

GERSON SCHADE

Institut für Griechische und Lateinische Philologie
Freie Universität Berlin
Germany

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON T.S. ELIOT'S *MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL*

ABSTRACT. Schade Gerson, *Some Observations on T.S. Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral"* (Kilka uwag na temat sztuki T.S. Eliota pt. „Mord w Katedrze”).

Louis MacNeice translated Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* in such a way that some were reminded of T.S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*. Both plays were staged in the mid-1930s in England, and the authors corresponded with each other. At first sight, this is the story of a minor figure imitating greater stylishness. A closer analysis, however, reveals that Eliot drew largely on Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. This is new, yet on second thoughts, not surprising: being obsessed by heritage and tradition, Eliot was surely a fervent reader of classical tragedies, perhaps even a fine connoisseur. Nevertheless, there is another story, lurking in the background so to say, this time about a great poet indebted to a subtle and sensitive mind.¹

Keywords: Eliot *Murder in the Cathedral*; Aeschylus *Agamemnon*; Louis MacNeice; Wyndham Lewis.

*But the classical student is bred to the purple, his training in syntax
Is also a training in thought
And even in morals ...
And it made one confident to think that nothing
Really was what is seemed under the sun.*

Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal* xiii

Since its first performance on stage, in the mid-30s in London, L. MacNeice's translation of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*² is regarded as somehow reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. The Aeschylean flavour in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, though, has passed unnoticed. Both plays' structure, however,

¹The article developed from a lecture held at a meeting of the Polish Philological Society's Poznań branch. Professor Jerzy Danielewicz helped to make the argument more precise, and the anonymous referee's pertinent observations led to a substantial reworking of the text.

²The play was first performed at the Westminster Theatre, November 1 and 8 the same year with the music composed by Benjamin Britte: cf. Armitage/Clark 1973:12.

is similar, statements of both plays' protagonists, each to be murdered half way during the play, resemble each other, and last not least, Eliot's chorus of women of Canterbury echoes Aeschylus' chorus of elders of Argos.

In October 1936 Louis MacNeice (1907–1963) published a translation of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. A passage of his translation is similar to a passage of a play by MacNeice's friend Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965), first performed in June 1935 at Canterbury, and one may imagine MacNeice as being inspired by it.³ The passage in question⁴ belongs to the chorus' comment on Agamemnon's murder, committed by his wife Clytemnestra.⁵ The spectacular scene,⁶ in the course of which all the justification which Clytemnestra can claim is held steadily before the eyes,⁷ is concluded by a choral song part of which, in MacNeice's translation, seems particularly close to Eliot's play (lines 1530–40):⁸

I am at a loss for thought, I lack
 All nimble counsel as to where
 To turn when the house is falling.
 I fear the house-collapsing crashing
 Blizzard of blood – of which these drops are earnest.
 Now is Destiny sharpening her justice
 On other whetstones for a new affliction.
 O earth, earth, if only you had received me
 Before I saw this man lie here as if in bed
 In a bath lined with silver.

In June 1935 T.S. Eliot (1888–1965) published his play *Murder in the Cathedral*. Drawing much on Edward Grim, the first biographer of Thomas, Eliot depicts the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral

³Already *The Times*' critic, who attended the first performance of MacNeice's *Agamemnon*, remarked that MacNeice's verses are "often reminiscent of Mr Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*" (cited from Stallworthy 1995: 195).

⁴Cf. Green 1960: 213–214.

⁵Cf. Dawe 1963: 45–46, and Taplin 1977: 325–7, on its singular overture (1346–71): all members of the chorus are given two lines of comment on their own.

⁶Cf. Popp 1971: 243–244, on a new, subtle type of lyrical amoebae in the *Oresteia* to be observed in this passage (*Agamemnon* 1448–1576, *Choephoroi* 306–478, *Eumenides* 916–1020): accompanying the protagonists' understanding of what is going on, it highlights the play's theological facet. Popp suggests that, rather than to be compared to structured argumentation, the impression made by the passage *Agamemnon* 1448–1576 resembles movements in a musical composition.

⁷As an example illustrating her state of mind Clytemnestra's impression of the dying Agamemnon may be cited (1389–92): "he coughed up a sharp spurt of blood and hit me with a black shower of gory dew – at which I rejoiced no less than the growing corn rejoices in the liquid blessing granted by Zeus when the sheathed ears well to birth", a metaphor "worthy of Shakespeare himself" (Lucas 1959: 117). The translations from the *Agamemnon* are by Alan H. Sommerstein: Aeschylus, *Oresteia*, Cambridge/Mass. 2008 (*The Loeb Classical Library* 146).

⁸MacNeice 2008: 65.

in 1170;⁹ the play premiered 50 yards from where Thomas Becket was killed in 1170.¹⁰ In Eliot's play, the stage direction indicates that "while the knights kill him, we hear the chorus":¹¹

A rain of blood has blinded my eyes.

(...)

How can I ever return, to the soft quiet seasons?

Night stay with us, stop sun, hold season, let the day not come, let the spring not come.

Can I look again at the day and its common things, and see them all smeared with blood, through a curtain of falling blood?

We did not wish anything to happen.

We understand the private catastrophe,

The personal loss, the general misery,

Living and partly living;

The terror by night that ends in daily action,

The terror by day that ends in sleep.

Tone and texture of both passages are similar and, as well as the Greek lyric metres are rendered by MacNeice into English prose, Eliot's lines are free of any metre. Both passages share the image of "a rain of blood" (Eliot), "a curtain of falling blood" (Eliot again), and "the ... blizzard of blood" (MacNeice) of which "drops" are singled out (MacNeice again). Such closeness, however, is not to be wondered at: Eliot's poetry loomed large on the horizon during MacNeice's years as an Oxford undergraduate. Eliot was admired by MacNeice, who even discovered "Aeschylean concentration" in his work.¹² Both knew each other,¹³ and in two of his letters to Eliot¹⁴ MacNeice mentioned his translation, which he sent to Eliot in July 1936.¹⁵

⁹Grim was present in Canterbury Cathedral on 29 December 1170, when four knights attacked and murdered Becket; attempting to defend Becket, Grim nearly lost his arm: cf. Duggan 2004.

¹⁰Malamud 1992: 70.

¹¹Eliot 1937: 76–77 = Eliot 1962: 47.

¹²MacNeice 1938: 103–104; v. etiam pp. 11–5 & 62–74.

¹³Both were awarded scholarships by the same Oxford college, in 1914 and 1926 respectively, yet both disliked Oxford similarly; cf. MacNeice 1965: 104–105, and Eliot 2009: 81. By stating, however, "I ought to be glad / That I studied the classics at Marlborough and Merton", MacNeice refers to the "privilege of learning a language / That is incontrovertibly dead" (the opening of *Autumn Journal* xiii, Mac Neice 1949: 50 = 2007: 130).

¹⁴Allison 2010: xvii–xviii and 264–265.

¹⁵MacNeice's version was not highly esteemed by Ian Scott-Kilvert (1917–1989), literary critic and translator of classical texts, who ambiguously spoke of a certain "gain in speed and directness of impact" in MacNeice's translation. By choosing free verse, MacNeice "quite abandons the majestic address and the visual grandeur of Aeschylus' poetry". To Scott-Kilvert, instead of "the celebrated ruggedness of Aeschylus" MacNeice's text shows "jerkiness of the movement" and the harshness of the diction borders on the "journalese" (Scott-Kilvert 1954: 537–538). MacNeice's text is indeed less gently flowing than Eliot's, who uses rhyming and alliteration to make

At first sight, it seems that a younger and still minor figure got some inspiration from a great and already established poet for his own menial toil.¹⁶ On closer inspection though, the relation of give and take between the two men (and the three texts) turns out to be more complex.

Translating Aeschylus, MacNeice was apparently inspired by Eliot; conceiving his play, however, Eliot seemingly draw inspiration from Aeschylus.¹⁷ Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* contains lines and expressions that are also to be found in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. This seems curious, given the fact that the plot of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, let alone the personnel, differs much from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. In Aeschylus, there is no group of priests, commenting on the play's action. And Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek forces against Troy, is not held to account for his past by the four tempters (or anything like), introduced by Eliot in order to provide to Thomas, Archbishop of Canterbury an opportunity for a change of mind before getting killed.¹⁸ After Agamemnon's assassination, however, an evaluation of his takes place, as is the case in Eliot, when the four knights elaborately report on Thomas' life in such a way that Thomas becomes the cause of his own destruction.¹⁹ Having just killed her husband, Clytemnestra discusses for quite a while with the chorus, elaborately re-evaluating her husband's life (1372–673). Both scenes in Eliot and Aeschylus unveil what was really going on long before the plays' action began, and both plays' protagonists were similarly unaware of it. These similarities between the plays by Eliot and Aeschylus have nothing to do whatsoever with MacNeice's translation. Aside from the just mentioned final scene during which the knights give their damning verdict on Thomas – which comes close to the just mentioned scene between Clytemnestra, the chorus, and eventually (from 1576 on)

his text's melody rather charming. However, MacNeice achieved what he planned: "I have tried to make this translation vigorous, intelligible, and homogeneous. ... I first wrote a very literal version, line for line, sometimes word for word, and afterwards modified it with a view to form, intelligibility, and effect." He wrote this to Eliot on June 23, 1936; sending his translation by the same post, MacNeice added that "Auden liked it very much", and that "Dodds has made some very helpful suggestions" (cited from Allison 2010: 265–266).

¹⁶Even Eliot's detractors had to acknowledge his status. Among contemporary writers one may refer to Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957), one of Eliot's most ardent defamers. Calling him a "Pseudoist" and "The Pseudo-Believer", Lewis opens his chapter on Eliot by stating (Lewis 1934: 65): "There is no person today who has had more influence upon the art of literature in England and America than Mr. T.S. Eliot." Four years later, Lewis was to paint a controversial portrait of Eliot; cf. Eliot's letter to Lewis (Rose 1963: 251, accompanied by a photograph of both Eliot and his painted portrait).

¹⁷A chorus of Eumenides is to turn up in Eliot's *The Family Reunion*, first published in March 1939. The Eumenides, the avenging Furies, pursue Orestes in the *Oresteia*'s last play, a trilogy of which the *Agamemnon* is the opening play. Eliot judged his play as defective "because the device of introducing into the play the Furies (the Eumenides) does not work" (Spender 1976: 208).

¹⁸Eliot 1937: 23–42 = Eliot 1962: 18–29.

¹⁹Eliot 1937: 77–84 = Eliot 1962: 48–52.

Aegisthus – the similarities between Eliot and Aeschylus are all to occur before Thomas' assassination.

The opening scenery in Eliot shows a chorus waiting in his seventh year:²⁰ "Seven years and the summer is over / Seven years since the Archbishop left us." These lines remind of the chorus' first line in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (40–5): "This is the tenth year since against Priam, ... King Menelaus together with Agamemnon ... launched the thousand-ship expedition of the Argives." In Aeschylus, the chorus were left alone at home (73–74), as is declared by the chorus in Eliot:²¹ "But mostly we are left to our own devices, / And we are content if we are left alone. ... For us, the poor, there is no action, / But only to wait and to witness." In Aeschylus, the chorus' mood is "sorrowful" (100), he waits for explanation (97), while in Eliot the chorus anticipates that "destiny waits for the coming,"²² and "Destiny waits in the hand of God."²³ In Aeschylus, it is Zeus who is to be invoked (160–161): "whoever he may be, if it pleases him to be so called," it is Zeus "who set mortals on the road to understanding" (176–177). Calchas is his prophet, interpreting the portent (130–7) that "Destiny will violently plunder all the livestock the community possesses," etc.²⁴

In Eliot, a (rather long) scene follows: the three priests interrogate a messenger, who announces that Thomas is coming. In Aeschylus, a group of persons is on stage (for a considerable time, too, i.e. lines 503–680), while the chorus and Clytemnestra ask a messenger announcing Agamemnon's arrival for more details. The first priest fears for the Archbishop,²⁵ as the chorus do for Agamemnon: in general, the gods are amorally jealous of human prosperity (750–7), and in particular, there was an impious deed (758–759) that breeds more to follow (i.e. the *cena Thyestea* and the chain of crimes that is to follow).

Eliot has something similar: in general, kings are amorally jealous of human prosperity, in particular the king who made the unknown and irrelevant Thomas an archbishop; and there was a crime, i.e. Thomas' disobedience, his

²⁰ Eliot 1937: 12 = Eliot 1962: 11. In the following, the chorus' mood is characterised by a certain apprehensiveness, quite common in Greek tragedy; it is repeated: "We do not wish anything to happen. / Seven years we have lived quietly, / Succeeded in avoiding notice, / Living and partly living" (1937: 18–19 = 1962: 15). If one thinks that the chorus is somehow in advance of Becket in seeing the coming of disaster (as did Leech 1969: 71) then one may compare a similarly sounding statement by the chorus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* (863–71). Assuming that, one may think of Eliot as adding another layer to his play, subtly modelling Becket's fall on that of Oedipus, from splendid king to blind beggar; suggestive as it sounds, no other Sophoclean reminiscence in the play, though, supports this reading.

²¹ Eliot 1937: 12–13 = Eliot 1962: 11–12.

²² Eliot 1937: 12–13 = Eliot 1962: 11–12.

²³ Eliot 1937: 13 = Eliot 1962: 12.

²⁴ Cf. MacNeice's translation (2008: 17): "By Fate's force the public / Wealth will be wasted."

²⁵ Eliot 1937: 16–17 = Eliot 1962: 14.

claiming that there is a higher authority than his king's. Though it is not spoken of, it is alluded to by the knights.²⁶ The priest who fears for him, also points at this, characterising Thomas as "Loathing power given by temporal devolution, / Wishing subjection to God alone."²⁷ Agamemnon too evokes the theme that gods are to be obeyed: they should be honoured, but not mortal men (922–4); speaking of himself, he wants to be revered only like a man, not as a god (925). In Eliot, all three priests are sceptical about the outcome, they ask questions,²⁸ and questions are brought forward by the two half-choruses in Aeschylus, too (475–88). When Agamemnon comes, in Aeschylus the path is strewn with clothing, an embroidered doormat (921–4), while in Eliot the Archbishop's road is similarly prepared by people "strewing the way with leaves and late flowers of the season."²⁹

Before the tempters begin to speak, Thomas gives a short account of his present situation to the priests, just after his arrival. Ending a catalogue-like survey, Thomas says that "Only John, the Dean of Salisbury, / Fearing for the King's name, warning against treason, / Made them hold their hands,"³⁰ i.e. only one person held back his enemies, prevented his killing, and stood on his side. The leader of the Greeks against Troy, Agamemnon, also gives a short account of his present situation, just after his arrival. Appearances are deceiving (840), he says, no longer trusting his comrades – just as Thomas knows that the clergy is no longer on his side: "Rebellious bishops, York, London, Salisbury, / Would have intercepted our letters, / Filled the coast with spies and sent to meet me / Some who hold me in bitterest hate."³¹ Agamemnon too has only one person whom he can trust (841–842): "only Odysseus, the one who sailed against his will, proved himself, once yoked, my willing right-hand man."

After the four tempters have spoken (for quite some time), and before they pronounce their final common verdict on Thomas, the chorus ask:³² "What is the sickly smell, the vapour? ... What is the sticky dew that forms on the back of my hand?" Anticipating Thomas' murder, which is to come soon, the chorus' statement reminds of a dramatic passage during the (rather long) Cassandra-scene in Aeschylus, when Cassandra suddenly recoils disgusted (1307). The chorus cannot understand why that should be so, and Cassandra replies (1309) that "the house breathes blood-dripping murder!" Again, the chorus are unable to get it,

²⁶ Eliot 1937: 74 = Eliot 1962: 46: "Where is Becket the Cheapside brat? / Where is Becket the faithless priest?" ('faithless' not in the sense of 'unbeliever' which makes no sense in Thomas' case, but meaning 'infidel', i.e. to the king, whom Thomas does disobey indeed).

²⁷ Eliot 1937: 17 = Eliot 1962: 14.

²⁸ Eliot 1937: 15 = Eliot 1962: 13.

²⁹ Eliot 1937: 15 = Eliot 1962: 13.

³⁰ Eliot 1937: 22–23 = Eliot 1962: 18.

³¹ Eliot 1937: 22–23 = Eliot 1962: 18.

³² Eliot 1937: 41 = Eliot 1962: 28.

and Cassandra explains (1311) that “the scent is very plain – just like the whiff of a grave!” In Aeschylus, before this happens Agamemnon arrived, while at the end of this scene he is murdered. In Eliot, before this happens Thomas arrived, and after it he is murdered.

The evidence gathered suggests that Eliot used the structure of Aeschylus' play for his own. Both the building-up, the turning-point, and the after-math,³³ have a parallel in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Moreover, despite appearing as so divergent at first sight, on second thoughts the plays' respective scenarios appear as not too dissimilar to each other: the assassination of a prominent ruler, the leader of the Greeks and the Archbishop respectively, killed by people who were not supposed to murder them, at least not generally known to be intent to do so. In both cases, the killing was later reported by an eyewitness: respectively by a friend who wanted to help and by the murderess herself.

One may object that such a report is a conventional practise in tragedy, and moreover, a report by a friend is not exactly comparable to a report by the murderess. Yet on balance, the particularly Aeschylean attitude of Eliot's chorus, i.e. his teaching theology by means of performing magnificent songs, being sombre and solemn at the same time, might outweigh these observations. Eventually, there is another parallel. In Aeschylus' play, Cassandra goes open-eyed to her death, as does Thomas to his in Eliot's play: Cassandra being a mortal who has betrayed a god, Thomas being a mortal who has betrayed a king.

The argument derives its strength from two observations: first, tone, mood, atmosphere prevailing in Eliot are clearly Aeschylean; second, structurally speaking, Becket is as clear-sighted as Cassandra while at the same as ignorant and power-greedy as Agamemnon. And as Cassandra betrayed Apollo, he betrayed Clytemnestra. Becket cannot but have been fearful too, in the same way as Agamemnon fearfully shied away from the purple carpet, the precious tapestry lain out before him; in the same way as Cassandra is at first unable to speak, paradoxically out of sheer horror of what she later predicts. Eliot's double use of characteristics of two main figures from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is further evidence that he felt free to draw on Aeschylean patterns.

Was it MacNeice who made Eliot turn to Aeschylus' august beings, always caught up in the movement of larger forces, as was Thomas Becket? Admittedly, Eliot and Aeschylus are great tragedians, a fact that accounts for much; true, but the fact that Eliot comes so close to Aeschylus is not an accident. Perhaps, as Stephen Spender suggested,³⁴ Eliot simply tried to appeal to both the lowest and highest denominators of his audience: on the one hand, to those who think that

³³I.e. the already mentioned evaluation of Agamemnon's failures (discussed by Clytemnestra, the chorus, and finally, Aegisthus), which corresponds to the discussion about Thomas' (among the knights).

³⁴Spender 1976: 211.

they are going to see a spectacular play, full of suspense, and, “on the other, to men of learning who know that Mr. T.S. Eliot is interested in Greek tragedy”. Eliot’s devices paid off.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allison 2010: J. Allison, *Letters of Louis MacNeice*, London 2010.
- Armitage/Clark 1973: C.M. Armitage, N. Clark, *A Bibliography of the Works of Louis MacNeice*, Edmonton 1973.
- Dawe 1963: R.D. Dawe, *Inconsistency of Plot and Character in Aeschylus*, “Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society” 9, 1963, 21–62.
- Duggan 2004: A.J. Duggan, *Edward Grim*, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online), 2004.
- Eliot 1937: T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, London 1937 (third ed.).
- Eliot 1962: T.S. Eliot, *Collected Plays*, London 1962.
- Eliot 2009: T.S. Eliot, *Letters I: 1898–1922*, London 2009 (revised ed.)
- Green 1960: P. Green, *Some Versions of Aeschylus: A Study of Tradition and Method in Translating Classical Poetry*, in: P.G., *Essays in Antiquity*, London 1960, 185–215.
- Leech 1969: C. Leech, *Tragedy*, New York 1969.
- Lewis 1934: W. Lewis, *Men Without Art*, London 1934.
- Lucas 1959: D.W. Lucas, *The Greek Tragic Poets*, London 1959 (second ed.).
- MacNeice 1938: L. MacNeice, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay*, Oxford 1938.
- MacNeice 1949: L. MacNeice, *Autumn Journal: A poem*, London 1949.
- MacNeice 1965: L. MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, London 1965.
- MacNeice 2007: L. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, London 2007.
- MacNeice 2008: L. MacNeice, *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus*, London 2008 (first published in 1936, reissued in the Faber Finds-collection).
- Malamud 1992: R. Malamud, *T.E. Eliot’s Drama: A Research and Production Sourcebook*, New York 1992.
- Popp 1971: H. Popp, *Das Amoibaion*, in: W. Jens (ed.), *Bauformen der griechischen Tragödie*, München 1971, 221–75.
- Rose 1963: W.K. Rose, *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*, London 1963.
- Scott-Kilvert 1954: I.S. Scott-Kilvert, *Melpomene in the West*, “Times Literary Supplement” 27.8.1954, 537–538.
- Spender 1976: S. Spender, *T.S. Eliot*, New York 1976.
- Stallworthy 1995: J. Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, London 1995.
- Taplin 1977: O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy*, Oxford 1977.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON T.S. ELIOT’S *MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL*

Summary

A detailed analysis of both texts shows that Eliot’s play *Murder in the Cathedral* (first performed in AD 1935) shares similarities with Aeschylus’ tragedy *Agamemnon* (first performed in 458 BC). Not only the plays’ structure, but also the respective story’s narrative is similar: having being absent for some years (in Becket’s case seven, in Agamemnon’s ten), on his return an eminent figure is viciously murdered; the act is carried out by people at first sight not to be suspected,

people who later in both plays give elaborate statements justifying their deeds. The attitude of Eliot's chorus may be added to these observations, a chorus which strikingly resembles the chorus in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*: sorrowful and frightened, given to gnomes as well as disposed for theology, outraged, yet coward to the end. This intense textual interrelation may suggest that Eliot profited from professional support. A friend of his, Louis MacNeice, contemporaneously prepared an impressive and rather successful translation of the *Agamemnon*. Moreover, MacNeice seems to have been inspired by Eliot's style, which he admired. Without doubt, Eliot was widely read. He would not have needed MacNeice to bring Aeschylus to his attention, though he might have been instigated by MacNeice, who considered Eliot as congenial with Aeschylus.