

## A GAME OF CHESS

### WL-II: A GAME OF CHESS

Two dialogues from both ends of the waste land's social scale will show what the breakdown of marriage and family brings: indifference, pain, madness. Maybe it is all a game anyway, as the title suggests. The waste land today has gone far along this path.

#### WL-IIa: High-class marriage (77-138)

A wealthy woman sits in her boudoir brushing her hair amid the sparkles and smells of her dressing table. Allusions in the text, as Eliot remarks in his note, link her to royalty: Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, Marc Antony's lover in Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra*:

The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,  
Burn'd on the water...<sup>59</sup>

and Dido, queen of Carthage, lover of Aeneas, hero of Virgil's Latin epic poem *The Aeneid*. Both queens were betrayed: Cleopatra by Antony and Dido by Aeneas.

In the painting above the fireplace the woman contemplates the figure of Philomel, the princess raped by her brother-in-law, Tereus, who then cut out her tongue and imprisoned her to keep her quiet. According to the myth, the gods later turned her into a nightingale, perhaps because of its grieving song. Philomel will return at the end of the poem in the guise of a swallow.<sup>60</sup>

Eliot will also quote St. Augustine on the "unholy loves" that met him when he came to Carthage.<sup>61</sup> But the waste land sees no horror in forced sex, and the Philomel myth is just another dirty story to get a laugh. The title of this section recalls a play by Thomas Middleton, *Women Beware Wom-*

*en*, where the moves of the seduction of a woman match her mother-in-law's moves in a game of chess.

The fine lady sitting on her royal "throne" gazes—in the painting as if through a window—at Philomel, no longer mute but as a nightingale filling the a "sylvan scene" with her pure song. But the scene is out of reach for the woman, for thus Satan once looked upon Eden, the paradise in which he knew could have no part. Eliot is thinking of a passage in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* where the devil

... to the border comes  
Of Eden, where delicious Paradise...  
    ... crowns the champaign head  
Of steep wilderness, whose hairy sides...  
Access denied; and overhead up grew...  
A sylvan scene.<sup>62</sup>

Neither Satan nor the woman can cross the border to enter the garden; they must remain in the waste land—paradise in reverse—where the nightingale's song goes unheard.

The lady is as ambiguous as Belladonna. Some of the props evoke an exotic brothel: the cupidons, coquettishly hiding and peeking, perfumes, low lights. Others—seven-branched candelabrum, candles, incense, vials, stained glass—belong in a sumptuous temple or church. But they all blend together into the bizarre imaginings of her diseased mind. Even her sophistication is vulgar and as "elegant and intelligent" as the "Shakespearian Rag", popular around 1912.

The woman now clamors for communication and demands to know what her husband is thinking. He does not say so, but he is thinking of rats and bones, death,<sup>63</sup> just as the dried voices of hollow men, whispering together,

Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass  
Or as rats' feet over broken glass  
In our dry cellar.<sup>64</sup>

The woman hears a "noise", the "wind". But in the waste land, it is "nothing". It is not the wind that heralded the coming of the Holy Spirit to Jesus's disciples at Pentecost, when

all at once from the sky came a noise like a rush of strong wind.<sup>65</sup>

Nor will God's "Breath from the four winds" come to the waste land, as it came to Israel in Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones:

The breath came into them, and they lived, and they stood up,  
a very great host.<sup>66</sup>

Eliot will use wind to symbolize the sanctifying work of the Holy Ghost, in *Four Quartets*, especially in *Little Gidding*.

The woman expects her husband to see something, perhaps something unusual, with moral implications. In Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* asked his mother "Do you see nothing there?" when she failed to see the ghost of her first husband, his father —murdered by the king whom she then married.<sup>67</sup> The woman's husband cannot speak, any more than the Hyacinth girl's friend, and like him he "knew nothing".<sup>68</sup> He remembers only the drowned sailor, the "pearls that were his eyes" (quoted again from *The Tempest*),<sup>69</sup> but nothing else. His wife wants to know what "that noise" is, "the wind", and she keeps asking whether he knows, sees, remembers "nothing".

Again the images of Christian mysticism are inverted, subverted: silence, unknowing, emptiness, nothing. St. John of the Cross said we come to know God only in dark of night, and that

to come to know all, wish not to know  
anything of anything.

Eliot will paraphrase this passage in *Four Quartets*.<sup>70</sup> He will also quote *The Cloud of Unknowing*, whose author pictures God's love drawing the soul into a dark cloud in order to become forgetful of whatever is not God's "naked" being.

This caution in thinking and speaking of the Divine has been called "apophatic" or "negative theology".<sup>71</sup> The prophet Isaiah is often quoted speaking of a God who "hides" in the temple.<sup>72</sup> The theology of "the hidden God" was developed by the Greek theologians St. Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite, author of the seminal *Mystical Theology*.<sup>73</sup> In this tradition, the person who wishes to mature in holiness must be willing constantly to reexamine his own religious experience —intellectual, moral, emotional— and must not take as final his own attitude toward the Divine nor to the behavior it may affect. "Detachment" is important in Buddhism

and in philosophical stoicism, as well as in Christian spirituality: owning nothing before God. Jesus said:

...unless the wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone.<sup>74</sup>

Detachment, then, applies even to one's "interior life"; this will be an important theme in *Four Quartets*, especially in regard to Julian of Norwich.<sup>75</sup>

But in the waste land, when the woman judges her husband to be "dead" and "empty", she is not thinking of apophatic theology; she is rather feeling Baudelaire's *ennui*: "what shall we ever do?" —have a outing, a game of chess? And in the meantime we await "the knock upon the door" when death comes a-calling.

#### WL-IIb: Low-class marriage (139-172)

The scene shifts to a pub at closing time. May is telling a couple about a conversation she had with her friend Lil. May had given her fair warning: she should fix herself up if she wanted to hold on to her husband Albert who was finishing four years of army service. Why, Lil didn't even use the money Albert gave her to buy herself a nice set of false teeth. Lil explained that her abortion after five children was the cause of her poor health. May asked her: "What you get married for if you don't want children?" In the waste land marriage is not marked by commitment, justice and fruitfulness, but lust, betrayal and death.

And all the while time is running out: "HURRY UP!" repeats the proprietor, "IT'S TIME" to close. As the women finally leave, he sends them off with the words of Ophelia, Hamlet's betrothed, who, doubting his love, went mad and drowned herself:

Good night, ladies. Good night, sweet ladies. Good night, good night.<sup>76</sup>

In the waste land even this tragedy is banal: when we hear "good night, ladies" we cannot help humming "merrily we roll along".