**T. S. Eliot: Murder in the Cathedral**

**Part I**

**Summary**

The scene is the Archbishop's Hall in Canterbury, December 2, 1170. A group of Canterbury's women find themselves inexplicably drawn to the cathedral, filled with foreboding. Three priests also arrive, wondering about the circumstances surrounding the imminent return of Archbishop Thomas Becket to Canterbury. Becket has been in exile for seven years; now he is to return, supposedly reconciled to the king, whose authority Becket opposed in defense of the church's sovereignty and the Pope's authority.

A messenger comes to inform the priests that Becket draws close to the city, urging them to prepare to meet him. He reports that crowds are welcoming Becket with wild abandon and great devotion. He also, however, hints at trouble on the horizon: he relates how Becket told the king, "I leave you as a man / Whom in this life I shall not see again." The messenger allows that none know precisely what Becket's words meant, but "no one considers it a happy prognostic." The priests recognize that, "[f]or good or ill," Becket's return will set a chain of events into motion: "For ill or good, let the wheel turn." The women return, imploring Becket not to return, for he brings doom with him.

One of the priests admonishes them to keep silent-but he, in turn, is himself admonished by the returning archbishop. He tells the priest that the women of Canterbury "speak better than they know" and speaks of suffering: it is necessary "[t]hat the pattern [i.e., of life] may subsist."-that is, to exist, to continue, to make sense. He knows, as do the women, that his return will bring suffering, even if he does not know exactly what shape that suffering will take. Becket's suffering begins when four figures of temptation appear to him.

The first tempter, identifying himself as an old friend to Becket, advises him to abandon his serious insistence on ecclesiastical independence and authority in favor of a life of pleasure, like the life he knew and enjoyed as the king's chancellor. The second who identifies himself as a political ally urges Becket to acquire and exercise temporal power to achieve his aims. The third appeals to Becket as "a rough straightforward Englishman," enticing the archbishop to betray the king. Becket remains steadfast in the face of all these temptations. A fourth tempter, however, comes closest to pulling Becket astray.

He urges the archbishop to embrace actively the role of martyr in order to win heavenly glory, asking him, "What earthly glory, of king or emperor, / What earthly pride, that is not poverty / Compared with richness of heavenly grandeur?" But Becket resists this temptation also, knowing that, if he is indeed to become a martyr, it must not be for reasons of personal pride: "The last temptation is the greatest treason: / To do the right deed for the wrong reason." Knowing that he is not consumed by pride, confident that he is serving the "greater cause" of God and God's church, Becket prepares to meet the fate he knows awaits him, confident that "my good Angel, whom God appoints / To be my guardian, hover over the swords' points."