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LIDIA KYZLINKOVA

ELIOT AND TENNYSON

(Some Facts to the Dramatic Technique of *Murder in the Cathedral*)

We have only to turn to Tennyson's Becket perceive how far Murder in the Cathedral has gone towards revitalizing the genre.

F. O. Matthiessen¹

1

The failure of the plays of the great poets of the nineteenth century is usually attributed to their lack of theatrical experience. There is, of course, a second main reason for this: all the poets failed to realize that the poetic idiom of one age will not serve for vital poetic drama in another. But that is not the full explanation why Tennyson's *Becket*, compared with Eliot's, seems an impostor, and his play a failure, at least in twentieth-century eyes. For originally the play was a thrilling success.²

Tennyson's *Becket* (1884) tries to be Shakespearean and fails in the attempt even more conspicuously than did its predecessors. The convention of five acts is used; there is a chronicle structure, reinforced by a sub-plot worked up between Henry and Rosamund. Following Shakespeare's model Tennyson introduced an immense cast of characters,³ trying to include all classes of society in his play, from king to beggar. He ranged over Becket's whole career from the days of his earliest friendship with the King and only in his final scene did he come to Becket's return, after his long exile in France, to the situation out of which Eliot made his whole play.

T. S. Eliot accepted the commission to write a play for the Canterbury Festival of June 1935, and he chose for his subject-matter again the martyrdom

¹ F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, Oxford University Press 1969, p. 173.

² That was due, not to the inherent virtues of the play, but to a combination of the author's poetic fame and the equally popular acting of Henry Irving (*Becket*) and Ellen Terry (*Rosamund*).

³ There are approximations to the Romeo and Juliet nurse type (*Margery*) and to the type of Macduff's small son (*Geoffrey*). Queen Eleanor is represented as a villainess (something like the Queen in *Cymbeline*).

of the most famous of all English Saints, Thomas Becket, who was Archbishop of Canterbury between the years 1162 and 1170, when he was brutally murdered, on the twenty-ninth of December, in his own cathedral church. *Murder in the Cathedral* is Eliot's most assured dramatic success. Starting from a revitalizing of the rhythms and idiom of dramatic poetry, T. S. Eliot was able to write a play in verse that was not only successful in itself but also capable of initiating a revival of poetic drama.

2

As Tennyson and Eliot both hit to the same subject, it is easy and interesting to compare their ways of setting about it. In Eliot's play, however, we are not engaged by the same means or by the same elements of dramatic craftsmanship as generally practised. Yet it is worthwhile briefly considering these in Tennyson's *Becket* and then seeing how far Eliot has made some use of them.

The general dramatic outline of *Becket* is determined by the familiar facts of history. The murder of the great Archbishop in Canterbury Cathedral forms the necessary catastrophe, and the general relations of Becket to the King provide an introduction to it.

PROLOGUE

A CASTLE IN NORMANDY

EXPOSITION

- a) Henry and Becket play chess. They receive news of Theobald's illness and impending death. The King proposes that Becket should be the successor of the dying Archbishop. Becket thinks it a jest.
- b) Henry explains to Becket the plan of Rosamund's Bower and asks him to look after her. Queen Eleanor enters, accompanied by Reginald Fitzurse, and sees the plan on the table. Henry is given her cross.
- c) Herbert of Bosham appears and announces Archbishop Theobald's death. Henry reminds Becket of their previous talk.
- d) The Queen urges Fitzurse to seek out Rosamund's retreat.

ACT I.

SCENE I. *Becket's House in London.*

COMPLICATION

- a) Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, begins to disclose the change of his relations towards the King. Herbert admires him.
- b) Rosamund enters and begs Becket to save her from Fitzurse. Becket hides her.
- c) Becket meets Fitzurse and kicks him out. Becket decides to send the Great Seal back to the King.
- d) John of Salisbury is not very pleased to take charge of Rosamund.

SCENE II. *Street in Northampton leading to the Castle.*

- e) Becket goes to the Castle and meets the Queen.

SCENE III. The Hall in Northampton Castle.

- f) Becket refuses and then consents to sign the Constitutions; he declines to seal it.
- g) Henry claims from Becket certain sums of money expended during his Chancellorship.
- h) Becket appears, bearing his cross before him as a protection, and appeals to the Pope.

SCENE IV. Refectory of Monastery at Northampton.

A Banquet on the Tables.

- i) Attendant brings a missive left at the gate, telling: "Fly at once to France".
- j) Becket calls in the poor and decides to leave England.
- k) The four Knights enter and want to see the Archbishop. The Beggars trick them and press upon them till they disappear through the door.

ACT II.

SCENE I. Rosamund's Bower.

- 1) Rosamund pleads for Becket and obtains from the King as a gift the fateful cross which Eleanor had given him.

SCENE II. Montmirail.

- m) Here the reconciliation might have been effected; it is frustrated by Becket's stubbornness (he would not forgo the formula "saving God's honour") and the King's passionate temper.

ACT III.

SCENE I. The Bower.

- n) Rosamund does not believe Margery.

SCENE II. Outside the Woods near Rosamund's Bower.

- o) Eleanor and Fitzurse have at least tracked Rosamund to her retreat.

SCENE III. Traitor's Meadow at Fréteval.

- p) Henry settles with Becket; he cannot bring himself to give the kiss of peace. Becket feels a presentiment of his fate.

ACT IV.

SCENE I. The Outskirts of the Bower.

- a) Queen Eleanor penetrates Rosamund's Bower by following the guidance of Rosamund's son, Geoffrey, who has strayed beyond the forbidden precincts.

SCENE II. Rosamund's Bower.

- b) Eleanor proffers to Rosamund the choice of poison or dagger. Rosamund pleads for her life and that of her child.
- c) Fitzurse enters and strives to renew his rejected suit to Rosamund. Eleanor offers Rosamund her life when she consents to marry Fitzurse. Rosamund rejects.
- d) Becket appears and saves Rosamund; he persuades her to take refuge in the nunnery at Godstow.

ACT V.

SCENE I. Castle in Normandy. King's Chamber.

- e) The King receives the suspended bishops of York, London and Salisbury. Henry, for all his anger, wishes to see Becket dead.

CLIMAX

f) Eleanor appears and showing Henry the cross, which she had wrested from Rosamund in the bower, persuades him that Rosamund has sent it back to him because she is dead to earth and dead henceforth to him. She mockingly hints that Becket has sent her to Godstow because he loves her himself. King Henry bursts into passionate fury and asks if there is nobody who could free him from this pestilent priest.

g) The four Knights enter and hear the last words of the King. Eleanor urges them to fulfil the King's wish.

SCENE II. A Room in Canterbury Monastery.

RESOLUTION

a) John of Salisbury admonishes Becket for being too proud and stubborn.

b) Rosamund appears disguised as monk. She thinks that Becket has excommunicated Henry and begs him to absolve the King.

c) The Knights enter and call upon Becket to absolve the bishops. Becket rejects.

SCENE III. North Transept of Canterbury Cathedral.

CATASTROPHE

a) Becket orders the monks to leave the door open. Edward Grim and John of Salisbury want him to hide himself.

b) The four Knights enter. Rosamund appears and begs them for mercy. The Knights murder Becket. Edward Grim raises his arm to protect him and it is sliced through.

c) The Knights rush out. Rosamund is seen kneeling by the body of Becket.⁴

3

Tennyson used the loose five-act structure of a chronicle play; there is a number of scenes, usually scattered in an apparently haphazard succession of places, so as to alternate the various groups of characters and keep the subplot (King Henry and Rosamund de Clifford) abreast of the main plot (based on historical fact). Each scene has little climax of its own, worked into the main narrative line; in the last scene the story is completed and the conflict resolved.

Tennyson was following a bad tradition. He was trying to imitate Shakespeare, as many others had tried before him. He seeks to follow his master almost exactly — theoretically. Though he presented Becket as a spiritual man, he did not succeed in creating much tension. The conception of the hero⁵ gives rise to a persistent anomaly which Tennyson has nowhere contrived to solve: if on the one hand Becket is proud and wilful then he is no martyr; and his death is merely a personal downfall; if on the other hand he is a saint, it is absurd to represent him as impetuous and headstrong, constantly requiring the restraining admonitions of John of Salisbury, his friend. Tennyson even put Becket

⁴ The analysis was made according to Tennyson's *Becket and Other Plays*, edited by Hallam Tennyson, Macmillan and Co. Ltd., London 1908.

⁵ It is interesting to see what Hallam Tennyson wrote about it: "My father's view of Becket was follows: Becket was a really great and impulsive man, with a firm sense of duty, and, when he renounced the world, looked upon himself as the head of that Church which was the people's tower of strength, their bulwark against throne and baronage." (From *Alfred, Lord Tennyson, A Memoir by His Son*, London 1899, p. 581).

into a very false position: the Archbishop of Canterbury becomes, in effect, Warden of the King's Mistress, however idealistic their relationship may be.

There are many questions to be asked in judging of an historical play. Tennyson brought to his drama much of the historian's approach; on the other hand, the problem of combining the story of the Archbishop's struggle with the King and the love-story of Henry and Fair Rosamund leads Tennyson to the highly unhistorical expedient of permitting Becket to save Rosamund from death at the point of Queen Eleanor's dagger.

It should be clear that Tennyson's "well made tragedy" has no theme. It is just a piece of falsified history, told for the sake of its intrigue, sentimentality, violence and spectacular effects.

4

Murder in the Cathedral has, in fact, a very limited plot, as Eliot points out;⁶ Becket returns to Canterbury, foresees that he will be murdered, and is murdered. From this angle of consideration *Murder in the Cathedral* has little claim to be a play of intricate construction. It is far from being a play obeying the generally accepted canons of dramatic technique. But for all its lack of action and its unconvincing protagonist, it is intensely moving and at times really exciting.

Eliot's play is constructed upon a strict, almost geometric, pattern; the suppression of names and the substitution of numbers for the Priests, Tempters and Knights reinforces this geometric pattern.

Two lines by the Chorus of the Women of Canterbury (repeated by the First Priest) —

*'Seven years and the summer is over.
Seven years since the Archbishop left us.'*⁷

fix the moment for Thomas's return, heralded by the Messenger. By the conversation of the Priests and the Messenger we are reminded of the background of

*'... ceaseless intrigue, combinations,
In conference, meetings accepted, meeting refused,
Meetings unended or endless
At one place or another in France.'*⁸

There are still "the old disputes" and the issue of peace or war between Henry and Thomas is uncertain. But Eliot makes no effort to exploit this situation dramatically. Indeed he sets it aside in order to present directly the Four Tempters and the next stage of action based on history is, dramatically considered, quite arbitrary — the Four Knights simply come to carry out what we

⁶ T. S. Eliot, *Poetry and Drama*, On Poetry and Poets, Faber, London 1971, p. 80.

⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, With an Introduction and Notes by Nevill Coghill, Faber, London 1965, p. 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

have to accept as the wishes of King Henry. In terms of action, as generally understood, there is no organic or continuous development.

Another traditional feature of serious drama is, of course, characterization. But how much do we know of Becket as a man? We may find a few indications — his sympathy with the Women of Canterbury; his courtesy with the Priests, but also on occasion his angry and resolute opposition to them — of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Essentially, however, what we have of Thomas is only that which Eliot's purpose requires.

"I did not want to increase the number of characters, I did not want to write a chronicle of twelfth-century politics, nor did I want to tamper unscrupulously with the meagre records as Tennyson did (in introducing Fair Rosamund, and in suggesting that Becket had been crossed in love in early youth). I wanted to concentrate on death and martyrdom."⁹ And this determines Eliot's treatment of Thomas. He virtually ignores Becket's career, he compresses the quarrel with King Henry into incidental reference; he incorporates only what is germane to his theme, and that retrospectively through the temptations.

The Tempters would appear from the text to be four aspects of Thomas himself. The first is a natural sensual man who loves pleasure, athletics, music, good company, luxurious fare, gaiety and romance. The second is the man who seeks the exercise of political power. The third is the man who might have used the power of the Church in secular ways — making cause with the "people" against the "throne". The fourth is the man who seeks the supreme glories of sainthood for the sake of the satisfactions it would bring him, to be able to rule from the tomb and to be "high in heaven". All these four characters are possible Thomases. So *Murder in the Cathedral* is not just a dramatization of the death of Thomas Becket; it is a deep-searching study of the significance of martyrdom.

There is no "big scene", which results from the latent dramatic potential of the original situation. Eliot has quite another keystone to the arch of his play. It is the Interlude. This takes the form of the sermon preached by Thomas on Christmas morning, 1170. The Interlude can be felt to present the element of inner conflict; it must be remembered, when this Interlude is being dramatically considered, that it follows upon the Four Temptations — the Fourth Temptation could be regarded as the crisis of the play — and the subsequent self-examination by Thomas in soliloquy. By comparison with those tense passages the grave words of the sermon constitute an anticlimax.

The disregard for organic development and continuity of the action, for characterization and for a central peak in the curve of the play must not make us think that Eliot lacks a knowledge of the craft of the dramatist. Quite apart from the masterly shaping of the verse to serve a dramatic end there are many indications that, had such been required, Eliot knows the technicalities of expression in the medium of drama. The Messenger's manner and idiom sharply stand off from the language of the Chorus and of the Priests. Sharp interchanges quicken tension and vary the pace at several points. The telling use of patterned question and answer arrest attention throughout the play. There is delightful exploitation of surprise and incongruity, e.g. in the Apology of the Four Knights.

⁹ T. S. Eliot, *Poetry and Drama*, On Poetry and Poets, pp. 80–81.

Eliot's knights "are not persons, but at first a gang, and then a set of attitudes; they murder for an idea, or for various ideas, and are not shown as individuals, disturbed by personal passions and personal motives".¹⁰ They gain a kind of impersonality and stand for the body of knights. Their part in *Murder in the Cathedral* can easily be seen to fall into two phases conceived on two totally different planes.

The first, in which they are nearest to being 'dramatis personae' in a historical play, does not call for much comment. The First, Second and Third Knight are but three mouth for one intent — punishment of the Archbishop who has defied his king. Their exchange of words with Thomas has dramatic vitality for it is the most sustained passage of open conflict in the play; but it does little more than recapitulate the respective arguments of Henry and Thomas. The episode closes with a line nicely weighted with irony:

*'We come for the King's justice, we come with swords.'*¹¹

In the second phase, which can be referred to as their Apology,¹² they speak wholly out of their historical context and serve in yet another way to liberate the play from the limitations of a historical-chronicle play. Eliot has followed history until the martyrdom is over; after that he abandons it and brings forward the murderer-knights to speak their bland apologies, whereas in history (and in Tennyson's play as well) they stamped out of the cathedral church shouting that they were King's men. Eliot's use of direct address in these speeches is a striking innovation in the theatrical technique of its time. The Knights speak in a highly naturalistic and colloquial twentieth-century style, even if they suddenly turn a theatre into a political meeting: 'We beg you to give us your attention for a few moments . . .'¹³ The two best speeches are those of the Second and the Fourth Knight, for although the others make their points and are diverting enough, these two put the historical situation with so great a show of fairness that many modern historians would agree with them. The Fourth Knight's speech deftly twists the interpretation of the course of events to lead to the conclusion that the Archbishop "had determined upon a death by martyrdom" and therefore, in their capacity of a Coroner's jury, the audience "will unhesitatingly render a verdict of Suicide while of Unsound Mind". This is, dramatically, the culmination of the whole Apology.¹⁴ For the Knights the play is over, and the First Knight suggests "that you now disperse quietly to your homes".

Looking back on the Four Knight's defence of their action, Eliot writes: "I may, for aught I know, have been slightly under the influence of St. Joan".¹⁵ Does the Apology of the Knights defeat the serious intent of the whole play then? It certainly does, although it does not shatter the unity of the play. It is an integral part of the play. The death of Thomas Becket, treated not as

¹⁰ Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot*, Faber, London 1969, p. 133.

¹¹ *Murder in the Cathedral*, p. 73.

¹² The murder of Thomas may then be seen as transitional to this phase.

¹³ *Murder in the Cathedral*, p. 83.

¹⁴ It must not, however be overlooked that there is in the Fourth Knight's casuistry a strange kind of logic and an unmistakeable reference back to the Fourth Temptation.

¹⁵ i.e. G. B. Shaw's *St. Joan*; T. S. Eliot, *Poetry and Drama, On Poetry and Poets*, Faber, London 1971, p. 81.

a historical event but as a spiritual examination of the nature of martyrdom, is thus set against a background not only of the twelfth but also of the twentieth century.

The real drama of *Murder in the Cathedral* is to be found in fact where its greatest poetry lies — in the choruses. The play is essentially a series of episodes linked by stasima or choral odes.¹⁶ The Chorus embodies one of the principal dramatic movements, from the early —

*'For us, the poor, there is no action,
But only to wait and to witness' — 17*

through the intermediate

'In our veins our bowels our skulls as well' — 18

to the final —

*'... the blood of the martyrs and the agony of the saints
Is upon our heads' 19*

— a movement from passivity to involvement to participation.

Each choric passage is related to its moment in the play. In the first (apart from its fixing the time —

*'Seven years and the summer is over
Seven years since the Archbishop left us' —*

and in a single line, "He who was always kind to his people", lighting up the character of Thomas) we are made to feel the imminence of some malady before which they feel helpless. This is intensified in their second stasimon where "the doom on the world" is brought fearfully nearer. After the Temptations they seem to be lost — "God is leaving us, God is leaving us, more pang, more pain than birth or death" — and can only cry pathetically

*'O Thomas Archbishop, save us, save us, save yourself
that we may be saved;
Destroy yourself and we are destroyed.' 20*

Their passage at the beginning of Part II emphasizes the symbolism of spring as a renewal of life, but closes in the burden of waiting to those of limited faith. Then follow the three great stasima which sound like a cosmic agony at the coming of the Knights and the killing of Thomas. Finally it is the closing *Te Deum* of the Chorus which regains for the play the liturgical plane and the spiritual atmosphere from which it has been momentarily and incongruously wrenched by the Apology of the Four Knights.

¹⁶ For the form Eliot is mainly indebted to Greek tragedy. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, however, the chorus is much farther individualized.

¹⁷ *Murder in the Cathedral*, p. 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 91–92.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

5

Because he was not writing a loose chronicle play in the pseudo-Shakespearean style of Tennyson's play about Becket, Thomas Stearns Eliot offers little about the Constitutions of Clarendon or the disputed coronation ceremony which were the chief bones of contention between Becket, Henry and their continental supporters, the Pope, the Emperor and the King of France. He is writing about a conflict between the epicurean and spiritual worlds and he rapidly tells us all we need to know of the historical situation in the introduction given by the three priests, and by the messenger who announces the return of the Archbishop to the Chorus, as the action opens. The Chorus sense a doom in which they will find themselves involved and pray that Becket may return at once to France; they do not wish anything to happen, they would rather go on in the misery of their half-lived lives.

Eliot has treated the historical facts faithfully but selectively, e.g. many an incident, and in particular one of the most touching (developed by Tennyson in the last Scene of his play) — an elderly monk, Edward Grim, raised his arm to protect the Archbishop from the first sword-thrust of Reginald Fitzurse, and it was sliced through — is left out as not germane to the true theme of the play. *Murder in the Cathedral* is not a Shakespearean chronicle-tragedy that tells an intricate, proliferating story full of incident, but a sparer drama, more in the manner of Aeschylus, about a "great cause in which incident and idiosyncrasy lose their importance".²¹

Unlike Shakespeare's plays, all of which take and give delight in the excitements of narrative, Eliot's play is about a situation, not a story, like *Everyman*²² before it, and *Waiting for Godot*²³ after.

²¹ Nevill Coghill, Introduction to T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, Faber, London

²² The English medieval morality play from the late fifteenth century.

²³ Tragicomedy in two acts by Samuel Beckett. The English version by the author was published in New York in 1954; originally written in French in 1952.

By means of graphic demonstration we can achieve the following results:

Fig. 1. The basic scheme-line of the action

- a) in Tennyson's *Becket*;
b) in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*

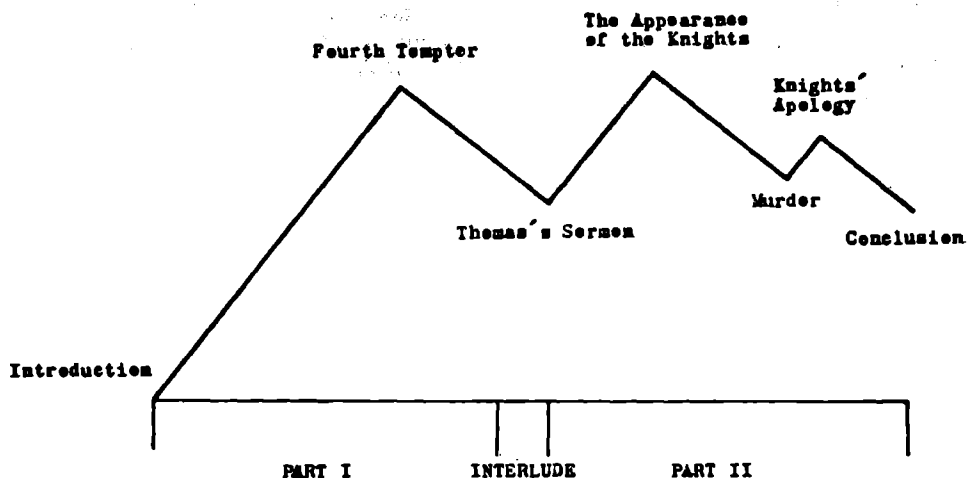
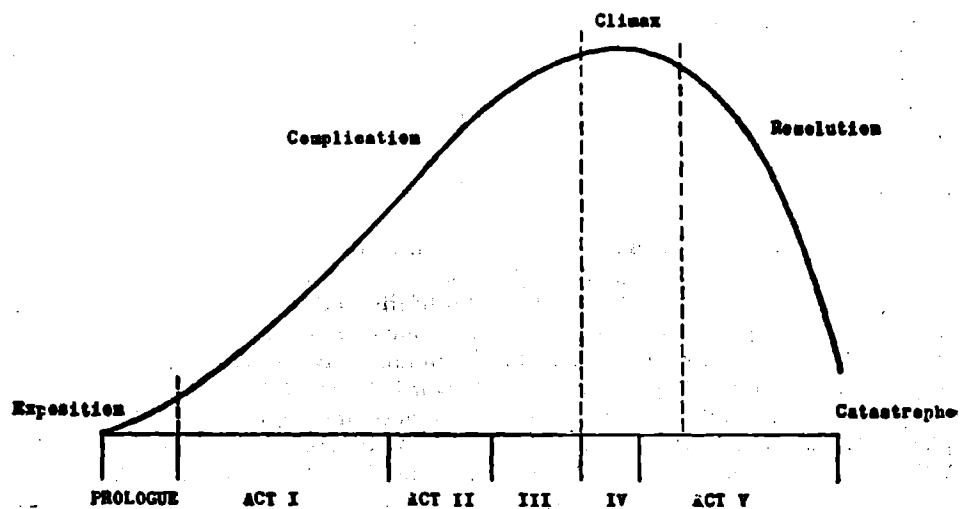


Fig. 2. The characters according to the length of their speeches

- a) in Tennyson's *Becket*;
b) in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*

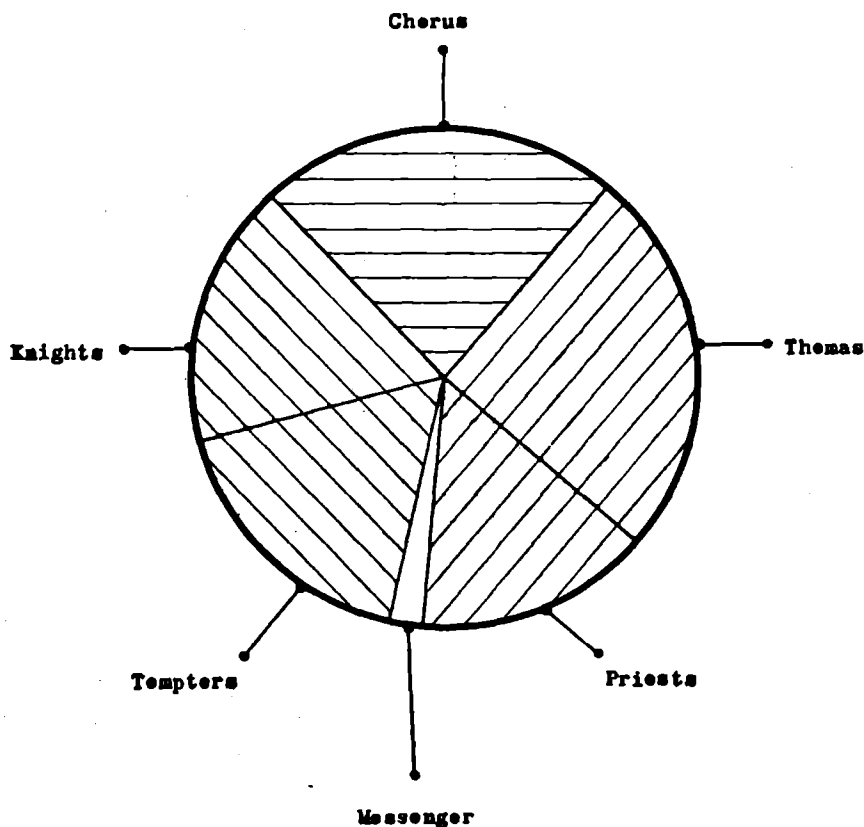
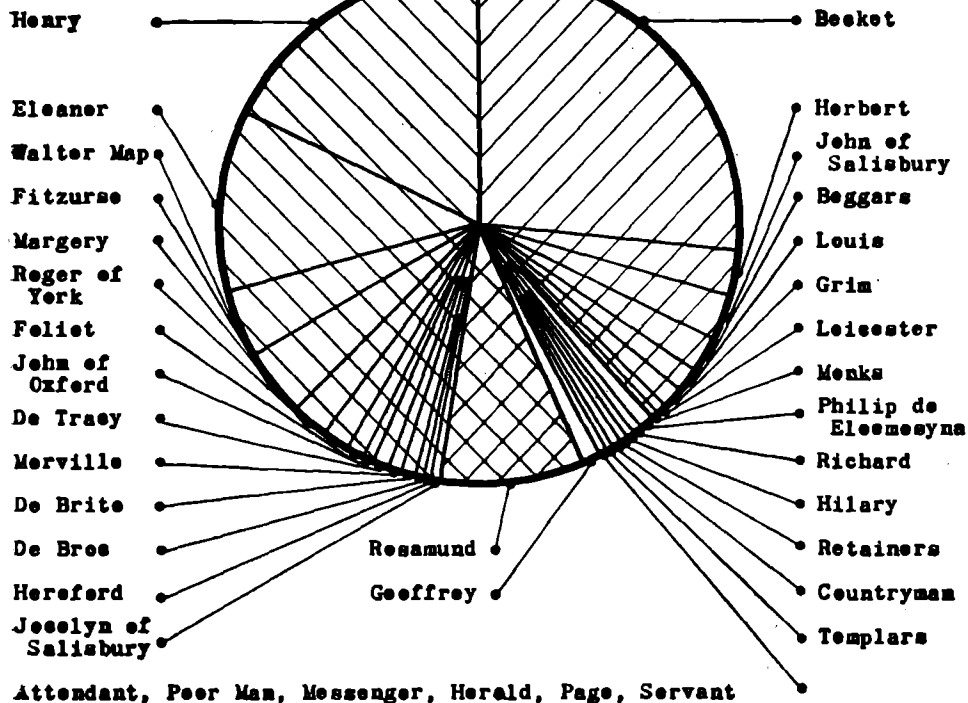
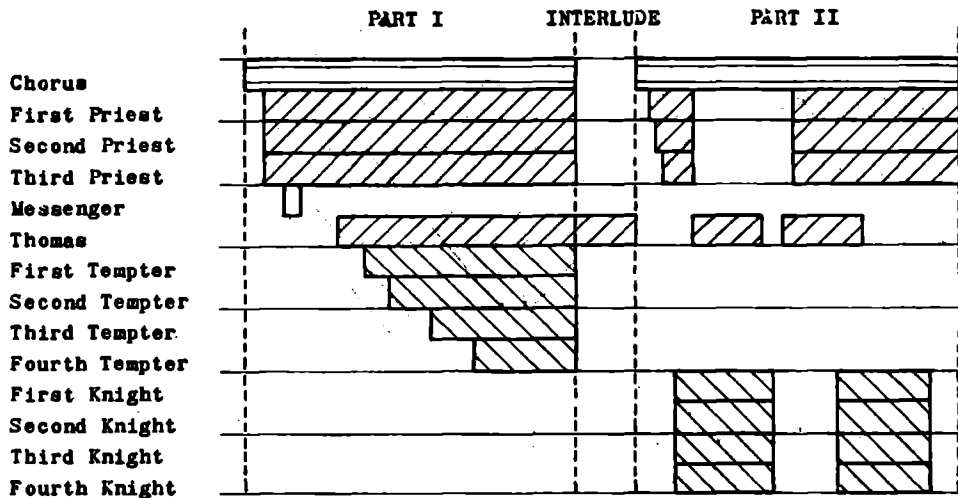
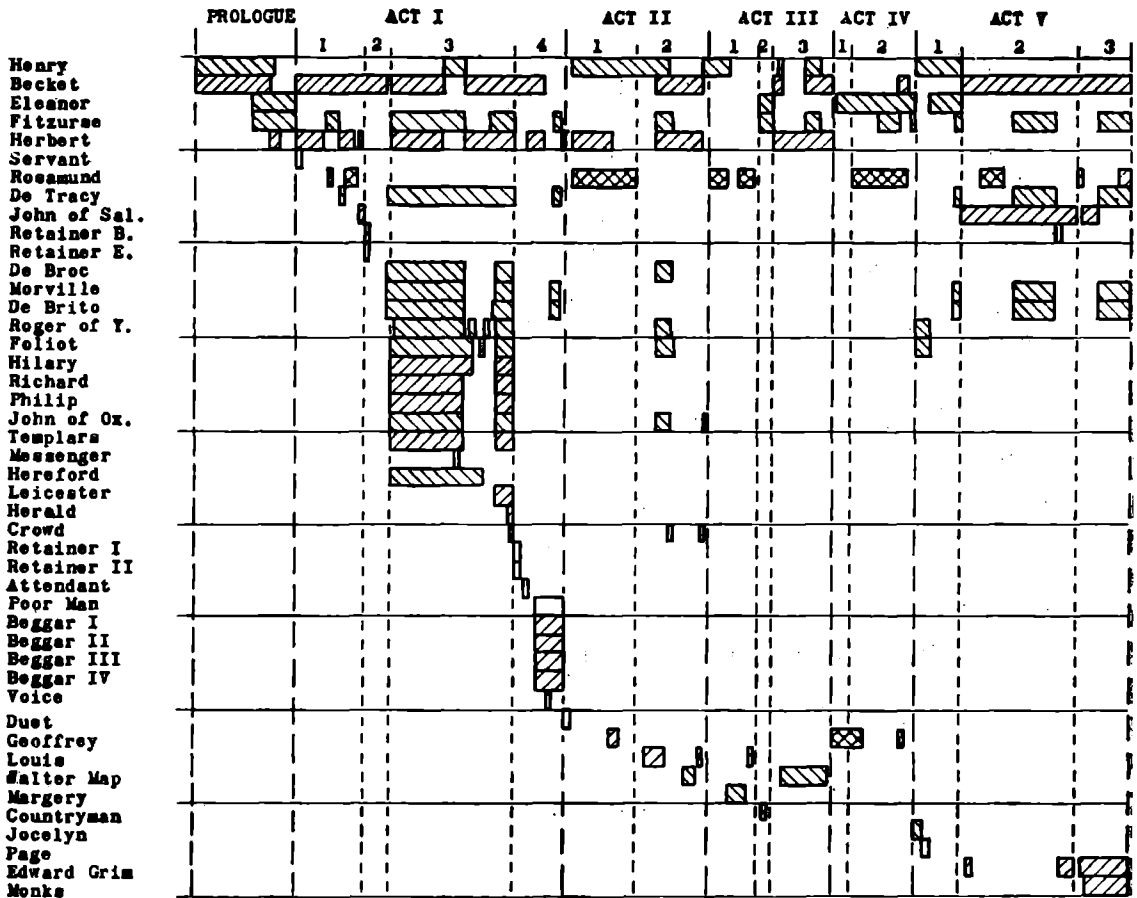


Fig. 3. The chronological survey of the characters in the play

a) in Tennyson's Becket;

b) in Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral



ELIOT A TENNYSON

(K dramatické výstavbě Vraždy v katedrále)

Renesance anglického poetického dramatu ve třicátých letech našeho století se po zásluze přičítá básníkovi, kritikovi a dramatikovi T. S. Eliotovi (1888–1965). Eliotova vlastní práce pro divadlo a zároveň důležitá fáze moderního poetického dramatu začala vytyčením funkce poezie, obnovováním a oživením rytmu a jazyka dramatické poezie.

Obnovit skvělou tradici veršovaného dramatu pokoušela se již skupina velkých viktoriánských básníků, zejména napodobováním básnického jazyka a stylu Williama Shakespeara. Ani Alfredu Tennysonovi (1809–1892), který Shakespeara imitoval nejzdařileji, nepodařilo se dát své době takové dramatické dílo, jež by mělo obdobný umělecký úspěch a význam, jako má Eliotova Vražda v katedrále.

Tématem Tennysonova Becketa (1884) je věrné zobrazení konfliktu velkého společenského dosahu, sporu krále Jindřicha II s arcibiskupem Tomášem Becketem. Boj historických představitelů státu a církve o moc poskytuje dobrou půdu pro živé dramatické zpracování. Zdramatizovaná historická událost, vybavená sentimentální zápletkou, zdá se být oslavou velikosti církve. Tennyson postupuje ve svém dramatu přesně podle tragédie shakespeareovské. Historický příběh — hlavní dějovou linii — kombinuje s milostnou zápletkou — vedlejší dějovou linií; drama se skládá z prologu a pěti dějství, každé z nich pak z mnoha výstupů, které umožňují střídání velkého počtu postav nejrůznějších společenských tříd. Stručný rozbor dramatické výstavby Tennysonova Becketa názorně ukazuje násilné skloubení milostného příběhu Jindřicha a Rosamundy s hlavní dějovou linií. Tennysonova postava Becketa je plná rozporů; je těžko rozhodnout, jde-li o tragédii nebo o hrdinské drama. Hra je tendenčně sentimentální, Tennysonovo programové hrdinství působí vykonstruovaně.

Obrací-li se dramatik tématem své hry k historii, bývá to zřídka proto, aby ukázal ve dvou hodinách jevištního času věrný obraz historických událostí nebo přijatého mýtu. Thomas Stearns Eliot volí při zpracování stejného námětu zcela jiný přístup. Děj vraždy v katedrále, původně napsaný pro Canterbury festival roku 1935, je velmi úzce vymezen. Týká se vlastně jen posledního výstupu Tennysonovy hry: Tomáš se vrací do Canterbury, předvidá, že bude zavražděn, a je zavražděn. Nedá se tedy počítat s žádným vnitřním vývojem; Eliotovo drama se přímo vymyká obvyklým pravidlům dramatické techniky. Hra je hlubokou studií o podstatě mučednictví.

Eliotovo drama, složené ze dvou částí a mezhry, je konstruováno téměř s geometrickou přesností; autor to zdůraznil tím, že nahradil jména kněží, pokušitelů a rytířů číslky. Hru uvádí sbor upracovaných a zbídačelých žen z Canterbury, které hořekují nad svým údělem, tuší neštěstí a vzpomínají na svého ochránce Tomáše Becketa. Rozhovor posla s kněžmi nám připomíná pozadí konfliktu mezi králem a arcibiskupem a stále napětí mezi nimi. Eliot se však nesnaží využít této situace dramaticky, naopak ji zcela pomlčí a po Tomášovi přivádí na scénu čtyři pokušitele. Ve shodě s historickou skutečností pak přicházejí už jen čtyři rytíři, aby zbavili krále nepřijemného soka.

Mezihra ve formě Becketova kázání snad obsahuje jistý prvek vnitřního konfliktu; pokud považujeme čtvrté pokušení za krizi, tvoří vážná slova kázání jeho protipól. Příchodem rytířů hra vrcholí, jejich ostrá výměna názorů s Tomášem je vlastně jediným otevřeným konfliktem hry. Vraždou Becketa však drama nekončí. Eliot nyní opouští historická fakta, rytíři předstupují s překvapující omluvou v hovorovém jazyce 20. století, plným klisé a frázi ostře kontrastujícím s bohatým a malebným Eliotovým veršem. Shawovská omluva rytířů, považovaná většinou za pokušení obecenstva a hodnocená vysoko jenom jako neotřelý dramatický prostředek momentu překvapení, šokující a nečekaný prvek celého dramatu, je neodmyslitelnou a pevnou součástí hry. Nenarušuje tedy jednotu dramatu, ale v jistém smyslu posouvá vážný úmysl hry do jiné roviny. Tímto realistickým zdůvodněním Tomášovy vraždy jako jediného možného východiska boje státní moci s mocí církevní je postavena do působivého kontrastu vina vrahů a světectví mučedníka, což je pro diváka důležitý podnět k zamyslení a pochybám a tím k dialektickému přehodnocení tradičního pojetí historického mýtu v pokrokovém smyslu.

Sbor zubožených a vykořisťovaných canterburských žen ztělesňuje hlavní hybnou sílu dramatu, spíše od pasivity k aktivnímu zapojení do děje. Hra je v podstatě sérií epizod spojených stasimy; na rozdíl od řecké tragédie je sbor více individualizován. Po šokující omluvě rytířů patří sboru i závěr.

Vražda v katedrále není výpravnou shakespearovskou tragédií se složitým dějem, ale jednoduchým dramatem, vycházejícím z tvaru Aischylova. Významným přínosem Eliotovým je nejen skvostný verš, precizní a revoluční dramatická stavba, ale i to, že učinil hlavní postavou a nositelem děje probouzející se lid, chudé pracující ženy. Vražda v katedrále není příběhem, zobrazuje situaci, je to drama situační, jako stará anglická moralitní hra Člověk (Everyman) a dnešní Čekání na Godota.

POZNÁMKA

Srovnání obou dramat dokresluje grafické znázornění základní dějové linie (obr. 1), poměrné délky promluv jednotlivých postav (obr. 2) a časový přehled jednajících postav na jevišti (obr. 3).