CHAPTER V

'BETWEEN THE HAMMER AND THE ANVIL': The Characters.
Then the bishop of Chichester spoke thus, 'My lord archbishop, saving your favour, we have much to complain of against you...you have placed us, as it were, between the hammer and the anvil; for if we disobey, we are ensnared in the bonds of disobedience; if we obey, we infringe the constitution and trespass against the king.'

First Priest ...what reconciliation
Of two proud men?

Third Priest what peace can be found
To grow between the hammer and the anvil?

Drama, or at least tragedy, in the great ages of its flourishing had always been historical. It is only during the last century and a half that historical drama has come to be regarded as a sort of incubus in the English theatre. This has been largely due to the misuse of it by nineteenth-century dramatists who turned it into pageantry and costume-drama. The historical "realism" of such drama confined itself to outward trappings and machinery made


2 Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, p.15.
as gorgeous as possible, while plots were thin and episodic. Characters with the labels of famous historical personages came onto the stage and went through words and movements that might have been historically accurate, but which did not make them recognisably human.

When Shakespeare wrote plays based on events from the remote past, his characters were not conceived as unrecognisable puppets fixed in a distant period, but as contemporary human beings one might recognise in everyday life. Drama, as people have repeatedly emphasised, is mainly a matter of the stage and human actors. These human performers who impersonate the figures of the past are the dramatist's most immediate means for establishing a rapport with his audience and gaining their belief in the humanness of his characters. And the actors will only be genuinely captured by characters whom they can recognise as people. Drama which merely concentrates on the external facts of incident and chronology will be an academic exercise, but not drama. History itself becomes more absorbing if the people involved in it can be seen to be thinking, feeling, and acting as we and people around us might. Man, writes Hugh Ross Williamson, "is the master not the slave of circumstances; a creature not an automation. And the 'meaning of history', in so far as it is discoverable at all is to be found in what people do. It is the story
of personalities, not the conditioned reaction of economic man — that abstraction of an abstraction."3

Therefore, for anyone who wishes to turn recorded events of the past into a play, a primary hurdle is to create credible human beings — to establish convincing motives for their actions and to make them behave as people behave. "The past", writes John Gassner, "remains the past, whereas it is the business of the playwright to make it the present. To do this, however, it is not history that we must write but character drama."4

Under the circumstances, a detailed documentation of the playwright's raw material might be more of a hindrance than a help. For in that case, he finds himself encumbered with so many more facts that he may twist and turn, use or leave out, but may not falsify — unless, of course, he is an Anouilh. A deluge of factual evidence may lead a writer to produce puppets manipulated by facts and events rather than a play about people with recognisable motives. Such consequences can be frequently seen in Tennyson's Becket.

In the case of the Becket story, however, the mass


of recorded material might prove advantageous because of the varied but equally plausible perspectives it provides on the central conflict and, therefore, on the behaviour of the two antagonists. From this point of view, the uncertainty and confusion of Becket's motives, their essential 'unknowableness' offers a lot of scope for imaginative treatment. He has often been interpreted as an extremely unsaintly saint, sometimes with positively vicious qualities.

The main factor which distinguishes the conflict between Henry and Becket from other similar conflicts in England or on the Continent, is the extent to which personalities and animosities, as well as intrinsic character affected an issue which was basically one of principles. The problem of conflicting jurisdictions had often been argued over, never resolved. But the disputants had hitherto managed to arrive at comfortable compromises which did not detract from the dignity of either side.

The case of Henry and Becket turned out to be much more "the story of personalities" than any of the other incidents. The main reason was the extremely intimate friendship that had existed between the two men for several years. In retrospect, it submerged impersonal issues in bitter vindictiveness. Another reason for this primary stress on personalities was the almost
titanic strength and forcefulness, or stubbornness of the two principal figures. R. W. Chambers calls the struggle between Henry and Becket "a battle of giants".5

It is this quality in the events that has largely attracted writers; not only literary artists, but historians too. Among the literary artists treated here, Anouilh and C. F. Meyer stress the personal relationship. Two others have a central biographical concern. Fry is absorbed in the complexities and contradictions within Henry's personality; and Shelley Mydans explores the man Thomas, with a view to finding out what really happened. In her note to the Signet edition of her novel, Mrs. Mydans describes how one night, reading to her children from Dickens's A Child's History of England,

...I came to this passage: "I will make", thought King Henry the Second, "this Chancellor of mine, Thomas à Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury. He will head the Church and, being devoted to me, will help me correct the Church". Now Thomas à Becket was proud and loved to be famous. He was already famous for the pomp of his life, for his riches, his gold and silver plate, his waggons, horses and attendants. He could do no more in that way than he had done; and being tired of that kind of fame (which is a very poor one) he longed to have his name celebrated for something else. Nothing, he knew, would render him so famous in the world as the setting of his own utmost power and ability against the utmost power and ability of the king.'

I stopped. This was very colourful, but was it true? It seemed an odd motivation for one of the great dramas of history... We did not go any further with Dickens' version of history. 'I think I will try to find out what did happen', I said.

Aubrey de Vere, wrote St. Thomas of Canterbury as a companion work to the earlier Alexander the Great, with the aim of exploring within "the gradual evolution of a character", "two opposing forms of greatness", the pagan and the Christian.

Eliot, inspite of subsuming character to theme, makes the very ambiguity of motive in the historical Thomas the pivot on which the whole play turns. However, he is not overmuch concerned with presenting rounded, three-dimensional human beings. This, from the point of view of his purposes, does not harm the play.

Tennyson, however, almost provides an object lesson on the dangers of allowing a political theme and a concern for history to take over so completely. He introduces large numbers of dramatically redundant characters and leaves them to their own devices. As a consequence also, he fails to make his central figure seem central to the reader. A melodramatic sub-plot forces him to introduce

7 De Vere, Recollections, p.363.
flat character-types who behave—in keeping with preconceived notions of how they should behave—with the rigidity of automata. Even in Tennyson's own work, some of the characters in Queen Mary throw those of Becket into the shade.

Of the personages who actually took part in the great drama in history, only Becket may be said to appear as a character in all the literary works concerned. Apart from Becket, the only ones who do this are the Knights, because they were the actual physical agents of the Archbishop's murder. Curtiment clearly brings this out. The murderers appear once only, for a few seconds, and speak not a word. "Four men", states the stage-direction, "silently touching and beckoning each other, leave the stage."

The Knights provide the clearest example in the story of historically authenticated figures, who have received little or no attention from chroniclers describing the actual course of the events. We have the bare fact that they murdered Becket; several tall stories

8 Laurence Binyon's The Young King covers the period after Becket's death up to the death of Young Henry in 1182. Becket's death is meant to hover over it like nemesis, but Becket himself does not appear.

9 Fry, Plays, p.249.
of how they came to grief in ghastly and horrible ways; and a few odd facts about their positions at court and their jobs. The writers whose works treat the Knights as characters at any length are, therefore, free to fill in the skeletal frame as they wish. It is striking, however, that with the remarkable exception of Mayer, the writers have all contrived to make them boors and callous brutes, regardless of the fact that these were men of Henry's court, and that Henry was a cultivated man who enjoyed the society of cultivated men. Such a treatment undoubtedly owes a great deal to the biblical mentality and vocabulary of the contemporary biographers of Thomas, who made rather a habit of stigmatising Henry's adherents as "wild beasts of the court". Thomas himself used the phrase.

Henry, Becket's antagonist is at least as important as Becket himself, but disappears physically from Murder in the Cathedral. Eliot thus succeeds in denuding the conflict of all interpersonal considerations and animosities between the two adversaries. What matters is not Henry the man, or even Henry the king, so much as the general principle for which he stood. In removing Becket's strongest external opponent from the scene, the author left the stage free for the portrayal of Becket's struggle within his own soul; in which the strongest inner opponent
turns out to be immeasurably more powerful than Henry. In the other works, however, Henry shares the honours almost equally with Thomas. In *Curtmantle* Henry himself is the unifying factor, while Becket is reduced to being a mouthpiece for the principles he represents.

Eleanor of Aquitaine, who appears in various guises in most of the works, is entirely irrelevant to Eliot who ignores her very existence. The Third Tempter, however, does mention "waiting hungry sons" around Henry who are causing trouble for him.

The remaining characters are generally treated collectively as groups: Henry's sons, for instance, or Becket's episcopal colleagues — among whom Foliot stands out fairly clearly —, other ecclesiastics, and the people.

Among the most noticeable of the minor characters we find, Tennyson's Rosamund, and the parallel figures of Anouilh's Gwendoline, Meyer's Gratia and Fry's Blae. The sharp contrast between Tennyson's "other woman" Rosamund, and Fry's camp-prostitute Blae, speaks volumes for the differing attitudes to sex in both, the playwrights and their respective societies. Then we have the 'King's —

10 "...the film version contains important new material:... a preliminary speech by Becket to the ecclesiastics of Canterbury; a new chorus; a prose trial scene showing Becket confronting King Henry, and an address by the Prior to the people in the Cathedral." Grover Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, p. 181.
man’ narrators, William Marshal and John the Bowman; Louis VII of France and Tennyson’s Walter Map.

Each of the works also contains a number of totally fictitious characters invented for purposes of supporting and filling out the author’s own view of the historical events and personages. This is most clearly evident in Anouilh’s use of the Little Monk, for instance, or the peasants in the first act. They are all invented characters.

Out of the huge cast involved in the drama, each writer selects for actual presentation only those pertinent to his particular themes. Among the playwrights, we have at one extreme, the absolutely stripped cast of Eliot’s play, and at the other, the crowded canvas of Tennyson’s. In Tennyson’s play — in keeping with his central political concern — the vast majority of his personae are either ecclesiastics or statesmen. In his choice of certain other figures, however, his biases led him by the nose. The entire cluster around the love-plot is a case in point. Eleanor, who is intrinsically necessary to Fry’s themes of family division and the complexity of human nature, was not essential to Tennyson’s main theme at all. She is only there to enact the black-hearted jealous woman, as against the snowy purity of Rosamund’s love. Walter
Map is entirely unnecessary, as even Tennyson was brought to realise by Irving. John of Salisbury and Herbert of Basham could have been conveniently amalgamated into one. The beggars and Margery again, are merely devices, and boring ones at that. They arouse no interest in themselves.

The novelists, of course, have a wider scope and introduce a larger number of characters. In this instance, the difference in choice of characters is due largely to Mrs. Mydane’s respect for history as opposed to Meyer’s use of it as a mask for personal emotions and attitudes. Shelley Mydane’s book is virtually biography; she never distorts facts or periods, although she may invent certain lesser characters and incidents. Meyer’s novel, on the other hand, is far more romance than anything else. The result is that during the struggle between Henry and Becket, we find the king’s sons already grown up, and playing — at least Richard does — an almost entirely unwarranted part in the limelight. The troubadour, Bertran de Born too, is dragged in for no better reason than that he is a flamboyant and colourful figure. He provides an opportunity for indulging in a certain Satanic Gothicism symbolic of the forces of evil building up around the already sorely beset Henry.
The figure of Thomas Becket has fascinated people for centuries, and still does to this day. He excited admiration and fierce partisanship from people who witnessed his contest with the king, through centuries of pleading pilgrims at his shrine. During the Reformation, however, he was metamorphosed into an advocate of disorder in the kingdom. Finally, Eliot's Fourth Tempter points out:

And later is worse, when men will not hate you Enough to defend or execrate you,
But pondering the qualities that you lacked
Will only try to find the historical fact.
When men will declare that there was no mystery
About this man who played a certain part in history.\footnote{\textit{	extup{Murder in the Cathedral}}, p.38.}

Historians may "declare that there was no mystery...", but it is precisely this, the enigma that was the historical Becket, which attracts imaginative writers.

Becket's individual personality, however, has suffered because of the attention paid to his representative position as Archbishop. In all the literary works, except Mydans' novel, Thomas appears remote, as if seen at two removes, more as 'the Archbishop' than as Thomas. "I must confess", writes Robert Speight, "...that inspite of playing Becket
more than a thousand times, I have never felt near to him as a man. He remains a figure in a tapestry or an effigy on a tomb — imposing, important, intransigent, undoubtedly heroic, but not very intelligent and with not very much to say to the modern world."  

As in other points of technique and convention, Tennyson was heavily influenced by his conceptions of Shakespeare's tragic and chronicle plays, so in his development of the central figures of his trilogy he has attempted to harmonise the data provided by historical records with what he felt to be the essence of tragedy. "As he sees it," writes John Peter, "tragedy clearly implies no more than a fall from eminence, and usually the death of some prominent figure, this fall being attributable directly to the hero's own imperfections ...Applied to his own Becket..., the conception gives rise to a persistent anomaly that arises when, having taken as his chief character a saint, he is thereafter obliged to endow him with a variety of gratuitous imperfections to account for his fall."  

But the anomaly arises because we are never sure whether the author considers Becket's death a "fall" or a triumphant exit from this vale of tears.


On the other hand, the imperfections in Becket are already there, not something thrust upon him halfway through the play. And as we approach the close, we feel that Becket himself is unaware of his flawed state at the end, in spite of the warnings of John of Salisbury.

The opening scene between Becket and Henry in the Prologue is set during his chancellorship. But although it gives us pointed indications about the main events that are to follow, it rather states than shows any intimacy between the king and his chancellor. The Becket we see during the chess-game is grave, capable of stern concentration and a fighter in his own way, although it is Henry who says that he hates being beaten. All the while that Henry has been getting worked up about the customs and the criminous clerks, Becket has remained calm and non-committal, even detached. And when the subject of Rosamund crops up, Becket sounds positively Victorian and pompous. He does not think twice about sermonising his king:

...put her away, my liege!
Put her away into a nunnery!...14

We hear a great deal from Henry about Becket's worldliness,

14 Works, p.694.
magnificence and fondness for rich living as well as his soldiership. But we never really see or feel it convincingly.

Henry ...I know thee...
A dish-designer and most amorous
Of good old...Gascon wine;
Will not thy body rebel, man, if thou flatter it?

Becket That palate is insane which cannot tell
A good dish from a bad, new wine from old.

Henry Well who loves wine loves woman.

Becket So I do.
Men are God's trees and women are God's flowers,
And when the Gascon wine mounts to my head,
The trees are all the statelier, and the flowers are all the fairer.15

This is a good example of the attempt to establish Becket in his historical role of the magnificent chancellor, but it fails. What registers in the Prologue is, above all, Becket's serious cast of mind, his moral integrity and what might, perhaps, be called a certain implicit self-righteousness. The refusal of the archbishopric is carried through as a conventional *nolo episcopari*, and the issue is ultimately left hanging in the air.

Thus, when we meet Becket again in the first act, the basic character of the man feels consistent to us. This is true inspite of the fact that the historical

15 Ibid.
Becket — and presumably Tennyson's — was supposed to have undergone a sudden transformation. In this scene again, Becket makes a long confessional speech on his past vagaries, but his actual behaviour and implicit attitudes are the same as those of the Prologue. The much-made-of transformation takes place only on a superficial level.

The historic and psychological problem of Thomas Becket is his startling transformation from an easygoing, luxurious, worldly statesman into a gaunt ecclesiastic, fanatically fighting for the rights of his see...He [Tennyson] is at pains to present to us the magnificent chancellor, the bosom friend of the King...; and then without the smallest transition, hey presto! he is the intransigent priest...16

Archer contends that between the Prologue and Act I, Tennyson should have introduced an "obligatory scene" to explain the "transformation". But the fact remains that — whether in keeping with or against the author's intentions — Becket the archbishop is not very different from Becket the chancellor, as he reveals himself to us. The "transformation" is a matter of verbal statement explained in several other verbal statements in Becket's long speeches to Herbert of Bosham at the beginning of the scene. The character up to this point — perhaps

inspite of the author's intentions — is consistent enough.

Another charge brought against Tennyson's portrayal of Becket is that the author, through the play, presents him as a man who has no doubts about his own stand, and knows from the beginning that he will oppose the king, and only then endows him with a tragic flaw in Act V.17 The critic does not make it clear why this very self-assurance and strength of conviction should not itself be a tragic flaw. Yet this is precisely what the author shows. The "tragic-flaw" of Tennyson's Becket is the traditional historical one of pride of spirit. This is not merely self-assurance, but over-confidence; not only in the righteousness of his cause, but in the righteousness of his own motives in defending it; coupled with a certain rashness, a violence of temperament. This flaw is established through the play. Towards the end of the first scene Becket himself soliloquises:

...John of Salisbury
Hath often laid a cold hand on my hosts,
And Herbert hath rebuked me even now.18


18 Works, p.703. Actually the historical Herbert was even more headstrong and fanatical than Becket. Tennyson must have known this; but giving his hero two mentors underlines the fact that he is conceived rather as a fallible human being than a saint.
At the beginning of the Northampton scene, we have Roger of York saying:

...Saving thine order, Thomas,
Is black and white at once and comes to nought.
O bolster'd up with stubbornness and pride,
Wilt thou destroy the Church in fighting for it...19

Roger may be an antipathetic figure, and an established enemy of Becket, but his words are not therefore to be discredited. They contain a good deal of truth. Nor can the self-dramatising tendency pointed up by Becket's entrance carrying his own cross, be ignored. The same kind of truth as contained in Roger's words, is asserted by Foliot:

As Chancellor thou wast against the Church;
Now as Archbishop thou goest against the King;
for, like a fool, thou knowest no middle way.20

If nothing else, the very repetition of these charges so constantly, impresses the reader. In making his exit from Northampton Hall, Becket is rebuked by Herbert himself for his violent, hot-headed replies. In the next scene, his own words criticise him when he takes leave of his retainers: "God redden your pale blood! But mine is human red; and when ye shall hear it is poured out upon

19 Ibid., p.705.
20 Ibid., p.710.
earth, and see it mounting to Heaven, my God bless you, ...will blast and blind you like a curse."21 There is something pharisaic in such disregard of human frailty.

Henry's accusation at Montmirail that Becket is making God's wishes synonymous with his — "None other God but me — me, Thomas,..." — is repeated in the last act rather more gently by John of Salisbury. Becket himself perceives that he and Henry are both "too headlong" for their office. His ravings against Rome also react against himself. At Fréteval the impartial Walter Map advises him to reduce the frequency of his excommunications which the victims are beginning to find ridiculous. In the dagger and poison scene Eleanor comments:

...My honest lord, you are known Thro' all the courts of Christendom as one That mars a cause with over-violence.22

Finally, Act V devotes almost an entire scene to John of Salisbury's rebukes. The cumulative effect of such speeches, as well as the resonance of self-righteousness in Becket's own speeches consistently expresses the flaw at the centre of his character. This flaw also embodies

21 Ibid., p.713.
22 Ibid., p.735.
one of the most prominently discussed dilemmas of the age, which G. Wilson Knight traces in Arnold's "Hseopoi: "The heart of man is obscure and motives are never single... who can ever claim with assurance to be the elect of God?" This pride, which Tennyson derives from history, contains the germ of Eliot's fourth temptation.

At the same time, as the self-examination in the first act indicates, Becket is conceived as a man with a stern sense of duty. He is a basically just and righteous man who, unfortunately never awakens from the spiritual blindness of self-assurance.

The character of Becket provides points of comparison with the figure of Cranmer in Queen Mary. — In this play Bishop Gardiner, the most obnoxious, cruel and hypocritically self-righteous of the ecclesiastics is called "As proud as Becket" by Bagenhall, who is a personification of the English gentleman. — Unlike Thomas Becket who, willingly, almost hurtles towards his death, Cranmer is a reluctant martyr, genuinely humble. He shows a very human frailty when he recants his Protestantism to save his life. It is only when he learns that nothing in the

23 Knight, op. cit., p.256.
world will be of avail against Mary's resolve to burn him, that he courageously abjures his recantation in full congregation and meets death with a brave face.

Becket, on the other hand, seems incapable of feeling fear, much less of showing it. His monolithic intransigence is in sharp contrast to the pitiful vacillation of Cranmer. And yet both, like Archbishop Stigand in Harold, are conceived of as spokesmen for an essentially English Church.

What is inconsistent in the presentation of Becket, is not the man's character, so much as the author's ambiguous attitude to his end. The play presents him as a "hero" rather than a "saint" in Christian terminology; since even in the moment of his death he is still blind to his imperfections. "Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control, the recognition of a divine order and of one's own place in that order,... these are the elements from which is formed the ideal human character." Becket's character is plentifully compounded of all the other elements, but shown to be lacking in "self-knowledge" and sometimes "self-control".

What remains to be pointed out in the character of Tennyson's Becket, is a rather laughable incongruity in

his mid-Victorian attitude to women; and the ridiculous position in which he is placed as Rosamund’s guardian angel. The fault lies in Tennyson’s tying himself up with a melodramatic love interest, rather than in the basic characterisation.25

My father’s view of Becket was as follows: Becket was a really great and impulsive man, with a firm sense of duty, and, when he renounced the world, looked upon himself as the head of that Church which was the people’s ‘tower of strength, their bulwark against the throne and baronage’. This idea so far wrought in his dominant nature as to betray him into many rash acts; and later he lost himself in the idea...his humanity and abiding tenderness for the poor, the weak, and the unprotected, heighten the impression so much as to make the poet feel passionately the wronged Rosamund’s reverential devotion for him...26

Tennyson’s general presentation of Becket is essentially in a Hebraic mould. The incongruity lies in endowing him with the kind of maudlin sentimentality that underlines the episode of the peasant and his dog, or the instance mentioned in the Memoir of Rosamund kneeling by his body.

Denuded of the ethical overtones of Christian martyrdom, the tragedy of Becket, as Tennyson presents

25 For a fuller account of this point, see Ch.IV on Themes.

26 Hallam Tennyson, op.cit., p.195, (Italics mine).
it, might have been that of a great man with the classic flaw of *hubris*. As it stands, however, the question of Christian martyrdom which the playwright cannot ignore, confuses the issue.

Writing at about the same time, Aubrey de Vere's interpretation of Becket is rather different. It bears comparison with Eliot's approach to him as a "saint", but on a far more simplified level.

In Becket my design was to illustrate the greatest of that lion race, those earlier Archbishops of Canterbury, who fought for the freedom of God's Church — ...He was not a man of the highest ability, but he had in the highest degree the great virtue of fidelity. Reluctantly he had become a man in charge; and he had vowed that, while that charge was his, his master should not suffer wrong. He had begun as a brave and honourable man of the world while free from its vices, though too regardful of its applause. This unsought elevation forced him on and up through strenuous airs of painful duties to a spiritual height made daily greater by the machinations of unscrupulous foes, and desertion of false friends. In the grades of merit he had proceeded "Hero" before long, and the next degree was that of "Saint". It came to him through suffering.27

Becket's chancellorship is left out of the question altogether, so that the problem of his conversion, or inconsistency of behaviour never arises. He is presented

27 *Recollections*, p.365. Also note the distinction made above, regarding Tennyson's Becket. (italics mine).
in broad, extremely simple outlines with a strong bias in his favour. His utter honesty and simplicity, and an unswerving fidelity to duty are repeatedly and heavily underlined. There is no complication of egotism, self-righteousness or vindictiveness. Henry talks of Becket's "English bread/And king-defying fierceness"28; Empress Matilda says, "Norman daring wed with English truth/Hath in him bred a hardy race of virtues."29 The Earl of Leicester comments:

...He's dangerous
Neither as proud nor tortuous, but as simple,
And passionate for the honour of his charge;
Some old mastiff is he, that by the door
Of hut or house, alike, keeps honest watch;—30

Gilbert Foliot, much against his will, confirms the verdict.

...what was there against us?
One man - one man alone; not trained in schools;
No canonist; with scant ascetic fame;
A man once worldly warred on by the world.
My lords, this man subduing his own heats,
And learning how to wait, hath to himself
Well nigh subdued the realm.31

Out of his own opponents' mouths, these judgements make a

28 St. Thomas of Canterbury, p.25.
29 Ibid., p.110.
30 Ibid., p.168.
31 Ibid., p.207.
strong impression. De Vere's Becket appeals largely for the quiet dignity of his bearing and the essential humility of his struggle. He has from the beginning acknowledged God as his master, in assuming "The divine burthen, and the weight" of his "Duty" to God. The conception of Thomas in this play is pure white.

Such an interpretation seems, at once, too simple and rather biased. Thomas, in fact, is universally acknowledged to have been a man of the highest ability. De Vere's insistence on his simplicity, sometimes makes him sound almost simple-minded, which is not much of a compliment to the historical Thomas. His "fidelity" was often pure obstinacy. The machinations of his foes are noted while Becket's own vindictiveness is ignored. It is clear that the point of view differs from Tennyson's, in being entirely orthodox Catholic. Thomas' career is interpreted as representative of the progress and development of Christian sanctity.

Fry's approach makes a strong contrast. His central figure is not Becket at all.

When writing about Henry II and Becket, it was not Becket's sainthood born of Church- and-State politics that chiefly concerned me, nor the evaluation of Henry's Customs of his kingdom; it was the degree of self-deception in Becket's thrust, and the whole
anxious of Henry's part; so that I was driven to ask myself whether, by his dedicated suffering for an ideal (his Passion, in a religious sense), Henry was not the more saintly of the two. 32

It is only in Fry's play that the character of Becket suffers morally, by comparison with Henry's. At the same time, the spotlight on Henry reacts adversely on the portrayal of Becket as a three-dimensional figure. As the conflict with the king progresses, Becket petrifies more and more into a symbolic mouthpiece for the Church. In the jolly good-fellowship of the early portion of the first act, we have indications of Becket's versatility; his flair for adapting his character to suit the view of the observer, without being consciously hypocritical. Henry asks:

I should like to know if there's anything
Our dear friend has of the ten talents
Can fail at. ...  ...  What are you Becket?
Force, craft or holy apprentice? 33

Henry, of course, is having some good-natured fun at his friend's expense, but he is also half serious; while the audience asks the question in all seriousness. A little later, with the most genuine sincerity he ever displays,

32 Fry, "Theatre and History", op.cit., p. 86 (Italics mine).
33 Fry, Plays, pp. 190-91.
Becakat summarises his own character:

... The Church itself. Neither waits for me, nor wants me, rather despises me than otherwise. And I'm not a man whose confidence thrives on its own. What I do well I do because men believe I will do it well. Before ever the thing is begun. ...
... I care for men's opinion. I doubt if I should ever be sufficient in myself, to hold my course without any approval. No one would say I was made of the stuff of martyrs.34

Although the last sentence is loaded with irony, Becket's estimation of himself accords, substantially, with the 'unconscious play-actor' interpretation of modern historians.

His subsequent behaviour, up to the Fréteval scene is ambiguous. His words as he puts the case for the Church, carry conviction. But Eleanor's words to him — "To guide the God/A little is sometimes not without merit"35 —, introduce a note of doubt as to which God Becket is serving; the God of the Church, or the god of the self. This ambiguity is further complicated, because Fry often, in the course of the struggle, makes Becket utter the author's own opinions. This is the case in a speech like "What a man knows he has by experience..."36

34 Ibid., p.198 (Italics mine).
35 Ibid., p.216 (Italics mine).
36 Ibid., p.218.
In the reconciliation scene, however, Becket is unequivocally represented as a man who sought martyrdom, whether consciously or unconsciously. Henry comments on Becket's "old weakness for riding in triumph..."; Becket himself speaks of the confusion and ambiguity of his motives:

But sometimes in the mind's despair
when every thought and contrary thought, every
Act and opposing act, equally bear some taint
Of the man I am, I see I may be one of those
Whose life won't serve.

Henry Don't be too proud to live. ... 

Finally, Marshal makes a choric comment:

...he seemed to me like a man
Who had gone through life saving up all passion
To spend at last on his own downfall 37;

and condemns Becket's "clumsy aggressive unforbearance"
on his return from exile.

In his chapter on Curtmantle, Emil Roy comments,
"To an extent Thomas resembles Hoel of Thor, Jennet of
The Lady, and Gattner of The Dark all cast as martyrs

37 Ibid., pp.247-248.
but afraid to die." Such a statement is rather misleading. For one thing, a martyr is one who consciously accepts death as a witness to his faith. Hoel in Thor with Angela at least, is far more of an unwitting sacrificial victim than a martyr. Thomas, in Curtmantle is conceived neither as a scapegoat, nor as a sacrificial victim, nor as a martyr. He is a man, ultimately self-deceived, who in large measure, provokes his own death. Hoel, has no say whatever in the fate that befalls him, but he certainly does not want to die. Bettnner again, finally accepts death, but with great reluctance. Thomas, on the contrary, is in Henry's words, "too proud to live." He has done his best to court death — although, perhaps, unconsciously. The author's conception of Becket, therefore, cannot be said to resemble that of these other characters. There is, however, a lack of clarity in Fry's presentation of Thomas.

Fry has tried to see Becket from Henry's point of view as well as Becket's own. The resultant ambiguity is one within Becket's character, as well as in the manner of presentation. This is especially evident as Becket freezes into "The Church". The concentration on Henry's complexity has inevitably left the author little scope for actually dramatizing the personality of Becket.

Anouilh, in *Cher Pitoeff* comments, "...le théâtre c'est d'abord et avant tout *Des Personnages* ..."; and it is in the characters of the Becket story that he shows himself primarily interested. Critics have claimed that since the playwright is interested in both protagonists equally, the title of the play, which seems to throw the concentration on only one of them, is deliberately misleading. This, however, is only partly true. All the various phases which the relationship goes through, are regulated largely by the changing shape of Becket's "honour" in his own mind. It is true that the king himself takes the step which sets in motion the machinery of the action. But even without it, Becket—being what he is shown to be — would, ultimately have found his "honour" in something else.

Anouilh's protagonist, in comparison with all the other Becket's, is the most modern in conception. The other dramatists are not very concerned to rationalise Becket's change from worldly chancellor to exemplary archbishop. In contrast, one of Anouilh's primary aims is to portray—if necessary, to invent—a Becket in whom this transformation will be consistent with a postulated character. And at least fifty percent of

39 Vandromme, op. cit., p.107. "...the theatre means, first and foremost, *Characters*..."
this personage is pure invention. Nevertheless, Anouilh succeeds in doing what the other playwrights either did not try to do, or failed to do; in providing us with a Becket whose actions are consistent with the kind of person the play shows him to be.

"Je n'ai pas été chercher dans les livres qui était vraiment Henri II — ni...Becket", writes Jean Anouilh in his programme note to the play. "J'ai fait le roi dont j'avais besoin et le Becket ambigu dont j'avais besoin." This statement indicates not only his cavalier attitude to facts, but also his primary interest in characters which would fit his own preconceptions. Anouilh's Becket has a family resemblance to the author's own idealistic heroes and heroines that far exceeds any resemblance he may bear to his historical original.

Critics have traced in the work of Anouilh a gradual development from the adolescent's gratuitous revolt against life and happiness — portrayed in the idealists of his early plays —, to a more world-accepting and life-accepting view, which sometimes makes the Créons of his plays more sympathetic than the Antigones. In L'Alouette and Becket

40 Ibid., p.240. "I did not search in the chronicles for the real Henry II — or Becket. I created the king I needed, and the ambiguous Becket I needed."
he has returned to the intransigent hero of his early plays, but in a rather more optimistic mood, and with a tendency to divide the sympathy of the audience among two or three personages.

Becket is an Anouilh idealist with a difference. He combines within himself a bit of both Créon and Antigone. His revolt, when he comes to it, does not take place in a vacuum, nor is it the expression of a total inexplicable distaste of life or its "bonheur". Becket gives his allegiance to something outside himself, and dies for a cause we can sympathise with as human beings. Whereas in the young adolescent idealism of Joan and Antigone it was 'childlikeness' that was emphasised, in the Henry of Becket it is 'childishness'. The childlike idealism of a Joan is here embodied in the Little Monk who serves as a sort of ghost from the past, the hero's alter-ego. In Becket it is the idealist who is the mature, sophisticated man of the world. His subtle intellect and refined aestheticism are very far from the naive simplicity and adolescent shrillness of a Joan or an Antigone. Henry, on the other hand, the one who compromises, is the one whose temper-tantrums and egotism are those of a pampered, spoilt child. In this play the ratio, idealism equals childhood and expediency equals adulthood, seems to have been reversed. There is, perhaps, a brightening of
Anouilh's world-view in his approach to Becket as a figure who has reached purity through the disillusionment and cynicism of a man of the world; instead of the white-hot, inexperienced, uncompromising but ignorantly innocent stand of youth.

In the Becket of the early half of the play, we have an apparently frivolous, elegant young aesthete who has achieved his position by somehow convincing himself that collaboration with the Norman conqueror does not demean his honour as a Saxon. He has worked his way to an intimate friendship with his king. His sole claim to distinction in terms of his author's world, at this stage, lies in his acute intelligence, his perception of his own hollowness, and the penchant for thoroughness in any job he undertakes. In one of the earliest conversations in the play, he replies to the king's slightly contemptuous question about how he succeeded in reconciling his honour with collaboration. Becket says, smiling:

Le problème n'était pas le même. Moi, J'étais un homme léger, n'est ce pas? En vérité, il ne s'est même pas posé. J'adore la chasse et seuls les Normands et leurs protégés avaient droit de chasser. J'adore le luxe et la luxe était normand. J'adore la vie et les Saxons
Thérèse in *La Sauvage*, faced with the same choice, had turned her back on riches and luxury and returned to the dark poverty of her past that was her only true inheritance. However, cynical and self-centred as Becket's speech is, it is not unsympathetic. The words are reminiscent of Créon trying to tempt Antigone with the simple joys of life. Life does have something to offer. In this speech, Becket is implicitly negating Antigone's stand, by opting for the pleasures of life, rather than die for an abstract ideal. At the same time, as Gwendoline tells him before she leaves, in his eagerness to taste as much as possible of the honey of life, he has forgotten that something may still be left with those from whom everything has been taken — in other words, honour. And the phrase, "j'étais un homme léger" underlines the basic hollowness within the man. Explaining his disregard for history in this play, Anouilh says, "je suis un homme léger..."
et facile — puisque je fais du théâtre." He is a player, he claims. Becket's application of the phrase to himself not only indicates his kinship with the author, but also the "player", the self-dramatizing, role-enacting streak in himself.

The overt frivolity and cynicism of the early Becket form a façade, a defensive coating against a feeling of falsity and emptiness and the self-mockery that lies behind some of his speeches. The old archbishop puts his finger precisely on the spot. In a gentle rebuke to Foliot's tirades against the "young debauchees", he defines the chancellor as a man who seems absent in spite of his physical presence; as a man in search of himself. The archbishop's words also define a similarity between Becket and the Sartrean authentic man.

Becket's character in the first two acts is a curious mixture of Warwick and Charles VII in L'Alouette. Like Becket, and his author, Charles repeatedly describes himself as "un homme léger". He is, furthermore, like the early Becket, afraid of being loved, afraid of the obligation and responsibility it creates in oneself. But also, like Becket, Charles is aware of his own hollowness. He has an intelligence which enables him to communicate with Joan, and lifts him well above the
level of those who surround him. Unlike Becket, however, he remains a moral coward to the end.

Like Warwick, the early Becket is young and takes elegance as a standard of life. Like Warwick, Becket in the first two acts does not scruple to sacrifice morality or virtue of any kind to the cynical expediency of practical government. What Warwick says about brainwashing his soldiers with propaganda against Joan, could have easily been said by the Becket who advises Henry to corrupt his vanquished foes with kindness instead of stiffening their courage by brutality. Warwick congratulates the imprisoned Joan on escaping with her life:

...Ma' sympathie personnelle pour vous, mise à part — on souffre horriblement, vous savez, et c'est toujours inutile la souffrance et inélégant...Malgré votre petite extraction, vous avez eu un réflexe de classe. Un gentleman est toujours prêt à mourir, quand il le faut, pour son honneur ou pour son roi, mais il n'y a que des gens du petit peuple qui se font tuer pour rien.42

42 pièces Costumes, pp.128-129. Fry's adaptation, pp.94-95. "I'm perfectly convinced you've done right to steer clear of martyrdom. I congratulate you most sincerely. It was astonishing considering the peasant stock you come from that you should behave with such distinction. A gentleman is always ready, when he must, to die for his honour, or his king but it's only the riff-raff who get themselves killed for nothing."
This speech is rich in irony. The analogies implied in it, people versus nobility equals inelegance versus
elegance equals abstract idealism versus expedience,
are central to Anouilh's conception. But Warwick,
although satirised in this speech, is not inimical.
The difference between Backet and Warwick is this:
that whereas Warwick can harmonise his talk about
elagence and class and honour since he comes of the
society of conquerors and aristocrats, Backet's origins,
like Joan's, are "un peu peuple". Like Joan he comes
of a conquered race. The early incongruity within him
arises from the attempt to reconcile a Warwick-like
attitude to life and the world, with a Joan-like
inherited past.

Once he has taken on the "burden" of God's
honour, however, his actions parallel those of Joan
or Antigone in his intransigent support of the Church's
rights, his claim of the right to say "No"; and finally
in defending his "No" to the death. However, Antigone's
revolt is entirely nihilistic; her refusal to
"compromise" is ultimately the denial of life and
its processes, a refusal to grow up and accept
responsibility. Joan's is similar. But her defence
of France and her love for humanity give her stand a more
positive colouring. Backet, however, dies defending an institution. It is something objective and outside himself — the temporal rights of the Church, which we can understand in human terms.

The consistency of Anouilh’s Backet lies largely in the fact that he is a Saxon; as well as in his resemblance to Anouilh’s other personages. In accepting the “burden” of the archbishopric, Backet accepts his own past, his race, and the guilt of his initial compromises. His later intransigence is, at least partly, a vindication of that past. His attitude to God is ambiguous. He is capable of an intellectual grasp of an abstract ideal which he defends; but the type of submission described by Eliot requires a deep love and a yearning to be merged in God’s will. This capacity is absent in Anouilh’s hero, who seems to have been conceived in entirely cerebral terms.

Backet’s aestheticism, reserve, his powerful intellect, as well as his inability to love, make him curiously cold and remote. Even his slight tenderness to the peasants or the Little Monk is born of a superior attitude. It tends to regard them as objects rather than persons.

Ginastier offers a different explanation of Backet’s transformation in terms of the twelfth century feudal code.
He explains it as a transfer of fealty from one suzerain to another. Backet had been bound to his king by an oath of fealty. In being called to the episcopate he is bound in the same manner to a far greater overlord. Anouilh himself, in the early paragraphs of his note provides a pointer for such an interpretation:

...il est profondément fidèle à son suzerain et au serment féodal qui le lie à lui. Il est l'homme d'une époque où les rapports humains — basés sur la fidélité d'un homme à un autre homme — étaient simples.

However, an explanation of Backet's change in terms of a feudal transfer of allegiance could only be a part of the whole interpretation. Ginestier's explanation does not cover Backet's early sense of guilt, or the problem of honour, and the resuming of the burden. It is too simple to be adequate for Anouilh's protagonist.

Based on the identical source of Thierry's history, Meyer's novella makes a good deal more of the exotic appeal of Backet's supposed Saracen antecedents than his Saxon origins, though the letter are also used.

43 Paul Ginastier, Anouilh, p.134.

44 Vendromme, op. cit., p.239. "...he was firmly bound to his suzerain and to his feudal oath. He belonged to an epoch in which human relationships — based on the fidelity of one man to another — were simple".
Indeed, Meyer's Becket gives a strong impression of an aristocratic and elegant hot-house plant. A recurring image describes Thomas "basking like a white slender serpent in the sunny warmth of his royal master's favour." Apart from analogies of physical appearance, the serpent also connotes traits of character in Thomas: his wisdom, his guile, his adaptability.

Meyer shows a tendency to treat physical traits as indices to character. Such a habit frequently enables him to epitomise the relationship between Becket and the king in visual terms of sharp physical contrasts. Thomas has the pallor, the elegant slenderness and refined appearance of the serpent, while Henry is described as being of "powerful stature and of lordly mien and his prominent blue eyes glowed like coals of fire." As the story progresses and catastrophe after catastrophe takes its toll of the two men's souls, the condition of the body again indicates the state of soul. Thomas becomes thinner, paler; his face becomes gaunt and emaciated, and his eyes glow from the depths of their sockets with a superhuman light. Henry becomes stouter, his face becomes ugly and bloated, the lips become thick, the eyes more and more

45 Meyer, op. cit., p.58.
46 Ibid., p.51. Slightly later (p.53) the narrator speaks of "the superhuman shrewdness" of Thomas' "pallid countenance".
protruding and blood-shot. While Beckett, in appearance and behaviour, signifies the remote withdrawnness of the ascetic, Henry as he degenerates, becomes more and more physically coarse.

In keeping with Beckett's elegant and fastidious appearance, are equally elegant and fastidious tastes and habits of mind. "One thing, however", says the Bowman, "it seems to me the chancellor lacked: the impetuosity and heat of full-blooded manliness."47 But, he hastens to add, this is no imputation of cowardice. The chancellor is an excellent soldier, but he is unable to stand the sight of blood or public executions; he is painfully reluctant to sign death-warrants. Above all he is a lover of birds and beasts — almost a Francis of Assisi — with a deep hatred of all hunting and blood-sports. Of all his characters, comments W. E. Yuill, "perhaps Becket is closest to Meyer's heart and exerts the most compulsive power over his imagination: ...Becket has the fastidiousness, the suavity, the subtle sense of superiority along with a certain lack of manliness that were characteristic of his creator."48

47 Ibid., p.60.

48 W. E. Yuill, "Conrad Ferdinand Meyer", op.cit., p.201. He also comments earlier that Meyer projected into "such men of destiny...a taste for power which he could never indulge in reality."
In spite of the Christian orthodoxy of the universe
of Meyer's story, Thomas himself is conceived in
astonishingly modern terms. To the depths of his being
he is a humanist, a scholar and an atheist, deeply
troubled by his vision of human suffering. The naive
Bowman uses the Saracen ancestry as a convenient peg
on which to hang this aspect of Thomas. He himself has
been to Cordova and conceived a deep admiration for
Arabic wisdom. However, his sentiments with regard to
its place in God's Christian universe are irreproachably
orthodox. "God," he says, "gave the heathen much art
and knowledge, mathematics, mechanics, architecture...
in order, as it seems to me, to grant them a brief glory
before eternal death." So much for human learning.
The Bowman's very simplicity, however, is an instrument
of the author's irony. The passage expresses Meyer's
own preoccupation with the conflict of clerical and
worldly values; and indirectly, his anti-Catholicism.
The Bowman himself, a runaway monk, symbolises flight
from the cloister, and his creator's anti-clericalism.
Meyer's Backet embodies the paganism of the Renaissance
humanist against the superstition and fanaticism of
the Church, in what may also be seen as a conflict

49 Ibid., p.35.
between the socio-cultural assumptions of two epochs in European history. The Saracen ancestry with all its scholarly and aesthetic associations, is the means of turning the historical Becket — who was thoroughly "medieval" and of his times — into a representative of the following and, in Meyer's view, far more enlightened age. Henry, in offering Becket the archbishopric, says: "...I suffer no mockery of sacred things! ...You have imbibed Arabic philosophy; you follow an esoteric doctrine, and you are not an humble Christian. But as for me, I wish to live and die one." Ironically, it is the unbeliever who becomes a Christian saint, and the humble Christian whose soul is forever damned.50

In keeping with this aspect of Becket's character, the Bowman accuses him of unbelief in the black Satanic arts and practices of witchcraft, which was accounted as heinous a sin as atheism. The narrator cites the incident of a self-confessed witch whose death-warrant the chancellor would not sign. "That Mary", Becket says, "is as much a witch as I a saint. John, there are moments when I shudder at that which human beings, and just

50 Ibid., p.137. Yuill comments: "...in interpreting Becket's development from the man of the world to a saintly figure, Meyer is simply substituting irony for direct attack. Becket's piety is the subtlest of all attacks on the King." Op. cit., p.198.
as much at what they think they are." Following this
"presumptuous philosophy", therefore, he contrives the
woman's escape.

Meyer tackles the problem of Thomas' transformation
with a piece of invented machinery, the seduction and
death of Gratia. Henry, thus, ignites a deep and gnawing
hate within the bosom of the chancellor, which he can
indulge only after becoming archbishop. Meyer himself
commented on Beckett:

This man — an intellectually superior nature,
humane almost in the modern way, but defenceless
in the face of medieval barbarity — this man
uses the Church as a weapon without being himself
a believer — legend and the poet both endow
him with Oriental blood.52

The narrator, however, also attempts to provide an
intrinsic psychological explanation. While not even his
most ardent supporters could refrain from reproaching
Becket with the sin of pride and arrogance, the Bowman
endows him with the fatal flaw of abject reverence and
servility to his master. This again is traced back to
the reverence for all authority inculcated by a Saracen
upbringing. In Gratia too, this humility provest her
undoing. Thomas himself tells Henry — not without a

51 Meyer, op.cit., p.63.
trace of irony and subtle sense of superiority —,

You know the defect of my character, fashioned as it is to humble submissiveness. Whether it be from early habit of kingly servitude or the nature of my race and blood, I can make no stand against anointed and exalted sovereignty. ...Never surrender me out of your hand into that of a master who might be mightier than you! For in my ignominious weakness I should have to render obedience in all things to him...even against you...53

This, we are to understand, is precisely what Henry has done in making him archbishop — surrendered him to a far greater than any earthly master, God.

Thomas' world-weariness after the death of his beloved child, provides another interpretation of his transformation. Always deeply moved by suffering humanity, he now begins to converse with the image of the crucified Jesus — the symbol of all human suffering and forgiveness —, as a brother in misery.

But if the chancellor's words were not wholly Christian, his deeds became more and more so. It seemed in those days as though Sir Thomas, weary of his glory, wished to dispense with splendour, and, though himself heart-sick and bereft of peace, desired to heal evil and bestow serenity in as much as in him lay.54

53 Meyer, op. cit., pp.120-121.
54 Ibid., pp.126-127. Meyer's own words about Becket, quoted above, also provide an explanation for this contradiction between words and deeds which the Bowman sees in Becket.
There are a few points of similarity between Meyer's and Anouilh's Beckett, particularly in the modernness of their conception. But the motive force of Anouilh's Beckett is an ideal which tends to disregard human beings almost entirely. Meyer's Beckett, on the other hand, is moved by a vast compassion for human beings. He may be three-quarters fiction, and there may be a certain amount of weird melodrama in the portrayal, but on the whole, he turns out to be more human.

Shelley Mydans' novel offers the most full and rounded, as well as the most sympathetic and historically accurate picture of Thomas Beckett. It explores his life from early childhood to death, and provides a sufficient backdrop of formative influences on his mind and character.

Thomas emerges as a very human and likeable figure, with a genuinely sincere religious devotion; a brilliant retentive memory; a lively, capable intellect more bent towards the active affairs of the world than towards learning and scholarship. His tact and prudence in diplomatic affairs are stressed. However, we also have a constant emphasis on his pride and ambition; a driving force amounting almost to mania, to achieve perfection in whatever field he chooses to tackle. We also note a
certain vindictiveness, especially in his relations with Roger of Pont L'Evêque, and a degree of self-righteousness in his own purity. Governing most of his actions we find a need to charm and an ability to win over people to himself, to gain their liking as well as approbation.

Through the childhood episodes treating of Thomas' life in the household of the Norman nobleman Richer de l'Aigle, we are shown not only his training in knightly exercises, his love of hunting and hawking, but also what it was that led to his ambition. If it was a household of boys belonging to noble families. The youngasters expected as a matter of course to be endowed with their own castles or be provided with a place in the higher ranks of the Church. Thomas alone, the son of a London burgheer, had no such prospects. Whatever he achieved would have to be on his own merit and by his own relentless efforts.

Thomas, heart-set on excelling in all things, it bred an obdurate determination centred on himself.55

These were qualities he also brought to his student life in Paris: "sharp-eyed and smiling, fiercely competitive, winning his way with a quick wit and laughing voice and holding it through work, some suffering, and stubborn pride." In the descriptions of his student days also, we come upon one aspect of his behaviour which throws some light upon his later conduct as Archbishop: "...his whole soul," we are told, "thrive on popularity. But even more than this he had the need to speak out in the cause of what he was convinced was right. It was a sort of curse with him; it made him appear ugly to his friends." Such a trait explains a good deal of what is usually called his intransigence or tactlessness in his struggle with Henry before his exile; and also during the two abortive reconciliations. In this particular instance of his student life, he is impelled to defend his own chastity against the good-natured ribaldry of his fellow-students regarding the forthcoming Love Parliament in the Paris schools. Thomas inevitably sounds prissy and priggish. His slightly older friend John of Salisbury mildly advises him to "learn to bank those admirable fires of your righteous indignation."

56 Ibid., p.105.
57 Ibid., p.102.
58 Ibid., p.105.
The space afforded by the novel-form, as well as the point of view of the omniscient narrator, enables Mrs. Mydane to present in the young and growing Thomas the seeds of those very qualities, which were later to affect the outcome of a conflict in which all Christendom was concerned. She sees Thomas' spiritual life as one long struggle to attain true humility and a loving communion with God. These genuinely religious longings are shown to be inextricably bound up with a nature smothered in "the weight of self", as Prior Robert of Merton tells him, "...the heaviest that a man can bear." In terms of this novel, Thomas' greatest obstacles to self-fulfilment do not arise from Henry's opposition, but from this weight of self. As early as his apprenticeship in Theobald's household we learn,

His were the sins of pride, ambition, lack of charity in judgement, not of moral laxity. ...Now for the first time in his life he felt the need for a scourge to whip his body and his mind into submission. He crept into the wintry reeds besides the wall and knelt, forcing his knees and body to a humble posture while with his will he struggled to subdue his heart;...50

In the description of his consecration as archbishop,

59 Ibid., p.342.
60 Ibid., pp.165-166.
the stress falls rather on Thomas' feelings and reactions
than on external paraphernalia, "A flood of loving kindness,
an unaccustomed flood, brought tears...as he thought:
As I have loved you, love one another."61

Thomas, as Shelley Mydans portrays him is constantly
subject to such ungraspable, Eliot-esque moments of
illumination, which are no sooner felt than they
disappear. On Christmas day 1168, during his exile
abroad, we see him finally attaining, through one such
moment, a genuine realisation of humility in the cathedral
at Sens:

...it struck him suddenly...that he was but
a man. A little man in all the oceans of
humanity...these little creatures capering
through their lives...Where in this picture
was there room for pride?...Was it not human
to be small and suffer? Why should that lead
to glory?...for the first time a dreadful
clarity came on him, and in a little voice,
full of surprise, dismay, he said aloud:
'Why I am loathsome!'

Nevertheless I love!
whose voice was that?...He heard the echo in
his heart, 'I love'.62

61 Ib id., p.338.
62 Ib id., p.456.
Eliot's portrayal of a metaphysical struggle with the wrong reason is, in this scene of the novel, made immediately comprehensible to ordinary people. The sort of reasoning that is shown going through Thomas' mind is something which most sensitive people feel at least once or twice in their lives. The only difference is that in an age of unbelief it leads to a suicidal despair, while in an age of faith it must have led to a deep and overflowing gratitude to an all-powerful being who condescended to take an interest in such an abject creature as man.

The central enigma of Thomas' career, the transformation from soldier-statesman to archbishop is, thus, explained in terms of a reversion to his deeper nature. After describing Becket's stand on the Battle Abbey controversy during his chancellorship, the author comments,

Thenceforth the King felt that he had in his new chancellor a staunch, unwavering champion of royal rights. In this perhaps he underestimated the effects of Thomas's legal training and failed to understand that with this man the weight of law might fall on one side whereas his heart was on the other.63

63 Ibid., p.259 (Italics mine).
At the same time, we are prepared in the course of the section on the Toulouse campaign, for the split in personal relations. The campaign shows the beginnings of a hostility between the two friends well before the death of the old archbishop. When Louis of France by his presence in the city of Toulouse makes it impossible for Henry to attack, Thomas attempts to override the king's feudal scruples. Henry flings back a contemptuous remark about Thomas' bourgeois origins, his sping of the nobility and his inability to understand their social codes. Thomas feels a sudden momentary hatred for the king flare up within him. Later on, after the campaign, while Henry keeps Thomas beside him in Normandy, the dying Theobald sends imperative letters commanding his archdeacon's presence at Canterbury. Thomas, at this point is shown bitterly regretting being tied to the court.

I am a courtier, thought Thomas bitterly,... dangling upon the will of him who rules...a man no longer...And in between his arguments, his ...pleadings he laughed and joked together with the King...and was his friend.64

The facts about Becket's life, as Mrs. Mydans presents them, follow the contemporary biographers.

64 Ibid., p.311.
Her interpretation is full and sympathetic without being biased. The author shows an ability to look at Thomas with the assumptions — largely religious — of his own age in mind, instead of looking at him from a twentieth-century angle. The figure of Thomas as it emerges from the novel is not one of pure sanctity. He is an understandable, likeable and on the whole, virtuous man. But he has his fair share of human failings. The most taxing struggle of his career proves to be not with the King, but with his own nature.

T. S. Eliot's presentation of Becket is much more austere than the full and detailed portrayal of Shelley Hydens. The contrast, however, is largely one arising from the different capabilities of the literary genres which the two writers use. The one is a five-hundred-page biographical novel covering an entire lifetime. The other is a tightly compressed drama of death and redemption, and concentrates all its forces on one moment of time.

Eliot's Becket, though consistent with the facts of history, also owes a great deal to family influences, as Herbert Howarth has shown. The most important of these was the imposing figure of the poet's grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, a Unitarian minister at St. Louis.
Eliot's grandfather as Herbert Howarth describes him — his stand on the question of slavery, his attitude to the concept of the Higher Law — finds echoes in the portrait of Thomas and his dilemma in Murder in the Cathedral. Among others may be seen the influence of the poet's mother's work Savonarola and the earlier poem on Giordano Bruno, both about martyrs.

Savonarola turns aside from the early temptations of life and love, and then from the temptation of the Cardinal's hat... His loyal followers and priests tempt him... they bar the doors and arm themselves... But Savonarola forces them to lay down their arms and open the door and suffer his submission and removal to prison.65

The analogies with the action of Murder in the Cathedral are very close.

At the same time, the figure of Thomas, in the language he uses and the sentiments he expresses, is closely analogous to the first person speakers of Eliot's own later poetry, particularly Ash-Wednesday. He is one more embodiment of a character which Giorgio Melchiori calls that of "the Witness" — the poor Women of the chorus are another, Melchiori sees this figure

65 Herbert Howarth, op.cit., p.32.
evolving from Gerontion to the "witness to Godhead"
of the later poems. 66 Thomas is a Witness to Godheadin the most profound sense; a martyr, bearing witness
to the death.

Although, as Melchiori warns, this protagonist
is not to be equated with the poet himself, he undoubtedly
bears the impress of the poet's own experiences. E. Martin
Browne explains why Eliot was attracted to the figure
of Thomas Becket and the story of his martyrdom; and
draws parallels between the two Thomasess:

Thomas was Eliot's own first name; and Thomas
Becket's gift of his life to 'the Law of God
above the Law of Men' had been consciously
and specifically made by--Thomas by Thomas
Eliot a few years before. He had a share of
the absolutism, the intransigence of his
namesake when ultimate values were concerned.
Neither in belief nor in poetry would be
compromise those things which he held timelessly
certain; and at the moment when he was called
upon to write his play, he found that the basic
conflict of the twentieth century came very
near to repeating that of the twelfth. 67

The concentration of the play falls entirely on the
conclusion of Becket's life and career, and throws the
whole emphasis on Thomas' climactic struggle against the

66 Melchiori, The Tightrope Walker (London: Routledge
67 Browne, op. cit., p.36.
pride of his nature and his final attainment of serenity. The novel of Mrs. Mydans and Eliot's play, although poles apart in form and treatment, have in common this stress on Becket's pride and his struggle to achieve true Christian humility. The one traces this effort through the experiences of a lifetime, the other concentrates on the climactic struggle before death. And while the form of the drama prevents Eliot from intervening to explain the protagonist's thoughts and feelings in the throes of the conflict, the narrative art of Mrs. Mydans permits a direct explication of Becket's thought process and emotions.

Owing to the compression in Eliot's selection from history, it is, of course, inevitable that the same austerity and sparseness which governs the rest of the play, should also affect the treatment of the central figure. At the same time, he is far from being the merely flat theological symbol that some critics have thought him. "The characters...of all the greatest drama", writes Eliot, "are drawn in positive and simple outlines. They may be filled in,...by much detail or many shifting aspects; but a clear and sharp and simple form remains through these..."68 In the case

68 "Ben Jonson", Selected Essays, p.152.
of his own St. Thomas, it is the clear, sharp outline that is emphasised, while the "shifting aspects" are confined to a minimum. All the same, he is a recognisable individual. In his dealings with his flock he shows the quiet, measured dignity of the teacher and spiritual father. With the Tempters, the hectoring arrogance flashes out; and the final temptation momentarily flings him into a very human despair. The exchanges with the Knights reveal the firmness of the statesman and even the courage of the soldier, while his final resignation reveals the dedication of the martyr and saint.

The struggle with the Tempters, indirectly also reveals his intellectual powers, interspersed with occasional traces of a slightly sardonic humour. "Proceed straight forward", he says in reply to the Third Tempter's claim that he is a "rough straightforward Englishman"; or, as he tries to deflate the verbose pomposity of the Tempter, "for a countryman/You wrap your meaning in as dark generality/As any courtier." 69

What Eliot says about Pascal is equally applicable to his own Thomas Becket. He describes Pascal as "the type of one kind of religious believer, which is highly passionate and ardent, but passionate only through a

69 *Murder in the Cathedral*, pp. 31-32.
powerful and regulated intellect,...facing unflinchingly
the demon of doubt which is inseparable from the spirit
of belief." 70

Above all, it is the pride of spirit, the ego,
the sin against the Holy Ghost, that is repeatedly
stressed in the presentation of Thomas. The opening
chorus speaks of him in general terms of Christ-analogies,
but we soon learn of his human failings from the Priests
and Messenger: "...what reconciliation/Of two proud men?"
asks the First Priest; "...is the wall of pride cast
down...", repeats the Second. After the Messenger leaves,
the First Priest hammers home this aspect of Thomas.

I know that the pride bred of sudden
prosperity
Was but confirmed by bitter adversity.
I saw him as Chancellor, flattered by the King.
Liked or feared by courtiers, in their
overbearing fashion,
Despised and despising, always isolated,
Never one among them, always insecure;
His pride always feeding upon his own virtues,
Pride drawing sustenance from impartiality,
Pride drawing sustenance from generosity,
Loathing power given by temporal devolution,
Wishing subjection to God alone. 71

What the first Priest explicitly describes, is dramatically
revealed in the exchanges between Thomas and the Tempters.

70 Selected Essays, p.411.
71 Murder in the Cathedral, pp.15-17.
The ego predominates in his forceful replies to the Second and Third Tempters:

...shall I who keep the keys
Of heaven and hell...
Descend to desire a punier power?

The word "punier" is loaded with contempt. To the Third he replies,

Shall I who ruled like an eagle over doves
Now take the shape of a wolf among wolves? 72

On the heels of this demonstration, the unexpected visitor throws Thomas' emphasis on his self back at him.
"Well done, Thomas your will is hard to bend". Aside from revealing the satanic extent of Thomas' pride, the fourth Tempter's words also indicate a strand of vindictiveness in the Archbishop:

...You hold the keys of heaven and hell.
...bind Thomas bind,
King and bishop under your heel.
...You hold the skeinis wind, Thomas, wind
The thread of life and death...

72 Ibid., pp.30-34 (Italics mine).
This whole speech is littered with powerful active verbs like "grasp", "bind", "hold", "wind", which indicate the forceful will; that sense of self which was the core of Backet's nature. Among the rewards of martyrdom, the fourth Tempter repeatedly stresses the satisfaction of seeing "Your persecutors in timeless torment,...".73 One of the effects of such emphasis is to underline the heroic extent of his achievement in attaining to a realisation of the true meaning of Christian martyrdom. "The stature of a man", writes Fry, "is not the height he achieves (one man's easy reach is another man's Everest) but the quality of his effort to ascend."74

Several critics, most notably Helen Gardner, have accused Eliot's Thomas of priggishness and unctuous solemnity in a good many of his speeches. This priggishness is partly the result of the playwright's need to make the central figure dramatise himself for purposes of thematic clarity. Partly it is what Spender calls the "vocational risk" of being an Eliot hero. In this play, at least, the protagonist has — in keeping with his role as teacher and pastor — a better right to his preachiness than a

73 Ibid., pp.36-39.
74 Fry, "Theatre and History", op.cit., p.86.
figure like Harry, for instance, in _The Family Reunion_. Eliot, in "Rhetoric and Poetic Drama", speaks of the need for a self-dramatizing character. "The really fine rhetoric of Shakespeare occurs in situations where a character in the play sees himself in a dramatic light... This dramatic sense on the part of the characters themselves is rare in modern drama... But in actual life ...we are at times aware of ourselves in this way, and these moments are of very great usefulness to dramatic verse."75 _Murder in the Cathedral_ dramatizes a climactic moment of self-awareness in the protagonist. Such conscious self-awareness also sets Becket head and shoulders above his fellow characters and makes for the painful isolation of his position at the centre of an uncomprehending crowd.76

In each writer's representation of this central figure, we find a blend of the historical original and traits which are dictated by the writer's own preoccupations. The two prose narratives stand at the two extremes of historicity; Shelley Hydens' being almost a biography, while Meyer's is almost pure fiction.

75 _Selected Essays_, pp.39-41.

76 For a discussion of Kornbluth's comparison of Becket with Everyman, see Ch.III on form.
Although the most foreign of English monarchs, Henry II was the one who left the strongest impress on the country's law and government. This is the aspect of his career which has attracted the greatest attention. He is on the whole, a less remote and more likeable figure than Becket — at least to modern eyes. But there is not about his actions and behaviour that enigmatic quality which surrounds Becket's at certain points; although Henry's seems to have been the fuller and more complex personality of the two.

However, most of the imaginative writers have tended to concentrate on Becket. Henry is, as a result, usually seen with reference to Becket; or his career as a foil to his antagonist's. This attitude emerges most clearly in the plays of Aubrey de Vere and Anodilh, and in Meyer's novelle. Such an approach stresses Henry's anti-clericalism, which came out most strongly in the Becket controversy. But it is nothing like the whole truth of his reign. Similarly, it throws into relief his stocky build, protruding gray eyes and close-cropped red hair, as against Becket's tall, slim, elegant stature, the pallor of his clear-cut sharp features, and his black
hair and eyes; or Henry's womanising as opposed to Becket's strict and lifelong chastity; or his slap-dash personal habits as opposed to Becket's splendid magnificence.

"Thomas", writes David Knowles, "was fated to expose a facet of Henry's character, a heartless and shifty facet, that another archbishop might have left unseen." Nowhere is this facet of Henry so heavily underlined as in Aubrey de Vere's poem. The portrait of Henry is completely flat. He functions entirely in relation to Becket. Anti-clericalism, duplicity, and vindictiveness are emphasised. He is described as a "eager Henry" (Beauclerk), "a bloodier Rufus". Thematically he embodies the hollow pride, the "phantom greatness" of undiluted imperialism. The Empress Matilda, a minor figure, is introduced into the play largely in order to show the emptiness and pain of all earthly power and ambition. She is the more effective because she is Henry's own mother, and has been one of the major instigators of the anarchy of Stephen's reign and the suffering of the innocent people. The once haughty "politic head", with the wisdom of old age,

and the experience of a turbulent life behind her, expresses disillusionment, as she faces death, in the deceptive and ephemeral glories of the world. She is meant to serve as a warning to her son, but she serves largely as an object lesson to the reader. Before Henry himself, this truth of experience and wisdom of old age have been dismissed by John of Oxford, the arch-exploiter of political expediency, as the meanderings of a sick mind close to death.

In writing the companion dramatic poems on Alexander the Great and St. Thomas of Canterbury, the author tells us that one of his aims was to illustrate two types of greatness. The imperial pride and external success which lead to internal hollowness, in the person of Alexander. The humility and dereliction, outward failure and suffering culminating in spiritual strength and sanctity, in the person of St. Thomas.

Alexander died, and his empire died with him. St. Thomas died also, and his death preserved from bonds, first in England, and as a consequence, throughout the world, the kingdom whose founder had promised that 'the gates of Hell should not prevail against it'.

78 Aubrey de Vere, Recollections, p.367.
Within the poem of St. Thomas of Canterbury, the same counter-movements are postulated in the characters of the protagonists. Henry, on a lesser scale, enacts the role of Alexander and represents the pride of earthly empire. After describing the isolation of Becket at Montmirail, Herbert concludes,

"Mid storm and darkness
He clung to God as limpet to the rock;
He's greater than he was...

Similarly, we hear of Henry:

"From ill to worse...
The forehead seemed; the vacillating thought;
There's fever and there's feebleness in both;
Greatness goes from him.

Prophetic statements regarding future family strife, see it as a consequence of Henry's war against his mother, the Church. "If you have risen against the Church, your mother", warns Becket, "God guard them [the children] from revolt against their sire!"

This development or deterioration in the characters does not, however, emerge as convincing presentation. It

80 Ibid., p. 166.
81 Ibid., p. 185.
is merely stated by others. Substantially, both protagonists are static figures who show very little variety, and no unexpected quirks or changes in behaviour to arouse interest in themselves as persons. They are, rather, lay-figures, representations of attitudes and qualities.

The other writers usually also stress certain qualities Henry had in common with Backet, the love of hawking and hunting, and their common concern for the business of administration. By contrast, Henry's intellectual and cultural attainments have received little attention. These, by all accounts, were something very remarkable in a ruler of those days. On the other hand, his fabled Angevin rages have been repeatedly dramatised by all the writers. This tendency to fly into demented fury at the slightest crossing of his will ultimately led to Backet's murder.

Backet's role in the controversy receives constant comparison with that of St. Anselm earlier, or Sir Thomas More some centuries later. Similarly, Henry's reputed anti-clericalism is compared, on the one hand, with that of William Rufus, and on the other, with that of Henry VIII.
Henry VIII himself, his proclamation indicates, saw in the position of his forbear a prototype of his own.82

Tennyson's portrayal of Henry, soon after the play was written, received plenty of commendations for its historicity and "liveliness". "The play", writes Hallam Tennyson, "is so accurate a representation of the personages and of the time, that J. R. Green said that all his researches into the annals of the twelfth century had not given him so vivid a conception of the character of Henry II and his court as was embodied in Tennyson's Backet.83 Such a compliment today would be considered, at best, equivocal. R. H. Hutton claimed that "The interest of Backet centres somewhat more than it ought to on Henry,...The picture which Tennyson gives of Henry's sudden Angevine fury, and of the high imaginative statesmanship that alternated with it is very striking..."84 Hutton inadvertently placed his finger on the weak spot of the portrait. The Angevine fury and the statesmanship are precisely all that we do get, apart from the incongruous Victorian husband and father image of the love-plot. The "high imaginative statesmanship" again, amounts to very little more than the Constitutions of Clarendon.

82 See Ch.II.
In the Prologue, however, we find traces of certain personal traits in Henry which could have been taken up and developed during the rest of the play, but are not. Here too, the anti-clericalism predominates, first during the chess-game, and then while discussing the state of affairs in Europe. Through the conversation during the chess-game, however, we also learn that Henry's concentration is easily distracted; that while the king is the more vociferously forceful, Becket is likely to get better results by his much more quiet but persistent doggedness. Furthermore, as a not very happy prognostic of the future, Henry reveals a certain childishness in his tantrums by kicking over the chess-board. As he himself complains, he loathes being beaten. After Eleanor's entrance, he reveals some humour. It is rather heavy, but that might be put down to the author's attempted imitation of Shakespeare's rhyming and punning. Most of the Prologue, however, is devoted very obviously to the job of information-giving and providing a full exposition of the main themes.

After that we see Henry again only half-way through the Northampton scene. Here we have essentially and entirely the anticlerical statesman, the restorer of order out of chaos — as seen through his own long speech —
the statesman of the ship of state which has jarred on
the rock of clerical immunity. The function of Henry's
speeches here is mainly informative. But they also show
him gradually working himself up into one of his
uncontrollable rages. This provides him with a reason
for making his exit as Beckett is heard approaching. The
rest of the scene focuses on Beckett as he faces the
"wild beasts of the court”.

Henry's next appearance as statesman is during the
Montmirail scene. Here, apart from his anti-clericalism,
he reveals a certain cynical wit; the essential pragmatism
and "common-sense" of his aims; his growing personal
hostility to Beckett — whom he accuses of confounding his
own arrogance with God's honour —, as well as a complete
lack of any distaste for political intrigue in all its
corruptness. John of Oxford is ordered to Rome to bribe
the whole college of cardinals, to "Swear and unswear,
state and misstate thy best!"85 To this the Frateval
scene adds nothing.

The romantic sub-plot scenes with Rosamund in the
bower, foist on the hitherto fairly historical portrait
an incongruous image; the almost chesty, eminently

85 [Works, p.724].
loving husband and father who fetches his son a ball to play with and asks after his health. However, the subject of Becket is usually also discussed so as not to lose the great statesman altogether in the domestic role.

The first scene of Act V begins by showing the statesman worked upon by the false tales of Roger of York and his confrères. He gets angrier. However, he realises the dangers of what might happen, manages to control his rising wrath momentarily and sends the ecclesiastics out. He is just ripe for the least touch to cause an explosion. Eleanor enters with the tale that Becket has sent Rosamund to Godstow, and provides the touch that sets off the explosion which causes Becket's death. The statesman and romantic lover combine in a mad Angevin fury, to utter the crucial words.

The main principle behind the characterisation of Henry is, therefore, the author's aim of harmonising the two incompatible plot-strands of the play. He functions as a common-denominator between the main Church-State action led by Becket, and the love-interest of which Rosamund is the chief figure. And here, as elsewhere, Tennyson raps the disadvantages of both too much and too little concern with history.
The portrait of Henry shares a family resemblance with both the antagonists of the earlier play, Harold. Like Harold, Henry is essentially a representative of heroic nationalism and wise, practical statesmanship. Like Harold again, he is the hero of the idyllic relationship with the idealised representative of Tennysonian womanhood. On the other hand, Henry's alacrity in employing any means to achieve his ends, is reminiscent of William the Conqueror's wiliness in making the unsuspecting Harold swear by the bones of saints. In his rages too, Henry shows some of the cruelty of William.

Unlike the two earlier plays which contain fairly unequivocal characters, in this play neither protagonist is black or white. Both are shades of grey though Becket may be a trifle paler than Henry. The real villain, if there is one, is the Pope. He is supplemented by Eleanor and the Knights.

"In the theatre", says Fry, "history means people rather than events. What they do is less important than what they feel and suffer while doing it. Their success or failure isn't measured in the worlds conquered or lost, but in the private battlefield, in the vale of soul-making as Keats called it..."
taking a decision is of greater moment than the decision's outcome, whether good or bad." Fry concentrates on a portrait of Henry as his central purpose, in keeping with his first statement. But, ironically, the tragedy of Henry is dramatised as precisely the tragedy of a man who does not suffer while making decisions; whose vision is so utterly single-minded that he commits the presumptuous blunder of consistently mistaking a part for the whole truth.

Fry had also implied a wish to mitigate the presentation of anti-clericalism in the picture of Henry, in his article "Talking of Henry." This has not really happened. One of the main channels for Fry's theme of the interplay of laws is the Church-State conflict, which takes up almost two-thirds of the play. This inevitably focuses on Henry's anti-clericalism. Henry's own tirades against the "reverend canon of rape and murder", or the "crozier-causing monkeys", or the "old would-be infallible Italian" rattling his keys of heaven and hell go against Fry's express intention, since they are very forcefully phrased and the images themselves are very expressive.

However, although Henry emerges as strongly anti-clerical in the first two acts, we are consistently

86 "Theatre and History", op.cit., p.66.
87 In The Twentieth Century (February 1961), pp.185-190.
reminded that this is only one of the aspects of his purpose to restore to England a strong and unified government.

It was the complexity and tragedy of Henry's character that first struck Fry. This he attempts to render in his portrait in Curmantle. It impresses us largely by the strength, vitality and bursting energy which exhausts itself only in death. On the periphery of this single bursting force, conceived in almost titanic terms, we see the man; his capacity for friendship, his ebullient joy in life, his wit and humour and intelligence, his blind faith in the law, and very basic touching humility which comes out inspite of his central tragic flaw, the classic hubris.

The principle underlying Fry's conception of Henry is embodied in one of the laws which form the complex of the play's second theme. Fry singles it out for mention in "Talking of Henry". This is what he calls the evolutionary principle that lies behind all life as well as art. "Just as the caterpillar pursues the shape of the butterfly", he says, "and the musician or poet is trying to express the form of the hidden order, so the human being is struggling to achieve the end or form, which already exists for him. You can't
move towards an end if the end isn't there already." In an earlier 'foreword' to a collection of his plays he had added, "It concerns every aspect of our lives, material, moral, spiritual; and good and evil become literally life and death, what continues the progression or what halts it; growth or ossification." 89

In Curiam, Becket defends this principle against Henry's attempt to impose the "Customs":

Henry ... These Customs Are the truth of the men whose lives shaped them.

Becket What a man knows he has by experience, But what a man is precedes experience. His experience merely reveals or destroys him; Either drives him to his own negation, Or persuades him to his affirmation, as he chooses. 90

In this interchange, Henry's words show that even he has a vague and very partial idea of what Becket has clearly stated. But what he is now proposing to do, is to impose externally, the shape of the lives of previous generations upon the generations to come. Thus he disregards the individual shape behind each human life which Becket is pointing at when he says "what a man is precedes experience". The freedom to evolve towards this shape results in

88 Ibid., p.187.
89 Three Plays, p.181.
90 Playa, p.218. (Italics mine).
self-revelation and fulfilment, whereas the attempt to distort anyone's individual experience into an enforced mould would be to ossify, deny and destroy the individual personality.

This contradiction between inherent and enforced "shape" or "form" or principle is the core of the portrait and tragedy of Henry. The uniform law which Henry proposes to enforce is, in practical terms, necessary after the chaotic, do-as-you-please reign of Stephen. At the same time, this order contains within it the seeds of destruction and anarchy. This is what Eleanor is getting at when she says,

You take me back to yourself in the only way
You know, by forcible possession,
As you took your own vision of the world
With a burly rape in the ditch. Your hopes, therefore,
Are born bastards, outside the laws I recognise.
The true law hides like the marrow of the bone,
Feeding us in secret. And this hidden law may prove to be
Not your single world, not unity but diversity...91

Eleanor's attitude comes closer to the truth than Henry's, but verges on sheer anarchy. All the contradictions portrayed within Henry's own character, spring from this central one. Henry is presented as a man whose experience "destroys him", "drives him to his own negation". In

91 Ibid., p.259.
attempting to enforce order outside himself, he creates anarchy within and, as Cleanor points out, becomes a prisoner inside himself. He is what Becket calls "a man at war with himself". This is caused not so much by the vision of external order, as by the exclusiveness of this vision which ignores the ontological principle behind each human life, including his own. This vision of law and order extends not only to his own lifetime or a few generations ahead, but to all future generations of Englishmen. Ultimately, Henry resembles the man who, with his eyes on the stars, tumbles into a ditch at his feet.

In simpler terms, Henry may be seen as an example of the Aristotelian tragic hero, who commits the sin of hubris. He constantly visualises himself in god-like terms, and is to a large extent responsible for his own downfall. "As tragic hero", writes J. Woodfield, "Henry fulfils the classical Aristotelian pattern...Henry's first decision, because it is an attempt to reconcile two "goods", does not precipitate a chain of evil, as occurs in Hamlet for instance, and one can well sympathise with him when he protests, 'what is my crime?', but progressively he assumes the role of divinity ascribed to him by his subjects, and it is this defiance of the
ontological order that constitutes his major crime."\(^{92}\) Such a statement is valid enough except for one or two points. In the first place, if "two goods" is meant to indicate civil and canon law, Fry has pointed out in no uncertain terms that this very attempt to reconcile them is a presumptuous blunder. Before the king can take an irrevocable step, Becket warns him. The dialectic between Church and State is something healthy, "living", deeply embedded in human nature, and not necessarily a step on the road to civil strife as Henry seems to presume. And if the decision "does not precipitate a chain of evil" it is at least a clear index of the beginnings of the downhill movement of Henry's fortunes. Secondly, Henry's assumption of the god-like role is neither gradual nor progressive. It is always there from the first scene of the first act. And when he says, "What is my crime?" we may sympathise, but we also itch to enlighten him. We are irritated at his stubborn obtuseness, since both Becket and Eleanor have already tried to spell out his "crime" to him in words of one syllable; only he has not bothered to listen.

However, Henry does emerge at the end as a man more sinned against than sinning. We are forced to recognise

\(^{92}\) Woodfield, "Christopher Fry's Curtmantle: The Form of Unity", Modern Drama 17 (September 1974), p.309.
the validity of his stand as a part of the truth.

Human nature being what it is, if there were no single, defined, externally enforceable law, the world would soon revert to the kind of anarchy from which Henry rescued England.

Henry the empire-builder and tragic hero is also a very human and attractive person, especially as he is portrayed in that first scene of sunshine and good-fellowship. He is witty and intelligent, high-spirited and mischievous as a school-boy in his teasing of Becket and Eleanor. He throws into relief Becket's tendency to gravity. He also shows a mercurial temperament in his quick changes of mood from burning indignation at the criminous clergy to whole-hearted laughter at Becket's imitation of the sanctimonious Louis of France. However, as the struggle engages and begins to progress, the portrait of Henry darkens. We see more and more anger and hate, moroseness, depression, and even despair; and at the same time, strong efforts to pull himself together. At the final proof of what he is to expect from his sons, he turns sadly to the faithful Marshal:
But the days have been lamed, Marshal, somewhere in the mind.
Why do I see that arc of drawn swords...
I can go further and harder than we've come.
But the health has gone out of the sir. 93

Yet he responds instantly to Marshal's heartening words with a joke about Merlin's reputation.

The third act shows hardly any lifting of the shadows. But even towards the end, stripped of all his possessions, Henry retains his indomitable will which forces him onwards till the exhausted body rebels. The deep pathos of the last scene lies in the final destruction of this almost superhuman will-power at one stroke, by the treachery of his favourite son.

The final impression left by Fry's portrait of Henry is that of an irresistible force flowing in one channel, finally meeting an impassable obstruction, and forced to retrace its own course upstream, to dissolution at its source. Henry, writes John Whiting, "is a man, a royal man, a man apart, yet deeply committed, a sensual man, a man of wit, humanity, faith and power. Totally comprehensible, he is Fry's greatest achievement in any play so far." 94

93 Plays, p.244.
94 Whiting, "Time for Tragedy", op.cit., p.73.
As with his portrait of Becket, C. F. Mayer's Henry is also sketched first in terms of physical appearance, which then provides an index to his character. As opposed to Becket's exotic slenderness and fragility, in Henry's appearance full-blooded manhood and virility are emphasised, with a strong touch of earthiness, even coarseness. Together with these traits he reveals a forceful but practical mind, a lusty nature and a certain childlike dependence on Becket which is rather touching, and somewhat similar to that portrayed in Anouilh's Henry. "King Henry," says the Bowman, "regarded him whom he had elevated out of nothingness with pleased satisfaction, as though he had created him. But the creature, my dear sir, became indispensable to the creator and brought him into subjection to his gentle wilfulness."\(^95\) We see Henry being repeatedly held back from his pleasures of the chase in order to attend to some business of government. Or again, as the narrator says,

> Evening after evening that peerless man sat at the royal table and cheered his king with the subtle play of his conversation.
> I can still see him with smiling face reclining in his chair and the happy king listening in rapt attention to every word that came from his scarcely moving lips.\(^96\)

\(^{95}\) Mayer, cp.cit., p.59.

\(^{96}\) Ibid., p.116.
The relationship between the two men, upon which the novella is built, is essentially one of contrasts in appearance and nature. It is never represented as the intimacy of equals in either tastes, or sensibility, or capacity for life. Even those points, like the love of hunting or the business of politics, which the two men had in common are, in Meyer's novella, basic points of difference. Unlike Anouilh's portrait of the early Becket as a light-hearted, frivolous young man, the king's companion in all his pleasures as well as business; The Saint always emphasises the disparity in age. Thomas is always "the Chancellor", the King's servant, never a companion in pleasure. On the other hand, Meyer and Anouilh are at one in making Thomas a good deal more anti-clerical than Henry himself, before his conversion into a model archbishop. Meyer's polarising of the figures of Henry and Becket is one version of his recurrent preoccupation with the opposition between the active, forceful, "full-blooded" man, and the aesthetic, contemplative "bloodless" personality.

Meyer's portrait of Becket contains far more fiction than history. But the representation of Henry's personality, on the whole, follows history, even though several of the actions ascribed to him are entirely invented. In the early stages of the novella while Becket still chancellor, is able to assume almost the entire burden of government,
Henry is presented as the lusty pleasure-seeker, whether at the chase or with women. The narrator describes the king as he found him during the early days of his service:

...like April, subject to capricious change, harsh, impatient, given to quick outbursts of passion, terrible anger, but also on occasion communicative, approachable and affable. When he was in good humour, one might risk jest, and I have seen the august sovereign laugh with his attendants until copious tears rolled down his cheeks...King Henry was a mighty huntsman, who loved the mad chase after the fleeing deer, leaving his retinue far behind. As he was a man of simple needs, he could put up at nightfall with any kind of shelter.

His love of women leads to the outcome of the pivotal incident, which brought Henry his chancellor's abiding hatred; and ultimately led to, what the Bowman presumes to be, his eternal damnation. This is the Gwendoline-like episode of Henry's seduction of Becket's daughter. The narrator comments:

King Henry inveighed against the play of chance and me for the child's unhappy death. Her ravishment and his own lustfulness caused him little self-reproach, for in such matters he let neither right nor law forbid him anything.

97 Ibid., p.55.
98 Ibid., pp.117-118.
Haney is a man of violent passions and deep emotions. It is again his tendency to fly into mad rages that impresses the writer most. The narrator describes Haney's reaction to the news of Thomas' excommunication of the Bishop of York:

He fumed and raged, unbelted himself before his serving-men, cast himself groaning on the bed, tore to shred the silken bolsters with his teeth and beat his breast with desperate fists.

(This description with slight variations is dramatised by Anouilh who makes it the final access of rage that causes Becket's death.) Haney's own son, Richard, calls his father a "raging beast". The attempt at reconciliation — in Mayer's novella — fails because Haney is suddenly overcome by a gust of rage. The final outburst causes Becket's death because, in his rising fury at the bishop's prejudiced account of Thomas' return, Haney fails to hear the mildly interjected corrections of the deacon. The narrator himself, we learn, has narrowly escaped being strangled in one of his master's maniacal passions.

As Becket's career approaches the archbishopric, and in the incidents soon after his conversion, we have a sketchy picture of Haney the statesman. This, however,

is almost smothered in repeated scenes showing or
describing his anguish of soul, or his wrath. As in
Anouilh's play, Henry's character deteriorates rapidly
at the end; but in a far more overtly earth-shaking way
than the cynicism of Anouilh's conclusion shows. Meyer's
Henry dies, convulsed in the act of uttering a false
paternal blessing on his son. The narrator is firmly
convinced that the revenge of the martyred saint even
in death, has doomed him to perpetual hell-fire. Anouilh,
on the other hand, in a universe devoid of heaven or
hell, contents himself with providing a bitterly sardonic
frame to his almost romantic main action. He shows that
on the earth as we know it, "le cuisine" always wins the
day.

Most critics have pointed out that with Becket
Anouilh shows a return to the clear-cut oppositions of
his earlier plays; and that in this play, his sympathies
are once more whole-heartedly with the idealist hero.
Although this is true, there are several ambiguities
and family differences which distinguish the mutually
opposed pair of protagonists from earlier pairs like
Créon and Antigone, or Joan and the Inquisitor.

A statement by M. Henri, a character in Eurydice
provides an important clue to the recurring sets of
characters in Anouilh's plays.

My friend, there are two races of men. A numerous, fecund, happy race, a fat flabby dough, which eats its sausage, has its children, uses its tools, counts its pennies, one year like the next inspite of epidemics and wars, till old age overtakes it; people made for living, everyday people, people you can scarcely imagine as dead. Then there are the others, the noble ones, the heroes. Those that you can very easily imagine laid out, pale, with a gaping red hole in the head, one moment triumphant with a guard of honour, and the next, dangling between two policemen — the cream of the crop.100

This differentiation of mankind into two races, the elect and the mediocrities, runs through most of Anouilh's work in one form or another.

On the face of it, the two protagonists of Becket seem to fall mainly into the two opposing compartments. There is, however, a slight difference. Although Becket is recognisably one of the heroic race, the opposite position is defined not by Henry but by the four barons. The king is given to treating them rather as pet dogs than anything else. In fact in the first half of the play presenting the two men's friendship, Henry, of all the characters, is shown to be closest to Becket's mental level, even though Becket's superiority is repeatedly emphasised.

100 Translated, L. C. Pronko, op.cit., p.33.
We are given to understand by the repeated assertions of Henry himself, that it is his close association with Becket, and due to Becket’s strong intellectual influence that he has been dragged up from a morass of mediocrity as crass as that of his barons. In the scene with Gwendoline, although the import of the speech is cynical, we hear Henry say,

...il y a des jours où j'ai l'impression qu'il n'y a que toi et moi de sensibles en Angleterre.
...Tu auras fait de moi un autre homme en quelque sorte...101

In a much more sincere moment, he reacts wrathfully against his wife’s reproaches:

Becket m'attaque et il m’a trahi. Je suis obligé de me battre contre lui et de le briser mais du moins m’a-t-il donné, à pleines mains, qu'il y a d'un peu bon en moi...102

On the other hand, Becket's own intelligence and the workings of his mind are sometimes entirely incomprehensible to Henry, who repeatedly expresses an almost childish fear

101 Becket, p.68. Hill, p.34. "...Sometimes I have the impression that you and I are the only sensitive men in England...You've made a different man of me in a way."

102 Ibid., p.111. Hill, p.67. "Becket is attacking me and he has betrayed me. I am forced to fight him and crush him, but at least he gave me with open hands, everything that is at all good in me."
of thought. It is bad for one's health, in his opinion.

In one of his frank, common-sense moments, Henry tells his friend:

C'est parce qu'on pense, qu'il y a des problèmes. Un jour, à force de penser, tu te trouveras devant un problème, ta grosse tête te présentera une solution et tu te planqueras dans une histoire impossible — qu'il aurait été beaucoup plus simple d'ignorer, comme le font la plupart des imbéciles qui, eux, vivent vieux.

This is precisely what happens when Becket is nominated archbishop. Although Henry is speaking from the point of view of the mediocre race, he is restating the opposition between the two races. Yet, one can see in his contemptuous reference to "la plupart des imbéciles" that he does not quite see himself as one of them. At the same time, Becket's ability to think definitely characterises him, even at this point, as one of the elect who, in Antigone's words, ask questions up to the end.

Henry is drawn, therefore, as a man fallen between two stools. Once Becket has taken up his "burden", Henry has not enough spiritual superiority to be able to comprehend his stand. Nor is he mediocre enough to be

103 Ibid., p.77. Hill, p.45. "It's because people think that there are problems. One day, if you go on like this, you'll think yourself into a dilemma, your big head will present you with a solution and you'll jump feet first into a hopeless mess — which you'd have done far better to ignore, like the majority of fools who know nothing and live to a ripe old age."
able to put up with his family and court. From this anomalous position arises that painful sense of isolation which makes him such a deeply pathetic figure, without ever making him admirable. The usual stress laid on the coarseness and brutality of Henry's character has obscured this aspect of the representation.104

He is, on the whole, represented as rather coarse and earthy beside the aesthetic refinement of Becket. But the author's attitude to this aspect of Henry is, at points, ambiguous. In France, during the visit to the bishop, Becket's "refined" attitude to conquered peoples is, at best, equivocal; while there is something almost clean in Henry's forthright brutality. Becket's words carry an undertone of bitter irony:

Mon prince, il ne faut jamais désespérer son ennemi. Cela le rend fort. La douceur est une meilleure politique. Elle déverilise. Une bonne occupation ne doit pas briser, elle doit pourrir.105

104 "Henry", writes L.C. Pronko, "...is a weak, pathetic and brutal figure..." op. cit., p.57. M. Rebut, in her article claims that Henry is represented as a sort of Falstaff, and quotes Foliot's words "un gros garçon brutal, mal sorti de l'adolescence..." But the point in Foliot's words is precisely the opposite. He had thought that Henry was merely a big brutal adolescent, but he finds that he is mistaken.

105 Becket, p.87. (My trans.) "My prince, one should never make the enemy despair. That makes them strong. Gentleness is more politic. It saps their virility. An effective occupation should never break, it should corrupt."
Becket's words illustrate the utterly corrupting quality of political expediency. Even gentleness has ignoble motives.

Henry's dealings with the clergy in the first council scene; as well as the way in which he swiftly sees through Foliot's hypocrisy to his cupidity, reveal a certain native practical shrewdness, a certain fondness for candour, and a devastating ability for calling a spade a spade. His comments on the jacquerie in the peasant's but also show that he can think when he wants to.

On the other hand, the whole point of the portrait hinges on emphasising the fact that almost everything that Henry does or does not do throughout the play, is determined by his attitude to Becket. While the friendship subsists, he follows Becket's advice in all matters of politics with the alacrity of a child awed by a superior intellect — though he may sometimes grumble, and sometimes even wish to knock the wind from Becket's sails. After the split between them, all his actions are governed by the sole purpose of breaking and crushing Becket even at the cost of the country's welfare. The actions which history enumerates as decisions of policy, Anouilh bases entirely on Henry's thwarted love for his friend. It is this attitude that has caused critics to attack the author for
introducing elements of homosexuality in the relationship.

Louis VII of France and the Queen Mother, both spokesmen for politics as a "métier", accuse Henry of lack of self-discipline in giving way to his unhealthy rancour against Becket. Louis comments to Becket, "Votre roi ne fait pas bien son métier, Archevêque. Il cède à une passion."

The Queen Mother warns Henry in the same manner,

"Mon fils, Dieu sait si j'ai critiqué votre tentative de rapprochement avec ce misérable, qui ne nous a fait que du mal... Dieu sait si je comprends votre haine pour lui! Mais, du moins qu'elle ne vous entraîne pas à un geste gros de conséquences pour le seul plaisir de blesser son orgueil. Henri n'est encore qu'un enfant... Des ambitieux — qui ne manquent jamais autour des princes — peuvent le conseiller, monter un parti contre vous, ...et diviser le royaume." 107

Henry's final demented outburst which causes Becket's death is attributed not to any excommunication of bishops; but to a sudden realisation on the part of the king himself that the turmoil of contradictory emotions which Becket inspires in him all the time paralyses any capacity for

106 Ibid., p.126. Hill, p.95. "Your king isn't doing his job properly, Archbishop. He is giving way to passion."

107 Ibid., pp.140-441. Hill, p.106. "My son, God knows I criticised your attempts at reconciliation with that wretch who has done us nothing but harm... God knows that I understand your hatred of him! But do not let it drag you into making a gesture you will regret, merely for the sake of wounding his pride. Henry is still a child... Ambitious self-seekers — and there is never any scarcity of those around princes — can advise him, raise a faction against you... to divide the kingdom!"
action or rational thought. And that as long as Becket is alive, he will never be free of this constriction. "Rien! Je ne peux rien!" he howls in anguish. "Veuille comme une fille. Tant qu'il vivra, je ne pourrai jamais rien. Je tremble étonné devant lui...Et je suis roi!" 108

Henry is constantly presented almost as a sort of adjunct to the poised, sophisticated Becket. This also underlines a certain childishness and sulky petulance — the adolescent shrillness — in his make-up, that was hitherto confined to the gratuitous revolts of idealists like Antigone. Henry is a weak, brutal, coarse, egotistical character on the whole. But he is redeemed by a certain simple innocence before the political sophistries of the early Becket; as well as the deep love for his friend which, even in the midst of his vengeance, tears him apart.

The cynicism of the concluding frame-scene, however, leaves a bitter taste in the mouth. It indicates that in the three-year interval between Becket's death and Henry's penance, the king's character has deteriorated to an extent

108 Ibid., p.144. Hill, p.110. "I can do nothing! Nothing! I'm as limp and useless as a girl! So long as he's alive, I'll never be able to do a thing. I tremble before him astonished. And I am the King!"
comparable with Becket's movement in the opposite direction after his consecration. It does not, however, come altogether as a surprise. From the very first scene with the clergy, we have been shown a certain shrewdness and hard-headedness in Henry's political dealings, when he actually got down to them. Once the paralysing influence of Becket's physical presence was removed, the growing cynicism born of his disillusion at what he considered his friend's treachery, would have done the rest.

Although Henry's actions pose no such enigma as Becket's assumption of God's honour, he is, in his way, a more rounded and human personality, with all his mediocrity, than the rather distant and cold figure of Becket himself.

In Eliot's play, concentrated as it is on the threat to the protagonist's mind, the physical presence of Henry would have been superfluous. However, as J. Dierickx maintains, "he is not quite banned from the original play. He is, in fact, one of these important characters in the drama of Eliot that do not appear on the stage, but are felt like ominous presences in the 'world around the corner.'"109 Henry is frequently

referred to in the play. But his importance lies not so much in himself as a person, as in his position as the head of a secular law and government, against which it has fallen to the martyr's lot to fight the good fight.

In the comments aroused by the Messenger's news the King and Becket are at first coupled together as two proud men, hammer and anvil. The first three Tempters make frequent references to Henry, but almost entirely in his capacity as sovereign. The Knights in Part Two, the "death-bringers" are the king's physical representatives on the scene. They take their stand in his name and the State's. However, as a person, Henry is entirely redundant to Eliot's schema.

Shelley Mydans' portrait of Henry is, on the whole, historical and unremarkable. Since the purpose of the book is to explore the truth of Thomas, events and people are, largely looked at from his point of view. Again, this biographical concentration on Becket means that Henry is totally absent from large chunks of the book. He shares the stage with Thomas only during the third and fourth books.

The portrait of Henry in most particulars follows those of Mrs. J. R. Green and Amy Kelly. The qualities emphasised are his energy and physical robustness — his love of hunting, his royalty and forcefulness, and his
well-trained mind. On the negative side, she portrays his tendency to fly into demented rages, a certain selfishness even in his friendship for Thomas, his duplicity — which the dramatists and Mayer generally tend to ignore —, his tendency to use people. Her most remarkable innovation is to endow Henry with the paganism, and cast him in the mould, of William Rufus. As a consequence, his anti-clericalism is heavily emphasized. The author, in portraying this side of Henry, makes a more detailed and integral use of his alleged demonic ancestry, than the vague allusions of any of the others.

Henry is first introduced half-way through Book Two — "young, but raised to be a king" — as a subject of the negotiations between Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury and Pope Eugenius to determine the succession to the throne of England. We see him for the first time, a little later, coming to pay homage to the French King, as Duke of Normandy; the occasion which sowed the first seeds of his marriage to Eleanor, then queen of France.

Although his face was not so fair as Geoffrey's and his frame more powerful than tall, although his whole demeanour was more restless, pent with unused energies, than regally deliberate, and though his mind was quick and curious rather than grave, he had in him the essence of a king... His face was open and courteous, and his grey eyes took in all that there was to see.
One would not know, except by reputation, that those eyes were capable of bloodshot rage and his firm body could convulse with passion, rolling and kicking on the floor.  

On his initial assumption of his main role beside Backet, in the novel, he is presented primarily as the quick, energetic statesman, constantly on the move, swift to take decisions and act on them, riding up and down the land having illegal castles demolished, making radical improvements in coinage, expelling mercenaries, carrying war into Wales. The impression we get is one of speed, power and efficiency, punctuated by outbursts of anger if his commands are not instantly understood and carried out.

The first bond initiating the friendship between Henry and Thomas, is an invitation from the King for Thomas to accompany him on one of his hawking jaunts. Thus they meet on the common ground of shared leisure pursuits. And for almost the first time in all his thirty-five years, Thomas under the influence of his youthful monarch's bursting energy and brilliance, is shown feeling the sheer exhilaration of youth.

It is in relation to Thomas that most of Henry's selfishness and duplicity, as well as his paganism, come out. Very early in the friendship we come upon the scene of Henry and Thomas in the forest in stormy weather, separated from the rest of the hunting party. This scene is the most detailed comment on Henry's paganism and his intention to use Thomas. The wood in which they are lost, it appears, is the one where Rufus was killed by an arrow from one of his own men. "He was an enemy of the Christian Church", Thomas replies with dogged courage. "The Church! The Church is sometimes grasping — as you may not know who have not ruled', the King said with a rather heavy scorn. 'But Rufus was a noble king, a good king to his people and he died for them.' This is the crux of the matter. Henry clearly reveals his own allegiance to the tradition recognising Rufus as the Divine King incarnate, who had to die himself, since he could find no substitute servant. This whole scene is cast as an implicit warning to Thomas that he is to be Henry's chosen substitute, if the time ever comes when the sacrifice is needed again. Henry's purpose in the friendship, therefore — at least partially — is the colossally selfish one of expecting Thomas to be prepared, quite literally, to 'lay down his life for a friend'. A couple of chapters later, he tells

111 Ibid., p.242.
Eleanor, "You of all people know the need and duty of a king — to rule his people and to lead them, and to take their sins upon him and to die for them if that is called for — or stand ready with a servant to play the king for him. Thomas is my chosen servant..."\textsuperscript{112}

And in the scene in the forest earlier, he had warned Thomas, "Never trust me...I will use you."\textsuperscript{113}

This is only the most extreme example of the way he uses people. The conversation with Eleanor takes place while they are discussing the prospective negotiations for a marriage between Young Henry and the Princess of France. In his subsequent dealings with his family he shows the same ruthless disregard for other people's individuality.

Henry emerges from this novel as a powerful and attractive figure, but also essentially ruthless. If not precisely egocentric, he is at least firmly determined that everyone and everything should give way to his grandiose schemes. His most redeeming features are, a genuine affection for Thomas which has developed despite his selfish determination to use him; and a deeply rooted conviction which emerges from his paganism, that kingship is essentially service to the people.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., p.275.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., p.245.
This paganism which implicitly underlines several of Henry's actions does not, however, obtrude on the narrative or make for any falsification. It is just shown as being there — an integral part of Henry's personality.

In most of the works in which Henry appears, He is usually a more forceful as well as a less remote personage than Thomas.

(iv)

Henry's queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine is not one of the most important figures, but she appears in all the literary works except Murder in the Cathedral. More than the overpowering figures of Becket and Henry, it is the treatment of Eleanor that provides a clear instance of the adaptation of a historical personage to different ends.

Although she was not an important participant in the historical conflict, her influence on events was never negligible. In her own right she was one of the richest heiresses of Western Christendom, possessing lands coveted by both England and France. This made her a crucial piece on the political chess-board. Her
divorce from the King of France and marriage to Henry Plantagenet cut away more than half of France overnight and put it in possession of the powerful Duke of Normandy, later King of England.

In her own person she was a vivid, colourful character, brought up in the brilliant court of the Dukes of Aquitaine; a woman thoroughly experienced in politics and the ways of the world by the time she became queen of France at the age of fifteen; a troubadour herself, and the inspiration of troubadours. She was the wife of two kings and the mother of two more. However, during the conflict with Becket, she was forced into the position of an "onlooker" — perhaps not very "disinterested" —, much to her resentment. It must have seemed rather dreary after the excitement of the crusade, the French court, and her own duchy of Aquitaine.

Of all the writers, however, it is only Fry who has attempted to give his Eleanor a rounded personality, as well as an attractiveness and stature to compare with her historical counterpart. Shelley Mydans sticks to history but shows very little of Eleanor, Tennyson and Meyer make her a black-hearted villainess, while Ancuith turns her into a cipher called Le Jaune Reine.
The prototype of Tennyson's Eleanor is Aldwyth in *Harold*, a flat character, who schemes to get Harold for herself, away from the pure lily Edith. She does not scruple to set the whole kingdom in an uproar to do it. However, when compared with Aldwyth, it does seem that Tennyson has attempted to provide Eleanor with an extra dimension.

The character of Eleanor is conceived on two levels— that of the wicked witch; a sort of descendant of Cymbeline's wicked queen, a diabolus ex machina who is shown as being directly instrumental in all the evil that befalls anyone in the play. But she is also the witty troubadour, given to euphuism and word-play. Tennyson fails, however, to make her quite convincing on this second level. Eleanor's frequent long-windedness and her facile rhyming and punning are merely boring, especially in the Prologue.

The motivating force behind her actions is, of course, her hatred of Rosamund. This, Tennyson makes quite clear from the start, is no mere woman's jealousy of another woman as it was in *Harold*. It is a question of the succession to the throne, in which her own children's rights are endangered by the supposed "left-handed" marriage of Henry and Rosamund; and also her own pride...
of royalty which is outraged by the hints of legitimacy in Henry's relations with Rosamund. She makes this clear in her words to Fitzurse in the Prologue:

I would she were but his paramour, for men tire of their fancies; but I fear this one fancy hath taken root, and borne blossom too, and she, whom the King loves indeed, is a power in the State... when the King passes, there may come a crash and embroilment as in Stephen's time;... 114

Then Tennyson spoils this impression of the politic queen, by showing her as a scheming blackmailer with some sort of hold over Fitzurse, villainously instructing him to destroy Rosamund.

Eleanor is the mechanical device that attempts the tie-up between the two plots. The second scene of Act I in the street at Northampton is quite redundant except that it shows her acquiring a grudge against Becket. The barons opportunely passing by, she instructs them, "Stir up the King, the Lords! Set all on fire against him". Then she soliloquises:

Fool! I will make thee hateful to thy King. Churl! I will have thee frightened into France. And I shall live to trample on thy grave. 115

114 Works, p.698.  
115 Ibid., p.704.
The impression is so melodramatic as to be ludicrous.

The bower scenes in which she appears, all contrive to underline this melodramatic aspect of the wicked witch; the "wolf-queen" prowling around the fold of the innocent lamb. To the child, Geoffrey, she is, quite literally, a wicked fairy, who does not even look like the good fairy she pretends to be. An additional touch of black is provided by Rosamund's rather sanctimonious allegations about Eleanor's goings-on with Saladin and Raymond of Antioch during the crusade.

In the last act she sets the final torch to Henry's seething emotions. The knights are again very opportunely present to get the full benefit of the outburst, and comply promptly with the king's ravings.

There is just one redeeming feature in this extremely flat melodramatic portrait. Tennyson's Eleanor does possess a certain sardonic humour; a trace of the ability of Fry's Eleanor to appreciate life's acid comments; as well as a capacity to deflate pomposity. We can appreciate her reply to Rosamund's self-righteous rant:

The more pity then
That thy true home - the heavens - cry out for thee
Who art too pure for earth.116

116 Ibid., p.733.
or her reply to Becket's melodramatic entry to save Rosamund's life:

My lord, we know you proud of your fine hand,
But having now admired it long enough,
We find that it is mightier than it seems —
At least mine own is fraile st: you are lam ing it. 117

In the last scene with Henry in Normandy, she makes what looks like a wry comment on the whole play:

You are too tragic: both of us are players
In such a comedy as our court of Provence
Had laugh'd at. 118

Eleanor is also briefly presented in her wicked-witch aspect by C. F. Mayer whose portrait is even more unrelieved black than Tennyson's. Luckily, her presentation is so sketchy that she hardly affects the impact of the story. However, as diabolus ex machina, her fiendish jealousy — pure and simple — is directly the cause of the innocent Gratia's death. After describing the incident of the witch Black Mary, the Bowman goes on,

A more evil witch who at that time lived in England, could for obvious reasons likewise not be burned. My lord the king was married to her. ... she had black luxuriant hair, unsteady, agitated eyes, and was forever as though in hurried flight... 119

117 Ibid., p. 735.
118 Ibid., p. 739.
Meyer's Eleanor employs spies to keep tabs on Henry's mistresses, whom she successively contrives to murder. She herself, however, it is implied, is or has been the mistress of the Lucifer-like Bertran de Born. These two, are the embodiments of all the external evil in the novel.

Fry, in making his Eleanor more historical, has also made her a much more rounded and sympathetic figure than any of the others. Her function is to a large extent chorific, and she acts as a sort of author persona within the play. In the early portions she is largely neutral. But as Henry becomes more and more belligerent and one-track, it is Eleanor who voices in the most understandable terms, the criticism of his actions. Eleanor is also, on the whole, the most sympathetic character in the play. As long as she remains on the scene there is some faint hope that her comprehensive outlook may save Henry from himself. When she finally fades out at the end of the Poitou scene, it provides a clear indication of her own powerlessness.

120 "Fry", writes Emil Roy, "is a character in his own plays...Fry says of his persona: 'He needs all his senses and perceptions to keep him aware of what his existence represents. He needs every property of mind he possesses, all those attributes which most clearly distinguish him from his fellow animals — compassion, laughter, concern beyond his own completeness, and much more." Christopher Fry, p.30.
and of the fact that Henry's doom is definitely sealed.

The function Eleanor performs in *Curtmantle* makes her, as a character, comparable to the Pharaoh's sister Anath in *The Firstborn*. Both stand as ineffectual meliorists between the two protagonists. Both voice an intuitive apprehension of life, and comment on the play's action from within it. Anath's passionate strictures on her brother's stubbornness during the course of the ten plagues resemble Eleanor's criticism of and progressive alienation from, Henry. The tragedy of both these empire-builders is a direct consequence of their headstrong ignoring of proffered advice or warning.

J. Woodfield has noted the way in which Fry constantly counterpoints Henry's fortunes with references to the king of France; and that the two movements are in opposite directions. When the play opens things look entirely bright for Henry. All the evils in the land are in the process of being cured, and his dynastic schemes seem secure in his possession of the four young eagles. In addition Thomas has just returned after wrestling some more concessions from the French king, and paving the way for one of the eagles to be prospective ruler of a united France and England. In contrast to the four eagles of England, Louis has once again — in spite of his
constant prayers — been blessed with a daughter. As the action progresses and Henry's star begins to decline, Louis's begins to rise.

Eleanor is a sort of tangible link between two opposing movements. She has been the wife of Louis and is now the wife of Henry:

Being the wife of Louis
Was like being married to a priest; with Henry
It is like being married to a jobbing Jupiter. 121

Eleanor herself makes explicit a connection which Marshal has already mentioned at the opening of the act in his reference to the "pretty damned effective joke" of making the Frenchmen wonder "Où se sont évancis le Poitou et l'Aquitaine?" She, who had been labelled the evil genius of France has been, up to now, only an instrument of good fortune for Henry. As references mount up, Eleanor seems to gather about her the aura of a charm or a talisman, to which she herself laughingly refers:

...In the tender fancy of my heart I thought He was marrying me for my great possessions. But you see I was only a superstition. 122

121 Ployn, p. 196.
122 Ibid., p. 195.
It follows from this that Henry's blind but deliberate, gradual alienation of Eleanor becomes as ominous as the fog of the London streets. She who had hitherto been his good angel, now becomes an instrument of his downfall, as she veers back to the king of France. Although she has been forced by Henry, much to her own resentment, into the position of a "disinterested onlooker", she proves to be an important factor in the rising or falling fortunes of France and England.

Eleanor, in this play, is the representative of Fry's vision of the complexity of life. During the conflict between Henry and Becket, she provides a sort of yardstick of personality against which the two antagonists are measured by life, and found wanting. She also speaks for the evolutionary principle within the individual himself, against hard and fast imposed definitions. Eleanor is a humanist and an individualist who might have exercised a moderating influence on a Henry more amenable to advice. As things stand, however, her individualism, reacting against Henry's blinkered vision of the future, almost verges on anarchism. The scene of the love-courts at Poitou is a criticism of the critic. Eleanor is in imminent danger of oversimplifying in the direction of lawlessness: "...consider", she says.
The nature of love. In love a man and woman
Are newly minted as in the beginning of the world
Creating themselves out of each other's eyes.
But in marriage, whatever world is made,
Has the bones of the woman walled up in the foundations,
No air to breathe, nor any light to move in.  

This sounds rather like some of the extremist statements
of present-day 'women's libbers'. The echo from Dona only
serves to underline the wrong-headedness of the view,
since *A Valediction: Of Weeping* is an evocation of love
in marriage. To Henry, Eleanor comments a little later,

Purpose, however wise, is hardly blessed,
God thrives on chance and change.  

She has a strong vision of the diversity in existence,
but lacks — or, at least, has smothered — any vision of
a governing unity behind it. She sees the "chance and
change" — and even that is better than Henry's blind
wilfulness — but has no intuition of the pattern of which
they are a part.

Eleanor sees herself, and is seen, as a creature
of light and sunshine, epitomised in the Poitou scene
of Act III. At the beginning of Act Two, she offers

123 Ibid., p.257.
124 Ibid., p.260.
Basket her opinion of the forthcoming struggles:

For me (a woman who dreads an abstract passion)
It presents a chilling prospect. These London streets,
Which I seem to have to walk as a penance
For loving life too warmly, tolerate me
Less every day. And you have lost
Your genius for life, that ready sense of the world
Which used to give your gravity a charm
And your laughter a solemnity,
As though you sang the complex heart of reality
And by singing mastered it.125

Warmth, sunshine, the South of France, a capacity for
laughter and a love of life — these associations cluster
around Eleanor. On the other hand, we also have Young
Henry’s verdict on the Court of Poitou as being out of
touch with reality, and asleep in the sun.

Eleanor, therefore, though a very likeable character,
is by no means merely an author’s mouthpiece. She is a
rounded, individual figure in her own right, with her own
failings. But she is, on the whole, conceived as the
most benign influence in the play.

Fry’s portrait of Eleanor can be better appreciated
if it is placed beside La Jeune Reine of Ancuilh’s Backet.
This figure contains absolutely nothing of her historical
original, except that she is the daughter of the Duke of

125 Ibid., p.215.
Aquitaine. She provides a clear example of Anouilh's habit of 'reducing' minor characters. She is almost as much of a fiction as Gwendoline or the Little Monk.

La Jeune Reine also provides an instance of Anouilh's use, in this play, of different minor characters to represent and work out the different thematic strands. As a result, the portrait of the young queen shows a deliberate disregard of her historical characteristics, while she is at the same time endowed with others that make her a recognisable inmate of Anouilh's world. She functions as one of the unhappy family group around Henry rather than an individual human being in her own right.

The brilliantly attractive, warm-blooded and intelligent Eleanor of Aquitaine becomes, in the hands of Anouilh, an insipid, eminently respectable, bourgeoise; a withered and shrewish wife, utterly dull and mediocre, constantly at work on her equally mediocre tapestry. She is extremely prim and self-righteous, conscious of the consequence owing to her royal status, as well as of all the supposed benefits she has brought to her husband.

Henry, for his part, never scruples to tell her exactly what he thinks of her. His giving her three sons was nothing but a burdensome duty which, once
discharged, he has no intention of renewing. Her eternal reproaches have alienated him through sheer boredom. Her much vaunted youth was nothing but a withered flower.

The Queen Mother, by contrast, at least possesses the merit of being able to talk sound common-sense on occasion. Although responsible for Henry's unhappy childhood, in the play itself at least, her speeches possess a certain dignity. She speaks essentially from the point of view of royalty, but her views on politics parallel those of the more sympathetic Louis VII.

126 Anouilh, Beckett, p. 112. Hill, p. 82. "I don't like my children. And as for your youth — that dusty flower, pressed in a hymn-book since you were twelve years old, with its watery blood and its insipid scent — you can say farewell to that without a tear. With age, bigotry and malice may perhaps give some spice to your character. Your body was an empty desert, Madam — which duty forced me to wander in alone! But you have never been a wife to me!"
Among the rest of the characters, the four Knights are the most important. In the historical documents they come into the limelight only in the accounts of Becket's murder, but then so fiercely and in such great detail, that they have left a permanent impress on the whole Becket tradition.

No work dealing with the Becket theme, therefore, can afford to ignore them totally, since they were the actual perpetrators of the murder. Again, because of the focus on the act of murder, the four knights, or barons, are usually treated collectively as a group.

It is noticeable that none of the writers except Eliot, introduces the Knights only for the murder scene. They are usually given some sort of part to play during the body of the action as well.

Tennyson singles out Fitzurse, the reputed leader of the group, for attention; and makes him from the beginning, a sort of lieutenant and right-hand man to Eleanor in her evil schemes. He leads the others by the nose. He is endowed, and he in turn endows the others, with a gratuitous desire to avenge themselves on Rosamund for some past imagined slight, as well as a physical lust for her.
In the scene outside Northampton Castle Eleanor instructs them to stir everyone up against Becket. In the following scene, they are given a fairly protracted role enacting the stirring-up, but it is entirely mechanical. They interrupt the reading of the Constitutions with a clash of swords and a chorus-like recitation of threats against Becket in several voices. Similarly, in making complaints to the king against the absent Becket, they speak one after another, completing each other's sentences. In the final portion of the scene they carry the king's demands for various sums of money to Becket. They enter, speak their piece, and leave, one after another, like so many jack-in-the-boxes. They are used together in the same way to threaten the beggars in the next scene.

The bower scenes show Fitzurse alone tagging along behind Eleanor. This mechanical, puppet-like quality characterises all the behaviour of the Knights. They are not recognisable human beings, so much as pieces of machinery being obviously manipulated by the author; jerky and monotonous in their actions, and seemingly, lacking in all volition of their own. They are meant largely to serve two purposes: to provide Eleanor with the instruments of Rosamund's undoing, and to personify against Becket the "wild beasts of the court" with whom
he has to struggle. De Morville, who has been conspicuously silent during the others' puppet-like antics throughout the play, is shown at the end as being rather less damned than the rest. In the scene of the murder, he is the only one who does not actually strike the Archbishop. He is engaged in holding back Rosamund. The documents say he was engaged in holding back the crowd.

Shelley Mydans' novel opens on the immediate scene of the murder, as we watch the Knights ride away from the Cathedral. As they ride through the muddy streets in the pouring rain, they are briefly sketched and individualised. They are "four knights, four lords of standing in the court and loyal followers of King Henry II, four murderers". Fitzurse is "well named, a rough and powerful man,...one another would choose to stand beside in battle, a man to follow when the fearful doubt comes creeping to a sobering mind." Brito is the fearful one crowding close beside him. Tracy is "a man of action...quick to hear a king's words spoken in anger, quick to interpret, quick to take the course laid out. He was a loyal man, and what he did in loyalty could not be wrong". Hugh de Morville is again singled out. He is the leader, not Fitzurse. He is a silent man and one who has long carried a burden on his
After this initial appearance on the scene, however, we see the Knights again only in the enactment of their historical role as "King's men". During the main action, Fitzurse appears a few times. He is shown growing more and more resentful of Becket's rise from his plebeian origins and his favour with the king, although Fitzurse himself is Becket's vessel. At the same time, he cannot help instinctively responding to Becket's charm of manner. On the whole, it may be said, there is nothing very remarkable about Shelley Mydans' presentation of the four Knights.

In Anouilh's play, on the other hand, "les quatre barons" are used throughout as a group, and again provide an instance of the author's thematic use of character. In this case, however, the role assigned to the Knights by history accords fairly well with the place they are made to occupy in the world of Anouilh's characters. They represent the mediocre, muttonheaded end of the "two races of men".

Like the clownish guards in Antigone, or the entertaining rough-and-ready Baudricourt and La Hire of L'Alouette, the "quatre barons", Henry's pet "imbéciles"

127 Mydans, op.cit., pp.11-12.
and drinking machines, provide most of the farce and burlesque of the play. Their very thick-headedness is caricatured to the point of absurdity. Unlike the attempted sinister villains of Tennyson, or the Eliot-esque personifications of cosmic evil, or the suave, gentlemanly courtiers of Meyer, Anouilh's barons are utterly stupid, and purely and simply farcical. They do not even merit the compliment of being given names.

Henry, at least in the beginning, regards them largely as objects of entertainment. The embroilment over the new forks rouses him to fiendish glee. They signify a total lack of appreciation for life's refinements by falling asleep and snoring through Gwendoline's song, after having eaten and drunk heavily. They open the second act with a hilariously caricatured conversation on the subject of thinking which they hold in supreme contempt. At the same time, it is the barons who voice a criticism of the growing brutality of modern warfare, described as "butcheries". The remainder of the act shows them comically stalking the harmless priest in the French cathedral. These scenes provide a sharp contrast between Becket's cautious intelligence and the unthinking, precipitate brutality of the barons.
On the other hand, during the conflict with Becket, the pain he experiences also makes Henry envy the four barons their mindlessness.

Ah! mes quatre imbéciles! Mes fidèles. Il fait chaud avec vous, comme dans une étable. Bonnes sueurs. Dans néants. (Il leur cogne la tête). Pas la plus petite lueur là-dedans, pour déranger un peu le fête. Dire qu'avant lui j'étais comme vous! Une bonne grosse machine à roter après boire, à pisser, à enfourcher les filles et à donner des coups. Qu'est ce que tu es venu y fourrer Becket, pour que cela ne tourne plus ronde? 128

These words are, of course, to be taken as a caricature of the mediocre race. But one cannot at this point, help recalling Jeanne's words to Le Hire,

Mon gros ours, tu sens bon la sueur chaude; l'oignon cru, le vin rouge, toutes les bonnes odeurs innocentes des hommes. Mon gros ours tu tues, tu jures, tu ne penses qu'aux filles...Et tu est pourtant comme un petit sou neuf dans la main de Dieu. 129

128 Anouilh, Becket, p.142. Hill, pp.108-109. "Ah my four idiots! My faithful hounds! It's warm beside you, like being in a stable. Good sweat! Comfortable nothingness! (He taps their skulls). Not the least little glimmer inside to spoil the fun. And to think that before he came I was like you! A good fat machine for belching after drink, for pissing, for mounting girls and punching heads. What the devil did you put into it, Becket, to stop the wheels from going round?"

129 Pièces Costumées, p.102. "My big bear, you smell of warm healthy sweat, raw onion, red wine, all the healthy innocent odours of men. My big bear, you kill, you swear, you think only of girls...And yet you are like a brand new penny in God's hand."
Adding up the impact of the two speeches, one cannot help seeing in them something that might be called anti-abstractionism, perhaps even anti-intellectualism; as if the author regretted to some extent, the earlier scathing contempt of his idealists for the common man; as if he were himself beginning to feel an affection for ordinary humanity, or at least felt that it was worth feeling. Joan's speech is opposed to the perverted abstractionism of the Inquisitor upholding the Idea. In Becket the idealist himself almost incapable of loving people, at least realises that it could have been an alternative solution, perhaps more valid than the stand he has taken.

Although Meyer used the same historical source as Anouilh — Thierry's history —, his knights seem to be an altogether different species from those of Anouilh. While not giving them, in any sense, an important role in the story, he mentions them as members of the king's court, gives them a few but concretely individualised traits, and makes their behaviour consistent with their personalities.

Meyer is the only one of the writers who sees the knights as other than brute beasts. In fact, he almost goes to the opposite extreme, making them embodiments of
medieval chivalry with a tinge of Renaissance culture. They are courteous and accomplished, intelligent, and ready to defend their honour at the drop of a hat.

Although they are almost always treated as a group, they are supplied with nicknames to indicate some of their distinguishing qualities. Thus, William Tracy is called "the Mocker". He is a man "expert with his pencil in artistic scurrility"; but also able with his sword, or he would not have long survived retaliation from the objects of his mockery. We first see him with a group of barons outside the king's chamber, awaiting Thomas' visit. Tracy is sketching a "caricature of a hypocritical anchorite, the primate to the life." 130 Reginald Fitzurse is Sir Rinald the Handsome, a lady-killer; Richard Buito is nicknamed "frappeur", "hit-hard" for his strong arm; and de Morville, who again does not appear much, is Sir Hugh the Taciturn.

It is not, however, the individuality of each knight that matters, but the author's radically different conception of their role. Above all, they are cultured gentlemen, among the flower of Norman chivalry. They would, therefore, have a snobbish conqueror's contempt for the Saxons, and a comparable resentment at their king's efforts to maintain his friendship with the

In keeping with this conception, the Bowman takes great care to clarify the knights' motives, as well as their behaviour during the murder. The knights are impelled not by loyalty to the king, or by any private grievance against the archbishop, but by a zeal to vindicate their honour as gentlemen which has been impugned by the king's wrathful words. Henry is described as having "hurled opprobrium upon his knights". "I can still see", says the Bowman, "Sir Hugh gnaw his lips and Sir Rinald twist his soft, long locks about his fingers and tear at them, while Sir Richard's brow grew deep red with rage, and Sir William Tracy's mouth, ordinarily so full of laughter, twitched in bitter scorn."131

As usual, Heyer uses the external and visual to point to character or emotional state.

Similarly, the actual murder, the Bowman says, was carried out in dignified solemnity, rather like a judicial trial and execution. At Canterbury, William Tracy is heard commanding everybody off the streets, "not in the disdainful manner in which harsh Norman arrogance was wont to address the Saxons, but with the measured dignity

131 Ibid., pp.198-199.
of a herald's proclamation." There is "a solemn and unhappy look in his eyes"; it becomes clear to the watching Bowman that the Knights have agreed "to quench the smart left upon their souls by the king's fiery abuse, not with a murder done in anger, but with due formality of judgement and condemnation."132

They may have become "the most unblessed of living men" by inadvertently executing a saint, but the action they took is conceived with as much sympathy as possible without overbalancing into ludicrousness. The knights acted according to their social and chivalric lights. It was just their bad luck that they contravened those of the Church, in the process. Meyer's version of the knights is, perhaps, too romantic, but it serves as a corrective to the standard traditional conception of the baron-brutes.

Eliot's Knights in keeping with the rest of his characters are not so much individuals, as representatives of a view of life. Unlike their counterpart Tempters, however, they are realistically conceived. They are understandable, and to a certain extent even individual, human beings. This individuality is especially noticeable in the platform-prose apologies to the audience. Like

132 Ibid., p.204.
the other writers, however, Eliot's main interest lies in treating them as a group.

The Knights are presented as embodiments of evil, of everything against which Thomas struggles. By killing Thomas they commit the most heinous crime conceivable, in terms of the world. In God's eternal pattern, however, they become instruments of the greatest good—the shedding of the blood on which the Church continually builds, grows stronger, and renews itself. In terms of the naturalistic action of Part Two they represent the authority of the King, whose encroaching claims would undermine the Church. In more general terms they voice the purely secular and materialistic view of life which has become predominant in modern society.

In actual presentation, through their speech and actions, they reveal themselves as rough, uncouth creatures, brutal and noisy, but not without a certain cynical wit. Within the twelfth century they act and speak as a chorico group, and there is no attempt at individuation, except for the sinister silence of the Fourth Knight who later turns out to be Richard Brito.

The Knights' role, as W. H. Mason has pointed out,
fails "into two phases conceived on two totally different planes." After completing the action of killing, they step out of the environment of the twelfth century action and assume the roles of twentieth-century politicians trying to sell their rationalizations to the modern audience, in terms of cliché-ridden propaganda.

The First Knight, Reginald Fitzurse, assumes the role of committee chairman, and punctuates his colleagues' speeches, with brief introductions and comments. Traci, the Third Knight, like the Third Tempter, presents himself as a simple country squire, a plain, blunt man, a man of action not given to academic logistics but able to point to one simple fact which anyone with half an eye should be able to see. The action they took was completely "disinterested".

The Second Knight, Hugh de Morville follows. He is, like the Second Tempter, a politician and statesman. His speech is extremely able, extremely secular and carries the convictions of an enlightened, worldly politician against what he thinks is old-fashioned and deliberate obscurantism.

The Fourth Knight, Richard Brito, in keeping with his analogy with the Fourth Tempter, has all along been

133 Mason, op.cit., p.41.
a rather silent sinister figure compared with his boisterous companions. He is introduced as coming of a family extremely loyal to the Church; his speech reveals him as a plausible and subtle psychologist. Taking as his basic premise the Fourth Temptation to wilful martyrdom, he arrives at the conclusion that the reverend archbishop's death was, in fact, a form of suicide; that the final action of the Knights had been deliberately provoked.

It has often been pointed out that the first three Tempters do not really tempt Thomas at all, and that it is only with the Fourth that Thomas really has to struggle. It is, however, generally accepted that the Fourth is a genuine Tempter trying to catch Thomas in a snare that will ensure his eternal damnation. But, in fact, as has been shown by H. Z. MacCoby and confirmed by Eliot himself, the Fourth Tempter is conceived as a good angel who, by externalizing and clarifying the temptation to Thomas' conscious mind, gives him the opportunity to reject it. If he had actually wanted to damn Thomas, the best way would have been not to appear at all, and to let him die unconscious of his sin. The Fourth Tempter plays for Thomas a role somewhat analogous to Marlowe's Mephistophiles. Both figures offer warning, but one is accepted and the other
blindly rejected. Perhaps another index to this aspect of the Fourth Tempter is his role as an unexpected visitor. This finds a sort of echo in the initial label of Reilly in The Cocktail Party as the Unidentified Guest. Reilly refers to himself as "the stranger" thus also implying an analogy with the figure in The Rock. Both, the Fourth Tempter and Reilly provide focuses of confession. They are figures who awaken the protagonists to full consciousness. "...Eliot", writes H. Z. Maccoby of the Fourth Tempter, "has hit on a conception of the Tempter as the servant of God. This is a Jewish rather than a Christian notion." If looked at from this point of view the apology of the Fourth Knight results from the words of the Fourth Tempter, but is antithetical to the Tempter in function.

(vi)

The common people are a fairly important force in most of the literary works. As has been often noted, both Henry and Becket during the conflict, were entirely single-minded in their respective stands. This firm conviction of each in the rightness of his cause arose

134 Maccoby, "Two Notes on 'Murder in the Cathedral'", Notes and Queries, 14, No.7 (July 1967), pp.253-256.
partly from a more basic claim that each in making his own stand was serving the people. Becket repeatedly saw himself as the shepherd of his flock, while Henry claimed to be making laws in the interests of the country's welfare. In the literary works the common people appear usually allying themselves with Becket.

Tennyson, in his use of the common people was perhaps more interested in following the Shakespearean convention of introducing "low" characters and comedy as "relief" into his overtly "tragic" play, than in representing the role of the people in the Becket story. However, the latter consideration was not altogether neglected. Hallam Tennyson mentions his father's view of the Church as the people's bulwark against the throne and baronage. Tennyson also wrote an extra speech concluding the Northampton scene, especially for Irving, opening with the line, "The voice of the Lord is in the voice of the people."135 This concept is reiterated through the play, especially by Becket himself, in terms of the shepherd and his flock.

However, the artist fails in dramatising the role of the people effectively. The comedy that goes with

135 Hallam Tennyson, op.cit., p.197.
it is heavy-handed and tedious, or just out of place. Margery with her arch knowingness and pseudo country-dialect is possibly the worst bore any writer ever conceived. The only purpose of her lengthy prose soliloquy is to let us know how she got into the bower. She is a garrulous, know-all, country-wench figure, but very little else; and about as necessary to the play — or less — as Walter Map. The beggars who take up the last scene of the first act are equally unnecessary. They are meant to show how the very dregs of humanity courageously cover up the retreat of their pastor against the "brute-barons" who would have his life.

With Fry, however, the people of England become almost a protagonist. Both Henry and Becket claim to be acting in the interests of the people. This theme has already been dealt with in the previous chapter.

To a certain extent, Fry's actual presentation of the common people may be said to be in the Shakespearean mode. He makes the "low" characters speak prose — though even the exalted ones do it when necessary —, and he endows them with the function of providing a good deal of the humour in the play. It is good-natured in the Prologue, but rather dark and ironic in the conclusion. Both scenes are used for commenting on facets of Henry.
However, it may be noted that none of these individual characters except Bias is a part of the main action of the play. But as concrete embodiments of a theme they are essential.

The Prologue brings forward some of the members of the king's retinue, who are quite clearly individualised in spite of the brief space in which they appear. The Huckster emerges as a timid, rather cantankerous figure, complaining about everything that has been going on. The Juggler is a practical man, given to forceful, expressive language; but for the moment mainly concerned with the wound in his arm, and the "clumsy, excitable sons of bitches" who dug a hole into him and are now arguing about who is to have the honour of sleeping in the pig-sty. The Barber, on the other hand, is a bit of a philosopher, who can remember the earlier state of the country "bleeding away like raw meat". He is willing to put up with his present discomforts and miseries as the necessary price for a future of law and order. The wife is something of a nag.

Through the cataclysmic events of the concluding scene, however, the people are visualised as a group. Even the old woman and her feather-bed are a part of it. Both scenes are filled with the bustle and anarchy that was a part of Henry's own life.
For Anouilh and Meyer, because of their common source in Thierry, "the people" are mainly the Saxons. They are, first and foremost, the vanquished race still repressed under the heel of the ruthless Norman conqueror. As a corollary, they are the meek and humble to whom Christ promised the kingdom of Heaven. Therefore, in these two works, after Becket is nominated archbishop, the conflict between Church and State as universal powers, resolves itself largely into a struggle between two races, between the overlord and the underdog. In both works Becket the chancellor is hated by the people as a traitor to his race. He is a man who has consented to truckle to the conqueror with a view to personal comfort and aggrandizement. However, whereas Anouilh makes racial guilt an important reason for Becket's transformation, Meyer having once stated the people's hatred for the traitor Saxon, shows within him no guilt or remorse or even consciousness of his having betrayed his own race. While he is chancellor, he is almost as neutral to both races as the detached Swabian narrator himself.

Anouilh first introduces the Saxon people into his play in the opening frame-scene, as a huge amorphous mass lying inert under its own weight, who by sheer force
of an increasing population have contrived to gain enough strength to make the proud Norman bend his back in penance at the shrine of a Saxon saint. Faced with a concerted rebellion from his sons and barons, Henry needs to placate and win over to himself those very same Saxons whom, in the action of the play, he calls dogs and treats like property to be used for his convenience.

The peasants of the first act are the main representatives of the common people as the conquered underdog. Poverty-stricken, lacking even the bare necessities to keep body and soul together, threatened with hanging at every step they take, they also belong to the world of Anouilh's early characters. They are embodiments of the abject squalor, the nameless terror, the servility and uncouthness which for Anouilh are the necessary consequences of poverty. The avidness with which the peasant gathers the money so carelessly flung down by Becket, the girl's pitiful eagerness to follow the handsome man to the palace, are actions which can only come from those who have faced the crying need for money all their lives.

"The true heroes of Anouilh's world", says L. C. Pronko, "are almost always poor, du peuple."
...Becket is also a poor man among the rich for he belongs to a conquered race..."136 The people, represented by the poor, are a recurring character in Anouilh's plays, and form the background and past of the intransigent protagonist. Warwick in L'Alouette makes an explicit contrast between the gentleman who has class, who would be ready to die for his honour or his country, and the poor plebeians who, rather vulgarly he thinks, are ready to die for silly things like ideals. Joan, by having recanted, has revealed an unexpected touch of "class" in her personality. Joan, however, returns to her origins, and dies for her ideal. So does Becket. The people, in forming the hero's racial background, are also meant to provide a moral contrast with the aristocratic soul who is socially of themselves.

The people as Christ's poor are not very important in Becket except in so far as the Church becomes equated with the Saxon race. Although the people discussing the customs of the realm in the third act are all members of the clergy, they take sides for State or Church according as they are Normans or Saxons. The common people appear as a subject of the discussion chiefly in the tug-of-war between Becket and Foliot about Saxon serfs who flee

136 Pronko, op.cit., p.119.
from their rightful owners and seek sanctuary in holy orders.

After this the people more or less disappear from the scene till the end, when one of the barons describes Thomas' welcome on his return to Canterbury. In the concluding frame-scene they return again as the huge mass of the conquered race, having got their back on the Norman, acclaiming him with cheers and pealing bells.

Meyer's attitude — adequately represented by his narrator — to the conflicting races, is one of studied neutrality.

In shooting as in judging everything depends upon the coign of vantage. At that time, living as I did amidst Saxons, I slunk aside ...when a company of Normans dashed past... Afterwards when I too was among those in authority, honour demanded that Saxons should uncover when addressing me. Now, however, ...I stand... upon the middle ground and say: Might and conquest are ordained of God, and because the Normans are of less sluggish and more insubordinate mind, He gave them the mastery. But the same God abased Himself and redeemed us all with His blood.137

The common people are, again, synonymous with Saxons. The early episode of a Saxon bowmaker and the ravishment of his daughter Hilda by one of the Normans of the

chancellor's retinue, illustrates the plight of a conquered race in the same way as Anouilh's scene with the peasants. The scene of Becket's first meeting with Henry after his consecration, shows him arriving at the castle followed by a huge crowd of poor Saxons singing a plaintive litany, and humbly sitting down to wait for him in the courtyard. The people are here seen in the role of Christ's poor. On the whole, however, they are not very important in the novella.

In Shelley Mydans' novel the common people make an extended and fairly sustained appearance in the story of a Canterbury moneyer, Elurred Porre, his family, and the fluctuations in their fortunes. This story moves as a narrative thread parallel to but on a lower level than the main interest of Thomas' biography and character; interweaving with it quite naturally, at various points. They represent neither Saxons, nor the conquered, nor even the abject poverty of peasants and serfs. They are quite ordinary townspeople, even fairly well-to-do at the start, who gradually grow poorer. Their lives are indirectly affected once in a while by Becket's own fortunes, though the great man himself remains unaware of their existence.
The novel opens on the immediate aftermath of Becket's murder and shows the old moneyer's daughter-in-law Hawisa being cured of her demon by the blood of the dead martyr.

The moneyer's family enact, in their small way, the daily round of ordinary existence which goes on in spite of the earth-shaking troubles of the great. They also enable the author to provide a representation of the general social background of the age: work in the forge, work on a small manor and farm with their accepted social codes, the village parish and the importance of the Church in the lives of the common people. The old moneyer, the head of the family and master-craftsman of a thriving mint, the owner of a small village holding is shown as a once-strong man dwindling into senility through the loss of his craft. Hawisa's dumb brother Almon, is a gentle God-struck soul, who finds reality only in the small church at Certeham. His mother Wulviva, is a strong, bustling, rather domineering and managing woman, but capable and good-hearted. She provides a touch of light comedy to the book, especially in such an incident as her prayer to the new saint to give back to her son the gift of speech — and of French as well, while he is about it, for
French helps a man get on in the world.

In Hawisa's demon and the fairy ancestry of her father, the author lightly sketches the almost unconsciously accepted stream of paganism that still underlay the lives and beliefs of the common people in the Middle Ages beneath the veneer of orthodox Christianity. It supplements the expressed beliefs of Henry in the main story. The moneyer's family represent the common people for whom, Henry thinks, it is the king's duty to die when necessary.

The common people, in this book, are particularised as well as representative, and are provided with a story of their own which integrates with and fills out the main interest.

Eliot, in Murder in the Cathedral makes his common people, the Chorus, the other protagonist of the play. Ultimately, it is only in the reactions of those people that Thomas' martyrdom becomes necessary and meaningful. In Eliot's scheme, they are needed largely in the role of the poor and humble whom Christ died to save.

The portrayal of the Poor Women also illustrates the smooth blending and overlapping of Eliot's own religious preoccupations and the facts of history. Historically again, they are the abject cringing peasants
of Anouilh — though racial considerations are entirely absent — at the base of the feudal pyramid. They are inured to a life of ceaseless toil and hardship, of struggle to obtain the barest subsistence from the soil; and used to accepting with tolerable equanimity whatever persecution is visited on them by the rulers of the land. They are also tied to the Church, but purely as a social institution, attending the yearly feasts and masses at regular intervals. The Women have gone on "living and partly living". In the face of knowable and physical suffering or persecution, their attitude expresses a stoic resignation, and unresisting acceptance born of sheer habit.

However, their life lived close to the soil, with the rhythm of the seasons in their blood, has given them an intuitive but uncertain apprehension of spiritual matters, which the more socially sophisticated but commonplace Priests seem to lack. This intuitive feeling of an approaching horror which they cannot know or understand, which above all, they are not used to, renders them shrill and hysterical with terror. They reveal an attitude of non-acceptance at the opposite extreme from the stoicism with which they meet their daily lives.
"Their abiding temptation", says W. R. Mueller of the Women, "is to leave well enough — or bad enough — alone; their abiding fear is to be forced to a decision."

In this they represent, according to Eliot, the great mass of mankind, of the twelfth century and of all ages, particularly of the present day. They are weak and vacillating, ready to accept the utmost oppression that man can impose, to avoid suffering the love of God. In the final chorus the Women pray:

Forgive us, O Lord, we acknowledge ourselves as type of the common man,
Of the men and women...
Who fear the blessing of God, the loneliness of the night of God...
Who fear the injustice of men less than the justice of God...

They have moved beyond the attitude of the waste-land inmates of Dante's limbo of "trimmers". They have accepted their guilt and consented to suffer for their salvation through the blood of the martyr and the intercession of the saint.

(vii)

Among the minor figures of Tennyson's play, the most

139 Murder in the Cathedral, p. 87.
noticeable are Walter Map and Little Geoffrey; among the ecclesiastics, John of Salisbury and Herbert of Bosham on Becket's side, and Roger of York and Gilbert Foliot as the leaders of the faction against him.

Geoffrey, the little son of Henry and Rosamund, is a pathos — and sentiment — eliciting device, in imitation of some of Shakespeare's child figures: little Macduff in *Macbeth*, for instance, or Prince Arthur in *King John*, or the two young princes in *Richard III*.

Walter Map is a historical but entirely unnecessary character introduced into the two reconciliation scenes, solely to be the author's mouth-piece to "comment on the times", and to provide a brand of heavy-handed wit comparable, in some ways with Eleanor's. His speeches are important in so far as they represent the author's own opinions. Map is conceived as a cynical, witty court satirist, given to importing grains of practical wisdom on the subject of moderation to extremists like Becket or Herbert of Bosham. He is clearly anti-clerical, and is used to treating the clergy — especially the Pope himself — as whetstones on which to sharpen the edge of his scurrility.

Roger of York and Gilbert Foliot are introduced for long enough to play their historical parts. But they
leave no impression of any kind as human beings.

Herbert of Bosham functions throughout as a sort of echo of Becket. On occasion, even he finds it necessary to lay a restraining hand on his superior's passions. In general, however, he whole-heartedly endorses Thomas' zeal in the cause of the Church, and tags after him through all the vicissitudes of his career.

John of Salisbury, on the other hand, makes a sustained appearance only in the last act, as an externalised version of Becket's "conscience"; a sort of guardian-angel who, with measured dignity and good-sense, attempts to make his hot-headed friend see the virtues of the golden mean. He also counsels him against the presumption of a wilful martyrdom. In this aspect as mentor, John's function in the play complements the role of Walter Map, as a vehicle for the expression of the author's views.

There are several other characters like John of Oxford, or the Pope's almoner, or the Earl of Leicester, who appear only to speak a few lines and then vanish from the play. Their importance to the work as a whole is negligible. They are simply there because history says they were there. And they are made to do and say, mechanically, what history says they did and said.
Fry's minor characters, are of much more intrinsic importance to his play, though they may not all be impressive as human beings. Of these, the most essential is the 'memory', William Marshal. Marshal functions on two levels: as the memory that encompasses the action of the play and, therefore, as immediate narrator to the audience; and as an actor within the play. In both aspects, however, Marshal strikes us as consistently the same person.

As a character within the play, he is a minor figure, who makes no earth-shaking decisions, engages in no conflicts; in fact, does not directly affect the main action in any way. He supplements Eleanor's role of a "disinterested onlooker", and observes the doings of the great from the point of view of the ordinary man.

However, Marshal is presented as essentially a king's man. Although as narrator he is capable, in retrospect, of criticising some of his master's actions, his memory as a medium of representation manipulates the whole play from the point of view of Henry. Marshal, the character, is somewhat in the tradition of the confidantes of ancient Greek or seventeenth-century

140 For Marshal as a structural device, see Ch.III on form.
French tragedy. He is the plain blunt man of action, faithful to his trust to the very end. Marshal, if anyone, is capable of thoroughly endorsing Henry's cry of "What's my crime?" His comments within the play, therefore, although choric and generally representative of the ordinary point of view, are often biased in favour of Henry. Marshal, the character, performs one more function. — At the end of the first act, Henry had instructed him to keep Roger with him, to be the book from which the child would read and learn. The grown-up Roger, as he appears at the end of the play, is almost a replica of William Marshal.

Fry's Marshal is in many ways comparable to Meyer's Bowman. The Bowman too, is a simple though educated, practical man of action; a king's man, faithful to his trust, inspite of having also won the favour of the chancellor. With regard to Becket he expresses awe, respect, fear, even admiration, but never the warm affection that he reveals for Henry. Both Marshal and the Bowman function primarily as devices of what Fry calls the "God's eye view" of the events. But the Bowman's ego is much more obtrusive in the main action—he constantly speaks of himself as an effective mediator between the two protagonists—than is Marshal's.
By the same token, Marshal is much more of an impersonal device than the Bowman.

Among Fry's other minor figures are Henry's "four legitimates"; Gilbert Foliot representing the clergy; and the King of France. Louis VII is talked about but does not appear, Philip Augustus appears only in the final humiliating scene. The kings of France are necessary to the play to the extent that they represent a counterpoint to the movement of Henry's fortunes, not really as people.

Gilbert Foliot is the only one of the clerics who is mentioned by name and individualized by action. The others just act in concert, when necessary, during the Northampton sequence. Foliot plays the role assigned to him by history with rather more moderation and less personal malice against Becket than in Tennyson or Anouilh.

Henry's four legitimate sons are needed more as a group than as separate persons. They are important to the play rather as a concept in Henry's mind — the "nest of young eagles" or the "four strong Plantagenet males" — than as characters in the action. When they do actually appear, their behaviour collectively resembles that of sulky, petulant and selfish children, incapable of seeing beyond their noses. Richard is distinguished from the
others by a certain taunting, caustic wit, as well as by the length of his role. Fry does not attempt to endow him with any of the glamour of the legendary Corcure-de-lion. In fact, it is Richard with his pitiless, sneering cynicism who, in the last scene, comes closest to being a villain.

The contrast with Meyer's treatment of the four sons is illuminating. Young Henry is briefly characterised as a shallow fop; Geoffrey, as mentally sharp, but given to duplicity. The fully melodramatic approach is reserved for Richard and John who are loaded with all, and more, of the qualities assigned to them by legend and tradition.

John, though only a little boy, is almost a fiend incarnate who takes sadistic pleasure in hurting animals or birds, in watching any kind of evil. He goes off into peals of devilish laughter when he hears of any of the animals in the Chancellor's fables coming to a sticky end.

Richard, on the other hand, even as a growing youth shows all the exemplary traits of the almost mythical Corcure-de-lion. Richard, in fact, and not John, is supposed to be his father's favourite. "He was forthright in nature", says the Bowman, "like a blast from a bugle, ebullient and mettlesome like a young courser foaming at the bit. He was irresistible; you could not help but like him. But there was no discretion in him, not a
penny’s worth.” Richard is warm-hearted, frank, the flower of knighthood and chivalric courtesy, and everyone’s favourite, including Becket’s. In terms of Meyer’s novelle the attempted reconciliation between the two adversaries owes nothing to the Pope’s legates or to Louis of France, or to political considerations — they are not even mentioned. It is brought about by the warm impulsiveness and generous affection of Richard, who rides all the way into France to seek out the exile and beg him to give his father the kiss of peace. His actions are dictated by a knightly shame at his father’s uncontrollable rages which have been growing more frequent since the break with the archbishop; and also, by the laudable aim of wishing the kingdom to hold together, which it cannot do in the face of Henry’s other rebellious sons without the guiding wisdom of the former chancellor. The brief reference to Henry’s last years contains no mention of Richard’s traitorous activities. During the revolt of 1173–74, we are told, he remains neutral, having been put off by his father’s mistrust during the attempted reconciliation. Henry’s death and his eternal damnation are put down to the growing deterioration within the king himself after the soul-destroying struggle with Becket. He is described as having died in the act of perjury, stretching out his

141 Meyer, op.cit., p.68.
hand over Richard in a false blessing. What Richard had
done to merit a father's 'false blessing' is not indicated.

The naive and eminently romantic Bowman even has a
dream about Richard and the beautiful Gratia falling in
love and getting married under the benign, smiling
countenances of Henry and Eleanor. Richard, in fact,
emerges as an almost fairy-tale figure. His portrait
is one of the clearest instances of the extent to which
Meyer disregards, sometimes even opposes, the known facts.
He either gives in to legends that have grown up around
personages, or just decides to invent as and when it suits
his purposes.

The minor characters of Anouilh's play are clearly
subordinated to thematic purposes. In the process, most
of them are reduced to grotesque caricatures of briefly
outlined sketches, in comparison with the full representation
of the major protagonists. Henry himself shows elements
of this tendency to caricature.

Gwendoline appears only for one scene, and is
necessary to the dramatist as an embodiment of ideal love,
as opposed to the various other kinds to which Henry is
given. Gwendoline is not a caricature, but a very brief
sketch which reveals little in terms of personality, but
serves very well to underline one of Anouilh's preoccupations.
She is reminiscent, in her insistence on absolute love, of the intransigence of Jean or Antigone. In the scene in which Henry covets Gwendoline, Anouilh brings face to face the two opposing concepts of "love" — Henry's physical appetite and Gwendoline's idealised emotion. Gwendoline, in her absoluteness, kills herself.

She is also there to remind Becket that she, too, comes of a conquered race; that death is the one answer to which the conqueror has no opposing force; and that she has had the courage to act as Becket, with all his talk of "honour", has not.

Another important minor figure is the fictitious Little Monk, about whom we learn nothing, except that he is sixteen, a Saxon, and almost an Antigone in male guise. He serves as Becket's "propre fantôme jeune" — the ghost of his youth. He supplements Gwendoline's idealism in love with another kind: he has voluntarily accepted the whole burden of the shame of his race. He serves Becket as a penance more rigorous than hair-shirts and bodily mortifications. He cannot look anyone in the face because of the shame weighing him down. Becket, the Archbishop, offers to shoulder half the load. The Little Monk is almost an allegorical figure. He is literally an embodiment of the past which has suddenly confronted
Becket, and thereby hastened the process of his recognition of guilt and his assumption of the burden.

Becket tells him,

J'ai besoin de toi. Cela doit te suffire.
Je te demande seulement de me regarder comme tu me regardes en ce moment. Il y en a qui portent un cilice pour se rappeler constamment ce que veut leur guenille...(...). J'en ai un d'ailleurs. Mais c'est désavouer vos épreuves, je m'y suis déjà habitué. ...
J'ai besoin d'autre chose qui me gratte et me dise à chaque instant ce que je suis. J'ai besoin de toi...
de me piquer à toi, pour trouver quelques épingles sur le chemin du bien...142

The Little Monk is envisaged by Becket as an instrument, in religious terms, for the expiation of guilt; a constant reminder of his "self" in the self-imposed quest for his own identity and its assertion as an absolute. Even here, Becket's attitude shows itself as essentially self-centred.

In the last act, the Little Monk reveals an endearing innocence in his conception of justice. In his terms, the machine which turns at present is an unjust, oppressive one. He wishes to be one of the grains of sand which, even while being itself crushed, will contrive, with the

142 Anouilh, Becket, pp. 105-106. (My trans.) "I need you. Let that suffice. I only ask you to keep looking at me as you are doing now. There are people who wear a hair-shirt to remind themselves constantly of their worthlessness...I have one too. But these tests and penances are ludicrous. I have already got used to it...I need something else to rub against me and tell me every instant what I am. I need you,...to prick myself against you in order to find a few thorns on this path of roses."
others that follow, to stop the machine's well-oiled turning and smash it. And then it will be the Saxons who run the new machine — that is justice. That is what justice ought to be, comments Becket, out of his greater maturity and experience. He drops the subject on a question mark; it receives a reply in the cynicism of the last frame-scene. The Little Monk, for the playwright, as for Becket, is a symbol rather than a person in his own right. Becket's attitude to him is reminiscent in some ways of the Créon who saw in the youth and absolutism of Antigone, his own young self as he might have been. From this point of view, Becket may be seen as a sort of Créon redeemed by Antigone. This, finally, is what gives the play the little optimism it has.

Louis VII, although a very minor figure is possibly the most likeable person in the play. He is much less remote and more human than Becket, much wiser and more mature than Henry. He is a choric figure who comes close to being an author-persona in his acute insight into the relationship of the protagonists; his wise
tolerance and characteristic restraint in passing
judgement on others. **3 Ha has rolled up his sleeves
and plunged his arms deep into life with the courage
of a Créon, knowing that politics means dirty-work,
but that somebody must soil his hands in order that the
world may go on with as little harm done as possible.
With humorous wisdom, he treats his kingship as a job
or a craft. He likes Becket but confesses frankly
that his first responsibility is to France; that kings
are poor devils who can rarely afford to indulge their
virtuous inclinations. Louis as a politician stands
diametrically opposed to Henry. The English king lacks
all self-discipline and rashly takes important steps of
policy with the sole purpose of slaking his thirst for
revenge.

143 "Certain of the plays contain a character who might be
looked upon as the author's mouthpiece. They are
characters who are either completely outside the action
of the play because of the nature of their roles, or
who are unaffected by what happens in the play because
they can look upon it with a more objective eye than
the other characters. Their attitudes range from a
gently disillusioned kindness to a bitter cynicism."
Princo, The World of Jean Anouilh, pp. 186-189. As an
author-persona Louis is comparable to Tennyson's Walter
Map, Fry's Marshal and Meyer's Bowman. They are all
detached minor figures commenting on the action from
within it. However, the extent of their detachment
differs from one to another. Map and Louis are as
completely author-personas as it is possible for charac-
ters within an action to be. The Bowman's and Marshal's
attitudes, on the other hand, frequently differ from
their respective authors'.
Louis VII has certain earlier parallels in Anouilh's work. One is the figure of Créon, who is capable of understanding and even envying Antigone's absolutism, though he cannot give in to it. The other is the equally sympathetic Bishop Cauchon who, even while attempting to get Joan to recant cannot help expressing, in the most moving terms, his admiration of Man alone in the desert of a vanished God.

Apart from Becket himself, the clerics who appear in the play are either nonentities or grotesque caricatures. The Bishops of York and Oxford are only voices which chime in with the lead provided by Foliot. The old Archbishop appears only in one scene, but his words reveal a calm courage in sticking to his guns against the king's demands; as well as a quiet sympathy and a gentle tolerance.

On the other hand, Foliot is a savage caricature. He leads the opposition against Becket among the clergy. A hypocritical and avaricious man, he has been bought over by Henry as the chief instrument in his revenge against Becket. In the person of Gilbert Foliot, Anouilh satirizes the political and temporal aspect of the Church; and also the Norman-English conquering race. All his words and actions are exaggerated and over-emphatic.
The stage-directions constantly describe him as jumping up, shouting, flying into rages and foaming at the mouth. Through almost half of the first council scene, he hurled abuse at Becket. His lack of all restraint makes him a ridiculous, fantastic figure beside the quiet dignity of the old archbishop.

The scene with Henry in the third act brings out the full force of his cupidity and unctuous hypocrisy, as well as his basic cynicism. His abuse of Becket draws on him the physical violence of Henry, who grabs him by the throat. The element of grotesque farce in Foliot's character and behaviour is underlined at the end of the scene in the stage-directions. As the clerics prepare to follow their bishop out in a dignified procession, one of them blandly straightens the mitre which has been knocked askew in the struggle with Henry.

In the discussion between Becket and the clergy on the 'customs', Foliot states the claim for the Norman conqueror and property-holder, ludicrous in its exaggeratedness, but with overtones of the author's savage irony. In the Northampton scene, it is Foliot who has rigged up, quite literally, a trial whose verdict is a foregone conclusion. He adds, to the several absurd charges against Becket, one of black-magic, for good
measure. Even Henry is moved to wonder if the Bishop is not laying it on too thick. The outcome of the episode as reported by the page, shows this almost twentieth-century “frame-up” collapsing like a house of cards under Becket’s dignity. The page describes the reaction of the king’s “agissant ami” Gilbert Foliot: "Il a eu une horrible crise de rage essayant en vain d’amener tout le monde, il a crié d’horribles injures et puis, finalement, il s’est évanoui."144 Henry goes off into a burst of hysterical laughter, and the audience feels inclined to follow suit. Anouilh’s Foliot is a worthy rival to the Angevin Henry in the matter of uncontrollable rages. But whereas the king’s “fires of straw” in this play are genuinely pathetic, Foliot’s are positively farcical. The coldly austere Foliot of history is almost unrecognisable. He is the main butt of the satire against the Church.

The Pope and Cardinal in the third act are equally farcical, but treated more frivolously and with much less savagery. The light-hearted rendering of these two ecclesiastics is similar to that of the prosecutor in L’Alouette, who has a tendency to see witchcraft and the devil behind Joan’s every sentence; particularly the

144 Becket, p.113. Hill, p.83. “He had a horrible fit of rage, trying to incite the crowd, he let out a screech of foul abuse and then fainted.”
devil in the guise of a beautiful naked woman.

The almost classic austerity of the form of *Murder in the Cathedral* necessitates the reduction of the dramatic-personages to a bare minimum. The three Priests, therefore, are the only figures who can reasonably be called minor characters. They are the representatives of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the temporal body of the Church Militant. Their role in the play is, on the whole, less significant than that of the other groups of characters. In Part I their function is largely expository, in putting the audience in possession of the necessary facts preceding the archbishop's return from exile. At the end of this section, joining in the three-part chorus during Becket's silence they present the external and practical obstacles in the path of Thomas' struggle. At the opening of Part II the priests indicate the passage of time as well as the significance of the Christian year. For the rest of the section they take over the roles assigned to various members of Becket's household in Grim's eyewitness account of the murder. Finally, they join the Chorus in thanksgiving for their saint.

The Priests as a group represent a level of existence midway between the instinctive order of the
Chorus and the entirely spiritualised consciousness of Thomas. Within the group, however, each of the three is slightly marked off as an individual different from the others. "The Three Priests", writes E. Martin Browne, "are clearly differentiated: the first is shrewd and worldly-wise but a coward and a child in spiritual things; the Second is strong, positive, managing, but without the spiritual perception of the Third, who being detached from worldly things can be open to the wind of prophecy."145

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The most common effect of historical information on the characterisation in these works is the single-mindedness of each protagonist, and a consequent lack of any struggle within them. Since the aims and purposes of both Becket and Henry were excellent in their own way, they present a classic example of the Hegelian type of conflict between two goods, and neither of the main contenders is a snow-white hero or a black-hearted villain. Whatever evil and suffering there is in the works is a result of obduracy and partial blindness on both sides. Only in Eliot's play can Henry, in a very

145 Browne, op. cit., p.42.
vague and rather inaccurate sense, be called a cause or instrument of evil. This is only because he is implicitly a symbol of the meaningless, purely materialistic view of life. And the Knights who represent him in the play are presented as embodiments of the pervasive evil in the cosmos against which Thomas and his like have to struggle.

The manner of presentation of character varies from writer to writer. Tennyson's chief stand-by, especially with regard to the main plot is, of course, the information provided by history. His play is largely a presentation of the "events"; in Fry's terms, rather what people did than what they felt and suffered while doing it. Consequently, the characterisation is, on the whole superficial and often incongruous. He relies mainly on overt statement in the delineation of character. Sometimes this takes the form of plain information-giving about a personage by one of the other characters — as in the case of Henry's descriptions of Backet's magnificence as chancellor, during the Prologue. Such description, if not supported by what we see of the character's behaviour, naturally fails to convince at any deep level. The most we can do is accept the statement on trust. Backet, actually, never appears as the chancellor except during the Prologue, and
then he is entirely occupied with preaching to Henry. The play provides no opportunity at all for a display of his splendour and magnificence in terms of behaviour.

Other modes of overt statement used by Tennyson are soliloquies and asides. Some of them are even crucial to the dramatist's conception of a person. One example is Becket's half soliloquy, half musing aloud to Herbert, in the first scene of Act One. Herbert's presence here is actually not necessary at all. He is only a device for destroying Becket's initial doubts about his own worthiness. Another example is a similar form of musing in which Henry indulges over Rosamund's hand, on the subject of his own lack of chastity and his resolution to be better. Asides and soliloquies are constantly being used by Eleanor to give us prior information about her evil designs. It is this habit, partly, that makes of her the flat melodramatic villainess she is.

Tennyson's use of soliloquies and asides as techniques of characterisation is an instance of the superficial adoption of an Elizabethan convention. The soliloquies of Shakespeare's personages reveal their characters through what we are able to perceive of how their thought processes work while they are actually
talking about something else. Tennyson's soliloquies, on the other hand, are almost always descriptive rather than revelatory. The characters soliloquize about themselves — their emotions or thoughts or motives, as in Becket's "Am I the man?" speeches, or in Eleanor's long speech, "The world hath trick'd her..." towards the end of the last bower scene. On the other hand, Macbeth, for instance, reveals — without talking about it — an imaginative and tortured soul in the visions of his murdering sleep, or Duncan's virtues pleading "like angels trumpet-tongued". Ultimately, this habit of overt statement and description, as much as any thing else, is responsible for the tendency to superficiality in the presentation of character.

Inspite of the huge cast of dramatis personae, the characterisation in Aubrey de Vere's St. Thomas of Canterbury is even more flat and undistinguished. This is mainly owing to the sameness and archaism of the language. The personages have nothing like a characteristic speech idiom or distinguishing thought processes. They are essentially static and postulated mouth-pieces of various attitudes to the central theme. These qualities also affect the presentation of the two main protagonists.
Fry's main preoccupation with a portrait of Henry in all his complexity as king and man, gives unity to what might have been a series of disconnected episodes. The other characters, including Becket, are naturally reduced not only in stature but also in fulness, as a consequence. Unlike Tennyson, Fry places little or no reliance on what might pass for soliloquies, for either describing or revealing character. The portrait of Henry begins not with an actual presentation of the man on the scene, but with a few members of his retinue reacting to some of the consequences of Henry's actions. Most of the burden, however, falls on Henry's own language, as much on the way he says things as on what he says. This, however, is mainly dialogue; either in exchanges with the others' ideas and points of view, or the way he sometimes talks past them. Fry's personages reveal themselves in speech and behaviour. Occasionally, however, evaluations of their actions are provided within the play by choric figures like William Marshal and Eleanor. But they are only expressed as the personal opinions of the speakers concerned. Such, for instance, is Marshal's comment on Becket as a man who went through life saving up all his passion to spend on his downfall. Such are also some of the prose pieces of Marshal the narrator which lightly guide our interpretation of Henry, without making for prejudice either way.
Fry's primary interest in Curtmantle, as he states in "Theatre and History" was in the characters, and what he could deduce of the feelings and motives behind their actions. One of Tennyson's main interests in treating historical subjects is described by his son as being, "a strong desire to reverse unfair judgements, and an eager delight in the analysis of human motive and character." One of the main preoccupations of both these writers, then, as also of the two novelists, was to present the personages of several hundred years ago as credible human beings. Such an aim automatically presupposes a belief in the universality of human nature, its basic unchangingness; that what these people did and suffered in the distant past is comprehensible in terms of our own experience of human beings in our own day.

With Anouilh and Eliot, the dominant preoccupation is theme, to which considerations of character are subordinated. Anouilh, in fact, interprets the actions of his historical personages from essentially modern premises. This is especially the case with his differentiation of people into the "two races of men". It is also noticeable in his concern with the self-dramatising protagonist in search of his own truth — his "role" —

146 Hallam Tennyson, Memoir II, p.174.
to which he sticks at all costs when he finds it.

The modern French theatre, as L. C. Franks has indicated, has been concerned largely with la condition humaine, men's predicament in the universe and the purpose of his life, rather than what makes up individual men, or what distinguishes one man from another.

This being the case, it follows that the historical figures in Beckett bear a far greater resemblance to other figures in Anouilh's own plays than to the people described by history. Looking at Anouilh's programme note to the play, it is obvious that what first struck him about the story was an aspect of the human predicament in which he had long been interested, but had not dealt with fully. This was the possibility of a close relationship between two men, explored in all its facets, in terms of his own view of the world and human beings.

The two protagonists, Beckett and Henry, are portrayed in considerable fulness and are interesting in their own right as people. They also show a development and complication in terms of Anouilh's own earlier characters. However, in comparison with these two, the rest of the characters are deliberately reduced, or flattened, or caricatured to fit the themes. The interest
of these other figures lies in the purpose they are meant to serve within the play rather than in themselves as persons.

There are several of these lesser figures in the play, each embodying one of the thematic strands. All these strands merge and interweave in Becket's search for his honour. The figure of Gwendoline, for instance, explores idealism and love; the young queen illustrates the unhappy family theme, the peasants dramatise poverty and the racial issue, and so on.

All these characters, except perhaps Louis VII and Gilbert Foliot, lack historicity, either because they are invented figures like Gwendoline; or because their historical features have been disregarded and the figures deliberately distorted to suit the author's purposes, as with the Young Queen or the Pope. Even Foliot's bad points have been emphasised at the expense of his redeeming features. Louis is given to commenting on the cumbrousness of God's honour; while in reality he was such a religious man that Eleanor is said to have remarked that she was married to a monk instead of a king.

Eliot's characters, in keeping with his search for a greater formalism and stylization in drama are mainly
symbolic figures. At the same time, they are not denuded of vitality. What Eliot says of Jenson's characters is also applicable to his own.

Whereas in Shakespeare the single emotional effect is due to the way in which the characters act upon one another, in Jenson it is given by the way in which the characters fit in with each other. ...The simplification consists largely in reduction of detail, in the seizing of aspects relevant to the relief of an emotional impulse which remains the same for that character, in making the character conform to a particular setting. This stripping is essential to the art, to which is also essential a flat-distortion in drawing. 147

Another important trait of characterisation, at least in the first three plays, is what M. C. Bradbrook calls the contrast between "the man who sees and the rest who are blind" 148, or as someone else says, the sheep and the goats. In Murder in the Cathedral this trait is illustrated in the wide gap between the acute spiritual consciousness of Thomas and the "living and partly living" existence of the poor women. This fundamental contrast is behind most of Eliot's poetry, the superior consciousness being the speaker in the poems.

147 Selected Essays, pp. 153-159.
As a consequence of this trait, we find a self-dramatising tendency in the protagonist, which has sometimes been called priggishness. In the conclusion to *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* Eliot had written,

I once designed and drafted a couple of scenes, of a verse play. My intention was to have one character whose sensibility and intelligence should be on the plane of the most sensitive and intelligent members of the audience; his speeches should be addressed to them as much as to the other personages in the play — or rather should be addressed to the latter, who were to be material, literal-minded and visionless, with the consciousness of being overheard by the former. There was to be an understanding between this protagonist and a small number of the audience while the rest of the audience would share the responses of the other characters in the play.\(^{149}\)

This contrast in character built upon differing levels of consciousness is a part of the main thematic opposition in the play, between two views of life.

In sum, each writer's treatment of his characters shows a blend of the historically attested traits of the personages, and family traits characteristic of the inmates of that writer's own created world. The proportions of the mixture, of course, range from the extreme historicity of Shelley Mydans or Fry to the almost complete disregard of it in Anouilh or Meyer.