CHAPTER III

MOVEMENT AND PATTERN: The Form.
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Tragedy does not show man as 'master of his fate' and 'captain of his soul'; but neither does it show 'helpless men, in ignorance sedate,/ Roll darkling down the torrent of his fate'. Its matter is made up of both what men do and what men suffer. Its pattern is woven out of the action and the suffering. This tension in tragic plots by which man appears as both architect of his fate and victim was given a metaphysical and religious interpretation in the famous passage in Murder in the Cathedral:

'...Action is suffering
And suffering action. Neither does the agent suffer
Nor the patient act. But both are fixed
In an eternal action, and eternal patience
To which all must consent that it may be willed
And which all must suffer that they may will it,
That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is
The action
And the suffering...'

(i)

'History and Poetry; poetic drama in the 19th & 20th centuries'

Aristotle in his discussion of plot in tragedy, distinguishes between the relative merits and functions of history, and poetry in which he includes all imaginative literature. He comes to the conclusion that, "Poetry, therefore, is a higher thing than history; for poetry tends to

express the universal, history the particular."2 He arrives at this conclusion from the reasoning that whereas it is incumbent upon the history writer to record fact with as much accuracy as possible, the poet, being not a recorder, but primarily a "maker", is obliged to be faithful not to objective facts, but to his own imaginative vision of them. Perhaps one reason why Aristotle thought fit to pursue and explain this distinction at length, was that in his day poetry usually took its subjects from "history", which included the corpus of myths and legends as well. Poetry, in the Poetics is almost entirely equated with tragedy.

The phrase "a more philosophical and higher thing" would then refer to the poet's or dramatist's perception of a series of significant relationships among the past events themselves and also in their bearing on the present. Past events might then be seen as having, in some sort, been the cause of the present; or as providing parallel situations to the present which might help the author to a new perspective on his own present. As such, the poet was absolved from strict fidelity to fact. He could select, juxtapose or telescope events to suit his own

purposes.

The fluid quality of the traditional mythical narratives must have been a help to the dramatists, in not imposing too much recalcitrant factual data which might hamper the poet. The use of these traditional stories, also gave a sort of religious sanction and the weight of foreknowledge to the whole framework of Greek drama.

The Biblical drama of the Middle Ages in Western Europe served a comparable purpose in its own society. In the Middle Ages, the Bible was accepted quite literally as a series of events that had happened. Plays based on stories from the Old and New Testaments also had a religious sanction as well as the advantage of foreknowledge in the audience.

"The fact is", says John Gassner, "that in the great ages of dramatic literature, non-comic drama was largely historical."3 This statement he illustrates from the Greeks, who made no distinction between legend and history; and from the medieval use of Biblical subjects. Finally, in the Renaissance, he adds,

theorists even went so far as to assert that all tragedy should be based on historical subjects. Thus, the practice of the greatest dramatists in Europe through the ages, sanctioned the assumption that tragedy is ex officio historical, till it became almost axiomatic.

In England, after the great age of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, tragedy tended to lose its force and become diluted. The nineteenth century is remarkable not for having produced great tragedy, but for the repeated and extremely strenuous attempts at poetic drama. Every single one of the great nineteenth-century poets, Romantic as well as Victorian, tried his hand at tragic poetic drama.

Equally conspicuous was the almost total failure of their attempts, with the possible exception of Shelley's play *The Cenci*. Following the lead of T. S. Eliot, most twentieth-century critics have ascribed this failure mainly to the use of the hackneyed blank-verse form. Its rhythms had become stale and attenuated, incapable of being moulded to the speaking voice. Eliot remarks, "These plays, which few people read more than once, are treated with respect as fine poetry; and their insipidity is usually attributed to the fact that the authors, though great poets, were amateurs in the theatre. But
even if the poets had had greater natural gifts for the theatre, or had toiled to acquire the craft, their plays would have been just as ineffective, unless their theatrical talent and experience had shown them the necessity for a different kind of versification. It is not primarily...lack of anything of what is called theatre, that makes these plays so lifeless; it is primarily that their rhythm of speech is something that we cannot associate with any human being except a poetry reciter.* In a similar vein, A. P. Hinchliffe, citing reasons for the failure of nineteenth-century poetic drama concludes, "Most of all they never evolved verse which gave the illusion of one man speaking to another, or speaking differently one from another."5

The hackneyed blank-verse form, however, was only one of a whole complex of literary and dramatic conventions which the Romantic and Victorian poet-dramatists saw fit to lift bodily from the Elizabethans and Jacobean—particularly Shakespeare—and incorporate mechanically into their own work. The worship of Shakespeare which prevailed during the nineteenth century

proved to be the most pernicious influence on its drama.\(^6\) While Shakespeare was being Elizabethan in the Elizabethan age, the Romantics and Victorians had adopted a pseudo-Shakespearean, hybrid method of working, which proved to be entirely irrelevant to the age in which they lived. They ended up composing plays on historical or quasi-historical and romantic subjects, with characters that acted like wooden puppets and spoke like no one on earth, and a host of minor technical conventions like sub-plots. The conventions were observed to the letter whether essential to the governing interests of a particular play or not. More often than not, these governing interests themselves were difficult to discern.

The language, apart from its over-used verse-form, consisted of figures and turns of speech, archaism and ready-made verbal ornaments indiscriminately borrowed from the Elizabethans. The nineteenth-century poet-dramatist, says Moody E. Prior, thus became a "dealer in a kind of standardized poetic-drama rhetoric, selecting figures not for their essential bearing on the play as a whole, but for their suggestions of

\(^6\) Denis Donoghue calls it "the piety of an age issuing in earnest plays by... practically every English poet from Coleridge to Swinburne". \textit{The Third Voice: Modern British and American Verse Drama} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 18.
conformity with the proper respectable traditions."

One of the major reasons for this literary worship of Shakespeare was the state into which the contemporary theatre had fallen, by trafficking in the crudest form of melodrama and spectacle. Reacting against this state of affairs, the poets turned out something called "closet-drama", not meant to be staged, but read in private in one's library. Unrestrained by considerations of actual performance, the "poetic" plays often became compositions of gigantic length, sometimes running into a couple of hundred pages. Tennyson's Tudor drama, *Queen Mary*, contains twenty-three scenes, each one of considerable length, and is full of long, flowery, involved and "elevating" speeches and soliloquies. Histrionic and theatrical conditions were relegated to a secondary position.6

The nineteenth-century poetic dramas were the main reason for the wariness and suspicion with which historical subjects and "poetical" treatment in general came to be regarded. Historical or poetic drama had become synonymous


8 "The tendency to be fascinated by detail at the expense of structure, to proliferate in ornament, is a general weakness of Victorian prose, poetry, painting and architecture; but only in the poetic drama was it a fatal weakness." E. S. Fraser, *The Modern Writer and his world* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p.192.
with "costume drama" which implied, principally, a lavish spectacle; but a hollow, superficial approach to human character and relationships. "A parallel", says Gassner, "will be found today in the malpractice of novelists of the fleshly school of historical romance." 9

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a reaction had set in against drama that was "poetical" and conventional, in favour of realism both in choice of subjects and treatment. The aim of this reaction was to restore to the drama a naturalness and lifelikeness which had long been missing. The main impetus of this movement was provided by the social-problem plays of the Norwegion, Ibsen. His influence on the turn-of-the-century English drama was entirely in the direction of realism. Writing to Edmund Gosse of his play Emperor and Galileo, Ibsen said, "My new drama is no tragedy in the ancient sense. What I sought to depict were human beings, and therefore, I would not let them talk the language of the gods." 10 Talented playwrights like Shaw soon made the realistic approach the prevailing mode of twentieth-century drama. Even today, according

9 Gassner, op.cit., p.464.
10 Quoted, Hinchliffe, op.cit., pp.5-7.
to theatre critics like John Gassner, after several attempts by avant-garde playwrights at formalism or stylization of one form or another, it is the realistic approach which retains the largest degree of vitality.

Like all over-emphasized formal tendencies, the realistic drama in the first quarter of the twentieth century began to deteriorate. Realism dwindled into slice-of-life performances with drawing-room settings, and characters who spoke like the ordinary man in the street; "realism, which later became naturalism, was becoming less a matter of facing realities and more an anti-romantic insistence on unpleasant realities." A swing of the pendulum in the opposite direction was inevitable.

As early as 1919, Eliot was theorising about poetic-drama, which chiefly meant non-naturalistic drama. Drama, he claimed, is a form of art, not a piece of life. As such, it is subject to certain formal rules and conventions, which life is not. In his essay "Four Elizabethan Dramatists" (1924), Eliot writes, "The great vice of English drama from Kyd to Galsworthy has been that its aim of realism was unlimited. In one play,

11 Hinchliffe, p.9.
Everyman, and perhaps in that one play only, we have a drama within the limitations of art;...there has been no form to arrest, so to speak, the flow of spirit at any particular point before it expands and ends its course in the desert of exact likeness to the reality which is perceived by the most commonplace mind. ...on the one hand, actual life is always the material, and on the other hand an abstraction from actual life is a necessary condition to the creation of the work of art.12

The realistic approach as many writers were beginning to realise, had caused a dearth of anything that could be called "tragedy" in modern drama. The nineteenth-century poet-dramatists, taking their subject-matter from the past, had all attempted tragedies. So had some of the Edwardians and Georgians at the turn of the century, and during the early decades of the twentieth. The realistic playwrights, however, tended to see men not in his aspiring greatness, but as a product of impersonal environmental forces. The swing back towards poetic drama was connected on the one hand, with attempts at producing tragedy, and on the other, with the use of a "distanced" subject matter.

For, as the practice of Eliot himself shows, when he turned from the historical subject of *Murder in the Cathedral*, and set his remaining plays in twentieth century upper-class society, he inevitably pruned and flattened his poetry, so that it would not obtrude in the plays as "poetry". In 1960, Robert Bolt composed a play on the story of Sir Thomas More. Although it is written in prose, it is a poetic play in that the writer's method of treating his subject is non-naturalistic. In his 'Preface' to *A Man for all Seasons*, Bolt explains why after two plays on twentieth-century subjects, he felt inclined to turn to history for his story. "In two previous plays...I had tried, but with fatal timidity, to handle contemporaries in a style that would make them larger than life; ... Inevitably these plays looked like what they most resembled, orthodox fourth-wall dramas with puzzling, uncomfortable, and if you are uncharitable, pretentious overtones. So for this one I took a historical setting in the hope that the distance in years would give me Dutch courage, and enable me to treat my characters in a properly heroic, properly theatrical manner."

The recoil from restricted and naturalistic subjects and treatment inevitably brought in its wake a turning

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to subjects from the past; since people's imaginations boggled at the idea of their contemporaries being associated with a heroic life-style.

This return to historical drama is an important feature of twentieth-century theatre, as more than one critic has pointed out. After the failure of the nineteenth-century playwrights to do anything vital with history, dramatists on the whole had tended to regard it suspiciously. They viewed it either as a mode of escape from the unpleasant realities of life, or a pedantic and academic exercise. In the hands of the nineteenth-century poets it had been both. However, as Gassner points out, history may now recommend itself to the aspiring playwright who is weary of the banal and the topical, or one who wishes, through the use of past events to get a new perspective on the present, or to imply attitudes to the concepts of time and history in general.

French dramatists during the first half of the twentieth century, have been especially remarkable for their use of Greek myth in throwing the present into a newer perspective. In 1935 Jean Giraudoux wrote *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* on the subject.
of the Trojan war, setting his play on the eve of the outbreak. He centred his main interest in the Trojan hero Hector, who almost un-Homerically, wishes to preserve peace at all costs. It is a deeply pacifist play, and provides a telling comment on the life of his own age, just four years before the outbreak of the Second World War. Similarly, in 1942 Jean Anouilh, who had written a *Eurydice* the previous year, produced *Antigone*. This play was initially received as something of a resistance manifesto at the time of the German occupation of France. "It is surely a sign of the times that French dramatists should be seeking in the great themes of Antiquity parallel situations and antecedents to present-day social, political, or simply human quandaries. In their re-reading of the Ancients, they have been impressed by the analogies between their problems and ours; they have discovered an unsuspected solidarity between them and us, and have thus become deeply aware of the fundamental unity of the human race despite the passing of time."14 When Anouilh later came to choose two of his subjects from the European Middle Ages, he treated them in the same spirit as he had

earlier treated Greek myths. He takes no account of any essential difference between "mythology" and history.

On the whole, it is possible to say that the twentieth-century plays on the Becket story use their history in this manner—to provide a new perspective on certain aspects of the present. In so doing, they implicitly assert the perennial sameness of human nature, and a solidarity between the present predicament and the remote subject. In terms of technique, such aims led writers to make deliberate use of anachronism by providing traditional figures with modern and extremely sophisticated attitudes and modes of thought; by a judicious use of slang and modern turns of speech in the dialogue, and by other such devices. The most obvious example, of course, lies in the speeches of self-justification made by Eliot's four Knights; or the chorus of the Four Tempters towards the close of the first part where they talk about pantomime cats and prizes given for school essays. Anouilh in Antigone makes the two sons of Oedipus, Polynices and Eteocles, typically twentieth-century, upper-class social parasites. They smoke cigarettes, drive fast cars, and gamble in casinos.

The return to the use of historical subjects in the twentieth century, was also connected with attempts to
revive religious drama; especially as seen in the institution of the annual festival of Arts at Canterbury. The first play to be produced there was Masefield's *The Coming of Christ*, in 1928. T. S. Eliot in one of his *Criterion* commentaries wrote of this play, "The poetry is pedestrian, machine made Shakespearean iambics; the imagery is full of Birmingham spirits and Sheffield shepherds. The theological orthodoxy is more than doubtful, the literary incompetence is more than certain. ...We venture to counsel our spiritual pastors, that they should see to it either that they employ artists who are definite in their theology or else are really good artists." 15

A few years later Eliot made good his challenge with a play of his own.

Apart from the obvious relevance of Biblical stories to religious drama, the Becket story proved to be even more obviously relevant to the purposes of the Canterbury Festival. Before the regular practice of producing new plays was instituted, older plays had been revived for use at the festival. Tennyson's *Becket* was presented in 1932 and 1933. In 1934 Laurence Binyon's *The Young King* was produced. This play, although not about Becket himself,

postulates the martyrdom as the chief cause of the estrangement between King Henry II and his eldest son, and treats the whole theme as a just retribution on the king's head. For the next year's Festival, Eliot wrote a new play *Murder in the Cathedral*. E. Martin Browne comments on the special attraction of the Becket story, "The commission required that the subject should relate to Canterbury, and there is no lack of interesting characters in her history. Thomas Becket, however, stands apart from all the rest. He is Canterbury's saint, and was the most popular saint of Western Europe throughout the Middle Ages. Such a devotion as he inspired does not happen without reason; and it leaves behind it, despite the historian's clinical analysis..., a kind of sure which does not fade away.”

(ii)

'The effects of history on form'

"Historical truth", says Lord Raglan, "is as a rule brutal, inconsequential, and apparently meaningless. It is, therefore, apt to be less interesting and far less

16 Explored by M. A. Lally, op. cit., pp.74-96. See Appendix.
aesthetically satisfying than dramatic truth. But the
great difference between them lies in the fact that whereas
historic truth is objective, dramatic truth is subjective,
that is to say, it is subject, not to conditions imposed by
external necessity, but to its own conventions. ¹⁸ This
is another version of the Aristotelian distinction between
the particularity of history and the universality of
poetry.

However, by the very act of deciding in favour of
an action from history, the author commits himself to
the advantages and limitations of his use of a story which
is already known, in greater or less degree, to his audience.
But it is important to bear in mind that the historical
dramatist of today will not be able to rely on the
foreknowledge of his audience to anything like the same
extent as the Greek dramatist relied on his, or the
dramatists of the medieval mystery plays relied on theirs.

In dealing with a well-known story instead of an
invented one, the dramatist has the advantage of being
able to achieve compactness and conciseness in his plot.
He can concentrate on those elements of the story which
are integral to his vision, and rely on the audience to
fill any gaps which call for additional information.

¹⁸ The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama
This also helps him cut down on expository material and any consequent irrelevance. Another advantage of using history is that it gives a touch of authenticity to the work. However little it may matter to the artistic integrity of the piece, the fact that the events dramatised did actually take place usually weighs advantageously with the audience. It satisfies a certain instinct for verisimilitude. It also lends a dimension of depth or universality to the work by implying connections between past and present. It provides what T. R. Henn calls "archetypal" fables—such as the deposition and death of a king—which, either because of familiarity or because of their correspondence with psychological patterns, need little or no reinforcement by way of "atmosphere".

On the other hand, the use of past events imposes definite limitations on the inventive freedom and flexibility of a writer. Aristotle's distinction between poetry and history has always been valid. The writer is free to manoeuvre, juxtapose, combine and telescope events to fit his vision. But a blatant falsification of fact is likely to irritate his audience and detract from the impact of his work. History, which lends authenticity, on the one hand, also makes for a certain rigidity of structure; and is likely to lead to an emphasis on
action and event rather than motive or character. Most important of all, a foreknowledge of the story on the part of the audience, introduces willy-nilly, an element of determinism into the author's vision. Most often, however, the writers recognise this fact and try to use it to advantage, instead of allowing it to hamper their vision.

Thus, Anouilh, through his Chorus in Antigone evolves a theory of tragedy around the concept of determinism and the foreknowledge of the audience. Implicitly, it also indicates the dramatist's use of alienation devices in keeping with his conception of the theatre as "play", a jeu d'esprit. "In a tragedy", says the Chorus, "nothing is in doubt and everyone's destiny is known. That makes for tranquillity. There is a sort of fellow-feeling among characters in a tragedy; he who kills is as innocent as he who gets killed. It's all a matter of what part you are playing. Tragedy is restful, and the reason is that hope, that foul, deceitful thing has no part in it..." At the very end the Chorus says, "it is over now. And they are all at peace. All those who were meant to die have died:
those who believed one thing, those who believed the contrary thing, and even those who believed nothing at all, yet were caught up in the web without knowing why..."19

Most of the versions of the Beckett story under consideration, have in one way or another underlined the fact that it has all happened; furthermore, that it has finished happening, i.e., what Eliot might call "the pastness of the past". Among the playwrights, Tennyson and Aubrey de Vere are the only ones who have produced straight chronicles. Although Tennyson has a Prologue that adumbrates all the themes and incidents of the story, it is not intended to serve as a device indicating retrospect. One of Eliot's main intentions is to emphasize the "timelessness" of his theme. Although the concept of Providence or Destiny runs through the play, an equal emphasis is laid on the importance of Thomas' choice, the act of will that renounces will and thereby, paradoxically, makes itself free.

Anouilh, on the other hand, provides his play with a framing scene, which serves as both prologue

and epilogue. It dramatises the penance of King Henry at the tomb of the martyr. From the stage directions between the first half of the frame-scene and the first main scene, we gather that the author intends the subsequent action to be dramatised as taking place in the king's mind: "C'est encore la cathédrale vide, et puis à un moment Becket tirera un rideau et ce sera la chambre du roi. Leur ton d'abord lointain comme celui d'un souvenir changera aussi et deviendra plus réaliste." During the rest of the play, however, Anouilh tends to forget all about the frame-scene till he reaches the end. The deterministic element, therefore, is not obtrusive or heavily emphasised as in Antigone.

This underlining of the pastness of the story, its historical nature, is also one of the effects achieved by Fry's use of William Marshal. Unlike Anouilh, who tends to forget the "souvenir" element in his play, Fry, every so often, keeps returning to

20 Anouilh, Becket ou l'honneur de Dieu, ed. W. D. Howarth (London: Harrap, 1962), p.45. "It is still the empty cathedral; after a moment Becket will draw back a curtain and it will be the king's room. Their tone, at first distant like a memory will also change and become more realistic" (Italics mine).
Marshal, who is used as narrator. In his note to the second edition of Curtmantle, Fry indicates minor textual changes. "I have begun both the Prologue and Act III with some words from Marshal, to establish him as the memory in which the action takes place." The main reason for this emphasis, of course, is to provide himself with freedom of manipulation. But indirectly the pastness of the event is brought before us at various points within the action itself.

C. F. Meyer's novelle belongs, technically, to a different genre, that of the prose narrative. However, the historical subject has led him also to provide an enclosing frame for his main story. He makes use of a fictitious minor character as narrator within the novelle. This figure, while impersonating the author to some extent, functions mainly as an "alienation" device. Meyer's narrator is Swiss like the author himself, a native of Schaffhausen. Although of noble birth, circumstances which he narrates at considerable


22 Meyer, comments W. E. Yuill, came to realise "the advantages of historical themes as a mask for his own views and feelings...But even the historical remoteness of the theme is not sufficient protection for the author: in many of his stories, Meyer strives to dissociate himself from his work through the technique of the narrative. The use of the "framework" is characteristic..." "Conrad Ferdinand Meyer", German Men of Letters, ed. Alex Natan (London: Oswald Wolff Ltd., 1961), pp.201-202.
length have obliged him to take up the craft of making crossbows. In this capacity he had been a member of King Henry II's household, and his most trusted servant during the later years of Becket's chancellorship, and the whole of the subsequent conflict between the King and the Archbishop. The present of Meyer's own third person narrative is the feast day of St. Thomas of Canterbury, 1191. The setting in which the author places his narrator enables him also to provide an illustration of the immediate and widespread cult of the martyr.

The narrator, John the Crossbowman, is on an annual Christmas visit to Zurich, and the day he chances to arrive is one of great flurry and bustle. This—he is later told by his one-man audience—is due to the fact that the Abbess of the Cathedral of Our Lady is holding a service in honour of the new English saint. The Bowman's interlocutor, Sir Burckhard, is a canon of the extremely orthodox monastery dedicated to the Saints, Felix and Regula, and inclined to be somewhat sceptical about the efficacy of a saint who must have been about his own age. At the same time, the reverend canon's curiosity is aroused by the new saint's unprecedented fame, and the chronicle which the Mother Abbess has been kind enough to lend him. So the old man now wants
a first-hand, eye-witness account from one who must have been himself an actor in the story.

This provides a prologue. The rest of the story is the first person account of John the Crossbowman. The book contains no chapter division. But where Meyer feels his reader needs a little breathing space, or when he wishes to offer implicit comments, we are brought back from the harrowing details of the main action to the picture of the old canon and the Crossbowman. They are having an after-dinner conversation in a cozy room, with the weather freezing outside — although, we are informed once in a while, the two men have been so engrossed in their conversation, that the fire has been allowed to die down.

The first person narrative also provides an epilogue within the frame of the after-dinner conversation, covering swiftly the period between the martyr's death and the narrator's present. The last couple of paragraphs complete the author's frame. The Crossbowman is adjured by the canon to spend the night at the monastery, "For did not the Saint that rules this day call you a wicked servant and a worker of iniquity, and might he not, unreconciled as he is, easily lay snare and ambush
for you as you go your dark way to the tavern? The canon has profoundly shaken. The contrast between his early, rather contemptuous, scepticism, and his last speech provides a note of ironic humour on which to end the book.

The use of a historical subject usually brings with it the dangers of an episodic plot which consists of a series of incidents strung together. Such a plot usually shows only the most superficial causal connections, historically the events took place in such an order. This kind of plot is Aristotle's bugbear. The universality which he sees as the distinguishing quality of poetry should provide enough justification for the literary artist in subduing chronological order to the exigencies of his vision.

Moody E. Prior comments on what distinguishes a shallow play from one that is rich and profound, even though both are based on the same story. "It is", he says, "in large part a matter of differences in the kinds of probabilities which are determinant in the action...If broadly enough considered, the principle of necessary and probable action will be found to define the formal basis of most good plays." When treating

24 The Language of Tragedy, p.5.
a subject from history, this roughly boils down to the difference between a simple, chronological approach which includes all the "important" incidents of the story; and an approach which selects and telescopes events. This latter may be faulty in its chronology, but it subdues and integrates its material to an underlying purpose. In the one case, the result is a dramatised chronicle lacking in artistic focus; in the other, a well-constructed play which works itself out towards a particular goal. This is, approximately, the difference between the works of Tennyson and de Vere on the one hand, and on the other, the three twentieth-century plays on the Becket theme.

In size, Meyer's book is something between the novel and the short story. It neither is nor is meant to be a chronicle of any kind. The interest, like Anouilh's, centres on the relationship between Henry and Becket. But of all the versions of the story, the Bowman's narrative contains the largest quantity of the legendary, of pure invention, and frequently even blatant falsification of well known facts.25 This last quality does tend to come

25 Meyer wrote in a letter to Felix Bovet, "Je me sers de la forme de la nouvelle historique purement et simplement pour y loger mes expériences et sentiments personnels, la préférant au 'zeitroman' parce qu'elle me masque mieux et qu'elle distance avant le lecteur. Ainsi sous une forme très objective et éminemment artistique, je suis au départ tout individuel et subjectif". ("I use the form of the historical nouvelle purely and simply as a receptacle for my personal experiences and sentiments, in preference to the 'zeitroman' because it provides a more effective mask for me and a greater distancing of the reader. Thus under a very objective and eminently artistic form, I am inwardly, entirely individual and subjective"). Quoted, Yuill, op.cit., p.202.
between the reader and the pages of the book.

On the other hand, Meyer is conscious of these departures, and punctuates the flow of the narrative at several points with the objections of the pedantic Sir Burckhard. Before the Bowman begins his narrative, we hear the Canon mention "a parchment in which the life and martyrdom of my contemporary were set forth and glorified", which the Mother Abbess of the nearby Cathedral has lent him, and which he has been reading. He wishes to hear the Bowman's version as being precisely what the chronicler's will not be. The Bowman launches forth on his tale, but when he comes to the legend of Becket's Saxon-Saracen origin, the old Canon, "voicing a growing incredulity" interrupts, "you ride the winged steed of phantasy no worse than your brown friend, the story-teller of Cordova. Presently you too will swear that you have seen it all yourself." Later, towards the end of the story, John runs together the events of two dates actually a year apart, into one day. The Canon again feels obliged to expostulate, "A whole year lies between them if the dates upon the margin of my chronicle are right!" The Bowman, who has been re-living all the harrowing incidents of the struggle, is justifiably irritated at this hair-splitting. "None of your

26 The Saint, p.20.
27 Ibid., pp.42-43.
inconsequential dates for me!" he growls, "...Once the last grain of sand has fallen in the glass, man issues forth out of the days' and hours' successions and stands as a finished and unequivocal reality before the judgement seat of God and man. Both are right and both are wrong, your chronicle with its letters writ on parchment and my memory with its characters graven on my heart."28

By the simple expedient of making Sir Burckhard an intelligent and curious, but also academic listener, Meyer shows himself aware of the discrepancy between the chronicler's and the artist's perspective on the same historical event. Both Burckhard and the Bowman are Meyer's creations. The author, therefore, contains within himself both points of view, though he leans towards the Bowman, as he shows by making him narrator. In the last speech quoted above, we see the author himself speaking. However, the main purpose of the old Canon's inopportune interruptions is to make the reader aware that the author does not expect us to swallow the Bowman's narrative as hard fact -- just in case we happen to share Sir Burckhard's mentality. But, he seems to be implying, there are more things in heaven and earth -- particularly in the hearts of men -- than are dreamt of in historians' philosophies.

28 Ibid., pp.168-69.
The movement of the novelle consists of large portions of flowing narration or description punctuated by short dramatic scenes. This is especially noticeable since it has no breaks for chapters; and has for narrator a rather garrulous and pious, but sympathetic minor figure who is given to analyzing everyone's characters, and guessing at their motives. "In Jenatsche and in Der Heilige, both of which were originally conceived as dramas, there is, under a variety of disguises, much more of myself, my true sorrows and passions, than in this poetry, which is hardly more than play, or at best the expression of a subordinate side of my nature", writes Meyer in a letter.29 One sees from the shape of the novelle why the author changed his mind about casting it as a drama. He seems to have a congenital incapacity to present a situation and let it speak for itself. The narrator continually interposes his own comments, judgements, and even actions in the most engrossing scenes. In the middle of the first confrontation between the King and the Archbishop, after the latter's consecration, we find the Archbishop returning the great seal to the king with his own hands. The narrator tells his listener, "Then my lord the king was amazed and most thoroughly affrighted. The great seal of state slipped from his hand and fell...

I approached and stooped down to pick up the costly instrument, the hilt of which was solid gold. As I examined it minutely, behold, it had a fracture, that ran through the centre of the precious stone and the arms of England."\(^{30}\) The symbol of the fractured seal is fairly obvious; and the price it pays in holding up the action seems rather high.

(iii)

'Aubrey de Vere and Tennyson'

Aubrey de Vere's dramatic poem *St. Thomas of Canterbury*,\(^ {31}\) written in 1876, provides a clear example of that hybrid form of nineteenth century 'tragedy' known as closet-drama. The author himself calls it a drama as well as a "philosophical poem".

The point of view from which Becket and his martyrdom are approached is an extremely simplified and conventional version of Eliot's religious attitude; but with regard to form the two works stand at opposite extremes.

*St. Thomas of Canterbury* covers only the period between Becket’s election to the Archbishopric and his

\(^{30}\) *The Saint*, p.153.

\(^{31}\) *St. Thomas of Canterbury* (London: King, 1876).
death, but it is by far the longest of the dramatic works. Like Tennyson's play, it follows the conventional division into five acts. But within this division there are in all, forty-four scenes, with a massive cast of thirty-three single, named characters, plus the usual crowd of attendants, courtiers, monks and others.

The poem -- for it is best treated as such -- aims at a very detailed representation of the stages in the career of Thomas as Archbishop. It begins with a scene at the entrance of Westminster Abbey, narrating the election and filling in the historical precedents on the main Church-State conflict; goes through his consecration -- concluding Act I; the Northampton sequence filling Act II; the exile filling Acts III and IV; and concludes with the return and martyrdom. The essentially undramatic nature of the dramatic-poem is underlined by the fact that the wearisome episodes of the exile -- which are either omitted or just touched upon by the other dramatists -- take up the central and largest portion of the work. The author, however, considers them necessary to his main purpose of tracing the development of true sanctity in the character of Backet. The poem is chock-full of narrative and descriptive passages. Several scenes represent minor characters discussing the themes,
describing the main antagonists, or just filling in huge chunks of information. Scenes that are essentially dramatic in themselves, are often narrated, and vice-versa.

The opening scene is a good instance of this tendency. While the election of Thomas is underway inside Westminster Abbey, we are presented with a scene at its entrance. Minor figures like Herbert of Bosham and John of Salisbury — the Archbishop's men; and the Earls of Leicester and Cornwall — the King's men, discuss the election, narrate details of past history, England's and Becket's, for the special benefit of the reader. Gilbert Foliot and John of Oxford walk across the scene for no other purpose than to animadvert against Becket and thus establish their hostility to him from the beginning; while two superfluous and anonymous "men-at-arms" voice the common people's whole-hearted support of Becket's cause. The 'Second Men-at-arms' illustrates the extreme banality and tediousness to which this narrative-descriptive tendency can descend in a literal prose catalogue of the people and things in the chancellor's train on his famous embassy to Paris.

In the Northampton sequence we get two or three discursive scenes explicating the main aims of each
an antagonist. The Westminster-Clarendon sequences, as well as a large part of the Northampton council, are presented in retrospect through long narrative speeches put in Becket's mouth to justify his own stand. This tendency is nowhere more striking than in Alexander Llewellyn's commonplace statements on the final outburst from the king which was the cause of Becket's murder. All the other writers dramatise this extremely tense moment. The narrative habit even makes the climactic scene of the martyrdom ineffectual. The first half of this scene -- not very long in any case -- is devoted to a conversation between 'A Monk' and John of Salisbury. Why the events preceding the murder have to be narrated to John of all people, we never know. Even in this narrative, the first interchange between the Knights and the primate is omitted. During the enactment of the actual murder Thomas behaves with exemplary patience. There is no suppressed violence in his reply to the knights, no taunting of Fitzurse, no human reaction at all save the injunction not to harm his sheep. The handling of this scene is also illustrative of the overall attempt to present a white-washed version of Thomas.

In the course of the entire play, the two antagonists
never meet, except in the freteval scene. This is also 
a manifestation of the undramatic nature of the work. The 
presentation of the conflict gives the impression of a 
battle in which the actual fighting is conducted by junior 
officers while the generals stand by and watch from a 
distance. The element of a "stand up fight between will 
and will" one of the most attractive points of the 
historical episode is underplayed.

As with the plays of Tennyson and Binyon, however, 
it is the language of the play, together with the narrative 
tendency, which muffles and diffuses whatever impact the 
story might have had. The language is, almost throughout, 
embarrassingly archaic. Many pedestrian speeches are 
devoted to the sole purpose of imparting historical 
information. The tendency all through the work is to 
explicate the main attitudes and points of view of the 
writer in so many words, rather than to offer representations 
carrying inherent conviction. We hear from the nun Didoes 
that she has heard Becket

...praise the king's high heart,
His wit at years when others chase their follies;
His prescient thought; his knowledge won from all,
...persistence iron-nerved,
Pliant at need, but with resilience still
Back-springing to a purpose of that height
Which makes ambition virtue.32

What we actually see of him, however, are only his duplicity and anti-clerical Caesarism. Similarly, both protagonists are postulated, in statement, as developing in two opposite directions. In actual fact, however, they remain static figures. Becket seems to us as close to perfection in the opening scene as at his death; Henry maintains a consistent anti-clericalism, and his role just peters out. The conversations in the first scene illustrate the complete ineffectiveness of an archaic diction weighted down with historical information: "Norman and Saxon", says Leicester, "daily blend in England":

The king is neither, Sir, he's Angevine:
His faithfulest subjects we; not less we know him
Of alien race — an alien emperor
Who counts our England 'mid his subject realms,
And seldom sees her face. Remember, Cornwall,
That, when that earlier Henry swore, new-crowned,
To grant this land once more the laws of Alfred,
Not Saxon churl alone desired the boon,
But Norman knight no less. Forget not this:
Matilda — how unlike her empress daughter! —
Was saint with, either race, and won her lord
To hold his parliaments.33

However important such a speech is thematically, its phrasing is banal and ludicrous. This general tendency is only relieved on occasion by the simple dignity of some of Becket's speeches on religion and the supremacy of the

33 Ibid., p.5.
Church, or an occasional attractive exchange between
John of Salisbury and Herbert of Bosham.

More even than Tennyson's play, *St. Thomas of
Canterbury* strikes us as distinctly mediocre and irrelevant
to present concerns. The entire stress of the work is
on a period of history per se; on Thomas' place in his
times -- as one of the "great line of lion-hearted
prelates who so long made Canterbury renowned throughout
the world..."34 -- and on his role in the history of
his country. History is seen simply as a record of past
events. There is little or no indication that the story
has any contemporary relevance for the author.

Tennyson's *Becket* closely follows the chronicle
mode of presentation. Although the play was begun in 1679,
it was published only in 1864. It was intended to complete
a trilogy of chronicle plays. The earlier two were *Queen
Mary* on the reign of Mary Tudor, and *Harold* on the time
just preceding the Norman Conquest. "This trilogy of
plays", he notes, "pours the making of England",35
especially in its struggle with the Roman Church. His
son, Hallam, also adds, "he bestowed infinite trouble on
his dramas, choosing these three great periods of *Harold,
Becket*, and *Mary*, so as to complete the line of Shakespeare's

34 Ibid., p.xl.
35 Hallam Tennyson, *Tennyson: A Memoir* (London: Macmillan,
1897), II, 173.
English chronicle-plays, which end with the Reformation."36

Tennyson, had, through the major part of his career, been essentially a lyric poet, but had always been interested in the dramatic form. When, in late middle age, he finally turned to the writing of drama, the trend had already swung from poetical-tragic plays to the realistic social drama which was to dominate the English stage for several decades. Tennyson himself lacked any kind of practical training for the theatre. When he finally embarked on his historical plays, therefore, he was turning his back on the new and more vital form of drama, by electing, like his fellow poets, to follow the Shakespearean model. In the second place, although he hoped that his plays might eventually achieve theatrical success, he was conscious that in their original form they were not cut out to meet practical theatrical demands. In his dedication of Becket to the Earl of Selborne, he mentions that the play is "not intended in its present form to meet the exigencies of our modern theatre..."37 "His dramas", says his son, "were written with the intention that the actors should edit them for the stage, keeping them at the high poetic level;"38 in various contemporary critical articles,

36 Ibid., p.174.
38 Hallam Tennyson, op.cit., p.175.
the plays are usually referred to as "the poems". J. H. Robertson in his early article on Becket in February 1885 in the periodical Our Corner repeatedly refers to it as "the book". Tennyson's primary intention, therefore, seems to have been to appeal to a reading public rather than a playhouse audience, in the manner of the writers of close-drama.

His intention of writing his history plays to complete Shakespeare's chronicle cycle, indicates his conscious acceptance of Shakespeare's dramatic mode — i.e. blank verse, five-act structure and other Shakespearean "conventions" — which had already had such a deadening effect on the dramatic work of his fellow poets.

An extremely important influence on Tennyson's plays was the great actor-manager of the Lyceum theatre, Sir Henry Irving. "Irving", says Sir Charles Tennyson, "had become the acknowledged leader of the English stage, and the Lyceum the Mecca of playgoers." Irving specialised in "character" roles. A few years before Tennyson began his attempts at drama, Irving had staged W. G. Wills's Charles the First and Lord Lytton's Richelieu. His revival of Hamlet in 1874 aroused a storm of excitement among London play-goers. After severe

cutting, Tennyson's *Queen Mary* was actually produced, and Irving created the part of Philip of Spain. In writing the play on *Becket*, says Sir Charles Tennyson, "I have no doubt that he had it in mind to provide a really fine and suitable part for Irving."\(^4\)\(^0\) For a long while, however, Irving, inspite of his genuine affection for the poet, could not see his way to producing *Becket*. In his opinion, it was not the kind of thing the audiences then wanted. However, a year after Tennyson's death, with several cuts in the original script, Irving did produce the play at the Lyceum with himself as Becket. It turned out to be one of the most resounding successes of his career.

G. Wilson Knight devotes a chapter of his book *The Golden Labyrinth*\(^4\)\(^1\) to Victorian drama. Instead of lumping both Romantics and Victorians together as nineteenth century poet-dramatists, he finds certain features which distinguish the one from the other. The chief of these is a shift from internal to external excitaments; from the mental conflicts and agonies of the Gothic-Satanic hero to social and public concerns. One of the most pressing of these public concerns was the Church-State

\(^4\)\(^0\) ibid., p.436.

conflict. Tennyson's historical trilogy, therefore, was in the tradition of a long line of Victorian State dramas, which included among others, a play on Pope Gregory VII — one of the chief figures in the medieval Empire-Papacy contest.

As his own comments and those of his contemporaries show, Tennyson thought of his plays as first history and then drama or anything else. This was partially, perhaps, a result of directing his initial appeal at a reading public instead of a theatre audience. Partly, of course, it was a tendency of the age itself. With the work of historians like Froude, Carlyle and J. R. Green, a new spirit of realism and accuracy had been infused into the field of history. Tennyson, having the social contacts he had, could not fail to be influenced by the work of his friends. Hallam Tennyson reports his father as saying that "to be a first rate historical playwright means much more work than formerly, seeing that 'exact history' has taken the place of the chance chronicle, and that a dramatist is expected to be cognisant of all the newest phases of contemporary drama."42 A little later he lists the vast quantity of historical reading that went into the making of Queen Mary.

42 H. Tennyson, op. cit., p.175.
This over-emphasis on "history" tends to have an adverse effect on drama as art. We see from Tennyson's own practice that it leads to a stress on event as such, at the expense of character or interpersonal relations or theme. It leads to an episodic plot which is held together only by chronological order. Critics who find Queen Mary the most vivid of the historical plays, have repeatedly attributed its lack of unity and coherence to the playwright's attempt to cram all the events of the reign into the play. Although the figure of the Queen is well-drawn, the interest that might otherwise have been centred on her person, is diffused in a welter of events. A similar charge can be levelled at Becket, where the introduction of the sub-plot further detracts from concentration on the protagonist.

There is a much more obvious blemish, also due to this passion for an "exact" representation of history. The playwright finds himself compelled to impart information to his readers or spectators, to enable them to view the dramatised events with a sufficient background in mind. As a result, we are faced with absurdities like the scene with John of Oxford at Northampton.
The third scene of Act I which is set in the hall at Northampton Castle, is the central scene of the play, and by far the longest. It telescopes the councils of Clarendon and Northampton into one, but is loaded with clumsily imparted information about the Church-State controversy, the antecedents of Stephen's reign, and Henry's administrative aims. It opens with an alteration between Becket and Roger of York on the rivalry between the two archbishoprics. This has no further bearing on the play except to establish Roger as Becket's enemy, and provide a superficial reason for Roger's attempts in the last act to instigate the king against Becket. Then follows a fairly long sequence in which John of Oxford reads four of the Constitutions of Clarendon. Becket answers each one, religiously following the documented accounts:

John of Oxford  (reads) 'All causes of advowsons and presentations, whether between laymen or clerics, shall be tried in the King's court.'

Becket  But that I cannot sign; for that would drag The cleric before the civil judgement seat And on a matter wholly spiritual. 43

So it carries on for about a page and a half; the action

43 Works, pp. 705-6.
stands still and the reader yawns. The words of both speakers are more for the benefit of the reader than for each other; so the sequence cannot even be called a dialogue. The information we are being given, furthermore, is too scrupulous in detail and not really essential to our comprehension of the play. And, finally, the fact that it is just so much information, and not an expression of any personal intercourse, drains it of all emotional content. As a result the language becomes undistinguished, and the verse rhythms become even more monotonous and mechanical than usual. A little later, we have the pope's almoner, a character who only appears on the scene to give information and an illusion of historical accuracy. He attempts to persuade Becket to submit to the king.

My Lord, thine ear! I have the ear of the Pope.
As thou hast honour for the Pope our master,
Have pity on him, sorely prest upon
By the fierce Emperor and his Antipope.
Thou knowest he was forced to fly to France;
He pray'd me to pray thee to pacify
Thy King; for if thou go against thy King,
Then must he likewise go against thy King,
And then thy king might join the Antipope,
And that would shake the Papacy as it stands. 44

The speech is absurd in its banality.

44 Ibid., pp.706-7.
The actual body of the play, as with Aubrey de Vere's, covers the period between Becket's consecration and his murder. This is, in itself, an unfortunate choice since the largest portion of this period consists of the time which Becket spent in exile in France. Since the exile is the least dramatic part of the story, this was, perhaps, one reason for Tennyson's copious use of a subplot in this play.

However, Tennyson provides his play with a Prologue, which is intended to point to all the succeeding events and developments. In the process, it provides a common point of departure for both, the main action and the subplot.

The Prologue opens with the hackneyed symbolism of a game of chess between Henry and Becket, which shows Henry contemplating the state of ecclesiastical affairs in his realm. Becket, playing with greater concentration, wins the gems: "...my bishop", he says, "Hath brought your king to a standstill."45 Henry, as a further earnest of what we are to expect, kicks over the chess-board. The conversation then proceeds to Rosamund, and Henry confides her and the chart of her bower to his

friend's care. Then the scene moves back to the main conflict of Church and State, but this time to the state of affairs in Europe, and the possible effects on England. We learn about the proposed coronation of the Young King; Henry's hopes of making Becket Archbishop in the event of Theobald's death, and Becket's protests. In the middle of this discussion, the "villains" of the piece, Eleanor and Reginald Fitzurse are introduced; and we are given a sample of Eleanor's troubadour accomplishments. Herbert of Bosham brings news of the old Archbishop's death; Henry, Becket and Herbert make their exits with nothing really settled, and Eleanor and Fitzurse proceed to discuss their nefarious plans against Rosamund, and incidentally Becket, in full view of the audience.

The Prologue is a fairly long scene, which achieves its purpose of adumbrating the course of the main action, but is both obvious and tedious. It is the only scene which attempts to present the friendship between the King and Becket while the latter was still Chancellor. But the scope of the Prologue does not permit a very convincing dramatization of this friendship. Henry is too wrapped up in Rosamund and the doings of the clergy; and Thomas sounds more like a sober preacher than the magnificent Chancellor he is supposed to be.
The Prologue is an example of a type of "exposition" which puts the audience in possession of the necessary facts but does very little else.

The play itself follows the five-act Elizabethan convention with each act divided into a number of scenes. The first act consists of four scenes, the first set in Becket's house soon after his consecration; the second in a street outside Northampton castle — this scene furnishes a pretext for Eleanor's enmity against Becket. The third is the council of Northampton itself, the central scene of the play. And the fourth scene presents a number of beggars eating at Becket's table on the night of his flight from Northampton.

The second act consists of two scenes: one between Henry and Rosamund in the bower, and the other showing the meeting at Montmirail.

The third act contains three scenes. The first is again between Henry and Rosamund in the bower; the second between Eleanor and Fitzurse outside the bower. The third dramatises the reconciliation at Fréteval.

Act IV concentrates entirely on the bower. The first scene is set on its outskirts between Eleanor and little Geoffrey. The second with Eleanor, Rosamund and Fitzurse
enacts the legend of the jealous queen offering the beautiful paramour a choice between the dagger and the cup of poison.

The fifth act has three scenes. The first shows Henry in Normandy being incited to his final burst of maniacal fury. The second is mainly a discussion between John of Salisbury and Thomas, interrupted first by Rosamund and then by the entrance and accusations of the knights. The last is a presentation of the martyrdom.

The shape of the play is entirely panoramic and episodic. The insertion of the sub-plot scenes is arbitrary and distracting. The Rosamund story diffuses the impact of the main conflict, while adding nothing substantial to the point of the play — if we can find one. As J. M. Robertson says, "It has neither unity nor continuity, being but a series of episodes which might as well be called "Fair Rosamund" as "Becket"; and which can only be arranged into acts by arbitrary division." Each scene is a self-contained whole; but it is hard to find any more intrinsic connection between one and another than between say, scenes two and three of act one. The second scene of Act I is centred around Eleanor attempting to bribe Becket for the map of the bower. When she fails, she vindictively

46 John M. Robertson, "Mr. Tennyson's 'Becket'", Our Corner (February 1885), p.94.
orders the four Knights and De Broc to "Set all on fire against him!" at the council. Part of the following council scene is devoted to dramatising the stirring up of the King and the lords.

Some of the individual scenes do have strong portions. The last section of Act I, scene iii, which dramatises the last day of the council of Northampton, is a good instance. Becket enters carrying his cross; he confronts the bishops and barons; and finally makes a dignified departure. The language too, particularly in Becket's speech to Leicester, acquires strength, arising from a deep sincerity. The conclusion of this long speech is simple in its use of words but carries emotional conviction:

I charge thee upon pain of mine anathema,
That thou obey not me but God in me,
Rather than Henry. I refuse to stand
By the King's censure, make my cry to the Pope,
By whom I will be judged; refer myself,
The King, these customs, all the Church to him,
And under this authority -- I depart.48

As with the act-division, the commonly accepted nineteenth-century notion of Shakespearean conventions also makes itself felt in other features of Becket. Tennyson

47 Works, p.704.
48 Ibid., p.712.
introduces a wide variety of characters ranging from King and Archbishop to the dregs of humanity, tattered beggars covered with boils and other loathsome diseases. In this connection the fourth scene of the first act should be noted. It is possibly the worst excrescence on the play. It opens with Becket's retainers taking leave of their master. This is followed by a deliberate attempt at tear-jerking. A poor man enters carrying a little dog with all its paws mangled and bleeding, which he wants the Archbishop to dress. The intention, probably, was to point to the cruelty of the forest laws, and to evoke the audience's sympathy for Becket by showing him as a tender-hearted animal lover. But the sentiment is totally "laid on" and spacious. The incident has no structural or thematic point. The rest of the scene is devoted to feeding the beggars, who are shown stalling the Four Knights while the Archbishop escapes. The whole scene is done in a pseudo country-dialect. There are copious references to the beggars' diseases which serve no purpose and evoke an almost physical disgust. This scene is also intended to provide "comic relief" after the tension of the Northampton scene but it is in the worst possible taste.

Another attempt at being Shakespearean is the
purposeless jugglery with the crucifix, which Eleanor had given Henry in the Prologue. Henry, most forgetfully, gives it to Rosamund during the first bower scene. We are led to expect later developments somewhat along the lines of Desdemona's handkerchief, which perhaps provided Tennyson with a model. Instead the whole thing fizzles out like a damp squib. Eleanor merely takes back her cross in the poison-and-dagger scene, and tries to intimidate Henry with it in the last act.

In the manner of Shakespeare, again, Tennyson is impelled to introduce songs which are, fortunately, confined to the sub-plot. The first bower-scene opens with a duet on love sung off-stage; Act III, scene ii closes with a brief eight-line lyric, meant to underline Rosamund's depressed mood. A little earlier, in the same scene we have the garrulous maid Margery. With conscious "cuteness" she emphasises in song the secrecy of the idyll:

Babble in bower
Under the rose!
Bee mustn't buzz,
Whoop — but he knows.

Kiss me, little one,
Nobody near,
Grasshopper, grasshopper,
Whoop — you can hear.
Kiss in the bower,
Tit on the tree!
Bird mustn't tell,
Whoop -- he can see.

This is a fair specimen of Tennyson's undistinguished lyricism in this play. Shakespeare uses music and song with a specific thematic or structural purpose -- as with Desdemona's willow-song, or Fidèle's dirge, or the beautiful "Hark! hark! the lark..." These songs are also superb lyrics in themselves. The songs in Becket, however, as J. M. Robertson remarks, "might be put in any drama the poet has written as fitly as here."

For this play, the most harmful formal device imported from Shakespearean conventions is the subplot. Since the main action was to be concerned with public and political issues, Tennyson, in his grandson's words, "attempted to give the play a more human interest by introducing a sympathetic love-story and a story of woman's jealousy". Tennyson had been greatly taken

49 *Works*, p.725.

50 Robertson, op.cit., p.94.

51 *Alfred Tennyson*, p.433. The words are used about the earlier play, *Harold*. 
with the Rosamund story from the very beginning of his career. As early as the 1632 volume, Fair Rosamund appears in *A Dream of Fair Women*. The poet finds her lamenting:

> Those dragon eyes of anger'd Eleanor
> Do hunt me night and day.52

In the second volume of his memoir, Hallam Tennyson quotes a short unpublished poem titled *Rosamund's Bower*, which he says his father had written before 1642.53 In addition to its personal attraction for the poet, the story was also traditionally well-known, and usually accepted as fact. William Archer may have been voicing a general expectation of his age when he wrote, "where legend (historic or otherwise) associates a particular character with a particular scene that is by any means presentable on stage, that scene becomes obligatory in a drama of which he is the leading figure."

> Several reasons in themselves excellent, therefore, must have combined to dictate Tennyson's sub-plot in *Becket*. Perhaps the author also wished to present Henry in some tender, domestic moments — though they may seem strangely uncharacteristic of the historical monarch.54

52 *Works*, p.61.
The story centres around Henry's romantic passion for Rosamund de Clifford. Legend claims that the king placed her, for safe keeping, in the maze of a bower somewhere near Woodstock, to protect her against the jealousy of his "wicked" queen, Eleanor. Eleanor, however, somehow gained access to the bower and, legend reports, offered Rosamund the harrowing choice between death by dagger or poison. It is this sequence of incidents which Tennyson's sub-plot dramatises, with a few twists of his own which are characteristically Victorian. It partakes of the black and white scheme of Victorian melodrama.

The dissimilarity in tone and level between the two strands of action is immediately obvious. However, the playwright makes extremely strenuous efforts to integrate them. The Prologue offers a common point of departure for both plots. The very first scene shows Becket sheltering Rosamund from the pursuit of Fitzurse and his friends. The second shows Eleanor trying to make Becket reveal the secret of the bower. In the middle acts — since Becket is supposed to be in France and Rosamund in England — the two strands, perforce, fall apart. Henry shuttles across the Channel a couple of times, to connect the two. In order to pull the two actions together again, Tennyson is driven
to another ridiculous expedient. At the end of the fourth act, Becket suddenly materialises out of nowhere, so to speak, to save Rosamund’s life; and provides Eleanor with a handle for causing his own murder. G. Wilson Knight calls the integration of the two plots "perfect" at the play’s conclusion. What we actually have is a valiant effort at such an integration which has the opposite effect of what the artist intended.

The language of the play is, on the whole, undistinguished. Tennyson uses the blank verse handed down from the Elizabethans, and follows the convention of making the lower class characters speak prose. There are times, however, when except for the lineation of the speeches on a page, there is very little to distinguish between verse and prose. But there are points in the play where the language rises to a somewhat stagy rhetoric, as in the long speeches of Henry and Becket in the Northampton scene. Some of Backet’s speeches in the concluding scenes are grave and dignified and add to his stature. His reply to Fitzurse is a good instance:

Reginald, all men know I loved the Prince.
His father gave him to my care, and I
Became his second father: ...
Rather than dim the splendour of his crown
I fain would treble and quadruple it
With revenues, realms and golden provinces
So that were done in equity.55

A perplexing problem which arises in the writing of historical drama, is to determine how closely the language of the dramatis personae should follow the speech habits of a given historical period. In a letter to Tennyson about Queen Mary, Edward Fitzgerald wrote, "I don't quite understand why you have so much relinquished thee and thou with their relative verbs for 'you' etc. I know that we have had more than enough of 'Thee' and 'Thou' in modern Plays and Poems; but it should surely rule the common talk of Mary's time..."56 This seems to have been a general opinion of the age, and the spirit in which Tennyson wrote the dialogue of his plays. Here, too, the poet-dramatists were following what they thought was the Shakespearean mode. They did not realise that since they were writing in a different age for a different audience, attempts at Elizabethanising could only lead to embarrassing archaisms like Roger of York's "The King's 'God's eyes!'"

55 Works, p.743.
56 Quoted, Hallam Tennyson, p.183.
come now so thick and fast, we fear that he may relieve thee of thine own"; or the habit of prefacing several of the exits with "away". The silliest of these is Henry's "Away — with me!" at the Northampton council. But there are occasional felicities of expression, like Fitz's description of Becket as "a beggar on horseback, with the retinue of three kings behind him, out-royalling royalty".

On the whole it seems as if the historical subject of the play has done more harm than good in matters of form. As in Queen Mary this is largely the result of the copiousness of the factual material available. Hallam Tennyson quotes a complimentary letter to his father about Becket, in which the writer affirms, "Truth in history is naturally truth in poetry". All three history plays show that they were constructed on some such assumption. That is precisely where they fail as works of art.

(iv)

'Christopher Fry and Curtmantle'

The twentieth-century reaction against realistic
drama in England, closely associated the name of Christopher Fry with that of T. S. Eliot, as a practitioner of poetic drama. However, unlike Eliot who had already won wide acclaim as a poet before attempting his work for the theatre, Fry was always and entirely a man of the theatre. "Unlike most poetic dramatists", says Derek Stanford, "Fry is firstly a man of the theatre. His training ground has been the stage rather than the library or the study; and it is this first-hand experience of the medium he writes for that helps to give him his immediacy of expression. ...between this poet and the theatre there was none of that apologetic patronising aloofness with which the literary author so often approaches the stage."59 The primary appeal of the nineteenth-century poet-dramatists had been to the reader. One of its main consequences was that it enabled the author to indulge his "poetical" side in long, involved soliloquies, disquisitions and lofty utterances on elevated topics, instead of aiming at a concentrated dramatic structure, in which the speeches would forward action and underline theme.

Although Fry has usually been associated with Eliot as a poetic-dramatist, he showed very little of

Eliot's concern over renovating verse forms. He generally uses a kind of loose blank verse. His chief contribution was his vital, witty language. Unlike the nineteenth-century dramatists, his idiom is not hybrid—Elizabethan or loaded with supposedly Shakespearean archaisms. However, most of his plays draw upon events from past ages for their plots.

But it was only with Curtmantle that the problem of treating history in the theatre came to the fore. The religious festival plays are based either on remote history or legend or Biblical myth, and do not have a mountain of documentary evidence about their protagonists to contend with. The 'Foreword' to Curtmantle and sundry other articles and interviews show that it was a problem which excited a good deal of concern and provoked a lot of thought in the dramatist. His main questions with regard to the dramatising of history are two: firstly, on what portions of history can a dramatist concentrate, that the historian cannot deal with better; secondly, what should be the writer's relative attitude to factual fidelity on the one hand, and on the other, to the fact that his primary purpose is to shape a viable theatrical experience.
The 'Foreword' to Curtmantle states,

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.

To try to recreate what has taken place in this world (or, indeed, to write about life at all) is to be faced by the task of putting a shape on almost limitless complexity. The necessity for shaping — for 'making a play of it' — is inherent in us, because pattern and balance are pervading facts of the universe.60

Fry then goes on to add that in the process of shaping, one is always tempted to oversimplify, and that is a falsification of life. Basically, the problem is one of subduing the raw material of history to a vision, without losing sight of the fact that every situation has several aspects to it.

In a very recent article, Fry points out how the dramatist may complement the historian: "By bringing into close proximity what happened in a wide space of time, the theatre can take the God's-eye view, often ironic, but redemptive in its perception of form within apparent

60 Fry, Plays, pp. 173-74.
In Curtmantle this perception is also paralleled thematically. At the end we are simultaneously given two pictures. The one, momentarily the more overwhelming, is that of the flaming city of Le Mans, the confusion among the populace, the "conquered king" returned to his origins — seemingly, of chaos come again out of the order he spent his life creating. The other picture shows the illegitimate son Roger, the Chancellor, attempting to comfort his father with a "God's-eye view" of the matter. Henry, he says, has succeeded in his most cherished dream of giving England a strong scaffolding of law "to last her longer than her cliffs". The results of this achievement, however, may be seen only in the future. The King's contemporaries saw the chaos and the tragedy; later ages are able to see it within the perspective of his most permanent achievement.

In the same article, Fry reiterates his belief in "keeping faith with the past", which, he says, "is more important than the dividends to be got from unjustified flashes of 'good theatre'. They are small change compared with the realities of the human drama sub specie aeternitatis." Reading between the lines it is possible

62 Ibid.
to see in such a statement, a disapproving glance at Anouilh's cavalier disregard of "the realities of the human drama", in his treatment of the same stretch of history.63

Curtmantle covers almost the whole of Henry's reign in England from about 1158 to 1189. The period is far longer than that covered by the other four plays. This is because one of Fry's most important purposes was "a progression towards a portrait of Henry".64 The other dramatists all conclude with the murder of Becket; so do the two novelists. Shelley Mydans, whose aim — somewhat comparable to Fry's — is an exploration of Thomas the man, takes in everything from Becket's birth to his death. It is no part of Fry's purpose, however, to dramatise Henry's childhood and upbringing. But we are always aware of them as an integral part of the protagonist. The concern with origins and beginnings is an important aspect of the play. "It is the Muse of Biography", remarks Stanford, "seeking to uncover the essence of the King..."65 But the Muse of Biography, in keeping with the requirements of the dramatic form, has been rigidly selective, and compressed the matter of thirty-five years into the space of a couple of hours.

63 A similar inference has been drawn from the quotation in the 'Foreword' by Sr. M. A. Lally, in her thesis, op.cit. pp.103-104.
64 Fry, Plays, p.174. 65 Stanford, p.44.
Although Fry claims in the 'foreword' that he was not attempting to write a chronicle play, that is, in fact, what he has written. The construction is loose and episodic, and the progression is linear, although it closes into a circle at the conclusion. The date headings of the acts are an indication of a chronological approach. However, this chronicle is basically different from the Tennysonian. Tennyson picked up the dramatisable events in his stretch of history and strung them into a series of scenes held together by nothing more profound than chronology. Fry's selection, on the other hand, is governed by his themes. Chronology is shaped to the pattern of one tragic life.

Sr. Mary Aquin Lally criticises this approach severely on the Aristotelian grounds of the universality of poetry as opposed to the particularity of history. She sees Fry's respectful attitude to the facts of history as a "Procrustean bed" which has amputated his imagination. However, the "Procrustean bed" might just as well have provided a challenge to self-discipline. "In many of his earlier plays", says Gerald Parker, "Fry has not always been able to avoid an indiscriminate handling of plot and structure. ...we are within reason in suggesting

66 A Comparative Study of Five Plays on the Becket Story... pp.100-108.
that the writing of a history play was, to Fry, a severe test of discipline.67 Parker, however, concludes that Fry did not quite succeed in disciplining himself, since the play remains a loosely constructed series of episodes. But it is held together as a whole by its over-riding themes.

Sr. M. A. Lally further remarks that Fry's use of the memory as a focal point of the play's structure, should have had an effect comparable to Miller's Death of a Salesman in its fluidity of time sequence. This is substantially just. Stanford makes the same point when he says that Henry's career is presented through the memory of William Marshal "with no Joycean trimmings." In a foot-note he adds, "The inner monologue and flow of consciousness have no part in shaping this play."68 The main difference between the two dramatists' approaches to a similar technique is that Miller focuses his play in the consciousness of the protagonist, Willy Loman, himself. Fry's "memory", on the other hand is a minor character and a choric figure, who has lived on for several years after the death of the protagonist, and is able to give us a "God's-eye view" as well as a fellow-actor's view of the events. Fry, in his use of the memory

68 Stanford, p.43.
sequence wants, in a manner of speaking, to eat his cake and have it too. His words in the 'Foreword' imply that his aim was to steer a middle course between a wholesale expressionism of Miller's type, and the plain factual chronicle of Tennyson: "...the deviations from historical accuracy are on the whole no greater than might occur in a man's memory. The episodes are telescoped, but nothing in the play is entirely invented." There speaks the conscientious artist but also the man with a healthy respect for the past. Viewed in this light, the device of Marshal's memory succeeds quite well.

Apart from providing scope for telescoping and necessary deviation from fact, Marshal the narrator provides the author with an almost, but not quite neutral character, a chorus of sorts. It also provides him with a device for establishing a smooth flowing transition between dramatised scenes with short pieces of narration, description or plain voicing of opinions. As a corollary, these transitions also indicate changes of scene.

One of the reasons Sr. M. A. Lally adduces for the failure of the memory-sequence technique, is that Marshal does not appear at all in the opening Prologue. In his

69 Plays, p.174.
70 Fry's use of Marshal may be compared to Meyer's use of his Bowman. Both narrator figures function as "alienation" devices to provide aesthetic distance, and a detached perspective on the historical episode as a completed action.
note to the 1965 edition of Curtimentia, Fry indicates that he has remedied this error. The Prologue now opens with Marshal's words, "Memory is not so harsh as experience...", which may also be seen as an implicit reference to the difference between fact and art; something like Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquility".

Besides the panoramic sweep of the action, the use of the Prologue is another point of comparison between Fry's and Tennyson's plays. Fry's Prologue is based on the description given by Peter of Blois, of Henry's energetic journeyings up and down the land early in his reign. It is centred entirely on five characters who belong to the train of Henry's camp-followers; a barber and his wife, a huckster, a juggler, and a prostitute Blae. Into this group irrupts a seeker-after-justice, Richard Anesty.

This Prologue serves to illustrate a sentence from Marshal's opening speech: "Order was being born out of the sweat of those days and nights: a time of pugnacious reality,..." Like Tennyson's Prologue, Fry's immediately touches on the main themes: the law and order being born out of chaos, and the figure of Henry. The setting is a dark wet night on the edge of a marsh, where the King

71 Plays, p.179.
72 Quoted, Ch.1.
73 Plays, p.179.
has ordered the camp to be made. The stage is filled with sound and bustle; the Huckster beats a drum while the Barber and his wife carry on a conversation at the tops of their voices. The Juggler enters with a wounded arm. He gives an explosive and highly coloured description of the brawl over a pig-sty, while the Huckster belligerently grumbles at the discomforts attendant on following the King around the country. The Barber more philosophically admonishes him: "You can tell yourself it's a great benefit to the Kingdom. That's the outcome of it. Law and order is the outcome. Haven't you got a memory for the smoke and ruin this land was? Mad, and murderous, and lawless, bleeding away like raw meat?" The Huckster is unconvinced. The Juggler spots a light in the distance coming closer. It turns out to be Anesty who has been trailing the King up and down the land. Almost his first words are, "Have I caught up with the King?" The two main themes tie up. After a brief exchange with the newcomer, the camp prepares to settle down for the night. Just as one series of sounds dies out, another starts up; the blowing of a horn to rouse everyone and get them on the move, in keeping with the king's chaotic habits. The scene ends with poor Anesty shouting, "Where is the King?"

74 Ibid., p.181.
75 Ibid., p.186.
The only purpose of Tennyson's Prologue is to state his themes and chalk out the later course of the events. This it succeeds in doing at the risk of a certain tedium, by shuffling his main characters on and off the stage for no reason except that the dramatist did or did not need them. Fry's Prologue, on the other hand, touches on his themes, whets our interest in the protagonist by keeping him off the stage and sending others in search of him. It provides us with varying reactions among the common people to the birth of law and order, and the manner in which it is being born. Above all, the scene is dramatic, with vivid colloquial dialogue striking a note of comedy and good natured bonhomie which carries over into the early portions of Act I.

It also provides an enclosing structure to the play, not only as Fry himself has pointed out, in the use of the common people, but also because it was on this night that Roger was conceived -- the human equivalent of the order that is being born out of chaos. At the conclusion, Roger the illegitimate one, conceived in a thoughtless moment, is the only one of Henry's children who stands by him. As Chancellor, it is indicated, he is ready to carry on his father's work of strengthening the law.

76 This has been pointed out by John Whiting, "Time for Tragedy", London Magazine, NSI (December 1961). For detailed comment on Roger, see Ch. IV, sec. iii.
The main body of the play consists of three acts, which are only implicitly divided into scenes. On the whole, the dramatist takes care to run them into one another, in keeping with the memory sequence technique. Each of the Acts, therefore, is provided with a heading of dates indicating the period covered. Act I is dated 1158-63, from less than four years after Henry's accession to the beginnings of the friction with Archbishop Thomas. Act II is dated 1163-70, and covers roughly the period taken up by the controversy and Becket's exile. This is the period to which Tennyson devotes his whole play except the Prologue. The Act ends with Henry's horrified reaction to the murder. The third act is dated 1174-89, and covers the period between Henry's humiliation and penance at Canterbury and his death. In each act the opening and closing scenes are extremely well defined and based on incidents that stand out in history; while the body of the Act is telescoped. Fry's act-division parallels three fairly clear-cut stages in Henry's reign. In terms of Becket's career, they might be labelled the Chancellor, the Archbishop, the Martyr.

The first act opens on a note of good-natured raillery and easy friendship between the King, his wife and his chancellor who has just returned after heading a successful embassy to Paris. In the middle of the
good-fellowship, however, a slightly ominous note is struck. Henry, ebulliently boasts: "from the Arctic circle to the Pyrenees/The King's peace is holding secure". Becket replies, "And God's peace, too, no doubt". A little later, Henry strikes another discordant note. He introduces the subject of the "reverend Canon of rape and murder". The tone again swings back to genial, schoolboy humour; Becket mimicks the monkishness of Louis VII of France. In the middle of the laughter, Henry, with elaborate casualness, drops his bombshell: "Which reminds me, Tom: I'm giving you Canterbury." The shock of the announcement is as great for the audience as for Becket himself. Then, however, the tempo slows down. Becket, recovering his composure, protests; his speeches, grave, well-argued but verging on the preachy, sound as if he were speaking for the author himself. The action tends to get held up. Marshal's prose memory speech, "What was one had become two..." marks a turning point in the play. The atmosphere of geniality and friendship turns cold for good. The play never returns to just that note of sheer fun.

Gerald Parker comments that the action of the play falls into two parts. In the first portion,
Henry of his own volition, takes a particular step, by making his friend the Primate. From the council of Clarendon onwards, we are shown the working out of the universal argument, beyond human comprehension or control. Actually the turning point comes in the moment when Henry announces his decision. The stage-direction at this point speaks of a "frozen silence". The council of Clarendon only accelerates a movement which has already begun in the latter part of the first act. We can almost see the rising movement of a wheel come to a dead halt at Henry's words. Through the rest of the first act it slowly begins a retracing movement that gathers greater momentum through the remaining two acts.

The act concludes with the first hostile confrontation between King and Archbishop at the council of Westminster. In between, a couple of scenes are run in — one, touching the illegitimate boy Roger who is placed under Marshal's care; the second, Becket's resignation of his chancellorship which gives us an initial taste of one of Henry's rages. The act concludes on a painful note, which dominates the rest of the play:

"Tell me how a man who has seen eye to eye with me/Can suddenly look at me as if he was blind?"80

80 Plays, p.213.
The second act opens with a telescoped version of the Clarendon-Northampton sequence. Tennyson's version never lets the protagonists come face to face in his big scene. The Clarendon-Northampton scene is central also to Fry's play. What distinguishes his presentation from Tennyson's however, is its much greater dramatic economy; its capacity to make the disputed issues clear without resorting to pedestrian devices like John of Oxford reading out the Constitutions of Clarendon. And certainly, it is far more dramatic to have Henry put forward his own case than to have it done at second or third hand. The concluding scene of Act II dramatises Henry's reaction to Becket's death. In his approach to the episode of the martyrdom, Fry is unlike any of the other writers. This scene has come in for a lot of criticism as being essentially undramatic, as using narration where direct presentation would have been far more effective, and as an example of Fry's lack of a histrionic sense.

Granted that the episode is far more effective in presentation than narration; granted also that Fry's approach to the martyrdom gives the impression of a rather uncomfortable spot glossed over. The fact remains, however, that he did not adopt this expedient for lack
of a histrionic sense, but because it was precisely what his play needed. He could not, at this critical juncture, afford to alienate the audience's sympathy from Henry. That is exactly what would have happened if the martyrdom had been allowed the visual appeal of direct presentation, while Henry was left to his own devices on the other side of the Channel. It would also have been flagrantly inconsistent with Marshal's memory as focus, to dramatise the martyrdom. Even if we disregard historicity and the extremely detailed eyewitness documents, Marshal is presented from the beginning as essentially a 'King's man', close to him in service and personal esteem. The logical conclusion is that he would remember far more about the King's reactions than about Becket's death which he had not seen.

Between the Clarendon-Northampton sequence and the martyrdom, we have two crucial scenes. The immediate effects of the Young King's coronation, and the reconciliation at Fréteval. The previous meetings are passed over in silence, so are Becket's doings in exile. Immediately following the Northampton scene are two brief scenes, essentially narrative and informative, about the birth of the French heir and Becket's flight.
across the Channel. The latter is rather arbitrary.
Fry himself points out that it was added later on.
It gives the impression of something extraneous and
unnecessary having been inserted into the movement
of the action.

The scene between Henry's children is a brotherly
wrangle immediately after Young Henry's coronation.
But it has nothing of the good humour that characterised
the opening of the first act. There are distinct
undertones of bitterness and jealousy in Richard's
malicious baiting of his elder brother. This scene --
like the nomination of Becket to the primacy -- shows
the King as the physical mover of an action, the
consequences of which he immediately sees going out
of his control. The Fréteval reconciliation is a
short, rather mediocre scene, and unlike Tennyson's
or Anouilh's representations, definitely not one of
the high points of the play.

The third act opens with Henry's penitence at
Becket's tomb -- which Anouilh uses as the frame of
his play -- and concludes with Henry's death. In
between, the only clearly marked scene is the sunny,
warm love-court at Poitou. The lack of clearly pointed
scenes for the rest of the act indicates the accentuated momentum of the play towards its end.

*Curtmantle* has two clearly marked strands of action. The first act concentrates entirely on the relationship between the King and Becket. The third concentrates entirely on the family conflict. In the second act we reach the peak of Henry's struggle with Becket, in the middle of which are sown the seeds of family dissension. The two strands coalesce in the words of the Young King: "If Becket had been there to crown me/I should have known what my dignity was worth." Marshal adds his commentary, prognosticating the events of the following act: "When he thought he had finally disposed of Becket, the name of Becket was breathed out like fire all over Christendom. And now, when with love and trust he stations the boys as sentinels to the Angevin world, the ground seems to crack where he stands." With this act the conflict with Becket ends -- physically -- but we have indications of the pervasive influence of Becket's invisible presence all through the rest of Henry's life.

81 *Plaza*, p.237.
The movement of the play is almost entirely downhill from the initial poise of the opening scene, with a few temporary recoveries. The rhythm of the action follows the career of the title figure. From the time Becket is named Archbishop the movement of Henry's fortunes is infinitesimally on the decline. His confidence in what seems to be his all-pervasive control is ominous. It is slowly but surely undermined for the audience in Becket's and Eleanor's speeches. Through Act II the tempo of the descent quickens, reaching one point of anguish at its conclusion. The first scene of Act III is a temporary recovery, a marshalling of his resources. But from the point of Eleanor's arrest the action rushes headlong to the concluding catastrophe.

The over-all shape of the play is inevitably reminiscent of the medieval wheel of Fortune. D. G. Louis calls the play a tragedy in the medieval De Casibus tradition, in the sense defined by Chaucer's Monk. But, she adds, like Shakespeare's Richard II, with which she draws several comparisons, Curtmantle also transcends this medieval form by being at the same time a tragedy of character. In fact, A. C. Bradley in his introductory

82 D. G. Louis, "Tragedy in Christopher Fry and Shakespeare..." College Languages Association Journal (December 1965), pp.151-58.
chapters on *Shakespearean Tragedy*, might have found extremely apt illustrations in Curtmantle to explain some of his theories. "The tragic world," he says, "is a world of action, and action is the translation of thought into reality. We see men and women confidently attempting it. They strike into the existing order in pursuance of their ideas. But what they achieve is not what they intended; it is terribly unlike it. ...the power that works through them makes them the instrument of a design which is not theirs. They act freely, and yet their action binds them hand and foot."83 This, as Fry portrays it, is the tragedy of Henry Curtmantle. Of the plays on the Becket story, Fry's is the only one that can be unequivocally designated as "a tragedy". The others have tragic overtones, but also a mixture of other elements which keep the works from being unqualified tragedies. Tennyson's play is a chronicle which ends with the main character's death. The final impact of Eliot's play partakes a great deal more of the rejoicing of martyrdom than its sorrow. The tragedy of Anouilh's play mingles with burlesque and farce. It is framed by the hypocritical expediency of the world, and leaves us feeling that Becket and the world are both

better off with him dead.

On the subject of language Fry comments, "The way a man writes for the theatre depends on the way he looks at life. ...The verse form is an effort to be true to what Eleanor in Curtmantle calls 'the silent order whose speech is all visible things'. No event is understandable in a prose sense alone. Its ultimate meaning (that is to say, the complete life of the event seen in its eternal context) is a poetic meaning. ...The problem a long way from being solved, is how to contain the complexities and paradoxes within two hours of entertainment; how to define the creative pattern of life without the danger of dogmatic statement. Dogma is static; life is movement." Such an attitude to the relative merits of prose and verse does lead to what Donoghue calls "the dubious equation of Prose with verisimilitude, and of Poetry with Truth." 84

Fry has, over the years, been frequently accused of extravagance and preciosity in language and metaphor. In the early plays, critics claim, the language tends to be something autonomous, and all the characters speak in identical rhythms with similar speech mannerisms.

But most of these critics agree that with the composition of plays like *A Sleep of Prisoners* and *The Dark is Light Enough*, the language shows a tendency to be toned down and functional. This tendency is even more markedly felt in *Curtmantle*. The poetry of this play, says Stanford, "has lost its puppy fat;... it is grim with the iron of argument. ... The verse is as stern as the feathers of an eagle."85

The verse of *Curtmantle* is essentially dramatic and utilitarian. Fry has evolved distinct and characteristic styles for his various *personae*. This is most strikingly felt in the speech rhythms of the two protagonists. Each speaks a verse characteristic of himself and in strong contrast to the other. Henry's language, expressive of his bursting energy, is forceful and very witty. Becket's, on the other hand, is quieter, graver, more thoughtful and argumentative and less obviously witty. For instance, we have Henry, towards the end of Act I, confronting the Archbishop:

> The kingdom, not a country parish. You know Very well the need of the kingdom you serve. It's a living land, not a charge of kneeling peasants Obedient to a bell.

85 *Christopher Fry*, p.44.
To this Becket replies:

If it is true
That I'm weak in spiritual authority — it isn't
For me to deny it — should you not thank God
That I mean to gain it?

A little later he says: "Henry, one of us there has to be/
To whom the single care is not of this world." Henry
replies:

Very well; give up this world.
Contend against me like an opposite.
See that the spiritual power is powerful in the spirit.
Indeed, go on, be smitten with a great light
And relieve us all of a load of darkness.86

Fry also uses a mixture of verse and prose; the prose,
in the Shakespearean manner, is generally confined to the
common people. It also serves for Marshal's memory
speeches. It is not fair, however, to condemn this
technique as the unthinking use of an outdated convention,
as it very largely is in Tennyson. Its use in Curtmantle
is in keeping with the author's view of the poetic and
prosaic realities of life. It serves to indicate, not
merely different social levels, but different levels of

86 Plays, pp.209-10.
awareness and complexity in the characters’ outlook and attitudes. The idiom is modern, but not obtrusively slangy or colloquial as Anouilh’s sometimes is; nor archaic or hybrid—Elizabethan in the manner of Tennyson and Aubrey de Vere. Fry’s Curtmantle, on the whole, steers a middle course between fidelity to historical fact and adaptation for artistic purposes.

(v)

'Jean Anouilh and Becket ou l'honneur de Dieu'

John Gassner notes that dramatic modernism consists of an alternation and interweaving of naturalistic and anti-naturalistic approaches to the theatre. The twentieth-century dramatists in France have tended, on the whole, to be anti-naturalistic in their approach to the theatre, in reaction to the turn of the century fashion of la pièce bien faite. Joseph Chiari, writing a book on the contemporary French theatre, chose for his subtitle the phrase, "The flight from Naturalism".

Jean Anouilh, who began writing for the theatre in the early thirties, approached his art with the anti-naturalistic bias of his age and country. In an essay Char Vitraç, he expresses his opinion of the naturalistic style: "L'effort des hommes pour faire autour d'eux la réalité sublime ou raisonnable — afin d'en supporter, en la masquant, l'absurdité finale — est doublé de l'effort des dramaturges pour donner une image encore aplatie, si c'est possible, de l'image déjà terriblement conventionnelle que les hommes se font de leur condition. Le naturalisme n'était pas, comme on l'a cru, la photographie de la réalité mais plutôt la reproduction léchée (...) de cette idée toute faite de la vie qui est devenue pour nous LA VIE."89 In other words, he thought of naturalism

89 P. Vandromme, Jean Anouilh: Un Auteur et ses Personnages (Paris: Table Ronde 1972), p.171. "The efforts men make to build around themselves a reality, sublime or rational— in order to be able to bear it by masking its final absurdity — is paralleled by the dramatists' efforts to provide an even more flattened picture, if possible, of the already terribly conventional image which men have made for themselves. Naturalism was not, as has been believed, a photographic presentation of reality, but rather a laboured reproduction of this ready-made idea of life, which has become for us, LIFE."
as a reproduction of superficialities rather than the true reality of life. Vitrac, on the other hand, he says, with his stenographic style and grotesque characters, creates "the sinister and grotesque game as we really play it."

Like Fry, Anouilh too, is entirely a man of the theatre. He sees himself rather as a craftsman or an artisan than as a philosopher of the boards. A play, in his own terms, is a game, un jeu d'esprit, with which the spectators are to be entertained. As a corollary, he often treats life itself as a game, or a piece of theatre; and people as players, or actors with their own roles. The predicament of his idealist is often defined as a search for his true role which leads to self-realisation. He repeatedly claims, as he does at the end of his programme note to Becket, "je suis un homme léger et facile — puisque je fais du théâtre."

"since I deal with the theatre, I am a light-hearted and frivolous man". However, in spite of his attempts at projecting himself as a light-hearted play-maker, too frivolous to take life or himself seriously, the underlying attitude to life which emerges from his plays is pessimistic and extremely dark.

90 Ibid., p.240.
Anouilh's acknowledged masters in the theatre were the Pirandello of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and Jean Giraudoux, among his elder contemporaries; and Molière and Marivaux among the older masters.

"Anouilh's plays", says Philip Thody, "are so self-consciously theatrical as to require of the audience virtually none of the traditional suspension of disbelief."91 This theatricalism does away with all traditional claims to verisimilitude, the creating and fostering of illusion in the audience, the well-knit plot, skilfully contrived entrances and exits. He carries a step further Dr. Johnson's belief that the spectators are always in their senses, and know that the stage is only a stage, and the actors only impersonators. Anouilh invites the audience to share in the game of make-believe. He once suggested, only half-ironically, that better results might be obtained in the theatre, if the critics and the audience could be made to rehearse their parts as well.

One of the main consequences of Anouilh's theatricalism, as John Harvey points out, is the use of plots that are openly derivative. Harvey quotes Anouilh as having said, "All works of literature are basically plagiarisms except the first which is unknown."92

His versions of Greek myths and episodes from history are only the most obvious examples of this attitude. In addition he has plays based on the works of Molière and Marivaux, and even Jean Giraudoux's *Siegfried*, which made a great impression on Anouilh on its first appearance in 1928.

Apart from *Becket*, he has two other plays based on history which he includes in his collection *Pièces Costumées*: one, written before *Becket*, on the subject of St. Joan of Arc, called *L'Alouette*; the other about Napoleon, titled *Le Foire d'Empoigne*.

*L'Alouette* provides points of comparison with *Becket* because it is drawn from a subject of medieval history, and also because its protagonist is an official Christian saint. *L'Alouette* also illustrates more obviously and clearly than *Becket*, Anouilh's method of continually breaking in on the illusion created by the play. *L'Alouette* has two "presents"; one is the situation of the audience, the other is the present of the play itself, the time of Joan's trial. Her story is then enacted in a series of flashbacks which every now and again return to the present of the trial. The whole structure follows the plan of a play-within-a-play. The opening stage-
directions indicate that the decor is neutral, the
costumes only vaguely medieval; the actors file out
onto the stage after the curtain goes up. The Earl of
Warwick, acting as a sort of master of ceremonies,
opens the play: "Nous sommes tous là? Bon. Alors le
procès, tout de suite. Plus vite elle sera jugée et
brûlée, mieux cela sera..." To which Bishop Cauchon
replies: "Mais, Monseigneur, il y a toute l'histoire
à jouer..." Warwick, anxious to get on with the trial
is contemptuous of the play-acting — the reenactment of Joan's
career. "Masquerades! Cela, c'est l'histoire pour les
enfants. La belle armure blanche, la tendre et dure
vierge guerrière, c'est comme cela qu'on lui fera ses
statues, plus tard, pour les nécessités d'une autre
politique..."93 In these words Warwick also provides
a wry gloss on the title of the collection, Pièces
Costumées; and an indirect comment on sainthood and
political expediency, that Anouilh picks up again in

"Warwick Are we all here? Good. Then let's have the
trial immediately. The sooner she's judged and burnt
the better... Cauchon But, my Lord, her whole story
has still to be played... Warwick Masquerades!
That is history for children. The beautiful white
armour, the standard, the strong, tender virgin-warrior,
that's how they'll show her in her statues later, to
fit the needs of later politics."
the concluding frame-scene of Becket.

Similarly, as Joan is about to be burnt, towards the end of the play, and the tone has been set for a tragic conclusion, there is a brusque interruption. Baudricourt comes rushing on to the stage to stop the burning, because the most important episode of Joan's story—the consecration of Charles VII at Reims—has not been played. Joan cannot be allowed to die without that. So upon the expectation of a tragic conclusion, is superimposed the pageant of the coronation at Reims. In Fry's terms, it is the God's-eye view of Joan's history that we get at the end, but by a severe and repeated dislocation of the factual sequence. The author explains that in his opinion, the story of Joan was a happy one; that the Joan we remember is not the poor prisoner at the stake, but the lark joyfully soaring up to heaven.

Literally translated, the collective title of Anouilh's history plays boils down to the phrase "costume drama". This is, however, merely intended as an indication of the historical subject matter, of the richness and panoramic sweep of a pageant; and, perhaps, a wry look at himself. But like all his collective titles, it is slightly deceptive. For
although Warwick in *L'Alouette* might think so, the plays are not pieces of mere shallow pageantry, even if they stick more — especially *Becket* — to the historical trappings of dress than did his versions of Greek myths. "Dans *L'Alouette* (1953) et *Becket* (1959), l'histoire n'est plus un épisode qui se combine avec le présent, elle règne sans partage, elle devient le livre aux merveilleux images que les enfants feuilletent..." By itself, such a comment could be misleading. "Le présent" is still there in the history plays; only, rather less obtrusively. Parallelisms are deliberately provided by the author, often through language and dialogue, between the incidents of history and the contemporary life of the audience. The behaviour of the personages is sometimes almost incongruously modern and Anouilh-ian.

Compared to the active manipulation in *L'Alouette*, *Becket* is relatively straightforward. This play too, however, is an extended flashback, bounded on either

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94 Robert de Luppé, *Jean Anouilh* (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1965), p.85. "In *L'Alouette* and *Becket* history is no longer merely an episode which combines with the present, it is entirely the past, it becomes "the marvellous picture-book" which children enjoy leafing through..."
side by a present within the play — the scene of
Henry II's penance at Canterbury. The actual action
of the play covers the period from Becket's nomination
as Chancellor to the time of his murder. Anouilh is
the only dramatist who devotes himself at considerable
length to the period of Becket's chancellorship. It
covers half of his play. Tennyson's Prologue merely
touches upon this period; and Fry in his first few
pages evokes the congenial relationship between Henry
and Becket in order to emphasise the downhill course
of the rest of the play. Anouilh, on the other hand,
wished to place at the centre of his play the relationship
between the two men, which he intended to explore in
all its facets. He had, therefore, to give as much
scope to the development and course of the friendship,
as to the enmity.

The English dramatists indicate a readiness to
follow whatever facts are necessary, as far as it is
in keeping with their over-all conception. Anouilh,
unlike them, very frankly takes the historical episode
merely as a jumping-off point from which to manufacture
a play, and does not scruple to distort or falsify
facts to make them fit his scheme of things. In the programme note to the production of Becket he describes how he chanced upon the story in Augustin Thierry's Histoire de la Conquête de l'Angleterre par les Normands and was attracted by what he saw in the relationship between the two men. Then he adds: "Mon émotion et mon plaisir m'ont suffi. Je n'ai rien lu d'autre. Le drame entre ces deux hommes m'a donné la pièce." Like L'Alouette but much more unobtrusively, the sequence of events is manipulated and telescoped wherever necessary. For instance, in actual fact there is a period of about three years between Becket's nomination as Chancellor and the levying of the great scutage for the war of

95 Contrasting the English and French traditions of historical drama, W. D. Howarth points out that the main difference lies in their attitudes to factual fidelity. Anouilh's Becket is seen to be in keeping with the traditional French approach which makes its historical figures "above all particular embodiments of universal truths." "Introduction", Becket (London: Harrap, 1962), p.19. Howarth also has an article, "History in the Theatre: the French and English Tradition", Trivium, 1 (1966), 151-68.

96 Vandromme, op.cit., p.240. "My pleasure and emotion were sufficient. I read no more. The drama between these two men ... had given me the play."
Toulouse. Anouilh compresses them into his very dramatic council scene near the beginning of the play. The disputes between the two after Becket's consecration ranged over a period of almost three years, culminating in the grand councils of Clerendon and Northampton. These are similarly compressed into two scenes in indeterminate settings in the third act: one between Becket and his bishops; and the other, a narrative version of the last day at Northampton. Here again, Anouilh differs from Tennyson and Fry who make a central scene of the Clerendon-Northampton sequence.

On the whole, however, Becket does not give the impression of a tightly wrought construction. It illustrates Anouilh's freer and more flexible approach; "instead of crowding his story into one moment of dramatic intensity, he composed an historical narrative whose frescoes cover almost three decades, take place in several countries, and sweep across medieval society from sovereign to courtesan, from peasant to pope."\(^{97}\) In this he resembles Tennyson and Fry. But all three of these plays differ from Eliot's almost Greek manner of approach. Again, unlike Tennyson, but like Fry, the indeterminate stage-setting enables Anouilh to free himself from problems

\(^{97}\) Harvey, op.cit., pp.21-22.
of shifting locales or the passage of time unless he expressly wishes to emphasise either.

"It could be said", writes Émil Roy, "that Eliot's construction is focussed and ritualistic, Fry's is panoramic and historical, and Anouilh's is musical and choreographic. This convenient scheme, which is useful if not applied too arbitrarily, would place Murder in a 'theatre of ideas', Curtmantle in a 'theatre of characters' and Becket in a 'theatre of situations'."\(^\text{98}\) Anouilh's central thematic situation -- the relationship between Becket and Henry, provides the unity of the play. Accordingly, we find that the play falls into two neat antithetical halves.\(^\text{99}\) The first half explores the friendship between the two men. It covers the first two acts which concentrate on the period of Becket's chancellorship. The second half deals with the struggle between the King and the Archbishop, and covers the third and fourth acts, concentrating on the period of Becket's primacy and ending with his death. From this point of view the pivotal scene, the penultimate one of the second act, is the one in which Henry joyfully


announces to Becket his brainwave of nominating him to
the archbishopric. The same incident in Fry serves a
similar purpose. But whereas Fry’s comes soon after
the beginning of the play, Anouilh’s comes almost exactly
in the middle of his. In the scene after this one, Anouilh
immediately dramatises the consequence of the King’s act —
the much discussed transformation of Becket from
statesman-soldier to ascetic-priest. In dramatising
this scene, Anouilh again differs from the others who
only report it. As most critics point out, Anouilh is
much more concerned with rationalising Becket’s conduct
than any of the others. This scene, therefore, concludes
with Becket alone on the stage addressing a crucifix,
partly musing upon his actions, partly carrying on a
friendly conversation with God. It explicates his thoughts
for the audience, and reveals that Becket is at least
sceptical of his own holiness.

The play consists of four acts, unobtrusively divided
into scenes, by changes in backdrop or drawing of curtains.
The opening scene of the first act and the closing one of
the last, provide a sort of prologue and epilogue to
the play. They are more like the enclosing frame of a
picture since they are two halves of the same scene — the
penitence of Henry at Becket’s tomb in 1174 during the
barons’ revolt.
The first act, excluding the frame-scene, is divided into four fairly clear scenes. The first is in the King's private chamber, and immediately establishes all the major themes, especially the close intimacy between Becket and the King. But beneath all the banter about "collaboration" and the use of forks, one senses a tinge of self-contempt and hollowness within Becket even at this stage. The transition to the second scene is managed without any interruption by parting curtains behind the two friends as they enter what is now a council-chamber, but in the Prologue scene had served for Canterbury Cathedral. This scene telescopes the nomination of Becket as chancellor and the levying of the scutage on the clergy. Both events are intended to establish Becket firmly as a king's man; but also as a man who is both chancellor and archdeacon, but who is, himself, not quite sure what he is. As the old archbishop points out, he is a man in search of himself. This scene concentrates on the two friends at work together.

The next shows them together at their leisure, out hunting in the forest where they get caught in a storm and have to shelter in the rough, stinking cabin of a Saxon peasant. This scene also returns with greater stress to the racial issue of Normans and Saxons, the overlords and underdogs, which had been touched upon in the scene
in the King's chamber. The last scene moves, again by means of a drawn curtain to the palace of Becket where we are introduced to Gwendoline, Becket's mistress. This scene is also the climax of the act, a sort of drawing together of the thematic strands already introduced, and concluding on a note that leads us to anticipate the action that is to follow. The King and his Barons are being regaled, offstage, to a sumptuous banquet; while Becket has a conversation with his mistress which further develops the conqueror-conquered theme. For Gwendoline, who is Welsh, also comes of a conquered race. Becket comments wryly, "Mais comme j'appartiens, moi aussi, à une race vaincue, j'ai l'impression que Dieu s'embrouille un peu..." We also learn that Becket is afraid to love as his mistress is not. There follows a sequence in which the King makes the girls sing the ballad about Becket's Saxon father and Saracen mother, which the Barons snore through; and the very dramatic moment when the King demands Gwendoline in exchange for the Saxon peasant girl he has given Becket. Becket sacrifices Gwendoline to what he calls his "honor". The act and scene end with the terrified Henry hurrying back to sleep in Becket's

room. Gwendoline has killed herself rather than sacrifice her honour or love. One seed of the subsequent bad blood between Henry and Becket has been sown. Gwendoline's death for an ideal is a foretaste of Becket's own end. The last line reiterates Becket's quest of his honour. "Mais où est l'honneur de Becket?" — "But where is Becket's honour?" 101

The second act opens in France on a comic note with a conversation between the four barons. They are rather like the group of witless guards in Antigone, we learn that they dislike Becket, and at least one of them has the brains to realise that the Chancellor may not be what he seems. The scene shifts to the King's tent. This one again is partly comic, and reminiscent of the first scene in the previous act, but this time with business and pleasure mixed. Juxtaposed with it is Becket's encounter with the Little Monk who becomes for him the image of his own youth, his conscience and his sense of guilt at having betrayed his race. 102 The next scene showing the progress of the king and his entourage to the French cathedral, is a theatrical pageant full of the sound of

102 For a detailed consideration of this function of the Little Monk, see Ch. V, sec. vii.
bells and trumpets and cheering, and the spectacle of oriflammes, and horses tramping all over the stage. It is one of those scenes which lends some colour to the title *Pièces Costumées*. But in one exchange between Becket and the King about the cheering crowds, we suddenly realise that inspite of the Gwendoline episode, the King still retains a certain innocence, while Becket shows the cynicism of maturity. The King, enchanted by the cheers, thinks the French people love him. Becket disillusiones him. He has had money distributed among the crowds. Indirectly, the power of money to corrupt is once again underlined. The scene within the cathedral is important for several reasons. The first half is partially a parody of present-day assassination scares. A dumb show is put on by the all-brawn-and-no-brain barons stalking a harmless priest they think might be an assassin. This piece of farce also points to a frightened-child aspect of the King. In startling juxtaposition, we have one of the climactic scenes of the play. A messenger brings news of the old Archbishop's death; Henry has his brain-wave; and Becket is nominated primate despite all his protests. The scene ends with a final exchange:
As if giving the lie directly to the King's final words, the next scene, which concludes the act, dramatises Becket's transformation. We see servants collecting all his fabulously costly things preparatory to selling them to a Jew; we hear about the poor being invited to dinner. The scene concludes with a remarkably self-critical but light-hearted speech, punctuated by a good deal of action, which Becket addresses to an ornate crucifix. At the end he takes it off its hook and decides to donate it to a poor convent.

The third act opens on a darkening note. It shows the king's unhappy family life, and strikes the note of isolation which sounds through the rest of the play. The ominous forebodings of the previous act's conclusion are immediately realised, as a cleric arrives with the seal of England and Becket's resignation as chancellor. The scene concludes with one of the King's anguished outbursts of pain and rage. (In keeping with the author's

103 Becket, p.93. Hill, p.62. "Becket (in a murmur) This is madness, my Lord, Don't do it. I could not serve both God and you. King (looking straight ahead, savagely stone.) You've never disappointed me Thomas. And you are the only man I trust. You will leave tonight..."
conception of the Henry-Becket relationship, the Angevin rages, provoked at various points by Becket's behaviour, are never merely anger. They are always mixed with the pain of thwarted affection. The final catastrophic explosion is far more an agony of grief and hurt than fury.) The next scene between the King and Foliot provides a sort of prologue to Henry's vendetta, but also clarifies very emphatically that he is not exchanging one friend for another.

The third scene moves to the archiepiscopal palace and shows Becket's determination to accept and come to terms with his guilty conscience by keeping the Little Monk constantly near him. It also shows simultaneously, the beginnings of Henry's vengeance. Foliot and some of the other bishops arrive for an interview, and we have a resumption of the Church-State conflict of the consiliar scene of the first act. But this time the sides are reversed. Foliot, who had then accused Becket of plunging a sword in the vitals of Mother Church, is now the spokesman for the King and his "customs"; while Becket, the King's former right-hand, the imposer of the scutage on the clergy has turned defender of the honour of God and His Church. (We are inevitably reminded of the perceptive words of the gentle old Archbishop in the first act:
"C'est une âme insaisissable... J'ai pu l'observer souvent, dans le plaisir et dans le bruit. Il y reste comme absent. Il se cherche"; a little later: "Notre rôle est de sonder les coeurs. Et je ne suis pas sûr que celui-ci soit toujours notre ennemi."104) The latter half of this scene and the whole of the next one, together present in neutral, telescoped fashion, the entire series of disputes between King and Primate up to Becket's departure from Northampton. Time and place are not even indicated, since the playwright's primary aim is to use the incident as one aspect of a changing relationship, rather than to emphasise its political importance. This fourth scene does not attempt to dramatise a confrontation in the manner of Fry, or even cash in on the extremely stagy potentialities of the last day at Northampton. While Becket's own great scene is played off-stage, we are presented with a wrangle between the King and his wife. This further emphasises the King's love-hate attitude to his former friend, and his complete isolation in the midst of an importunate family. The great scene is finally narrated by a page. Anouilh's handling of the Northampton council,

104 Ibid., pp.55-56. Hill, p.19. "His is a strange, elusive nature...I've had plenty of opportunity to observe him in the bustle of daily living. He is, as it were, detached. As if seeking his real self. "It is our task to see into the hearts of men. And I am not sure that this one will always be our enemy."
one of the most outstanding episodes of the conflict, is similar to Fry's handling of Becket's martyrdom. The purposes of the two writers are similar: to throw the dramatic focus onto Henry's reactions as a deeply involved spectator of scenes in which Becket plays the lead.

The next scene, at the court of Louis VII of France, is more remarkable for the author's own attitude to politics than anything else. The following scene between the Pope and one of his Cardinals is an exaggerated take off on the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the Roman curia, and the temporal aspect of the Church as a whole. Louis's sceptical attitude to politics and politicians in general, and the Church in particular is reiterated. In fact, the scene looks like a burlesque illustration of his warning to Becket: "Méfiez-vous de lui. Pour trente deniers, il vous vendra. C'est un homme qui a besoin d'argent."105

The Pope is visualised as a comic Judas to Becket's Christ. The sentence is a good example of Anouilh's serio-comic approach to the whole story. It appears from the scene between the Pope and the Cardinal, that the actual amount in question is three thousand silver marks. It also serves

105 Ibid., p.118. Hill, p.89. "Beware of the Pope. He'll sell you for thirty pieces of silver. The man needs money."
to throw into very startling relief the scene which follows.

This entire scene is a deeply moving prayer addressed by Becket to a wooden crucifix. It immediately reminds us of and contrasts with the light-hearted, conversational, but half-serious address which concludes the previous act. It serves the purpose of an Elizabethan soliloquy, and clarifies Becket's motives for us. We learn that he is, in all humility, planning to re-assume all his primatial dignities and re-engage in the struggle. For he has found that in actual life the old Biblical saw about the rich man and the camel and the eye of a needle often works the wrong way round. True humility may be found in the midst of worldly wealth, while the deepest poverty and physical penury are not incompatible with the most abysmal pride — a noticeably Eliotic piece of reasoning.

It also prepares us for what is to follow in the last act which culminates in the murder. In its influence on the audience's reaction to Becket's death this prayer serves a function similar to that of Eliot's prose sermon. But its effectiveness is somewhat mitigated by some of Becket's speeches on the plain of La Ferté-Bernard.
The fourth act opens on the same setting, a monastic cell at the Cistercian Abbey of Pontigny. It does nothing to further the action. What it does is to provide an additional reason for Becket's return and an additional instance of the King's vengeance. The Cistercian foundations in all of Henry's domains have been threatened with extinction unless Becket is immediately expelled from Pontigny. There follows a short scene between Becket and Louis VII as a prologue to the great confrontation scene at Fréteval.

The reconciliation scene at Fréteval, is dramatically the highest point in the play, and in the tradition of the Créon-Antigone, Jeanne-Warwick confrontations of his earlier plays. But most emphatically, it is a dramatic representation of the central metaphor of the play which epitomises the main theme. In Becket's words at the very beginning, "C'était un dialogue de sourds." "We were like two deaf men talking." 106

This scene is actually sub-divided into a sequence of three cinematic close-ups. The first is a conversation between Louis and his barons, and then between a couple of sentries. This portion is entirely choric. The

106 Ibid., p.44. Hill, p.5.
historic meeting receives comment from within the play, first from the point of view of the exalted circles, and then from the common man's. We watch at a distance of two removes. The technique is reminiscent of Anouilh's habitual use of the play-within-a-play approach. This first-third of the scene also employs pageantry. The stage is, on the one hand, bared of all back-drop except the cyclorama, and on the other, it is filled up with a crowd of people on horseback with banners and lances, to the accompaniment of blaring trumpets.

The central portion is the actual confrontation between Henry and Becket. This time the scene is completely bare of all spectacle or sound except the sharp dirge of the winter wind in the background; the two men on horseback hold their conversation alone. (There is a curious piece of irony in this scene. In the previous conversation between the sentries, the older one pompously tells his green young companion, "Tu te figures peut-être qu'ils se demandent des nouvelles de leurs familles, couillon? Ou qu'ils se plaignent de leurs engelures? Le sort du monde qu'ils débattent en ce moment! Des choses que toi et moi on n'y comprendra
But when we are privileged to take a closer look for ourselves, which the sentries are not, we find that the two men are not, in fact, debating the fate of the world. They are actually talking about chilblains, and Henry’s family, and other small matters the ordinary man would understand. The irony of the juxtaposition implicitly indicates the stress on the personal relationship as opposed to the more general conflict of principles or ideas; and at the same time reduces the stature of the exalted personages to more ordinary human proportions.) The central conflict is thoroughly discussed in all its aspects; but revealed, in almost existential terms as ultimately insoluble.

The third portion of the scene shifts back to the side of Louis of France, who is soon joined by Becket. It rounds off the scene with the impartial opinion of the French king on the nature of the reconciliation:

“De quelle paix voulez-vous parler? Celle de votre âme ou de la paix du roi? Si c’est celle-là, elle ne semblait guère chaleureuse de loin.”

These words


108 Ibid., p.135. (My trans.) “Which peace are you speaking of? Your soul’s or the King’s? If it is the latter, it didn’t seem very warm at a distance.” (This scene is omitted from Hill’s translation).
also strike a note of ominous expectancy about the rest of the action. This feeling is made explicit when Louis advises Becket to beware of his king till he has received the kiss of peace.

The next two scenes are not very important to the action. They allow the tension of the Fréteval episode to relax a little. The first dramatises the stormy channel crossing on Becket's homeward journey. Becket exults at the sailor's skill in negotiating the storm, and comments on the cleanliness of man's struggle with the elements. In contrast to God's tempests, he says, the tempests of men leave a bad taste in the mouth. The following scene presents Becket and the Little Monk disembarked on a deserted coast. Here again, the main purpose is not to further action but to sort out themes; as well as to strike with certainty, for the first time, the note of the approaching martyrdom.

The next scene dramatises an episode connected with the coronation of the Young King. Henry serves his son at dinner. In Anouilh's play, this incident is supposed to occur before the coronation, whereas actually, it was after. Anouilh also gives his own slant to the function of the coronation. As he presents it, Henry's sole aim in taking this step was to aggravate Becket by
having York usurp one of Canterbury's most cherished privileges. This also provides a clear example of Anouilh's deliberate juggling with the time sequence. In actual fact, the coronation not only went before the Fréteval reconciliation, but was the direct cause of Henry's complete capitulation. The second half of the coronation-dinner scene contains the king's wrathful explosion which led to the murder. With Anouilh, unlike the other dramatists, the question of the excommunicated bishops does not arise at all, since the coronation has not yet taken place. Nor do any of the bishops come into the picture as having incited Henry's rage. The Four Barons are used to do all the dirty work. Answering the king's questions, they report that Becket is going about the country with an armed horde of Saxons at his back; so it is partly the racial issue again that is made the cause of Becket's death. The king goes off into a paroxysm of pain and fury and the Barons leave the stage.

The next scene, in Canterbury Cathedral — the last of the play proper — shows the murder. Here again, unlike the other dramatists, Anouilh telescopes and makes his own radical changes. We see Becket, quite convinced that he is to die, being helped on with his full vestments
by the Little Monk, who during the actual murder serves as a substitute for Edward Grim. The Four Barons make only one entrance; there is no altercation between them and the Archbishop — they have come only to kill him. The actual sword-blows, falling almost ritually, merge into the penitential blows being given the King by the monks in the second half of the frame-scene. Becket's last words quite consistent with Anouilh's conception of him, are certainly not those reported by the chroniclers, or used by Tennyson and Eliot. He says: "...Ah! que vous rendez tout difficile et que votre honneur est lourde! (...) Pauvre Henri".109

Although less faithful to history, Anouilh's scene is carried out with much greater dramatic economy, much less noise, flurry and bustle than Tennyson's two long scenes, His ritual picture of the actual death resembles Eliot's. Its merging into the epilogue-like frame-scene is a visual presentation of the tie between the two men and their fortunes for good or ill.

The fourth act is the one that was most drastically abridged in the stage version, as well as the English translation of Lucienne Hill used for the Broadway

109 Ibid., p.147. Hill, p.115. "Oh, how difficult you make it all! And how heavy your honour is to bear! (...) Poor Henry."
production. The English translation omits from the fourth act, the first scene between Becket and the Superior at Pontigny; the one between Louis and his barons in the first part of the Fréteval episode. The latter also entails doing away with the spectacular pageantry and crowd effects indicated in the stage-directions. The two sentries are brought onto the absolutely bare stage used for the central confrontation. The third portion of this scene, between Louis and Becket, is also omitted; so that in the translation, the Fréteval scene is a great deal shortened, and runs into one straight scene rather than splitting up into three parts. The slight role which Anouilh gives Louis as a sort of well-meaning but rather ineffectual deus-ex-machina and chorus is totally eliminated.

The following two scenes — the channel crossing, and the landing — are also omitted. The general effect of all this cutting is, of course, to shorten considerably what is otherwise the longest act in the play; and to give an impression of the action moving swiftly to its close. Since the omitted scenes are largely devoted to discussion and comment, the abridged version of the act stresses movement and action, and the tension of an anticipated climax, at the expense of an explicit
discussion of certain themes and ideas. On the whole, therefore, as far as stage-worthiness is concerned, the cuts are an improvement.

The rhythm of the whole play is rather wave-like. We find that the most memorable scenes are those that conclude the acts. These are the Gwendoline scene, the king's announcement of the primacy immediately followed by the transformation scene, the prayer in the cell at Pontigny, and finally, of course, the murder. The scene at Frêteval in the middle of the last act comes as a gathering of strands for the whole play. The scenes which come at the end of acts tend to gather up and summarise the portion of the act which has gone before; and, in some way, to point to what is to follow. They all include finality and continuity, except for the murder scene which consummates the play.

Although Anouilh does not so designate any of his plays, some of them including *Becket*, might be usefully discussed as tragedies. These are mainly the ones that are based on myth and history. The chorus in *Antigone* even articulates a theory of tragedy in which the emphasis falls heavily on fatality and predestination. For Anouilh, says John Harvey, the stage is set for tragedy
"when an individual feels himself rooted to a role, irrevocably trapped in a part."\textsuperscript{110} In this sense, Anouilh's conception of Beckett is tragic. This is especially noticeable in the emphasis Beckett lays on his situation as absurd and irrevocable. He tells the King how he was a man in search of himself till the day the King confided to his keeping the "burden" of God's honour. The King talks in terms of reason and logic; Becket replies, "Il faut seulement faire, absurdement, ce dont on a été chargé—jusqu'au bout."\textsuperscript{111} The frame again, stresses the predetermined nature of the action as a sort of re-enactment of things long over and done with. In its conception of the inevitability of the conflict and the defeat of idealism, the play is a tragedy.

However, the tragic impact is considerably mitigated by Anouilh's almost burlesque handling of the political issues; his general modernisation and reduction of the historical figures and the unrelieved cynicism of the

\textsuperscript{110} Anouilh: A Study in Theatrics, p.90.

\textsuperscript{111} Becket, p.132. Hill, p.101. "We must only do -- absurdly -- what we have been given to do right to the end."
Some critics have seen in the last an implicit assertion that Becket's death reaped its reward on earth as well as in heaven, since Norman and Saxon are finally shown coming together. In this they find the positive note of reconciliation and renewal with which all great tragedy ends. Far from being positive and reconciling, however, the closing frame-scene is a dark comment on the main action. Our attention is captured, not by the Saxons acclamining the King's penitence, but by Henry's last words that in the final analysis, the honour of God is a useful thing to have on one's side. Becket is to be venerated as a saint. He instructs one of the very same murderers to take on the job of hunting out and punishing the other murderers, "afin que tous n'ignorent rien de notre volonté royale de défendre désormais l'honneur de Dieu et la mémoire de notre ami." Political expediency, and hypocrisy are shown triumphant despite Becket's death. This interpretation is endorsed by the author, whose stage-direction for Henry's speech reads, "avec assez de majesté hypocrite sous son air de gros garçon." 112

112 Ibid., p.148. Hill, p.116. "...so that no one will be in any doubt as to our royal desire to defend the honour of God and the memory of our friend from this day forward." "with a touch of hypocritical majesty beneath his slightly-loutish manner," Ginestier calls this speech "la flèche du Parthe" — the Parthian shot. Jean Anouilh. (Paris: Éditions Seghers, 1974), p.133.
The expedient of framing the main action between two halves of a scene dramatising Henry's penitence serves several useful purposes. In the first place, it provides a theatrical perspective for the audience and distances the action. It adds to the feeling of inevitability by emphasising that it is the re-enactment of an action already completed. It gives an over-all neatness to an otherwise sprawling structure. Finally, it provides the author's opinion of the action. The first half of the frame very dramatically and with great economy sets the tone of the play, epitomises the central conflict and touches on the main themes of the play. This short conversation between Henry and his mental spectre of Becket is a good instance of what John Harvey describes as Anouilh's method of providing his expositions by means of "sharp, revelatory vignettes."113

The manner in which Anouilh manages the transitions at the two ends between the main action and the frame-scenes — by fading-out and fading-in effects of sound and light — also indicates the influence of the cinema on his work for the theatre. Just before the first transition, while the king is still speaking, the stage-direction runs, "Becket va s'enfoncer doucement

113 Harvey, op.cit., p.104.
dans l'ombre et disparaîtra pendant la réplique du roi". During the actual transition, "L'éclairage change. C'est encore la cathédrale vide, et puis à un moment Becket tirera un rideau et ce sera la chambre du roi. Leur ton d'abord lointain comme celui d'un souvenir changera aussi et deviendra plus réaliste." 114
At the other end of the play, we have darkness falling on the murder and light returning on the king receiving his blows. The monks hit him with the same gestures that the murderers had made in killing Becket. Similarly, in the Frêteval episode, the rapid shifts in perspective from spectators to protagonists, back to spectators shows the influence of the cinema. We find this in some of the other scene shifts as well.

The setting and decor are indeterminate and neutral. One is a vague decor of pillars which serves in turn for cathedrals, council-halls and even the trees of a forest. A curtain separating two parts of the stage is regularly used for scene changes, entrances and exits. At the

114 Becket, pp.44-45. Hill, pp.6-7. "Becket quietly withdraws into the darkness and disappears during the king's next speech." "The lighting changes. We are still in the empty cathedral. Then a moment or so later, Becket will draw aside a curtain and reveal the king's room. Their manner... far away at first, like a memory relieved, will gradually become more real."
beginning of the second act, for instance, the first scene shows the barons round a camp-fire against the pillared setting which is supposed to be a forest in France. A curtained-off portion indicates the king's tent. When Becket, after speaking with them wishes to go to the king, he lifts the curtain, hooks it up; and the scene shifts to the king's tent, while the barons walk off the stage. Sometimes deliberately obtrusive devices are used. The Pope and Cardinal in the third act are wheeled onto and off the stage.

Anouilh's interweaving of several heterogeneous formal elements in Becket is in keeping with the general twentieth-century attitude to drama; and his own interpretation of a play as a game of make-believe. One critic notes a mixture of three different modes in this play: "la tragédie shakespeareenne, le cinéma et la comédie vaudevillesque". The role of the four barons immediately strikes us as being entirely vaudevillesque. They are a bunch of dimwits at the opposite end of the human scale from Becket. We have the comic dialogue which opens the second act; and, in the same act, the dumb-show with the priest in the French cathedral. In the same vein we have the exaggerated, farcical scene between the cardinal and the...

115 M. Rabut, "Le Thème de Thomas Becket...", p.525.
pope. Anouilh uses such scenes to counterpoint and distance ironically the seriousness of his main subject.

The deliberate use of anachronism is connected with the use of farce. Scenes dealing with the racial issue are full of references to "occupation" and "collaboration". In the second act Henry and Becket discuss politics as a game of cricket which sounds more like tennis than anything else. The pope and cardinal with their terrible Italian accents, Henry wishing to spend his winters in France are deliberate caricatures of modern national types. The pantomime between the barons and the priest in the second act is occasioned by an assassination scare reported by Becket's over-zealous secret police. Trying to calm the king, Becket comments sardonically, "Les policiers ont un peu tendance à voir des assassins partout pour se faire valoir." The whole episode is a parody of modern politics as the cloak-and-dagger stuff represented in spy-thrillers.

Unlike the English dramatists, Anouilh does not write in verse. But while, technically speaking, his language is prose, his use of it is poetical and

116 Becket, p.89. Hill, p.57. "Policemen have a slight tendency to see assassins everywhere. They only do it to make themselves important."
theatricalist. His acknowledged master in the shaping of his style and his approach to the French theatre of language was Jean Giraudoux. "Our age", Giraudoux claimed, "no longer asks writers merely for books — every street corner is littered with them — what above all else it appeals for is language." In his article À Jean Giraudoux, Anouilh acknowledges his great debt; especially the impact made upon him by the first Paris production of Siegfried.

Anouilh's language maintains a balance between the slangy and colloquial, and the more obviously poetical. In La Rêpétition, ou l'amour puni, Anouilh has a character who, in the course of a rehearsal of Marivaux's play, comments on the difference between art and life in terms of language. "Naturalness and truth in the theatre, my dear, are the most unnatural thing in the world. First of all, in life the text is always so bad! We live in a world that has completely forgotten the semicolon, we all speak in unfinished sentences with three little dots at the end, because we never find the exact word. And then the natural tone of conversation which actors claim to have found: those stammerings, those hiccups, hesitations and mistakes — it's scarcely worthwhile."

gathering five or six hundred people together to show them that. ... Life is very pretty but it has no form. The object of art is precisely to give it one, and through all possible artifices to create something that is truer than truth." 118

In Becket, since he was treating a story from a distant period, he was anxious to emphasise pageantry -- the "costumed" effect -- wherever possible. Avoiding a naturalistic style was also in keeping with his subject. However, as in his treatment of Greek myths like Antigone or his play on Joan of Arc, his idiom is never "historical" in the sense of being pseudo or archaic. At the same time, unlike Eliot and Fry, he does not strive for a 'neutral' style which is of neither the twelfth nor the twentieth century. At times he uses deliberately colloquial modern expressions and slang to underline anachronism and point to parallels between the two periods. At times he uses colloquial expressions as an index of character or different levels of society. The conversation of the two sentries in the Frêtaeval scene, opens: "Ouvre tes mirettes, petite tête! Et fourre-t'en jusque-là! Tu

Similarly, the four barons are usually given colloquial, slangy speech to underline the commonplaceness of their minds. Henry is often ungrammatical, but his speech is usually vivid and forceful. In the early half of the play it is full of a devastating candour and wit. The argument over the scutage in the first act is a good example. The archbishop has just informed Henry that since the job of clerics is to pray not fight, the Church is not liable to the tax. Henry reacts furiously. The speech is fairly long, not at all naturalistic, but full of vigour and "modernness" of idiom. "Vous pensez sérieusement que je m'en vais me laisser filouter de plus de deux tiers de ma taxe, avec des arguties pareilles? Au temps de la conquête, quand il s'agissait de s'enrichir, ils l'ont retrouvée leur soutane,...nos abbés normands: et gaillardement! L'épée au poing, les fesses sur la selle, dès poitrion-minet. 'Allons-y, mon prince! Boutons tout ça dehors! Dieu le veut!' ...Et quand on avait besoin d'une petite messe le cas échéant, ils n'avaient jamais le temps; ils ne savaient plus où ils avaient laissé leurs habits sacerdotaux, ...de peur de se laisser rafle un morceau de gâteau pendant ce

119 Becket, p.126. Hill, p.97. "Open those eyes of yours lad! And drink it all in. You're new to the job, but you won't see something like this everyday!"
Becket, on the other hand, in keeping with his aestheticism and fastidious elegance of temperament, is refined in his speech, sometimes witty, sometimes grave, never ungrammatical or slangy. In Becket's speech too, we find some of the most moving and most poetically cadenced passages in the play, like the long prayer at the end of the third act. Thus, through his distribution of speech habits, Anouilh is also able to indicate the relative position of his characters along a continuum between the totally aware existential idealism of Becket, and the abysmal unawareness and mediocrity of the barons. Anouilh's language is clear and concise and rarely trails off into a series of dots. The characters do not waste words. They express themselves fluently; naturally but not naturalistically, and with precision. The style is often deliberately uneven and jarring; it can be at once elegant and abrasive.

Ibid., p.51. Hill, p.13-14. "Do you seriously think that I am going to let myself be swindled out of more than two thirds of my revenues with arguments of that sort? In the days of the Conquest, when there was booty to be had, our Norman abbots tucked up their robes all right. And lustily too! 'Let's go to it Sire! Out with the Saxon scum! It's God's will!' ...And on the odd occasions when you wanted a little mass, they never had the time. They'd mislaid their vestments, ... any excuse to put it off for fear they'd miss some of the pickings while their backs were turned."
Although not in verse, Anouilh's \textit{Becket} also illustrates a poetic approach to the historical subject which results in a play whose basic conception is tragic, though it is not entirely a tragedy.

(vi)

'Eliot and \textit{Murder in the Cathedral}'

The case of T. S. Eliot's \textit{Murder in the Cathedral} is rather unusual. He does not claim to be writing a "history" play of any kind. The subject-matter merely serves as a starting point for a drama of ritual and liturgy, embodying the author's own religious preoccupations. At the same time he considered it important to be faithful to factual detail whenever he needed it, which was not very often. In the note to his edition of \textit{Murder in the Cathedral} Coghill says, "When Mr. Eliot invited me to prepare this edition I called on him to ask if there were any particular points he would like me to stress in it. He replied that he would like me to show how the action and dialogue were based in authentic records and were faithful to historical truth."\textsuperscript{121}

Unlike Fry and Anouilh, but like Tennyson, Eliot was not primarily a man of the theatre. But his critical essays clearly show that from the beginning of his career he had been interested in the drama as well as other performing arts like the ballet and the music-hall revue. The latter, he felt, might provide hints for a new direction in dramatic method. Eliot's essays were perhaps the most important single indication of the reaction against naturalistic modes of drama, which had, by the early decades of the twentieth century, become superficial and lifeless. Eliot led the reaction in favour of dramatic formalism, stressing the need for rules and conventions in art, as opposed to the demands for unrestrained verisimilitude made by the realists. In advocating a return to poetic drama, Eliot claimed that it was the dramatist's job to find himself a verse form as unlike the over-used Elizabethan blank-verse as possible.

Eliot's conception of poetic drama was a part of his other convictions, social, literary and religious. He does not view it as an esoteric or coterie art. On the contrary, one of the main concerns of his theorising was that the general public and the literary artist had drifted too far apart in modern times. In his view, the poetic dramatist ought to be able to appeal to several
classes of people at the same time. "In a play of Shakespeare", Eliot comments, "you get several levels of significance. For the simplest auditors there is the plot, for the more thoughtful the character and the conflict of character, for the more literary the words and phrasing, for the more musically sensitive the rhythm, and for auditors of greater sensitiveness and understanding a meaning which reveals itself gradually. And I do not believe that the classification of audience is so clear-cut as this; but rather that the sensitiveness of every auditor is acted upon by all these elements at once, though in different degrees of consciousness. At none of these levels is the auditor bothered by the presence of that which he does not understand." 122

Eliot's belief that verse was the proper medium for drama was based on the conviction that, contrary to the generally accepted opinion, it was only in verse that the full gamut of human emotions could find adequate expression. "The human soul in intense emotion", he says, "strives to express itself in verse. ...The tendency, at any rate, of prose drama is to emphasise the ephemeral and the superficial; if we want to get at the permanent..."

and universal, we tend to express ourselves in verse.123 Drama from Aeschylus onwards had been in verse, and human nature had not become so very different that only prose could now be true to it in all essentials, as most people seemed to think. Dramatists like Chekhov and Ibsen were, in his opinion, essentially poets whose imaginations had been restricted by their use of prose. Basically, for Eliot, poetic drama was a means of liberating the imaginations of both dramatist and audience from the debilitating influence of unrelieved verisimilitude.

Together with this stress on a verse medium, Eliot also favoured other devices which would make drama more formal, and emphasise its nature as a work of art. Drama, he claimed, should return to the ritual and liturgical sources from which it had sprung, if it was to revitalise itself; "drama", he says, "springs from religious liturgy, and...it cannot afford to depart far from religious liturgy. ... when drama has ranged as far as it has in our own day, is not the only solution to return to religious liturgy? And the only dramatic satisfaction that I find now, is in a High Mass well performed. Have you not there everything necessary? And indeed, if you

consider the ritual of the Church during the cycle of the year, you have a complete drama represented. The mass is a small drama having all the unities; but in the Church year you have the full drama of creation. This view, of course, is qualified by a sharp distinction between religion and drama by one of the other speakers in the "Dialogue of Dramatic Poetry", but it provides an excellent indication of what Eliot himself was working towards in his plays; most clearly in Murder in the Cathedral. It stresses the formal, and communal elements of the dramatic genre. To a certain extent, it also includes the participation of the audience; and a deliberate dispelling of the illusion of verisimilitude.

This emphasis on the return to the liturgical origins of drama is in keeping with Eliot's "ritualistic sensibility"; his emphasis on the need for tradition and authority, and on the past as an organic part of the present. After Murder in the Cathedral, however, Eliot's drama tended, on the surface, to move towards the realistic mode, with a verse rigidly toned down and unobtrusive; and actions set in upper-class drawing-room surroundings with characters drawn from contemporary life.

But his constant concern with a drama rooted in its origins is illustrated by the fact that his modern plays are constructed on parallels drawn from Greek myths, to which Eliot himself has drawn our attention.

Spender sees Eliot as "a poet who brought into consciousness and into confrontation, two opposite things: the spiritually negative character of the contemporary world and the spiritually positive character of the past tradition. He was obsessed with time. The past and the modern co-exist in his poetry as an imagined present of conflicting symbols to which are attached values of spiritual life or death. Although he had in his mind very vivid pictures of the past he never saw that past as a nostalgic world into which he could escape from the present. He always saw it as a force still surviving in the present..."126; "the historical sense", writes Eliot himself, "involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence..."127 After his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism this vision of life was amalgamated into his view of the doctrine of the Incarnation as the point of intersection, along the historical continuum, between

126 Ibid., p.9.
time and eternity; and the Christian sacramental view of time. It was this vision that had important formal as well as thematic consequences in his work. The formal are most clearly seen in Murder in the Cathedral which treats an overtly historical subject.

In the seventh chorus from The Rock, Eliot explicates what, for him, is the significance of the dogma of the incarnation.

Then came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in time and of time, A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call history: transecting, bisecting the world of time, a moment in time but not like a moment of time, A moment in time but time was made through that moment: for without the meaning there is no time, and that moment of time gave the meaning. 128

The Incarnation is, for Eliot, the original "timeless moment" which redeems the otherwise dreary, linear flux of past, present and future. The previous Chorus had said:

...the Son of Man was not crucified once for all, The blood of the martyrs not shed once for all, The lives of the saints not given once for all: But the Son of Man is crucified always, And there shall be martyrs and Saints. 129

129 Ibid., 159.
These words are caught up in the opening Chorus of *Murder in the Cathedral*, "Shall the Son of Man be born again in the litter of scorn..."

In sum, Eliot's view of history is not one which considers it a succession of events that happened, that we should know about since in some vague way they have conducted the world to the present. Nor does he consider it a golden age that was so much better than our own. History, for Eliot, is "a pattern of timeless moments" in which the Incarnation is ever renewed and fructified by the Saints and Martyrs. Eliot's approach to the Becket story as history is, therefore, to view it as one of these "timeless moments", a part of the eternal design.

Since history is viewed as a "pattern" rather than a sequence, the consecutive train of past, present and future becomes meaningless. They all exist simultaneously in the "timeless moment"; and such "moments" which make up the "pattern" are all re-enactments of the Incarnation of Christ, whereby God chose to make Himself man, enter the world of time and redeem it from Adam's curse. From this point of view we may speak of what Bernard Bergonzi calls "Eliot's synchronous superimposition of the medieval

130 "Little Gidding", *Four Quartets*, Ibid., p. 197.
and the modern"; \(^{131}\) time is viewed spatially. \(^{132}\) This is the main reason which accounts for the curiously still, timeless quality of *Murder in the Cathedral*. It also leads to the use of specific technical devices which bridge the chronological gap between Becket's time and ours. We never actually feel the passage of time or the movement of any sort of action, except where the author deliberately wishes us to feel it. The movement of the action which we feel in the other plays on Becket comes not only from the length of the period covered, but also from viewing the action as a flow, a sequence of events, something linear.

In an article on the play in volume fifteen of *The Criterion* Michael Sayers comments, "There is no background to the action. It might be (in fact it is) played against infinity. ...God's own museum-pieces, ticketed from baptism, ... on show to eternity." Thomas, he compares to an *objet d'art* without history. Although the comments


\(^{132}\) "Grounded in the doctrine of the Incarnation, which in a moment of history reunites fallen man and nature, with eternity, the sacramental view sees time as an eternal present, and history in general, the pattern of human events, as a kind of 'incarnation' or true analogue of the eternal design of God." William V. Spanos, "Figure as Mimetic Principle", *Twentieth Century Interpretations*..., ed. David R. Clark, p.55.
are intended to disparage, they pin-point the impression of stillness conveyed by the play. In the fifth section of 'Burnt Norton', Eliot writes:

Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness. ...  
And the end and the beginning were always there...  
... And all is always now.133

The most striking effect of the play's structure is this feeling of a continual present. This is, of course, reinforced by the fact that all the most important "action" consists not of things physically done, but of what goes on in Thomas' soul.

"It is not", writes David E. Jones, "a plain representation of 'the historical fact', but a ritual presentation of the act of martyrdom in its timeless significance, having a relationship to the historical fact which is like that of the Holy Communion to the Last Supper."134 This is the basic and most radical difference in Eliot's approach as compared with the other playwrights'. All of them, in one way or another, re-presents the historical

133 Complete Poems and Plays, p.175.

episode, covering several years. Eliot excerpts one tiny portion from those events and builds on it a play symbolic of a timeless reality. In contrast to the panoramic sweep of the other plays, Eliot concentrates his action within the last month of Becket's life, from his return to Canterbury on the 2nd of December to his murder on the 29th of December 1170. On the other hand, at several points in the play, most overtly in the prose addresses of the Knights, he repeatedly bridges the huge time-lag between the twelfth century and the twentieth.

In "Poetry and Drama", Eliot admits that "the essential action of the play was somewhat limited. ... I did not want to write a chronicle of twelfth century politics, nor did I want to tamper unscrupulously with the meagre records. ... I wanted to concentrate on death and martyrdom. This limitedness of outward action and the concentration on death and martyrdom are the determining features of the play's structure.

*Murder in the Cathedral* is divided neither into acts nor scenes. It is shorter than the other plays and consists of two symmetrical halves connected by a prose 'Interlude' — Becket's last Christmas-morning sermon.

to his people, preached a few days before his death. Another feature which distinguishes Eliot's approach lies in the peculiar set of conditions for which he wrote. Its original setting was to be the chapter house of Canterbury Cathedral which, as Eliot, Martin Brown and Robert Speaight all emphasise, had only one exit, down a long aisle through the audience. The author, moreover, was required to limit the length of the play to a particular time-span, "The first question to ask before writing a play", says Eliot, "is where is it to be produced?"136 And Patricia Adair comments, "Seldom has a work of art been wedded so closely to its setting"; the vast, echoing cathedral, she adds, dwarfs the human figure to nothingness; and since Eliot was concerned with justifying the ways of God to man, it would be unfair to judge the work by ordinary dramatic standards.137 However, in spite of being so closely bound to its original setting, the play also proved adaptable to ordinary stage conditions, and turned out to be one of the greatest commercial successes of its day. But in comparing it with the other plays on the same story, it must be borne in mind that the play


was essentially religious, written for expressly religious purposes, setting, actors and audience.

Part I opens the action with a long choric utterance from the Poor Women of Canterbury. Apart from its intrinsic beauty as poetry, it is extremely economical as an exposition device. It opens on a note of terror and foreboding as well as expectation. Then we are introduced to the rhythm of the seasonal cycle which is throughout the play associated with the Chorus of Poor Women, as well as the Christ theme. The next paragraph fills in the background a little and tells us something about the women themselves. The chorus concludes on a note of "waiting" and expectation:

Shall the Son of Man be born again in the litter of acorn?
for us the poor, there is no action,
But only to wait and to witness. 138

The Three Priests enter and fill in some of the background of Becket's fortunes during exile, and touch on the central conflict between Church and State. The Messenger enters in the manner of the Greek drama and announces the imminent arrival of Thomas. He describes the progress along the way in terms strongly reminiscent of the

descriptions of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He also gives a brief, sharp account of the final reconciliation scene in France. Further speeches from the Priests follow, expressing various attitudes to the Archbishop and his return. There is another Chorus full of an instinctive apprehension of some "unknown terror" with which the Women contrast the dull, dreary round of their daily lives. This part of the Chorus shows a remarkable blending of Eliot's own themes and symbols on the one hand, and actual historical social detail. On the heels of the Second Priest's rebuke to the Women, Thomas enters, and with his first word, "Peace", the play moves onto a higher theological and allegorical plane from the relatively naturalistic level of the preceding portion. There follows a short exchange between Thomas and the Priests; this time Thomas fills in a few necessary details about his arrival. A series of exchanges between Thomas and his Four Tempters follows. This is the most important portion of the play, thematically. The struggle with temptation is actually something which must have taken place within the mind and conscience of Thomas. The Tempters are an allegorical device to externalise the struggle on the plane of stage-action and provide the illusion of
something happening. "Eliot's plays", writes Coghill, "are about situations, not stories, like Everyman before them, and Waiting for Godot after." The Tempters help dramatise an otherwise undramatic situation which almost is the entire play. The greatest tension is concentrated in this scene, especially in the encounter with the Fourth Tempter which leads Thomas to the verge of despair.

The central peak of the play is embodied in the long silence of Thomas while Priests, Tempters and Canterbury Women provide its verbal equivalent in an orchestrated three-part chorus of great complexity. While the Tempters voice what goes on within Thomas himself, the Priests and Women counterpoint with external difficulties surrounding the prospective saint and martyr. The one voices what Coghill points to as the temptation to wanhope, the cardinal sin in Christianity; the others voice their fears; the Priests the very commonsensical one of going against the tide of events, the Chorus the vaguer and more instinctive but more metaphysical fear of universal defilement. This is what M. L. Bradbrook calls the "single moment of choice, the Kierkegaardian choice,...; the rest of the play leads up to and away

139 Coghill ed., Murder in the Cathedral, p.10.
from this moment."\textsuperscript{140} The Sermon, filling the prose Interlude which bisects the play, is intended to provide a full clarification of this moment of long silence which symbolises, in visual terms, the stillness in the midst of clamour and moment.

It is this point in the play, its very foundation, that has come in for severe criticism as being intrinsically undramatic. Helen Gardner questions whether Eliot's central subject, a prise de conscience, is susceptible to dramatic treatment at all.\textsuperscript{141} It must be admitted that dramatising mental strife and a conversion to beatitude, as it stands, is an almost impossible task, and Dame Helen's charge does hold good with regard to The Family Reunion. But in Murder in the Cathedral, Eliot has for this very reason resorted to the device of the Tempters. The turmoil within Thomas at the critical moment is given expression by the three-part chorus and clarified in the sermon. But the hurdle of showing Thomas' actual change of heart convincingly instead of explaining it, has not been entirely overcome.

However, owing to the expedient of externalising

the temptation, the play achieves a very real conflict
and tension at the crisis. "In Heaven", says Helen Gardner,
"there can be no drama, for the life of drama is change."142
The statement is valid enough, but that should not
disqualify Murder in the Cathedral from being effective
drama. The play is about sanctity, but it is not precisely
about "Heaven". The emphasis falls entirely on the pain
of attainment. Helen Gardner herself compares the play
with the Ariel poems. Change which she calls the "life
of drama" is at the centre of the main scene with the
Tempters. The Fourth Tempter's ironic use of the wheel
passage is the climax of a series of rewards which he
offers as the fruits of martyrdom. It is at once the
zenith of the dramatic tension — which has been steadily
mounting during this exchange —, and the nadir of Thomas'
sinfulness. It is an intensely dramatic moment.

The prose sermon which links the two halves of the
play is an intrinsic part of the action, and also serves
several other purposes. One of them is to turn the
twentieth-century spectator-audience into a sort of
participating congregation. The main idea behind the
sermon, of course, was to make it serve as an explicit

142 Ibid., p.131.
verbal equivalent of the play's central crisis, the outcome of Thomas' agon towards the end of Part One. The playwright had been able to dramatise this only by the central figure's silence, while the chorus externalised his turmoil. The sermon is a brilliant expedient for which Eliot found precedent in Fitzstephen's historical account. This account also gave him the Gospel-text. The sermon forms "a nodus of theme, symbol and tradition, of past and present in binding Becket's search for peace with our own."143 It gives us Eliot's own conception of the significance of the Mass of martyrdom and the function of the saint, of God's peace. The device is the essentially dramatic one of the pastor taking leave of his flock, since he knows he is going to die. E. Martin Browne asserts that the sermon had been integral to Eliot's conception of Murder in the Cathedral from the very beginning. After pointing out that the scene has always been the best remembered in the play, he adds: "the author was exactly right in calculating that when the hero reveals his heart in saying farewell to his people he will win the maximum response."144 Robert Speaight, long experienced in the role of Eliot's Becket, also affirms that the sermon proved to be a pièce de résistance.

144 The Making of T. S. Eliot's Plays, p.47.
The second part of the play opens with a chorus that parallels the opening chorus of Part One, in the theme of waiting for something from across the sea. But a line like "And war among men defiles the world, but death in the Lord renews it", shows that the women have progressed in some way from the first chorus in their understanding or intuition of the situation. This chorus is followed by the device of the three Priests entering one after another with the banners of St. Stephen, St. John the Apostle, and the Holy Innocents respectively. They commemorate the feast-days that fall between Christmas-Day, that was indicated by the Sermon, and the twenty-ninth of December when the Archbishop was murdered.

The use of the Priests with the banners and the Introits is the most clear example of Eliot's use of liturgy in the play. In Part One all the "action" takes place within Thomas, and we do not feel the passage of time at all -- nor are we meant to feel it. In Part Two, on the contrary, the author, through this liturgical

device, deliberately wishes to indicate the passage of
time — movement —, between the Christmas morning sermon
and its consummation in the martyrdom. On the other
hand, the use of liturgy emphasizes, not the ordinary
flow of time in the sense of "birth, copulation and death"
or the recurring movement of the seasons, but significant
time, time redeemed, according to the calendar of the
Church-year, where every day commemorates one of the
"timeless moments" of history.

The banners and Introits, therefore, with the movement
of time, also underline the stillness, time seen as a
pattern, simultaneously and spatially. For, what is
brought before us is a constant re-enactment of the
sacrifice of Christ, in the "actions" of St. Stephen,
St. John and the Holy Innocents. They are prototypes,
superimposed on one another, to which one more such "still
point of the turning world" is about to be added in
fulfilment of the pattern. The technical device of the
Priests thus comprehends the central paradox of movement
and stillness, flowing time and the moment. "What is
the day that we know that we hope for or fear for?"
asks the Third Priest.
Every day is the day we should fear from or hope from.

One moment weighs like another. Only in retrospection, selection,

We say, that was the day. The critical moment
That is always now, and here. Even now in sordid particulars

The eternal design may appear.146

The "sordid particulars", which may apply to the
Four Knights as well as the relatively realistic qualities of the following action, invade the stillness. The Knights enter, and are courteously greeted by the Priests and invited to dine. (This incident which Eliot, in a ritual play treats quite realistically, is treated by C. F. Meyer in his novella as a sort of parallel to Christ's Last Supper, and indirectly, to the Eucharist.)

Thomas enters and an altercation follows between him and the Knights, more or less as described in Grim's account. Thomas is accused of ingratitude and treachery to his king, of breaking his oath of homage, of fleeing across the Channel and stirring up strife abroad; and more immediately, of wishing to negate Young Henry's coronation by excommunicating the three bishops.

After this first series of exchanges with the Knights, there follows the great "death-bringers" chorus, which

146 Murder in the Cathedral, pp. 56-57.
through repeated use of the senses and visceral images, indicates a merging of the Women with all Creation, in a collective guilt and responsibility for the sin of the world. This chorus is followed by a speech from Thomas, a sort of appendix to the Christmas sermon; and an exchange with the Priests. While the Priests hustle him about, anxious to save his life, Thomas tries to explain why the attempt is futile; the difference between physical death which is now certain, and "danger" of the kind he has already overcome: "I am not in danger: only near to death." 147

As Thomas is hurried off to vespers, the Women break in with the Dies Irae chorus in which they reach the nadir of absolute despair, and apprehension of the utter "Void", the meaninglessness of a universe without God. This is followed by another exchange between Thomas and the Priests, opening with the famous incident of bolting the cathedral doors. Thomas stresses the timelessness of his "action" or "decision", both words connoting a will to the complete renunciation of will.

The doors are opened, and the Knights enter, slightly drunk, calling out for the Archbishop in the burlesque rhythms of the music-hall. These three verses spoken in

147 Ibid., p.70.
chorus by the Knights, show a remarkable blend of Biblical significance with references to the Book of Daniel and the Revelation, and a twentieth-century music-hall act, and the historical narrative of Thomas Becket.

Becket's next speech on the meaning of his death, binds him closely with Christ as his prototype. The second series of exchanges with the Knights, also corresponds roughly to the records. The Knights reiterate their demands; Thomas again refuses. Becket says a final prayer as the Knights kill him to the accompaniment of a chorus. The action again moves beyond the naturalistic plane. The killing, Nevill Coghill comments, "must not be done naturalistically, but as a part of a deliberate ritual, like a slow and symbolic ballet-movement." 148 The slaying becomes a ritual, an "enactment", a visual embodiment of what Raymond Williams calls the "rhythm of sacrifice". 149

The chorus which accompanies the murder expresses the horror of a whole universe defiled by blood-guilt. But paradoxically, this very acknowledgement implies a readiness to be cleansed in the martyr's blood.

148 Coghill, op.cit., p.133.
This chorus is followed by the apologetic prose address of the Knights which have been fair game for adverse criticism. Without even the break of a curtain, this abrupt transition into a blatantly twentieth-century mode feels like the "sudden series of slaps in the face" with which Eliot intended to shock the audience out of their complacency. Some critics regard these speeches as a serious blemish on the play. Raymond Williams finds in them "a distinctly Shavian element of 'knowing comedy' which seems to me essentially sentimental". Some, like J. L. Styan, see them as a technical tour de force: they have, he says, "all the force of an aside in Molière and a Verfremdungseffekt of Bertolt Brecht rolled into one." 

150 George Hoellering in an article on "Filming 'Murder in the Cathedral'" says, "this scene was his main reason for writing the play." N. Braybrooks ed., T. S. Eliot: A Symposium for his Seventieth Birthday (London: Hart-Davis, 1958), p.63.


There is no doubt, however, that the Knights' speeches are and were intended to be part of the purpose of the whole play. "The notes show", writes E. Martin Browne, "that it was an integral part of the original plan; and it clearly parallels the Temptations in matter and the Sermon as a prose passage of direct address."153 In general, Eliot himself was against breaking what he called the unity of feeling in a play. But in this instance, the sudden jolt caused by the shift from the metaphysical horror of the Chorus to the down-to-earth tone of a present day political meeting, is the whole point of the device. It is an essential part of Eliot's conception of history, and the relationship between past and present. Nowhere else in the play is Eliot's "synchronous" vision of history brought so forcibly to our awareness.

When your fathers fixed the place of GOD,
And settled all the inconvenient saints,
Apostles, martyrs, in a kind of Whipsnade,
Then they could set about imperial expansion
Accompanied by industrial development.154

So says the second Chorus from The Rock. This is what is dramatized in the Knights' apologies. They are extremely well-reasoned, well-argued, spirited attempts to "settle"

153 Browne, op.cit., p.53.
154 Complete Poems and Plays, p.151.
Thomas and his action or suffering, with the "inconvenient" martyrs and saints, "in a kind of whip-snade", like a rare zoological specimen.

The first Knight and leader of the group, Reginald Fitzurse, chairs the meeting and introduces the other three, who then, one by one, proceed to defend their actions. The Third Knight, William de Traci, speaks first, and the substance of his speech is the most straightforward: whatever else may be said against them, surely everyone will agree that they could never have hoped for any personal gain from their action; they have been completely "disinterested". The irony here is not as obvious as that of the longer, more complex speeches of the other two. On the face of it, the Third Knight's contention seems fair enough. But if — as was originally intended — the roles of the Knights are doubled with those of the Tempters, we find that the corresponding Third Tempter was precisely the one who proposed an alliance between the Church and the baronage — "a happy coalition of intelligent interests" (italics mine) — against the King. Looking at history we find that one of the main pretexts alleged for the barons' revolt of 1173-74 headed by the King's sons, was vengeance for the murder of Becket.
While the Third Knight's speech is rather simple and naive, the next address by Hugh de Morville is altogether on a different level. It appeals to the logical level-headedness of all right-thinking "unsentimental" individuals; to the patriotism of the good citizen, and to the aims of the welfare state. The speech is an extremely cogent argument for materialism, political expediency, constitutional supremacy, or what have you. Incidentally, we get quite a full account of the background against which Becket's struggle with the King took place. The arguments Morville uses are all twentieth-century commonplaces, widely accepted as self-evident truths.

The Fourth Knight who speaks last, has the subtlest and most insidious argument. He makes Christian theology stand on its head, and turns a martyrdom into "Suicide while of Unsound Mind"; which it would, in fact, have been if the Fourth Tempter had had his way. The verdict — rather like the conclusion of a coroner's inquest — is also an ironic side-glance at the sickness of modern society, and the meaninglessness of existences without God.

On the heels of the chairman's injunctions not to loiter at street corners or cause any disturbances, the
play moves back to the spiritual level with the First Priest's lament over the dead Archbishop. It ends with a _Te Deum_ chorus in praise of God and His creation, on a note of resolution, of harmony restored through catastrophe and suffering. All the discordant motifs used intermittently through the play, are gathered up in the final chorus and given significance through the acceptance of the martyr's blood.

The structure of the play is austere in its simplicity. There is little or nothing of what might be called plot. Unlike the episodic construction of the other Becket plays, this one is built around a central moment, a critical situation. The two halves of the play are almost exactly symmetrical in shape and size. The allegorical pattern of Part One is reproduced in realistic, visual terms in Part Two. Thomas' crisis at the end of Part One — a figurative death and rebirth — is paralleled by his physical death in Part Two, and resurrection signified in the last line of the play: "Blessed Thomas, pray for us." 155

In terms of significance, of course, Part One is more important for its concentration on the spiritual

155 Murder in the Cathedral, p. 88.
crisis and conversion of Thomas. But it is impossible to agree with Denis Donoghue when he says that "everything after Part One is structurally superfluous." Although the second part more or less duplicates the first in structure and pattern, it does so on an external level. In the simplest terms, it is meant to show how the "action" of the play concludes, the consummation of Thomas' spiritual martyrdom in terms of actual death. Equally important or more, however, is that it shows the completion of the Chorus' conversion, their recognition of their own sin and responsibility in the deed of death, and acceptance of the saving blood of the martyr.

The original meaning of the word "martyr", in Greek, was just "witness". The Chorus' repeated references to themselves as those who have to wait and bear witness, as well as their spiritual suffering makes them, in a sense, martyrs also. The course of their development runs parallel, on a lower level of intensity, with that of Thomas. The function of Part Two is to make this clear. As Part One ends with Thomas' explicit recognition of the right reason for martyrdom, Part Two concludes on a similar note of recognition and reconciliation in the final chorus. The action of Part One, however, is more important, because

156 The Third Voice..., p.82.
the change in the Women is shown as following from Thomas' own awakening. His long silence during the three-part chorus at the end of Part One, therefore, is a critical climax involving in his decision or comprehension, not only his own fate, but the fate of all those around him.

"The true martyrdom", comments David E. Jones, "requires the fulfilment of two halves of a pattern. The first half must be fulfilled by the martyr himself; ... But as the martyrdom requires the right attitude to God on the part of the martyr, so also it requires the right attitude on the part of the great mass of men."157 Thomas and the Women move towards the point of acceptance from opposite ends of the scale: he, from the arrogance of seeing himself as mover, to the humility of an instrument of God; they, from indifference born of excessive lowliness and humility, to a recognition of their part in the "pattern". The form of the play therefore, is shaped precisely to the need of Eliot's main concern, the concentration on "death and martyrdom".

The play moves on two levels of significance which correspond to the spiritual and materialistic views of life.

The two parts of the play, as has been seen, fall into the two corresponding categories, the allegorical and realistic modes of representation. From the point of view of dramatic genre, however, there are two further levels, the tragic and the satiric; and both are given their full value. With equal viability, one critic devotes an article to elucidating the "satiric theme and structure" in *Murder in the Cathedral*; while another, sees the play, together with Shaw's *St. Joan* as a tragedy with an affirmative bias.158

In general, it is possible to say that Thomas and the *Women of Canterbury*, in their attainment of salvation through suffering, are conceived as moving on the religious-tragic level; while the central scenes with the Tempters and Knights are conceived and treated in the mode of satire. The distinction between the tragic and the satiric, however, is never clear-cut. Both strands interweave through the heart of the play; tragedy and satire find their resolution in salvation and beatitude.

Most of those moments in the play where the poet explicitly includes the audience among his *dramatic-personae* are satirically treated. He does this at other times also...

by the deliberate use of anachronism as in the four
Tempters' speech "Man's life is a cheat and a disappoint-
ment;..." in Part One.159

The Knights in Part Two are a clear example of the
use of satire in both areas of the play. Within the
medieval action, their scenes with Thomas parallel the
Tempter scene of the first part, and the satire verges
on burlesque. When they step out of the action to confront
the audience in a modern manner — but essentially no
different from the medieval rationalisers of the murder —,
they provide the biggest shock of the play.

Hugh Kenner points to this interweaving of tragic
and satiric elements from another angle. According to
him, the whole action is structured on the principle of
Eliot's "moral dialectic", which is a vision of two
diametrically opposed mental states that issue in an
identical action or result. Thus Thomas' death in
Murder in the Cathedral can be explained equally well
from either of two opposed points of view; the one embodied
in the sermon — the result of a religious world-view;
the other, in the apology of the Fourth Knight, a parody
of the significance of the sermon. There is only the

159 Murder in the Cathedral, p.41.
"knife-edge" of Thomas' own consciousness to distinguish between the two. In pointing out how Eliot manages to solve his dramatic problem, Kenner indicates another important function of the Knights' apologies. "Eliot's great dramatic problem is that the distinctions he wishes to dramatise do not terminate in distinct actions, but in the same action. In this dilemma he has recourse to the unexplained contrast lurking in every detective story, the contrast between actions as they were performed, ... and the same actions as the Sleuth glibly recounts them in his omniscience. ... Eliot's ingenious stratagem was to give the first telling the substantiability of dramatic exhibition, and producing the glib summing-up as a fatuous anticlimax."160 The summing-up is neither fatuous nor an anti-climax. But that does not substantially alter Kenner's point. Eliot could not afford to make the Knights' arguments a fatuous anticlimax because they were intended to be a temptation of the audience to parallel that of Thomas in Part One.

The play, as a whole, has an underlying sacramental rhythm of sin, suffering, sacrifice and redemption. E. Martin Browne points out the precise suitability of the conditions imposed by the Canterbury Festival to

Eliot's own theories of drama and religious ritual.

"Thus Eliot began his dramatic career properly as in Greek tragedy by showing the story of a cult at the sacred spot associated with that cult." 161

The form of Murder in the Cathedral is also modelled on the formal principles which governed the ancient Greek drama. Like the Greek tragedians, Eliot had a subject on which he could assume prior knowledge in his audience. In an age where any common ground of beliefs or principles between the dramatist and his audience is almost non-existent — as Eliot himself so often points out — he had for the first production a remarkably homogeneous audience, whose beliefs he could take for granted.

As with Greek drama, Eliot begins at the point of crisis — "a man comes home foreseeing that he will be killed, and he is killed." 162 Except for the middle phrase, "foreseeing that he will be killed", Eliot might just as well have been talking about the Agamemnon. 163

The bare essentials of the background are filled in as and when necessary during the course of the play. As

162 "Poetry and Drama", On Poetry and Poets, p. 80.
163 There is a curious parallel in the exposition of the two plays. The opening chorus of Murder in its mixture of hope and foreboding, in its repeated stress on waiting and expectancy of the protagonist's "coming" is strongly reminiscent of the weary sentry's opening speech in the Agamemnon.
with Greek tragedy, the pattern of re-enactment, as well as the theme of Eliot's play, carry overtones of religious determinism. But it lays an equal stress on individual responsibility, in the Christian manner.

Aristotle, looking at the examples before him, came to the conclusion that plot was the "soul" of tragedy. The emphasis fell on universal powers working themselves out in human destinies. The cast of characters was stripped to the barest minimum, and since they were personages well known in tradition, the dramatists laid no stress on characterisation of individuals. Furthermore, since the dramas habitually opened at the point of crisis and swiftly worked themselves to their conclusions, there was neither the time nor the space to warrant any exploration of the characters' idiosyncrasies. The stress in Greek drama also fell rather more on the workings of the powers-that-be than on individual volition. All these conditions combined to give them concise, tightly knit plays, in which the core was an unfolding action. Eliot's stress on the unfolding of his action — which, paradoxically, amounts to stillness — on God's eternal pattern; and the almost complete disregard for individualisation of character, are similar to what we have in Greek drama. Frederick A. Pottle claims that Murder in the Cathedral illustrates
"a remarkable epoch when drama, after having long been rotten with character (...), turned again to plot." 164

The action from the arrival of Thomas to his murder, is supposed to cover almost a month. But the play as a whole gives the impression of concentration upon a single moment conceived almost spatially. Discussing the relevance of the Aristotelian Unities for later ages, Eliot comments: "The laws (not rules) of unity of place and time remain valid in that every play which observes them in so far as its material allows is in that respect and degree superior to plays which observe them less. ... the Unities are not three separate laws. They are three aspects of one law: we may violate the law of Unity of Place more flagrantly if we preserve the law of Unity of Time, or vice versa; we may violate both if we observe more closely the law of Unity of Sentiment." 165 Murder in the Cathedral is almost classic in its observance of the Unities, at least so far as the twelfth-century action is concerned. But it flagrantly transgresses the Unities of Time and Sentiment to serve its own special purposes. We accept


this willingly, however, because — as Eliot himself approvingly quotes from Butcher — "the action converges on a definite point. The thread of purpose running through it becomes more marked. ...The end is linked to the beginning with inevitable certainty, and in the end we discern the meaning of the whole."

The most notable feature, however, which allies Murder in the Cathedral with classical Greek tragedy, is its use of a chorus. For this purpose, Eliot has gone back to the original form of the Aeschylean chorus which, he says, "has always fundamentally the same uses. It mediates between the action and the audience; it intensifies the action by projecting its emotional consequences, so that we as the audience see it doubly, by seeing its effect on other people." The Canterbury Women, however, do not stop at being a neutral theatrical device, a bunch of ineffectual commentators on the action. For the completion of Eliot's formal design of Christian martyrdom, they are as necessary as participants in the action, as Thomas himself. We see them move, in the course of the play, from a terror of consciousness, through an intuitive grasp of the significance of Thomas' act, to a final acceptance of their own complicity in

166 Ibid., p.47.
167 Quoted, D. E. Jones, op.cit., p.52.
the universal guilt. In making the Women acknowledge themselves "as type of the common man" 168, Eliot underlines the Chorus' mediating function between the heroic protagonist and the prosaic audience in the Greek manner. It also emphasises the parallels between the spiritual state of the Chorus at the beginning of the play and that of most of the audience. The "common man" is not only themselves, but the spectators sitting across from the stage. It thus becomes a means of reiterating throughout the play the perennial nature of its themes, and consequently, another means for emphasising the simultaneity of past and present. The Chorus as participating personage, however, comprehends and moves beyond the spiritual torpor in which the dramatist's contemporaries are sunk. The Women also impersonate, on a lower scale than Thomas' the situation of the individual before his God.

The other major influence on the form of *Murder in the Cathedral* is the medieval Morality play. It is one aspect of Eliot's "medievalism" in this play. The historical episode, the theology mainly based on Augustine and Aquinas, and a part of the treatment, all emphasise its roots in the Middle Ages. Its affiliations with

168 *Murder in the Cathedral*, p. 87.
the Morality play, illustrate the Christian half of Eliot's aim of returning drama to its liturgical origins. In a letter to E. Martin Browne, while the play was still being written, Eliot said of Part One: "It is... formalised with no attempt at realism, and more in the mode of Everyman or a Morality Play." 169

The form of Everyman, granted a Christian subject with allegorical personages, shows certain similarities with classical Greek drama. Everyman, too, is a drama which begins at the point of crisis, and rapidly proceeds to a resolution. Death suddenly summons Everyman to God to present the accounts of his life before the heavenly tribunal. The dramatic tension remains very high throughout the play as, one by one, all the protagonist's earthly friends desert him save his feeble Good-deeds. Like Murder in the Cathedral, Everyman ends affirmatively. Both, the classical Greek drama and the medieval Morality were essentially stylised and ritualistic performances of the presentational rather than the illusionistic or representational type; and both dealt with religious subjects.

Martin L. Kornbluth has devoted an entire article to tracing the parallels between Eliot's play and *Everyman*. He finds several resemblances between the two protagonists. Actually, however, the resemblance extends only to their initial physical predicament. Both are on the brink of imminent death and subsequent danger of damnation; they have very little time to retrieve their losses, to put their "rooms in order". The action in both plays compresses itself into this brief span between death's summons and the physical consummation. In terms of moral significance, however, it is Eliot's Women of Canterbury who are the equivalents of Everyman; "human kind" who "cannot bear very much reality". Their predicament, physically, is less tense than Everyman's because they are not on the verge of death; they have time if only they become conscious. Thomas belongs to Eliot's elect; he is a saint of the heroic race, despite of his human failings, or perhaps because of them. His spiritual apotheosis and death reincarnate the Divine Grace by which Everyman — the Canterbury Women — is saved.

The influence of the Morality play is most obviously seen in Eliot's use of the allegorical device of the Four Tempters. E. Martin Browne describes how this device
originated from the needs of the play: "...a draft (which was in
in verse) reached me. It was complete, practically as printed,
up to the end of the scene of Thomas' arrival on 2 December 1170.
But since the rest of the play (already planned...) concerns
Christmas Day and the day of the murder (29 December), how
is it to show Thomas achieving the state of mind indicated
by the sermon on Christmas Day, and how in the process is
the necessary historical detail to be introduced? ...I
suggested, it was possible, even likely, that persons who
wished to influence his behaviour in various directions
would have visited Thomas."171 Among the visitors, Browne
says, he thought of a courtier-companion of Thomas' youth,
a fellow-politician and a baron, who in the course of the
conversation, would also be qualified to provide the
necessary amount of information. Here we have the germ
of the first three Tempters, who were originally conceived
not as morality figures at all, but real live human beings.
The quotation indicates that the central situation was
already in the playwright's mind. It was, in the simplest
terms, a change of heart, something within the protagonist,
which would make his death a martyrdom instead of a suicide.
The problem Eliot faced was one of externalising a mental
state in terms clear enough to be understood by average

171 Browne, op.cit., p.42.
twentieth-century people. The quotation also indirectly explains why in Part One the passage of time is not felt at all. The strongest impression is that of a single moment. If the blank between 2 December and Christmas Day had been filled by visits from real persons, perhaps this would not have been the case.

The brilliant idea of turning the visitors into externalised versions of Thomas' own several inner selves came from one of Eliot's friends, Rupert Brooke. This also gave the dramatist the opportunity to add the fourth and most effective Tempter. It might not have been possible to introduce him as a realistic visitor, or if possible, he would not have been half as effective as he is. For as an allegorical figure he is conceived as the exact obverse of Thomas the martyr and saint. "This scene", says Martin Browne, "enables Eliot to bring into his drama the whole future of Becket's cult, and to cast an ironic glance upon the subsequent treatments of the history in which his motives were accorded scant respect." 172

What Eliot has done with his Tempters, however, is rather deeper than making labelled abstractions of qualities. Martin Browne says he wrote a letter to Eliot suggesting that as the play stood, the transition from the realistic

172 Ibid., p.43.
to the allegorical level was too unexpected and would confuse the audience. In order to lessen this confusion he suggested labelling the Tempters according to their temptations. He quotes Eliot's sharp reaction: "WON'T have tempters given individual abstract names; won't have pseudo-morality play pre-Raphaelite simplicity. Let the audience adjust planes of reality for themselves."173 As it turned out, Eliot was right. The charm of the Tempter-figures lies in their plausibility as real human beings, even though we know for a fact that they are meant to be allegorical representations. Some of the exchanges with the first three Tempters even preserve vestiges of their original conception as realistic human visitors. Towards the end of the first temptation, Thomas as pastor advises his interlocutor to watch out for the health of his soul: "Look to your behaviour. You were safer/Think of penitence and follow your master." To the Third Tempter who claims to be "a rough straightforward Englishman" somewhat in the manner of Mark Antony in Julius Caesar, Thomas says: "For a countryman/You wrap your meaning in as dark generality/As any courtier."174 The Tempters, although conceived allegorically, partake as much of common humanity as the Priests or the Chorus.

173 Ibid., p.349.
174 Murder in the Cathedral, pp.25, 32. Also noted, Coghill, p.110.
Eliot, speaking of "the three voices of poetry" comments, "The first is the voice of the poet talking to himself — or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience... The Third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he would say within limits of one imaginary character..." 175 After prolific use of the first and second voices Eliot, in Murder in the Cathedral produced his first sustained attempt in the third voice. However, one cannot help noticing that the first and second voices occur almost as frequently as the third. Some of Thomas' speeches are strongly reminiscent of the "I" in Ash-Wednesday. This is especially apparent in portions like the central wheel speech or the speeches which explain the significance of his martyrdom.

However, as it has often been pointed out, the language of Murder in the Cathedral varies not in accordance with the character of the speaker, but with the sentiments expressed. On these terms, the charge often leveled against the Chorus that their exalted utterance is never in keeping with their station as "scrubbers and sweepers", becomes

meaningless. The idiom is perfectly expressive of their vague forebodings of cosmic doom, their feeling of sin and defilement and later, the harmonious resolution. In keeping with the sentiments the rhythm of their language is Biblical and liturgical. Two of the choruses in the second part are based, in rhythm and meaning, on the Dies Irae and Te Deum. The language results from Eliot's formal and ritualistic conception of his play. It underlines the universality of the central situation, but as a corollary, does not allow much individuation. Similarly, Thomas, who is conceived as the most enlightened consciousness in the play, often sounds like portions of the Four Quartets; except in the exchanges with the Tempters, where his arrogance is emphasised; and the scenes with the Knights which closely follow the language of Edward Grim's account.

A close study of the drama of the Elizabethan and Jacobean age, had led Eliot to the conclusion that if dramatic poetry was to be revitalised, it would have to shake off the influence of Shakespearean blank verse which had had such a strangulating effect on the nineteenth century. He advocated a return to the verse form of
Everyman which he called the only work of English drama "within the limitations of art". In contrast to his later aim in the plays with modern settings, at the time of Murder in the Cathedral Eliot spoke of the necessity of constantly reminding his audience that his play was in verse. "Blank verse", he said, "can too easily be made to sound as if it were bad prose, and the more regular the verse the more easily it can be maltreated in this way. So we introduce rhyme, even doggerel as a constant reminder that it is verse and not a compromise with prose." The scene with the Tempters provides the most effective illustration of this aim. The First — in keeping with his temptation to return to the pleasures of youth — speaks in light, tripping rhythms. His opening speech is in rhymed couplets which are almost doggerel. The rhythms of the Second are heavier and loaded with alliteration; the sequence modulates into a short stymoythic exchange

176 "The way to feel for its rhythms is to stress the most important syllables of the most important words, and let the rest trip along the tongue, with a slight breathing pause at the ends of lines where it may seem necessary, and a slight marking of rhymes where they occur." Coghill, pp.145-46.
177 *Selected Essays*, p.111.
between Thomas and the Tempter which has been traced
The Fourth Tempter's speeches begin with a tongue-in-cheek
manner and move more and more towards the longer, graver
rhythms of Thomas himself, as the Tempter gradually reveals
himself as the Archbishop's alter-ego.

Rhythmic and linguistic variety is one of the most
notable features of *Murder in the Cathedral*. But it is
always governed by the significance of what is said and
its desired effect on the hearer. The mixture of prose
and verse is another instance of this variety. In general,
Eliot himself admits that it is not advisable to mix the
two, since every transition from one to the other will
jerk on the audience and make them unpleasantly aware of
the medium. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, however, he found
prose indispensable at two crucial points; in the Sermon,
and in the Knights' political-platform speeches. In the
case of the Sermon, Eliot explains, prose had to be used,
since a verse sermon would ring false even to the most ardent
church-goers. Besides, since it falls between the two
parts of the play, the transition is not abrupt; and Thomas'
last speech in Part One prepares the audience for a direct
address. The theological content of the Sermon as well
as the strong overtones of Biblical phrasing and rhythm,
give its prose the dignity and flowing cadence of verse.
The Knights' addresses are a different matter altogether. The author, at this point, deliberately intended to jar the audience. And the abrupt shift from the Ecclesiastes-like verse of the "Clear the air..." chorus to colloquial modern prose, suited his purposes very well indeed. The prose of the Knights provides a sharp contrast with that of the Sermon. This linguistic contrast also underlines the contrast in the thematic content of the speeches. The prose of the Sermon has the depth and dignity of the religious, Christian world-view. The cliché-ridden platform-prose of the Knights rings hollow and parodies the materialistic outlook of the majority in the modern world.

The linguistic variety of *Murder in the Cathedral* results from the variety of modes which it blends into an integrated work of art. Features of classical Greek tragedy and the medieval Morality play rub shoulders with typically modern forms of popular entertainment like the vaudeville and the music-hall revue. Yet the final impression left by the play is one of stasis, although within the "pattern" there is movement. It shows parallels with the visual arts which use a spatial continuum rather than a temporal. This impression is clearly epitomised in Marguerite Rabut's analogy comparing it with a medieval
The religious and medieval historical subject and the formal theological and ritualistic treatment combine to give this impression.

(vii)

'Conclusion'

The historical nature of the Becket story has led to dramatic works which are all, in some degree, "non-naturalistic" in their formal approach. Tennyson and de Vere, in the face of the rising tide of the new realistic social drama, produced conventional poetic plays following the historical-tragical Elizabethan pattern. These works lack vitality because they were mechanically fitted into

179 "Le Thème de Thomas Becket...", p.546. "Thomas stands alone like one of those beautiful serene figures sculptured on the central portal of a cathedral; he appears surrounded by his people to whom he is preaching; at his side the four tempters whisper in his ear; and at his feet is the scene of the martyrdom, where he expires under the sword-blows of the barons."
an outmoded convention. The approaches of the twentieth century dramatists are individual and characteristic of each artist. However, the historically distanced subject matter, facilitated, in all three cases, a purposefully anti-naturalistic treatment. Formally, these three plays are all stylised and practical illustrations of the writers' theoretical preconceptions of drama as an art form. All three writers equate the naturalistic tendency with a superficial approach to reality; and claim a deeper truth for art which can be reached only through a degree of formalism. Eliot talks about the limitations of art as opposed to the desert of exact likeness, Fry about the poetic and prosaic views of life, Anouilh about flattened ideas of life, as opposed to the sinister and grotesque game as we play it.

In conclusion, it may be pointed out that the form of each play follows from the dramatist’s attitude to history in general, and the historical nature of the Beckett story in particular. Tennyson and de Vere saw history largely as a succession of events in the past with some causal influence on the present. They made of their plays simple chronicles with episodic plots, almost like versified chapters from history books. Fry and Anouilh, leaving the actual events firmly in the past,
saw the perennial significance of certain themes and their relevance to the present. Their emphasis falls on the sameness of human nature. The form of their plays, therefore, is sprawling and panoramic, but with devices that enable rapid shifts in perspective, and selection, telescoping and superimposing of detail. The final impression is one of movement, things happening, but within the framework of a completed story. Eliot's "synchronous" vision of history concentrates on one "timeless moment" of Becket's story. Its over-all stillness and formality throws the emphasis on pattern rather than movement.
The form imposed by Eliot on his historical raw-material remains the most original, paradoxically, by being most contemporary with its medieval subject.