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THOMAS BECKET IN ENGLISH POETIC DRAMA

On Tennyson's *Becket*, T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*
and Christopher Fry's *Curtmantle*

In the Foreword to his drama *Curtmantle* Christopher Fry asks himself the following question: "How far should fidelity to historical events be sacrificed to suit the theatre?" Fry immediately answers and says: "If a playwright is rash enough to treat real events at all, he has to accept a double responsibility: to drag out of the sea of detail a story simple enough to be understood by people who knew nothing about it before; and to do so without distorting the material he has chosen to use" (p. 173). It would be interesting then to examine and compare how much of the historical detail Tennyson, T. S. Eliot and Fry employed, as all three of them hit on the same subject.

Both Tennyson and Fry treat historical facts chronologically. Tennyson's is a chronicle play. Fry established one of the King's men as the memory in which the action of the play takes place, so we have a kind of telescoped series of episodes. However, it is not true that Eliot gives us very little of history, as is generally understood. There is much more that leaps to the eye or ear even if his drama, most appropriately called *Murder in the Cathedral*, focuses on one situation, the murder of Thomas Becket.

One of the best-known martyrs in English history, Thomas Becket was a Londoner, born in 1118, the son of a Norman merchant settled there. He was educated at Merton Priory and later in London, Paris and Bologna. When he returned to England, he became a notary to a rich relation. In about 1142 he attracted the notice of Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury, and was taken into the circle of his promising young men. This was almost at the height of the anarchy during the reign of Stephen (1135–1154); it is hardly surprising that these clerks of the archbishop's household, skilled especially in Roman and canon law, engaged in endless discussions and arguments on points of law, theology and topics of the day. No doubt Becket's interest in law combined with his knowledge of what his country suffered in time of anarchy made him vigorous

in supporting the new King's administration of justice when, in 1155, Henry II appointed him Chancellor of the realm. All three playwrights ignore young Thomas's career, though Tennyson's *Becket* mentions something in a quarrel with Archbishop of York: "Roger of York, / When I and thou were youths in Theobald's house, / Twice did thy malice and thy calumnies / Exile me from the face of Theobald" (*Becket*, p. 46). Eliot tells us about Becket's origin in the first appearance of the Knights: "This is the man who was the trademan's son: the backstairs brat who was born in Cheapside" (*Murder*, p. 66). Tennyson and Fry start with Becket as Chancellor, and Tennyson, whose Becket is offered the archbishopric already in the Prologue, is especially brief. Eliot and Fry give us a picture of what the country looked like "during the reign of the late Queen Matilda and the irruption of the unhappy usurper Stephen" as the Second Knight puts it in the shocking Apology of Eliot's *Murder*. Fry imagines the land in those times to have been full of smoke and ruin, "mad and murderous, and lawless, bleeding away like raw meat" (*Curtmantle*, p. 181).

Henry II or Plantagenet (1133–1189), Fry's main and Tennyson's second main protagonist, the son of Matilda (daughter of Henry I) and of Geoffrey Plantagenet, Count of Anjou, was twenty-one when he became the first Angevin king of England and the wealthiest ruler in Europe. His extensive continental inheritance, which included Normandy, Brittany, and Anjou, was substantially enhanced by his marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine. His empire thus stretched from Scotland to the Pyrenees, or as Fry says, "from the Arctic circle to the Pyrenees". Henry received the homage of Malcolm III of Scotland, subdued the Welsh, and obtained the submission of the Irish kings. Henry dealt effectively to end the anarchy of his predecessor's reign, razing illegally built baronial castles systematically to the ground and introducing a number of remarkable legal reforms with the help of a team of able administrators headed by his Chancellor, Thomas Becket. It has already been said that Tennyson shows very little of Becket as Chancellor, and the King's trust in Becket is expressed in a strange way: Becket is given a chart of the King's mistress Rosamund's bower and made to promise to look after her. Eliot and Fry give us a great deal here — Eliot through the speeches of the First Priest ("I saw him as Chancellor, flattered by the King", p. 28), Thomas himself ("I was the King, his arm, his better reason", p. 40), the First Tempter and later again in the Apology of the Knights. Fry devotes over half of the first act to Becket-Chancellor, so we learn gradually about the period of "wit and wine and wisdom" (*Murder*, p. 84).

Henry's wife, Eleanor, has an important part in both Tennyson's and Fry's plays; Eliot leaves her out completely. In Tennyson there is no suggestion of love between Eleanor and Henry: she aims at finishing with Rosamund and later with Becket too, as the latter mars her wicked plans. Rosamund de Clifford, according to a late tradition or legend, was a beautiful mistress of Henry II, kept by him in a secret bower; there she was discovered by Queen Eleanor and offered the alternatives of poison or dagger, and it is said she chose the former. In

Tennyson's version she is given yet another possibility — to marry one of the King's men and Eleanor's yesman, one of Becket's murderers, Reginald Fitz Urse. Fry does mention Rosamund too, though he scarcely gives her more than one line. Eleanor is an intelligent wife before the split, a cautious mother and tolerant queen. Henry, Becket and Eleanor are seen as equally compelling figures here:

ELEANOR. Let me say this to the man who makes the world –
 And also to the man who makes himself the Church.
 Consider complexity, delight in difference.
 Fear, for God's sake, your exact words.
 Do you think you can draw lines on the living water?
 Together we might make a world of progress.
 Between us, by our three variants of human nature,
 You and Becket and me, we could be
 The complete reaching forward (*Curtmantle*, p. 226)

All three playwrights comment on Henry's desire for a secure Plantagenet empire. Fry stresses the "endless tramping up and down" and across the Channel with the whole court to show the King's interest in his kingdom, where "the King's peace is holding secure" (*Curtmantle*, p. 190).

The Church courts and the privileges of the clergy, however, remained an exception to the growing rule of law as emanating from the King. The separation of the lay and ecclesiastical courts introduced by William I (The Conqueror) needed more definition. The Church claimed more and more cases as belonging to them, which, of course, started during the previous reign of King Stephen, when all law was, if not in abeyance, highly unreliable. They claimed the exclusive right to punish the criminal clergy. They could not inflict the death penalty and they seldom exercised their right to imprison (prisons cost money). So penance and, more severely, degradation were the usual penalties. Consequently, a cleric who committed a murder and was convicted in a Church court was left virtually unpunished for it, compared, at least, to what a layman would have suffered for such a crime. When many clerks or lower clergy were men with little education and moral standards no higher than laymen of their type, scandals were frequent. Here both Tennyson and Fry give us examples of criminal churchmen: Tennyson's Henry complains about a cleric who "lately poisoned his own mother, / And being brought before the courts of the Church, / They but degraded him. I hope they whipt him. / I would have hang'd him" (*Becket*, p. 2). Fry's Henry puts it more bluntly: "The reverend Canon of rape and murder, who thinks / Because they shaved his head in a holy circle / He can grow the hair of an ape on his breast and his genitals. / He thinks he has the divine right / To cut throats and not hang for it" (*Curtmantle*, p. 192). Henry II was anxious to have uniform, secular authority in matters of justice established over the whole country, and he was determined to exert more control over the Church, which acquired considerable power and wealth during the anarchy

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ELEANOR. It's as well that there should be someone in this country
To undertake chastity for the King. (*Curtmantle*, p. 191)

All the authorities also agree that Becket was most reluctant to become the successor of Theobald; he even warned the King saying that as Archbishop he would have other loyalties that might bring him into opposition to the King. For Eliot this is not vital. Tennyson and Fry, however, deal with Becket's doubts and hesitations in this matter quite thoroughly. Nevertheless, expressly at Henry's wish, Becket was elected to the See of Canterbury in 1162. He insisted, however, on relinquishing his Chancellorship. Interestingly enough, it is Tennyson this time who does not mention anything of the kind. Henry's original plan had, apparently, been different; he wanted to unite the offices of Chancellor and Archbishop. Both Eliot and Fry incorporate this faithfully. Eliot's Second Tempter rebukes Becket for having resigned the Chancellorship on becoming Archbishop and similarly the Second Knight (there are clear parallels between the four Tempters and four Knights), in his final apologetic speech, considers it a grave mistake. Fry's Becket reasons that the French king (Louis VII) tried to do the same thing which did not work.

As Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Becket immediately became a champion of ecclesiastical claims and led an exemplary life. In Tennyson's Becket you are not aware of any change but one must take into account that Tennyson does not devote to Becket-Chancellor much time. Both Eliot and Fry comment on it several times, Eliot again through the Temptations and the Apology of the Knights, where most historical facts can be found in the play. In Fry's drama Eleanor is the first to notice the sudden change in Becket: "And you have lost / Your genius for life, that ready sense of the world" (*Curtmantle*, p. 216). Fry's Becket-Archbishop is no longer a witty confidant and he seems nothing but an instrument of the Church, its "tongue" to be "used in argument" between the State and the Church. Henry, provoked by several errors of justice in the church courts, claimed the right to punish clerical criminals after they had been tried and degraded by their bishop's court. Becket opposed this. No one, he said, should be punished twice for the same offence: to unfrock a priest and then to hang him was to punish him twice. At the Council of Westminster (October 1163), where this was discussed, Becket persuaded the bishops to refuse their consent, although he and the rest agreed to a pledge that the clergy would observe in all things the royal customs — but with the meaningful addition of "saving our order". Later (in December of the same year), having failed to obtain positive support from the Pope and his fellow bishops for the conflict ahead, Becket gave way. Henry, however, drew up a statement of some sixteen points to define exactly the relations between Church and State. These were the famous "Constitutions" which he presented for acceptance at Clarendon in 1164. Becket opposed again, though after much pressure he verbally yielded — for which he was immediately to reproach himself in penance — but refused to seal the document. The quarrel broke out again.

For Eliot all of those “meetings accepted, meetings refused, / Meetings un-ended or endless” (*Murder*, p. 25) are unimportant and he also refers to them as “old disputes”. He gives us some geographic names, though, e. g. Clarendon, Northampton, Montmirail. Eliot’s Third Tempter suggests an alliance between barons and Becket, “a happy coalition of intelligent interests” aiming at the end of “the tyrannous jurisdiction / Of king’s court over bishop’s court, / Of king’s court over baron’s court” (*Murder*, p. 43), which may be regarded as one of Eliot’s glimpses into the future, too; it makes one think of the Magna Carta. Eliot would do this occasionally and it may be interesting to discuss it later. In the Knights’ Apology Becket is accused of “first making, then breaking” the King’s order he helped establish. Tennyson and Fry are more interested in this, though both of them sum up the quarrels more or less and present one big scene, at the Council of Northampton (October 1164). Here the King openly proceeded against Becket on various charges from the time of his Chancellorship. In Tennyson, the Archbishop of York and bishops are very much against Becket at the court, taking sides with the King. Fry’s bishops support Becket first, while later they beg him to be moderate, fearing the King’s anger. Both Tennyson and Fry use an episode in which Becket, bearing his cross before him as a protection, denied that the king in council had any right to judge him. The Archbishop was fined and the decision to imprison him taken, but Becket was too quick. He fled by night to the Continent in disguise and eventually found refuge in the Cistercian Abbey of Pontigny. For some years Henry and Becket remained in feud, each manoeuvring for whatever continental support he was able to command or inveigle (support from the Pope, Alexander III, and the French King, Louis VII). A reconciliation might have been effected at Montmirail in 1169, and again at Montmartre later in the same year: at the former Becket would not forgo the formulas “salvo honore Dei” and “salvo ordine suo”, at the latter Henry could not bring himself to give the kiss of peace. Tennyson includes the meeting of the kings (Henry II and Louis VII) at Montmirail where Becket’s “saving God’s honour” is regarded as “a shift, a trick” by Henry. Fry has just one final reconciliation before Becket’s return to Canterbury.

A new and more dangerous quarrel erupted when Henry insisted on having his son and heir, the young Henry, crowned by the Archbishop of York, assisted by the Bishops of London and Salisbury. It had, however, from time immemorial, been claimed as the right of the See of Canterbury to crown the Kings of England. Becket instantly suspended the Archbishop of York and the bishops. Then there was another meeting and a reconciliation at Fréteval (July 1170). This was “a patched up affair” , as Eliot puts it, but probably both antagonists welcomed a truce. Becket certainly wanted to return to England, although it seems well attested that he knew he was going to England to die. All three playwrights refer to this incident. Tennyson’s Henry promises Becket the kiss of peace on English ground, which makes Becket reveal his premonition:

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BECKET. I fear, my liege, we may not meet in England.

HENRY. How, do you make me a traitor?

BECKET. No, indeed! That be far from thee. (*Becket*, p. 142)

Fry's Becket believes the King will accompany him to England:

HENRY. I can't come yet.

A little time will be yours to find your place again.

BECKET. This isn't the homecoming I expected.

HENRY. Your old weakness for riding in triumph, Becket.

I have to disappoint you. But if we go on soberly

The day for redeeming the past won't be far off.

BECKET. I pray it may come. But looking towards England now

Something tells me I am parting from you

As one you may see no more in this life.

HENRY. Heaven forgive us, do you think I intend

Any treachery to you?

BECKET. May it be a long way from your wish. (*Curtmantle*, p. 247)

In Eliot's *Murder* this is reported by the Messenger, who informs the priests before Becket's return to Canterbury:

MESSENGER Peace, but not the kiss of peace.

.....

If you ask my opinion, I think that this peace

Is nothing like an end, or like a beginning.

It is common knowledge that when the Archbishop

Parted from the King, he said to the King,

My Lord, he said, I leave you as a man

Whom in this life I shall not see again.

I have this, I assure you, on the highest authority:

There are several opinions as to what he meant,

But no one considers it a happy prognostic. (*Murder*, p. 27)

Thomas Becket reached Canterbury in time to preach his Christmas sermon for the year 1170. On Christmas Day he used his pulpit to denounce and excommunicate his enemies. In Normandy Henry received the suspended bishops of York, London and Salisbury. The King in his fury uttered words which were enough to set four knights of his household on the way to England. The King's messenger failed to overtake Reginald Fitz Urse, William de Tracy, Hugh de Morville and Richard Brito before they had broken into Canterbury cathedral and murdered the Archbishop (on 29 December 1170). Tennyson gives us almost every detail of this in the last scene of Act V: the King's furious words, the unnoticed disappearance of four of his men (nobody is sent after them here), the four barons' arrival at Canterbury and their rude demands for the immediate absolution of the bishops the Archbishop excommunicated. When Becket rejects, saying it is now a matter for the Pope, they withdraw to arm themselves. John of Salisbury, Becket's friend, and some monks fail to persuade him to hide himself, so when the barons come back again, Becket is prepared for death. Tennyson would not leave out one of the most touching incidents, as Eliot did — an elderly monk, Edward Grim, raises his arm to protect the Archbishop's

head from the first sword-trust of Reginald Fitz Urse, and it was sliced through. When the knights accomplish their deed, they leave the precincts shouting that they are the King's men.

It is no concern of Eliot to individualize the Knights. They are but four mouths for one intent — punishment of the Archbishop, who, in their opinion, has betrayed the King. In their exchange of words with Thomas, Eliot recapitulates the main arguments of Henry and Thomas. When Becket gives them his final answer that he has no longer the power to cancel the bishops' suspension, they close the episode with the following line: "We come for the King's justice, we come with swords" (*Murder*, p. 78). Then they come again, "slightly tipsy", and kill the Archbishop, while the Chorus suffers and expresses its consciousness of all-pervading evil. But the play is not over yet; the Knights come forward and offer their apologies, they refer to "fair play" and want everyone to "hear both sides of the case". The Second and the Fourth Knight put the historical situation with such fairness that many modern historians would agree with them.

Fry is more interested in Henry than Becket. When the four men leave to do the King's bidding after his unfortunate words "Who will get rid of this turbulent priest for me?! Are you all such feeble lovers of the kingdom?" (*Curtmantle*, p. 249), Henry realizes what they are after and immediately orders them to be stopped:

HENRY. Get after them. Marshal; set men riding
On every road to the coast, search every port
And ship, and bring the lunatics back
If you kill your horses! (*Curtmantle*, p. 250)

A messenger wordlessly confirms Henry's worst expectations.

The great poets of the nineteenth century failed to revive poetic drama and Tennyson was no exception, although his *Becket* (1879, finally produced in 1893) was originally a thrilling success (which was due to a combination of the author's poetic fame and the equally popular acting of Henry Irving as Becket and Ellen Terry in the role of Rosamund). Tennyson, like many others before him, tried to imitate Shakespearean tragedy in every respect. He used the typical five acts, and a chronicle structure. The main plot is determined by the familiar facts of history, where the murder of the Archbishop forms the necessary catastrophe. There is a sentimental sub-plot worked up between Henry and Rosamund, who was either his former wife or mistress (Tennyson leaves this a mystery), but definitely his true love for ever (in accordance with Victorian beliefs it is strongly suggested that it is now a chaste love, in view of his being officially married to Eleanor). Queen Eleanor is a typical villainess. Tennyson tried to present his hero as a spiritual man, but he did not succeed very well. His Becket is proud and wilful, far from being a martyr or saint. Moreover, he is put into a very false position: the Archbishop of Canterbury becomes Warden of the King's Mistress. Becket is even permitted to save Rosamund from death at the

point of Queen Eleanor's dagger, and Rosamund is seen kneeling next to the murdered Becket in the very last scene of the tragedy. This is a kind of melodrama, a piece of falsified history, even if in other places Tennyson brought to his drama much of a historian's approach, and certain scenes are skilfully dramatized historical episodes. Following Shakespeare's model much more closely than his predecessors, Tennyson introduces an immense cast of characters: all classes of society are included in the play, from king to beggar. Of course, the lower orders speak a kind of comic prose, while the more serious characters of higher rank speak in blank verse.

T. S. Eliot accepted the commission to write a play for the Canterbury Festival of June 1935 and so his most assured dramatic success came into being. Starting from a revitalising of the rhythm and idiom of dramatic poetry, Eliot was able to write a play in verse that was not only successful in itself but also capable of initiating a revival of poetic drama. *Murder in the Cathedral* is a religious play, not because it is about an Archbishop who is killed, but because it is about man's relationship to God. It has a very limited plot, as Eliot himself admits in his *Poetry and Drama*: Becket returns to Canterbury, foresees that he will be murdered, and is murdered. There is a strict, almost geometric, structure; the suppression of names and the substitution of numbers for the Priests, Tempters and Knights reinforce this pattern. The form reminds us of a Greek tragedy, as the play is essentially a series of episodes linked by choral odes. The Chorus is represented by the poor Women of Canterbury, who seem to feel helpless at first without their kind Archbishop; later they get more involved because they know and fear that something is going to happen, and finally they suffer, so they participate in the action. The play is divided into two parts. The Interlude between them takes the form of the sermon preached by Thomas on Christmas morning, 1170. It is, actually, his answer to the Four Temptations, and forms a kind of anticlimax. The murder of Thomas Becket towards the end of Part II is followed by the unexpected and surprising Apology of the Knights. They suddenly turn a theatre into a political meeting and address their audience or readers in a colloquial twentieth century style. Finally there is the closing choric passage with *Te Deum* sung in the background, which regains for the play the serious spiritual atmosphere. Because he was not writing a loose chronicle play in the pseudo-Shakespearean style of Tennyson's play about Becket, Eliot offers little about the Constitutions of Clarendon or the disputed coronation ceremony, which were the chief bones of contention between Becket, Henry and their continental supporters. But there is everything we need to know. Sometimes there is even more, because Eliot informs us about such things as the King's end ("To be master or servant within an hour,/ This is the course of temporal power,/ The Old King shall know it, when at last breath,/ No sons, no empire, he bites broken teeth" p. 46), the Magna Carta, and the Reformation, when all the shrines in England will be pillaged (as they were) and St.

Thomas will dwindle to a figure “who played a certain part in history”. In this way Eliot is solving a problem in the twentieth-century audience relationship.

Christopher Fry's *Curtmantle* had its world premiere at the 1962 Edinburgh Festival. Fry's plan was to explore the character of Henry II (who was nicknamed Curtmantle because of the plain short cloak he wore). Fry also stresses the theme of law: in Henry's attempt to impose a unity upon the “interplay of different laws: civil, canon, moral, aesthetic and the laws of God”, Fry mentions in his Foreword, he (Henry) is opposed by Becket, then by Eleanor, and finally by his rebellious sons. The tragedy is a three-act affair, with a prologue, which shows us a camp of the King's followers and servants commenting on the King's love of law and. chatting happily with a visitor looking for the King. They grumble when they are ordered to break up the camp in the middle of the night, though they seem used to it, and one of them remarks: “If a man can't have his lawful sleep to hell with the law”. The Prologue ends with the visitor's laments: “Where is the King? Where shall I find the King? A law that's just and merciful!” This exclamation presents the theme of the whole play. The first act, covering the years from 1158 to 1163, initiates the struggle between Henry and Becket. In the second act, spanning the years from 1163 to 1170, all the characters suffer in different ways the impending death of Becket. At court Becket is made scapegoat, but Becket's murder is not performed on the stage, it is just reported. The third act covers the period from 1174–89. It begins with Henry's penance at Canterbury and finishes at Le Mans, the King's birthplace, where he is struck down by a serious illness after several successive defeats. He manages to grant the demands of his treacherous sons and dies, his helpless body stripped by some greedy refugees. The end reminds one strongly of Shakespeare's King Lear — the King left alone, abandoned, almost out of his mind, his kingdom divided, his children fighting one another. Fry did not want a chronicle play though he follows chronology. He wanted the stage to be William Marshal's mind, as if he was remembering the life of Henry. This is not an invented figure at all. William Marshal was 1st Earl of Pembroke and Striguil, who fought in France with Henry II and in 1170 was given charge of the young Prince Henry. He then served in the government of Richard I and was one of the chief advisers of King John. In 1216 he was appointed regent for Henry III and managed to restore order after the first Barons' War. He died in 1219. He does deserve his prominence in the play. Like the Greek Chorus, Marshal not only forwards the action but serves as the author's mouthpiece. He also represents the trusting and hopeful common man. He always speaks in prose, introduces the whole play, and while playing his part (he is one of the King's noblemen) he occasionally steps aside to comment on or explain the action. Prose is usually assigned to the low-born and verse to aristocrats. But sometimes it is reversed, e. g. in the quarrel among the princes only the illegitimate Roger speaks verse. In the last scene all the characters speak in prose.

Both Eliot and Fry treat the historical facts selectively but faithfully; Eliot presents a variety of standpoints because "history at all times draws / the strangest consequence from remotest cause" (*Murder* p. 58), Fry claims "the deviations from historical accuracy are no greater than might occur in a man's memory" (*Curtmantle*, Foreword, p. 174). Moreover, both plays justify themselves dramatically and are full of extravagant imagery and brilliant wit. Fry is an obvious disciple and admirer of Eliot, although he soon developed a style of his own, in which there is real thought and real care for the English language.

Note. Page references to the analyzed dramas concern the following editions:

ELIOT, T. S. *Murder in the Cathedral*. London: Faber and Faber, 1965

FRY, CHRISTOPHER. *Curtmantle*, in *Plays*. Oxford: OUP, 1971

TENNYSON, ALFRED. *Becket*, in *Becket and Other Plays*. London: Macmillan, 1908

