiest to refute because it is merely a poorly camouflaged attempt by the knights to deny responsibility for what they have done. The knights blame Becket for not being cautious around them when they were angry. Not only does this argument show the knights' lack of responsibility, it is also undermines their credibility. When one Richard Brito says that Becket should have been prudent in dealing the knights, the readers should realize that they, too, should be prudent in their analysis of the arguments the knights present.

While there are many escapes from the conclusion that Thomas Becket was, in fact, a true, holy martyr, the use of skepticism proves these escapes to be based on faulty logic. Eliot intended the audience to remain spectators as Becket is tempted by the Four Tempters. However, he obviously intended the Four Knights to parallel the Tempters, this time involving the audience by tempting them into believing fallacies because they are easier to accept. McNelly puts this concept aptly when he writes, "If in the end, we

reject, perhaps quite properly, the justifications of the knights, we must ask how much of their own conscious rationalizations may be found in our own unconscious motivations” (1523). Whether or not the readers accept Eliot’s conclusion in the presence of the knights’ arguments (which prove to be the most appealing temptations found in the play), reality indicates that there is only one path to truth—unbreakable integrity. While the knights would have the readers think otherwise, those who reflect on Murder in the Cathedral come to the conclusion that to compromise one’s beliefs to extend one’s physical life is, in fact, the equivalent of spiritual death. When the reader realizes that there is no righteous justification for Becket’s death, he or she begins to fully realize that there is no shortcut to truth.

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