CHAPTER III
"I AM MARTYR IN MYSELF": TENNYSON'S BECKET
"I am Martyr in Myself": Tennyson's Becket

Though thematically Becket is historical, Tennyson's purpose in writing it, as Jebb rightly points out, is 'to write a play, not to rewrite history.' Becket is a drama of great power finely conceived and finely executed as well as a poem of great and varied beauty. Besides presenting a vivid portrait of Henry's Court, the five-Act play projects an almost perfectly faithful picture of Thomas Becket as a martyr.

Like all other martyr plays, Tennyson's Becket deals with the hero's awareness of his choice by God and the entailing divine mission. Consequent on Theobald's death and Henry's insistent desire to confer the primacy on Becket, Becket is reluctant and timorous to assume the great honour. Like Moses and other chosen vessels, Becket is overpowered by a sense of inadequacy and unwillingness to accept the mission entrusted to him. He says:

Mock me not, I am not even a monk
Thy jest - no more. 2

He refers to his arm 'as a solider's, not a spiritual arm' (p. 649). When Henry persists in his intention, he exclaims:

Make me archbishop! Why, my liege, I know
Some three or four poor priests a thousand times
Fitter for this grand function. Me archbishop!
God's favour and King's favour might so clash
That thou and I -- that were a jest indeed! (p. 649).

Though he wonders at his installation, Becket is conscious
of his being elected from birth. He tells Herbert that he is
the man for that mission in spite of his repeated queries:

Am I the man? My mother, ere she bore me,
Dream'd that twelve stars fell glittering out of leavan
Into her bosom. (p. 652)

Herbert interprets the mother's dream as the fire and light of
the spirit of the twelve Apostles entering into his making. Becket
refers to a dream of his childhood wherein

The Virgin, in a vision of my sleep,
Gave me the golden keys of Paradise. Dream,
Or prophecy, that? (p. 652)

He also recapitulates how when he was a retainer of Theobald

The good old man would sometimes have his jest -
He took his mitre off, and set on me,
And said, 'My young Archbishop -- thou
wouldst make
A stately Archbishop! (p. 652)

Becket repeats in more strident and confident tone, his
experience of a mystic dream he had the previous night when
he stood in Canterbury Minster and spoke to the Lord of the
secular life he had erstwhile lived. He explains how, to his
question - "Am I the man?", the Lord answered: "Thou art the man, and all the more the man." (p.652). Becket tells how the King's voice is potent for him because he has been his 'friend', 'brother' and his 'uplifter' in this world. He also tells Herbert how the King chose him as Archbishop believing

That I should go against the Church with him,
And I shall go against him with the Church. (p.652).

Becket grows aware of the great rift that would yawn between him and King Henry upon his stance to take the side of the Church and to render it as a 'bulwark against Throne and Baronage.' (p.652).

It becomes clear that the King and Becket are steering towards irreconcilable opposites - the King bent on subordinating the Church in his institution of a secular Law and Becket fighting for the supremacy of the Church. Becket knows no half-measures. He has served the King fully as Chancellor under him. He has served Theobald as a cleric and served him well. Despite his great love for the King, he feels impelled to champion the cause of the Church and not capitulate in the King's favour. The Ancient Laws and customs of the Crown become the bone of contention between the one-time-friends and boon companions. Both being strong-minded and dogged in determination, the clash between them is unavoidable. Henry learns that 'Hell knows no fury like
love to hatred turned', but in Becket affection persists in the face of disagreement. He tells Herbert:

O Herbert here
I gash myself asunder from the King,
Tho' leaving each, a wound; mine own, a grief
To show the scar for ever -- his, a hate
Not ever to be heal'd. (p. 653)

He keeps his word to King Henry in safeguarding Rosamund from the evil reach of Eleanor. The promise had been rendered both before the rift and after it on French soil.

The martyrdom of Becket is hinted at in the very outset of the 'game of chess'. The 'Prologue', wherein the casual words of Becket and the King at chess are shown, is replete with the suggestion of a coming fall-out. It indicates how the coming events cast their shadows before. As Becket makes a reference to the King's defeat saying:

Why -- there then, for you see my bishop
Hath brought your King to a standstill.
You are beaten. (p. 647)

the King, in deep disrelish of defeat, kicks over the board and says:

Why, there then -- down go bishop and
King together. (p. 647)

Like any martyr's end which is destined for a divine purpose, as, for instance, Milton's Samson, Becket's martyrdom
is for the untramelling of the Roman Church from the cramping clutches of the crown and for the restoration of the supremacy and glory of the Catholic Church. The King says: "Meanwhile, the revenues are mine". Becket feels that the Church's revenue should be here - not a rood lost. Before he resign his Chancellorship, Becket exclaims:

O, my dear friend, the King!
O, brother! — I may come to martyrdom,
I am martyr in myself already. (p. 655).

From this it is clear that the dark presage that the dissolution of the worldly bond between them may spell the doom and death of him is latent in the mind of Becket.

The rift between the Church and state, represented by Thomas Becket and Henry II respectively, is always in the forefront. Tennyson vividly sketches the equally determined and aggressively assertive characters of Becket and Henry. In consonance with the clearsightedness of a martyr to his being a chosen instrument of God to effect the divine purpose, Becket is fully aware that if entrusted with the 'Archbishoprick', he has to fight his King to keep the Church as a bulwark against the King and his baronage from embezzling the revenues of the Church. He foresees his martyrdom.

The play has five acts, which is quite apt a division leading to the catastrophe. It begins with a prologue which is premonitory. The playwright presents that all is necessary
for a good understanding of the play in the prologue itself. The prologue begins with a revelation that the Archbishop of Canterbury, Theobald, is dying and already the King is seen searching for a successor to him. Tennyson very wryly brings in the 'customs' which widen the rift between King Henry and Thomas Becket, after the latter is made the archbishop. The 'game of chess' resulting in the King's confident cry, 'I loathe being beaten', (p.647), is significant to the later consequences in the play. The Henry-Rosamund sub-plot is also hinted at in the prologue. Becket, 'Rosamund's father's friend', promises to take care of Henry's 'true heart-wife', 'whatever come between us' (p.648). Henry also talks of his young son Henry's coronation which later tilts the tragic equilibrium. It has always been the privilege of the Archbishop of Canterbury to crown the King of England. Henry thus insists that the next Archbishop of Canterbury must crown young Henry and that would be none other than Becket. Becket is horrified and considers himself not a fitting person to the much prized and prestigious spiritual chair. To excuse himself, Becket suggests the name of the leading men of the Church such as Gilbert Foliot, Roger of York, Henry of Winchester and others, but these are rejected by Henry. Only after Herbert lets Becket and Henry know the dying wish of Theobald, does Becket reluctantly agree to take over the reins of the Archbishoprick of Canterbury. The picture of Henry's
bubbling energy both in mind and spirit is depicted in his taking spontaneous decisions such as making Becket the Archbishop and leaping over the table to go 'a hawking' lest he should grow fat respectively. Eleanor and Fitzurse, too, are introduced in the prologue itself. Reginald Fitzurse plays the accomplice in bringing 'the rosefaced minion of the king', 'to the level of the dust (p. 651).

The dreams and prophecies about which Becket tells Herbert, do foretell the former's climb to the archbishoprick. Now spiritually agile, Becket decides to be the spiritual Head, saying, 'all my doubts I fling from me like dust' (p. 653). Becket knows well that there would be a clash between him and the King and it would only widen between them. But he sticks on to his decision and considers himself to be a man of the Church:

The rift that runs between me and the King;
I served our Theobald well when I was with him;
I served King Henry well as Chancellor;
I am his no more, and I must serve the Church.

(p. 653)

The third scene in Act I is, perhaps, the most important of all the scenes in the play. The playwright tells
everything about the altercation, in this scene. Much attention
is also focussed on the traditional splendours of the Court, the
courtiers and the protocol. The scene in Northampton castle
is of much significance. The delineation of the arguments, and
counter-arguments, the basic principles on which the church and
the state differ, the technicalities on which the rift widens is
superb. The historical details are dexterously incorporated into
the play.

Becket declines to sign the customs fearlessly nor is he
afraid of any physical force for he would 'die the death of
martyrdom' (p.658), if killed. Speaking of the physical force
he asks the barons to:

Strike, and ye set these customs by my death
Ringing their own death-knell thro' all the realm
(p.658).

He is then urged on by his well-wishers to sign the document.
Hilary entreats him to sign. Philip de Eleemosyna conveys the
Pope's wish to Becket advising him to pacify the King:

Lest there be battle between Heaven and Earth,
And Earth should get the better—for the time.
(p.659).

Tennyson presents a touching stage sentiment by making
the templars of the court appeal to Becket to sign. These are
a sort of temptations and he hurriedly accepts the customs.
Just after his assent, his conscience pricks him as having been 'false to himself' and soon refuses to put his seal on the paper and tears it asunder. He, thus, defies the most powerful head in the state. This is an important event in 'the great cause'.

Expressing his strong resentment, Henry makes an extempore speech that is admirable. Henry weighs the pros and cons of his actions before the court, defending everything he did. Becket and he were like 'two rivers gently flowing side by side', (p.661), but now Becket, his one-time friend and confidant, is like a snake:

Snake—ay, but he that lookt a fangless one,
Issues a venomous adder. (p.661).

It is quite evident that the whole court is convinced by Henry's speech. He says that he did everything he could for Becket, but Becket in turn has proved 'ten-fold false to me'. Henry so loved Becket that he was bent on making him everything but the King. Unfortunately, his fond belief that Becket would stand by the King has been thwarted. Henry moans and bleeds in his heart saying:

My comrade, boon companion, my coreveller,
The master of his master, the King's king.—
God's eyes! I had meant to make him all but king.
Chancellor-Archbishop, he might well have sway'd
All England under Henry, the young King,
When I was hence. What did the traitor say?
False to himself, but ten-fold false to me! (p.661).
Soon Becket is seen carrying the cross followed by a crowd of worshippers, almost saint-like in appearance and the scene is rightly summed up by Herbert,

As once he bore the standard of the Angles,  
So now he bears the standard of the angels  (p.661).

Becket boldly explicates, under that prince he fights saying that he is strong—not in mine ownself, but Heaven." (p.662). The rest of the bishops make out a case against him warning Becket that 'no foresworn Archbishop shall helm the Church'. (p.662). He is asked to repay all the money he had spent while he was the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The same sentiments earlier expressed by Henry about their erstwhile friendship are now repeated by the archbishop:

The King and I were brothers. All I had  
I lavish'd for the glory of the King;  
I shone from him, for him, his glory, his Reflection; now the glory of the Church  
Hath swallow'd up the glory of the King;  
I am his no more, but hers. (p.663).

The King could be Becket's mentor. Henry could have 'raised him from the puddle of the gutter' (p.661), he could have 'made porcelain from the clay of the city' (p.661), but now that Becket is the man of the Church, he unquestionably owes his allegiance to the Church and so he cannot go against the norms of the Church, come what may. The scene very aptly comes to an end with the anxious crowd shouting:

Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord! (p.664).
The Church and the state are thus at loggerheads with each other because of the personal clash between their respective heads. All the threads of the conflict are finely intertwined by the playwright.

Like the other martyrs, whose deep conviction in their faith is often misconstrued as arrogance and pride, Becket is misunderstood by Roger of York who admonishes him:

O bolster'd up with stubbornness and pride,
Wilt thou destroy the Church in fighting for it,
And bring us all to shame? (p.657).

Becket is clearsighted enough to realise that no true reconciliation can grow between him and his one-time gay companion, King Henry, when they both attempt a compromise. The King states that he has vowed not to give the 'kiss of peace' to Thomas on French ground nor any ground but English where his cathedral stands. He tells Becket:

Even now, who knows?
I might deliver all things to thy hand
If....but I say no more.... (p.681).

Becket shrewdly suspects the royal promise that had been ominously fenced with "if". He tells Herbert who queries whether the King spoke of the customs:

I live to die for, I die to live for it....
..................................................And
When my voice
Is martyr'd mute, and this man disappears,
That perfect trust may come again between us,
And there, there, there, not her I shall rejoice
To find my stray sheep back within the fold (p.681).
Becket is equally aware of the fact that the Church, whose supremacy was symbolically presented in the Papal Power, had grown corrupt and hence was enervated. When Philip de Eleemosyna wheedles him to sign the obnoxious laws and customs of the realm and says that he is the secret whisper of the Holy Father, Becket avers:

If Rome be feeble, then should I be firm (p.659).

Earlier he tells Herbert:

Save for myself no Rome were left in England,  
All had been his. Why should this Rome, this Rome,  
Still choose Barabbas rather than the Christ,  
Absolve the left-hand thief and damn the right?  
(p.674).

He further adds

I would have done my most to keep Rome holy,  
I would have made Rome know she still is Rome—  
Who stands aghast at her eternal self  
And shakes at mortal kings—her vacillation,  
Avarice, Craft — (p.674).

Baulked of her spiteful thrust at her rival, Rosamund, by Becket, Eleanor turns her rage against the priest. She persuades the barons against Becket and poisons Henry's hearing with a distorted version of the story, maddening the King beyond the bounds of endurance. The maddened King cries out:

No man to love me, honour me,  
Obey me! ....  
Will no man free me from this pestilent priest?  
(p.689).

To the bristling and nettled knights, the queen poses the question:
Are ye king's men? I am king's woman, I (p.689).

The infuriated knights rush out to execute Becket.

Becket is seized with premonitory warnings of his impending martyrdom. He speaks of his being born on a Tuesday and of his flight to Northampton falling on a Tuesday, together with the bitter banishment from England befalling on a Tuesday. He says:

On a Tuesday at Pontigny came to me
The ghostly warning of my martyrdom (p.692).

With unflinching courage and conviction, Becket holds out against the barons:

Tho' all the swords in England flash'd above me
Ready to fall at Henry's word or yours—
Tho' all the loud - lung'd trumpets upon earth
Blared from the heights of all the thrones of her kings,
Blowing the world against me, I would stand
Clothed with the full authority of Rome,
Mail'd in the perfect panoply of faith,
First of the foremost of their files, who die
For God, to people heaven in the great day
When God makes up his jewels. (p.694).

John of Salisbury deplores that Becket never leans on any man's advising. He adds that the barons seek and Becket makes occasion for his death. Becket with unruffled calm replies:

My counsel is already taken, John.
I am prepared to die. (p.694).
He adds further that

Valour and holy life should go together. (p.695).

He stands his ground and waits for the assassins, refusing the saving device of taking refuge in his own cathedral. Becket asks for the cross to be borne before him and the mitre to be laid on his head as he goes 'to meet' his King. As the murderers bang against the doors Becket with unruffled calm says:

And yet my dream foretold my martyrdom
In mine own Church. It is God's will
Go on. (p.695).

As Grim tries to force Becket to a place of safety, Becket likens it to forcing one from being crowned. As the knights strike at him, Becket commends his cause to God and the saints. With touching tenderness, he tells Grim who wraps his arms round him:

Spare this defence, dear brother. (p.697).

The character of Becket may not fit into the Shakespearean mould, but he is presented as a martyr in a Christian tragedy. Tennyson, through subtle suggestions, hints at the martyrdom of Becket throughout the play. An atmosphere is built up by the playwright to suit Becket's nature of death. His words in the 'Prologue' after he had heard about the death of Theobald, "My heart is full of tears I have no answer" (p.650), do build up a serene atmosphere. He is sad that his dear old archbishop is dead and he is not happy over the talk he has with the King.
about the successor to the dead Theobald. He visualises some kind of martyrdom — a sacrifice that he has to make, if the Church is to live in peace.

Speaking of the last of his visions Becket queries: 'I fell, Why fall? Why did he smite me? What?' (p.652). Though Becket could not get at the truth then, the vision proves quite prophetic. The Lord God smote Becket in the vision because He wants Becket to die for the Church, that his martyrdom might glorify the Church.

Before Becket sends back the 'Great Seal of England', he does some loud thinking wherein he prophesies his martyrdom:

O my dear friend, the King!
O' brother!—I may come to martyrdom.
I am martyr in myself already. (p.655).

He boldly refuses to sign the customs, despite many threats (Act I, Sc.III). He has already attained a composure that would fear nothing for the honour of God. He fearlessly asks De Broc to

Strike, and I die the death of martyrdom. (p.658).

Another warning is given by Walter Map (Act III, Sc.III) of the ensuing danger to Becket. The death may not be by martyrdom alone, but he may be killed by some barons in their self-interest in the name of the King. Map says:

before God I promise you the King hath many more Wolves than he can tame in his woods of England, and if it suit their purpose to howl for the King, and you still move against him, you may have no less than to die for it (p.681).
In a serene tone, Becket declares what he intends to do. The Church can never die, even if the state dies. The sheep in this world should not stray away but should be one, and the only way for the sheep to keep united is by their shepherd's sacrifice. Becket, speaking of the customs to Herbert, says:

I live to die for it, I die to live for it.
The State will die, the Church can never die,
The King's not like to die for that which dies;
But I must die for that which never dies......
It must be so, my friend! The wolves of England Must murder her one shepherd, that the sheep May feed in peace. (p.681).

And with an emphatic tone, he continues:

When my voice
Is martyr'd mute, and this man disappears,
That perfect trust may come again between us,
And there, there, there not hers I shall rejoice
To find my stray sheep back within the fold. (p.681).

When Becket narrates his childhood reminiscences to John of Salisbury (A.V, Sc.II), the latter asks Becket why he is thinking of the 'Old things'. Then Becket replies:

The drowning man, they say, remembers all
The chances of his life, just ere he dies. (p.692).

to which John of Salisbury answers:

Will you drown yourself?
He loses half the meed of martyrdom
Who will be martyr when he might escape. (p.692).

The question posed by John of Salisbury is of much significance. Here arises a question: who is a real martyr? And perhaps, the best explanation is Eliot's when he writes in
Murder in the Cathedral, "a martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways". ³

In Becket, the archbishop knows that he has to sacrifice himself for the scattering sheep which he feels is the design of God. If the Church is to have a rock-like foundation, some saints have to lay down their lives for it and as the saying goes, the Church on earth is built by the blood of martyrs. The martyr is only an instrument of God in this act. He has no will of his own because his will is co-mingled with the will of God and the result is that he has to die for 'The great cause'. Another question of importance is, will it be a perfect martyrdom, if knowing full well that he can help himself out of the suffering, a martyr goes through it? The only plausible answer is that 'God's will be done', and that 'will' persists despite some obstructions. If God wills it that a shepherd should die for the sheep of the Church, it is His design and it takes place, come what may. The only interdict on the part of the martyr is that he should completely lose 'his will in the will of God'. Only then, there will be a perfect martyrdom.

It is with prayer and praise that Becket meets his death:

At the right hand of Power—
Power and great glory—for thy Church, O Lord—
Into thy hands, O Lord—into Thy hands! (p.698).

Thus, Tennyson portrays Becket with all the sentient wisdom of a martyr who knows that he is called out, that he has a divine mission to fulfil and that his martyrdom is a step divinely ordered. The end is marked by extraordinary or supernatural events that bespeak divine displeasures at the malefactors, and, what is more, is met with a rare calmness, purging the mind of passion precisely as it happens to Milton's Samson at the close of his life:

And calm of mind, all passion spent.  