CHAPTER IV

THE 'LIVING DIALECTIC': Themes
...Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.

(Matthew 22:21)

There is a true and living Dialectic between the Church and the state Which has to be argued forever in good part. ...
It's the nature of man that argues; The deep roots of disputation Which dug in the dust, and formed Adam's body.¹

(i)

'The Conflict of Church and State - its ramifications.'

As has been pointed out earlier, the basic potential of the Becket story is essentially tragic on two main counts. It was part of a conflict of principles and jurisdictions in which firm allegiance to either side automatically meant opposition to the other. Secondly, in this particular instance, the exclusiveness of either side was greatly exacerbated by the strength and obduracy

of the personages involved, as well as by their previous friendly relations with one another.

Tragedy, as T. R. Henn points out, has always, somehow, been concerned with political themes. It was, from the practice of the ancient Greeks downwards, accepted as almost axiomatic that tragedy should treat of kings or queens or other high personages, representatives of countries or powers; so that their characters as individual human beings might be lent a symbolic and representative dimension; so that in the catastrophes which overtook them, might be configured the fates of nations or institutions. Thus it would seem that tragedy has always, in some sort, had a public character; and that the use of exalted personages, implicitly at least, touched on political themes even if they were not important to the main purpose of particular plays.

Twentieth-century drama has, on the whole, been extremely aware of political issues, owing to the cataclysmic events of the first half of the century, and to the dissemination of political ideologies like Marxism which claim to provide fool-proof theories on the events. However, it has tended to tackle political issues either in the Marxist terms of a class struggle; or in terms of an individual rebellion against the
tyranny of the hide-bound letter of the law as personified by the State. Owing to the rise of democracy and various other collective forms of government, the emphasis of modern drama has shifted from the vicissitudes in the lives of exalted, quasi-symbolic persons to the "common-man" who has qualities of personal heroism, though he may not be very high up in the land. In fact, the drama which treats of political issues tends to be topical, to confine itself to peculiarities of our own day, and to distinctly non-exalted characters.

With such a tendency the plays on the seckat story show a marked contrast. However, the raw material of history may be used, the very fact that it forms the skeleton of each of the plays, leads to comparisons with, or evaluations in terms of the traditional implications of tragedy.

The theme of the conflict between divine and human law, has been of perennial interest in literature, and is at least as old as the Antigone of Sophocles. The conflict here is between the law of the state and the law of the gods. The one claims that Polyneices was a traitor and his body must, therefore, be left outside the city walls since he has forfeited the right to a proper ritual burial. The other commands that Antigone shall be faithful to her duties as a sister and perform the last rites for
This theme in Antigone is also an example of the single individual's heroic but necessarily ineffective rebellion against the state. The classic instance of such rebellion in actual life is that of the trial and death of Socrates. Both Antigone and Socrates die martyred by the law of the State. But, while Antigone is killed by the letter of the law, the death of Socrates is engineered by a malicious manipulation of the law; so that Socrates, by submitting to the law, to the last, affirms the need and validity of that law. Robert Bolt's version of the trial and death of Sir Thomas More is somewhat similar. More's execution is the result of a perversion of law epitomised in the person of the cynical timeserver Thomas Cromwell. More also dies, implicitly affirming the law; because it is this same law on which he bases his defence.

A consideration of the idea of the law of the state leads directly to the question of what Herbert Howarth has called the "Higher Law". In the first chapter dealing with family influences on T. S. Eliot, Howarth talks about the poet's grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot,
a Unitarian minister who hated the custom of slavery, but also acknowledged the importance of the law of the land. He believed that active resistance to the law should only be a last resort and then the individual must be prepared to pay the price. As Howarth puts it, "...having made his stand the protester was under the moral obligation to compensate his disobedience to the State by paying the penalty, ... as the laws of the State required, and only by suffering patiently could he justify what he had done." This attitude lies, not only behind Eliot's aversion to all manifestations of the "inner voice", but also his conception of the situation of Becket. Becket does appeal to the Higher Law — the "Law of God above the law of Man" — but he also answers all the charges brought against him by the Knights. And when the time comes to pay the price, he makes no resistance. The point is that Becket appeals from one law to another outside himself. He does not claim to be the sole repository of the Higher Law. This dilemma of the conscientious objector is an important aspect of all interpretations of Becket's behaviour. For his intransigent stand on behalf of ecclesiastical jurisdiction was, at bottom, a rebellion against the law of the State.

3 Ibid., p.346.
The medieval struggle between Empire and Papacy provided an outstanding historical embodiment of the perennial conflict of human and divine laws. It began with problems of practical politics. But even as it came to a head in the eleventh century between Pope Gregory VII and Emperor Henry IV, it was essentially a conflict of principle, of regnum versus sacerdotium. The Gregorian doctrine put forth and supported by the ecclesiastical party, is succinctly outlined by John of Salisbury in *Policraticus*. He writes,

...the State is a kind of organism, whose life is a gift of God, controlled by the motions of divine equity and ruled by the governing force of reason. But the powers which establish and implant in us the practices of religion and hand down to us the ceremonies of God ... in the body politic take the place of the soul. Those, indeed, who preside over the practice of religious duties, ought to be upheld and reverenced as being the soul of the body. For who doubts that the ministers of God's holiness are his vicars? Furthermore, like as the soul hath pre-eminence over the whole body, so also those whom God calls to be officials of religion are set over the whole body ...  

This book completed in 1159, was dedicated to the Chancellor, Thomas Becket.

The imperial party contended that in State and Church, God had created two co-ordinate but autonomous powers of equal authority, which should function together in harmony, each in its own sphere. What the Gregorian principles postulated was a single ecclesiastical hierarchy covering all Christendom, cutting across barriers of nation and social class; thus creating parallel and independent jurisdictions within the secular governments of the states concerned. It virtually amounted to saying that kings were not supreme heads in their own realms, but subservient to the spiritual authority of the Pope in Rome.

This conflict of principle between Church and State, provides a theme common to all the writers who deal with the Becket story. However, it is rarely the major concern except in the works of the two Victorians. The others all make use of it in the working out of preoccupations that are peculiarly their own. Thus, writers like Fry or Shelley Mydans whose central concern is the evolution of a character, are both obliged to stress the conflict as a pivotal issue in the careers of their protagonists. However, Fry's other main theme is the interplay of different laws in Henry's career and in human life generally. It subsumes the Church-State conflict of the twelfth century which, from this point of view, becomes merely one aspect of the interplay of laws. Henry's struggle with his wife
and children illustrates the other aspects of this theme.

The central concern of writers like Meyer and Anouilh is an essentially human and psychological one: the relationship between the two men. They, therefore, only touch on the Church-State theme; and in both cases, it serves largely as an analogue of the totally insular conflict of Saxon and Norman, which takes precedence over a purely political struggle of rival jurisdictions. For Anouilh it provides one historically concrete opposition from which ramify other sets of contraries with which he is repeatedly concerned in the early plays: the opposition between idealism and expediency, the poor and the rich, the conqueror and the conquered. But in its original political aspect of regnum versus sacerdotium, the conflict is almost non-existent for Anouilh. The exclusiveness and intransigence of the claims of either side provide the hint on which the playwright bases his dominating idea of human isolation, epitomised in the metaphor of a dialogue between two deaf men.

Aubrey de Vere was chiefly concerned to illustrate an essentially Christian heroism in the person of St. Thomas of Canterbury, as opposed to the pagan form earlier embodied in Alexander the Great. But in order to do this, he had to stress the aspect of Becket as a defender of the
Church against the encroachments of the State. He gives his opinion of what might have happened to Western civilisation if the Church had not succeeded in holding its own in the struggle: "the far future would have been strangled before its birth. The debased conditions of the New Europe would have proved a barren soil wholly incapable of germinating modern civilisation. After the destruction of all spiritual, and consequently of all moral freedom, the restoration of the best arts, letters and political ideas of the ancient world would have been as impossible as the growth of corn upon rock."5

On the other hand, Tennyson writing his play as a chronicle of events, centres all the interest of his main plot on the particulars of the Church-States controversy; and, except in a few scattered speeches of Becket himself, fails to raise the practical and insular issues to the level of universal principles.

At the other extreme, Eliot's approach refines the two opposing principles of jurisdiction to two mutually exclusive ways of life and views of the world. Perhaps it would not be too far wrong to say that this opposition is central to his whole career. In The Idea of a Christian Society he writes,

5 Recollections (New York: Edward Arnold, 1897), pp.363-64.
In matters of dogma, matters of faith and morals, it [the Church] will speak as the final authority within the nation; in more mixed questions it will speak through individuals. At times it can and should be in conflict with the State, in rebuking derelictions in policy, or in defending itself against the encroachments of the temporal power, or in shielding the community against tyranny and asserting its neglected rights, or in contesting heretical opinion or immoral legislation and administration.6

Many of Eliot's views on authority and Christian orthodoxy have strong parallels with the thought of the Middle Ages upon which he drew. And the subject he chose for Murder in the Cathedral was peculiarly suited to his outlook. Eliot's historicity in this play is of a different kind from that of the other dramatists. He not only attempts to point to the relevance of a past event to the twentieth century, but treats the medieval subject on its own religious and theological assumptions which are also his.

Since the most striking feature of the Backet story is the struggle of Church and State in an age of unquestioned faith, the religious assumptions behind the literary treatments become a matter of some importance. Tennyson, Fry, Meyer and Shelley Mydans assume a tacit acceptance of the Christian faith and its moral premises. Fry had

been actively concerned with religious themes in his earlier plays. In Curtmantle, however, he deliberately eschews a 'stained-glass window' approach for a secular treatment of his subject. Neither Christianity nor religious beliefs form a very important part of the play's themes. However, they cannot be, and never are, totally ignored. Fry is overtly Christian in his faith, and this faith is taken for granted in the play. In contrast, Eliot's main concerns are explicitly religious and theological; and history is rigorously pruned to suit them.

Unlike the others, it is doubtful whether Anouilh's Becket even believes in the existence of God. Anouilh himself, from what his other plays show, is basically agnostic. The subtitle of his play on Becket, "ou l'honneur de Dieu", underlines the ambiguity of the protagonist's religious faith: that the "honour of God" may also be the selfhood of Becket. Anouilh's approach to the religious issue may be compared to Robert Bolt's in his play on Sir Thomas More. Both playwrights sidetrack obviously religious or theological matters and concentrate on the individual and his conscience or integrity or identity. The original dilemma of the conflicting claims of two institutions and orthodoxies is turned into the individual's resistance of the State
in single-minded adherence to "an ultimate principle of meaning within himself". In the hands of Anouilh, the Antigone of Sophocles had undergone a similar transformation.

(ii)

'The Victorianism of Aubrey de Vere and Tennyson'

As in Tennyson's play, the Church-State theme in its purely historical perspective is central to Aubrey de Vere's *St. Thomas of Canterbury*. Unlike Tennyson, however, this poem is an almost black-and-white treatment of a Hegelian conflict. Henry and his Royal Customs are seen as the embodiments of the Caesar of St. Matthew's Gospel, of the pride and despotism of temporal sovereignty. On the other hand, Becket upholds, in his person, not only the supremacy of the eternal kingdom of heaven, but also the principle of nationalism and patriotism.

Aubrey de Vere meets Anouilh half-way in making his Becket half Saxon; the other half is Norman, and the whole, entirely English. He repeatedly underlines the point that Becket was the first native Englishman on the throne of Canterbury since the Conquest. In upholding the Church he also upholds tradition as represented by the laws of


8 See Ch. II.
Alfred and Edward the Confessor. And in so doing, he stands for the rights of the common people of England. The opposition here, however, is not between Saxon and Norman. Saxon and Norman have, by the time of Henry II amalgamated into Englishman. This native English stock personified by Thomas, stands opposed to the "alien" "Angevins". The Plantagenet Henry is essentially a foreigner, in whose imperial schemes England is merely a small portion of a vast domain ranging from "Scottish shores to mountains of Navarre" — and not a very important portion at that.  

Henry's "Royal Customs" have been customary only since the Conquest, under the reigns of despots like the Conqueror or Henry I. The poem views them as innovations, primarily because Henry Plantagenet codifies and demands — as right and law — concessions from the Church, which had earlier been handled on a flexible give-and-take basis.

Becket, in the climactic Northampton scene (II, iv), explicates this core which runs through the poem.

To Catholic souls custom is law itself;  
Law that its own foot hears not, dumbly treading  
A velvet path, smoothed by tradition old.  
I war not, sirs, with ways traditionary;  
The Church of Christ herself is a tradition; —  
Aye, but 'tis God's tradition, not of men!  
Sir, these your Customs are God's Laws reversed,  

9 See Leicester's speech, St. Thomas of Canterbury, I, i, p. 5; quoted, Ch. III.
Old innovations from the first withstood,
The rights of Holy Church, the poor man's portion,
Sold, and for nought, to aliens. ....

A century they have lived; but he never lived,
The man that knew their number or their scope,
Where found, by whom begotten, or how named:
Like malefactors long they hid in holes;
They walked in mystery like the noon-tide pest;
In the air they danced; they lived on breath of princes,
Largest when princes' lives were most unclean,
... I defy your Customs; they are nought;
From them I turn to our old English laws,
The Confessor's; and theirs who went before him,
The charters old, and sacred oaths of kings:

The conflict, therefore, is not between the Law of God
and the law of man, as in Sophocles' Antigone. St. Thomas of
Canterbury shows that the individual will of "Caesar" — as
in Polycraticus — is as much opposed to the law of man as
it is to the Law of God. "My empire", asserts Henry, "is
an empire ruled by laws."

Not warring wills; but, mark you, royal laws,
The efflux of one royal will, forth flowing
Like rivers through the land.

Becket in the Fréteval scene comments:

Yours are the passions that torment our clay,
The intellect and courage which exalt it,
The clear conception of a state and empire —
Yet seen but from below. To raise that state...
Your kingdom you would level to a plain

10 St. Thomas of Canterbury, p. 72.
11 Ibid., p. 151 (Italics mine).
O'erlooked by one hill only, and, thereon
The royal tent.\textsuperscript{12}

The Royal Customs are the instruments of the pride of
Ozymandias.

At the purely secular level, in the same scene, Becket
indicates to Henry the difference between the "law"
embodied in the Royal Customs, and the "majesty of law"
embodied in the conception of the ancient Greek city-states
which Henry is said to have admired; the kind of law which
Socrates died for rather than break. This is essentially
human law, and within the play itself, is represented by
the king's justiciar, Richard de Luci. De Luci courageously
declares in the midst of the others' servile assent:

\begin{quote}
I deem the royal claim doubtful in part;
More doubtful yet this claim to presentations.
The law must solve that knot. The law declared,
Nor swayed by spiritual threat or civil,
I will enforce that law.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

At the very end he flatly declines to give even the semblance
of a legal sanction to the murder:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., pp.186-87.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p.59.
\end{quote}
That which the Council fain had done, but dared not, it would now do through me. Return, my lord, and tell them that this realm's justiciary is not their faction's hangmen.\footnote{14}

In contrast to the strong, dignified de Luci, stands the ubiquitous John of Oxford, the brains behind Henry's schemes for Becket's persecution. His role as a perverter of law and justice bears comparison with Robert Bolt's picture of Thomas Cromwell. It also provides a clear index of the fragility of the supposed righteousness of Henry's "customs".

Human law of the kind represented by the Justiciar, is seen as a consequence and close analogue of the divine: "... a change which stamped out all spiritual liberty and reduced religion to formality must destroy alike the moral life of the present and the future."\footnote{15} Eleanor's characteristic irreligion and anarchism illustrate the author's statement. She sees Jerusalem as a "blot" on the Holy Land, a "Black den of Saints". Consequently, on a moral and social plane she has ceased to believe in the institution and sacrament of marriage; a "married mistress" her mother-in-law calls her. We find Eleanor taunting Henry.

\footnote{14} Ibid., p.234.  
\footnote{15} Ibid., p.xxiii.
My land's a land of mind yet more than mirth,
Where men who wish your wish have longer sight.
There are who whisper there that marriage vows
Like vows monastic, mean but priestly gain; ... 16

Such sentiments are the logical conclusion of the purely secular attitude Henry is attempting to foster.

The conflict between Church and State — in its aspect of a struggle between emerging English nationalism and the power of the Pope in Rome — provides the main interest of Tennyson’s play. It is a preoccupation that binds his three history plays together, although the periods selected for dramatisation are separated from each other by fairly long stretches of time. Nor do the plays fall according to chronological order. Queen Mary was intended to dramatise the climactic episode in England’s national struggle with Rome, just preceding the resolution of the reign of Elizabeth. The next play, Harold, takes us back to the opening episode of the struggle. Harold’s nationalism and simple gentlemanliness stand opposed to the wily encroachments of William the Conqueror who invaded England under the banner of St. Peter. "As though winding into his problem’s heart", says G. Wilson Knight, "Tennyson finally concentrates on the crucial story ..."

16 Ibid., p.18.
dramatised in *Becket.* From a massive deployment of historical, social, romantic and humorous material flames out the central opposition of Church and State." 17

This may have been what the author intended; but as things stand, the "massive deployment" tends to smother the clarity of the main issue and blur it with superficial concerns; while the romantic interest proves to be a superfluous distraction, more irritating than that of *Harold* because it is given more importance by the author.

Of the three plays, *Queen Mary,* although the most massive, is definitely the most effective in its treatment of religious and national issues.

Charles Tennyson describes the contemporary social conditions which led his grandfather to treat the Church-State theme in detail. Tennyson's final choice of a theme, comments his grandson, "was decided by a great national controversy which reached its climax during the early 1870s, and which was brought very close home to him by his friendship with W. G. Ward. The rise of the Tractarian Movement after the passing of Catholic Emancipation in 1829, had initiated a new phase of religious struggle in England." 18 The conversion of Ward, Newman and Manning to Catholicism shocked Protestant feeling. This was aggravated by the events in

17 *The Golden Labyrinth,* p. 266.
18 *Alfred Tennyson,* p. 413.
Italy. The Vatican found its temporal power threatened by the movement for Italian Unity and its spiritual position undermined by the upsurge of liberal thought. In 1664 Pius the Ninth issued the Encyclical Quanta Curia condemning every claim to put civil authority on a level with ecclesiastical. In 1676 he summoned an Oecumenical Council which by solemn decree confirmed the dogma of Papal Infallibility.

The central problem of the relative authority of Church and State, therefore, was almost as alive in Tennyson's time as it had been in the time of Becket; and substantially, in much the same form. And Tennyson, we find, often imposes his own Victorian sentiments on his historical personages. Even Becket, whose stand in the conflict out-Gregoriad Gregory VII himself, is shown inveighing against the Papacy. From the burning fanaticism of Queen Mary an unknown voice cries out to God "of His infinite love to break down all kingship and queenship, all priesthood and prelacy; to cancel and abolish all bonds of human allegiance, all the magistracy, all the nobles, and all the wealthy; and to send us again, according to his promise, the one King, the Christ, and all things
in common, as in the day of the first church..."19

This blend of religious-socialist anarchism has a remarkably modern ring; and the passionate sincerity of the speech stamps it as expressing Tennyson's own feelings. "Tennyson", comments one of his contemporaries, "...looked forward, not always un hopefully, to the day when there would be one Shepherd and one Flock."20

In Becket, since the author's allegiance is evenly divided between the positions taken by the two protagonists, he inserts Walter Map as his own representative in the play. At Montmirail, Map's wise-cracks goad Becket into an outburst against Rome:

I would have done my most to keep Rome holy,
I would have made Rome know she still is Rome —
Who stands aghast at her eternal self
And shakes at mortal kings — her vacillation,
Avarice, craft — 0 God, how many an innocent
Has left his bones upon the way to Rome
Unwept, uncared for. Yes — on mine own self
The King had no power except for Rome.
'Tis not the King who is guilty of mine exile,
But Rome, Rome, Rome!21

19 Works, p.648. In I,iv of Becket one of the beggars says, "Becket shall be king, and the Holy Father shall be king, and the world shall live by the king's venison and the bread o'the Lord, and there shall be no more poor forever." Works, p.715.

20 Quoted, Hallam Tennyson, Memoir, p.169.

21 Works, p.723.
Inspite of Tennyson's own patriotic and Protestant leanings, the history plays are a valiant attempt at giving the devil his due. What he firmly condemns is fanaticism of all types; not Catholicism or even the pope per se. The martyrdom of Archbishop Cranmer in *Queen Mary* is balanced by the martyrdom of Becket in the third play. Mary Tudor herself, is portrayed with sympathy. What is condemned in her is not so much her allegiance to Rome, as her consequent fanaticism; and what Tennyson saw as the betrayal of her country, the marriage with Philip of Spain. The Pope's own representative, Cardinal Pole, is a timid but tolerant man in contrast to people like Bishop Gardiner, a former Protestant who has recanted. Even the Conqueror in *Harold*, though shrewd and cunning and deceitful, is not drawn as a villain, but as a strong administrator without too many scruples. Tennyson, inspite of his own sympathies, tries his conscientious best not to weight the scales in the struggle; "his friendship with Simeon, Ward and Aubrey de Vere", says his grandson, "had given him a warm admiration for their single-minded faith and devotion to their Church, while the mystical side of his nature found much that was congenial in the Catholic communion..."22 Such an approach to a burning question that was both contemporary and historical, is in marked contrast to the brilliant but

22 Charles Tennyson, op. cit., pp. 413-14.
biassed interpretations of a historian like J.A. Froude.

The patriotism which was such an important part of the Laureate's make-up, becomes most apparent in Becket. In the two earlier plays the clear-cut distinctions between Catholic and Protestant tend to turn the problem, largely, into a religious struggle. The main issue in Becket is not a religious struggle between Catholic and Protestant as in Queen Mary, nor between a nationalist quasi-Protestant like Harold and a foreign "Papist" invader. In Harold the Saxon — almost national — church is represented by Archbishop Stigand, "Old uncanonical Stigand.../Who had my pallium from an Antipope!" From the beginning of the play we have intimations of hostility between Stigand and the Saxon clergy on the one hand, and the Norman bishops on the other. In Becket, however, the distinctions are far less clear. Henry's position partakes of both Harold's and the Conqueror's, so does Becket's. The relatively well-defined issues of nationalism — whether in church or in politics — versus the tyranny and corruption of Rome are complicated by one of the main ramifications of the Church-State conflict; that of the Law of God versus the law of man in general. Rosamund, who is the figure most

23 Works, p.653.
unequivocally presented as a paragon of virtue, feels the dilemma within herself. She is bound to Henry because she loves him. She understands and approves his aims. But the claims of the church are also active within her. This is perhaps the most useful function she serves in the play. She mirrors a genuine conflict where both sides have a lot to say for themselves.

The paramount importance of the Church-State theme is made clear in the opening Prologue which shows Becket, the chancellor and Henry at chess.24 The game brings before us the immediate situation in England. As long as Becket and Henry remain on the scene they continue to discuss the conflict in its various aspects. All through the chess-game Henry has, without let or hindrance, been allowed to put forward the view of the State; while Becket remains studiously non-committal and concentrates on the game in hand. After a brief exchange on the subject of Rosamund, they come back to the main theme — this time, the character and position of Becket himself. Another portion on Rosamund; and then the Church-State theme is seen in its European dimensions, and the predicament of England as part of a larger conflict.

24 For the chess-game as symbol, see Ch. VI, sec.iii.
Henry...I true son
Of Holy Church — no croucher to the Gregories
That tread the kings their children underheel —
Must curb her; and the Holy Father, while
This Barbarossa butts him from his chair,
Will need my help — be facile to my hands.
Now is my time.

A little later he says, "I'll have no more Anselms." In
the first scene of the fifth act, Henry calls Becket "a
Gregory of my throning." The first speech makes an extremely
Tennysonian point: that being a faithful son of the Church
need not necessarily mean implicit subservience to the Pope
in all things. The cross-references to Gregories and
Anselms establish the context of the conflict in time and
space. It is something that has been going on in England
for a century, and is part of a wider controversy involving
all Europe.

The major scenes of the play are devoted to dramatising
incidents in which the Church-State issue is the central
concern. These are, the long central scene at Northampton
Castle and the two reconciliation scenes at Montmirail
and Frêteval. In the Northampton scene the Pope and the
Church of Rome are represented by the Pope's almoner,
Philip of Eleemosyna who conveys to Becket the "secret
whisper of the Holy Father" counselling him to temporise.

25 Works, pp.696, 737.
This is the first point at which we are shown Rome's part in the controversy. It is not religious idealism, but avarice and political expediency that govern the actions of the Pope. "This Almoner", says Becket, "hath tasted Henry's gold"; and again, "...Rome is venal ev'n unto rottenness."26

The two reconciliation scenes show Henry attempting to patch up "a peace —/A piece in this long-tugged-at, threadbare worn/Quarrel of Crown and Church..."27 They closely follow historical accounts but do very little else. In the scene at Montmirail, however, Henry's words touch on an important aspect of the theme of God's law which we find embodied in the person and actions of Becket. Henry speaks to Louis of France:

Take heed he do not turn and rend you too:
For whatsoever may displease him — that
Is clean against God's honour — a shift, a trick
Whereby to challenge, face me out of all
My regal rights.28

This accusation was, in fact repeatedly made against Becket, and forms the crux of the ambiguity in his character. It is also a part of what G. Wilson Knight points to as a major

26 Ibid., p.707.
27 Ibid., p.719.
28 Ibid., p.721.
thematic preoccupation in the Victorian State dramas; "who can ever claim with assurance to be the elect of God?" 29

In both the reconciliation scenes, Tennyson introduces an impartial commentator, Walter Map. He says nothing very constructive or conclusive beyond the fact that the Pope is "fain to diagonalise"; and that the best course for either side in the conflict would be moderation. The King himself, though a good son of the Church, and the supposed benefactor of his land, does not scruple to use questionable means. He has, says Map, "bought half the college of Red hats." 30 The final reconciliation Map sees as hollow from the beginning. He now scoffs at the coronation of the Young King and the aims behind it doomed to failure, as he had earlier scoffed at the Pope's diagonalising. Superficially seen, Walter Map seems merely an extraneous expedient to introduce humour into a controversy that threatens to become tedious. Implicitly, however, he serves to put forward the dramatist's own view of the Church-State theme as an insoluble confusion, resulting from the morass of mixed motives, practical considerations and political

29 Knight, op.cit., p.256. This, substantially, is the dilemma of the individual who rebels against the State in the name of a Higher Law. See earlier, sec.i.

30 Works, p.723.
unscrupulousness in which the human representatives of either side have contrived to get bogged down. Tennyson's view of the theme in Becket seems to have deepened, perhaps become darker than in the previous almost black and white version of Harold. Henry's last words to John of Oxford at the conclusion of the Montmirail scene support this view:

Honest John!
To Rome again! the storm begins again
Spare not thy tongue! be lavish with our coins,
Threaten our junction with the Emperor — flatter
And fright the Pope — bribe all the Cardinals — leave
Lateran and Vatican in one dust of gold — 31

The upshot of the scene is this: God's vicar on earth and all his temporal government are thoroughly corrupt; Becket, the one intransigent idealist of the play is not free from a dash of egotism. Henry, the champion of nationalism, for all his praiseworthy aims, fights foul. Church and State, idealism and expediency, law, duty and egotism are not separate and mutually exclusive issues, but mingled in varying proportions within the same human beings.

After the Frêteval scene the Church-State theme tails off into an impasse, unresolved even by the martyrdom. The closest thing to a resolution is provided by Becket's

31 Ibid., p. 724.
"conscience", John of Salisbury:

And may there not be something
Of the world's leaven in thee too, when crying
On Holy Church to thunder out her rights
And thine own wrong so pitilessly?...
We are self-uncertain creatures, and we may,
... mix our spites
And private hates with our defence of Heaven.32

The implied alternative is one of moderation and humility.
The only fact that emerges unequivocally is the corruption
in the temporal government of the Church in Rome. It
claims to be the Mother Church but is quite obviously
unworthy of the trust, in spite of Becket's valiant stand
against the Constitutions of Clarendon.

In order to lighten the weight of the main issue in
Becket, Tennyson sought to provide a romantic interest which
would be at a more domestic and ordinary human level than
the controversy of institutions and ideals.33 With a
somewhat similar aim, he had in Harold, sought to provide
a love triangle between Harold, the king's ward Edith whom

32 Ibid., p.740.
33 Sir Alfred Lyall accepts the convention of Tennyson's
time: "...the story of Rosamond and Eleanor provides
just the romantic element of secret love and feminine
vindictiveness that is needed to soften and vary the
harsh disputing, the interchange of threats and curses
between priests and barons; and to Tennyson's skill in
seizing and working upon these points of vantage we may
attribute largely the success of this piece upon the stage."
Tennyson (New Delhi: S. Chand and Co., 1950).
he loves, and Aldwyth, the villainess who means to wrest him out of Edith's hands.

In *Becket* the triangle is formed by Henry, Rosamund de Clifford whom he loves, and Eleanor his queen. The Rosamund sequence is the receptacle into which Tennyson pours most of his Victorian preoccupations. Where the main action impinges on it, they overflow into it. This 'sub-plot' is based entirely on the conventions of sentimental melodrama, and illustrates the Victorian-Tennysonian attitudes to women, to marriage and domesticity; as well as the country-town opposition.

"The face we despise in this Janus of poets", says J. B. Steane, "is sentimental, prissily pretty and heavily moralistic by turns..."34 Perhaps "despise" is too strong a word to use. But the sentence sums up concisely the impression made by the Rosamund story. The qualities Steane indicates are not among those most likely to appeal to the twentieth century, since Tennyson's sentiments are thoroughly "respectable" and conventional. A little later in the same chapter, Steane adds a comment on the Victorian attitude to Womanhood, which Tennyson's poetry had done a good deal to foster. "The insistence on

reverence for womanhood, with its purity (...) erected one vast falsehood somewhere at the centre of life. Woman could be passionate but not sexual: she must endure her husband's animal nature, loving him inspite of it. He, in the meantime, must hate it in himself and try to crush it 'as a vice of blood'.

These words fit exactly the main feature of the Henry-Hosamund situation. The historical Rosamund de Clifford was, of course, one of a line of Henry's mistresses who infatuated him rather more than the rest. Tennyson's Rosamund, although obviously the mother of Henry's child, is conceived of in terms of utter chastity and snow-white purity. Her seclusion in the bower while it preserves her life, also symbolically underlines her protected purity.

Physical sex, on the contrary, is conceived of as something bestial and foul. Here, however, Tennyson may have found himself in something of a quandary when he came to the presentation of Henry, who has always been well-known through history for a promiscuous love-life. Unlike Fry or Anouilh, he glosses over this aspect of Henry's character. In direct presentation, we see either the

king fighting for his rights, or the almost uncomfortably 
chaste, exalted lover-husband of Rosamund. His promiscuity 
is vaguely alluded to, in the midst of other more important 
matters. The first time, his chancellor in a rather preachy 
mood, frames his rebuke in impersonal terms:

My good liege, if a man 
Wastes himself among women, how should he love 
A woman as a woman should be loved?36

The second time it is Henry himself, musing beside Rosamund 
in a self-condemnatory mood:

...I am not worthy of her — this beast body 
That God has plunged my soul in — I, that taking 
The Fiend's advantage of a throne, so long 
Have wander'd among women — a foul stream 
Thro' fever-breeding levels — at her side, 
Among these happy dales, run clearer, drop 
The mud I carried, like yon brook and glass 
The faithful face of heaven...37

One cannot help thinking of Steane's words, quoted above; 
"beast body", "foul stream", "fever-breeding levels" are 
strongly expressive of the dramatist's disgust. The word 
"women" is filled with a lofty distaste. It seems as if 
the "women" and Fair Rosamund belong to two entirely 
different species, and masculine chivalry is confined

36 Works, p.695.
38 Ibid., p.717.
only to the Rosamunds of the world.

The third allusion to Henry's promiscuity comes from the hate-filled Eleanor, who has been so thoroughly blackened in the course of the play, that the reader is not expected to credit much of what she says. "The King", she tells Rosamund, "Hath divers ofs and ons, ofs and belongings, / Almost as many as your true Mussulman —"38 In any case, she has been forestalled by Henry's own self-condemnation earlier, and the king retains all the sympathy he needs.

Tennyson's universal panacea for all ills, both public and private, is marriage, domesticity, the hearth and home. With this initial bias, he introduces in the play discreet, often ambiguous references to show that "Rosamund is the king's wife by a left-handed marriage"39 — whatever that may mean. In the Prologue when Becket advises Henry to put Rosamund away in a nunnery, he replies, "How dost thou know I am not wedded to her?" Apparently the fact of bigamy did not strike the dramatist. A little later in the same scene, Henry calls Rosamund his "true heart wife".40 It becomes clear later in the play, that Rosamund herself apparently knows of Eleanor's existence only as the wife of Louis of France. She is firmly convinced that she,

38 Ibid., p.732.
39 Hallam Tennyson, Memoir, p.195.
40 Works, pp.694, 695.
herself, is married to Henry. So, a piece of clearly attested adultery is befogged by ambiguous references to a doubtful marriage, and Henry is left in the unenviable position of having two wives.

The bower scenes in which Henry appears are meant to be tableaux of domesticity and idyllic bliss. Henry, fleeing from "Sceptre and crosier-clashing", comes to the bower for "a gasp of freer air, a breathing-while/To rest upon thy bosom."

With little Geoffrey, he is the fond father, joking at him and commenting on his looks. The first bower scene is a good picture of Tennyson's attitude to family-life. "Tennyson", says Harold Nicolson, "from the first saw Paradise regained not in a monastery, but in a home." The picture in Enoch Arden — which shows the castaway sailor returned home after several years of being presumed dead, watching unseen through a window the blissful contentment of Philip and Annie Lee and the children at tea before a glowing hearth — brings this impression forcibly home to us. Becket himself, the intransigent upholder of ecclesiastical supremacy is moved, most uncharacteristically, to murmur:

41 Ibid., p. 716.

Ban John, how much we lose, we celibates,
Lacking the love of woman and of child.

A few lines later he talks of "this love, this mother runs
thru' all/The world God made..."43

Another hackneyed but characteristically Victorian
theme finds its way into the play through the Rosamund
episodes. This is the country-town opposition, epitomised
in Rosamund's words in the fifth act. "The plagues/That
smite the city spare the solitudes."44 She is talking of
physical ones, of course, in reply to Becket's solicitous
inquiry after her son's health. But the words seem equally
applicable to moral plagues in terms of what the play has
already shown.

The exhausting and bitter wrangles of the main action,
seem to be emphatically labelled "town" or court, with all
its intrigues and political manoeuvring. From here Henry
flees to the peace, mental and physical, of the bower and
all it stands for — the "country". This opposition is
struck up from the beginning of the play. In the Prologue,
Henry is anxious to convey Rosamund out of the city to the
security of her bower. In the first scene of Act I,

43 Works, p.742.
44 Ibid., p.741.
Rosamund comes fleeing to Becket's house for shelter from the pursuit of Fitzurse and his companions. When Becket asks her for an explanation, she says:

...there stole into the city a breath
   Full of the meadows, and it minded me
   Of the sweet woods of Clifford, and the walks
   Where I could move at pleasure, and I thought
   Lo! I must out or die. 45

Becket again, is brought in to endorse this theme. In a moment of exhaustion at Montmirail, he says to Herbert:

   Better have been
   A fisherman at Bosham, my good Herbert,
   Thy birthplace — the sea-creek — the pretty rill
   That falls into it — the green field — the gray church —
   The simple lobster-basket, and the mesh —
   The more or less of daily labour done —
   The pretty gaping bills in the home-nest
   Piping for bread — the daily want supplied —
   The daily pleasure to supply it. 46

This is so Tennysonian that one can hardly help thinking of Enoch Arden again. The words are solely for the benefit of the reader for it is hardly likely that Herbert would have needed a disquisition of this kind. The author, perhaps, realises that the speech is out of place. Herbert's reply

46 Ibid., p.722.
is a flat contradiction: Thomas, he says, would not have liked such a life at all.

On the other hand, Rosamund's repeated references to the loneliness of the bower, and to herself as a bird in a cage constantly secluded from the world, contrive to throw a slight ambiguity on the healthful pleasures of the country.

Nevill Coghill compares Becket with Shakespeare's histories, and condemns it for having "no theme. It is just a piece of falsified history told for the sake of its intrigue, sentimentality, violence and spectacular effects."47 On the face of it, this might seem true. And it is, of course, a fact that none of Tennyson's plays will bear comparison with Shakespeare's. Becket, however, by itself, and as part of a trilogy, does have a theme. The drawback is, that it is not effectively dramatised, although it had a great deal of importance for the author himself. This happened for two main reasons. Firstly, in the main action, Tennyson concentrated too much on historical accuracy seen in terms of events as they actually happened. The play, therefore, impresses more as a spectacular episodic pageant than anything else. Secondly, he allowed the Rosamund story to usurp his interest to the

47 Coghill, "Tennyson's 'Becket'", Murder in the Cathedral p. 155.
extent of muffling the cause of the dénouement, even though the only ascertainable "fact" about it was that Rosamund had been Henry's mistress. Unfortunately, Tennyson's play reaped the disadvantages of both too much and too little historical accuracy. The melodramatic sentimentality of the Rosamund action overflows into the main issue between church and state without integrating the two actions. At the same time, taken together with Queen Mary, Becket does illustrate Tennyson's concern with the Church-State issue and with the emergence of English nationalism.

(iii)

'Christopher Fry and the complexity of life'

Fry's Curtmantle, on the other hand, has been described as an example of the "theatre of character". His main themes, as he himself points out in the 'Foreword' to the play, are two: a progression towards a portrait of Henry, and the larger, more inclusive and universal theme of the interplay of different types of law. The starting-off point is again the struggle of Church and State in a particular section of history. But whereas Tennyson never got beyond the particular conflict in a particular set of historical circumstances, Fry expands his vision to
include "laws"; and by implication, the human condition as it perennially is. The story of Henry Plantagenet is used as a concrete instance. Fry develops the principal themes by placing Henry and his life's work at the centre of the play, bringing him into collision with other people, ideas or institutions, and exploring the ramifications of each conflict. The struggle with Becket and the Church becomes only one of a series of conflicts brought on by the driving force of the king's aims.

The particular themes, however, are best seen as specific aspects of Fry's deep conviction of the complexity of life. His plays constantly affirm that there is a limit beyond which human reason cannot penetrate; that there are inscrutable purposes which human power cannot control, and which man disregards only at his own peril. What Fry says in the 'foreword' to Curtmantle regarding the play's form and technique can also be interpreted as an indirect statement of this conviction. "To try to re-create what has taken place in this world (...) is to be faced by the task of putting a shape on almost limitless complexity. ... It is tempting to make a misleading simplification. In the absence of any other household-god, simplicity becomes a gross superstition. It gives us the security of 'knowing' of being at home in events. We even call it reality, or
getting down to the truth. But everything that we ignored remains to confute us. The artist's difficulty in imposing a form on reality without oversimplifying, is analogous to the individual's problem of giving a direction to his life without being blinded to other and even contrary points of view. Henry's tragedy is that of a man who has oversimplified, and whose deceptively straightforward view of life has been confuted by everything he ignored. Within the play itself, Eleanor endorses her creator's words:

Let me say this to the man who makes the world —
And also to the man who makes himself the Church.
Consider complexity, delight in difference.
Fear, for God's sake, your exact words.
Do you think you can draw lines on the living water?

In this as well as in its tragic nature, Curtmantle resembles the earlier Biblical play, The Firstborn. Seti, like Henry, is an empire-builder who牺牲s everyone and everything to his dream of Egypt's golden future, and is doomed to failure. Moses expresses the playwright's own consciousness of the mystery in life and all creation. Ramesses, in his naiveté wants from Moses "the formula" of his greatness. Moses replies:

Where in this droughty
Overwatered world can you find me clarity?
What spirit made the hawk? a bird obedient
To grace, a bright lash on the cheek of the wind
And drawn and ringed with feathered earth and sun,
An achievement of eternity's birdsmit. But did he
Also bleak the glittering charcoal of the eyes
And sharpen beak and claws on his hone of lust?
What language is life? Not one I know.
A quarrel in God's nature. 50

Later he says to his sister Miriam:

Shall we live in mystery and yet
Conduct ourselves as though everything were known?
If, in battle upon the sea, we fought
As though on land, we should be more embroiled
With water than the enemy. 51

In spite of this, Moses himself becomes "embroiled with
water". In his single-minded attempts to free the Hebrew
slaves, he sees himself as the instrument of God; but till
the last moment does not realise that it is going to
involve the sacrifice of his spiritual son, Rameses.
"I followed a light into a blindness" 52, he says, as he sees Rameses die.

In both the speeches of Moses, as in that of Eleanor
from Curtwainly, the image of water and the sea symbolises

50 Three Plays, p.35.
51 Ibid., p.54.
52 Ibid., p.92.
Fry's conception of the mystery of life and creation.
The image connotes some of the ambiguity we find in Eliot's use of it, as both destroyer and life-giver. It is mainly, however, a concrete metaphor for something shifting which cannot be outlined, pinned down or held back; something liquid as opposed to the firm solidity of land; something unfathomable, vague and vast and all-embracing.

On a more particular plane, this theme of the unknown powers in life is concretely dramatised in the discrepancy between a man's intentions and the actual outcome of his actions. In *The Firstborn*, Rameses speaks bitterly of the consequences of what he thought was an act of goodness and generosity in making Moses' nephew Shendi a supervisor:

> I put the whip in his hand. I raised that arm. I struck that Jew. I did it. I did not know how the things we do take their own life after they are done, how they can twist themselves into foul shapes.53

In *Curtmantle* this theme becomes a structural principle in Henry's tragedy.

A corollary of this view of human action is Henry's anguished vision of the moment when "life goes separate

53 Ibid., p.60.
from the man", after realizing the full import of the words he had uttered in the throes of a violent rage.

Dear Christ, the day that any man would dread is when life goes separate from the man, When he speaks what he doesn't say, and does what is not his doing, and an hour of the day which was unimportant as it went by Comes back revealed as the satan of all hours, Which will never let the man go. And then He would see the natural poisons in him Creep from everything he sees and touches As though saying, 'Here is the world you created In your own image'. But this is not the world He would have made.54

The crux on which the catastrophe hinges is not the doing of external circumstances. Some action, either deliberate or rising from the unconscious sets an uncontrollable train of events in motion.

This attitude to life and the world is what governs the themes as well as the characterisation in Curtmantle.

The theme of the failure of empire and dynasty, already treated in the person of the Pharaoh in The Firstborn, re-appears with Henry in Curtmantle. It follows as a logical development from Fry's governing vision of life's complexity. The Firstborn closes with the death of Ramses, the firstborn of Egypt; a symbol of the utter futility of Sati's life's work. Sati had presented Moses with an end-justifies-the-means

54 Player, pp.250-51.
explanation of his treatment of the Jews.

Would you have the earth never see purple
Because the murex dies? Blame, dear Moses,
The gods for their creative plan which is
Not to count the cost but enormously
To bring about. 55

The murex was a mollusc, resembling a pustule, which was valued from earliest times for the purple dye it yielded. In Seti's speech the Hebrews are mureses who have to be squeezed out so that "the earth" — Egypt — may "see purple". Seti can see nothing but Egypt and her glory. He justifies the destruction of the Jews by claiming that it is the only means of ensuring his empire's brilliant future. Henry's manipulation of Becket, and of his own children to further his imperial schemes shows a similar one-track attitude; a similar disregard of human individuality; a similar proneness to use a growing organism as an instrument. The fault under the circumstances, Fry seems to say, lies with the protagonist's vision, not with the gods or fate. "And so", says Moses, "they bring about/The enormity of Egypt."

Egypt is only
One golden eruption of time, one flying spark
Attempting the ultimate fire. 56

55 Three Plays, pp.48-49.
56 Ibid., p.49.
This comment points to the imperialist's partial vision. It also carries the implication that schemes of empire, on the whole, contain within them the seeds of their own destruction; because, by definition, they never "consider complexity".

The conclusion of Curtmantle, however, is not as final as that of The firstborn. Henry's death does not mean the end of his dynasty. Nor does it bring all his efforts to dust, although his schemes of an Angevin empire are shattered. While the earlier play concludes more as the tragedy of a civilization, Curtmantle concludes, essentially, as the personal tragedy of a king who is also a man.

Fry's major concern in the play, together with Henry himself, is the portrayal of the interplay of types of law. This is also a particular development of the author's conviction of life's many-sidedness. Since Henry himself is the spear-head of one kind of law— that of the civil administration of the kingdom —, Fry's main themes are very closely interlocked; and Henry's drive for order becomes one of the external manifestations of his character.

This aspect of Henry also reveals Fry's concern with the problem of time, progress, and what is usually falsely visualised as the destiny of a nation. Henry, the law-giver
and empire-builder is obsessed with his notion of progress, which is to turn people into the instruments of their times. In this respect, Fry's presentation of the difference between the secular and religious points of view is curiously similar to Eliot's. Henry voices the modern liberal view of justice and progress, while Becket (regardless of whether he is self-deceived or not) speaks from the standpoint of eternity and permanence.

**Henry**
...We're losing precious weeks.
Everyday men are born into an island
Not yet ready to receive them.
I need reassurance.

**Becket**
Of what, reassurance of what?
Whether indeed there can ever be a world Answering to the man created?

**Henry**
That is our whole concern: Suppose you tell me How you see your own part in the process.

**Becket**
To protect us from going aground on deceptive time,
To keep our course in the deep reality.
As time is contained in eternity
So is temporal action contained in eternal truth.
And that truth can't be put at the mercy of time.57

Fry, however, differs from Eliot in recognising the validity of Henry's claims as well as Becket's. Eternity and ultimate truth have to be acknowledged. But at the same time, we

57 *Plays*, p.216.
cannot get away from the fact that as long as man is on earth he is time-bound. As Meadows says in *A Sleep of Prisoners*, "Lord, where we fail as men/We fail as deeds of time."58 It is the exclusive maintenance of either view, as with Becket and Henry, that recoils on its own head. This is one more particularization of the dangers of oversimplification. Thus, when Henry starts talking about the "whole community", "humanity" and the "will of the people", we cannot help thinking in the context of modern secularism and the totalitarian state. These terms have now become precisely such abstractions as he accuses Becket of using. — Henry has been describing "the will of God" (an undefinable abstraction) as "Mauling humanity with visitations of horror beyond belief."59 — At the same time, within the context of the play itself, Becket's own behaviour is implicitly at variance with his praiseworthy speeches. He dies self-deceived, his murder accelerated by his own actions.

The theme of time and eternity is dramatised concretely in terms of the medieval Church-State conflict. This conflict is, therefore, presented in its particular as well as universal aspects. At the particular level it is the

58 Ibid., p.54.
59 Ibid., p.219.
portrayal of the actual historical struggle between civil and canon law. At a more universal level it becomes a clash between the laws governed by time and those seen sub specie aeternitatis, or on what Fry, in his explanation called the "moral" law and the "law of God". Henry, in his attempts to treat all his subjects equally under one common jurisdiction, represents a "moral" law; something that is very praiseworthy in purely human terms. Becket claiming ecclesiastical supremacy, stands for a "law of God", in that it was believed that Christ Himself had delegated His authority, to the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

The conflict between Church and State dominates the first half of the play up to the flight of Becket from Northampton. The practical problem on which this theme is centred here, as in the other works, is that of the 'criminous' clerks. It proves, in Act I, to be the first thundercloud on an otherwise sunny horizon. The genial, friendly atmosphere of Becket's return from Paris is shaken by Henry's explosion against the wilful obscurantism of the "crozier-clutching monkeys". He accuses them of protecting their raping, murdering clergy behind the canon law, while "other honest poor damned sons of Cain" have to hang for crimes committed in a momentary passion.60

60 Ibid., p.192.
Henry's point of view in wanting one common law to govern the whole country instead of two authorities with two separate and autonomous legal systems, is understandable and sympathetic. At the same time, the dilemma of a human person in acknowledging the justice or otherwise of capital punishment for any crime is a very vital question in the twentieth century, and seemingly irresolvable since there is an equal amount to be said on both sides. The original dispute over criminous clerks arose from the fact that canon law forbade the clergy from passing sentences of blood for any crime. Secular law, on the other hand, habitually imposed sentences of death, mutilation or flogging even for what we might consider small crimes like theft or forest offences.61

Even at this juncture in the play, Becket enters a mild disagreement; and seeing the tendency of Henry's passion, Eleanor changes the subject. But as soon as Henry mentions the archbishopric to Becket, everyone including the audience, knows what is to follow. Becket's

61 E. A. Freeman, writing at the end of the last century, comments, "I do see in the struggle for ecclesiastical exemptions a struggle for the mitigation of the criminal code. I do see in Thomas' generation the beginnings of a feeling against the barbarous punishments inflicted in the King's courts, of which there is no trace in the earlier part of the same century." "Mr. Froude's 'Life and Times of Thomas Becket'.", Contemporary Review, 33 (1879), p.219.
warning, however, is phrased not in the particular terms of civil versus canon law. Nor does he even attempt to adduce the general Gregorian arguments of John of Salisbury in *Policraticus*. Becket's remonstrance comes in the extremely idealised terms of the conflict between the law of man and the law of God; of the "mystery" in life and circumstances that might turn a man's best intentions into his worst enemies; of the classic sin of *hubris*, where man attempts to dictate the future only at his own peril. After pointing out that the difference between the laws of Church and State is a "true and living dialectic", Becket raises it to the universal plane of an argument within man's nature:

So it's very unlikely, because your friend becomes Primate of England, the argument will end. ... Do you mean That I should now become that tongue, To be used in argument between you and me?

A few lines later, Becket voices what is something of a central idea in the play:

The truth, like all of us, being of many dimensions, And men so placed they stake their lives on the shape of it Until by a shift of their position, the shape Of truth has changed.
This idea can also be seen as a prediction and rationalisation of his own sudden transformation after consecration. His final argument before the adamant Henry is one of humility, of the uncertainty, the "unknowableness" of the process of "universal workings".

You're dividing us, and, what is more, forcing yourself and me, indeed the whole kingdom, into a kind of intrusion on the human mystery where we may not know what it is we're doing, what powers we are serving, or what is being made of us.62

These words are given a visual equivalent in the fog which shrouds the opening scenes of the next act; and provided with a footnote in Eleanor's words:

...the familiar world has departed.
A death-world here, where every move is magnified onto the fog's blind face
And becomes the gesture of a giant.63

The conflict, of its very nature, is not only insoluble, but something living and creative, if considered from an impartial perspective.

One point, however, emerges very clearly from Fry's treatment. Disparate ideologies do not argue in a vacuum; the human being almost always functions as a reducing

62 Plays, pp.199-200.
63 Ibid., p.222.
element. Fry's approach to the Church-State theme shows a contracting of universal issues, to the human plane of personal acrimony and bitterness. In one of his counter-arguments to Becket's warnings, Henry says, "Too complacent, is he, to enlarge himself/To the size of the new world we have under our hand?" Eleanor, in the Northampton scene, expects to see "two unproved worlds fly at each other". As she watches the dispute to its conclusion, Marshal says to her, "This business has grown too big for me". What he means, of course, is that the mutual bitterness at this stage, has very little to do with the original issues; that hatred has got out of hand.

**Eleanor**

Grown very small, Marshal: the size of two men in a rage. We are not going to see great issues contending, Nor the new spirit of England being forged in a fire. We shall see the kicks and blows of angry men, Both losing sight of the cause. The high names of God and the State are now displaced By hurt pride, self-distrust and foiled ambition, And the rest of our common luggage.

Abstract ideals have been eclipsed in a welter of personal emotion. That is Fry's comment on this particular conflict.

64 Ibid., p. 201.
65 Ibid., p. 226.
In *The Firstborn*, a similar theme is shown working itself out in the opposite direction. The two protagonists are visualised almost entirely as representatives of mutually exclusive absolutes. The impinging of an earlier relationship between them, creates no personal animosity. The actors have, in fact, enlarged themselves to include their worlds. Henry and Becket, on the other hand, have lowered their representative significance to fit a personal scrimmage.

From this contraction, a corruption of their ideals inevitably follows. Henry, the "lord of justice", who at the start of the conflict took his stand in the name of equity and the common law, is carried away by a thirst for revenge. He descends to an entirely unjust persecution of his former friend, in order to trample him in the dust; and to downright tyranny in exiling all the Archbishop's kin. Nor is Becket entirely free of egocentric pride, although he sees himself as the tongue of the Church whose truth is "not under the law but under Grace".

The people of England are almost the primary ingredient of Henry's restless ambition to restore law and order. Marshal's opening memory speech in the Prologue indicates the importance which the playwright gives to this theme: "...a time of pugnacious reality, ... beginning and ending,"
as it did in his thoughts also, with the people he
governed."66 The play opens and closes with the people.
Henry, in identifying himself with civil law and government,
does not see it as an abstraction; or in terms of a high-
minded absolute, like Becket's conception of his own role.
He always sees it in terms of the people whom the law is
to benefit. The opening incident with the beggar dramatises
this point. Henry, in his own speeches, refers to his
"poor damned sons of Cain"; to "Order and protection, and
justice/for the man who has a shirt or who has not"; to
the need and experience of "many generations" which have
made the common law; to the "well-being of the whole
community" and "the will of the people". Becket's counter-
arguments are all in terms of lofty abstractions. He
finally clinches them with:

They [the people] have many wills: many lusts and
many thirsts:
A will for death as well as a will for life.
But quick or dormant, in th'rm they have a longing
To be worked into the eternal fabric
By God's love.67

Ironically, within the play itself, it is Becket's
abstractions which seem to win the day with the people.
Henry, for his pains, is left stripped and naked at the end.

66 Plays, p.179.
67 Ibid., p.219.
As Marshal's speech indicates, the people are observed, in general, from the point of view of Henry. Sometimes the attitude is curiously Shakespearean, especially as expressed in a speech of Henry's at the end of the Northampton episode. Marshal has been describing the veneration with which the people have followed Becket; Henry replies:

There you have the measure of these people. You can labour night and day to give them a world that's comprehensible. But their idolatry goes to any man — though he reeks of fault and cares less about their lives than he does for a point of heresy so fine. It wouldn't shake a hair in God's nostril — so long as they think he bargains with a world beyond them.

Well, let them have his blessing, drawn with two fingers on the air. I shall still bless them better in their daily lives.  

It might almost be Antony talking about "Our slippery people, whose love is never link'd to the deserver 'till his deserts are past".  

But Henry's tone has more of the sadness of a benevolent ruler and less of Antony's scathing patrician contempt.

68 Ibid., p. 229.

In speeches such as this, Henry, despite a lot of medieval superstition in his personality seems almost a representative of the twentieth century, labouring for people who are bogged down in the mentality of the twelfth. The substance of such speeches also has a lot in common with the Apology of Eliot's Second Knight, Hugh de Morville. The main difference is that Fry, despite of his own religious commitment to orthodox Christianity, has allowed the purely secular outlook to have its say as fully and sympathetically as possible; while Eliot's presentation of it is entirely satirical and intended as a temptation to be withstood.

The fickleness and ordinariness of the people is dramatised in the conclusion of the play, as the refugees sit around the dying king. We know that Henry, with the best intentions in the world, has given them ample cause for their dissatisfaction. The simple minds of the common people are, of course, incapable of visualising grand designs in a larger perspective, or appreciating the prospective advantages of Henry's reforms to future generations. They are concerned with the here and now; and their here and now is that they have been rendered homeless and penniless by the actions of the king.
The Church-State conflict, on one level, modulates into a struggle between the integrity of the human individual, and the attempt of the State or law to turn him into an instrument of time, or good government or anything else. It is also another aspect of the larger conviction of life's complexity. Here Henry comes into collision with Eleanor. Eleanor is shown, throughout the play, as standing up for that innate dignity in man which makes him refuse to turn himself into an object to be used. But this refusal is also humility which respects the integrity of other human beings. Henry, on the other hand, has the pride as well as the humility of the instrument. He sees himself as dictating the future, but also as the instrument of his time. He regards his family and Becket, similarly, as instruments of his purpose.

In the middle of the struggle between King and Archbishop, Eleanor makes a plea for tolerance and a wider vision: that she and Henry and Becket by their "three variants of human nature" should work together, respecting each other's differences. In the heat of the passionate recriminations, she is ignored. She realises that Henry's one-track mind will lead him and those around him to a crashing fall. But in her reaction against this extreme, Eleanor veers towards another.
The scene of the Love courts of Poitou introduces a law which is purely aesthetic; and develops further the theme of the interplay of laws. But coming, as it does, right after the brief scene of Henry's penitence at Canterbury, it is bound to seem trivial and frivolous and esoteric, in comparison with Henry's schemes. The love courts do neither harm nor good to anyone. In this they contrast sharply with Henry's good intentions and grandiose aims which destroy himself and so many others. But the love courts appear self-centred and superficial. Young Henry, who should have been a favourable observer, comments: "In this drowsy hive you are all so in love with yourselves/No facts can penetrate." Henry appearing suddenly in their midst, calls the world of Poitou a place

...where an acid wit
Is valued higher than the mind hurt by it,
Where rules dictate how man should move, or love,
Or cough, or betray, or do nothing:
The unexceptionable dance of what has withered within.70

This, Fry seems to say, is law entirely on an aesthetic plane, divorced from either a code of civil government, or the law of God and His Church. Manners have become morals.

70 Plays, pp.258-59.
Early in the scene Eleanor herself enunciates what sounds suspiciously like a philosophy of anarchism:

We welcome Harry here, from the dark life
Of his father's kingdom. Here he will find the laws
Keep time in him like his own heart; for here
We govern as music governs itself within,
By the silent order whose speech is all visible things.71

All through the Poitou scene, we have also been made conscious of the breach of a fundamental moral and social law, summed up in Henry's quotation of the text "A man's enemies are the men of his own house" — the women first, we might add. These words are spoken by Henry in self-pity and through a lack of self-knowledge. There is also something to be said in explanation of his wife and children's behaviour. But this does not negate or justify the act of betrayal.

Besides the consolidation of civil government, the establishment of a dynastic empire had been another of Henry's main aims. Here again, his intentions were, at least partly, altruistic and clannish rather than egotistical and selfish. Here again, with his customary blindness and bull-headedness, he contrived to turn his family against him.

71 Ibid., p.256.
The family conflict dominates the second half of the play, from the scene after the coronation to the end. Although we have had intimations of Henry's far-flung projects from the beginning, they move to the fore only after the scene at Northampton. After Northampton, the Church-State conflict, for all practical purposes, moves into the background. In the first act, Becket's return from the embassy to Paris had touched on Henry's dynastic schemes. The chancellor had successfully accomplished a negotiation of marriage between Henry's eldest son and the infant princess Margaret of France. Louis VII's consistent failure to produce a male heir, is an additional cause of the mirth and jollity of the first scene. Henry exults in his luck:

Not a son is born to Louis, though he would give
God his place in his bed if he could get one.
But four good boys to me.
There's God articulate if ever a god spoke.
Four strong Plantagenet males born
To a kingdom worthy of God's admiration.72

Henry commits the classic sin of presumption. Being firmly convinced of "God's admiration" of his kingdom and all his enterprises, Henry almost begins to see himself as a god:

72 Ibid., p.190.
A pity the whole of the earth is not to be Serene in our keeping. But there are still The four good Plantagenet males to come. We must leave them something to do.\textsuperscript{73}

This comes towards the end of the opening scene. Between these two speeches the theme of the country's administration and Henry's quarrel with the Church has come to the fore. From this point we do not hear much about the "young eagles" and their future.

When the theme comes to the fore again, there are already several dark clouds over Henry and his schemes. The immediate cause of Young Henry's coronation, as Fry presents it, is the birth of a male heir to Louis of France; one of "Life's more acid comments on human endeavour." Henry, determined to forge ahead in spite of the acid comment, declares:

\begin{quote}
We'll plant the saplings firmly in their place. All the boys shall have their lands, and learn To love and defend them while I am alive to see it.\textsuperscript{74}
\end{quote}

It never strikes him that the boys might conceivably wish to have a say in this high-handed parcelling out of their destinies. All through play, Henry shows a strong sense

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., p.201. 
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., p.233.
of the clan, the family, the house as a united body; and, a priori, expects in the others the same attitude. He takes it for granted that he knows what is best and that his sons owe him implicit obedience and gratitude. It is a strongly patriarchal attitude.

The main drawback in Fry's handling is, that the concentration on Henry and his far-flung aims has not allowed the author to dramatise convincingly any kind of personal relationship between the father and children. We hear a lot about the "young eagles" and their grandiose destiny, and about the father's love for them. But we never really see it. In giving the boys their titles, Henry's action seems to be dictated more by the prospective danger to his imperial schemes than by affection for his children. The deaths of Young Henry and Geoffrey are passed over in a few words of sorrow. Indeed, there seems to be a curious element of impersonality in Henry's clannishness. This may be an unintentional result of telescoping a period of over thirty years into a space small enough to be comprehensible at one sitting. It is a fault, nevertheless, for we have to accept on trust the verbal assurances of Henry's great love for his sons if we are to get the full impact of the tragic ending.
The tragic theme of family disunity, of the ingratitude of children turning against the father and against each other is of universal significance and as old, perhaps, as the institution of the family itself. The classic expression of the theme is in the words of Christ: "I came not to send peace but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against the mother, ...And a man's foes shall be they of his own household." (Matthew 10:34-36). But Christ's injunction was for his people to leave father and mother, and follow Him. Fry in Curtmantle, on the contrary, uses the text rather in the Hebraic sense (Micah 7:6), as part of a more universal corruption among mankind, and the emphasis falls on unnaturalness.

Historical sources do lay a certain amount of stress on the supposed demon ancestry of the Angevin house. Fry only makes a few scattered references to it. But they serve to underline the importance of the conception of family and heredity. As a rationalisation of the behaviour of Henry's sons, it is almost frivolous. In one of his explosions of rage during the Northampton sequence, Henry says,
I had a demon for an ancestor. There are times I feel her wading in my blood and howling for a sacrifice of obscurantical fools.\textsuperscript{75}

Later in the act, after the skirmish among the boys, he rounds on them:

So you mean to carry out the prophecy:
from the devil we came, and to the devil we'll go —
Brother against brother, the sons against the father.
I thought we might have got free from that curse.\textsuperscript{76}

The reference here is to be taken rather more seriously than the previous one, but as an indication of Henry's own blindness rather than as a genuine curse on the family. For all his progressiveness, Henry shows a streak of superstition. In this instance, instead of seeing his own responsibility in the bickering of his sons, he throws it all on the demon ancestry, on heredity, and blood. In the Poitou scene, the three sons face their father with the same excuse:

\begin{quote}
Geoffrey

Haven't you forgotten the prediction about our family?
What it is our blood inherits? Each of us against the other,
Brother against brother, the sons against the father?
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., p.220.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., p.243.
Young Henry That is one hereditary right you can't Deprive us of.

Richard You can't rob us of your nature.77

Family, heredity, the main motive behind Henry's ambitions to empire, is being used by father and sons alike, to exculpate themselves from the personal guilt of deliberately willed action. That they themselves apparently believe in the genuineness of this ancestry makes no difference. It is an impersonal element being used as a scapegoat for faults they do not recognise as springing from their individual selves. At the same time, these references to an inherited curse also point to an aspect of the interplay-of-laws theme. Natural law in the shape of heredity comes face to face with the moral law of honouring and obeying one's parents.

On the personal level, the theme of Henry's dynastic ambitions resolves itself into a story of filial treachery in which, however, the betrayers do have some excuse for their actions. Perhaps the most powerful work on the theme of filial ingratitude in English, is Shakespeare's King Lear, to which Curtimentle bears some resemblance. This is most clearly apparent in the scenes of Henry's painful end.

77 Ibid., p.261.
The theme is predominant and central in Lear, where the entire five acts including a parallel sub-plot are devoted to its detailed exploration. In Curtmantle, however, it is only one of the results of Henry's wilful ignoring of the complexity of life.

Although the theme of filial ingratitude is common to Curtmantle and Lear, the stature of Henry's children is far smaller than that of Lear's daughters. Compared to the stark, sublime proportions of evil embodied in Goneril and Regan, Henry's sons seem sulky, petulant, selfish children. Henry's own actions are far more responsible for his tragedy than Lear's were for his. Even Richard, who is the closest thing in the play to a villain, is not quite that. He has some justification for his behaviour in Henry's refusal to acknowledge his hereditary rights. And also because the king has constantly used his children as chess-pieces in a game of power-politics, instead of regarding them as people with natures and wills of their own.

Roger, the chancellor, is Henry's Cordelia, who stands by him to the end. He attempts periodically, even in boyhood to make the "four legitimates" see their father's point of view. "I tell you", he says during the sword-fight, "If you don't know how to combine in one Plantagenet will/You might
as well trundle the crown straight into the sea*78
At the end it is he who reassures his dying father of
the permanent worth of the common law he has created.
It is his cloak which covers the abandoned and despoiled
body of the dead king.

The treatment of Roger's illegitimacy shows a
reversal of the scheme of the Gloucester sub-plot in
King Lear. It is another ironic comment on Henry's
desperate drive for order. Of all his children, it is
the illegitimate one, conceived in a confused night
outside the sanctified bonds of marriage, who stands true.
The legitimates turn against their father and betray a
fundamental moral law. It is another instance of the
interplay of laws — the manufactured law of society
and the instinctive law of nature. The "illegal" child
is a "natural" son in every sense of the word; while the
"legal" sons turn out, quite literally, "unnatural".

Roger is conceived as a sort of human embodiment of
the idea of life's mystery. Anath in The firstborn
describes the precariousness of all human existence:

78 Ibid., p.241.
We are born too inexplicably out
Of one night's pleasure, and have too little security:
No more than a beating heart to keep us probable.79

This applies even more strongly to the circumstances of
Roger's birth. He is the product of what Henry calls "A
week of good life wasted in a flood"80 "A bull night",
Henry tells Roger at the end, "and an unfastidious whore,
while the rain soaked through the tent. And by God's mercy
you were made.81 Yet at the end of the play, Roger is
the chancellor, the custodian of law and order in the
country, unconsciously fulfilling Marshal's prophecy that
he had brought home the future.

The final scenes of Turfmanle, on Henry's last days
and death also bear a resemblance to Lear, in the
unadulterated pain of the humiliation inflicted by the
son upon one who has been conceived through the play as
a Titan. The naked-man theme, one of the poles from which
Henry's character is developed, is central to the heath-
scenes of Lear. But the difference in depth between the
two treatments is immediately obvious. Henry is congenitally
incapable of the humility of Lear's "Poor naked wretches..."
He dies as blind to his own faults as he had lived,
unreigned, and perhaps, unredeemed by his suffering.

79 Three Plays, p.64.
80 Plays, p.206.
81 Ibid., p.273.
The significance of the theme is rather obviously drawn by William Marshal, in an understated and somewhat superficial way. He repeats his own quotation of Henry's words from the first act: "'Christ', he said, 'we'll have no naked men.'" Marshal is Henry's Kent. A rather peculiar indication of these thematic resemblances is the occurrence, here, of the image of the rack which Kent uses for the dead Lear. Henry speaks to the Canterbury monks: "Don't think because you see me stretched on the rack, you can extort unfair promises..." On the other hand, it might just as well be a conventional use of the image of an instrument of torture.

Sr. M. A. Lally, in her thesis comes to the conclusion that "Fry...disregards the full dramatic potential of plot, characterisation, and language, and uses them chiefly to demonstrate a point, specifically, that evil is punished in this world." This is to accuse the playwright of a superficiality which is definitely not there. If the reader wishes to draw such a conclusion, it may be possible, but it would only be one of many. In the first place, what is thought of as conscious "evil" is more a matter of

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82 Ibid., p.277. For a detailed account of this theme in connection with the play's title and the symbol of the mantle, see Ch. VI, sec.ii.
83 Ibid., p.274.
84 *A Comparative Study of Five Plays on the Becket Story...*, p.116.
blindness, of faults committed with the best intentions. Secondly, what Fry stresses, is not the "punishment" of evil so much as the limitations of the human vision. What we see as uncontestably good may come to a very sticky end, and vice-versa, as in the case of Roger. As Moses, seeing Hoses's struck down, phrases it:

The shadows are too many. All was right, except this, all, the reason, The purpose, the justice, except this culmination. Good has turned against itself and become Its own enemy. Have we to say that truth Is only punishment?  

This is what the playwright has been driving at in Curtimentie. The play is a tragedy of human motives, of the illusion of certainty when we are groping in the dark; not a Sunday-school lesson.

A comparison between Fry's and Tennyson's handling of their themes is interesting from the point of view of their avowed intentions of preserving historical accuracy as far as possible. Both writers attempt a reconstruction of past events against the necessary background of local colour; both have some affinities with Shakespeare's tragedies and histories. However, Tennyson went at his raw material in the spirit of a research scholar. It

85 Three Plays, p.92.
was partly this approach and partly the realistic-spectacular demands of his age that led him to emphasize event at the expense of his theme of the Church-State struggle, which he had taken at a rather superficial level to start with. The result is that critics like Coghill are at least half right in finding it merely a piece of history with no theme. Fry, in his 'Foreword' to Curtsmante also reiterated his belief in the need for preserving fidelity to facts as far as the needs of the work of art permit. But he has dramatised interpersonal relationships within the framework of a theme of perennial significance. These are intrinsically more dramatic and interesting than a series of scenes transcribing politics in chronological order, as we find in Aubrey de Vere and Tennyson.

(iv)

'Jean Anouilh and the idealist's predicament'

The problem of art versus historical accuracy did not arise for Anouilh at all. He wrote Becket, he informs us, "by chance". He humorously describes how he was attracted by the handsome green binding of what turned out to be Augustin Thierry's *Conquest of England by the Normans*.

in a street stall. He bought it because of that, put it away on his shelf and forgot about it. A day came when he had nothing better to do so he read the story of Henry and Becket: "some thirty pages, which one might have taken to be fiction except that the bottom of the pages were jammed with references in Latin...

I was dazzled. I had expected to find a saint — I am always a trifle distrustful of saints as I am of great theatre stars — and I found a man."87 This gives us one of the main themes of the play — the concern with Becket and his search for integrity. It also offers an explanation of the title which some critics have found misleading; since, they claim, the writer's main concern is the relationship of contrasts between the protagonists, and not with Becket alone.

A little later in the same article, Anouilh explains how he met a historian friend after he had finished the play. His friend informed him that Thierry's history had long been superseded, and Becket had been definitely proved to be a Norman. "I decided", writes Anouilh, "that if history in the next fifty years should go on making progress it will perhaps discover that Becket was indubitably of Saxon origin; in any case, for this drama of friendship...

87 Ibid., sec.2, p.2.
between two men, between the king and his friend, his companion in pleasure and in work (and this is what had gripped me about the story), this friend whom he could not cease to love though he became his worst enemy,...for this drama it was a thousand times better that Becket remained a Saxon. 88

The Church-State theme of history, for Anouilh, resolves itself into an exploration of a personal relationship between the two protagonists in terms of an opposition central to all his plays: that of idealism against expediency; intransigence against compromise; the attempt to be true to one's innermost self at all costs, against giving in to the demands of everyday life and society. "He has spent thirty years, it would seem, rewriting the same play around the conflict between purity and compromise...", comments John Harvey. 89

The Church in Becket signifies several different things. For Becket himself, it is a concept equivalent to "l'honneur de Dieu", after he has assumed the burden ('le fardeau'). While chancellor, however, the Church, for him, is just another institution. Foliot, early in the first act, had accused him of plunging a sword in

88 Ibid., p.3.
89 Anouilh: A Study in Theatrics, p.113.
the breast of Mother Church. Later, the honour of God and the honour of the Church become synonymous with Becket's sense of his own "honour" which, in Anouilh's terms, is the deepest self.

In the third act of the play, the historical argument between the particular ecclesiastical and secular claims takes place, not between Becket and the king, but between Becket and his venial bishops. This clearly illustrates the ambiguous way in which the concept of 'Church' functions in the play. Anouilh gives the actual arguments a peculiar twist in keeping with his adaptation of the facts. The main practical problem in the dispute between Becket and his bishops is not the question of 'criminous clerks', or appeals to Rome. It concerns Saxon serfs fleeing their Norman masters and seeking sanctuary in Holy Orders. The English translation of the play takes in the first portion of this scene which discusses, one by one, excommunications, Becket's supposed contempt of court, and the criminous clerks. But it omits almost entirely the point about Saxon serfs by cutting out half of this scene which is devoted entirely to its discussion. In the process, it anglicizes and historicizes the author's own slant on one aspect of the Church-State theme which, as he himself indicates, means a lot to his conception of the play.
This scene between Becket and the bishops, taken in its entirety, gives the theme a racial colouring—Saxon versus Norman equals Church versus State,—at least so far as Becket in England is concerned. Serfs fleeing to the Church are repeatedly called Saxon.

Gilbert Foliot puts the case for the Norman conqueror and property-holder, and the State. "Tout peut être remis en question en Angleterre hormis le fait qu'elle a été conquise et partagée en l'an mille soixante-six.

L'Angleterre est le pays du droit et du respect le plus scrupuleux du droit. Mais le droit ne commence qu'à cette date, sinon, il n'y a plus d'Angleterre."90 A little later, Becket claims that he has once and for all accepted the responsibility of upholding an unwritten law higher than the king's. Foliot counters: "Vous savez à quoi elle sert, en vérité, cette application stricte de la juridiction ecclésiastique? À voler — je dis bien, à voler — les serfs saxons à leur seigneur. ...Est-ce justice ou tour de passe-passe? La propriété aussi n'estelle pas sacrée? Si on leur dérobait un bœuf, empêcheriez-vous les propriétaires de se plaindre et

90 Becket, p.107. Hill, p.78. "Everything can be called into question in England except the fact that it was conquered and shared out in 1066. England is the land of law and of the most scrupulous respect for the law; but the law begins at that date only, or England ceases to exist."
Foliot's speech, especially the final telling analogy, explicitly enforces the ratio between the racial and the Church-State themes. It also touches on one of the oldest concerns of Anouilh's theatre: poverty and the concept of property. For once, history accords with one of Anouilh's pet preoccupations. In the medieval feudal hierarchy the serfs, on the lowest rung of the social ladder, were bound to the land they tilled, and were bought, sold, or changed hands, with it. They were part of the lord's chattels. Foliot's analogy, in terms of contemporary social mores is, therefore, accurate enough. But behind the whole speech we see the author's irony, summed up in Becket's reply, "un serf saxon a une âme..."92

This ambiguity and fluidity in Anouilh's use of the concept of the Church is further emphasised when we remember that the positions taken up in this scene of the third act are precisely the reverse of what they had been in the

91 Ibid., p.108. (My trans.) "You know, in reality, what purpose this strict application of ecclesiastical jurisdiction serves. Robbery — I repeat, robbery. The Saxon serfs are stolen from their rightful lords. Do you call that justice or trickery? Isn't property also sacred? If a bull were stolen, would you prevent the owners from complaining, and attempting to recover it?"

92 Ibid., (My trans.) "a Saxon serf has a soul..."
council scene of the first act. Even in the earlier scene, however, one of Henry's speeches had already identified the Norman clergy with the conquest of England and the right to property. The Conqueror's bishops, says Henry, were so busy fighting, they made all sorts of excuses to avoid saying Mass for fear that while they were at it, someone else would get their share of the plunder. In this scene, the gentleness and quiet seriousness of the old archbishop uphold the dignity of the Church; while it is attacked in Henry's sarcasms, in the ill-natured spleen of Foliot's personal attacks on Becket and the reeking hypocrisy of his talk of ideals and principles.

The ambiguity in Anouilh's treatment owes a lot to the double nature of the Church itself, which fits admirably with his own governing opposition between idealism and expediency. It lies in the discrepancy between the spiritual and ideal aspect of the Church as found in the teachings of Christ, and the actual machine of temporal Church government which had become as contaminated by the "cuisine" of politics as anything in the secular field. Within this play, Anouilh's intransigent idealist is equated with the former. The temporal and political aspect of the 'Church militant' is thoroughly and unequivocally caricatured in the
scene between the Pope and the Cardinal.

The Pope's problem is how to please both sides in the English struggle, and at the same time retain the bribe of three thousand marks offered by Henry, and his "honour". The Cardinal offers his advice: "Recevez l'argent du roi, Très Saint-Père et l'Archevêque. L'un compenseant l'autre. L'argent enlèvera tout côté subversif à l'audience accordée à l'Archevêque et d'un autre côté, l'Archevêque reçu, effacera ce qu'il pouvait y avoir d'humiliant à avoir accepté l'argent." The extremely reasonable, logical tone adds to the author's irony. They get themselves embroiled in what reads like a hilarious parody of the exhausting proceedings during Becket's exile. Finally, the Pope accepts the advice with a Parthian shot at his adviser, "La seule chose que je me demande, Zambelli, c'est l'intérêt que vous pouvez avoir à me donner un bon conseil."

93 Ibid., p.119. Hill, p.90. "Receive the money from the King Very Holy Father, and receive the Archbishop too. The one will neutralise the other. The money will remove all subversive taint from the audience you will grant the Archbishop, and, on the other hand, the reception of the Archbishop will efface whatever taint of humiliation there may have been in accepting the money".

94 Ibid., p.121. Hill, p.92. "The only thing that puzzles me, Zambelli, is why you should want to give me a piece of good advice."
As with Eliot, the main interest of the Church-State theme for Anouilh lies in its analogy with two attitudes to life, which all his plays, with different emphases, explore. One of his central concerns in Becket is, thus, an exploration of the relationship — first in friendship and then in enmity — between the protagonists. The conflicting institutions they represent are only important in so far as they affect and complicate the course of the relationship. While friendship had been a minor but recurring theme in the earlier plays, in Becket it comes to the fore. But it also brings with it the other themes of love, poverty, revolt, which are here treated in a relatively minor key. In larger perspective, Becket is, like all of Anouilh's works, pervaded by the sense of human isolation, and the failure of all relationships due to the human being's inability to communicate.

Anouilh's portrayal of friendship in this play differs from his other attempts. The two protagonists, inspite of all the misunderstanding and hatred of the struggle, preserve some sort of feeling for each other to the end. The earlier approaches contrasted an ideal and impossible dream of friendship with the bleak reality; or showed friends cut off from each other by barriers of understanding. However, we are left in no doubt that this friendship too, is doomed to failure.
From the very beginning the dramatist underlines the inequality between the two men, of intellectual and spiritual attainments, as well as of social status. Even in the first act, Becket shows either the social servility of a valet, rubbing down the King after his bath; or the patronising attitude of a mentor reminding the king that it is time for the council. In the council scene, Henry displays the pleasure of a child playing lord bountiful in suddenly springing the chancellorship on his friend; and his constant "mon petit saxon" makes Becket sound rather as if he were a pet dog. On the other hand, Henry is conscious of Becket's far greater mental superiority and a certain reserve, which frighten him; "c'est un garçon qui pense tout le temps", he tells his council. "Quelquefois ça me gêne de le sentir penser à côté de moi..." 95 A genuine and lasting friendship needs a mutual acceptance of equality on either side in order to be able to avoid a feeling either of inferiority tinged with envy and malice, or superiority tinged with contempt.

This feeling of inferiority is only aggravated by Becket's awareness of his own unworthiness at the betrayal of his race, and the king's slightly contemptuous attitude.

95 Ibid., p.49. Hill, pp.11-12. "...he's a lad who thinks every minute of the time. Sometimes it embarrasses me to feel him thinking away beside me."
for the same reason: "Et l'honneur s'est concilié aussi avec la collaboration?" asks Henry in the first scene. Becket sums up the problem in the speech which concludes the first act, "...Si tu étais mon vrai prince, si tu étais de ma race, comme tout serait simple?" Even in the first act the friendship is something fragile and precarious. By the end of the second, we know it will never withstand the kind of struggle that is necessarily forthcoming.

The tragedy of the broken friendship, however, recoils almost wholly on Henry, since Becket has been portrayed almost entirely as an aesthete who is incapable and afraid of the responsibility of loving and being loved. "Je n'aime pas qu'on m'aime...", he tells Gwendoline, echoing word for word Charles VII of L'Alouette. But while Becket stops short at this point, Charles offers an explanation of his words. "Cela vous crée des obligations. Et j'ai horreur des obligations." It is this early attitude which makes Becket insist so much on the "burden" of obligations.

96 Ibid., p.47. Hill, p.9. "And was honour reconciled with collaboration too?"

97 Ibid., p.72. Hill, p.39. "If you were my true prince, if you were one of my race, how simple everything would be."

98 Ibid., p.64. Hill, p.30. "I don't like being loved."

99 Anouilh, Pièces Costumées, p.126. "It creates obligations. And I have a horror of obligations."
he has assumed in accepting the primacy. With his customary acuteness, Louis of France, watching the meeting at Fréteval, defines the two men's relationship for his barons. One of the French barons comments on how Henry now hates Becket. Louis checks him: "Messieurs, ou nous ne sommes pas psychologues, ou, des deux, c'est lui qui aime d'amour. Becket a une tendresse protectrice pour le roi. Mais il n'aime au monde que l'idée qu'il s'est forgée de son honneur." In the scene after the resignation of the chancellorship, Henry himself, in some of the simplest and most moving words in the play, describes friendship to Foliot. It is, he says, a domestic animal with a look in its eyes that spreads warmth within you. One never suspects that the animal has teeth, and it is only after it is dead that it bites. "Becket and Henry", writes L. C. Pronko, "are separated by the abyss that lies between heroism and mediocrity: they belong to different races and must remain forever incomprehensible to each other. And yet despite their differences, in the face of overwhelming odds a feeling of friendship subsists between the two, and it is with

100 *Becket*, p.127. (My trans.) "Gentlemen, I am either a poor psychologist, or, of the two, it is he who truly loves. Becket has a protective tenderness for the king. But he loves nothing in the world except the idea that he has forged of his honour."
reluctance, one feels, that they separate for the last time, each incapable of expressing his feeling for the other." 101

One of the offshoots of the theme of the two men's relationship, is an opposition which Anouilh had earlier posited clearly in *L'Alouette*. It had emerged as an even choice in Anouilh's canon for the first time in *Antigone*. This is the opposition between love of men and intransigent allegiance to an abstract, rarefied, pure ideal. This ideal, however differently phrased, amounts to a sense of the integrity of self. In the early plays, Anouilh had been unequivocally on the side of abstract idealism. In *Antigone*, for the first time, he created for his idealist an antagonist at least as sympathetic if not more. Créon, with touching humility states the case for the small joys of a simple life. In *L'Alouette* and *Becket* the opposition becomes complex and ambiguous.

In *L'Alouette* the contrast is between Joan and the Inquisitor, who speak respectively for Man and the love of man; and a vague, tyrannical abstraction called God. The idealist, in defending her Voices, defends her self-hood

101 *The World of Jean Anouilh*, p. 179.
and integrity. But in her affection for the common soldier as typified by La Hire, and in the several tender humanitarian acts of which the Inquisitor accuses her, she shows her feeling for common humanity; not merely Man but men. It is the Inquisitor, the representative of the establishment, who defends an abstraction. The point is, that perhaps for the only time in Anouilh's theatre, his two races of men, the elect and the mediocre, in this instance Joan and La Hire or Baudricourt, are virtually, on the same side. Although Joan is spiritually several cuts above the soldiers, she understands and loves them.

In Becket, the opposition almost swings back to its original form. Becket is the detached idealist in quest of an abstraction which he equates with the honour of God, and it is Henry who loves. However, it is the idealist, not the Créon of the play who voices his understanding of both attitudes; the absolute quest for purity centred in the self, as well as the out-going love for other men. In the brief scene after the Channel-crossing, he admits, "Cela aurait été une solution aussi, mon Dieu, d'aimer les hommes."102 In an earlier speech in the Channel-crossing

102 Becket, p.138. (My trans.), "Loving men would also have been one solution, my God!"
On the one hand there is a contempt for struggles among men, and on the other an existentialist glorification of man struggling with the elements. In a rush of warmth Becket cries out that he loves men, but we know that by nature he does not, as he has himself acknowledged.

A conviction of the isolation of all human beings lies at the root of Anouilh's work. Loneliness is seen as one of the inevitable facts of life. This, ultimately,  

103 Ibid., p. 136. (My trans.) "God's beautiful tempest! Men's storms are ignoble. They leave a bad taste in the mouth, whether one emerges from them conqueror or vanquished. Men should strive only with savage beasts or against the elements. (...) Look at him at the wheel, the old sculptured weatherbeaten face. With his quid of tobacco which he never spits out. ... Look at the man on his walnut shell, at peace while hell rages about him. He can do anything. Ah! I love men! The tough race!"
provides the tragic force behind the broken relationship of Henry and Becket. P. Vandromme describes the human situation as portrayed in Anouilh's *Pièces Noires*: "La vie est un archipel dont les îles ne sont reliées par rien, ni par personne. On est seul toujours. Seul dans son berceau, seul dans sa chemise, seul dans son cercueil." 104 "Someone has to understand", cries out Joan in *The Lark*, "otherwise I'm by myself, and I have to face them alone." 105 In *Becket*, both protagonists face this isolation: Becket, because he is one of the elect; and Henry, because he is neither superior enough to understand Becket, nor mediocre enough not to be bored by his courtiers and family. The tragedy of loneliness again, is greater for Henry, since Becket has been more or less isolated all his life. The fastidiousness of his aesthete's temperament has constantly led him to shun any genuine emotional involvement with or commitment to another human being. "Il y reste comme absent", observes the wise old Archbishop at the beginning of the play. 106 The physical

104 Jean Anouilh: *Un Auteur et ses Personnages*, p. 51. "Life is an archipelago; its islands not connected to each other by anything or anybody. One is always alone. Alone in the cradle, alone in one's shirt, alone in the shroud." The quotation is reminiscent of Arnold's second isolation poem *To Marguerite*. Both theme and metaphor are the same.


106 *Becket*, p. 55. Hill, p. 19. "He is, as it were, detached."
proximity of the two men, at the conclusion of the first act, brutally emphasises their mental and spiritual separateness. Henry, on the other hand, loves his friend and is conscious that association with Becket has brought out the best in him. It has lifted him a degree above the common or garden humanity of the barons. After Becket has sent back the seal, Henry speaks in pain and anger: "Tu crois que tu as l'honneur de Dieu à défendre maintenant! Moi, j'aurais fait une guerre...contre l'intérêt de l'Angleterre pour te défendre, petit Saxon. Moi, j'aurais donné l'honneur du royaume en riant pour toi. ... Je vais apprendre à être seul."

Within the central themes of the relationship and Becket's search for his honour, are important but comparatively minor strands, which clarify and supplement the main lines of thought. The pervasive conviction of human isolation, mainly dramatised in the relationship between Henry and Becket, is further supplemented by the theme of unhappy family life. In the whole corpus of his earlier work, Anouilh has not once presented a

107 Ibid., p.99. Hill, p.70. "You think you have God's Honour to defend now! I would have gone to war...against England's interests, to defend you, little Saxon. I would have given the honour of the kingdom...laughingly...for you. ...I shall learn to be alone." For a discussion of the images of coldness and deafness underlining this theme, see Ch.VI, sec.iii.
happy family. "The primary social unit — the family —", writes L. C. Pronko, "has broken down and acts not as a group but as a heterogeneous mixture of individuals. With little regard for conventional morality, each goes his own way. The husband and wife are usually unhappy, ... The children do not love their parents, nor do the parents exhibit any particular affection for their children, except as tools to their own personal happiness." 108

As a possible exception, we learn vaguely, that Becket believes in his own parents' love for each other, but they are both conveniently dead; and his father has left Becket a legacy of guilt in "collaborating" with the conqueror. Henry's family life, of which we get extended glimpses through the second half of the play, is miserably unhappy, and the fault lies on both sides. Henry is so obsessed with Becket, first with his affection and then with thoughts of vengeance, that he is a stranger to his family. When he is forced into their company, they bore him to tears. The Young Queen is obviously jealous of Becket's influence and makes the shrewish accusations of a commonplace mind. Henry is intolerant; and even in his vindictiveness, unable to stand a word spoken against Becket. He dislikes and despises his children, especially since one of them wishes to be Henry III. He treats them more or less as

pieces of furniture; or, as in the coronation-dinner scene, pawns for his revenge against Becket. Against the Queen Mother's acute consciousness of the dignities and consequence due to royalty, Henry flings the memory of his own unhappy childhood. "Et moi, mon fils", asks the Queen Mother, "je ne vous ai, non plus, rien donné?" "Le Roi (...) La vie. Si. Merci, Madame. Mais après je ne vous ai jamais vue qu'entre deux portes, parée pour un bal, ou en couronne et en manteau d'ermine, dix minutes avant les cérémonies, où vous étiez bien obligée de m'avoir à vos côtés. J'ai été seul toujours, personne ne m'a jamais aimé sur cette terre que Becket!" 109

The unhappiness of Henry's family life is another of history's données which harmonises with Anouilh's outlook. History, however, raised the predicament to the proportions of a national tragedy. Anouilh's treatment is on a much more domestic, individual and human scale. We do not see a monarch in agony conquered and taunted by his son; but the petty, shrewish bickerings of any unhappily married couple; and the pathetic picture of a lonely child neglected

109 Becket, p.112. Hill, p.82. "And I, my son, I gave you nothing either, I suppose?" "King (...) Life. Yes. Thank you. But after that I never saw you save in a passage, dressed for a ball, or in your crown and ermine mantle ten minutes before official ceremonies where you were forced to tolerate my presence. I have always been alone, and no one on this earth has ever loved me except Becket."
by the high-society mother. The lonely child in his turn, does not care two straws for the happiness or upbringing of his own children. The picture owes much less to history than it does to the author's own conception of family life in modern society. The root cause of all this misery is, again, human self-centredness in general; the lack of willingness or capacity to sympathise with another's point of view.

The theme of love in Becket is connected, on the one hand with that of unhappy family life, and on the other, with the central relationship between Becket and Henry. As in Anouilh's other treatments of the same theme, perfect and ideal love between man and woman is shown to be incompatible with life. Gwendoline represents a pure and selfless love, which Becket sacrifices to his aestheticism; and which Henry, in attempting to corrupt, wantonly destroys. Gwendoline commits suicide. We are given hints, especially in Henry's insistence, that this was the reason Becket turned against him. However, such an explanation of Becket's transformation would be very superficial.

An interesting parallel is provided by C. F. Meyer's introduction of Becket's fifteen-year old daughter Gratia, whose innocence Henry violates. He also inadvertently
causes her death. Meyer provides this as the pivot on which Becket's conversion turns, and gives the impression of having introduced an extraneous piece of machinery to solve an otherwise impregnable problem.

This is not the case with Anouilh's introduction of Gwendoline. She just underlines a recurring theme of the playwright's world; and is also a useful reminder to Becket of how a conquered race may maintain its honour in the face of coercion.

At the other extreme, in Henry's scheme of values, love between man and woman is reduced to physical sex. The Saxon peasant girl, or the girl he sleeps with in the French camp, or the girl he catches sight of among the spectators of his procession, are merely objects of his own pleasure. The same attitude is underlined in Henry's repeated reminiscences of the debauches they had together when he and Becket were friends.

In these references, however, another nuance is introduced. Henry regards women as instruments of his pleasure, and his wife as a barren desert in which to do his duty. But he truly and sincerely loves his friend; who, on his side is almost incapable of feeling more than a passing tenderness for anyone. Critics have accused
the author of not having avoided implications of homosexuality in his delineation of the two men's relationship, and even of deliberately introducing them and thus degrading his subject.

The presentation of Henry's behaviour after the break with his friend, and the Young Queen's shrewish accusations, lend colour to such a charge. But one of the Queen Mother's speeches in the fourth act almost clinches this view. On the whole, whatever the old queen has said during the play, has been sound sense. In this scene she is busy rebuking Henry for giving in to his rancour at the expense of the country's welfare. "Vous avez contre cet homme une rancœur qui n'est ni saîne ni virile! ...Thomas Becket serait une femme qui vous aurait trahi, et que vous aimeriez encore, vous n'agiriez pas autrement."110 To this the Young Queen adds that she has tolerated his mistresses but will not tolerate everything. This nuance in the relationship is a very clear instance of Anouilh's essentially modern approach to his twelfth century subject. In introducing the homosexual slant, however, the modern approach has

110 Ibid., p.141. Hill, p.107. "You have rancour against the man which is neither healthy nor manly. ...If Thomas Becket were a faithless woman whom you still hankered after, you would act no differently."
definitely cut into the dignity of the original.

One of the most important minor strands in the play is the racial issue between Normans and Saxons. Anouilh himself had indicated its importance by refusing to turn his Becket into a Norman in keeping with the dictates of history. At one point it provides an analogue with the Church-State theme; at another, with the conqueror-conquered theme. The fact that Becket is a Saxon who has run with the hare and hunted with the hounds in the racial struggle is the main reason for his implicit self-mockery throughout the first act. It is this also which sets him off on his quest of "honour" and integrity; which makes him shoulder the "burden" of the Church all the more stubbornly when he comes to it.

Early in his career, in the Pièces Noires, Anouilh had been deeply concerned with the mire of poverty and squalor in the protagonist's past which clutches at him and holds him down. It becomes a part of him and prevents him from being able to reconcile his own integrity with the prospect of a moneyed and socially graceful future. In this play, Becket's Saxon past, and the fact that he has chosen to compromise with the pleasures of life by denying his race, provide a powerful equivalent of moral guilt to
the physical poverty of the early idealists. Thérèse of La Sauvage in refusing to give up her past and all the debilitating inheritance of her poverty, upholds her integrity. Gaston, in Le Voyageur sans bagage, being an amnesiac, is given an extremely unrealistic chance to jettison his rich but morally unsavoury past, and literally, begin a new life. The irredeemable nature of a man's past has always, however, been one of Anouilh's firmest beliefs.

Closely connected with it is a feeling of guilt and shame in the idealist, and the consequent search for purification. R. L. Jones and D.I. Grossvogel note the recurrence of this feeling in Anouilh's personages.111 Robert de Luppé writes, "Toutes ces pièces...en peut imaginer qu'elles dessinent les traits d'une seule et même conscience...avec son amertume, sa révolte,...avec ses évasions dans la fantaisie..."112 This is the consciousness of what he calls "weeds", "stains", filth, wounds which separate the pristine simplicity of a child's consciousness from that of the adult. In terms of the age-old opposition between 'innocence' and 'experience', Becket, in contrast to Anouilh's earlier treatments of the theme, is a more optimistic play. It shows a mature hero who has managed


112 Jean Anouilh, p.93. "All these plays...outline the traits of a single consciousness with grievous sores, its bitterness, its revolt...its attempts at escape into fantasy..."
to recover innocence through experience.

In the first act, Becket is plagued by the consciousness of his guilt in denying his race. He mocks at himself and calls himself a frivolous man. This awareness of the void within himself achieves clearest expression in the speech which concludes this act. If the king had been of his own race, Becket muses, everything would have been plain-sailing, in a well-ordered world where men were bound to each other by their oaths of fealty. As it is, however, he calls himself a "twofold bastard" who has achieved his success through trickery, and is compelled to improvise his "honour" as he goes along.

In the second act he is offered the chance to redeem his guilt. He comes face to face with the sixteen-year old Little Monk, who has come all the way to France to assuage — a hundred years after the Conquest — the "shame" of his race in being conquered. Becket sees in him, his own past self as he might have been. The king, then, against all advice, makes him primate, thus giving him the opportunity to resist the Norman to the death. Here Saxon becomes identified with the Church and God's honour. Becket, in his primacy, expiates the guilt of his early denial of his past and his race, as well as the larger shame of the Norman Conquest. It is this that gives a positive balance to a conclusion which might have been unrelieved in its cynicism.
The racial issue in its conqueror-conquered aspect also provides Anouilh with opportunities for drawing Antigone-like parallels with the German occupation during the second world war; and offers an uncomfortable perspective on the contemporary struggle for Algerian independence against the French.

The problem of race and conquest is also a part of Anouilh's recurring concern with the idea of poverty, the importance of money, and social class. This had been a dominant preoccupation of the early plays. L. C. Pronko describes the attitude of the rich upper-classes to the poor, in Anouilh's plays. "With patronising hauteur when not with outright contempt, they look upon the inferior creatures as beasts; as a convenience to aid them in their enjoyment of life. ...these poor are on the same level as the horses, the pets, and the other possessions of the wealthy — a part of their train de maison, to help maintain their prestige and flatter their vanity." At the same time, poverty in itself is always seen as something abject and degrading.

The first act of Becket contains a scene in which the two friends, out hunting, get caught in a downpour and are
forced to seek shelter in the smelly cabin of a poor peasant. The scene dramatizes on the one hand the dumb, terrified cringing of the poor peasant; and on the other hand, Henry's contemptuous treatment of the peasant and his daughter as if they were objects or animals rather than human beings. This is evident in his repeated use of the impersonal pronoun "he" to refer to the peasant or any of his family. In between stands Becket, tied to the peasants by the bonds of a common race; and to Henry by his possession of wealth, the king's friendship, as well as his sworn liege-homage.

The abjectness of the peasants' poverty is stressed by the marginal nature of their existence. The peasants eat roots, they are allowed to burn only two measures of dead wood to keep warm; they are even forbidden to move from their birthplace in search of slightly better conditions of existence. And at the slightest deviation from these laws they are hanged.

The theme of poverty complicates itself in the last scene of the second act. Becket, in keeping with his thoroughgoing nature, is busy stripping himself of all worldly goods, according to the teachings of the Gospels. Actual material poverty is supposed to bring with it humility and poverty of the spirit. Becket himself,
however, has enough insight into his actions to realise that this is not what is happening. The mere getting rid of possessions will not bring him either nearer to God, or to the poverty of his race, which he has so long denied. His actions have been dictated not by genuine saintliness but by that streak of elegance and perfectionism which makes him thorough in every job he takes on. Towards the end, therefore, he is compelled to renounce this ostentatious poverty and assume his full dignities and regalia as primate, to carry his struggle to its conclusion.

As the degrading effects of material poverty are dramatised in the scene with the peasants, the burlesque episode between the Pope and Cardinal Zambelli dramatises the corrupting effects of material wealth within the bosom of the Church itself. In the scheme of the play, we find no difference between the intrigues and machinations of secular politicians and the conduct of the temporal Church government at Rome. Louis of France warns Becket to beware of the Pope. He is a man who needs money, and is quite capable of "selling" the Archbishop for "thirty pieces of silver". The Christ-parallel enters in this play too, but as parody and burlesque. Almost on the heels of Louis's words the Pope and Cardinal are wheeled onto the scene. The first words of the Pope indicate his comic perplexity.
He wishes to retain Henry's bribe of three thousand marks — a far larger sum than Judes ever got — without losing face in the eyes of Christendom. The rest of the scene moves around this problem. It incidentally also caricatures the intrigues and counter-intrigues, spies and counter spies that complicated the politics of the Papal curia.

In its treatment of politics, Becket resembles the two earlier plays L'Alouette and Antigone. Anouilh's general attitude to politics is that it inevitably entails dirty work. Créon in Antigone, as well as politicians like Warwick in L'Alouette or Louis VII in Becket are sympathetic and likeable figures on the whole. It is out of their own mouths that they condemn the political process to which they are bound by the irrevocable "yes" they have said to life. Créon, conscious as he is of the falseness of political expediency, sees its necessity for a relatively comfortable life on earth. Similarly, Warwick talks to Cauchon about the necessity of propaganda. Personally, he quite likes what he has seen of Joan, but it is essential to the purposes of the English government that she should be defamed and burnt. The kindly, level-headed Louis VII, regards politics as a job that has to be done like any other, and at the same time wryly
confides to his barons: "Les rois sont de pauvres bougres qui n'ont le loisir d'être honnête homme qu'une fois sur deux." Although he likes Becket, he is sheltering him, at the moment, mainly because he is a mill-stone round Henry's neck. And mill-stones round English kings' necks are always sympathetic to the kings of France. To Becket himself, he adds, "Je ne suis comptable que des intérêts de la France, Becket. Je n'ai vraiment pas les moyens de me charger de ceux du Ciel. Dans un mois, dans un an, je puis vous rappeler ici et, tout aussi bénéfiquement, vous dire que, mes affaires avec le roi d'Angleterre ayant évolué autrement, je dois vous bannir (...) Archevêque, je crois que vous avez fait la cuisine, vous aussi?" Giving in to one's own inclinations towards integrity, Louis regards as a form of self-indulgence. There is dirty work to be done, and it is usually the king who has to do it. There is even a peculiar sort of heroism in such an outlook as that of Créon and Louis. But the game of politics itself,

114 Becket, p.115. (My trans.) "Kings are poor devils who have the leisure to be honest only once in a while."

115 Ibid., pp.117-18. Hill, p.86. "I am only responsible for France's interests, Becket. I really can't afford to shoulder those of heaven. In a month or a year I can summon you back here and tell you just as blandly that my dealings with the King of England have taken a different turn and that I am obliged to banish you. (...) I believe you have dabbled in politics too, Archbishop?"
remains unequivocally, "la cuisine".

Finally, Anouilh's preoccupation with Becket’s defence of the "honour of God" provides an index of his over-all attitude to life. It necessitates a consideration of the relevance of God; and of the view of man's predicament in the universe as it emerges from this play.

In the first half of the play, Becket's own conception of "honour" is essentially aesthetic. It is not very different from Henry's attitude to the honour of the kingdom, or the barons to that of the soldier, or Foliot's to that of the Church. It is a parody of what he finally dies for. At this stage, however, it leads him to the far from honourable action of sacrificing the innocent Gwendoline to his word given to the king. All the while Becket is conscious of the void in him where honour ought to be.

In the second half of the play, when the word really begins to mean something to him, we hear not so much of his honour, as of the "honour of God". The two concepts, however, seem to be identified. The title itself seems to indicate, in its ambiguity, that Becket, in the conception of the play, may be equated with the honour of God. But this might be interpreted with equal plausibility to arrive
at two diametrically opposed attitudes in the protagonist; that of Christian humility or atheistic existentialism.

Becket might have either equated his selfhood with the honour of God—submerged, in the manner of Eliot, his own will in the all-embracing will of God, and submitted himself in all humility to being that will. Or, the other way around, he might have equated the will of God with his selfhood. So that his defence of God's honour would be equivalent to a defence of his own self, in a universe which places man at its centre as the sole agent of his own free will.

For a long while in the play, we are not at all sure in which direction the "honour of God" is heading. For, in the discussion with the bishops, Becket gives all the usual reasons for placing the eternal law of God and His Church above the laws and property rights of earthly kings. He quotes verses from the Gospels to support his arguments. The impression of him as a true believer fighting God's fight on earth, is strengthened especially by the two prayer-soliloquies which occur at the end of the second and third acts. The one at the end of the second act is more of a conversational address to an equal rather than a prayer. Becket expresses very valid doubts about the genuineness of the apparent humility of his actions.
It seems to be an approach, rather in the Eliotic vein, to what Foliot a little later calls the temptation of sanctity, one of the most effective snares of the devil. The next one is more of a prayer, and much more emotional. It amplifies this theme, and brings Anouilh's conception close to Eliot's fourth temptation. Having realised that the appearances of physical penury and austerity may conceal abysses of the blackest pride, Becket concludes with the decision to resume his full dignities and carry on the struggle as best he can. The prayer ends on a note of resignation and humble submission — 'Your will be done' — which is very close to Eliot's favourite phrase from Dante.

However, in the reconciliation scene at La Ferté-Bernard, Becket's conversation with the king seems explicitly to illustrate the kinship between Becket's view of God's honour, and the similar conceptions of Anouilh's other idealists. He advises Henry to stick to his position, if necessary even against God. And what do you have to do? Henry asks. To resist you with all my strength, says Becket. "Je n'ai pas à vous convaincre", he says "J'ai seulement à vous dire non." "Le Roi Il faut pourtant être logique, Becket! Becket Non. Cela n'est pas nécessaire, mon roi. Il faut seulement faire, absurdement, ce dont on a été chargé — jusqu'au
bought. Towards the end of the interview, Henry asks him whether he set himself to love God, when he broke the friendship. Becket clarifies: he has set himself not to loving God, but the honour of God.

Most critics have seized upon these words and phrases as a clear indication of atheism. Such phrases show conclusively that the author, at least, intended to infer a connection between Becket's predicament and those of his other idealists, especially Antigone. Placed against the two prayers, however, it is impossible to say that Becket's words at Fréteval are those of one who ultimately believes in nothing but himself. There is a great deal of self-reliance in his words to Henry. But they could be interpreted as the words of a believer momentarily torn by doubts about the existence of God, and uncertainty of his own faith. The discrimination between loving God and loving the honour of God could be put down to Backet's own inability to love. If he is incapable of loving men wholeheartedly, he can hardly be expected to "love" a personal God. God, therefore, becomes identified with an abstract conception, "the honour of God" — objectified in the rights of the Church —, to which Becket gives wholehearted intellectual allegiance.

116 Ibid., p.132. Hill, p.101. "It is not for me to win you round. I have only to say no to you." "Kino But you must be logical, Becket! Becket No. That isn't necessary, my liege. We must only do — absurdly — what we have been given to do — right to the end."
Belief in a supreme, unworldly power is not necessarily incompatible with an incapacity to love.

Here, a comparison with Anouilh's earlier play about a saint, L'Alouette, is useful. The text of the play makes it clear that Joan is a devout believer. Her death — in the face of the Inquisitor's perverted abstraction — is not caused by lack of belief in God and His Church; but by her equally insistent belief in her own self, and in the greatness as well as sinfulness of men. Joan is a humanist, but that does not make her an atheist. That the protagonist might believe where the author does not, makes his plight more tragic. This is perhaps what Cauchon is getting at when he speaks to Warwick, "Ever since that day of Joan's arrest, God has been dead to us. Neither she, whatever she may imagine, nor we, certainly, have heard any more. We have gone on, following our daily custom; our pre-eminent duty, to defend the old house, this great and wise human building which is all that remains to us in... this loneliness, in the desert of a vanished God, in the privation and the misery of the animal, the man is indeed great who continues to lift his head. Greatly alone."117

Joan's last action at the stake, is to call for a cross. In this play, we ultimately get the impression that

Joan herself believes in God, some universal governing power. Her tragedy is that the author has placed her in a universe devoid of one. The same may be said of Becket's predicament. The tragedy of Joan and Becket is that of Vigny's Christ on the Mount of Olives. He prays and waits for an answer while God remains silent. Christ's last words are the same as those of Becket's prayer at the end of the third act: "Que votre volonté/Soit faite et non la mienne et pour l'éternité!" — "Thy will be done, not mine, for all eternity". Joan, in L'Alouette, offers an explanation of God's silence: "Mais quand vous laissez, vous me l'avez fait dire au début par Monseigneur saint Michel, c'est quand vous nous faites la plus confiance. C'est quand vous nous laissez assumer tout seule." 118

All through the play, Joan's insistence has been that men should make the strongest efforts they are capable of before expecting God's help. The view that God is actually paying man the highest compliment in leaving him alone to make his decisions at such a crisis, is existential and romantic in the extreme, but not really incompatible with belief. There is nothing in the actual plays, here or in Becket, to gainsay such a view of the matter.

118 Pièces Costumées, p.132. "But as you sent word to me through St. Michael at the beginning, it is when you place the greatest confidence in us that you let us take all the responsibility alone."
Of the plays on the Becket story, it is Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* which is entirely governed in its structure, its characterisation and its selection from history by the importance of its theme. Stated in the broadest terms, it is a search for salvation and redemption from Original Sin. This theme is the motive force behind all of Eliot's work. Nevill Coghill indicates the manner in which history has been used to underline theme: "Based upon history, it is a distillation of it, a particular image of a perpetual situation, the witnessing of what is to be rendered to God when Caesar stakes his ever-encroaching claims;...It needs the human part in sainthood, purified into a willing harmony with the Will at the still centre of things.... *Murder in the Cathedral* is a vision of this kind, seen working itself out through the actualities of history."\(^{119}\)

We find the specific strands of the play almost exactly described in the fifth section of *The Dry Salvages* in *Four Quartets*.

Men's curiosity searches past and future
And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint —
No occupation either, but something given
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.
For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight, ...
... only hints and guesses,
... and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half-guessed, the gift half-understood,
is Incarnation.120

Murder in the Cathedral dramatises on the one hand, the "occupation for the saint", and on the other, its effects on "most of us" as seen in the poor Women of Canterbury.

For Eliot, all the meaning in human life is concentrated in the dogma of the Incarnation of Christ, which made possible the redemption of men from original sin. The Incarnation is Eliot's prototype of the moment when the eternity of God entered the world of time and flux in a specific moment of recorded history, and conquered time through time. In these terms, Murder in the Cathedral re-enacts Christ's conquest of time, through the suffering of Thomas Becket. This suffering also achieves the salvation of the Women who learn to apprehend the action in the right spirit. Thomas offers comfort to the hysterical

120 Complete Poems and Plays, pp.189-90.
Women, in the moment "When the figure of God's purpose is made complete" — the physical consummation of his suffering in death. But, he adds, as they continue with their lives, they will forget its piercing clarity and remember it only as a dream. The only reality of their lives will, with the passage of time, "seem unreal" for "Human kind cannot bear very much reality." Over all looms a settled conviction of the primacy of the religious life.

In Murder in the Cathedral the Church-State conflict of twelfth-century politics is universalised to represent what for Eliot, are two mutually exclusive views of life, the spiritual and religious, as opposed to the secular and materialistic. Eliot's early poetry was concerned with the meaninglessness and absurdity of the predicament of modern men in a world without God. "For", says the seventh chorus from The Rock, "man is a vain thing, and man without God is a seed upon the wind; driven this way and that, and finding no place for lodgement and germination"; bound to the endlessly recurring cycle of past, present and future, of the natural seasons of "birth, copulation and death". Murder in the Cathedral, through its use of the

121 Murder in the Cathedral, p.69.
122 Complete Poems and Plays, p.160.
historical conflict, crystallises the recurring opposites which are the constant themes of Eliot's work: time and timelessness; words and the Word; movement and stillness; the meaninglessness of the existence of Dante's "trimmers" or the Hollow men, and significant action which may lead to salvation or damnation.

On the face of it, because of Eliot's radically different purposes and manner, his play might seem the least historical. But his originality lies precisely in this: that in spite of not intending to write a history-play; in spite of the motivating force of religious and ritualistic themes drawn from his deepest personal experience; and in spite of the brevity of the period he selected, he is never led to falsify historical fact. But several important portions, like the scene with the Tempters, are invented. His play makes the best of both history and artistic freedom, unlike Tennyson's which made the worst of both.

The struggle of Church and State provides Eliot with occasions for filling in the historical background where necessary. On the other hand, it also offers a concrete equivalent for Eliot's own most personal preoccupation in life. In the first Part, the three Priests, and the Messenger who brings news of the
Archbishop's arrival discusses the theme, largely on the plane of history and twelfth-century politics. This also provides occasion for a brief, practical account of Becket as a person. All the while, however, we hear undercurrents of the religious and universal aspect of the theme, especially that of Becket as a Christ-figure with which the first chorus opens the play.

The Third Priest who seems, spiritually, the closest to Becket, strikes the note of the futility of all government which is purely secular and temporal:

They have but one law, to seize power and keep it,
And the steadfast can manipulate the greed and lust of the others,
The feeble is devoured by his own. 123

To this dog-eat-dog picture, the central theme opposes the "Law of God" as embodied in Thomas' struggle and martyrdom.

This central opposition is worked out most thoroughly in Thomas' encounters with the Tempters and Knights: the first on the internal plane of spiritual experience, and the second on the external plane of twelfth-century and twentieth-century politics. The Tempters and Knights,

The four Tempters have been variously analysed as representing past and present, or past and future; as some being genuine temptations and others not temptations at all. The basic assumption behind all the Tempters, however, is that their arguments are confined, even the fourth Tempter's, to the dimension of time as meaningless flux, and a world without God. This state Eliot describes in 'East Coker' in terms of the modern world:

0 dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant to
the vacant,
The captains, merchants, bankers, eminent men
of letters,
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and
the rulers,
... all go into the dark,
... And cold the sense and lost the motive of
action.125

The First Tempter, in terms reminiscent of the third
turning of the stairs in Ash-Wednesday, offers a return
to youth, young comradeship and the pleasures of the
senses. This temptation is most easily resistible because

124 Ibid., p.73.
it is the most temporary and most ephemeral. Even in terms of the world, it is the most obviously and quickly doomed to change and decay. Ironically, the Tempter's reply to Thomas' initial resistance, sounds as if he too speaks better than he understands. "You talk of seasons that are past", Thomas has said. "And of the new season", retorts the Tempter. "Spring has come in the winter. Snow in the branches/Shall float as sweet as blossoms."126 He is, of course, referring to the return of youthful pleasures in middle-age, and the return of youthful friendships after years of coldness. But the reader is reminded of the "Midwinter spring" of 'Little Gidding', which Thomas is about to enact in his own person.

The second temptation is on the level of more mature experience and inclined to be altruistic where the first had been entirely selfish and rather frivolous. It is the temptation to worldly power, to secular government, with the purpose of doing good to others — to regain the chancellorship at the price of a certain submission. This temptation is a very clear instance of arguing by results as the world does. To pay the price of submission would be to abrogate, in the first place, the primacy of God's law which gives the world whatever meaning it

126 Murder in the Cathedral, p.24.
possesses. In that case, there would be little difference between the order and disorder of a purely temporal government; Thomas points out,

Those who put their faith in worldly order
Not controlled by the order of God,
In confident ignorance, but arrest disorder,
Make it fast, breed fatal disease,
Degraded what they exalt.¹²⁷

Viewed from the perspective of the eternal design, the good and evil which the world sees as such, confound each other and become meaningless as good and evil. What is evil in the eyes of the world may be an ultimate good, which earthly short-sightedness fails to recognise.

The Third Tempter would seem to be more easily refutable than the Second. Since Thomas has refused to compromise with God's law for the highest prize in the secular government, it is hardly likely that he will be tempted by the desire to pervert ecclesiastical power to secular ends. The Second and Third Tempters have been seen as two parts of a single temptation to power, or as representatives of the past and future respectively. The Third Tempter, however, W. H. Mason points out, serves as "the dramatic expedient whereby Eliot can break through

¹²⁷ Ibid., p.30.
the confines of historical time. He represents the stream or tendency of historical evolution. ...from the struggle over Magna Carta (...) through to the achievement of parliamentary democracy it has been the country lords...who have gained political dominance progressively at the expense of the Crown."128 (And Magna Carta, it might be added, was an achievement led by Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury). The conception is a similar one to that which leads the fourth Tempter to discuss the cult of St. Thomas. In these terms, the third temptation may be interpreted as a temptation to enlightened progressiveness, to pioneer a particular course in the evolution of the country's history.

The fourth and most dangerous of the Tempters has also been the one to receive the largest quantity of critical comment. He is almost identical with Thomas' unredeemed self. His is the temptation of the Devil, the temptation to spiritual pride, to turn the glory of God to the servitude of the egocentric self. The Fourth Tempter moves progressively through several stages, from the simple reasoning that the way of martyrdom is the only one left open; through the spiritual power of the

martyr over the greatest of earthly potentates; the
eternal destruction of all the earthly rewards of
martyrdom; to the ultimate presumption of willing his
self onto a plane equal with God and His Saints. Both
action and reward, however, are still conceived of from
the perspective of the world and the human reason.

It is the persistence of this worldly and materia-
listic perspective, which leads Thomas from this point
to what Coghill calls the fifth temptation, that of
wanhope. The ultimate temptation to despair may lead
directly to the act of suicide. This dilemma, essentially
born of a totally secular vision of life, is expressed
by Thomas:

Is there no way in my soul's sickness,
Does not lead to damnation in pride?...
Can sinful pride be driven out
Only by more sinful? Can I neither act nor suffer
Without perdition?129

From the point of view of the Fourth Tempter — who is
at this moment shown to be the most enlightened
consciousness in the play — there certainly is not.
The Tempter retaliating with the central wheel speech,
omits one of its most essential lines, "For the pattern
is the action/And the suffering..." This turns the

129 Murder in the Cathedral, p. 40.
central Christian paradox of stillness and movement, action and suffering into a facile equivalent of the medieval wheel of fortune, the perpetual flux, the futility of all things fixed in an almost Greek fatalism. The long silence of Thomas follows in the midst of the despairing clamour of the three-part chorus, again spoken from the perspective of the world. This silence signifies his epiphany. When he speaks next, his words are born of a religious perception which views life and the world from the still-centre of God's Will, which he no longer wishes to drag into his own; but in which he now wants to submerge his own will.

From this point onward, Thomas genuinely speaks from a spiritual standpoint, while the others all remain on the worldly level. In Part One Thomas' religious vision had been only apparently so. It had, therefore, led to an almost deathly struggle. Now, in facing the accusations of the Knights who argue from the same premises as the Tempters had, Becket answers with a serenity and effortlessness that emanate from his deepest convictions. The scene with the Knights within the twelfth-century action is conceived almost entirely — at least by the Knights themselves —, on the literal and immediate political level. Becket's reply, however, merges the
It is not I who insult the King,
And there is higher than I or the King.
It is not I, Becket from Cheapside,
It is not against me, Becket, that you strive.
It is not Becket who pronounces doom,
But the Law of Christ's Church the judgement
of Rome. 130

The reply is born of a complete renunciation of his
personal individuality; and a vision of the self as merely
an instrument of God's eternal pattern.

This theme of the conflict between two ways of looking
at life and the world, is clearly summarised in Thomas'
words to the Chorus and Priests just before the second
entry of the Knights:

You differ to the fact, for every life and every act
Consequence of good and evil can be shown.
And as in time results of many deeds are blended
So good and evil in the end become confounded.
It is not in time that my death shall be known;
It is out of time that my decision is taken...
I give my life
To the Law of God above the Law of Man. 131

In passing, it may be noted that this opposition of
two mutually exclusive views of life, gives rise to

130 Ibid., p. 65.
131 Ibid., p. 73.
recurring implicit contraries within single concepts. 'Justice', 'Peace', 'Law' are loaded words which constantly crop up. Each contains within itself the contradiction 'King's' versus 'God's', or 'the world's' versus 'God's', entirely exclusive on each side. The paradox in the word 'Peace' is explained by Thomas in the Sermon. These contraries are repeatedly underlined, and sometimes explicitly juxtaposed as in the last line of the speech just quoted. Every time one side of each concept is mentioned, the other is implied.

The arguments and rationalisations of the totally secular outlook are most strikingly represented in the twentieth-century Apologies of the Knights. In the modern world, according to Eliot, "something has happened that has never happened before..."

Men have left GOD not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never happened before That men both deny gods and worship gods, professing first Reason, And then Money, and Power, and what they call life, or Race, or Dialectic.132

The Knights' Apologies elevate to the place of God, "Reason", common-sense; and "Power", the welfare of the State. If they are read parallel to the temptations

of the first part, they turn out to be external, explicit completions of the arguments of the world, which began within Thomas himself. This is especially true of the long, complicated speeches of the Second and Fourth Knights. The Second Knight who speaks in terms of social justice, and the "just subordination of the pretensions of the Church to the welfare of the State", carries on from the temptation to worldly power with the aim of benefiting the commonweal. He thoroughly implicates the secular twentieth-century outlook, hemmed-in by political ideologies. He represents man the political animal.

The Fourth Knight draws his conclusion of "Suicide while of Unsound Mind" — again, arguing from results — directly from the deliberately willed martyrdom with which the Fourth Tempter had faced Thomas. He speaks in terms of modern scientific psychology, dissecting the human soul with all the arrogant self-assurance of a technician taking a machine to pieces. His modern secular premises, of course, make it impossible for him to give credence to any genuinely spiritual motives in the Archbishop. The Fourth Knight's arguments remind us of Backet's own words, that to many of his audience his behaviour would seem "Senseless self-slaughter of a lunatic, /Arrogant passion of a fanatic." The warning is intended for those of

133 Murder in the Cathedral, p.45.
his twentieth-century spectators who believe in nothing further than their eye can see or their reason understand.

"The knife-edge between annihilation and self-surrender", writes Hugh Kenner, "is the dramatic theme of Murder in the Cathedral." The two sides of the "knife-edge" are explicated, respectively, in the speech of the Fourth Knight at the end, and in Thomas' Sermon in the middle of the play. Kenner finds that the play is built on what he calls Eliot's "moral dialectic"; a conception of two diametrically opposed states of mind or soul which issue in an identical action. Of these two states, one is genuinely spiritual, and the other a worldly parody of it. Thus, the will to annihilation, postulated by the Fourth Knight is the worldly parody of the self-surrender to God's purpose, of the true martyr. It is also the difference between eternal damnation, and the salvation not only of the protagonist, but of the lesser humans around him.

This conception of Eliot's "moral dialectic" again results from the fundamental contradiction between the religious and the purely materialistic significance of existence. The Fourth Knight, according to the lights of this world, sees death as a destruction and an end. Since he cannot conceive of a reality beyond this life and the tangible

world, it is impossible that he should have the faintest
inkling of the spiritual experience vouchsafed to Thomas,
and later to the Women. However, in consideration of a
similar mentality on the part of his twentieth-century
audience, Eliot has allowed Thomas to have his say in
serene, lucid prose, explaining the apparently inexplicable.
We have this advantage over the Fourth Knight, that the
martyr's motives have been explained to us; while the
Knight can only see the physical fact of death.

The germ of Eliot's approach to the Church-State
conflict of history can be seen in Aubrey de Vere's
treatment of the theme. Both writers approach their
subjects from an orthodox, Catholic standpoint. Both
see the conflict in clear-cut terms of Good and Evil.
And both see in the death of Thomas a Christian martyrdom.
However, the works that result differ widely in originality
and execution. De Vere confines his play to the reconstruc-
tion of a particular section of the twelfth century.
The result is that his stand appears biased; and his
thematic concerns of no moment to any age outside the
historical period to which they are confined. Eliot,
instead of leaving his figures as historical individuals,
makes them symbolical and representative of universal
ideals and outlooks. He, therefore, does not give the
impression of being unjustly prejudiced either way;
he praises or condemns, not people and their characters, but the universal principles they embody. And universal principles, as he repeatedly affirms, are common to all ages. Therefore, while Aubrey de Vera's approach stagnates in embryo; Eliot, working upwards from the same basic attitude produces a work of far greater originality and sophistication.

In her essay, "History or Poetic Drama", Stevie Smith makes several charges against Eliot's approach to the Church-State conflict, largely in terms of historical truth and truth to life. In the Knights' speeches, she thinks, "may be seen all that Mr. Eliot believes and thinks we should believe, about the sickness of states and the lies of statesmen. ...But this does not seem a constructive political opinion, it seems rather childish as if he thought men did not sometimes have to govern, as if he thought that by the act of governing they became at once not men but monsters." As a blanket objection to all such charges, it may be stated that the play is a work of art expressing a personal vision of life, not a sermon on political philosophy. Even taking the charge on its own grounds, we may say that the satiric intent behind the Knights' speeches is not meant to dismiss all

politics or to deny the necessity of temporal government; but merely to show the meaninglessness of temporal government, however high-minded or "progressive", unless it acknowledges a higher power than the world can know. The martyrdom of Bécket is one concrete instance which Eliot has picked up to illustrate the imperative necessity of religious belief to give any human life ultimate significance. In fact, the Knights' reasoning is so sound that William R. Mueller calls them the representatives of the "brave ones, the loyal ones" of society, who "faithfully follow the demands of the best light available to them".136 With so much scope left for contrary interpretations, the least one can do is acknowledge that Eliot has not unduly weighted the scales.

He is, in fact, interested not only in showing a conflict between the two views of life; but also the necessity of their interaction. He insists that only through time can time be conquered; that the timeless moment of the Incarnation which Thomas is about to re-enact, is just as much a part of recorded history, a moment in the flux of time. Similarly, the women are saved because they apprehend, within the temporal continuum, the significance of the Archbishop's death.

Another charge brought by Stevie Smith is, "Is this how it was, is this the truth? ... he makes his archbishop so good and strong a man, that we may forget to ask, Were they all like this, is the Church so sweet a thing, was it not already at this time of Becket, a bride of Christ somewhat stained with blood and no less greedy of political power...?" We might answer again, that this is a work of art, not history; and in Eliot’s own words, he was not writing a chronicle in the manner of Tennyson. In terms of the foregoing charge, we might end up calling Tennyson’s play the better one for his condemnation of the Roman curia. A more important point is, that Eliot is not even trying to suggest that the temporal government of the Church was always spotless. In fact, he writes in the second chorus from The Rock: "The Church must be forever building, for it is forever decaying within and attacked from without." This is why the Tempter could plausibly ask Thomas to use his ecclesiastical power in collusion with the barons, against the King. Once again, the distinction between the Church-militant on earth, and the Church-Triumphant in Heaven, must be called to mind. It is only the latter that is infallible.

137 Smith, op.cit., p.171.

138 Complete Poems and Plays, p.152.
The Church-militant, like any other institution, is made up of fallible human beings and open to abuse; but that is no reason for decrying the institution itself. Also, for Eliot, it is an earthly and tangible means for an approach to Christian dogma which is, in his own experience central to the religious view of life.

Eliot's drama deals in great depth with a narrow range of experience. The action of the first three plays centres on the protagonist's perfection of his will which entails a struggle and awakening analogous with the author's. In Murder in the Cathedral, this experience is followed by actual death. Eliot's conception of a Christian martyrdom is based on a firm belief in original sin and the finitude of man. This is even apparent in his early poetry which is not explicitly Christian. In an essay on Baudelaire, he calls that poet a true Christian for his firm belief in original sin. "More than half a century later", Eliot writes, "T. E. Hulme left behind him a paragraph which Baudelaire would have approved:

'In the light of these absolute values, man himself is judged to be essentially limited and imperfect. He is endowed with Original Sin. While he can occasionally accomplish acts which partake of perfection, he can never himself be perfect. Certain secondary results in regard to ordinary human action in society follow
from this. A man is essentially bad, he can only accomplish anything of value by discipline—ethical and political. Order is thus not merely negative, but creative and liberating. Institutions are necessary."^139 In a later essay, "Second Thoughts about Humanism", Eliot adds, "It is to the immense credit of Huime that he found out for himself that there is an absolute to which man can never attain. For the modern humanist, as for the romantic, 'the problem of evil disappears, the conception of sin disappears'.^140 As a corollary, follows the stress on what Eliot calls "the greatest and most difficult of all Christian virtues, the virtue of humility."^141 This is the virtue supremely exercised in Thomas' acceptance of his martyrdom in the right spirit. The injunction to perfect one's will, ultimately means a humble recognition of sin; one's own, as well as one's responsibility in the sin of all mankind; and thus to leave the way open to an equally humble acceptance of Divine Grace.

Eliot believes that although Christ's sacrifice opened the possibility of salvation to all men, salvation itself is never certain. It entails a constant struggle on the part of the individual with the forces of evil,

139 Eliot, Selected Essays, p.438.
140 Ibid., p.490.
within and outside himself. "The world turns and the world changes", wrote Eliot in The Rock. "But one thing does not change. ... The perpetual struggle of Good and Evil." This forms the central epon of Murder in the Cathedral; first in Thomas' struggle with the Tempters, and then in the analogous and parallel, but also consequent struggle of the Poor Women.

Since "human kind" cannot bear "very much reality", the ultimate reality of the Incarnation and Crucifixion is at once too distant and too complex and intense for human kind to apprehend directly. Thomas, like all Christian martyrs and saints, imitates and re-enacts the sacrifice of Christ, and provides an immediacy of embodiment for the dogma. The martyr's imitation of the Christ-pattern is a very essential strand in the play. The habit of seeing parallels between the life of Christ as told in the Gospels and the lives of saints; and seeing a re-enactment of the former in the latter, is traditional in Christian thought; and was especially prevalent in the Middle Ages. It was an integral part of the Christian sacramental view of history, which saw in the stories of the Old Testament, prefigurations of incidents in the life of Christ, and in the persons of Moses or Joshua or David or even Adam,

142 Complete Poems and Plays, p.148.
fallible prototypes of Christ Himself.

"The pattern of a single life, ending with death, underlay all Christian thought and speculation, and provided an increasing focus for devotion and the imagination throughout the later Middle Ages", writes Helen Gardner.143 The truth of such a statement is especially felt in the case of Thomas Becket, whose murder elicited a spate of biographies. In his dramatization of the imitation-of-Christ pattern, Eliot is at one with the approach of the medieval biographers.

The Messenger’s speech is an explicit culmination of the women’s generalized references to "the coming", in the opening chorus:

The New Year waits, destiny waits for the coming. Who has stretched out his hand to the fire and remembered the Saints at All Hallows, Remembered the martyrs and saints who wait? and who shall Stretch out his hand to the fire, and deny his master? who shall be warp By the fire, and deny his master?144

These lines draw together Christ’s birth in December, with the Crucifixion — in the allusions to Peter’s denial —, and the prophecies of the "second coming", into the moment

143 *Religion and Literature*, p.74.
144 *Murder in the Cathedral*, p.12.
of anticipating Thomas' arrival from France. In these references of the Women, as in their attitude to the seasonal cycle, and in Thomas' explication of the significance of martyrdom, we find another of Eliot's pairs of recurring contraries — that of Birth and Death —, here reconciled in one moment of time.

The Christ parallel moves through the temptation episode, the Sermon, to the Passion and death. The Sermon explains the theological assumptions of the play, and also indicates the nature of the illumination Thomas has received at the end of the first part. It turns on three themes — the paradox of the Mass which celebrates the Nativity of Christ, juxtaposes birth and death, mourning and rejoicing, and absorbs them into one significant moment; the nature of Christ's peace; and the nature of a Christian martyrdom. Every point is underlined by the insistence that this is not as the world sees or believes or feels.

In the celebration of the Mass, says Thomas, "we re-enact the Passion and Death of Our Lord; and on this Christmas Day we do this in celebration of His Birth. So that at the same moment we rejoice in His coming for the salvation of men, and offer again to God His Body and Blood in sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the
sins of the whole world." In a certain sense, therefore, the significance of the Mass may be seen as the central theme of the play; and Thomas’ death as a physical re-enactment in his own person, of the sacrifice of the Mass. The theological concept of the Eucharist, like the image of the wheel, is a symbol of the reconciliation of contraries — birth and death —, which the world sees as exclusively and permanently opposed. "The doctrine of the Resurrection", writes Helen Gardner, "...makes death more than the payment of our debts to nature, or the release of the soul from imprisonment in the body. The moment of death becomes...the moment when man, through the victory of Christ over sin and death, is remade. ...It concentrates the imagination on the absoluteness and finality of death as the great test of faith."

The theme of death and martyrdom also leads to an exploration of the nature of peace. The Sermon sees Christ’s peace, not as the world sees peace — as the half-baked existence of people following a daily routine undisturbed. Christ’s peace is the peace of God’s will submerging men’s, the peace which Dante was pointing at when he wrote "e’n la sua voluntade è nostra pace", and

145 Ibid., p.47.
146 Religion and Literature, p.73.
which Eliot glorifies in "Little Gidding". Everyone in the play is looking for peace — Thomas' first word on entering is "peace." But it is usually of the wrong kind. The terrified women long to be left alone in the mire of their daily existence, "living and partly living." The Priests and the know-all Messenger discuss the "peace" between the King and the Archbishop that was patched up at Fréteval. Even Thomas' initial conception is that of a willed peace. The experience of Christ's peace comes to him during his moment of illumination. It comes to the women right at the end, as they apprehend the true significance of the Primate's death, in the La Deum chorus. This peace is attainable only through the anguish and suffering experienced in arriving at a consciousness of sin, and of one's collective responsibility in the sin of all men. This, as Thomas points out in the Sermon, was also what Christ meant when He said, "I come not to bring peace but a sword".

In speaking of Christian martyrdom, Thomas draws explicit analogies with the Christmas Mass — thus supporting the Christ parallel —, and explains its true nature.

A Christian martyrdom is never an accident. Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effect of a man's will to become a Saint, as a man by willing and contriving may become a ruler of men. A martyrdom is always the design of
God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways. It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr.  

The word "martyr", as has already been pointed out, could also be applied to the Chorus of Women, whose role in the play is precisely to bear witness — as the Bible repeatedly uses the word — to what they have seen of the witness of Thomas, and to their own experience and development. The first chorus opens with words strongly expressive of their role as witnesses. They are compelled, they say, by some indescribable force they cannot understand, to direct their steps to the Cathedral:

Some presage of an act Which our eyes are compelled to witness, has forced our feet Towards the cathedral. We are forced to bear witness.  

The external nature of the force is repeatedly stressed; it is certainly not an act of will at this stage. We may see in this, perhaps, the initial workings of Divine Grace in the lives of these Poor Women. It is given to them to

148 Murder in the Cathedral, p. 49.
149 Ibid., p. 11.
feel intuitively what God's anointed, the Priests, cannot even begin to understand. This Chorus concludes: "for us, the poor, there is no action/But only to wait and to witness."149

The experience of the Women, on a much lower plane, sometimes parallels, sometimes counterpoints that of Thomas. It is also a result of Thomas' own change of will. The Women are the representatives of the poor, humble sinners whom Christ died to save; as Thomas is, in some sense, a representative of Christ Himself. John F. Butler draws parallels between the salvation offered by the Christian religion and the great humanistic tragedies. Basing his article on the scheme of Eliot's play, he comes to the conclusion that there are "two levels of salvation: ...the Church is the society of Christians formed by the spiritually great acknowledging that their eminence is meant to serve their brethren, and by the spiritually ordinary acknowledging their debt to the great and seeking to improve in their following of them."150

The experience of the Women as portrayed in Murder in the Cathedral moves from a terror of being disturbed or awakened to consciousness in any way —

149 Ibid., p.13.
Archbishop, secure and assured of your fate,...
do you realise what it means...
The strain on the brain of the small folk who
stand to the doom of the house, the doom
of their Lord, the doom of the world? 151

— through a horrified consciousness of sin and death; a
reluctant involvement in the action, and recognition of
their own guilt; finally to the serene resignation,
acceptance and reconciliation of the last Chorus:

Forgive us, O Lord...
we acknowledge
That the sin of the world is upon our heads;
that the blood of the martyrs and the
agony of the saints
Is upon our heads. 152

Both Thomas and the Women undergo the experience of
the 'dark night of the soul': Thomas, in his struggle with
the Fourth Tempter, the Women in witnessing the killing of
their Archbishop. For both, this nadir of their experience
becomes the first step, the lowest rung on the ladder of
salvation. This state Eliot describes in the third section
of "Burnt Norton":

Descend lower, descend only
Into the world of perpetual solitude,
World not world, but that which is not world,

151 Murder in the Cathedral, p.20.
152 Ibid., pp.87-88.
Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property,
Dissipation of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy,
Inoperancy of the world of spirit;...153

The experience of the Women in their movement towards acceptance and awakening is the same "hard and bitter agony" — of the Birth which seems more like Death — that is described by the Magus.

Through the experience of these tillers of the soil, Eliot dramatises the opposition of the recurring seasonal cycle of birth and death as the world understands it, and the significance of birth and death through time redeemed by the Incarnation and Passion.

The weariness and futility of eternal recurrence in time is heavily underlined by the "waste-land" overtones of the early choruses. The treatment of the seasonal cycle, like everything else in the play, is based on the over-all opposition of two views of life. Seen from the purely materialistic view of the world the seasons become, as in The Waste-Land, a meaningless and ever-recurring flux, synonymous with mutability. This is the point from which the Women initially regard them;

Since golden October declined into sombre November
And apples were gathered and stored, and
the land became brown sharp points of death
in a waste of water and mud...
Now I fear disturbance of the quiet seasons... 154

In the next chorus, however, though the Women are still
submerged in the waste-land mentality, they unconsciously
amalgamate the natural seasonal cycle with the movement
of the Christian Year. Thus, in a manner, they forecast
the opposite approach of time redeemed to which they will
attain at the end of the play.

One year is a year of rain,
Another a year of dryness,...
Yet we have gone on living,
Living and partly living.
We have kept the feasts, heard the masses,
We have brewed beer and cyder,
Gathered wood against the winter,...

In the same chorus is introduced the rhythm of birth and
death, and the Women's fear which is like the agony of
the Magi:

But now a great fear is upon us, a fear not
of one but of many,
A fear like birth and death, when we see birth
and death alone
In a void apart. 155

154 *Murder in the Cathedral*, p. 11-12.
155 Ibid., pp. 19-20.
Within the materialistic attitude to the seasonal cycle, there are vague hints of the religious and Christian approach. But consciously, for the women themselves, at this point, even their religion is a matter of natural recurrence, in which the same feasts fall in the same seasons year in and year out, and are treated with the same unconscious habitual acceptance as sowing and harvest or brewing beer and cider.

The next two choruses occur during Thomas' agon and are, therefore, fraught with the imminence of evil and death seen in almost apocalyptic visions of destruction and beasts of prey. These choruses strongly resemble the fifth section of *The Waste-Land*.

The seasons return in the opening Chorus of Part Two. But in between has intervened the Archbishop's Sermon on the significance of Birth and Death as embodied in the Christmas Mass. In the light of the Sermon we discover an increasing awakening in the women's attitude to the seasons:

The peace of this world is always uncertain, unless men keep the peace of God. And war among men defiles this world, but death in the Lord renews it. And the world must be cleaned in the winter, or we shall have only A sour spring, a parched summer, an empty harvest.156

156 Ibid., pp.53-54.
They have come to realise this much although they do not know, that when they actually come to witnessing the action that is to clean the world in the winter, it will appear to them a universal defilement, "an instant eternity of evil and wrong".

The Women's state of mind during the "Clear the air!" chorus is an illustration of the confounding of what the world sees as good and evil, when viewed as a part of the eternal pattern of God. What seems to the Women the most evil and sacrilegious moment in the play, is actually the moment of consummation and beatitude. The agents of evil, "the death-bringers" become instruments of God's plan; the moment of death is also the moment of Thomas' resurrection and the moment of a new spiritual birth for the women.

This reconciliation is beautifully expressed in the great final chorus of the play, where the Women at last approach the seasons with a fully and genuinely Christian comprehension:

Even in us the voices of the seasons, the snuffle of winter, the song of spring, the drone of summer, the voices of beasts and of birds, praise Thee.
We thank Thee for Thy mercies of blood, for Thy... martyrs and saints
Shall enrich the earth, shall create the holy places.157

157 Ibid., pp.86-87.
This chorus is, therefore, the final expression in this play of what Eliot re-affirms in "Little Gidding":

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. 158

The waste-land aspect of the seasons, and as a corollary, the anthropological approach to the sacrificial side of Christianity, parallel the rites of the old pagan fertility cults. This parallel provides in the play what Eliot has called an "under-pattern" in poetic drama. In his essay on John Marston, Eliot had written, "It is possible that what distinguishes poetic drama from prosaic drama is a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once." 159 The main explicit pattern is the Christian theological one of the martyr's imitation of Christ, leading to the salvation and redemption of those less strong than he.

But this very Christ-pattern has strong parallels in the ritual sacrifices and literal rejuvenation of the earth in the older fertility cults. This side of Christianity with these parallels had already been consciously employed in The Waste-Land. In terms of

158 complete Poems and Plays, p. 197.
159 Selected Essays, p. 229.
the "under-pattern", therefore, Thomas in imitating Christ also imitates the Divine King of pagan ritual whose blood literally renews the earth. The under-pattern adds depth to the play. In terms of Kenner's analysis of Eliot's moral dialectic, it also presents a materialistic and literal parody of the main spiritual pattern of Christian atonement and redemption. The seasonal cycle of birth and death offers an ambiguous embodiment of both patterns.\footnote{For further comments on this point, see Appendix.}

While the theme of martyrdom and the theological assumptions behind the play are essentially medieval, the conception of the psychological struggle within the mind of Thomas is essentially modern, sophisticated, and in some ways, existential. The predicament of Thomas is similar to that of the protagonist of \textit{Ash-Wednesday}. Eliot's religious conceptions laid a far greater stress on the elements of doubt and suffering than on the serene joys of an unquestioning faith. He traces the quality of greatness in Tennyson's \textit{In Memoriam} to the element of doubt and despair that finds expression there. In the essay on Pascal, Eliot describes him as "facing unflinchingly the demon of doubt which is inseparable from the spirit of belief"; or "the drought, the dark night which is an essential stage in the progress of the
Christian mystic."161 This strain in Murder in the Cathedral, as in Eliot's other work, derives largely from the mysticism of St. John of the Cross. The saint had written of "the dark night of the soul" in terms which Eliot emulates in the Dies Irae chorus; "...The Void more horrid than active shapes of hell; Emptiness, absence, separation from God;..."162 All his protagonists suffer this central experience of the wrestle with the "demon of doubt". The Fourth temptation is a gripping dramatization of this experience; as is the representation of the agonized depths to which the Women sink in the second part.

A. G. George devotes his book, T. S. Eliot: His Mind and Art to tracing characteristically existential elements in Eliot's work; while several critics have repeatedly remarked on his sense of human solitude. In a letter to E. Martin Browne, Eliot himself comments on Beckett's position: "I meant to emphasize his loneliness, but you can only do that by showing a man in a crowd of people who from different points of view don't understand what he is after."163 This is one of the reasons why the play contains hardly any "dialogue" in the precise

161 *Selected Essays*, pp.411-12.
162 *Murder in the Cathedral*, p.71.
sense of verbal communication between people — an exchange of views or attitudes or ideas —, except, perhaps, in the scenes between Thomas and the Tempters or Thomas and the Knights. Even here, however, the first instance is an allegorical externalisation of an inner struggle, while the second sticks to dialogue proper only so long as the discussion turns on the immediate political issues. The ritualistic treatment of the whole play covers this lack of exchange convincingly, and also serves to emphasise the protagonist's solitude.

The central crisis of the play which turns on an act of the protagonist's will is a result of the existential elements in Eliot's outlook. Paradoxically, however, the "choice", the "act of will" entails a willing renunciation of the will and the self to the Divine plan. At the same time, the will is also actuated by the gift of Divine Grace which Thomas himself describes later as "a tremour of bliss, a wink of heaven, a whisper..."164 "'Christianity'", quotes John Macquarrie from Kierkegaard, "'in the New Testament has to do with man's will, everything turns on changing the will..."165 This is repeatedly expressed by Eliot in several of his works in the same phrase, "Make perfect your will". Thomas phrases it as "I have therefore only to make perfect my will."166 Eliot's Christianity,

164 Murder in the Cathedral. p.70.
166 Murder in the Cathedral. p.69.
as dramatised in his plays, has a lot in common with
Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism; particularly
in its emphasis on the futility of all human beings,
on the "leap" of faith and the doctrine of the Incarnation,
and the discontinuity between the world and the state
of grace. These existential elements are one aspect
of Eliot's modernism in this play.

In "Poetry and Drama" Eliot states that he "wanted
to bring home to the audience the contemporary relevance
of the situation" of Murder in the Cathedral. His main
concern in his early poetry had been the spiritual malaise
of modern man who is tied to the material needs and
exigencies of the daily round; who is incapable either
of honest doubt or of honest belief in anything beyond
the world that he can see and feel. In his essay on
Baudelaire Eliot wrote: "So far as we are human, what we
do must be either evil or good; so far as we do evil or
good, we are human; and it is better, in a paradoxical
way, to do evil than to do nothing; at least we exist.
...The worst that can be said of most of our malefactors...
is that they are not men enough to be damned."168

The pageant-play The Rock, which preceded Murder
in the Cathedral, was an explicitly didactic and

168 Selected Essays, p. 429.
propagandist attempt to rouse modern men and society from this lethargic torpor. "The World", wrote Eliot in "Thoughts After Lambeth", "is trying the experiment of attempting to form a civilised but non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time so that the faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and rebuild civilization and save the world from suicide." This is also the aim, in a sense, of Murder in the Cathedral, though it is handled with far greater subtlety than it was in The Rock. This aim results in alienation devices which underline the synchronic quality of the play, and at the same time diminish the purely local and period qualities of the historical material. From the point of view of themes, modern society provides the materialistic, time-bound attitude to life, as opposed to the spiritual, Christian one which gives any life meaning.

At several points in the play, the action deliberately steps out of its twelfth century context, or draws the twentieth-century audience into it. Towards the end of Part One, the Tempters in chorus describe life in despairing twentieth-century terms:

169 Ibid., p.387.
Man's life is a cheat and a disappointment;
All things are unreal,...
The Catherine wheel, the pantomime cat,
The prizes given for the English Essay,
The scholar's degree, the statesman's decoration
All things become less real, man passes
from unreality to unreality.170

Then follows an interpretation of Becket's death according
to the lines laid down by most modern historians, which
anticipates the Apology of the Fourth Knight. The speech
of the Tempter reveals the same attitude as is described
in the third chorus from The Rock:

Where my Word is unspoken
In the land of lobelia and tennis flannels
The rabbit shall burrow and the thorn revisit,
...And the wind shall say: 'Here were decent
godless people;
Their only monument the asphalt road
And a thousand golf-balls.'171

Thomas himself, in the speech which concludes Part
One, clearly implicates the audience in his death, which
is also the death of Christ and all His other martyrs and
saints.

But for every evil, every sacrilege,
Crime, wrong, oppression and the axe's edge,
Indifference, exploitation, you, and you,
And you, must all be punished. So must you.172

170 Murder in the Cathedral, p.41.
171 Complete Poems and Plays, p.158.
172 Murder in the Cathedral, p.45.
The Sermon is addressed to a congregation composed of twelfth and twentieth-century ordinary man, while the women embody modern man in all but their acceptance of the sacrifice.

Finally and most obviously, of course, there are the Knights' Apologies in the manner of Shaw's epilogue to St. Joan, parodying the rationalizations of Thomas' motives among modern-day historians. David R. Clark finds parallels to these in our own day with a speech made by a United States senator on the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He traces parallels between the predicament of Thomas and the modern one of Dr. King, on the one hand, and with that of Socrates on the other, to indicate the perennial nature of the martyr's dilemma, embodied in Murder in the Cathedral. 173

In the light of Eliot's explicit aim of bringing home to the contemporary audience the relevance of the theme, it is easy enough to accuse the play of didacticism, as has been done quite frequently. It is necessary, under the circumstances to distinguish between didacticism or propaganda that is harmful to a work of art — i.e., when a work is written solely for the purpose of converting spectators, and in which all aesthetic considerations are

173 "Introduction", Twentieth Century Interpretations..., pp. 8-10.
sacrificed to the preaching —; and art which contains moral and religious elements as primary ingredients of a vision of life: "the whole of modern literature", writes Eliot in "Religion and Literature", "is corrupted by what I call Secularism, ... it is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life: of something which I assume to be our primary concern". Eliot himself has, here, put his finger on the assumptions behind the charges of didacticism in this play.

About the basic relevance of Christian dogma to the play's themes there can never, however, be any doubt. But this is not to say that the play can only be fully appreciated by believing Christians. This charge, if true, would certainly detract from the play's effectiveness as a work of art. In his essay on Dante, Eliot himself has dealt with this problem which keeps cropping up over and over regarding the Divine Comedy. The Comedy is built, like Murder in the Cathedral on the Christian faith and on the philosophy of Aquinas and the Church Fathers. "You are not", writes Eliot, "called upon to believe what Dante believed, for your belief will not give you a grain's worth more of understanding and appreciation; but you are called upon more and more to understand it. If you can

174 Selected Essays, p.398.
read poetry as poetry, you will 'believe' in Dante's theology exactly as you believe in the physical reality of his journey; that is, you suspend both belief and disbelief. I will not deny that it may be in practice easier for a Catholic to grasp the meaning, in many places, than for the ordinary agnostic; but that is not because the Catholic believes but because he has been instructed. It is a matter of knowledge and ignorance, not of belief and scepticism.175 What Eliot says of Dante's Comedy, is similarly applicable to his own Murder in the Cathedral.

The play, like all his work, is an objective expression of a deeply felt and deeply lived experience. Some people, because of its essentially religious nature, might find it antipathetic or irrelevant to the modern context. But the play cannot be accused of merely propagandist aims. It embodies a vision of life which we are free to accept or reject on our own responsibility.

Eliot's historicity in this play — inspite of his deliberate avoidance of the chronicle form and all that smacks of historical "realism" —, is far greater and arises from a deeper level than that of Tennyson's chronicle Becket; or even Fry's Curtmantle which shows so much

175 Ibid., p.258.
concern for fidelity to the "realities of the human drama sub specie aeternitatis". 176 Eliot's entire philosophy of life, as revealed in Murder in the Cathedral and elsewhere, partakes of the deep Christian faith as well as the philosophical thought of the Middle Ages. In the spirit of his interpretation of Becket's death, and the religious assumptions he brings to it, Eliot is closer to the medieval biographers of the illustrious Archbishop than any of the other playwrights; so close, in fact, that at various points in the play where he has relied on historical data he has been able to lift passages from these biographers and use them almost verbatim without giving his play any incongruous overtones. J. J. Boulton devotes a whole article to pointing out Eliot's debt to the biographers, by juxtaposing passages from the play with the relevant portions from Grim or Herbert of Bosham or Fitzstephen. 177

In tracing the influence of medieval theology and philosophy in Eliot's work, Leo Shapiro mentions the dogma of original sin; the vexed question of predestination and free-will with Eliot's symbol of the wheel; the meanings of the Word and the Shadow in Thomistic terminology;

176 Fry, "Theatre and History", p.87.

177 In David R. Clarke ed., Twentieth Century Interpretations... pp.74-79.
the conception of the Civitas Dei. In Murder in the Cathedral this last is touched upon in the Chorus which opens with "Here we have no continuing city*. Fitzstephen mentions it as the text on which Thomas preached on his return to Canterbury.

One more such belief may be noted. Eliot's interpretation of the doctrine of the Atonement is one of the motivating forces of the dramatisation of Thomas' martyrdom and the witness and salvation of the Women. Thomas explicitly states it twice. In the Sermon, he explains the significance of the Christmas Mass: "at the same moment we rejoice in His coming for the salvation of men, and offer again to God His Body and Blood in sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sine of the world."

Following from this, he says in reply to the taunts of the Knights:

No traitor to the King. I am a priest,
A Christian saved by the blood of Christ,
Ready to suffer with my blood.
This is the sign of the Church always,
The sign of blood. Blood for blood.
His blood given to buy my life,
My blood given to pay for His death,
My death for His death.179

178 Murder in the Cathedral, p.47 (italics mine).
179 Ibid., pp.74-75.
The doctrine of the Atonement as interpreted through these passages was first propounded by St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), in his treatise *Cur Deus Homo?* ("why did God Become Man?"). The historical Becket, after his consecration is said to have taken this great predecessor as his model.

The generally accepted explanation of the Incarnation of Christ before St. Anselm, had been what is called the "ransom" theory. Joseph Campbell describes it as follows:

"The Devil through his ruse in the Garden of Eden had acquired a legal right to man's soul, which God, as a just God, had to honour. However, since the right had been acquired by a ruse, God might justly terminate it by a ruse. He offered as ransom for the soul of man, the soul of his own divine Son, knowing, as the Devil did not, that since the Second Person of the Trinity is beyond the touch of corruption, Satan would not be able to lay hold."  

This naive explanation had thrown the stress on the episode of the temptations in the desert. By resisting them, Christ paralleled the temptation of Adam and redeemed his fall.

St. Anselm, on the other hand, proposed that the claimant in the case was not the Devil but the Father, whose command had been disobeyed; and the claim, moreover, was against man. What was required was not a ransom rendered to Satan, but atonement rendered to God, ... The injury, however, had been against the infinite majesty of God, whereas man is finite. Hence no act or offering by any number of men could ever have cleared the account. In Christ true God and true Man, the species Man had a perfect representative... adequate to make satisfaction for an infinite offence. Merely living perfectly, as Christ did, however, would not have sufficed to compensate for man's fault, since living perfectly is no more than man's duty and produces no merit to spare. 'If man had a sweet experience in sinning, is it not fitting', Anselm argued, 'that he should have a hard experience in satisfying?'... But there is nothing harder or more difficult that a man can suffer for the honour of God101 spontaneously, and not of debt, than death, and in no way can man give himself more fully to God than when he surrenders himself to death for His honour'.102

In connection with Eliot's treatment of the theme of the Atonement goes the imagery of blood. In the concept of the Eucharist as well as Thomas' general use of the word to signify sacrifice and redemption, its connotations are almost always Biblical. Even this

101 This phrase has become permanently associated with Becket's stand in the controversy against Henry.

102 Campbell, op.cit., p.19. "the way was now open for a fresh appreciation of the human sufferings of the Redeemer...The Devil slipped out of the drama and left God and Man face to face." — R. W. Southern. The Making of the Middle Ages (London: Hutchinson, 1953), p.236.
symbol, however, has been treated ambiguously as in the poor Woman's use of it in the horrified, hysterical outburst which accompanies the killing of Thomas. It visualises a deluge of blood defiling and corrupting the world, compounded with allusions to the bleeding boughs from Dante's grove of suicides from the "Inferno". "Wash them" is a recurring refrain. This chorus presents the image of blood in all the ambiguity of its application within the play. It resolves another paradox: the blood seen by the world as defilement, is the atoning blood of redemption, sent to "wash" mankind of its sins. Even at this point, the Woman still "know and do not know".

Between this chorus and the final one, there is a long silence from the Woman, which is comparable to Thomas' towards the end of the first part. And as the first part ended in words of awakening and fulfilment from Thomas, so the second acknowledges the blood of the martyr, and concludes with the petition "Blessed Thomas pray for us".

Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral is at the same time the most deeply medieval, as well as the most relevant to modern times, of the plays on the Becket story. "Eliot", writes Stephen Spender, "can enter into the conflicts of Canterbury in the year 1170 because the struggle between the temporal and the spiritual powers within the context
of a society in which Heaven and Hell were real places, is one that he can imagine. In *Murder in the Cathedral* he does not have to resort to the Joycean device of the parallel myth taken from antiquity...which can with some effort be interpreted as parallels from Greek tragedy in his later upper-middle-class drawing-room dramas."183 The play presents a medieval religious outlook filtered through a sophisticated twentieth-century sensibility and intellect.

(vi)

'Conclusion'

The themes of all these works on the Becket story, therefore, may be seen to ramify from the initial datum of the medieval struggle of Empire and Popery. However, it is more important to realise how each writer shapes this given point to his own personal ends; and draws from it, or weaves into it, his own thematic strands. The foregoing portions have attempted to show this. The two Victorians, Tennyson and Aubrey de Vere, are governed by patriotic concerns, and by the relevance of the conflict of twelfth-century politics to the religious ferment in Victorian society and public life. Fry's two main themes —

183 *Eliot*, pp.197-98.
the portrait of Henry and the interplay of laws — as well as his other concerns in the play, are best understood against the background of his overall conviction of the ultimately unfathomable quality of life. Anouilh's treatment is governed by his constant preoccupation with the idealist's predicament in the cynical, expedient world of the twentieth century. Finally, Eliot's themes of martyrdom and the individual's quest for salvation are subsumed in a vision of two mutually exclusive attitudes to life; the secular and the spiritual, which he virtually equates with death and life respectively. In the medieval conflict between Christ and Caesar, Eliot found an ideally concrete equivalent for his vision of this ultimate opposition.