CHAPTER V
"I AM TRUTH, NOT CUSTOM": FRY'S BECKET
"I am Truth, not Custom": Fry's Becket

The title, Curtmantle, derived from the nickname of Henry II, indicates that the play is more concerned with the character of Henry than with Becket, the Archbishop. Henry came to be called 'Curtmantle' because his cloak was "as short as his need for sleep." The motive force behind the play, as the title indicates, is the formulation of a portrait of Henry. Henry's is quite a complex character and most of the qualities are expressed by Fry in the "Foreword" when he says:

Just as the thirty-five years of his reign contain a concentration of the human condition, so his character covers a vast field of human nature. He was simple and royal.... direct and paradoxical, compassionate and hard, a man of intellect, a man of action, God-fearing, superstitious, blasphemous, far-seeing, short-sighted, affectionate, lustful, patient, volcanic, humble, overriding.1

Naturally, Curtmantle seeks to dramatise the life of King Henry II. The main events and incidents in Henry's troublesome reign are reminiscences of William Marshal, an attendant on the King. This telescoping of events is achieved with great ease as a result of this technique of reminiscence. More importantly, the figure of Henry emerges sharp and colossal in contrast to the other characters, as Marshal's memory is mainly engaged in recalling the life of Henry and of the others only to the extent that they had a bearing on it.

1. Christopher Fry, Curtmantle "Foreword" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. IX. Subsequent page references to this edition are parenthesised within the text.
As Fry in his "Foreword" to the play says: "the stage is William Marshal's mind, as though he were remembering the life of Henry." He is endowed with a choric function which enables him to recount the action 'doing) away with time and place,' as Fry has intended and to comment on its significance. Marshal is a highly placed official of the Court, as his name itself suggests, and he is a close confidant of the King. As has been pointed out by J. Woodfield, "he marshals the facts in order for the audience; he records the passing of time and events. Another function is to manipulate the response of the audience in favour of Henry, a role which is an important corrective to this history," because almost all the writers who attempted the theme of Becket's martyrdom have focused their dramatic attention on Becket.

Although the focus of the play is on Henry, the playwright does full justice to the character of Becket as a tragic hero who becomes a martyr. Nowhere does Fry leave the threads of the texture of the play loose. Like the poor women of Canterbury who constitute the chorus in Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral, almost all the characters in Curtmantle suffer in tragic ways, the impending death of Becket in the Second Act ranging from 1163 to 1170. Henry does not approve of the ways of Becket. The latter is deprived of meaningful choice.

The King begins to blame individuals as his failures begin to

2. Christopher Fry, Curtmantle "Foreword", p. VIII.
increase. That Becket has lost the good will of the King is knelled in Eleanor's voice:

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

(p. 37)

Becket and Henry attack each other's ambition, pride and lack of vision. The King is enraged at the leniency of the ecclesiastical courts and the archbishop is equally adamant, opposing the King's pragmatic approach with an affirmation of man's grace:

And this truth is not custom.
This is not under the law, but under grace.
What you see as the freedom of the world,
Within the law, I fear, as the enslavement
Of that other state of man, in which and in
Which only, he can know his perfect freedom,

(p. 40)

The role of Eleanor in Fry's Curtmantle is that of a perceptive observer and commentator. She is aware of her precarious position as a former French queen now wed to a British monarch, yet she tries to mediate the differences between her husband and her sons. For Becket she has great admiration as a person and as a statesman. She is utterly unlike the Eleanor who directly brings on the murder of the Archbishop in Tennyson's Becket.

Becket is not so militant a co-adjutor of the King against the Church as he is in Anouilh's Becket, but his versatile
services, to which his liege stints no tribute, are performed with humble acknowledgement that "there would be no Becket, without the King" (p. 11), that he is "the King's representative" (p. 13). Henry's unquestioning belief that

Tom loves the law, 
And he knows as well as I do the day is soon coming 
When those who deviate will be compelled 
Into the common pattern

(p. 15)

is, indeed, a major reason for his naming his associate to be Archbishop. He is influenced not by friendship, not by any antagonism to the Church displayed by Becket, but by the conviction that the new Archbishop will be in a stronger position than before to play a part in the stabilization of the realm. For this reason he brushes aside every objection that Becket raises, even the coolly and eloquently reasoned predictions that

Who ever is made Archbishop will very soon 
Offend either you, Henry, or his God .......
We shall not be as we have been

(p. 21)

The King sees only an opportunity to

give England 
An incorruptible scaffolding of law 
To last her longer than her cliffs

(p. 23)

When Becket makes a choice in favour of God rather than of King, Henry's grievance initially is not so much one of personal betrayal as of the cause to which he has envisioned their common services to be directed. The opportunity that
the two together enjoy to fulfill "the need of the Kingdom" is what he dwells on when they meet face to face, but that burden comes to be mingled with annoyance over the challenge to his authority. The same two notes he continues to sound as the rift widens. In maintaining the stability of the Kingdom, he insists upon the enforcement of those powers and prerogatives which have traditionally belonged to the Crown. The Archbishop is willing to recognize these with privileges with, however, the proviso "only saving our order." The repeated insistence on that proviso brings from Henry the indignant reply: "One order is going to be saved; mine in this kingdom!" (p. 41). Thus, resistance on the part of Becket is viewed by Henry as an affront both to himself and to the nation. He says:

Why should a man make God my enemy
And the enemy of a maturing nation,
As this man does?

(p. 46)

Even when Henry sanctions the return of Becket from France (not entirely for unselfish reasons), the "most uncompromising key" of the Archbishop so infuriates him that he bursts out:

What's the good of any of you, standing round
Like a lot of rotting pit-traps, while you leave me
Wide open to the insolence of a fellow
Who came to me first on a limping mule, and now
Might as well spread his buttocks on the throne?
Do you all intend to sit about forever
With your hands hanging slack between your knees,
Leaving him to foul the whole distance we've covered?
Who will get rid of this turbulent priest for me?
Are you all such feeble lovers of the kingdom?

(p. 71)
The disservice he notes in Becket's behaviour to himself and to the Kingdom is significant, perhaps more significant even than the deep misgivings and bitter remorse to which he soon gives expression. As his queen, Eleanor, has sagely observed earlier, issues and personalities have become entangled:

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

(p. 48)

That the conflict between Becket and Henry is the crux of the drama is evident in the King's decision to name Thomas as Archbishop in the 'Prologue'. Even before the decision is made known in the first fifty lines of the 'Prologue', the conflict is anticipated both in the explicit statement of their respective positions by the two then friends and in the playing of a chess game in which Becket's bishop checkmates Henry's king. However, there is a lot more to the tragedy of Henry Curtmantle, as Fry presents it, than an external conflict between two protagonists and a fall-of-princes structure.

The initial struggle between King Henry and Chancellor Becket starts in the First Act which covers five years from 1158-1163. Richard Anesty's question, in the 'Prologue' - "Where is King?" is answered by Marshal in this Act. When he says: "The King's arrived in the yard, ma'am;
with the Chancellor." The Chancellor's charity to the beggar
is reported to the queen by Marshal. Becket's statement:
"There would be no Becket, with the King", when complimented
by the Queen, is ironic in the sense that Becket and the King
become enemies in their own lifetime. The King has a word
of appreciation for the deft handling of the situation at Paris
by Becket. Henry is happy that the mission is successful and
that the state is undergoing a rapid change towards peace:

And that puts us clearly into the ascendent
For a term of good order, while we do our work
From the Arctic circle to the Pyrenees
The King's peace is holding secure.

(pp. 11-12)

The plight of Henry and his subjects for a good Government is
well understood by the queen when she says:

I never see a man in the Court who hasn't a limp,
The soles of his feet as raw with blisters
As yours are, Henry.

(p. 12)

The real conflict between "the Crown and the Crony",
starts in this scene. Henry is angry with the clerical
law-breakers and is irritated by the priestly encroachments upon
his prerogatives. But, Henry immediately shows his jubilation
at the lack of a French heir. And in this mood of irritation
and complacency, he wants to have his own man as the head
of the Church and finds none better than Becket, his friend
and Chancellor, to be the Archbishop of Canterbury. Becket is reluctant because a similar manoeuvre by Louis of France had earlier failed. He expresses the Church's lack of confidence in him and also pleads his own inadequacy. Fry seems to be pointing out the primal sin in Henry of which Becket seems to have had a clear glimpse. Becket argues for a delicate balance of powers:

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

(p. 22)

Becket warns his friend Henry of the unforeseen consequences of divine will, despite human purpose. Henry is adamant and confident that both of them can:

give England An incorruptible scaffolding of law To last her longer than her cliffs.

(p. 23)

By his action, Henry sets up a counter-movement against himself and this is exemplified in the rising fortunes of Louis of France, whom Henry had earlier despised and whom he continues to despise. As Chancellor, Becket is bland but genial, having been in the glow of Henry's confidence. When he is made Archbishop his speeches become academic, unimpassioned and full of sophistry. When Henry offers Canterbury to him he gives expression to his apprehensions. In the course of the mighty
debate between the Church and the State, he tells Henry:

The vehement liberty of terror, which ignores our flesh,
Is not the will,
But it knows the will, returns to it in calm.
Even when in rebellion it keeps
The signature of light. In the avalanche of snow
The star-figure of the flake is there unchanged.
It was out of a whirlwind that God answered Job.
And here, too, in the whirl of our senses,
The way for the will has to be kept unthreatened.

(p. 41)

If at all there is one character who sympathises with
Becket and who understands that, "the security of them all,
rests insecurely on Henry's stability," it is William Marshal.
Once the erstwhile companions separate, he restores the common-
sense perspective of real life when he says:

What was one had become two.
The simple and reasonable action, at the very
moment it came to life, was neither simple nor
limited to reason.

Thus, he participates in the action like the Greek chorus and
also serves as the author's mouthpiece. Emil Roy rightly says
that, "Marshal also represents the consciousness of the trusting,
hopeful, common man whose welfare depends on the well-being
of the King who suffers his destruction and who also survives
his downfall." Becket resigns the Chancellorship as soon as
he is made the Archbishop, precipitating matters. Becket is
accused of treachery towards the King by Henry:

4. Emil Roy, Christopher Fry (Southern Illinois Press, 1971),
p. 128.
5. Ibid.
I owe no obedience to a man who cheats my trust in him.

(p. 33)

Becket is no longer Henry's close confident. Henry has become subservient to Becket who is made the Head of the Church, as interpreted by the Churchmen. Becket's role has undoubtedly shifted and his stature is magnified to such an extent that he has become Henry's judge. Once treated like a brother, he is now a father figure, finding fault with the King's ways. He advises Henry to comply with the terms of the Church. The altercation ends in a deadlock. The efforts to dominate one another fail to click. Both of them part, shaken and angered, the act ending in an impasse. Fry focusses attention on characterization in the First and the Second Acts. But by the end of the First Act, both the characters—that of Henry and Becket—are fully developed and the Archbishop is dead by the end of the Second Act. Becket identifies himself completely with the Church after he is appointed the Archbishop, thus becoming an instrument of the Church. He has become the Church's 'tongue' to be 'used in its argument.' Dicrickx's comment seems to be quite apt when he compares Fry's Becket with Eliot's and says that the "Eliotic hero develops towards renunciation, submission and acceptance, instead of violence and struggle, while Fry presents a man (Thomas) who is suddenly seized in a whirlwind of passion, after having doubted his own capacities."

The second half of *Curtmantle* concentrates more on the conflict between Henry and his wife Eleanor, than the first, which emphasises Henry's struggle with Becket and the conflict between the civil and cannon law. Becket and his men are threatened with violence if they do not agree to the 'customs of the Kingdom, codified.' At first, Becket relents but is unyielding when the King asks him to sign the parchment. A brief study of the intended encroachments upon the rights of the Church by the King, would be helpful for a fuller understanding of the quarrel between Henry and Becket. The following four are the most important of the sixteen articles of the constitution of Clarendon:

a. If a clergyman stood accused of a crime, he was to be first placed before a civil court. If the civil court found that the charge levelled was well grounded, he was then to be sent to an ecclesiastical court for trial, secular officer watching over the judicial proceedings. On his conviction he would lose the benefit of clergy, and thus could not be protected by the Church any further; this means that he was to be degraded by the Bishop, and punished as a layman.

b. Any dispute about the right of perpetual presentation to a benefice, whether claimed by laymen or by clerics, was to be settled in the civil courts of the country.

c. Members of the Royal household and tenants -in-chief of the King, could not be excommunicated, and their lands could not be put under interdict without the King's permission having previously been obtained.
d. Bishops and Archbishops could not lawfully go beyond the sea, without the permission of the King, which meant that they could not go to Rome.

Becket, the Archbishop, takes up an attitude of uncompromising resistance. As Emil Roy points out, Becket is, "forced to choose between the state to which he owes love and honour and his devotion to a religious ideal." The ingredients of an effective piece of drama are undoubtedly present in the conflict between the British monarch and the Archbishop of Canterbury during the third quarter of the twelfth century. The dramatic effectiveness does not necessarily grow out of the zeal with which Henry II sought to bring the Church under his control and the steadfastness with which Becket set himself in opposition. Nor is the effectiveness heightened by the fact that the latter had the backing of the general populace and faced the antagonism of the feudal lords, four of whom took as a command the King's petulant exclamation: "will no man free me from this pestilent priest"? Nor is the dramatic heightening accomplished by the fact that the murder of the Archbishop came to be regarded as martyrdom, that the cathedral in which it was committed became a shrine to which pilgrims made their way. "What does impart drama to the conflict is that prior to the break between the two men, they had been close friends and associates, that Becket as Chancellor for eight years had

7 Emil Roy, Christopher Fry, p.131.
been an obedient subject of Henry and had even supported the monarch's measures against the Church. We may also see an anticipation of Fry's treatment in Henry's vivid description of the way in which he has "struck a shape from out of the vague, and law from madness." For that reason, he is the more intent on breaking Becket to his will. The dramatic conflict arises from the Archbishop's no less strong insistence on maintaining the Church as "A bulwark against Throne and Baronage" (I, i, 9), on rehabilitating it to be a potent force in the kingdom (I, i, 83-98) on his yielding to the monarch with the proviso: "Saving God's honour!" (II, ii, 75).

The sub-plot involving Henry's mistress Rosamund interacts the main plot not only in the antipathy Rosamund evokes from Eleanor and in the girl's spurning of the attentions directed to her by the knights who later murder Becket, but also in the part that Rosamund plays in prompting the King's declaration that brings on the murder. Early in the play, Henry enforces an oath that his friend will protect the maiden "Whatever come between us." This oath Becket proceeds to keep, saving her from a murderous weapon wielded


9. Anouilh, Becket, Translation by Lucianne Hill, (Coward McCann, 1960), I, iii, 194-235. Subsequent Act, Scene and line references to this edition are parenthesised within the text.
by Eleanor, so that the latter vows: "But he and she must never meet again" (IV, ii, 245) and connives with Fitzurse,

We will to France and be
Beforehand with the King and Brew from out
This Godstow - Becket intermeddling such
A strong hate-philtre as may madden him - madden
Against his priest beyond all hellebore

(IV, ii, 260-264)

It is this situation which Tennyson contrives as the source of the bitterness on the part of Henry that leads to Becket's death. Eleanor's insinuation that Becket has put Rosamund into a monastery at Godstow for his own purposes causes the King to lose all control in a set of impassioned speeches which conclude with the exclamation: "Will no man free me from this pestilent priest?" (V, i, 100-145). Thus, Becket's keeping of his oath provides Eleanor with the weapon that brings on his death.

The Rosamund sub-plot, while it plays a large part in motivating the assassination of Becket, confuses the fundamental issue at the centre of the disagreement between Henry and Archbishop. Becket stands by the Church identifying himself with the divine power. All the clergy are visibly depressed and Foliot openly expresses his despair. It is then that Henry shows his real mettle as a shrewd politician and diplomat when he demands the repayment of what all the money Becket had spent while he was the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Becket is neither the confidant nor the advocate of the Church that
one finds him to be in the First Act and the earlier part of the Second Act respectively, but is a scapegoat.

Henry is not happy over the news of an heir to Louis of France. To keep his kingdom safe, he commits a tactical mistake. He wants to parcel out the lands among his sons and then crown the young Henry as the King of England. In his haste, he does not understand that he would be sinning against the degree, tilting the equipoise. He finds himself in a very weak position. Becket's escape to France relegates Henry's hope to over-ride the Archbishop. But, the Archbishop proves too smart for the King and he expresses his own suspicions telling Henry that:

Something tells me I am parting from you
As one you may see no more in this life

(p. 69)

The moment Becket enters England, he asserts himself by communicating to the Bishops who took part in the coronation of young Henry. This enrages Henry to a point of no return. In this unfortunate mood of enragement, he utters the tragic words:

Who will get rid of this turbulent priest for me?
Are you all such feeble lovers of this kingdom?

(p. 71)

Four knights take the King at his words and leave the court without the King's knowledge to fulfil his bidding. But
soon he realises the implication of his tragic utterances and sends forth his soldiers to bring back those arrogant knights. Finally, as in a classical play, a messenger peeps in to confirm Henry's fears over Becket's death. As Emil Roy remarks, "By having Becket's off-stage death reported, Fry has avoided the melodramatic defeat of good by evil and balanced Henry's impetuousness with his idealisms and guilt. The action also takes on inevitability leading to Henry's progressive alienation from family, realm and finally life itself."

The Third Act begins in darkness as the Second Act has ended. The scene opens with Henry awaiting chastisement by the monks for the Archbishop's killing. He seems to be testing his spirit by self-punishment and trial by ordeal. The King becomes Becket's chief mourner. He has already withstood three years of chastisement.

Curtmantle, like Henry's own historical career, falls into two neat halves. The first half, from the King's accession to the murder of Thomas Becket in 1170, is taken up with the monarch's exhausting struggle with his Archbishop of Canterbury. In terms of Fry's theme of the interplay of laws, this section dramatises the dilemma of men caught between the law of God, on the one hand, and the law of the State, on the other. Becket has disappointed all Henry's expectations. Men become

the tools of destiny and although they may rage and defy, as Henry does, they eventually succumb.

As Merchant declares, the central tragic irony in Curtmantle is that "Henry II works for due process of law which is ultimately an expression of God's order and that Becket, subdued to God's will which is precisely the law towards which Henry's ambitions are directed, finds himself in personal opposition to Henry." Henry's affirmative way clashes with the negative way of Becket who "realizes the essential instrumentality of man's will as, at its highest form, wholly submissive to the ways of providence."

Henry's life as a journey is established in the 'Prologue' in which Anesty pre-figures the King in his quest for truth, law and order and the action exemplifies the restless, desperate quality of Henry's search. When Henry sends Becket back to England from France, he declares:

Becket,
The sea is running as smooth as a hound for you;
I'm sending you back with a pliant wind
All in your favour

(p. 70)

This statement proves ironic as Henry intuitively hears "the ice creaking on the river...... the horses on the frozen roads" (p. 74) which presage the news of Becket's murder. At

12. Ibid., p. 104.
Le Mans, when the fire turns against Henry, he renounces God. His tears are not those of repentance, but of anger and remorse - a mixture of Promethean defiance and tragic recognition.

In Murder in the Cathedral, Eliot gives us a movingly religious and poetic play. Like Anouilh, Fry presents a sympathetic study in Henry just as Henry says of Becket:

'It looks as if this island isn't large enough to contain both of us.'

(p. 47)

So, in the play there is hardly room for both men. Eleanor laments, in vain, the clash of their personalities. The portrait of Henry evolves, and the theme of Law becomes the interplay between those of State and God. Becket warns Henry which makes him feel that Becket is "the sickness of the Kingdom."

"The action of the play rises to the inevitable murder of Becket, and in the third and last Act Henry lives out his life trying to shake free the shadow of Becket." 13

A study of Curtmantle, considering Becket as a tragic hero who becomes a martyr, reveals that Fry is more Christian in his play than his existentialist contemporaries. He brings in the idea that man is responsible only for life and not for imposing his moral standards on it. He also opposes the contention of T.S. Eliot that human nature shares in the evil

which befalls all nature. Fry has presented the struggle of a human being to achieve the end which already exists for him, "just as the caterpillar pursues the shape of the butterfly, and the musician or the poet is trying to express the form of the hidden order." 14