CONCLUSION

In the last resort, this thesis has been concerned with the various treatments of the Becket story as individual works of art rather than as versions of history. As has already been pointed out, one of the main reasons for the attraction this episode has had is the mystery of Becket the man and Becket the Christian saint. For Becket's sanctity is incontrovertible. In this conclusion I would like to examine what, in the Middle Ages, made for sainthood and martyrdom.

The one fact that no historian can ever explain away, or even explain satisfactorily is the miracle of conversion, the mystery that lies at the heart of sainthood and martyrdom. Literature alone can feed the heart and head by recreating that miracle. The 'sea of faith' that girdled Europe in the time of Becket has long since retreated; its 'melancholy...withdrawing roar' becoming ever fainter with the centuries. But because we stand on the dry sands of unbelief the soul's need for appeasement grows sharper and more pressing.

Taking an over-view of the works considered in this thesis, it may be suggested that apart from T. S. Eliot,
the other writers have all tended to treat Becket as an ordinary human being in history and drawn their conclusions about his character — favourable or adverse — in terms of the apparent consistency of his behaviour under the circumstances in which he was placed. In Anouilh's terms, what he had expected to find in history had been a 'saint', and what he had actually found was a 'MAN'. And he was delighted with this unexpected discovery. Fry's play is the treatment of Henry's story rather than Becket's. And Becket himself figures only as a secondary personage. Tennyson's play is flawed at the heart because the dramatist could not make up his mind to deny the fact of Becket's sanctity. At the same time, his basic assumptions regarding his title figure are secular. Becket, for him, is primarily the statesman and the representative of a national Church.

T. S. Eliot, on the other hand, transcends these interpretations, as he also transcends history, in offering us an intuitive apprehension of the nature of Christian sanctity and of the particular miracle of Becket's attainment of sanctity. Eliot's transcendence of history, however, is inclusive. His presentation of the climactic moment of conversion is arrived at, not through any ignoring of historical fact, but through
an acceptance and comprehension of all the charges generally levelled against Becket. This is clearly evident in his use of the tempter figures, and particularly of the fourth and most insidious tempter.

Whereas the other dramatists all present an unredeemed Becket, Eliot's stress falls on the miracle of Becket redeemed. And whereas a totally secular attitude is sceptical of the suddenness of Becket's conversion, a religious point of view believes that the miracle of conversion can take place even in the moment of death.

Thomas Becket, the luster after power and wealth suffers a sea-change. How does this happen? One has to go back to the history of those two great and astonishingly similar men, who perhaps more than any others were responsible for the foundation and entrenchment of Christianity — St. Paul and St. Augustine. The conversion in both cases was dramatic and sudden — like a flash of lightning. Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee, pupil of Gamaliel and persecutor of the Christians is blinded by light on the road to Damascus and the scales fell from his eyes. St. Augustine too, at Milan in 386, is converted suddenly.
As he casts himself under the fig-tree crying, "How long Lord? Wilt Thou be angry forever", he hears a voice chanting "Take up and read; take up and read".

He opens the Bible at random and chances on the words of St. Paul: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof." It was a moment, for Augustine, of passionate illumination after a passionate and tormented search.

The point to be taken is that conversion to the faith comes through Divine Grace not through human reason. "If I am convinced by reason", says Ambrose, "I reject faith." Grace is a gift coming unsought and unbidden. "This grace is a light supernatural and a special gift of God and a proper sign of the chosen children of God and the earnest of everlasting health; for God lifteth up man from earthly things to love heavenly things and of him that is fleshly he maketh (a) spiritual (man). Wherefore the more that nature is holden under and overcome, the more grace is poured in..." "For by Grace

2 Quoted, Baker, p.140.
are ye saved through faith", wrote St. Paul; "and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God." (Ephesians 2: 8). Something of this sort may have happened to Thomas. When, with the robes of the Archbishop's office, he put on also, Jesus Christ, there must have been some inward illumination; and with that the complete and instantaneous transformation into the new man. "I have had a tremour of bliss, a wink of heaven, a whisper", Eliot's Thomas tells the Priests a little before his death. The inward conversion shows itself in a new temporal life of purity and holiness.

This is the Becket of Eliot's play. But strife with "nature" continues to the very end. Becket is tempted even in his last hours by the most subtly refined temptation of them all — the pride of spirit that seeks in martyrdom the glorification of the self. Till he has won this final battle of the spirit his holiness cannot be saintly and complete.

The Christian ideal of humility which Becket ultimately comes to realise and accept, finds its natural opposite in pride, a coarse and bumptious confidence in one's strength, typified by the Henry Plantagenet of

4 Murder in the Cathedral, p.70.
Henry, who inhabits *civitas terrana*, is not capable of understanding that a man must lose his life in order to save it; Becket, who has his eyes fixed on *civitas dei*, is convinced of this truth. Touched by God's grace, he holds as steadfastly to this conviction as to the great Cross he grasps in his hands.

But Henry's actions recoil only on himself; and Becket's martyrdom works *ad maiorem dei gloriam* — to the greater glory of God. All this is orthodox Christian doctrine. In the words of St. Augustine: "Evil men do many things contrary to the will of God; but so great is his wisdom, and so great his power that all things which seem to oppose his will tend towards those results or ends which he himself has foreknown as good and just." 5

Eliot rests his play firmly on the pillars of medieval church dogma; these dry bones live because of his faith. At the same time, Eliot's attitude to Becket is not world- or life-denying. It intuitively fills

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the gap left by history between Becket the man and Becket
the saint by comprehending the primacy of the spiritual
life over the materialistic. In the last analysis, it
is probably Eliot's play which has the most lasting appeal
by transcending history through history.

This conclusion has concentrated on Eliot because
the value of his work lies not only in its consummate
artistry but also in its profound response to the deep
human need for the spiritual. "Our hearts are restless
till we rest in thee", says Augustine, and that is why
after all the dust of the Church-State conflict has settled,
and even the clash of two great human characters grown
faint in the waning light, the luminous stars of the peace
which passeth all understanding rise on the darkening
human horizon. It is that light which falls on the pages
of Murder in the Cathedral.