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Thematic development in four Becket plays

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THEMATIC DEVELOPMENT IN FOUR BECKET PLAYS

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CHAPTER I

THE BECKET PLAYS AND HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Since Augustin Thierry's The Conquest of England by the Normans (1825)[1] rescued Thomas Becket from the oblivion into which his shrine and memory had been cast by the spite of Henry VIII, the martyred archbishop has been the subject of six historical dramas. Douglas William Jerrold staged a successful chronicle history in 1829; George Darley followed with another in 1840. Both held to Henry VIII's assessment of Becket's motives in his quarrel with Henry Plantagenet, but both saw the potential in Thomas as a stage hero. Darley was explicit on this point:

> ...Despite of all his faults, and all our prejudices, we must admit the grandeur of Becket's character, his indomitable resolution, his sublime arrogance itself, the ability and rectitude which distinguished much of his conduct: experienced eyes will perceive the stage effectiveness of his peculiarities, his triumphs, his failures, and the terrific pathos of his fate.[2]

By mid-nineteenth century, the "prejudices" mentioned by Darley had entirely dissipated. Becket was once again a genuine English folk hero. Aubrey De Vere's 1876 closet drama, St. Thomas of

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[1]Interestingly, Thierry's early volume prompted the writing of the most recent Becket play - Jean Anouilh's. Anouilh thus wrote his play in self-imposed ignorance of the fine recent scholarship on Becket.

[2]George Darley, "Preface," Thomas à Becket, A Dramatic Chronicle (London: Edward Moxon, 1840), p. iii.

Canterbury,[3] identified Becket with the Christian ideal of greatness and contrasted the Martyr with Alexander, the pagan ideal whom De Vere had earlier depicted in another closet drama. Alfred Lord Tennyson, a close friend of De Vere, gave a more interesting portrayal of Thomas in his Becket,[4] staged successfully in 1892 shortly after the author's death, with Henry Irving in the title role.

Two highly successful Becket dramas have appeared in the twentieth century. T. S. Eliot returned to the medieval morality play as a model for his Murder in the Cathedral.[5] Staged originally at the Canterbury festival in June of 1935, Eliot's play has remained on the boards - particularly in the academic world - ever since. In 1960, Jean Anouilh's Becket, Or the Honor of God,[6] translated by Lucienne Hill, appeared on the English and American stages.

One would think six plays on the same subject would present numerous possibilities for interesting comparisons. The truth is quite otherwise. Mr. Theodore Graves has concluded his thesis on "The Becket Plays as Tragedy" with a comment that needs to be made here at the outset: "The Becket plays as a group hold together only factitiously."[7] We have

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[3]Aubrey De Vere, The Poetical Works of Aubrey De Vere, vol. III, Alexander the Great, St. Thomas of Canterbury, and Other Poems (London: K. Paul Trench and Co., 1884).

[4]Alfred Lord Tennyson, Becket (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1894).

[5]T. S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1963).

[6]Jean Anouilh, Becket, Or the Honor of God, trans. by Lucienne Hill (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1960).

[7]Theodore Graves, "The Becket Plays as Tragedy," unpublished thesis (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1967), p. 56.

also indicated that the Romantic plays show Thomas in an unfavorable light, whereas the remaining four portray him sympathetically. In other ways, too, unity fails to materialize. The earliest four are historical chronicles in imitation of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, but Eliot's play covers only the last month of Becket's life, and Anouilh's play begins after the archbishop's death and proceeds as a lengthy series of flashbacks. Jerrold's and Anouilh's plays were written by professional playwrights; the rest were written by men known primarily for their poetry. Four of the plays were successfully staged, but Darley's and De Vere's are closet dramas. Of the two closet dramas, Darley's is essentially dramatic, De Vere's much closer to narrative poetry. Although thematically the plays vary widely, it is at this point that we come closest to unifying the plays: all of the plays do handle in some form the state-church struggle which the Henry-Thomas quarrel in a larger sense represented, the relationship between the king and his chancellor-archbishop, and the murder of Becket.

Eliminating one Romantic[8] and one Victorian[9] drama will allow us to consider plays representing four distinct approaches to the Becket history. It shall be the purpose of this paper to treat the development

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[8]We shall eliminate Jerrold's play because we have not had access to it and because its success was overshadowed by other works. In an effusive biography Jerrold's son devotes one line to his history: "His Thomas a Becket was proclaimed a success."

[9]We shall eliminate De Vere's play because it is a play in name only. Poor as poetry, it is worse as drama. Wilfrid Ward, De Vere's biographer, cannot recommend St. Thomas: "[It] is a heavy, sprawling play that is unhappily full of irrelevant physical and ideological detail.... More goes on between scenes than during."

of the major historical themes within the Becket plays of Darley, Tennyson, Eliot, and Anouilh.

Before we can properly treat of the development of the major historical themes, however, we must define clearly the critical approach we shall use, determine the values and limitations of our approach, and validate the approach by reference to authoritative support for it.

Because we are dealing in this paper with historical drama and because historical drama deals primarily with factual materials, we shall maintain that major characters and actions on stage should accurately reflect their real counterparts. Where the historical record does not or cannot speak authoritatively (e.g., in the area of motivation), we shall consider it the duty of the drama to speak clearly on the basis of logic and probability. Finally, we judge it the obligation of the historical drama to present its characters and actions in the context of the background historical situation of which they are a part. Characters not only struggle against one another out of personal and private motivations but also contend for the transcendent historical issues of the day. Henry and Thomas, for example, were quite obviously caught up in the church-state power struggle which wracked Europe in the later Middle Ages. In another connection, Mr. Holmes Alexander has used the phrase "perception of wholeness" to refer to a person who sees the transcendent issues involved in a given situation.[10] We shall use

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[10]Holmes Alexander, "Stuart Symington Has Much to Offer as a Vice-Presidential Candidate," Richmond News Leader, June 26, 1968, p. 18.

this phrase in our assessment of the extent to which each Becket play evinces an understanding of the historical controversy between church and state.

On first glance, one might think we have placed a straitjacket on historical drama, but the objection is invalid. We have set no limits on the stagecraft employed in the historical play. The playwright has in this form of drama the same liberties in choice, arrangement, and staging of incidents as in any other type of play. We do not quarrel with the alteration of minor details so long as they do not intrude upon the accurate portrayal of major characters and actions (the anachronistic clock in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, the fusing of two bastard sons of Henry II into one character in Fry's Curtmantle, and the inclusion of the legendary Rosamond-Eleanor stories in the earlier Becket plays are suggested examples of "minor details").

The historical playwright has the same liberties in matters of stagecraft as playwrights in other areas have; he must meet the same theatrical demands as are imposed on other dramatists. In terms of the setting assumed for the play and within the conditions of the theater of the playwright's time, he must create one or more believable characters by means of a succession of internal and external actions producing intense conflict and, ultimately, adequate resolution.[11] We do not deny these responsibilities must be met by all dramatists; we simply state the

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[11]The historical drama is thus far still ruled by Aristotle's definition of tragedy (paraphrased and modified above). Whether it too will succumb to the new definitions of drama promoted by the "absurdists" is anyone's guess.

historical dramatist assumes the additional responsibility implied in the word "historical."

Nor do we deny the existence of literary and dramatic grounds for the criticism of historical plays. Mr. Theodore Graves' consideration of the Becket plays as potential tragedies certainly represents a legitimate approach to criticism of the plays on purely dramatic grounds. (Our own historical approach will return us to Mr. Graves' thesis in Chapter V.) Other points of view are surely possible in spite of the intractable nature of the plays. Our approach, then, is a partial one, but so are all others.

Partial though our critical approach may be, it is nevertheless a valid and worthwhile way of examining the thematic development of historical plays. It is a worthwhile approach in the first place as a support for the expectations of the person who attends the historical play to learn about the subject of the play, rather than about the ingenuity of the playwright. It does little good to decry such a person's lack of theatrical sophistication; he exists, and in good numbers. Many who saw the screen version of Anouilh's Becket have commented to me of their great admiration for Thomas, based on what they had seen. I have had to reply that Becket was certainly a great man, but that they should not trust the portrait they had seen in the motion picture. The problem is they will trust the dramatic portrait because it was so effectively done. In this connection T. S. Eliot has commented:

> ...if we, as readers, keep our religious and moral convictions in one department, and take our reading merely for entertainment or on a higher plane, for aesthetic pleasure,

> I would point out that the author, whatever his conscious intentions in writing, in practice recognises no such distinctions. The author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he knows it or not; and we are affected by it, as human beings, whether we intend to be or not.[12]

Mr. Eliot is, of course, speaking of reading any form of literature rather than of seeing plays, and his primary purpose is to prove the necessity of a Christian approach to the criticism of literature. But let us ignore his purpose to concentrate upon his reasoning: dramatic literature - read or observed on the stage - engraves its ideas upon the mind indelibly. It follows that the historical drama should treat truth with respect. If the dramatist fails to do this, the critic must serve as the corrective.

In the second place, the drama that is judged true to the historical record is ready to be criticized on literary and dramatic grounds. It has not used a famous name simply to assure an audience, nor has it descended through caricature of its subject to the lesser level of the propaganda play (the level on which recent plays about Lyndon Johnson and Lester Maddox have operated with great financial success, yet with little regard for subtlety of dramatic technique).

Finally, and most importantly, criticism on historical grounds is justifiable out of simple regard for the truth. The audience looks for it, to be sure, but should not the playwright be searching for the truth about his subject also? Is not the historical play the result of the playwright's search? Not every writer would feel compelled to answer

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[12] T. S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," A Grammar of Literary Criticism, ed. Lawrence Sargent Hall (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 556.

these questions affirmatively, but an impressive number would. We must finally let these authors and critics speak for themselves.

The critic Robert Metcalf Smith has come close to our approach:

> It is true that the dramatist who ventures into this field is under an obligation to observe some of the essential facts of history. In general, it may be said that the dramatist who employs history must make no departure from such facts, known to be true or generally believed, as are common knowledge of his audience; otherwise he is free to invent as he wishes. This invention may take the form of alteration of character or creation of incident; it may be incidental to the main course of the drama, as in Henry IV or William Tell, or it may determine the main course of the drama.
>
> The dramatist may use history in one or more of four ways. He may vitalise and recreate the splendor of the past; he may present a historical figure offering dramatic possibilities; he may employ historical events as a background for fictional characters; or he may use history to give added interest to his main plot.[13]

Mr. Smith's distinctions as to the possible uses of history in drama are quite useful. The Becket plays fall primarily into the category using "historical figures offering dramatic possibilities." Mr. Smith does not mention-as we have indicated - that plays in this category might need to recapture historical truth unknown to an audience in order to insure the accurate portrayal of the major chatacters and actions.

George Bernard Shaw, in this connection, makes a second useful distinction:

> ...The "histories" of Shakespeare are chronicles dramatised; and my own chief historical plays, Caesar and Cleopatra and Saint Joan, are fully documented chronicle plays of this type.

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[13]Robert Metcalf Smith, Types of Historical Drama (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1928), pp. 3-4.

> Familiarity with them would get a student safely through examination papers on their periods.... A much commoner theatrical product is the historical romance, mostly fiction with historical names attached to the stock characters of the stage.[14]

If playwrights rigidly adhered to Shaw's dichotomy, the need for criticism on historical grounds might greatly lessen. The term "romance," however, is in disfavor in our age, and few serious playwrights would wish the term applied to their plays. In any event the Becket plays are patently intended as "histories," whatever "romantic" trappings some may have. Shaw's claim that his play (Saint Joan in this instance) might be substituted for a history of the era needs some further consideration. Shaw admits "...my drama of Saint Joan's career, though it may give the essential truth of it, gives an inexact picture of some accidental facts." His distinction between "essential" and "accidental" historical materials is exactly the one we have drawn between "major" and "minor" details. Shaw develops this point: "But it is the business of the stage to make its figures more intelligible to themselves than they would be in real life, for by no other means can they be made intelligible to an audience."[15] What one makes intelligible is more than the chronology of a person or a series of events; it is, rather, the essential character of a person and the transcendent historical events in which the character of the person is operative. Shaw, therefore, seems to agree that the playwright should attempt what we have termed a "perception of wholeness."

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[14]George Bernard Shaw, "Preface" to Saint Joan (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1966), p. 44.

[15]Shaw

Mr. E. Martin Browne has a peculiar claim to speaking authoritatively on historical drama, particularly as related to Becket. His association with the plays of T. S. Eliot spanned the last half of Eliot's life. He was the original director of Murder in the Cathedral, working with Eliot not only in the staging of the play but in the revision of its script. Recently he criticised Anouilh's Becket for its "falsified history"

> ...His play is brilliant with jewels of theatrical skill, and fascinating in its subtlety of characterization. But when you get away from it, you find yourself with a sour taste in the mouth. After all, these events really happened, these people really lived.... The play succeeds on its own terms, but they are not the terms of history.
>
> But is this a valid criticism of a drama? May not the dramatist re-form the material to suit his purpose? Do we cast out Shakespeare's Henry VI because his Joan of Arc is a monster, or Richard III because the king is a melodramatic villain?
>
> There is a crucial difference between Shakespeare and Anouilh. The former is writing history as he knows it; the distortions are not his, but the Tudor propaganda-line of his time, or misapprehensions due to insufficient knowledge which parallel those of Anouilh's nineteenth-century source-book. The modern dramatist has deliberately falsified history: he has knowingly capitalised upon the name and fame of historical characters to make out of them a fiction. However much he entertains us, we come away feeling betrayed; this cynical view of truth, we feel, implies an equally cynical view of life. Those who distort the past deny the present [italics mine]; those who deprive dead men of dignity forfeit the dignity of the living also.[16]

Browne's analysis of Shakespeare is substantiated by E. M. W. Tillyard's masterful work Shakespeare's History Plays. Shakespeare wrote within a certain philosophy of history now somewhat discredited, but he was committed to the history play as a tool for educating Englishmen in

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[16]E. Martin Browne, "Henry II as Hero," Drama Survey, II (June, 1962), pp. 63-72.

the glories of their Tudor ancestry.[17]

Finally, the comments of Christopher Fry in the Foreword of his play Curtmantle are pertinent:

> ...If a playwright is rash enough to treat real events at all, he has to accept a double responsibility: to drag out of the sea of detail a story simple enough to be understood by people who knew nothing about it before; and to do so without distorting the material he has chosen to use. Otherwise let him invent his characters, let him go to Ruritania for his history.[18]

Fry's search for a "simple" and undistorted story moves him in two directions simultaneously:

> ...The play has two themes: one a progression towards a portrait of Henry, a search for his reality. The other theme is Law, or rather the interplay of different laws, civil, canon, moral, aesthetic, and the laws of God; and how they belong and do not belong to each other.[19]

The first is the expected theme, the usual one. The second theme indicates that Fry sees the need to place his characters against the background of a transcendent historical struggle. In short, he is attempting to distill from the historical events the "perception of wholeness" we have mentioned before.

The historical drama, then, can be legitimately criticised from an historical point of view. No critic has suggested that this critical approach can replace literary and dramatic judgment; it is a supplementary approach only. We employ the approach in this thesis as one means of bringing a satisfactory unity out of the chaotic variety of the Becket plays.

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[18]Christopher Fry, "Foreward" to Curtmantle (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. vii.

[19]Fry, p. viii.

We shall pursue in the next chapter the extent to which the four plays evince a perception of the wholeness of the historical situation in which the main characters found themselves. Chapter Three will consider the relationship Henry and Becket bore one another in life and within the plays. We shall begin each of these chapters with the play that most fully develops the theme under discussion, following with the remaining plays in descending order of treatment. Chapter Four will take up the special problems of Becket's actions and motivations culminating in his martyrdom and saint-hood. Since all four plays give substantial treatment to this theme, we shall group the plays according to their interpretations of Becket's motives in his movement toward martyrdom. In a final chapter we shall summarize our findings and draw conclusions as to the value of each of the plays from the historical point of view.

CHAPTER II

THE "PERCEPTION OF WHOLENESS": PERSONAL STRUGGLES IN CONTEXT

Historians are in general agreement that the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries saw England and France rise as the first modern nation-states under unified national leadership.[1] The story of their struggles toward nationhood is at least partially the story of the reduction of papal hegemony in Europe. The Becket-Henry quarrel is a single major episode in the extended crisis over the relationship of the ancient, established church to the young and struggling nation-state.

Many dramatic critics have seen the Becket-Henry quarrel in the same light. Nathan Scott, commenting on Murder in the Cathedral, made the point precisely: "Thomas of Canterbury ... was martyred in his Cathedral on a dark December afternoon in 1170 because of his refusal to surrender the sacerdotium of the Church to the regnum of the Crown...."[2] Donald Blake spoke to the same point in a discussion of Eliot's language:

> Eliot's discrimination in the selection of material is revealing of how conscious he was of his artistic end. Eliot was mindful of revising language to make commensurate with the matter so central to the play - martyrdom and the clash

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[1] See Ch. 17 of Wallace K. Ferguson and Geoffrey Brunn's A Survey of European Civilization (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1947) or Ch. 3 in Walter Phelps Hall and Robert Albion's A History of England and the British Empire (New York: Ginn and Co., 1953) for fuller development of this point.

[2] Nathan Scott, Man in the Modern Theater (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1967), p. 17.

> reflected therein between the values and attitudes of secularism and those of religion. Consistently he introduces changes to make the dialogue more impersonal because his theme embraces a condition mirrored in the confrontation of Henry and Becket, but not strictly limited to these personalities in their page of history.[3]

The medieval struggle between church and state represents the essential background to the drama of Thomas Becket. The playwright who fails to master this theme loses a crucial historical dimension to his play. An illustration from another historical person should carry the point: Joan of Arc struggled and died for the spiritual and physical unification of France. Had she instead labored for the unification of tiny Andorra or remote Mauritania, who would have remembered her? Her cause was great and she was seen as greater. In like manner the characters of Henry and Thomas become heroic because of the greatness of the institutions for which they fought one another, their intrinsic worth as persons notwithstanding.

Two approaches are open to the dramatist employing this theme. He may decide to present his play in an abstract form, thus bending his structure dialogue, characterization, and every other dramatic element to the reenforcement of his theme. Or he may determine on a more realistic presentation of his characters and actions, in which instance the transcendent historical issue will speak from the background in muted form through the events in the plot.

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[3]Donald Blake, "Murder in the Cathedral: A Unified Play," unpublished thesis (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1967), p. 7.

T. S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral employs the first, or abstract, approach. Eliot does not, however, use abstract form simply to point out the historical theme. Mr. Scott is again informative:

> ... Mr. Eliot's principal concern was not to reconstruct the Church-State tensions of the English Middle Ages: his interest lay rather in the human drama of the Archbishop, in the martyr's interior motivation: as he was to say many years later, "I wanted to concentrate on death and martyrdom." And thus, instead of the concrete political actualities of a historical situation greatly removed from us in time, it is Becket's way of facing his imminent ordeal that constitutes the living center of the play.[4]

Mr. Eliot recognised what every other playwright dealing with the Becket materials has realized: that the dramatic strength of Becket's history lies in the personalities and the supreme event - the martyrdom - involved. This recognition does not preclude consideration of church-state tensions, and Mr. Eliot, in fact, does consider these tensions in ways we shall now examine.

Explicit consideration of the historical theme is given by the Second Knight, who, in his set speech defending the knights' murder of the archbishop, offers these comments:

> I therefore ask you to consider soberly: what were the Archbishop's aims? And what was King Henry's aim? In the answer to these questions lies the key to the problem. (Part II, p. 80)

The Second Knight claims that Thomas - as Chancellor and Archbishop - could have helped bring about "an almost ideal State: a union of spiritual and temporal administration, under the temporal government." (Part II, p. 81).

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[4]Scott, p. 17.

Instead, he became:

> ... more priestly than the priests, he ostentatiously and offensively adopted and ascetic manner of life, he affirmed immediately that there was a higher order than that which our King, and he as the King's servant, had for so many years striven to establish; and that - God knows why - the two orders were incompatible. (Part II, p. 81)

Since Becket strove for the supremacy of the spiritual order, his execution by partisans of the temporal order was fully justified. Eliot's Second Knight has during this time been talking ostensibly to the Canterbury women (the Chorus) in the play; his concluding remarks are obviously directed to the audience - and the remarks state the historical direction of the church-state controversy after Becket:

> Unhappily, there are times when violence is the only way in which social justice can be secured. At another time, you would condemn an Archbishop by vote of Parliament and execute him formally as a traitor, and no one would have to bear the burden of being called murderer. And at a later time still, even such temperate measures as these would become unnecessary. But, if you have now arrived at a just subordination of the pretensions of the Church to the welfare of the State, remember that it is we who took the first step. (Part II, p. 82)

The Fourth Knight then accuses Becket of having courted martyrdom and claims he thus was a "Suicide while of unsound mind" (Part II, p. 84). As the knights conclude their defense of their actions, the wailing begins, led by the First Priest, who acclaims:

> The Church lies bereft,
> Alone, desecrated, desolated, and the heathen shall build on the ruins,
> Their world without God. I see it. I see it. (Part II, p. 84)

These are the only direct references to the church-state quarrel, and they come, admittedly, rather late in the development of the play.

One could make the theme more explicit, however, only by adding material that would diminish the theme of death in good cause. The death and martyrdom are central as Eliot claimed, but the causes of the martyrdom lie within the historical situation stated by the Second Knight, completely outside the claims of a courted martyrdom.

The form of the play implicitly strengthens the historical theme. Murder in the Cathedral fuses Greek tragedy, the medieval morality play, and the Catholic liturgical forms into an attractive whole.[5] How is not relevant here; the overriding sense of fate that emerges from the fusion is. Thomas and the Canterbury women anticipate his martyrdom from the play's opening moments. Yet they only vaguely understand why he must die:

> I have seen these things in a shaft of sunlight.
> Destiny waits in the hand of God, not in the hands of the
> statesmen
> Who do, some well, some ill, planning and guessing,
> Having their aims which turn in their hands in the
> pattern of time. (Part I, p. 13)

They know not only that he will die, but they know his death will affect their lives in some inexplicable way:

> We
> Are afraid in a fear which we cannot know,
> which we cannot face, which none understands,
> And our hearts are torn from us, our brains unskinned
> like the layers of an onion, our selves are lost ...
> (Part I, p. 20)

Their intuitive fear can be explained only in historical terms. Fear for

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[5]See Emil Roy, "The Becket Plays: Eliot, Fry, and Anouilh," Modern Drama, VIII:3 (December, 1965), pp. 268-276, for a discussion of the form of Eliot's play.

the archbishop as a person is only part of it; fear of religious desecration is but one other part. Their real fear is the translation of the comfortable religious house in which they have lived so many years by the intrusion of the secular nation-state - in sum, the destruction of the medieval world. Becket's martyrdom ultimately symbolizes this last fear above all else.

Eliot is not content to leave his religious play in the throes of such depressing themes as the triumph of the secular over the religious order, or the death of a martyr. He attempts, with notably less success, to point to the triumph of the Church over history. Thomas, after all, has accepted martyrdom as an occasion of triumph. The Priests and Canterbury women attempt to rise to this understanding:

> Third Priest: ... the Church is stronger for this action,
> Triumphant in adversity ... (Part II, p. 84)
>
> First priest: O my Lord
> The glory of whose new state is hidden from us,
> Pray for us of your charity. (Part II, p. 85)
>
> Chorus: We acknowledge our trespass, our weakness,
> our fault: we acknowledge
> That the sum of the world is upon our heads; that the
> blood of the martyrs and the agony of the saints
> Is upon our heads.
> Lord, have mercy upon us.
> Christ, have mercy upon us.
> Lord, have mercy upon us.
> Blessed Thomas, pray for us. (Part II, p. 88)

The conclusion is a haunting liturgical chant. It affirms that hope is not dead. The joy of triumph, however, is still in the future for the Priests and Canterbury women. His improvement on the historical theme reaches no further.

Darley and Tennyson approach the historical theme in a more realistic manner. That is to say, their settings are realistic, their characterizations individual rather than typical, and their plot lines chronological in development. "Realistic" must not be taken to mean including an accurate version of the Becket history, however, for both Darley and Tennyson mix the romantic legends of the Becket era into their story lines.

Of the two, Darley's Thomas à Becket, A Dramatic Chronicle handles the historical theme more satisfactorily. The excellent Preface to the printed edition of his play gives something of the author's understanding of the historical situation:

> ... But in truth the era itself, when Feudal, Ecclesiastical, Political, and Academical Institutions were establishing themselves broader and firmer on the bases left by previous barbarity; when men had still about them the vigor of the primitive life, and all the enthusiasm of commencing civilization; - such an era by natural consequences teemed with characters, enterprises, vicissitudes, etc., dramatic because so pregnant with individualism and with action. (p. iv)

As with Eliot, Darley is not intent on portraying the ecclesiastical-state feud primarily; rather Darley wants to portray the richness of life in the feudal era. It is this concern that will allow him to mix into the Becket history the romantic nonsense of the Eleanor-Rosamond legends:

> ... my Heroine, being less a historical than romantic personage, is made contemporaneous with, although in truth somewhat antecedant to the facts dramatized. No important falsification of history is committed by this anachronism, yet the interest of a gracious female character is acquired. (p. iv)

What the "gracious female character" does to the larger historical theme we

shall see in a moment.

Darley follows the details of Becket's career closely, from his period as chancellor throughout his archbishopric to the funeral following his murder. Becket is ever aware that he is asserting the rights of the miter against the crown. After he has resigned his chancellorship and, consequently, lost Henry's friendship, he remarks to himself:

> I can divine him thoroughly, and his purposes!
> The king delves hard beneath St. Peter's rock;
> But ere it sink an inch, the mighty coign
> Shall bruise him, past more sapping, with its shoulder! (II, v)

Thenceforward, he refers time and again to the "foes o' the Church" (IV, ii) who want to "crush the Church in me" (IV, ii). He asserts the Church's rights to land possessed by the king's men (III, i), refuses to diminish Church prerogatives by signing the Councils of Clarendon (III, v-vi), scoffs at the notion the secular power has authority over Church prelates (IV, i), and lashes on every side with the thunderbolt of excommunication. In all, he pushes the king and his barons beyond endurance with his imperious defense of the Church. Darley's statement of the historical theme is considerable, but the church position is caricatured through overstatement rather than fairly presented.

Darley remains the captive of the post-Henry VIII prejudices against Becket. The archbishop's pretensions are painted in such ludicrous terms that there is no reason to state the contentions of the crown. They - whatever they may be - are assumed to be honorable and just. Thus, one-half the historical issue remains undeveloped in the play.

Becket's death follows, naturally enough, from his insufferable

behavior in defense of the rights of the church. Darley, however, has a second plot - Queen Eleanor's implacable hatred of Rosamond - to wed to the primary story line. In the first scene of the fifth act, Darley has Eleanor read a personal letter from Becket in which he declines to assist her in the murder of the king's paramour. Eleanor now hates Becket as much as the king and the barons. In a manner that is never spelled out, she will seek his death too. In the concluding scene of the play (V, xv), Eleanor attends Becket's funeral to ask the suddenly saintly archbishop's prayers on her behalf, for she has found and poisoned the "fair Rosamond." The two plots never mix satisfactorily, but the attempt is made nonetheless. As the legendary element looms so large in the play (thirteen out of thirty-eight scenes,) it often obscures the theme of a church-state quarrel.

The same Eleanor-Rosamond quarrel that often obscures the historical theme in Darley's play almost totally obscures the church-state controversy in Lord Tennyson's Becket. Tennyson had read Darley's play[6] and, though his portrait of Thomas is sympathetic as Darley's is not, he clearly approves of the overall structure of the earlier play.

Tennyson's opening scene shows king and chancellor at a game of chess. Archbishop Theobald is dying and Henry expands upon his desire to curb growing ecclesiastical power. Becket beats the preoccupied king at chess with his bishop and the stage is beautifully set for what, historically

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[6]Tennyson's admiration for Darley's works moved him to offer to pay for a collected edition of his poetry and plays. No action was taken on the offer.

speaking, did follow. Upon his appointment to the archbishopric, Becket resigns his chancellorship with the comment: "I served the King Henry well as Chancellor;/ I am his no more, and I must serve the Church." (I, i). He fights the battles by now familiar to us - against the "customs of the realm" at Northampton and in exile, and, upon his return to Canterbury, against the prelates and barons who participated in crowning Henry's son.

His martyrdom, however, has little to do with these matters. The Eleanor-Rosamond legend intrudes again, more disastrously than in the Darley play, precisely because Tennyson is more adept at handling two stories. Tennyson succeeds in integrating his two plots by making Eleanor the villainess in both stories. Becket is the victim, not of an historical quarrel of immense proportions, but of a woman's spite. Tennyson handles the historical theme well in the beginning, but ends in absurdity, with a wholly false, melodramatic portrayal of the martyrdom.

Under Jean Anouilh's pen the church-state quarrel which we have defined as the essence of the historical situation is transformed into Becket's personal, existential search for his "honor." We have seen that the Eliot, Darley, and Tennyson plays handle the theme, with varying degrees of success, only incidentally. In Anouilh's Becket, even the incidental relation of the state-church theme is in effect lost beneath two other predominant themes: the friendship between the two men, and, more importantly for us at this point, Becket's groping toward his sense of honor.

That Anouilh was not interested in the historical theme, he candidly admits in his Introduction to the English version. "I am not a serious man,"

he says; "I wrote Becket by chance" (p. v). He informs us that he bought a book for its virtuous green cover, found it to contain thirty magnificent pages on Becket, then put it aside for a year until his wife, having read it to while away a winter's evening, demanded that he do a play on it. After finishing his Becket, he tells us:

> Altogether shamefaced at the idea of having written an historical play, I gave it to an historian friend of mine to read, and he roared with laughter, saying: "Are you unaware that history, like everything else on this earth, makes progress? In Augustin Thierry's time one could believe that Becket was of Saxon origin, but for over fifty years we have had proof that he was a good Norman ...."
>
> A large part of the subject of my play was based on the fact that Becket was of the vanquished race. A serious man at this point would have torn out his hair; then he would have rewritten his play on a more exact historical basis .... I changed nothing .... (pp. vii-viii)

He changed nothing because his purposes were essentially non-historical:

> ...For this drama of friendship between two men, between the king and his friend, his companion in pleasure and in work (and this is what had gripped me about the story), this friend whom he could not cease to love though he became his worst enemy the night he was named archbishop - for this drama it was a thousand times better that Becket remained a Saxon. (p. viii)

Both themes substituted by Anouilh for the historical theme are legitimate for Darley's purposes, but they are not legitimate substitutes for the historical theme itself. Both themes are purely personal and fail to carry the drama into the area of the larger struggle their specific conflict represented. For the moment let us leave off any consideration of the theme of friendship (Chapter Three will handle this theme in detail). We must comment on the theme of honor, however, for this theme could have been

used to help develop the sense of a larger struggle between church and state. It fails to do this because of Darley's understanding of the theater and the function of tragedy.

John Harvey's discussion of Anouilh's tragedies is pertinent at this point:

> Anouilh's tragedies are often called metaphysical, because they treat man's unacceptable place in the universe. But could they not with equal logic be classified as tragedies of character? The emphasis is placed not on the idealism per se but on the gradual revelation of the idealism to the hero. Conflict anchors itself within each protagonist: having placed his values beyond himself, the hero is impelled at once toward life and toward the ideal; he seeks to reconcile the necessary with the impossible. It would seem that the success or failure of such tragedy should depend to a large extent on the impact of the hero on the spectators. Thus the playwright's principal task should be the fullest possible development of his tragic hero.[7]

There can be little dissent from Mr. Harvey's analysis of Anouilh's tragedies, but his phrase "values beyond himself" needs qualification, at least so far as it relates to Becket. The emphasis is always on the person of Henry or Thomas, never on their actions except as they illuminate the characters of the protagonists. The historical situation has no independent importance. Thus Anouilh's Thomas is a product of the modern philosophy of existentialism; his relation to the historical movements of the twelfth century is that of a man seeking to create himself in his actions, rather than that of a man creating institutions and historical movement with his actions. Thomas claims to find the "honor of God" (i.e., Harvey's "values

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[7]John Harvey, Anouilh, A Study in Theatrics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), pp. 91-92.

beyond himself"); in reality he simply finds honor within himself. At their reconciliation meeting before he returns to Canterbury, Thomas tells the king: "We must only do - absurdly - what we have been given to do - right to the end" (IV, p. 114). Thomas has become an overwhelmingly modern man: he sees nothing outside himself as important. He acts from his own interior logic, as the king acts from his. Since they conflict, struggle is necessary; but the outward forces of history are unimportant, it is the inward force of one's own logic that carries the conflict to its climax.

The "honor of God" in the final analysis is ineffective as a substitute for the church-state struggle theme. God's honor is not sufficiently distinguished from the interior life of Becket to give it the necessary vitality of its own. This is not to say that the "honor of God" is an ineffective theme in other connections. The truth is that Anouilh handles this theme quite well, as we shall have occasion to see in Chapters Three and Four.

CHAPTER III

HENRY AND THOMAS: THE THEME OF FRIENDSHIP

As Thomas draws near to Canterbury in the first act of Murder in the Cathedral, a messenger is dispatched with the news of the archbishop's imminent arrival. The First Priest asks the messenger the crucial question: "...is it war or peace?" (Part I, p. 16) The messenger's answer is unsatisfactory, causing the First Priest to muse:

> Had the King been greater, or had he been weaker
> Things had perhaps been different for Thomas. (Part I, p. 17)

Henry and Thomas were more than pawns in some grand historical design of Fate; they were very much their own men - both brilliant, volatile, and ambitious to a fault. The First Priest's statement points to an essential equality in character and ability. The historical record substantiates this general view of the king and Thomas,[1] and criticism of the Becket plays along historical lines requires us to determine whether this essential equality is maintained in each of the portraits the dramatists have given.

Jean Anouilh, as we saw in the second chapter, considers the Henry-Thomas affair a "drama of friendship." His Becket, Or the Honor of God is an argument for this theme. Anouilh uses certain catch words to characterize each of his protagonists. Henry always suffers from "cold,"

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[1]Richard Winston, Thomas Becket (New York: Alfred Knopf Co., 1967). Winston's book is the most up-to-date and in this matter merely agrees with other authorities as to the essential equality of ability in the two men.

"boredom," and his "love" of Becket. Thomas "thinks," is an "esthete," and searches for his "honor." An elaboration of these words as they apply to the actions of the two friends will provide the necessary insight into their relationship.

Henry remarks in the opening scene as he kneels before Becket's tomb: "How cold it was on that bare plain at La Ferte-Bernard, the last time we two met! It's funny, it's always been cold, in our story, save at the beginning when we were friends." (p. 12) Henry's "cold" is emotional as well as physical. He is warm only with Becket, or with various improvisations he makes when Becket is not with him - hawks, whores, or his cronies among the baronage [a group he can address unceremoniously after announcing the imminent coronation of his son:

> Let us drink, gentlemen. That's about all one can do in your company. Let us get drunk, like men, all night, until we roll under the table in vomit and oblivion. Ah, my four idiots! My faithful hounds! It's warm beside you, like being in a stable.... (IV, p. 121)]

With Becket, the whoring, the drinking, and the hawking are qualitatively different. Henry says to Becket, again in the opening scene: "...we were two brothers, weren't we - you and I?" (I, p. 12) and when they meet for the last time:

> Yet I know you well enough, God knows. Ten years we spent together, little Saxon! At the hunt, at the whorehouse, at war; carousing all night long the two of us.... (IV, p. 114)

Though he speaks to the barons and Becket of the same pleasures, depreciation and irony are absent only when he speaks to Becket.

The king is bored by his family life. He remarks on one occasion

to his wife: "The joys of family life are strictly limited, Madam. To be perfectly frank, you bore me...." (III, p. 78). He finds even Becket tiresome when Thomas acts as his instructor ["You are a bore today! I get the feeling that I'm listening to the Archbishop." (I, p. 30)]; yet Becket is the only one who can release him from his usual ennui ["I've been bored to tears for a month," the king remarks upon Becket's return from a month's absence after his coronation as archbishop (III, p. 78)].

For Henry "cold" and "boredom" are essentially the same problem, to be handled satisfactorily by the warmth and joie de vivre of his friendship or "love" for Becket. Anouilh's Becket is conclusive on this point. Time and again Henry remarks, "I loved him." His "Do you love me, Becket?" (p. 27) at the beginning turns only to "You never loved me, did you, Becket?" (p. 116) at their last meeting.

Becket himself is, first of all, a man of intelligence. To the extent that Henry is basically emotional, Thomas is basically cerebral. Henry often remarks that Thomas taught him what he knows. The king rejoices in his friend's intelligence, using it to justify appointing him to the chancellorship:

> ...you know more than all of us put together. (To the others)
> He's read books, you know. It's amazing the amount he knows....
> he's a lad who thinks every minute of the time! Sometimes
> it embarrasses me to feel him thinking away beside me....
> I never did anything without your advice, anyway. Nobody
> knew it, now everybody will, that's all. (p. 18)

Even after Thomas has disappointed him, he can only remark: "... the only intelligent man in my kingdom is against me" (p. 94).

Thomas's concern with the esthetic seems a simple extension of his intellectualism. At worst it would turn him into a dilettante - a term he uses for himself when he prays to God for courage to leave his exile in France and return to Canterbury. In truth, however, his estheticism is related to his search for honor. Henry remarks to Thomas - the situation is unimportant here - on one occasion:

> You can't lie. I know you. Not because you're afraid of lies but because it's distasteful to you. You consider it inelegant. What looks like morality in you is nothing more than esthetics. (p. 42)

Becket admits the charge. A statement of his but a moment later tells us why he is an esthete:

> There is a gap in me where honor ought to be. (p. 44)

He serves Henry, but the king's service does not fulfill his deepest need. As the first act closes, he muses over the king who sleeps beside him:

> My prince....If you were my true prince, ... how simple everything would be. How tenderly I would love you, my prince, in an ordered world.... But I cheated my way into the ranks, a twofold bastard, and found a place among the conquerors. You can sleep peacefully though, my prince. So long as Becket is obliged to improvise his honor, he will serve you....
> But where is Becket's honor? (I, p. 47)

In the church, Becket finds his "honor." For this reason he drops his association with Henry - he cannot serve two masters. When - after their long quarrel - Thomas and Henry meet again to attempt to resolve their differences, Thomas explains what has happened to him:

> I felt for the first time I was being entrusted with something, that's all - there in the empty cathedral, somewhere

> in France, that day when you ordered me to take up this burden, I was a man without honor. And suddenly I found it - one I never imagined would become mine - the honor of God. A frail, incomprehensible honor, vulnerable as a boy-King fleeing from danger. (IV, p. 114)

Thomas will go on to martyrdom for this honor - "the honor of God."

The relationship of Thomas to Henry has a rather special nature, obviously. Thomas is in Henry's debt for his position in life and repays the king with devoted and competent service until he is elevated to the archbishopric. The king is a man longing for Thomas's affection - to the point of psychopathic dependence on him. Friendship the two men do have, but, under Anouilh's hands, the relationship is anything but healthy. There are lines in the play that strongly hint of homosexuality as a bond between them[1] - a point not entirely disprovable, but unattractive in the play in any case.

Anouilh's "drama of friendship" is in trouble on two points - his effeminate portrayal of Henry and his illogical portrait of Becket. The Henry of this play palely resembles the original Henry in that he and Becket were good friends. Everything else about this Henry is false historically and unattractive dramatically. His whoring ways do not erase his unmanly attachment to Becket; his indecisiveness without Becket places the crown on the head of an immature lout rather than on one of England's greatest kings.

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[1]Henry's conversation with the Queen Mother on the occasion of the crowning of Prince Henry shows that the Queen Mother has always been suspicious of the friendship. She says (in part): "It is England you must think of, not your hatred - or disappointed love - for that man.... You have a rancor against the man which is neither healthy nor manly." (IV, p. 119).

Anouilh's greatest problem is his archbishop, however; for Chancellor Becket can remark to the king:

> ...one must never drive one's enemies to despair. It makes them strong. Gentleness is better politics. It saps virility. A good occupational force must not crush, it must corrupt. (II, p. 65)

but Archbishop Thomas has forgot the chancellor's words, defending his excommunications with:

> The Kingdom of God must be defended like any other Kingdom...Without might,...right counts for nothing. The King is the written law, but there is another unwritten law which always makes Kings bend the neck eventually. (III, p. 90)

The implication is that Becket, having obtained his "honor," leaves his all-wise ways and becomes all-simple. A wise-fool Becket simply won't wash. Either one or, more likely, both portraits of Becket are in error.

If Anouilh relates a friendship in which the king is the inferior partner, George Darley reverses the situation. In Darley's Thomas à Becket, Henry's character is unimpeachable; Becket's is a strange combination of cunning and self-adulation. In his cunning lies his rise to eminence; in his self adulation lies his weakness and the seed of his fall.

The king seems to love Becket:

> He shall be Primate...
> He is my friend, who loves his self for me;
> Whom I can trust with all my thoughts. (II, i)

but he is shrewd enough to be Thomas's equal in intelligence. Thus, he is on guard immediately when Thomas appears in monkish garb to resign his position as chancellor:

> Ha! - Has a serpent crept from out the dust
> Up my throne-steps to sting me i' the back,
> And slide away under the alter then? (II, v)

Henry is a man, not a fawning inferior. In the same scene, as he recognizes the depth of the gulf Becket has opened between them, he seizes the iniative and removes Becket from the archdeaconry of Canterbury, placing an old Becket enemy in his stead:

> Well, then, our Saxon proxy of St. Peter,
> To give thee further time for prayer, full swing
> For self-disciplinance (which I confess
> Thou hast great need of!) here thou art relieved
> Of that most duteous office, and much worldly,
> The Arch-deaconship... (II, v)

The king is not to be taken for a purely vindictive man. He has divined Becket's motives and means to thwart them, but he does not want malicious vengeance. In Rosamond's bower, where he seeks release from the pressures of his public life, even Rosamond defends Becket:

> Nay but, my sovereign love, think how most apt
> All are to dream the wronger knows his wrongs.
> And thence our bitterest quarrels: Becket may
> Do wrong more ignorantly than malignantly. (IV, v)

Henry gently remonstrates:

> Malignantly, say I! and that admitted,
> As ignorantly as you please. Ah! thou art too clement:
> A beauty in your sex, in ours a blemish. (IV, v)

But, as Rosamond persists, the king relents:

> Well, you shall give the discipline yourself
> To penitent Becket when he bares his shoulders;
> You shall your scourge of feathers and your besom
> of flowers, lay on him sharply! Come! forget him. (IV, v)

"Forget him." - These words separate Darley's Henry from Anouilh's. Darley's Henry can think rationally of his kingdom, his paramour, and of Thomas; Anouilh's king can think only of Becket.

Darley's portrait of Thomas is another matter. His Becket is the

personification of craft and prideful ambition. He tempers his every action to bring himself personal adulation, first, from the king and later, from the Saxon peasants. Because he thinks he controls the king he is contemptuous of him:

> Harry of England!
> Albeit thou hast much wisdom, for one
> Born but to be made a fool of from the cradle, -
> Yet so predominates the weaker element
> That even the fiery spirit heaven put to it
> Cannot drink up the spring of softness in thee,
> But leaves thee mouldable by skillful hands. (I, iii)

Yet his control is based on adulation, and he must constantly thrust himself to the center of everyone's attention. When his party for the king reaches a lull, he is frantic that his guests may have forgot him:

> What's this? I am forgotten!
> Most by myself, and worst - [Turning to his guests.]
> Drink, gentlemen!
> Ye trifle with me only!... (I, iii)

The moment he is appointed archbishop, he knows the world of gaiety and luxury, so natural to a chancellor, must disappear. He must put on new garments and a new face:

> 'Tis reasonable,
> I do confess, to think that this fine essence,
> Grandeur of soul, should breathe itself throughout
> The mien and movements: every word should speak it,
> How'er so calm - like the pleased lion's murmur!
> Each tone, glance, posture, should be great with it.
> The o'er-familiar smile, salute, and chat
> Which sinks us to the low and common level,
> Should be dismissed... (II, iii)

Both Thomases - the gay chancellor and the humble archbishop - are postures adopted by a poseur to suit his audience. The same man is master of many poses: superb knight, master horseman, renowned scholar, shrewd debater. Thomas is

a very chameleon in his ability to insinuate himself into a situation until he is its master!

At the point of Becket's becoming archbishop, however, Darley's portrait of him becomes illogical. Becket's pride has not yet reached its consummation: a position which, by virtue of its power, guarantees him the adulation on which his soul feeds. The archbishopric establishes him on that independent throne (From the time of his appointment, he reaches toward the summit in III, viz "Who am I but the Sacerdotal King/ Of this great state?"), but he fails utterly to profit from his exalted estate. He immediately disassociates himself from king, baron, and bishops. At such a juncture, only the Saxon peasantry is left to adore him. Twice in the play brief reference is made to his attempt to win a following among the peasants. Yet the peasants are involved in only one of the play's thirty-six scenes, and even that scene quickly moves on to other matters. The cry of the peasants ("Largesse! Largesse! Cry out more welcomes - More welcomes and more largesse! [V, iv]) indicates the superficiality of their support - a matter that the shrewd Becket would have known in advance. In sum, Becket's actions as archbishop are without legitimate motivation. He wins no real adulation and his ambition is blunted by his unwise handling of the very powers on which his schemes depend.

Darley sees the friendship of Henry and Thomas as the gift of a fair-minded, loving king to a self-seeking subject. Though Becket - as chancellor - cater to the king's whims, assisting the king, for example, in his clandestine affair with Rosamond; still he holds the king in contempt and only furthers his own ambition.

The theme of friendship - even on the bases hertofore suggested - is inconsistently developed in two particulars. Henry practically recants his friendship on first sight of Becket in monk's clothing. The suddenness of the change in Henry's attitude may call his sincerity into question nearly as much as Becket's. Further, Henry disappears from the play after his tryst with Rosamond at the clo se of Act IV. For the fifteen scenes of Act V, numerous other forces wrestle against Becket. Darley does not even use the famous "Will no man in my kingdom rid me of one pestilent priest?" statement known to be the specific motivation of the knights in Becket's murder. In the end, the quarrel between king and archbishop hardly seems to count for much. Becket falls from an accumulation of his past mistakes: his malice toward the knights who kill him, for one thing; his problems with the king but one more thing of no greater importance than the first item mentioned.

Though his play is so often an echo of Darley's that what is said of the one frequently applies to the other, Tennyson's Becket, nevertheless, presents the theme of friendship in a much more balanced manner. Moreover, Tennyson handles the theme in better form than Anouilh, although the French playwright employs friendship as his major theme whereas Tennyson means only to chronicle the events. The reason is simply put: Tennyson presents a more attractive Henry than Anouilh and a more attractive Becket than Darley.

Tennyson's Henry differs only slightly from Darley's. He is fair-minded, well disposed toward Becket in the beginning, and Becket's equal in every respect. Tennyson has caught something of the Angevin temper for which

Henry was famous - a matter seen only rarely in Darley's play and seen in Anouilh's more often in relation to the king's attitude towards his own family. The opening scene makes the point (the king and Thomas are at the chessboard):

> Becket. Well - will you move?
> Henry. There. [Moves.
> Becket. Check - you move so wildly.
> Henry. There then! [Moves.
> Becket. Why - there then, for you see my bishop
> Hath brought your king to a standstill. You are beaten.
> Henry. (Kicks over the board.) Why, there then - down
> go bishop and king together. (Prologue.)

This angry king has more than one occasion to be furious with Thomas (after Northampton in I, iii; when Rosamond attempts to intercede for the archbishop in II, i; after Montmirail in II, iii; and especially after Eleanor has spread her vitriol about in several scenes); but the potential of a restored friendship seems to remain, for Henry in II, ii gives up the notion of crowning his son without the archbishop and decides to "patch up a peace." Circumstances intervene, but peace finally comes in III, iii. Henry has not been guilty of insincerity when he later screams:

> God's eye! I would the Church were down in hell!
> Will no man rid me of this pestilent priest? (V, i)

He is merely responding to the evil web woven by the arch-villainess of the play, Queen Eleanor.

Becket is portrayed in equally sympathetic terms. He has seen signs that he is destined to be archbishop. In a dream he has pled with the Lord:

> "O Lord, my God,
> Henry the King hath been my friend, my brother,

> And mine uplifter in this world, and chosen me
> For this thy great archbishopric, believing
> That I should go against the Church with him
> And I shall go against him with the Church
> And I have said no word of this to him:
> Am I the man?" And the Lord answered me,
> "Thou art the man..." (I,i)

He pursues the church's aims because it is his duty. He opposes the king out of a higher loyalty and, naturally enough, comes to suspect the king's motives. When Henry offers him reconciliation in front of the French king, Becket offers an aside: "Words! he will wriggle out of them like an eel/ When the time comes..." (II, ii). He, nevertheless, is a sincere priest who as often imputes to Henry honorable motives in other areas:

> I would have done my most to keep Rome holy,
> I would have made Rome know she still is Rome...
> 'Tis not the King who is guilty of mine exile
> But Rome, Rome, Rome... (II, ii)

Becket's character stands out most clearly against the background of the cruel and vindictive queen. Eleanor's request of aid from Becket in her pursuit of Rosamond (I, ii) - a request he refuses - proves the archbishop's honor is intact. Eleanor's henchmen - the barons who kill Thomas - pursue Rosamond with a lust that is simply farcical since she is the king's mistress. Nevertheless, Becket is resourceful enough to thwart queen and Baron: he grabs Eleanor's arm as she is about to plunge a dagger into Rosamond's heart (IV, ii). At this juncture he sends Rosamond to Godstowe nunnery to protect her from her enemies. He has reached the summit: he has served the church and the king in the same action. Yet this action brings about his death, for Eleanor twists the archbishop's reason for putting Rosamond away until the king wishes Thomas were dead (V, i). Eleanor sees to it the king has his wish.

In Tennyson's play, king and archbishop are the equal of each other in character and ability. Neither is villainous, neither is personally vindictive; but both are obstinate and often petty. Insofar as Tennyson's portrayal of the parties to the friendship is concerned, we must credit him with a superior handling of his material. However, Tennyson loses the advantages of his character portrayal by introducing Eleanor and the barons as the forces that keep the friendship broken and that eventually cause it to end with Thomas's murder. Since the king has little directly to do with Becket's martyrdom, the theme of their friendship verges on the irrelevant.

Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral does not handle the theme of friendship between king and archbishop in any important sense. Henry does not appear in the stage version of the play,[2] and references to their early friendship are largely confined to Becket's conversations with the Tempters, the first two in particular. These conversations we need to consider briefly.

The First Tempter reminds Becket of the warmth of his friendship with the king in times past and avers, "Friendship should be more than biting time can sever" (Part I, p. 24). Thomas is not seriously tempted by memories of his youth. He replies:

> Men learn little from others' experience.
> But in the life of one man, never
> The same time returns. (Part I, p. 25)

The Second Tempter emphasizes the public side of Thomas's friendship with

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[2]Henry did appear in a scene drawn especially for the motion picture version of Murder in the Cathedral.

Henry - his period as Chancellor of England: "You, master of policy/ Whom all acknowledged, should guide the state again" (Part I, p. 27). But Thomas serves another order now:

> Power with the King -
> I was the King, his arm, his better reason.
> But what was once exaltation
> Would now be only mean descent. (Part I, p. 31)

The Third Tempter offers a corruption of Thomas's period as Chancellor: open rebellion against the king. Thomas dismisses the temptation contemptuously:

> Shall I who ruled like an eagle over doves
> Now take the shape of a wolf among wolves?
> Pursue your treacheries as you have done before:
> No one shall say that I betrayed a king. (Part I, p. 34)

The temptations arising out of his youthful friendship with the king are ended. The memories are too old to evoke more than a second's thought. Only the Fourth Tempter's advice to court martyrdom (considered in detail in Chapter IV) gives Thomas pause, for this temptation arises out of the present, not the dead past.

CHAPTER IV

ARCHBISHOP THOMAS: THE THEME OF MARTYRDOM

Christopher Fry's 1961 drama of the life of Henry II gives the Becket story from the king's point of view. The king is puzzled about Becket even before he is elevated to the archbishopric of Canterbury, for he asks his friend:

> What are you, Becket?
> Force, craft, or the holy apprentice?[1]

Henry's words bespeak the confusion that exists concerning Thomas's motivations at any given time of his career. Did Becket serve the state disinterestedly or as a cunning self seeker? Was he a politician of unexcelled shrewdness or a statesman of unimpeachable honor? The Henry of Christopher Fry's Curtmantle isn't sure.

We have stated earlier that the dramatist has an obligation to speak from a position of probability and logic wherever the historical record is ambiguous. We must now determine the extent to which each of the Becket dramatists meets this criterion in his handling of the martyrdom of Becket.

The ambiguity of Becket's motivations has led the four dramatists to strikingly different interpretations of the murder and the acts immediately preceding it. Broadly speaking, the playwrights have given us three interpretations of his martyrdom: that Becket died because of the machinations of evil people around him, that he was murdered because of his overweening

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[1] Fry, I, i.

personal ambition, or that he died simply for the defense of the church. In some sense each motive is present in the historical act; modern historians however, look to the last mentioned as prime among them.[2] We shall take the interpretations in the order listed as moving from least important to most important in terms of the historical act, and as moving from least successful to most successful stage presentation.

As we mentioned in our discussion of the church-state quarrel as a theme, Tennyson makes Queen Eleanor the agent of Becket's death. Hating Becket for his protection of the king's mistress, Rosamond, Eleanor taunts the king into a frenzy over Becket, then incites the knights to defend the king by killing the archbishop. Tennyson thus has Becket die because of the scheming of a master villainess. Besides the false history and the melodramatic implications (we must remember both Tennyson and Darley wrote in the age of melodrama), Tennyson compounds the absurdity of his view of the martyrdom by ignoring what his plot has clearly said. In short, he is intent throughout much of the play to show the martyrdom arising out of Becket's rightful defense of the church against Henry's pretentions for the state.

Becket knows from the beginning that conflict between Canterbury and the throne is inevitable. He confides to Herbert of Bosham as he makes ready for his new position:

> ... I seem appall'd - on such a sudden
> At such an eagle-height I stand and see
> the rift that runs between me and the king. (I, 1)

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[2]Again we point to Winston's book as authoritative.

He knows what he will do as archbishop:

> Our holy mother Canterbury, who sits
> With tatter'd robes...
> ... - we will make her whole... (I, i)

At Northampton (I, iii), his conflict with the king grows out of bounds, and Thomas goes into exile in France, the opprobrium of Gilbert Foliot, Bishop of London, ringing in his ears: "...like a fool, thou knowst no middle way." (I, ii) Years later, after Henry and Thomas are supposedly reconciled, Becket confides to his friend Herbert that he expects to be martyred:

> I live to die for it [the church]...
> It must be so my friend! The wolves of England
> Must murder her one shepherd, that the sheep
> May feed in peace... (III, iii)

Contrast the above development of an apparent reason for martyrdom with the actual reason developed by the plot - Eleanor's angry comments after Becket's refusal of assistance:

> ...Stir up the King...
> Set all on fire against him [Becket]!
> .....
> ...Fool! I will make thee hateful to the King.
> Churl! I will have thee frightened into France
> And I shall live to trample on thy grave. (I, ii)

and her goading of the king at the climactic moment of the play:

> I will go and live and die in Aquitaine.
> I dreamed I was the consort of a King
> Not one whose back his priest has broken.
> .....
> Your cleric hath your lady.
> Nay, what uncomely faces, could he see you!
> Foam at the mouth because King Thomas, lord
> Not only of your vassals but amours,
> Thro' chastest honor of the Decalogue
> Hath used the full authority of his Church
> To put her into Godstowe nunnery. (V, i)

By this time Henry is literally foaming at the mouth and Becket's death is sealed.

The knights who kill Becket do not mention Rosamond (who, in this play, is in Canterbury at the time of Becket's death) or Eleanor. They in effect demand that Thomas drop his pretensions to power (that is, that he withdraw his excommunications of the bishops and barons who participated in the crowning of the king's son) and that he give in on all points of contention between himself and the king. Becket handles himself well. Before the knights' arrival, he has promised Rosamond he would not excommunicate the king. He pleads with the knights, not to save his own life, but to save their souls. He dies as a martyr and a saint should: bravely and without bitterness.

The scene is the best of the play except for the opening Prologue. Were it not obvious from the scene immediately preceding his murder that Eleanor's spite was the real reason for the knights' actions, the play should need to be judged successful in its presentation of the martyrdom. Moreover, no additional scene beyond his martyrdom is necessary to prove his saintliness: his actions have already shown his saintliness. Tennyson's play must finally be judged as a drama of excellent potential, but greatly marred by the failure of its plot to show a protagonist dying in defense of his life's work.

If Tennyson's play is infected by ambiguity as to why Becket is martyred, Darley's play is ambiguous on the point of his sainthood. There is little doubt why he is murdered: he has been "asking" for it for a long time. His character - spelled out in some detail in Chapter Three - is so

puffed with pride and narcissism that the audience looks forward to His death as the necessary end to his pretensions and vanity.

Not that Darley is consistent in his portrait of Thomas. Just after Henry has attacked him as a "serpent" and a "hypocrite" for appearing in monk's robes in the king's audience, Becket soliloquizes eloquently on his situation:

> Why, hypocrite? - hypocrite!
> Were not my services unto the King
> Sincerest, whilst I was his servant? Now
> That I am servant of the Church alone,
> Should they not be sincere to it? His fault,
> If foe to it, he thus will make him mine!
> No man can serve two masters, - save they be
> At one! - Am I to blame that loftier steps
> Give larger views, and clear from mists, through which
> Haply I err'd where they are thick below? -
> Howe'er he choose to reason it, let him! (II, iv)

This glimpse of Thomas with pure purpose and a large soul must be considered a lapse on Darley's part, for it does not occur again.

So convincing is his overall characterization of Becket as a man of overweening personal ambition that Darley correctly senses even Becket's most devoted followers will be hard put to defend him. John of Salisbury cannot understand why Thomas must dress himself so lavishly (they are awaiting the return of the angry knights):

> I know not what to name it,
> Grandeur of soul or pettiness, pride of state,
> Contempt of peril, calm from sense of right,
> Or contradictiveness insane! (V, xi)

But Becket's clothing merely reflects his imperious demeanor. When De Traci attempts to arrest him as a traitor, the archbishop assaults him physically and verbally:

> Take off that impious hand, which dares profane
> My stole immaculate; or I will shake thee,
> Vile reptile, off, and trample thee in the dust!
> Bosham, let be! - I have an arm as stout
> As any stalking Norman of them all! - (V, xii)

He dies with a curse on his lips: "Execrabilis esto!" (V, xii)

Murder for the archbishop? Yes, perfectly understandable! But sainthood? For Darley's Becket, out of the question. Yet Darley does show us Becket's funeral, and he does make Queen Eleanor kneel before his tomb (she who despised Thomas throughout the play!) and pray:

> O most holy Becket!
> Pray for me, make my peace with ireful heaven,
> Thou who hast now such influence o'er the Saints
> As new amongst them, and above them all
> Rank'd by thy bleeding crown of Martyrdom! - (V, xv)

Darley's last scene (V, xv) reverses the essential personality of every character it portrays. The imperious archbishop is now the "most holy" saint; the evil queen is a humble suppliant at his tomb; and "Fair Rosamond" (who appears as a ghost to promise Eleanor "...Thy name shall stand/ A breviary of all abhorr'd in women.") becomes a revengeful fury. The changes in Eleanor and Rosamond do not concern us here; the change in Thomas Becket does. Quite obviously Darley was caught with a characterization of Becket which conflicted with his historical designation as saint. A wise playwright would have ignored the question of his sainthood altogether or would have attacked the legitimacy of his acceptance among the church's blessed. Given his portrait of Becket, we must conclude Darley chose the weakest possible ending for his play. His apparent contention is that murder of an archbishop inside his church makes sainthood inevitable, regardless of his character.

But, if his character conflicts so mightily with his sainthood, how does Becket become a proper subject of tragedy or dramatic chronicling? Darley's Preface[3] clarifies his thoughts at this point: he was caught up in the brilliant trappings of events surrounding the murdered archbishop - consistent characterization and logical motivation were not his concern. As melodrama in the worst sense, such a play may succeed. As tragedy or dramatic history, the play is a failure, for, while it provides ample cause for his murder, it provides no reason for his sainthood.

Anouilh and Eliot handle the theme of martyrdom much more attractively than Tennyson and Darley. Their basic view is that Becket's death is the inevitable result of the defense of the church - a defense based on honorable personal motives arrived at after much struggle with impure motivations.

For Anouilh's Becket, the struggle is, first of all, to find the "honor of God" and, later, to hold onto it despite its heavy cost. From the subtitle of the play (Or The Honor of God) through Becket's last agony ["Oh, how difficult You make it all! And how heavy Your honor is to bear!" (IV, p. 127)], Anouilh has developed this theme with remarkable consistency. Even the stage reinforces his theme. Though the action occurs in various places in England, France, and Italy, the stage setting is always the interior

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[3]Most of the pertinent part of Darley's Preface has been printed in the Introductory material to Chapter One. In sum, Darley is struck by the "grandeur" of his character, "his indomitable resolution, his sublime arrogance...." All this accounts for a character of peculiar "stage-effectiveness," says Darley.

of Canterbury cathedral - where Becket finds his honor and where he dies for it.

However, Anouilh's development of Henry as a foil for Thomas and his view of the play as a "drama of friendship" tend to muddy the development of his theme of honor. That is to say, a theater audience is more likely to grasp the frantic combat between friends than it is to see the interior struggle of Becket. One must read the play several times to realize fully Anouilh's final assessment of Thomas: he is a man who holds life and his ideals closely together; he will let go of life rather than his ideals whenever the tension between them becomes too great.[4]

Anouilh wastes no time on the murder. Within seconds after the barons have burst through the great doors into the main sanctuary, they are upon Becket, killing him. Thomas's last thought is of the king. "Poor Henry" he utters, and dies beneath the knights' blows. Immediately the scene shifts to a naked Henry whose back is being bruised by the Canterbury priests. The playwright's dramatic instincts are sound, for the weak king he has given us could hardly bear this particular memory. In fact, it can only be a second-hand memory, for the king was in France when Becket was killed. The fade-in to a scene of the king's discomfiture is a nice irony: Becket and the king suffer in proportion as they have lived and grasped the meaning of life.

After the penance, Henry announces to his barons: "...it is our

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[4]In this sense he is a typical Anouilh hero as mentioned in Chapter Two. See John Harvey's Anouilh, A Study in Theatrics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964) for a more extensive definition of Anouilh's heroes.

wish that, henceforward, he should be honored and prayed to in the Kingdom as a saint" (IV, p. 128). Anouilh cannot resist a final irony: Becket's sainthood rests not on his pursuit of the "honor of God," but on the king's need for the support of the Saxon peasantry against the insurrections of his noxious sons. The incident is susceptible of various interpretations, but probably means only that the playwright could not be content with a "saint" and so determined to make him a man again - i.e., the victim of a last joke by a former friend.

T. S. Eliot's Becket is a man of more diffuse motivation. Like Anouilh's Thomas, he is contemplative, but he contemplates the universe, so to speak, rather than a single element such as honor. Murder in the Cathedral is in one sense the drama of Thomas's meditations on his impending martyrdom and the narrowing of his possible motivations. Before Thomas's appearance at Canterbury, the First Priest has already characterized the archbishop in terms that bespeak his final motivation for martyrdom and unite him with Anouilh's Becket as well:

> I saw him as Chancellor, flattered by the King,
> Liked or feared by courtiers, in their overbearing fashion,
> Despised and despising, always isolated,
> Never one among them, always insecure;
> His pride always feeding upon his own virtues,
> Pride drawing sustenance from impartiality,
> Pride drawing sustenance from generosity,
> Loathing power given by temporal devolution,
> Wishing subjection to God alone. (Part I, p. 25)

Indeed, Becket will finally submit to what he conceives as God's will, exactly as Anouilh's archbishop submitted in order to defend God's "honor" - the "will" and the "honor" being the same in the final analysis. But this is

foreshadowing, for Thomas has yet to examine his motives.

The first three tempters try to move Becket away from martyrdom. The Fourth Tempter echoes Thomas's own thoughts, however, and comes closer to persuading him:

> What can compare with glory of Saints
> Dwelling forever in presence of God?
> .....
> Seek the way of martyrdom, make yourself the lowest
> On earth, to be high in heaven. (Part I, p. 44)

Thomas rejects this tempter also, not because he offers martyrdom, but because he asks Thomas to seek martyrdom:

> The last temptation is the greatest treason:
> To do the right deed for the wrong reason. (Part I, p. 45)

First Thomas must reject a sought-for, contrived martyrdom - and this is the stage he has reached as Part One ends. Next he must properly define martyrdom - which he attempts to do in the Christmas sermon forming the Interlude of the play:

> A Christian martyrdom is never an accident....
> A martyrdom is always the design of God, for his love
> of men.... It is never the design of man; for the true
> martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who
> has lost his will in the will of God, who no longer
> desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being
> a martyr. (p. 49)

Finally he must simply await the time "When the figure of God's purpose is made complete" (Part II, p. 69). In the last few days and hours, he simply waits for the event:

> All my life they have been coming, these feet. All my life
> I have waited. Death will come only when I am worthy,
> And if I am worthy, there is no danger.
> I have only therefore to make perfect my will. (Part II, p. 69)

Eliot's and Anouilh's Thomases both search for God - one for his "will," the other for his "honor." We intimated earlier they should be about the same thing. If we assume both are fulfilled in their search, though, we must draw a distinction between them. Anouilh's Thomas pursues God's honor; Eliot's Thomas waits for God's will. We cannot push the distinction too far for Eliot handles only the last month of Becket's life when the die is essentially cast, but the distinction holds true on stage. Eliot's archbishop is almost entirely a passive protagonist. Passivity is a problem in any play and is seldom handled successfully. Eliot's play escapes the general anathema on such a protagonist partially by its medieval form and poetic diction. It succeeds also because every word from the opening Chorus on looks toward the consummate act of the martyrdom.

The act - when it comes - is portrayed in much the same chronicle form employed by Darley and Tennyson. The difference is primarily one of rhythm - Eliot's knights using the jangling meter of an emotional Christian hymn to reinforce the emotional undercurrents of the moment. At the moment of his murder, however, the Chorus keens its terror and confusion in lines of considerable length and varied meter - indicating the permanent nature of its peculiar misfortunes:

> Can I look again at the day and its common things,
> and see them all smeared with blood...
> We are soiled by a filth that we cannot clean...
> It is not we alone, it is not the house, it is not
> the city that is defiled,
> But the world that is wholly foul. (Part II, p. 77)

As the moaning of the Chorus dies, the murderers appear before it. Each one defends his action as a member of Parliament might offer rebuttal

to his fellows in Commons. The Fourth Knight is convinced Becket succumbed to the temptation to court martyrdom. As evidence he lists the occasions on which Becket could have modified his behaviour sufficiently to smother the flames about him. His argument is that Becket is essentially a "suicide" - a persuasive thought when the archbishop's passivity is taken into account. Thomas has indeed "made perfect his will," but his very inaction has become the instrument of his death: he has forced martyrdom from his enemies!

But the "suicide" concept must fall before Thomas's belief that his death is the will of God. Abraham did not think to kill his son Isaac; he thought to do the will of God. Thomas does not decide to make his enemies kill him; he decides to act - or not act - as God wills. He says to the priests just before the entry of the knights:

> You think me reckless, desperate, and mad.
> You argue by results, as this world does,
> .....
> It is out of time that my decision is taken
> If you call that decision
> To which my whole being gives entire consent.
> I give my life
> To the Law of God above the Law of Man. (Part II, pp. 73-74)

Such a decision in Thomas's case brings martyrdom in its wake.

Sainthood also comes in the wake of Thomas's decision. Becket's essential saintliness is never in doubt in this play. The Chorus and Priests refer to the "saints and martyrs" of the church from the play's opening moments, and always the implication is that Thomas is like them and will be one of them. In truth, martyrdom and sainthood are interchangeable terms in this play. Whoever suffers one enters the other.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY

We have applied our historical approach to the criticism of three major themes in four Becket plays. We need now to consider in brief to what extent each Becket play has successfully handled the themes of church-state struggle, friendship, and martyrdom. Afterwards we shall parallel our critical judgment from the historical point of view with the observations of other critics working from different viewpoints. Finally, we shall ask why dramatists have handled the Becket materials at all and decide whether the story of Thomas actually meets the definitions most often given for tragedy.

Only Murder in the Cathedral successfully handles the theme of struggle between church and state. The Second Knight expresses the theme overtly; it is implicitly reinforced by the morality-play form, the cathedral setting, and the variation of the poetic dialogue to contrast the sacred and secular aspects of the play. Darley and Tennyson are sidetracked by their notion that a play cannot succeed without a female counterpart to Becket. Anouilh is, by his own admission, not interested in the historical theme: his theme of Becket's search for his honor, attractive in itself, does not reach beyond Thomas's conscience. It denies any validity to the outward historical situation and ends by casting the archbishop in the role of the modern existentialist man.

None of the four plays adequately handles the theme of personal friendship between the king and Thomas. Anouilh makes it his major theme,

yet because the nature of their friendship is so historically inaccurate and dramatically unattractive, the play cannot be judged successful on this point. Darley abuses the character of Becket and leaves a great deal of ambiguity regarding the place of Henry in the assassination of the archbishop. Tennyson places the friendship on the proper footing - i.e., with characters equal in ability and stage vitality - but denies the martyrdom arose out of their early friendship and late quarrel and thus loses the potential value of the theme. For Eliot, the theme of friendship is simply irrelevant; he sees Becket as a martyr, not to a man, but to a transcendent struggle between secularism and Christianity. Murder in the Cathedral, then, cannot fairly be judged on the same basis as were the other plays. Eliot's decision not to treat this theme resulted in a tighter construction for his play - contributed, in short, to the play's unity. However, the decision did some damage to the play as well. The absence of Henry forces Thomas into a pasivity that is difficult to project from a stage. The film version of Murder in the Cathedral corrected this flaw by introducing Henry and thus treating the theme of friendship to gain dramatic intensity.

Murder in the Cathedral treats the theme of martyrdom and saint-hood more effectively than the other plays. Eliot's Thomas deserves the title martyr and saint, for he is consistently and effectively motivated. Anouilh has done quite well with the martyrdom theme but has reverted to comedy in his handling of Thomas's sainthood - a matter consistent with Anouilh's professional talents but intolerable in a theme of such high seriousness. Darley and Tennyson have succumbed to the poor plotting that might

be expected from men known primarily for their poetic rather than their dramatic competence. Darley cannot reconcile his murdered poseur with his historical saint; in fact, he makes no real attempt. Tennyson presents a saint murdered irrelevantly - a situation tantamount to having an Albert Schweitzer die as a pedestrian run over by an automobile. Such anomalies do occur, but none did in the case of Becket, and any such irrelevancy must detract from the dramatic value of a situation.

In sum, the best of the plays, historically speaking, is Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral.[1] Eliot's play surpasses the others in its treatment of two of the three themes we have considered and is itself unconcerned with the third. This unconcern does no harm historically and actually aids in unifying the play. Its effect on the action is considerably less satisfying, but this is a dramatic consideration with no direct bearing on the critical opinions we are offering here. Each of the other plays must fall before its attempt to provide an unhistorical love interest in Becket's life. Tennyson and Darley add Rosamond to the story, but the Rosamond story is only tangentially related to the archbishop (in addition to being legendary). Anouilh adds the relation to Henry and has Becket search for his "honor." The first is treated unhistorically and demeans the characters of both Thomas and the king; the second makes of Becket a modern man (He searches not for God or for God's love but for the "honor of God,"

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[1]Donald Blake, in his earlier mentioned thesis, agrees that Murder in the Cathedral is accurate historically: "Reliable historical accounts reveal that Eliot has in no way tampered with the facts surrounding Becket's murder...", p. 5.

an abstraction that has as much meaning if the word "Thomas" is substituted for "God" in the phrase). To the extent that Becket lives in the modern, theistic world in which the historical Becket actually lived.

The preponderance of critical opinion based on strictly dramatic grounds seems to concur with our contention that Murder in the Cathedral is the superior play. Helen Gardner praises its fine dramatic verse;[2] F. O. Matthiessen[3] and Bernard Knieger[4] agree. Martin Cornbluth contends that Eliot has made of Becket a modern "Everyman";[5] Carol Smith sees Becket as a Christ figure.[6] Each critic has his own reason, but each agrees that Murder in the Cathedral is a surpassing achievement. Praise of the other plays is more difficult to come by. Eliot himself criticized Tennyson's play as "preoccupied chiefly with lyric effect."[7] Darley's one biographer criticizes both Darley and Tennyson: "Darley, with the false delicacy of his age, attempts to whitewash Rosamond, and reveal her as an innocent creature who might vie with Barry Cornwall's melting beauties. Tennyson afterwards fell

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[2]Helen Gardner, The Art of T. S. Eliot (New York: Dutton, 1959), p. 127.

[3]F. O. Matthiessen, The Achievement of T. S. Eliot (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 174.

[4]Bernard Knieger, "The Dramatic Achievement of T. S. Eliot," Modern Drama, III (1961), pp. 287-92.

[5]Martin Cornbluth, "A Twentieth-Century Everyman," College English XXI (1959), pp. 26-29.

[6]Carol Smith, T. S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice (Princeton, 1963), pp. 105-09.

[7]Blake, p. xi.

heavily into the same pit."[8] But the biographer's scorn is reserved mainly for Darley: "Despite the gusto of the writing and the determination of the author to let his characters work out their own doom, the quarrel between Becket and Henry becomes a struggle between arbitrary forces, manipulated externally to an end by no means inevitable."[9] Anouilh's play has been praised by many, but one wonders if the praise will stand up in the future. Tennyson's play was well received in 1892 but has little standing today. We return to E. Martin Browne for his substantial criticism of Anouilh: "But when you get away from it, you find yourself with a sourtaste in your mouth."[10]

Two final questions must be considered. First, why have dramatists so often handled the Becket materials? A superficial answer seems to be that the materials contain all the elents of a fine Greek tragedy. The character of Becket is superb in its strengths and in its weaknesses. The supporting cast is equally notable. Becket seems to be brought to death by pride, the classic hamartia. His life is glorious; his end, bloody and partly deserved.

Yet a second question will not down: Is Becket's career the matter of true tragedy, or do appearances deceive us? Theodore Graves thinks that appearances are deceiving. His thesis on "The Becket Plays as Tragedy"

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[8]Claude Abbott, The Life and Letters of George Darley, Poet and Critic (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 221.

[9]Abbott.

[10]Browne, p. 67.

makes the point that tragedy requires that the tragic figure be denied any final triumph. His defeat must be complete. For a saint, death is victory. His spirit survives death and exercises more authority than it did during physical life. Obviously, claims Mr. Graves, Becket is not the material of true tragedy and only Anouilh's play can lay any claim to being tragic.- it being an exception because God is missing from his play and Becket's death can be taken as final in the spiritual as well as physical sense.

But Mr. Graves has seen only one side of tragedy. One can concede that, for the Christian Becket, martyrdom and sainthood represent fulfillment without thereby denying the tragedy inherent in the same events. Kenneth Macgowan is instructive:

> There are a number of very great tragedies in which the hero achieves his objectives. Hamlet takes the King's life, though he loses his own. Oedipus desires something higher than his own life, of greater value than his throne or his eyesight - the good of the state - and this he secures.... The secret of successful tragedy - and I am using "successful" in both its higher sense and its baser - is to leave the audience with the feeling that the death of the hero accomplished something. This is the tragedy of fulfillment, not the tragedy of frustration. It produces what Aristotle calls "catharsis." This purging of emotion through tragedy can come only where there is a certain spiritual greatness in the hero and/or a sense of the salutary in the outcome.[11]

Robinson Jeffers caught the essence of the tragedy of fulfillment in "Original Sin":

> And not fear death; it is the only way to be cleansed.[12]

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[11]Kenneth Macgowan, A Primer of Playwrighting (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 81.

[12]John Killinger, The Failure of Theology in Modern Literature (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1963), p. 202.

Becket has "a certain spiritual greatness" and he senses that death is "the only way to be cleansed." His story, indeed, does contain the essence of tragedy - but of fulfillment rather than of defeat.

Neither of the earlier Becket plays (Darley's, Tennyson's) is tragic, however. Darley's archbishop deserves death; there is no spiritual substance to him. Becket's death in Tennyson's drama is irrelevant to his spirituality. Both dramatists have made melodrama out of essential tragedy. Anouilh has made Thomas a tragic figure, exactly as Mr. Graves has indicated. His Thomas is tragic in the absolute defeat his death represents, and because his defeat is absolute, he is not the Thomas of history. Eliot has caught the essence of Becket's martyrdom: the archbishop accepts his death as fulfillment of the will of God - a most Christian and most tragic death.

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VITA

A native of Roanoke and a graduate of its public schools, Richard A. Bell has lived in the Piedmont region of Virginia for his entire adult life. He graduated from the University of Richmond in 1958, spent the 1960-61 school session at Union Seminary, and enrolled for several education courses at Richmond Professional Institute during the early 60's - all before deciding to re-enroll at the University of Richmond to pursue a Master's program in English.

He has taught every grade from the fourth through the twelfth in public schools in Albemarle and Spotsylvania Counties, at George Wythe High and The Collegiate Schools in the Richmond area, and at the Blackstone Day School in Nottoway County. In addition, he has held a position as Instructor in English in the Evening College of Virginia Commonwealth University for the past six years. Since 1965, he has been headmaster of the Blackstone Day School.

He is married to the former Miss Luann Stull, also of Roanoke, and is the father of an eight-year-old son (Peter John) and an infant daughter (Jennifer Lynn).