

# Becket Study Guide



---

© 2020 [eNotes.com, Inc.](http://eNotes.com) or its Licensors.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

# Table of Contents

<b><u>Summary</u></b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b><u>Themes</u></b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b><u>Characters</u></b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b><u>Critical Essays</u></b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b><u>Analysis</u></b> .....	<b>27</b>
<b><u>Teaching Guide</u></b> .....	<b>34</b>

# Summary

## Summary

King Henry is doing ritual penance for his suspected role in the assassination of Thomas à Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, formerly his friend and chancellor of England. While the king wonders aloud where their friendship went wrong, Thomas's ghostly presence appears before him, telling him to pray instead of talk. The scene then shifts to the early days of the two men's boon companionship. Henry makes an impulsive appointment of Becket to the position of chancellor, a move intended to give the king more control of a rebellious clergy. Equally mistrusted by the bishops and by the king's own henchmen, Becket nevertheless performs his duties with grace and skill, earning the grudging respect of both sides.

The king, however, fails to understand his friend's true motivations. While riding through the woods shortly after Becket's appointment as chancellor, the two are caught in a downpour. The king's questions to Becket show the king to be quite ignorant regarding his own subjects and the laws that govern them. The king then becomes enamored of the young peasant girl in the shack where they take cover. Becket pretends to want the girl for himself in order to parry the king's indiscretion. Becket soon thereafter loses his mistress to the king's misguided playfulness: The king decides that Becket should return the favor that the king granted Becket in the shack. Specifically, the king should sleep with Becket's mistress. Becket, circumspect as ever, agrees to share Gwendolen's favors in exchange for those of the peasant girl. Gwendolen stabs herself rather than sleep with the king. Henry, oblivious as ever, concludes that he has survived an assassination attempt on Gwendolen's part.

As chancellor, Becket finds himself obliged to educate and civilize the king and his henchmen-barons, instructing them in manners and in enlightened self-interest, especially when dealing with conquered enemies such as France. Becket also perceives a growing domestic threat from the British clergy. Upon learning of the death of the archbishop of Canterbury, Henry decides to move against that threat by naming his friend Becket to the post, much against Becket's wishes and better judgment. Becket, a former candidate for the priesthood, resolves to do, as usual, the best possible job of whatever is handed to him, giving away all of his possessions to the poor. The king, meanwhile, faces trouble in his household as well as in his reign. He is henpecked by his wife and mother, both of whom envy his friendship with Becket, and he is unable to control his adolescent sons.

Becket's resignation as chancellor, on the grounds that he cannot serve God and king at once, drives the king to the desperate act of plotting against Becket with Gilbert Folliot, bishop of London and chief among Becket's enemies within the church. Soon Becket, condemned on patently false charges of embezzlement and witchcraft, seeks refuge, going first to France and then as far as Rome for an audience with the pope. Becket then returns to France. The French, however, find him too worrisome a fugitive for permanent asylum. The king of France, seeking compromise, arranges for Becket to meet with King Henry on neutral ground in an effort to reconcile their differences. Both men still care about each other, but neither will abandon his principles and the meeting fails. Returning from France, knowing his life to be in danger, Becket waits at Canterbury for the inevitable, a murderous assault by the henchmen of the king. The play's final scene, replicating the first, portrays the king's ritual flagellation for his part in the assassination plot. Such penance is in fact a deft political move, defusing a revolt mounted against the king by his own sons. The king is showing, in his canny statecraft, how much he has learned from Becket. A final irony is that Becket, from the grave, manages at last to transform Henry II from a petty tribal chieftain into a true monarch.

# Summary

## Act 1

The play opens at the tomb of Becket in the Cathedral of Canterbury. King Henry II enters, removes his cape, revealing that he is naked, kneels, and begins to pray. The king is at the tomb waiting to be flogged by priests in payment for his role in the assassination of Becket, the archbishop of Canterbury. As Henry speaks, Becket appears on stage. Henry recalls earlier times when they were best friends.

The scene shifts suddenly, and it is now several years earlier. A much younger Becket, dressed as a nobleman, enters Henry's bedroom. The relationship between the two men becomes clearer here: Becket is a Saxon who has been taken into service by the king, who is Norman. Becket helps Henry dress, and the two go to the Privy Council together.

At the Privy Council, the fundamental tension between the king and the church is revealed: The clergy's refusal to pay a tax levied by the crown has brought the matter to a head. In a movement Henry believes will solidify his own power, Henry names Becket as chancellor of England. Henry, however, has forgotten that Becket is not only his friend but also an archdeacon in the church.

An argument over taxes with the archbishop of Canterbury, the bishop of Oxford, and Gilbert Folliot ensues. Becket shows his shrewdness by outmaneuvering the church representatives. He is fully Henry's man, and as he says, "My mother is England now."

In the next scene, the king and Becket are hunting. They come across a Saxon family, and Becket tries to save a young girl from Henry's lechery by saying he fancies her himself. Henry makes him promise a favor for a favor. Later that night, Henry asks for Becket's mistress, Gwendolen. Becket complies. When Gwendolen goes to the king, she kills herself. Act 1 ends with Henry sleeping in Becket's room because the suicide has frightened him. Becket closes the act with the words "But where is Becket's honor?"

## Act 2

The second act opens in a forest in France, where the English army has just won a victory against the French. As chancellor, Becket warns Henry that the clergy has gained a great deal of power in England. Soon after, a young Saxon monk from Hastings is captured with a knife. It appears that he wanted to attempt an assassination of the king. The monk reminds Becket of himself at a younger age. Meanwhile, the king receives word that the archbishop of Canterbury has died. Henry pounces on this event to name a man to this seat who he thinks is fully his man: Becket. Becket, on the other hand, is horrified. He begs the king not to make such an appointment. "This is madness, my Lord," he says, "Don't do it. I could not serve both God and you."

Becket unwillingly takes the post and undertakes a remarkable change. He gives away his worldly goods. He dresses himself in the simple attire of a poor monk with bare feet. He invites forty beggars to dinner and serves them as if they were royalty. As the act closes, Becket is at a crucifix, praying.

## Act 3

Act 3 opens with Henry in his palace accompanied by his mother and his wife. They are discussing Becket's odd behavior. An emissary arrives from Becket to return the Great Seal, the mark of the king's chancellor. Becket has chosen God over the king. In particular, he wants the men responsible for the slaying of a monk tried in the ecclesiastical court rather than the royal court. In addition, he has excommunicated the three men responsible, all friends of the king. Henry's feelings toward Becket have changed dramatically: He says that he now hates Becket. He begins plotting with Folliot against Becket.

The scene shifts to Hastings, where Folliot approaches Becket and tells him that he has been charged with fraud, perjury, and treason. Becket flees to France, where he is protected by King Louis, who only offers him safety so long as the interests of France are served. Becket travels to see the pope and asks to be relieved of his duty. He wants nothing more than to be a poor monk. After prayer, Becket understands that he has been chosen to be archbishop of Canterbury in order to defend God's honor; it is this role he must play out.

#### **Act 4**

Events reach a head in this act. King Louis of France attempts to intervene and make peace between Becket and Henry. The two men meet. It is their last meeting. Henry guarantees Becket safe passage back to England. Nevertheless, the political will not be able to consolidate power under the throne until Becket is no longer archbishop. In a famous statement to his barons, Henry cries, "Will no one rid me of him?"

The barons take him at his word. As Becket prepares to celebrate the mass in Canterbury Cathedral, a troop of Henry's henchmen approach. They assassinate both Becket and the young Saxon monk who always accompanies him.

The scene returns to Henry at Canterbury, where he has just been flogged by priests. He promises the monks that he will seek out the perpetrators of the murder and have them put to justice. The play closes with this promise from Henry, and he marches out of the cathedral triumphantly.

# Themes

## Themes: Themes and Meanings

As in his earlier *L'Alouette* (pr., pb. 1953; *The Lark*, 1955), dealing with Joan of Arc, Anouilh in *Becket* presents the life of a martyred Christian saint through the eyes of a nonbeliever, less concerned with faith than with possible human motivation. As in such reworkings of Greek myth as *Antigone* (pr. 1944; English translation, 1946), Anouilh at times departs radically from recorded historical data to present a myth applicable to his own time. By the time he came to write *Becket*, for example, Anouilh was well aware that the martyred bishop had been no Saxon, as supposed by the Romantic historian Augustin Thierry, but rather a Norman, as was Henry himself. Notwithstanding, Anouilh derives considerable rhetorical and dramatic effect in *Becket* from the political dialectic between the Norman king and the pragmatic Becket, ostensibly the compromised (and compromising) representative of the conquered Saxon people. In *Becket*, Anouilh continues an exposition begun years earlier in *Antigone*, sustained through subsequent plays, of the inevitable conflict within each individual between idealism and realism. Whereas Antigone chooses death over compromise, Thomas a Becket outlives her by many years, still in search of the "truth" that Antigone, through faith, takes for granted. Forced, by his father's collaboration with the occupant Norman forces, to improvise his values, going so far as to deny his evident love for Gwendolen in favor of his newly contracted loyalty to the crown, still improvising, Becket becomes a martyr only when, and after, his contract to defend the honor of God, as Archbishop of Canterbury, conflicts with his previously sworn loyalty to the king, causing him to return the chancellor's seal.

As elsewhere in the canon of his plays, Anouilh in *Becket* seriously questions the possibility of true friendship, let alone love. The cross-cultural love and marriage of Becket's parents, an invention borrowed from Thierry, are here presented as an unattainable ideal, contrasting sharply with Becket's loss of Gwendolen and the king's own deeply troubled union with Eleanor of Aquitaine. The two men's companionship, meanwhile, is flawed from the start, based as it is upon Henry's unquestioning admiration and Becket's deeper, if disillusioned, understanding of things as they really are.

To a considerable extent, *Becket* may be viewed and enjoyed as a "political" (if nonpartisan) play, dealing as it does with the uses and abuses of power. Becket, in his actions as in his share of the dialogue, offers a plausible model of pragmatic statesmanship, owing in large measure to his instinctive grasp of individual and group psychology. The king, as a slow but generally willing learner, affords his smarter, subtler friend ample opportunity both to expose and to test his theories. At no point, however, does the author allow content to intrude upon *Becket's* entertainment value; his realized ambition, in *Becket* as in most of his other plays, is to create playable, absorbing drama with memorable lines.

## Themes

### Friendship and Love

Anouilh explores the extent to which a friendship can be stretched, as well as what happens to the love between friends when the friendship is irrevocably over. Indeed, H. G. McIntyre argues in his book *The Theatre of Jean Anouilh* that "the play's major theme is the tragic failure of a friendship."

At the beginning of the play, Henry and Becket maintain what appears to be a close friendship. They hunt together, fight battles together, and carouse together. Yet, because of the inequality of their stations, the two men cannot maintain a friendship on equal footing. King Henry has the power both to give and to take away. Anyone daring to enter a friendship with him must consider what might happen if he were to fall out of the king's favor. For Becket, this means that he can never relax into the friendship, nor can he always trust

Henry's good will. For example, when Becket tries to save a young Saxon girl from Henry's lusty advances, Becket is forced to promise Henry a favor for a favor. Henry, in a particularly cruel act, chooses to redeem this promise by taking Becket's mistress from him.

Consequently, while the king grows in his love for Becket, Becket does not requite that love. He maintains his own council. It is this reticence that seems to infuriate and hurt the king the most. His love for Becket grows out of all proportion; and when Becket refuses to do the king's bidding, the king cannot determine his own feelings. He speaks of Becket: "A miserable wretch who ate my bread! A man I raised up from nothing! A Saxon! I loved him! Yes, I loved him! And I believe I still do!" It is as if Henry prefers a dead Becket to a Becket who will not love him back. Thus, while this is the story of one of the great friendships of history, it is also the story of one of the most disastrous instances of unrequited love in history as well.

### **Honor**

As Alba Della Fazia argues in her book *Jean Anouilh*, "Anouilh's heroes love honor not for honor's sake, but for the sake of an *idea of honor* which they have created for themselves." In no other play is this truer than in *Becket*. Early on in the play, Becket notes in several places that he is a man without honor. Indeed, act 1 closes with Becket asking perhaps the most important question in the play: "But where is Becket's honor?"

Becket finally creates an "idea of honor" when he takes on the mantle of the archbishop of Canterbury. As such, he has become God's man, rather than Henry's. In so doing, the issue of Becket's honor no longer has relevance to the man or to the play. As Becket tells Henry in the final act:

I felt for the first time that I was entrusted with something, that's all—there in that empty cathedral somewhere in France, that day when you ordered me to take up this burden. I was a man without honor. And suddenly I found it—one I never imagined would ever become mine—the honor of God. A frail incomprehensible honor, vulnerable as a boy-King fleeing from danger.

In the final analysis, what is at stake for Becket, and what he chooses to defend with his life, is not his own honor, but the honor of God. When the barons cut him down while celebrating mass, Becket dies, but the honor of God remains intact.

### **Alienation and Absurdity**

Influenced by the French existentialists, Anouilh creates Becket as a hero aware of his own existence and of the absurdity of his own situation. He is an outsider, a Saxon, alienated from power and the ruling Norman class by the accident of his birth. Moreover, he is alienated from the Saxons because, like his father, Becket works for the Normans. He is a collaborator with the conquering race, but not one of them. Early in the play, he is alienated from the church because of his close friendship with Henry and his profligate nature. Later in the play, he is alienated from both the church and from Henry because of his refusal to engage in politically expedient compromise. Becket understands clearly the absurdity of his situation; he tells Henry in act 4, "We must only do—absurdly—what we have been given to do." For Becket, the only response to his own alienation and the absurdity of existence is to do well those things he has to do. When Becket takes up protecting the honor of God as that which he must do, he does so without wavering and without compromise. He understands that it is his commitment to this task that offers the only defense to the apparent meaninglessness of the universe.

# Characters

## Characters: Characters Discussed

### Henry II

Henry II, the high-strung Norman king of England, who defines his power in terms of his relationship with his friend, adviser, and eventual adversary Thomas Becket. Henry's demeanor, as well as his age, changes as he goes from young optimistic monarch to disillusioned sovereign. Initially, he believes that all he has to do to accomplish something is to give the order and have it obeyed. This simplistic attitude changes as he discovers that vested interests are formidable bulwarks. Furthermore, people develop different priorities as circumstances change; their attitudes in life alter as their roles in life differ. Henry becomes more withdrawn and isolated; he feels deserted by everybody and realizes that he must learn to be alone. In his desperation, he cries out for others to save him, thus preparing the way for the play's ultimate tragedy.

### Thomas à Becket

Thomas à Becket, a Saxon of common birth whose love of luxury and desire to elevate himself from his despised origins lead him into a friendship with King Henry, with whom he helps pass the time drinking and wenching. Henry appoints him chancellor of England and then Archbishop of Canterbury. In doing so, he precipitates Becket's transformation from a servant of the crown to a servant of God, putting him on a collision course with the authority of the monarch. Becket regains his honor and atones for having cheated his way into the ranks of the conquerors of his people through his martyrdom.

### Gilbert Foliot

Gilbert Foliot, the bishop of London, "a thin-lipped, venomous man" who is led more by his antipathies than by his principles. Loyalty to the church proves less durable than his hatred of Becket. He is not without courage, although predisposed to believing that the interests of church and state are one, making it easy for him to become an agent for the condemnation of Becket.

### Gwendolen

Gwendolen, Becket's young Welsh mistress. He acquires her as a spoil of war, but she grows to love him. She becomes a symbol of Becket's devotion to Henry when Henry demands that she be delivered to his bed as a favor. Gwendolen goes without protest, but when Henry tries to embrace her, she commits suicide.

### The Four English Barons

The Four English Barons, whom Henry calls his "four idiots" and his "faithful hounds." Their unswerving loyalty to the crown gives him reassurance of his own worth. These men are so willing to please that they respond to the royal will even without a direct order. They symbolize the triumph of the ethical state that has no higher goal than loyalty to itself, and they serve it even should their path lead to murder.

### The Archbishop of Canterbury

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Becket's elderly predecessor, an old-time server who tries to reach an accommodation with the state by appealing to reason. When that fails, he is not above using his office to get his way. He knows that he is too old for a confrontation with the king over the issue of taxation of the church,



and he urges circumspection, hoping that Becket will, in time, prove to be an ally.

### **Louis**

Louis, king of France, “a burly man with intelligent eyes” who shows that the nature of his position is to make things as difficult for England as possible. He is not averse to becoming involved in the struggles between the English Catholic church and the state. He grants Becket his royal protection, at least until the political climate might change. Louis knows that there is no principle in politics, save inconsistency.

### **The Pope**

The Pope, a thin, fidgety, small man with a problem: He needs money but believes that if he takes it from the king of England, he cannot give support to Becket, who is fighting for the rights of the church. He wants to survive in a world of high intrigue and apparently will make any kind of deal as long as he can hold on to a good reputation.

### **Cardinal Zambelli**

Cardinal Zambelli, the swarthy and somewhat grubby adviser to the pontiff, who tells the Pope that he should play a double game: relieve Becket of his functions as primate and then immediately reappoint him, thus scoring points against both him and the king of England. In this world of high papal politics, epitomized by this cardinal and pope, everything is a game played by constantly changing rules.

### **The Queen Mother**

The Queen Mother, who believes that if her son Henry had only listened to her, he would not be in the mess he is in now.

### **The Young Queen**

The Young Queen, Henry’s wife. She is a constant object of his abuse. She is naturally disturbed that her husband prefers debauchery with his friend Becket to attending to his duties as a father and husband. In her bitterness, she becomes a nag.

### **Henry**

Henry and

### **Richard**

Richard, Henry’s young sons. He treats them with great contempt as his family generally becomes the object of his scorn and ire.

## **Characters**

### **Archbishop of Canterbury**

The archbishop of Canterbury is the highest official of the Catholic Church in England. At the time of the play, the archbishop and Henry are engaged in a struggle for power. At issue is who will have authority over England: the king or the church. Ironically, the most important action undertaken by the archbishop of Canterbury is dying. His death opens the way for Henry to appoint Becket to this position, thus setting the

tragedy in motion.

### **Thomas Becket**

Thomas Becket is first the king's friend, later the king's chancellor, and finally God's archbishop of Canterbury. In a historical inaccuracy, Anouilh has written Becket as a Saxon, a member of the subjugated English race conquered by the Normans. Thus, although Becket is a close personal friend of the king's and his most trusted adviser, he is not of the same race as the king. Much of the tension in the play is derived from Becket's role as a collaborator with the Normans.

In the early acts of the play, Becket is unemotional and detached. He prides himself on doing what needs to be done well. He does not consider himself, however, to be a man of honor. In spite of his self-analysis, he reveals himself to be more moral than he will admit. When a young monk tries to murder the king, Becket saves the monk before he can commit treason. He also protects a young Saxon girl from Henry's lust. This action costs him his own mistress.

Although Becket is ambitious, he begs Henry not to name him as archbishop of Canterbury. By taking on this role, Becket finds the honor that has so long eluded him. In the final scenes of the play, it is clear that Becket will sacrifice his own life in order to uphold God's honor. He dies at the hands of Henry's barons as he celebrates mass, refusing to protect himself in any way.

### **Gilbert Folliot**

Gilbert Folliot is an important cleric and a strong opponent of Thomas Becket. When the archbishop of Canterbury dies, Folliot is the likely successor; Henry's appointment of Becket seals Folliot's hatred of the man. He becomes bishop of London soon after Becket's appointment, and from this position of power he negotiates with the pope on Henry's behalf. Historically, Folliot was excommunicated for his role in Becket's murder, although he was later absolved.

### **Gwendolen**

Gwendolen is Becket's mistress when the play opens. She is Welsh and a self-described "war captive." Like the Saxons, the Welsh have been defeated by the Normans. Gwendolen clearly loves Becket, however. Her trust is betrayed when Becket gives her to Henry according to the terms of a bargain he made earlier to save the young Saxon girl. Gwendolen appears to be composed about the matter; however, she commits suicide with a knife when Henry leads her to his bed.

### **King Henry II**

King Henry II is the ruler of England. In order to attain the throne, he has had to use all his political wiles to unite various factions in England. He is alternately ruthless, fun loving, politically savvy, and easily led. The play demonstrates Henry's maneuvering to move power and money from the Catholic Church to the royal court. Moreover, he seems to have little regard for the people he rules; as a Norman, he has nothing but disdain for the subjugated Saxons. He is a French speaker, whereas his people speak Anglo-Saxon. Nevertheless, he has taken a young Saxon, Thomas Becket, as his chief adviser.

In the opening scenes, Henry demonstrates his lust, his temper, and his willingness to be led by Becket's advice. He also proves himself to be a man of great appetites: He is a womanizer, a drinker, and a passionate friend. Henry never forgets that he is king, however; in a crucial scene, he takes Becket's mistress from him, merely to show Becket that he can.

Becket's defection to the church causes Henry great anguish. As a character, he seems utterly alone after the break between the two men. Indeed, Henry reveals the extent to which he will go to consolidate royal power: He encourages his barons to rid him of Becket, which they do through assassination. Henry grows throughout the play from a rogue to a jaded king, willing to sacrifice his friendship, his love, and his heart for control of

England.

**King Louis**

King Louis of France is Henry II's chief political enemy in Europe. In the play, Louis offers Becket sanctuary but subsequently sends him home to England when it becomes politically expedient to do so.

**Monk**

The monk is a young Saxon man bent on killing the king with a small knife. Becket intercepts him before he is able to do so. The Monk reminds Becket of himself as a much younger man, and he arranges for the boy to be sent back to Hastings. Eventually, the monk becomes Becket's only servant and waits upon him as he prepares the Eucharist for the final mass. The boy dies with Becket under an assassin's blade.

**The Pope**

The pope is the head of the Catholic Church. He is also involved in the political intrigues of all the courts of Europe. Like King Louis, he is willing to use Becket for his own political advantage.

**The Queen**

The queen is Henry's wife. Although Anouilh chooses not to give her a name other than "The Queen," historically she is Eleanor of Aquitaine, a very powerful and wealthy member of the French nobility. In this play, she is portrayed as an ineffectual, nagging wife, jealous of her husband's infidelities and especially jealous of his relationship with Becket.

# Critical Essays

## Critical Essays: Critical Context

Among Anouilh's best-known dramatic efforts, *Becket* was written at the approximate midpoint of a distinguished, sometimes controversial, dramatic career that spanned more than fifty years. Arguably the most "theatrical" French playwright of the mid-twentieth century, Anouilh had long since shunned the traditional classifications of "comedy" and "tragedy," preferring such personal terminology as "black" plays (*Le Voyageur sans bagage*, pr., pb. 1937; *Traveller Without Luggage*, 1959; *Antigone*), "pink" plays (*L'Invitation au chateau*, pr. 1947; *Ring Round the Moon*, 1950), "grating" plays (*La Valse des toreadors*, pr., pb. 1952; *Waltz of the Toreadors*, 1953), and "costume" plays such as *The Lark* and *Becket*. Indeed, many of the "black" plays contain elements of comedy, just as the "pink" plays bear tragic undertones to complement their comic surface. *Becket*, perhaps the most successful of Anouilh's historical plays, combines tragic and comic elements in approximately equal balance, barely avoiding melodrama in such scenes as that of Gwendolen's death. As a product of the author's full maturity, preceded by several lesser efforts, *Becket* displays a sureness of touch and a depth of vision absent from such earlier efforts as *Antigone*; at the same time, its monumental scope and glossy surface relate it closely to the commercial or boulevard theater that Anouilh had long been accused of courting, especially by those critics who preferred to see him as a literary playwright.

Formed in the artistic French dramatic climate of the 1930's, Jean Anouilh tended to write memorable, thought-provoking dialogue, all the while eschewing other literary forms and professing his own inability "to write." Perhaps inevitably, his thoughtful, literate (if not literary) dialogue would invite comparison with that of such recognized thinker-playwrights as Albert Camus and especially Jean-Paul Sartre, professional men-of-letters who turned to the theater for the illustration of ideas already expressed in other literary forms. Anouilh, whose greatest successes derived from intrinsic theatricality rather than from specific content, no doubt felt miscast in such company—and with good reason. As a traditional dramatist, heir apparent to Jean Giraudoux, he also disliked (and frequently parodied) the absurdist current of drama that surfaced during the 1950's with the works of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Arthur Adamov. Indeed, Anouilh's "costume" plays, performed after the initial successes of what Martin Esslin termed the Theater of the Absurd, may be seen as a reassertion of traditional dramatic values, an attempt to prove that the dramatic conventions established by previous generations were still both viable and workable. Unfortunately, such efforts would inevitably provoke critical accusations of crowd-pleasing commercialism.

The life and death of Thomas a Becket have often tempted playwrights, most notably T.S. Eliot, whose *Murder in the Cathedral* (pr., pb. 1935) is still frequently performed. Eliot's, however, is emphatically a believer's play, stressing theological debate. Anouilh, well acquainted with Eliot's play, attempted some twenty-five years later to expand the scope of Eliot's inquiry, opening the exposition to include not only the outdoors but also the full scope of Occidental history. Whereas for Eliot, Becket's life was exemplary and inspirational, for Anouilh it was legendary and symbolic, illustrative of problems that continue to perplex the human race.

Like Camus in his *Caligula* (pb. 1944; English translation, 1948), Anouilh perceived in the historical figure of Becket the true stuff of legend, subject to the same kind of interpretation that he himself had performed some fifteen years earlier in *Antigone*, following a path well-worn by older French playwrights who had sought in Greek mythology parallels to contemporary problems. Anouilh's Becket, accordingly, is very much a model hero for the late twentieth century, unwilling or unable to believe in a higher power, yet constantly in search of values that might lead him to himself.

## Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation

As in his earlier *L'Alouette* (1953; *The Lark*, 1955), about Joan of Arc, Anouilh, in *Becket*, treats the life and death of a martyred Christian saint through the eyes of a nonbeliever who is less concerned with faith than with human character and motivation. What matters to Anouilh is the legendary figure of Becket as recalled and reconstructed over the centuries in history and literature. As had the Greek myth that he had exploited earlier in his *Antigone* (1944; English translation, 1946), the lives of the saints provided context for psychological and social commentary. What Anouilh does in *Becket* is demystify the saint under consideration, presenting him to the audience in straightforward human terms.

The legend of Thomas à Becket has appealed frequently to playwrights, most notably T. S. Eliot, whose *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) is often revived. Eliot's play, however, takes the point of view of a believer, with emphasis on theological debate. Anouilh, well acquainted with Eliot's version, attempted some twenty-five years later to expand the scope of Eliot's inquiry, opening the exposition to include not only the outdoors (through the use of costly stage sets) but also a full range of European history and politics. For Eliot, Thomas's life is exemplary and inspirational; for Anouilh, it is legendary and symbolic, illustrative of problems that continue to plague the human race. Borrowing freely from the conventions of murder mystery, spy fiction, and broad political satire, as well as from cinematic technique, Anouilh creates in *Becket* a highly convincing and entertaining portrayal of a close friendship in decline. The text of *Becket* often reads more like a screenplay than a stage play, with frequent flashbacks, rapid scene changes, and highly specific instructions about how a particular line is to be delivered. A 1964 film version, featuring Richard Burton as Becket and Peter O'Toole as the king, was extremely faithful to the text and remained in circulation for years afterward. By the time he addresses himself to Becket, Anouilh is well aware that the martyred bishop was no Saxon, as supposed by the historian Augustin Thierry (1795-1856), whose works Anouilh had read as a boy, but rather a Norman like the king himself. Thus deprived of a possible dramatic theme, Anouilh, in *Becket*, derives considerable rhetorical and dramatic effect at the level of character from the political interplay between the king and the pragmatic Becket (who does not, in fact, represent the compromising spirit of the conquered Saxon people). Inner-directed, secretive, at times seemingly heartless, Anouilh's Thomas is a shrewd political manipulator, yet it is impossible for him to believe in anything except the strict code of personal conduct that somehow, until the end, ensures his survival. In *Becket*, Anouilh continues an exposition, begun before *Antigone* and sustained through subsequent plays, of the inevitable conflict between idealism and realism. Antigone chooses death over compromise, but Thomas is a survivor, an unlikely candidate, until his last principled stand, for martyrdom. Forced, by his father's supposed collaboration with the occupying Norman army, to invent his own values, Thomas goes even so far as to deny his evident love for the unfortunate Gwendolen in favor of his newly contracted loyalty to the king. Still improvising, Becket becomes a martyr only when his contract to defend the "honor of God" as archbishop conflicts with his previously sworn loyalty to the king.

Fifteen years after the first performances of *Antigone* and the subsequent liberation of France by Allied forces, the divided moral choices of World War II were still quite fresh in Anouilh's memory. No doubt he had also not forgotten the accusations of political ambiguity that had been leveled against *Antigone*. Thomas, at least as much a pragmatist as Antigone's antagonist, Creon, emerges as a more affirmative character than Creon or Antigone. Thomas substitutes in all of his actions an aesthetic standard for the religious conviction that he lacks. Even at the end, for Anouilh's Thomas, certain actions are simply more beautiful or appropriate than others. He shows, for example, an instinctive feel for the uses and abuses of political power, based upon his grasp of individual and group psychology. The king, a slow but generally receptive learner until the friendship goes sour, allows his cleverer, subtler friend ample opportunity to explain and to test his theories. At no point, however, does Anouilh allow content to intrude upon the play's intended entertainment value. His realized ambition, in *Becket* as in most of his other plays, is the creation of a playable, engrossing drama with a number of memorable lines and scenes.

Among Anouilh's best-known dramatic efforts (although expensive to mount and therefore seldom revived in production), *Becket* was written at the approximate midpoint of a distinguished, sometimes controversial dramatic career spanning more than fifty years and nearly as many plays. Among French playwrights of his generation, Anouilh is perhaps the most concerned with great theater rather than great ideas or great experiments. He shunned, however, such traditional classifications as comedy and tragedy, preferring to label his plays as black, pink, or grating, the last designed to set one's teeth on edge. Another of Anouilh's classifications is costume plays such as *Becket* and *The Lark*.

Many of the black plays are rich in comic elements, just as most pink plays carry tragic undertones beneath a comic surface. *Becket*, perhaps the most accomplished of the costume plays, combines comic and tragic elements in approximately equal portion, steering clear of melodrama in such scenes as that of Gwendolen's suicide. As a product of the author's full maturity, preceded by several lesser efforts, *Becket* displays a sure touch and a depth of vision absent from such earlier efforts as *Antigone*. At the same time, its monumental scope and glossy surface relate it closely to the commercial theater that Anouilh had long been accused of courting, especially by those who preferred to see him as a literary playwright. As Albert Camus had in his *Caligula*, Anouilh found in Becket a legendary historical figure subject to interpretation. Anouilh, following the lead of Jean Giraudoux and other French playwrights, found in classical mythology a rich context for the analysis of contemporary problems. Anouilh's Thomas emerges as a model hero for the latter half of the twentieth century. Unable or unwilling to believe in a higher power, Becket constantly improvises in search of values that might lead him toward himself.

## Criticism: The Becket Plays: Eliot, Fry, and Anouilh

Within the last three decades the martyrdom of Thomas Becket has furnished dramatic material for notable plays of T. S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, and Jean Anouilh. *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and all of Fry's work including *Curtmantle* (1961) stem directly from Eliot's determination to have a poetic drama. Although Anouilh's play *Becket, or the Honor of God* (1961) owes little or nothing to Eliot or a theory of poetic drama, all three writers have dissociated themselves from modern realism. As Francis Fergusson has said in another context, they use the stage, the characters, and the story to demonstrate an idea which they take to be the undiscussible truth. Eliot takes dramatic root in classical Greek and medieval morality plays, the Elizabethans and metaphysicals. Fry is distinctly Shavian, and Anouilh has singled out a performance of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* for its seminal impact on his work. Just as significant is the fact that although both *Murder* and *Curtmantle* are the culminations of a long and publicly debated process of theory and experimentation, they are apparently both dead-ends. Eliot never again used either a martyrdom or such a dazzling array of verse so prominently. Fry's play—which appeared after a “crisis of confidence” lasting nine years—may have ended his playwriting career. Anouilh's *Becket*, on the other hand, is still another illustration of human alienation from a sterile universe but one presenting a more mature, positive hero than had his earlier plays.

It could be said that Eliot's construction is focused and ritualistic, Fry's is panoramic and historical, and Anouilh's is musical and choreographic. This convenient scheme, which is useful if not applied too arbitrarily, would place *Murder* in a “theater of ideas,” *Curtmantle* in a “theater of characters,” and *Becket* in a “theater of situations.” However, Eliot and Fry are both Christian. In agreeing to accept a being prior to existence, they seem less existentialist than Anouilh, Sartre, and their French contemporaries. Like Becket, Anouilh's protagonists refuse to accept any standards other than those they adopt for themselves. “I was a man without honor,” Anouilh's Becket tells Henry. “And suddenly I found it . . . the honor of God. A frail, incomprehensible honor.” But when Becket says in *Curtmantle*, “What a man is precedes experience,” he speaks for Fry who has attacked Sartre's existentialism in a recent letter: “In the main I find that kind as full of holes as a cullinder.” Even those of Fry's characters who have no insight into mystery are true children of life, differing from his heroes only in their lack of perception, O. Mandel points out. Not nature but human

nature is chaotic, splitting the reason away from the emotions. As Dynamene says in *A Phoenix Too Frequent*, “When the thoughts are alert for life, the instincts rage for destruction.” Man is responsible for accepting life, not for imposing his moral standards on it.

On the other hand Fry rejects Eliot’s contention that human nature shares in the evil which befell all nature after the Fall, an idea stressed in *Murder* by the chorus:

We are soiled by a filth that we cannot clean, united to supernatural vermin  
It is not we alone, it is not the house, it is not the city that is defiled,  
But the world that is wholly foul.

Fry sees evil as a consequence of man’s consciousness that he must die and love for life the supreme good. “Dear Christ,” Henry muses, “the day that any man would dread / Is when life goes separate from the man.” Thus he necessarily emphasizes vices and shortcomings rather than active evil in his protagonists. Eliot has made his position clear in his 1930 essay on Baudelaire. Striking out at the “Life-Forcers” for their failure to show much concern for the letter, he insists that the spirit is not enough. “A Christian martyrdom is no accident. . . . A martyr, a saint, is always made by the design of God,” Thomas preaches. Only a formal religion can provide a necessary moral and ethical order (although Eliot’s orthodoxy mellowed later).

Their thematic differences also extend into character. In Fry’s Henry the flaw is not a lack of heroism but too much of it, the king “not content to be one man, and not the human race.” A childish fascination with power obsesses Anouilh’s Henry, balanced by the obsession with honor which dominates Becket. Although different from Eliot’s, as J. Dierickx says, Anouilh’s theater elevates characters “whose isolation is the result of some mysterious election, some disturbing vocation—for purity if not for sainthood.” The French existentialists usually set their heroes far above the inferior spiritual position of the placid, self-satisfied bourgeois. This pattern resembles the opposition of Understanding Hero-Blind Chorus which Dierickx sees as a familiar theme in Eliot’s work. But in Eliot an implacable, nearly immobile fixation on the eternal is embodied in his saint who “no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of martyrdom.” While the title character in Anouilh’s *Becket* (as in nearly all his plays) rejects the compromises of life in favor of an aesthetic ideal of purity, Fry’s antagonists become embodiments of a historical dialectic. Eleanor tells Henry and Thomas,

Together, we might have made a world of progress  
Between us, by our three variants of human nature,  
You and Becket and me, we could have been  
The complete reaching forward.

Eliot’s Becket, however, moves and does not move—through a spiritual dialectic which resembles but is not part of the changes in the human soul, earthly governments, and the seasons. If Eliot’s play ends in the exaltation which the Chorus shares by its recognition and acceptance of the meaning of Becket’s death and beatification, *Curtmantle* climaxes in the terror of the destruction of Henry’s realm and family, pity for his tortured and defiled body, and tragic enlightenment. His retainer Marshal terms him “a man / Who had gone through life saving up all passion / To spend at last on his own downfall.” Anouilh’s *Becket*, rather, ends with the ironic compromise, the final union of the king’s and God’s honor which renders both meaningless and worthless. “The honor of God,” Henry cynically observes, “is a very good thing, and taken all in all, one gains by having it on one’s side.” Unlike Anouilh, neither Fry nor Eliot is very interested in rationalizing Thomas’s motives for resisting Henry. Near the beginnings of *Murder* and *Curtmantle*, both of them clarify the issues, though Eliot’s concept of varieties of sin in conflict with good is replaced in Fry with a superhuman contest involving “the interplay of different laws,” political and spiritual. Anouilh’s Becket, however, carries on an incessant game of aspiration: “We must only do—absurdly—what we have been given to do—right to the end.” He frankly rejects any conception of an orderly spiritual structure within the

universe and insists on an almost romantic testing of his consciousness on his pulses.

Turning to the plays in question, an idea or more precisely, an intuition prior to perception, dominates Eliot's play. *Murder* yokes the metaphysical concreteness of verse to an idealized Christian theology, setting forth the martyrdom of a saint for the spiritual refreshment of a saving remnant. With the deliberateness of ritual and the elegance of dance, Thomas Becket fulfills his destiny in terms of divine, human, and natural phases. The precise approaches of the four Tempters, each of them going a step beyond his predecessor, are formally duplicated by the frenzied, drunken accusations, murder and self-defence of the four knights. Every speech reflects by intonation the kind of idea, class, level of intelligence, progress of the action and mounting danger to Thomas. Yet the play has more of the logically ordered *Symposium* in its movement than the *Bacchae* or any morality play. The very paucity of its literal, recognizable, concrete detail lifts the mind forcefully into interpretation while its insistence on reason above reason casts the mind back upon dumb faith: "They know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer."

Anouilh's *Becket* is a study of good and bad faith, in which each of the situations demonstrates the acceptance or rejection of essences in favor of freedom to choose. Becket in turn is confidant, chancellor, archbishop, enemy, and victim of the King, but he never surrenders his drive for order in the name of honor. Although he comes to identify himself with a heroic desire for an impossible absolute, he clearly doubts the existence of any moral order shaping the universe. What looks like morality in him is only aesthetics, says Henry. Becket longs for an ethical code with the self-contained purity and completeness of an art object and finds his ideal only in death.

All the other characters sharpen the cutting edge of Becket's quest, for the situations rather than his character evolve. The comically inept Pope and his retainers graphically illustrate the corruption of wit by sterile function. If Becket's heroism is measured against the petty craftiness and intrigues of his peers, Henry is a caricature of Carlyle's great man: "I am prepared to forget a lot of things, but not that I am king." He is a childish worshiper of power, a mean, despicable, and impulsive character. Henry is just wise enough to appreciate Becket's enormous abilities, and cunning enough to seek to make of him a servant. Only his self-pitying weaknesses, his passionate need for Becket's love and his occasional frankness grant him a measure of sympathy. Gwendolyn's suicide supports the view that a perfect love between either men or man and woman cannot be maintained in this life, that death is preferable to compromise. Like his one-time mistress, Thomas chooses to die when all freedom to choose another course has been taken from him.

In *Curmantele* Becket has chosen to identify his life so completely with the Church that he is little more than an instrument, its "tongue" to be "used in argument" between the State and the Church. Aside from minor idiosyncrasies, he closely resembles Eliot's figure. Fry's Henry, unlike Thomas is far more three dimensional. We become aware of his self-aggrandizement, his deep sense of family and personal loyalties, his furious temper, his passion for order, and his identification with simple absolutes. Dierickx notes that the Eliotic hero develops "towards renunciation, submission, acceptance, instead of violence and struggle; while Fry presents a man who is suddenly seized in a whirlwind of passion, after having however doubted his own capacities." Fry is more interested in the man Henry than in the situations which inspire Anouilh or in Eliot's theological scheme, although his progression does have a certain abstract aptness.

From his first confrontation with Becket, Henry envisions a utopian embodiment for his personal dreams, a form of worldly immortality. By assuming godlike prerogatives he justifies his over-confident manipulations of wife, family, church, and kingdom. But Thomas prefers the more intellectualized perspective of innumerable alternatives to Henry's perfect conformity. The significance for him of choice or free will lies in the testing of character, not in any final resolution. Man's attempt to complete the victory of good over evil in this world would only cut off "the deep roots of disputation / Which dug in the dust, and formed Adam's body."



Once Henry has committed his initial act of pride—naming Becket to fill the posts both of Chancellor and Archbishop, Becket is effectively deprived of meaningful choice. Henry finds himself trapped by the life-force no less than Thomas had. His ideal of English common law takes on a vitality of its own which bends Henry rather than stemming from him as he had wished.

Both Fry and Eliot fail to convincingly dramatize Becket's inner struggle between pride and acquiescence. But by stressing the theme of Law, Fry has found a useful equivalent for the "wheel" of fate which seems so abstract in *Murder*. For whether or not Becket "willed" his death, his martyrdom removed the church's opposition to the political supremacy of the secular government and affirmed the subordination of human to divine justice. Fry's denouement involves moral values but does not depend upon any final resolution of their conflicting claims. Thomas's spiritual ideal is ironically embodied in Henry's social instrument.

Poetic drama, as David E. Jones suggests in his book on Eliot, aims at organic unity, the crystallization of meaning in imagery, and a capacity for lifting the action onto a plane of universal significance. Since only Eliot and Fry write in English verse often dense with imagery, only their plays could be compared fairly in this regard. Three years after *Murder* was produced in 1935, Fry used the same three-level scheme of character presentation in the short, primitivist *The Boy with a Cart*. His choral "People of South England" speak imageclogged blank verse while, like Eliot's murderers, minor characters often speak racier prose. The themes of martyrdom and church-building as in Eliot's earlier *The Rock* are used, and the sun-image becomes Fry's equivalent for the wheel Louis Martz has singled out as Eliot's presiding image. But *Curtmantle* is separated both from *Murder* and Fry's own derivative early experiment by six mature plays. And in his final effort we find some of the spareness of verse toward which Eliot's own later plays moved. Both writers, it seems, have found it impossible either to be satisfied with a coterie audience or to use the whole range of lyric verse in a bourgeois theater of prose realism. Eliot has never been expansive. On the other hand, Fry's looseness has always plagued him with structural problems: after *Curtmantle*'s première he commented wryly to an interviewer from *Time*: "There are several plays here." Despite Fry's early indebtedness to Eliot and his continued admiration of *Murder*, important differences emerge in their uses of poetry.

Recurrent images in the plays are similar: the Waste Land, seasons, beasts and birds, everyday tasks and the blood of redemption, an "underpattern" Jones has traced through *Murder* in some detail. Fry had long since abandoned Eliot's stairstepped characters on three levels of perception: the order of nature (represented by the chorus), the order of the mind (the priests, tempters and murderers) and finally the order of charity (Thomas). Yet both writers have conservative world-views. They assume that the universe has a Ptolemaic form and pressure. The bodies of man, the world and the cosmos are symbolically fitted within one another like concentric bowls or hoops. Their magnitudes may seem vastly different, it is true, but only to the unaided eye. To the awakened imagination, each is a micro- or macrocosm of the other. Many examples could be drawn from both Fry and Eliot:

What is woven on the loom of fate,  
What is woven in the councils of princes  
Is woven also in our veins, our brains

say Eliot's chorus. When the witty uses of irony are added to this vast stock of comparisons, the possibilities for richness of texture and illumination are multiplied.

But while Fry's poetry confirms Henry's motivations as the action amplifies or distorts them, Eliot's is peculiarly abstract in reference; it often stands for the unseen or even the unknowable. *Curtmantle*'s imagery is man-in-society centered. Eliot's figures revolve about the theological paradoxes of acting and suffering. As Martz says, Becket's death is the still point of the world that turns within the play.

Nearly all the images in *Murder* are literally circular or cyclical in a larger rhythmic sense. The unity of action and suffering within a single concept of God as Unmoved Mover are contained in the phrase, “the wheel may turn and still / Be forever still.” In Thomas’s mind the wheel implies theological patterns of rise and fall: into grace from life, into heavenly glory from worldly disgrace, into divine vindication from earthly injustice. The alternating rise and fall of the seasons, empires and individual destinies are assimilated by Becket’s wheel, visually formed at the end by the knights’ swords with Thomas as the still point.

With few exceptions Thomas’s images are banal, even embarrassingly flat: “the purple bullfinch in the lilac tree” is unusual. Only for the priests, tempters and murderers who understand in terms of the reason does Thomas have the central position granted Henry by nearly all Fry’s language. The priests see him as steersman, anvil to Henry’s hammer, the firm rock in a sea of political strife. His stability at the wheel’s center contrasts with the sinful waverings of mankind. In the minds of the tempters, however, Thomas fits into the cycle of hunter and hunted, eater and the eaten (with sacrificial and sacramental overtones reflecting Eliot’s Dionysian and Christian sources). He is a cooked goose, an old stag circled by hounds, a morsel thrown to a thousand hungry appetites, or the unwary prey of hooks and traps. For the knights, in their sordid lust and anger, he has crept upon Henry’s shirt like a blood-swollen louse.

Only in the language of the completely uncomprehending Women of Canterbury are the full potentialities of the similar, but discontinuous realms of body, earth and cosmos developed. Balanced opposites such as light and dark, cold and heat, high and low are complemented with progressions such as approach and withdrawal, ecstasy and indifference, pain and lassitude. Kenner rightly suspects that the incredible richness and allusiveness of the choral speeches must certainly be wasted on an audience as they tumble over and interact with one another. One of the choral themes is fear of God’s love more than of the violence of man. Balanced metaphors of emergence-from-withinness and impingement-from-withoutness suggest, respectively, their fears of inner demons and of outer violations. Innerness involves the heaving of a sick, laboring earth, cold in the groin, unskinning of onion-like brains and bestial forms taking shape from thick air. From outside come the poking wind and tapping rain, corruption in the dish and incense in the latrine, root and shoot consuming eyes and ears: all deathbringers. Another overlapping theme is feeling in nullity: of eating and being eaten, of dissolving, of taking meaningless journeys. The chorus’s perceptions are almost wholly kinetic, sensuous and visceral. So much of their imagery suggests both the unreality of what is perceived, along with the overintensity of sensation and intuition. Becoming is the only reality to the chorus, while being is rarely glimpsed and then miraculously, “in a shaft of sunlight.”

What is incidental for Eliot becomes central for Fry. In *Curtmantle* the King focuses and complicates most of Fry’s imagery. Henry figuratively appears as both steersman for the ship of state and as the ice, storms, and rocks which endanger it. He is both physician and disease for the body politic, blacksmith and metal for the country’s disused framework, harrowing Christ and infernal labyrinth through which Englishmen wander. He is rationalist and priest, unifier and divider. The ironic complexity of his metonyms confirms the enormous gulf between his idealized goals and his ruthless methods, between his failure to provide an orderly transfer of power and the viability of the legal system he bequeaths his country. Thus Henry is England’s sun and its darkness, its water and wasteland, both traveler and roadway.

While Eliot’s still-turning wheel is dominant, in *Curtmantle* the cutting and revolving circle recurs compulsively at moments of crisis. Crowns, nests, rings, skulls and blood, a bull-fight arena and the Eliotic circle of swordsmen occur at various moments when Henry’s security and authority are threatened. And the destructive splitting-apart of values, friends, and realm emerges in images of double and half-ness: double vision and two-ness of kingdoms, images and worlds. The effect is summed up wryly as “redemption by divine arithmetic.” Despite the orderliness and often striking relevance of Fry’s imagery, it sometimes lacks the solidity and palpability so characteristic of Eliot, whose language penetrates to a core of archetype and ritual.

Given the dedicated, Christian commitment of his audience and the suspension of *Murder's* timescheme between a 1170 and 1935, Eliot could make rigorous demands on both his auditors and his medium. His occasionally slashing attacks on tyranny are stated in often dense, ironic imagery within a pageant-like form close to litany. Its particular angle of perception rests upon *revealed* truth, a truth which in Fergusson's terms is at once reasoned and beyond reason. If common sense and observation conflict with the lessons of martyrdom, that is one of Eliot's points. Fry's shift of emphasis from Thomas to Henry results from his attempt to dovetail the King's historical character with the more abstract theme of conflicting legal systems, civil, religious, moral, and divine. This entails a richer sweep of panoramic detail, more psychological depth and a looser kind of prosaic dialogue than either of his contemporaries use. Though willing to meet the demands of an easily-bored, unsophisticated audience, Fry has linked his brilliant, witty imagery to the whole play as carefully and artfully as Eliot has done. Anouilh is more secular, more radical and more existentialist than either of his English contemporaries. He has adopted a sparer, more theatricalist form to focus on a simpler loyalty-revenge relationship in a chaotic, impinging universe. Neither Fry nor Eliot are willing to find their worlds as disorderly and shapeless nor the conventions of their theater as acceptable as Anouilh. For the allusive, ironic resources of their—and perhaps most—verse depend rather heavily, it seems, upon the poet's acceptance of an ordered cosmos. Within this diverse design, allusive and ironic poetry can extend man's minutest perceptions at the same time it mirrors his incredible variety, as it has in *Murder in the Cathedral and Curtmantle*.

Source: Emil Roy, "The Becket Plays: Eliot, Fry, and Anouilh," in *Modern Drama*, Vol. 8, No. 3, December 1965, pp. 268–76.

## Criticism: Becket: Anouilh as Devil's Advocate

It is hardly necessary to recall the theatrical success *Becket* enjoyed when it was first presented in Paris in October, 1959, and on Broadway in 1960 and again in 1961. The last major play of Jean Anouilh intrigued and delighted Parisian theater-goers at a time when box office receipts throughout France were reaching their post-war low, and caught the widespread attention of the American public, usually reluctant to look with favor to a European import that raises problems which are neither commercially appealing nor immediately solvable. The granting of the coveted Tony award to *Becket* as the most distinguished play of the 1960 season, as well as the subsequent Hollywood production of Anouilh's drama, further popularized and gave impetus to the important questions posed by the French playwright in his retelling of the saint's life.

Employing historical data already twice used (Tennyson's *Becket* in 1884 and T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* in 1935), Anouilh is less concerned with factual accuracy than he is with verbal brilliance and psychological analysis of the two opponents, the Archbishop of Canterbury and Henry II. Anouilh's facility with language needs no defense here in spite of *Time* magazine's reviewer who saw nothing in the play except "playful trills and prayerful chords and swelling harmonies" in which "there is no guarantee of history." Nor is it necessary that one uphold again the basic drama license which permits the playwright to ignore certain events, change others, and in general arrange the various episodes of his drama as best befits his creative personality and his own particular vision of the subject at hand. No one can attempt to say that Anouilh's Becket, an expert in debauchery who abruptly and seemingly without explanation becomes a champion of God on earth, has much in common with the Archbishop of Canterbury, before or after his break with Henry II. Nor can one see much resemblance between the crafty, powerful King of England and the not-so-witty and boyishly boisterous monarch described by the author. Those who are steeped in French literature, however, know fully well that the creative act of writing needs little or no history so long as the form, through its subtlety of expression and the frequency of stimulating, full-blooded language, seizes and arrests the mind of readers and spectators.

But the aim of this paper is not to refute the unnamed reviewer in *Time*. It is too late for that, and the public has already done it. My purpose is to reexamine *Becket* in the light of the terrible struggle between its two main antagonists as portrayed by Anouilh and not as recorded by history. Their lovehate relationship, as I hope to show below, contains many aspects which reveal a point of view on the part of the author that seems to have escaped, so far, reviewers and critics alike. Not that the question, "Is Anouilh on the side of Becket or on that of Henry?" has not been asked. Unsatisfied with the King's submission to public flagellation and his final decree that Becket be "in this kingdom, from now on, begged and honored a saint," Tom F. Driver quizzed in the Nov. 2, 1960 *Christian Century*: "Now who are we to say has won this battle? Is this, after all, a victory for the honor of God? Or is this a victory for the Caesars of the world, those who break with their might the power of God's servants and then, when practical issues are settled, put the honor of God on their lips?" And the reviewer concluded that "in history Caesar almost always wins," hence "Jean Anouilh's drama is closer to Protestant thought" than it would have been had he sympathized with Becket. The question and the answer are, I think, beside the point. *Becket* is not simply a play about the struggle between the Caesars of the world and God. Nor is it a commentary on the relative powers of Church and State, or public and private interest. Anouilh is too clever a playwright to have merely wished to re-do a topic already admirably developed in his *Antigone*. *Becket* is, essentially, the drama of two men who need each other and who, because of their humanity, are ultimately unable to accept their interdependence. The play is, then, a re-orchestration of the familiar modern theme of man's need of man and search for the *other*, culminating, just as inevitably as in most contemporary works, with the seeker's utter and complete loneliness. And if Anouilh has taken sides it is not because of the historical examples at hand, nor because of the Protestant inclinations he might have, but because he saw in Henry II a more humane and human man than he did in Becket. Often in French literature the lesser of the two heroes occupies the title page. Many examples could be recalled, but suffice it to point to a play in a somewhat similar vein, Corneille's *Polyeucte*, whose clearly more likable character is Sévère, the kind and gentle atheist who lives the life of a Christian without being aware of it, and not the fiery, altar-smashing convert whose belligerency is all too often most unhuman.

From the start, Anouilh's version of Henry II is replete with compassion and understanding. In his very first speech the King, kneeling and waiting to be whipped, addresses the yet unseen Becket and speaks of his human dignity about to be crushed: "Don't you think," he asks at the end, "that it would have been better for us to get along together?" And the implacable Becket appears, not to console his former friend, nor to express regret, but only to make the simple, factual statement: "We could not get along." The first lines of the play are a clue to Becket's continued intransigence and to Henry's human fears and misgivings. "And yet, we were like brothers, you and I," pursues the King. Becket, self-sufficient, needs no brother. He needs *another* to be sure, a weaker reflection of his own, to dominate, to teach, to change and thereby prove his own superiority. "You taught me everything," confesses Henry, docile and thankful. Indeed, in his dealings with opponents the King can neither persuade nor force them to agree with him. But it is Becket who always finds the opportune, if immoral solution. When Henry argues with the Archbishop about the right of the Court to request and obtain funds from the Church, it is the King's friend who counsels his monarch to affirm his tyranny in no uncertain terms. "Laws and customs give us means of coercion," he informs his King, who quickly agrees, thereby proclaiming not his own absolute authority but that of Becket. As a matter of fact, Becket's early cruelty is not merely pursued for the conquest of practical issues or for the love of pleasure; it is merely an exercise calculated to promote and establish Becket the absolute, Becket the God-like figure who can govern all of England by governing the King.

Even in such daily routine activity as hunting, the hero's motivation is purely esthetic and abstract. When Henry inquires if he likes to hunt for falcons, his friend replies: "I like better the boar at the tip of my sword. When he turns and charges, there is a delicious moment of *tête-à-tête* when one feels finally responsible for oneself." Becket's desire for complete independence no matter the cost remains uncomprehensible to Henry's human frailty. "It's curious," he observes, "this taste of yours for danger." But perils and challenges are, of course, vehicles to an absolute and total existence.

The hero's pursuit of women is not much different from his onslaught of wild life. To his King's question: "Do you love Gwendoline?" he replies: "She is my mistress, my prince." To an earlier question: "Do you love me, Becket?" he had similarly answered: "I am your servant, my prince." Becket is incapable of love, which he considers essentially an abandon, a weakness. "I do not like to be loved," he declares to Gwendoline, because obviously being loved facilitates the way for loving and his relationship with people can only be one of opposition, as between the hunter and the hunted. The moment of friendship or love is also and at the same time the moment of combat, and tenderness and pleasure are bridges to be crossed on the way to victory. Love *per se* is unknown to him, and he could never feel toward Henry as the King feels toward him. For Henry loves Becket as the pupil adores the master, or as the son reveres the father (there is a fifteen-year difference between their ages, and at one point in the play Henry addresses Becket as *papa*), but most of all he loves him for no reason, and he has no need to explain his love, to give it labels, as he accuses Becket of doing: "To justify your sentiments, why do you have to put tags on everything?"

The King, on the other hand, has a straightforward and sincere attitude toward women. He likes Gwendoline's body, but her singing too. "I look tough," he says in this connection, "but I am tender fellow." He would like to take possession of the girl, and according to a previous pact between the two, Becket cannot refuse returning her to him. But Henry realizes the causes behind his friend's hesitation. "You like her?" he inquires. "Are you capable of liking anything? Tell me if you like her." And correctly interpreting Becket's silence as a negative answer, he continues: "I know you. . . . The idea [of passing the girl back and forth] is repugnant to you. It seems inelegant. Whatever has to do with morality is, where you are concerned, a matter of esthetics. Is this true or not?" And Becket agrees: "It is true, my lord."

Ordered to go into the King's bedroom, Gwendoline revolts:

GWENDOLINE: My lord promised me to him?

BECKET: I gave my word as a gentleman to give him whatever he would ask. I did not think it would be you.

GWENDOLINE: If he sends me away tomorrow, my lord, will he take me back?

BECKET *firmly*: No. . . .

GWENDOLINE: My lord doesn't love anyone in the world, isn't that so?

BECKET *firmly*: No.

Gwendoline goes into the King's quarters, and a moment later Henry reappears to remit to Becket a peasant girl in exchange. Becket orders her to disrobe, and as she does he "*looks at her with expressionless eyes, whistling, an air of absence about him. Suddenly he stops, goes to her, grabs the puzzled and semi-naked girl with brutality, and speaks: I hope that you have a beautiful soul and that you find all this quite depraving.*" Becket's debauchery, then, like his cruelty in political affairs, is pursued for perfection, and what he seeks in the excessive indulgence of the appetites is not pleasure but conquest, not the human sensuality that Henry desires, but the absolute in perversion, the dehumanization of the conquered.

And at the end of Act I, when he is informed of Gwendoline's suicide, when, in bed next to him, he witnesses the King's nightmare, he remains totally unperturbed, thinking only of himself and questioning where his honor, that is to say his boundless freedom, might be. Becket's Nietzschean aspirations are not merely those that modern men chase on the subconscious level with results that are always and of necessity futile and negative. Anouilh gives the distinct impression that his brilliant hero has indeed the un-human capacity for attaining his goal or at least deluding himself and others that he can.

The occasion presents itself in Act II when the Archbishop dies and the King conceives the uncanny idea of naming Becket to the vacant post. The initial reaction of the King's friend is at once one of fear and reluctance: "Becket, *on whose face one already reads the horror of what will follow*: No, my prince." And later, he "*murmurs, as if crushed, after a long silence*: My prince, I see now that you do not joke. Don't go ahead with your plan." Becket's attitude is not surprising if we recall how diligently and how determinedly he had worked at becoming absolute by the devil's means. Being forced to change course now, to adopt unknown and conceivably more difficult means, is explainably a terrifying course of events that he is not certain of carrying through. But the hesitation is only temporary. Once he realizes that the King's mind is made up, he accepts the inevitable and is as resolute and singleminded in his new role of God's servant as he had been in the past as disciple of Lucifer. "I shall not be able to serve God and you," he warns Henry who fails to understand that Becket's inhumanity precludes even the slightest trace of conscious hypocrisy. It is not so much that the King's affection for his friend is blinding; but vulnerable human being that he is, he loves Becket and he cannot imagine their friendship ever coming to an end. Had he been more perspicacious, he would have known that Becket had a singular penchant for seemingly emulating the actions of a saint while laboring assiduously for the perfection of his own supremacy. In Act I, for example, his generous freeing of Gwendoline's brother is an obvious repetition of the magnanimous gesture of Molière's Don Juan in his play of the same name; for just as Don Juan's almsgiving to the beggar was above all an imitation of the forgiving Christian God, so too Becket's apparent noble act has all the earmarks of a powerful ambition to rival the grandeur of a beatified soul.

Early in Act III, however, Henry becomes painfully aware of Becket's indifference toward his King. It is the saddest discovery of his life, one that is almost akin to that of a deceived lover: "You think that you have the honor of God to defend now," he tells him. "I would have started a war with all of England behind me, and even against England's interests, in order to please you, little Saxon. I would have laughingly abandoned the honor of the kingdom for you. Only I loved you and you did not love me; there is all the difference." Henry's feelings for Becket are so intense that he confesses hating him, but at the same time he defends his Archbishop against the attacks of the Queen Mother, his wife, and Becket's own enemies within the Church. His ungrateful friend, however, does his best to deepen the abyss between State and Church, that is between another person and his own. He knows that relationship between humans can be broken by violence, and like Jean Genet who stole his friend's wallet not because he wanted his money but because he wanted to destroy the bonds of friendship to which some time his instinct led (*Diary of a Thief, 1949*), he too seizes upon all occasions to break with his King. When the matter of who has the right to pass judgment on the infraction of a clerk comes up, he chooses to magnify the issue out of all proportions and take a completely intransigent stand in spite of the Constitutions of Clarendon which affirmed the King's prerogative to punish ecclesiastical persons once they had been tried in ecclesiastical courts. The Clarendon laws were written to correct an alleged injustice which resulted in a situation where, according to Olive J. Brose, "anyone who could read a sentence in the Bible could claim the privilege of a clerk." But Becket's defense of a clerk accused of murder and rape is not so much an effort to maintain a long-standing privilege of the Church, as it is an occasion to bring the boar at the tip of his sword, to fight the King in the open come what may, so that the survival of the fittest be eternally assured. Right and wrong are academic questions, and force alone is viewed as the course of action to be followed: "Do you think that *right* just has to show its face and obtain everything on its good looks?" he inquires of the Bishop of York. "Without force . . . right is nothing." Only Becket is not interested in victory, in his point of view prevailing over that of the King here and now. As a matter of fact he knows fully well that he cannot win, nor does he really want to. What he desires is magnanimous death in battle, one that would assure martyrdom and cast around him a permanent aura of sainthood. Awaiting to be murdered, he speaks to the monk-servant who is about to dress him, and says: "I must be handsome. Quickly . . . button all the buttons. Without omitting any. . . . Now give me my silver cross. I must hold it."

Becket's need for proper pre-death decorum is calculated to give an air of sobriety and respectability to his final hour. That it does, but it also (and Anouilh is too clever a playwright not to have intended to show the two sides of the coin) belittles the hero for it shows his pride, his cold-bloodedness, his fierce inhumanity.

What a contrast between Becket's death and the thousand deaths Henry suffers prior to and during his hysterical seizure of Act. IV. His cry: "I loved him. I loved him. . . . And I think I love him still. Oh my Thomas!" reveals a sensibility that is all too human and worthy of sympathy. Anouilh's vision of Henry is one that is so replete with weakness and misgivings that in the famous reunion scene of the same act we are made to side more than ever with the apparent villain against the all too obvious (hence suspicious) champion of God. When Becket is about to get down to business, the King, anxious to prolong the few moments of idle talk that precede the head-on collision, pleads in a pathetic voice: "Let's not start yet, I tell you. Let's speak of something else." The dialogue between the two is a gem of dramatic achievement. We learn that understandably enough the King's feet are cold in the freezing winter air; we learn, too, that Becket's feet are naked and that he does not feel the cold at all. When he counsels Henry to fight the low temperature by undressing and washing with cold water, the King answers the insensitive (if correct) advice with a most moving speech: "I used to do it," he says, "when you were there to make me. Now I don't wash any more. I stink. For a while I even grew a beard."

But eventually the discussion becomes serious:

HENRY: You know that I am the King and that I must act like a king. What do you hope? A weakness on my part?

BECKET: No. That would crush me.

HENRY: To conquer me by force?

BECKET: You are the one who is strong.

HENRY: Do you hope to convince me?

BECKET: No more. It's not up to me to convince you. My job is only to say no.

HENRY: But one must be logical, Becket!

BECKET: No. It's not necessary, my King. One must only do, absurdly, what one has been charged with doing—till the end.

There is thus no question for Becket of the validity of the cause. As the libertine friend of the King he had sought the absolute in debauchery; as Archbishop he requires no explanation, no justification of the assignment. He does not love God, and a few moments later in the reunion scene he is quick to admit it:

HENRY: So you've begun to love God? . . .

BECKET: (gently): I have begun to love the honor of God.

Becket's choice to carry on "absurdly" the mission that has been entrusted to him is in effect an existentialist's type of decision, a decision against life. Following in the footsteps of most contemporary existentialists, Anouilh considers life vile, desperate and senseless, allowing only from time to time a puritanic "no" that is both the honor of man and his death. And seemingly to defend the honor of God, Becket says "no" to Henry. But the honor of God is also the honor of Becket who emulates God, and the death he seeks is nothing less than that of Christ. An audacious claim from someone who is simply an esthetic moralist who disregards morality ("The only thing that is immoral my prince," he once said, "is not to do what one must, when one must") and is incapable of loving God or man.

Henry's search for *another*, then, remains fruitless; indeed, had he been able to subdue Becket, his friendship for him would have diminished and died because its object would have been no longer worthy of it. On the other hand, Becket's relationship with the King aborts because as Archbishop of Canterbury he must walk on a different road, and their former complicity in debauchery is no longer for him the shortest route to sovereignty. Man's search for man is futile on both sides, and both antagonists lose. But if "it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all," then Henry is a qualified winner because he is at least left with the fond memory of a rapprochement which, at times, provided him with sources of joy and support. This is perhaps the only reward of an essentially evil but human monarch who, in spite of everything, is capable of love.

On the contrary, Anouilh's conception of Becket precludes any recompense. We know, of course, that Becket, the real Becket, became a saint and has been honored through the centuries. But he is not the personage of Anouilh. His hero deserves no recognition either as man or as martyr. Readers and spectators cannot identify themselves with someone who is beyond the sordid but also beyond love, someone whose strength disallows any suffering. At best we can react with a faint, ironic smile at the vainness of his aspiration to rival and ultimately to become God. Fraud that he is, Becket makes Henry appear as the likeable character.

Source: Alfred Cismaru, "Becket: Anouilh as Devil's Advocate," in *Renascence: Essays on Value in Literature*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Winter 1966, pp. 81–88.

## Criticism: Construction of Gender in Becket

In 1959, Jean Anouilh created a play loosely depicting the historical events surrounding the martyrdom of Thomas à Becket at the hands of the barons loyal to Henry II of England. For Anouilh, historical accuracy was less important than was his positioning of Becket and Henry as diametrically opposed characters: Becket the Saxon, Henry the Norman; Becket the esthete, Henry the profligate. Indeed, it is the relationship between the two men that has attracted most critical attention. Although no reviews or scholarly articles make the case that the love between Henry and Becket is homosexual in nature, several important studies go out of their way to say that this relationship is clearly *not* a homosexual one. Philip Thody says "it is unfortunate that it could so easily be interpreted as homosexual. . . . This is the only fault in an otherwise technically perfect play, for it distracts attention from the tragic nature of Henry's love and the moral implications of Becket's final attitude." Thus, the body of criticism surrounding *Becket* is strangely skewed, calling attention to that which it so stoutly denies. Why might this be the case? Reconsidering Anouilh's construction of gender in the roles of Henry, Becket, and the two queens, as well as the historical moment in which the play was written, might shed some light on this puzzle.

In 1959, homosexuality was not only in the closet, the closet doors were firmly shut, locked, and bolted. Whereas in Europe there was significantly more tolerance for a variety of sexual identities, in the United States, fresh from the horrors of McCarthyism, there was little social, religious, or legal tolerance for homosexuality. This does not mean that homosexuality did not exist; rather, it means that homosexuality was simply not a topic of conversation. One did not have to address that which was not talked about. One need only look at the extent to which Hollywood producers and studios hid leading man Rock Hudson's sexual orientation from the public for a glimpse of the climate of the time. And yet Anouilh's play about the love between two men was an enormous success, first in France and then in New York. Even more surprising, the 1964 film version in English, starring Peter O'Toole and Richard Burton, was a gigantic critical and commercial success, attracting audiences from the American East Coast intelligentsia and the rural Midwestern middle class alike. By rendering homosexuality invisible, American culture was able to embrace the story of two men who love each other without the taint of sin. Given the political and moral culture of the United States, the love between Henry and Becket could only be constructed as Platonic, a love between two dear friends, devoid of any hint of Eros, the passionate, intimate love between lovers.



Yet this construction was shaky. Ironically perhaps, the weight of its own success problematized the thematic integrity of *Becket*, leading to the strange denial and reconstruction of the clearly homoerotic subtext of the play and film. To shore up the difficult interpretation, that the love between Henry and Becket was simply and strictly Platonic, reviewers chose to comment on what the play was *not*, rather than on what it was.

In recent years, however, feminist, gay, lesbian, and gender schools of criticism have allowed readers to reexamine literary works in order to demonstrate how gendered identities are constructed by writers and by cultures. At times, scholars employing these methodologies must strive mightily to uncover hidden or covert messages concerning gender construction. In *Becket*, ironically, the problem is reversed: the homoeroticism is so overt that making a case for it becomes difficult. Can something so obvious be what the play is *really* about? Perhaps. Like Poe's "Purloined Letter," Anouilh has hidden his subtext in plain sight. Using the tools of feminist and gender criticism, then, contemporary readers can benefit from a return to Anouilh's text to examine how the writer has constructed the gendered identities of Henry, Becket, and not incidentally, the two queens.

Anouilh gives readers a Henry who is a "man's man." He loves to hunt, whore, drink, and exert power. Love for Henry, however, seems only to take one form: that directed toward Becket. Why this is so is complicated, both in the way that Henry constructs the women around him and in the way Anouilh creates his characters. Henry is a man of great appetites; he cannot love just a little. Rather, his love is overpowering and all encompassing. The women in the play, however, are not strong enough to bear the weight of Henry's love.

The women Henry chooses to bed, for example, are flimsy, one-dimensional caricatures. They are to be lied to, taken advantage of, and dismissed. In act 2, Henry forgets the girl in his bed in his excitement to go to war. He says, "What are you doing here? . . . Be off. Put on your clothes and go home. Give her a gold piece, Thomas." As she leaves, however, Henry calls after her that she "has the prettiest eyes in the world." Tellingly, Henry turns to Becket and says, "You always have to tell them that, even when you pay for it, if you want real pleasure with them." For Henry, women are an alien species. His comment to Becket is much the way a dog handler might discuss a recalcitrant pet.

He is just as lost in his own household. His relationships with both his wife, the Young Queen, and his mother, the Queen Mother, are similarly based on a gender construction that requires wives and mothers to be nagging, jealous, and powerless annoyances. Although the Young Queen has born Henry three sons, he does not love her, nor does he even consider her a human being. "Your body was an empty desert, Madame!—which, duty forced me to wander in alone. But you have never been a wife to me!" Henry screams at her in act 3. Tellingly, he immediately contrasts the image of his wife as "dusty" and "desert"-like with his construction of Becket: "And Becket was my friend, red-blooded, generous, and full of strength!"

Anouilh himself bears the responsibility for these creations. It is he who chooses to portray the women of the play as foils for Henry's obsession with Becket. Although many critics have taken Anouilh to task for his historical error in creating Becket as a Saxon, none have commented on Anouilh's relegation of the powerful Eleanor of Aquitaine or the Empress Matilda to the roles of the "Young Queen" and "Queen Mother" respectively. Yet this is surely a deliberate and perverse reading of the historical background. Anouilh is so bent on deflecting attention away from the female characters of the play and so determined to concentrate his full attention on the male to male love in the play that he does not even grant these two important historical personages the courtesy of their own names. Any reader of this play without sufficient historical context would lose the implications of this choice. Yet what Anouilh hides in this maneuver is significant: Henry is only king by virtue of both his mother and his wife.

As Matilda's son, Henry has a legitimate claim on the throne of England, a throne that has been the subject of a bitter civil war between Matilda's followers and King Stephen. Henry, finally, with his mother's support, is

able to unite the country. Eleanor, on the other hand, is the wife of King Louis of France when she meets Henry, some years her junior. She divorces Louis in order to marry Henry. Anouilh conveniently suppresses this fact in his depiction of the relationship between Louis and Henry. Eleanor is, in her own right, the wealthiest and most powerful woman in Europe, sole heir to the duchy of Aquitaine. Without her wealth, and without her influence, it is unlikely that the young upstart Henry would have the wherewithal to grab the throne of England. Moreover, her ability to produce male heirs in a world where life is so very tenuous is nothing to sneer at. There is virtually no account of twelfth-century Europe that fails to take Eleanor into account. Thus, Anouilh's reduction of this historical figure to the "Young Queen," while certainly focusing attention on Henry, is nonetheless a simplistic and misogynistic device. He renders her invisible in order to make more visible Henry's love, in all its complexity, for Becket.

There is one significant exception to the construction of women in this play: Becket's mistress, Gwendolen, is beautiful, intelligent, and capable of strong love, which she, like Henry, directs toward Becket. In many ways, Gwendolen is as heroic as the man she loves: Rather than give her body to the king, she commits suicide in his bed. Thus, Anouilh seems to tell the reader, the only powerful woman is a dead one.

Anouilh's construction of his male characters is far more complicated and ultimately problematic. Becket, for example, is brave and courageous. He does not reveal strong emotion, and he is by all accounts a formidable warrior, suffering injury at the hands of the French enemy while commanding Henry's troops. At the same time, Henry persists in calling him "my little Saxon" and "son." Through his use of affectionate diminutives and through his insistent demands for Becket's love, Henry attempts to juvenilize and perhaps feminize Becket. "He is my man," Henry tells the archbishop, while treating him like a child. And yet, the reader discovers, the king is "appreciably younger" than Becket himself.

Not surprisingly, given Anouilh's apparent plan for the play, the playwright early on renders Becket as unmanly, in spite of his physical prowess. He uses the term "frivolous" multiple times to describe Becket, and he creates a Becket more interested in his shoes and dinnerware than in power, clearly not masculine preoccupations. Nowhere, however, is Anouilh's attitude toward the Becket of the early play more apparent than in this telling stage direction: "He pirouettes and goes out, insolent and graceful as a young boy." It is almost as if Anouilh himself has fallen in love with his own creation, as inappropriate as that love might be.

Henry, on the other hand, is apparently created to be masculine through and through. Yet there are hints early on that his love for Becket is more than that of friend for friend. He asks again and again if Becket loves him. Significantly, at one point this question includes another possible object of Becket's affection. Henry asks in act 1, "Did you love me when I made you Chancellor. I sometimes wonder if you're capable of love. Do you love Gwendolen?"

Shortly after this scene, Henry requests that Becket give him Gwendolen. Various readings of the play suggest that Henry does this to exert his power over Becket or that he does this to punish Becket for his refusal to admit he loves him. Yet there is a simpler explanation: Henry is jealous of Gwendolen. He does not desire Gwendolen for herself but wishes to remove her from Becket's embrace. For Henry, Becket must love him, or no one.

Indeed, Henry's insecurities and his ongoing attempts to win Becket's love nearly destroy him. Whereas Becket grows in stature throughout the play, losing the frivolity of his youth, Henry diminishes. He acts for all the world like a bereft lover, pining after his beloved. Becket's disaffection is at the source of all of Henry's angst.

In the final scenes of the play, there is a strange gender reversal, marked first by the Queen Mother's speech to Henry: "It is England you must think of, not your hatred—or disappointed love—for that man. . . . You have a rancor against that man which is neither healthy nor manly. . . . If Thomas Becket were a faithless woman

whom you still hankered after, you would act no differently.” Clearly, Matilda has guessed the nature of Henry’s love for Becket.

Henry tries to reassert his grasp on his manhood. After booting his family members from the room, he turns to his barons and says, “Let us drink, gentlemen. . . . Let us get drunk, like men, all night; until we roll under the table, in vomit and oblivion.” For Henry, then, being a man has to do with drunkenness and carousing, not with love. Indeed, it is love that destroys his very masculinity. The climax of the scene comes just a few lines later. Henry howls with pain, “I loved him! Yes I loved him! And I believe I still do! . . . I can do nothing! Nothing! I’m as limp and useless as a girl!”

Unrequited love has rendered Henry metaphorically impotent. Only through the destruction of the object of his desire can Henry hope to reconstruct himself as powerful man. In the final scene of the play, which is, of course a return to the first scene, Henry is whipped by Becket’s monks. While readers know that this is the penalty exacted by the church for Henry’s role in Becket’s death, there is an additional troubling implication: Whipping is often the self-inflicted punishment meted out by monks on their own bodies for sins of the flesh.

In conclusion, then, while Henry’s love for Becket has never been consummated in any physical sense, his homoerotic desire is nonetheless real, and nonetheless dangerous for the carefully constructed masculinity both Henry and Anouilh need for the play to close successfully. Becket’s death is required not only for the honor of God but also, and perhaps more importantly, for the regendering of Henry as male.

Source: Diane Henningfeld, Critical Essay on *Becket, or the Honor of God*, in *Drama for Students*, Gale, 2004.

## Critical Essays: Critical Overview

By the end of World War II, Anouilh was widely recognized as the most successful playwright in France. His 1958 play, *Becket*, did nothing to diminish his reputation. Indeed, the play was both a commercial and critical success.

As early as 1961 (the same year the English language movie of *Becket* was released), critic Leonard Cabell Pronko chose to examine the characters in Anouilh’s plays, finding particular interest in the friendship between Becket and Henry. He writes, “And yet despite their differences, in the face of overwhelming odds, a feeling of friendship subsists between the two, and it is with reluctance, one feels, that they separate for the last time, each incapable of expressing his real feelings for the other.”

Emil Roy, on the other hand, in an article for *Modern Drama* examines the heroism of Anouilh’s characters while emphasizing Becket’s essential alienation. Becket “is still another illustration of human alienation from a sterile universe but one presenting a more mature, positive hero than had his earlier plays.”

Likewise, in his 1965 article, “*Becket* and Honor: A Trim Reckoning,” Jesse C. Gatlin speaks to the alienation in the play while indirectly acknowledging Anouilh’s debt to the French existentialists, most notably to Albert Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He writes:

Anouilh hammers home the point that each man is effectively his own universe, condemned to strive, alone and unaided, wrestling his huge boulder up his chosen hill, and forced forever to find his justice and his reward not in the view from the hilltop nor in the satisfaction of reaching it, but in the lonely, neverending task itself of labeling his burdens to suit his direst needs.

At times, Anouilh's commercial popularity has worked against his reputation as a significant literary figure. Philip Thody, for example, reports that Anouilh "writes essentially for the public which he knows, which appreciates him as an artist and entertainer." This public is, according to Thody, "middle-class" and "middle-brow European."

Regardless of the criticism, Anouilh's longterm productivity and popularity render him an important French writer, one who will be long remembered for his work.

# Analysis

## Analysis: The Play

*Becket* begins as it will end, with King Henry performing ritual penance for his long-suspected role in the assassination of Thomas a Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, formerly his friend and chancellor of England. While the king wonders aloud how and where their friendship went wrong, Becket's ghostly presence soon appears, exhorting the king to pray instead of talking. The scene then shifts abruptly to the days of the two men's boon companionship, culminating in the king's impulsive appointment of Becket to the post of chancellor, a move calculated to increase the crown's control of a rebellious clergy. Equally mistrusted by the bishops and by the king's own noble henchmen, Becket nevertheless discharges his duties with truly diplomatic grace and considerable skill, temporarily earning the grudging respect of both sides. Refined, even somewhat dandified in manners and appearance, Becket seems determined to establish the dignity of the British crown, the better to increase its power.

The king, as boorish as Becket is refined, in time comes to perceive the extent of Becket's skills, exerted on his own behalf. He crucially fails, however, to seek or find his friend's true motivations: The second half of act 1, directly following Becket's appointment as chancellor, shows Becket and the king riding through the woods when they are caught in a downpour; as they seek refuge in a peasant's hut, the king betrays nearly total ignorance of his subjects and even of the laws of his own land. It is Becket, indeed, who provides the needed education, meanwhile parrying the king's sudden urge to abduct the peasant's daughter. Indispensable to the delineation and development of character, the scene will end tragically with the suicide of Becket's mistress Gwendolen, whom the king has demanded of Becket in exchange for the peasant girl. He has asked Becket if he loves Gwendolen, yet Becket, true to his personal code of honor, has remained inscrutable, loyally allowing the king to have his own way. When Gwendolen stabs herself as an alternative to sleeping with the king, the king concludes that he has narrowly escaped an assassination attempt and crawls into Becket's bed for comfort. Act 1 ends with Becket's soliloquy before the sleeping king, weighing the merits of his own pragmatism.

At the start of act 2, the king's barons, little more than a band of armed thugs, are grumbling with resentment toward the subtle, smooth-talking chancellor when Becket himself appears, assessing the human cost of the battle that the British have just won. As before, Becket must instruct both king and barons in the art of politics, arguing that diplomacy is the best tool of the victor and that looting the vanquished territory works against the victor's ultimate material interest; he encourages the king, against the latter's instincts, to treat the vanquished French with generosity and dignity, the better to appease their resentment and prevent reprisals. Becket then informs the king of a growing threat posed at home by the British clergy, whose power competes increasingly with that of the crown. As Becket and the king discuss such matters across the nude form of the king's latest amatory conquest, a guard arrives to announce the arrest of a suspicious character found lurking outside the king's tent, a young monk armed with a knife. A countryman of Becket's, the young monk seems to remind Becket of his former self; throughout the action that follows, Becket will supervise the monk's capture and eventual release, gradually befriendng the fractious youth.

During the formal march into the town already conquered, Becket continues his civilizing, restraining influence upon the king, all the while protecting the king's person with the strictest security procedures. A messenger suddenly appears, announcing the death of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The king, Becket's recent intelligence still ringing in his ears, impulsively decides to replace the dead bishop with Becket himself, a former candidate for the priesthood, in order to place "his own man" in that politically sensitive position. Becket, taken quite by surprise, begs the king not to act on his impulses, claiming that he could not possibly serve both God and crown. Although still officially a deacon, Becket appears, throughout the play, to

be quite without the consolation of faith, having long since adopted an ethical, at times aesthetic, standard of behavior to compensate for the lack of absolute values; in place of “good” or “bad,” he has come to believe that certain actions are more pleasing, or “beautiful,” than others. Notwithstanding, King Henry perseveres, against considerable opposition from within the Church as well as from Becket himself, toward getting his own way, and soon prevails.

After another change of scenery, act 2 ends with Becket, newly named as archbishop, giving away all of his considerable wealth and inviting all the local poor to dine at his generous table. As he prays to the God that he will now serve, Becket doubts his own motivations, claiming that he is having too good a time to be completely serious.

Act 3 begins with a domestic squabble in the royal household, King Henry at odds with his queen, his mother, and his two ill-behaved sons. The bone of contention is Becket, of whom both women have always disapproved and of whom they are both jealous, owing to the king’s preoccupation with him. Amid traded insults, many of which cut deep, a messenger arrives with a letter from Becket that encloses the chancellor’s signet ring, returned as tangible proof that Becket cannot serve two masters at once. The scene then shifts to the London Cathedral, where Bishop Gilbert Folliot, already recognized as being among Becket’s angriest opponents, is preparing to celebrate Mass. The king, dressed as a peasant, requests “confession” for his “sin” in choosing Becket against Folliot’s own vigorous opposition. As Folliot remains impassive, the king pours out his tale of betrayed friendship, enlisting the bishop’s help in “getting rid” of Becket, going so far as to manhandle the clergyman when his wishes are not granted immediately. The scene then moves to Canterbury Cathedral, where Becket receives the rebellious young monk whose subsequent life he has followed closely. Claiming that he needs the youth near him as a kind of gadfly, all the while discouraging him from overt violence, Becket then agrees to admit the delegation of clergy bent on his dismissal. Folliot is the first to speak, citing Becket for a supposed embezzlement of funds due the crown. Becket then cites three cases in which the king has violated territory granted to the Church, prosecuting individuals traditionally protected by ecclesiastical law; Becket’s response has been excommunication of the three royal henchmen involved, and he refuses to reconsider his previous decisions. Another scene change presents a tribunal at which Becket is condemned, in absentia, on trumped-up charges of having celebrated a black Mass. To the king’s objection, Becket’s sworn enemy Folliot admits that the charges are false, but that they are sure to obtain the king’s stated wishes. As predicted, Becket is condemned, whereupon another dispute erupts between the king, displeased with the verdict, and the queens, who rejoice at the apparent downfall of their rival.

The scene then shifts to the court of France, where Becket has sought asylum. The king, Louis VII, receives the delegation of English clergy, pretending interest in their case against Becket even as Becket himself is concealed in the next room. Acknowledging that political expediency might rescind Becket’s welcome, King Louis also warns the archbishop against placing too much trust in the pope, a known manipulator. Becket’s visit to Rome, portrayed in the next scene, depicts the pope and his cardinal-assistant as stereotypical Italian thieves, playing both ends against the middle in an attempt to satisfy both Becket and the British crown. Act 3 closes with Becket in prayer, still searching for his faith.

At the start of act 4 Becket is obliged, as foreseen, to leave his refuge in France. King Louis, reluctant to dismiss him, tries to reconcile him with the intransigent King Henry by arranging a meeting between the two men on neutral French territory. The meeting, held on horseback in very cold weather, results in a predictable stalemate; although it is clear that both men still care about each other, neither will abandon his principles. Becket’s principle is the honor of God, which is threatened by the king’s civil law. During a subsequent scene frequently omitted in production, Becket returns to France by boat, accompanied by the young monk who has been his constant companion since the start of his exile in France. The king, meanwhile, has chosen to violate Becket’s prerogatives as archbishop by having his son and successor crowned by the Bishop of York. Another scene of family discord soon follows, with both queens denouncing the king’s preoccupation with Becket as unhealthy. Indeed, the king soon falls almost physically ill; as his henchmen-barons rush off to restore the

king's health and sanity by killing Becket, their movements are eerily orchestrated by the monarch's amplified heartbeat. Becket, returned to Canterbury, dons his episcopal garb in anticipation of what will soon happen and meets death with dignity, lamenting only that the young monk has been killed first, without a chance to strike back.

The final scene of *Becket* replicates the first, with the king getting dressed after his ritual flagellation by monks loyal to the now-sainted Becket, a political gesture that will have its planned effect: A schismatic movement mounted by Henry's sons has in fact been defeated, or at least deferred. The king then hypocritically demands of his barons that Becket's murderers be brought to justice, in a speech quite possibly modeled upon the request in the film *Casablanca* to "round up the usual suspects," as the barons themselves are known to be the guilty parties. A final irony is that Becket, from beyond the grave, has managed at last to transform Henry II from a mere tribal chieftain into a truly powerful monarch.

## Analysis: Dramatic Devices

Although divided into what appear to be four traditional acts, *Becket* more often resembles a series of tableaux, a technique frequently employed in Anouilh's other plays. Breaking with the unities of action, time, and place prescribed by French neoclassicism, the action of *Becket* ranges freely through time and space, taking frequent advantage of techniques borrowed from the cinema, such as flashbacks and split framing. As originally written, the text of *Becket* calls both for horseback scenes and for a scene on open water, although the latter was—perhaps wisely—deleted from the initial Paris production. Anouilh's apparent intent was to create a spectacle of truly epic proportions, suggesting in its very sweep and grandeur the importance of the two main characters to the development of European history. A number of scenes must be set outdoors, and the horseback scene in which the two adversaries confront each other across a freezing plain is difficult to match for sheer dramatic power. Indeed, the scenic prescriptions of *Becket* suffice to strain the resources of the stage, as well as those of potential designers and financial backers.

Even with regard to the dialogue, the text of *Becket* often more closely resembles a film scenario than a stage play: The author's stage directions, incorporated in the printed text, tend to be highly prescriptive as to timing, delivery, and even facial expression, allowing little creative freedom to potential actors and director. Arguably, Anouilh often appears to be directing the play himself, across the printed page, a circumstance which, when added to the numerous complexities of staging, might help to explain why *Becket*, for all of its genuine merits, is seldom revived in production.

## Analysis: Places Discussed

### \*Canterbury Cathedral

\*Canterbury Cathedral. Medieval cathedral located in Canterbury, a city southeast of London. The play both opens and closes at Canterbury Cathedral. The stage directions locate Henry II of England at Becket's tomb at the beginning of the play. The year is 1170. Henry is naked, except for his crown and cloak, and is about to be scourged by monks as punishment for the murder of Becket. That this punishment takes place in the cathedral is particularly important because it symbolizes the power of the Church. Henry's attempt to control not only the state but also the Church through his friend Becket is what has led Henry to this ignominious moment.

The bulk of the play is told in flashbacks and traces the friendship and later the enmity between Henry and Becket. When Henry names Becket Archbishop of Canterbury, Becket turns from being thoroughly the king's man to being God's man.

When the struggles between Henry and Becket reach their peak, Henry asks of his four henchmen if any of them can rid him of Becket. The men take this as a command and go to murder Becket at Canterbury Cathedral, where he is about to celebrate mass.

Because churches are traditionally places of sanctuary, the murder in the cathedral is particularly horrific and leads to serious repercussions for Henry. Within two years, Becket becomes a saint and his tomb in Canterbury Cathedral becomes the site of miracles and pilgrimages. In killing Becket, Henry creates a martyr, and the holiest site in England.

## **Analysis: Historical Context**

### **The Middle Ages**

The historical events on which *Becket* is based took place during the twelfth century, culminating with the death of Becket in 1170. Anouilh openly admits his error in making Becket's Saxon parentage an important thematic device in the play. Historically, Becket was born to a prosperous Norman merchant. Theobald, the archbishop of Canterbury, recommended Becket to Henry as a candidate for chancellor, to which Henry agreed. The two men became fast friends, and Henry even entrusted the education of his son, Henry, to Becket. The boy lived in Becket's household for much of his childhood and youth.

During this time, King Henry was attempting to consolidate power in England under the aegis of the throne. He believed that by further elevating Becket to archbishop of Canterbury he would have Becket's help in reforming the Catholic Church. He was mistaken. In October of 1163, at the Great Council of Winchester, Henry demanded that clerics who committed crimes should be turned over to the royal courts for trial and punishment. Becket stoutly refused, maintaining that the trial and punishment of clerics falls under the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts. Henry was furious. He removed young Henry from Becket's care and confiscated all of Becket's estates. Nonetheless, Becket continued to oppose the king. When, in 1164, Becket refused to accept the Constitutions of Clarendon, Henry declared him a traitor and Becket fled to France. Finally, after a partial reconciliation and with the promise of safe passage, Becket returned to England in December of 1170. Becket continued to oppose the king, however, and Henry, in his court in Normandy, reportedly asked who among his barons would rid him of Becket. Consequently, on December 29, a troop of Henry's men crossed the English Channel, traveled to Canterbury, and assassinated the archbishop Becket while he celebrated mass. This murder outraged public opinion, and Henry found it necessary to do public penance. Becket was quickly canonized by the pope, and the site of his death became the destination for pilgrimages for years to come.

### **Post-WWII France: The Algerian War**

After the Allied victory in World War II in 1945, France set out to reestablish its colonial holdings across the world, most notably in Vietnam and Algeria. Beginning on November 1, 1954, Muslim Algerians rebelled against the French. Ultimately, the Algerians were successful in ridding themselves of the French colonial rule in 1962, but not before the struggle had dire results both in Algeria and in France. By 1958, the war caused civil unrest and economic crisis in France, and the Fourth Republic under Premier Pierre Pflimlin was brought to a standstill. In Algiers, there was a massive riot brought about by the French army who had lost their faith in the government in Paris. Finally, Charles De Gaulle, the World War II war hero, was asked to come out of retirement and become premier. De Gaulle took charge, using extensive emergency powers granted to him by the electorate. The themes of conquest, colonialism, and collaboration played out in *Becket* were deeply influenced not only by the German occupation of World War II but also by the Algerian War.

### **French Existentialism**

Anouilh's work was influenced by a major mid-twentieth-century philosophical movement, existentialism. The existentialists, notably Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, argue that life is an essentially absurd



proposition. That is, the only thing that humans can know is their own existence and that there is no meaning to that existence other than that which humans create individually for themselves. This does not absolve humans from the responsibility of choice. For Sartre, human beings are free to choose. Inherent in this belief is that human beings can always change who they are and their lot in life. The circumstances of one's birth, then, become either challenges or opportunities, depending on one's choices. Anouilh's heroes, most particularly Becket, illustrate this philosophy: It is through Becket's choice to honor God, not God's intervention in Becket's life, that Becket finds meaning in his own life and death.

## Analysis: Literary Style

### Flashback

Anouilh chooses to construct *Becket* through a device known as "flashback." That is, the opening scene chronologically takes place *after* the entire action of the rest of the play. When Henry appears naked on the altar of Canterbury Cathedral, ready to receive his flogging at the hands of the monks, in penance for the murder of Becket, he creates for the audience the rest of the play. As a device, flashback allows a playwright to play with time; events are sequenced as the character remembers them. In addition, the use of flashback allows Anouilh to compress the historical events (which took place over sixteen years) into a series of vignettes or tableaux lasting only the length of the play. Flashback can, however, diminish the element of suspense in a literary work, as the audience knows events before they happen. In some ways, a flashback allows the audience to see into both the past and the future. In *Becket*, suspense is not an issue, since the historical circumstances of Becket's murder are well known. Anouilh, then, uses flashback as a way of focusing the play on the theme of honor. The events of the play are so arranged that the audience watches Becket's growth as a man of honor, already knowing that he dies a martyr. Finally, Anouilh brings closure to his play by ending it with the same scene that opened it, bringing the king full circle to Canterbury.

### Hero

Anouilh also uses the idea of the hero as an organizing device for the play. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, anthropologist Joseph Campbell outlines the basic conventional figures of a heroic story. The heroic story starts with a call, or a mission. In the case of Becket, the call comes in the form of an appointment to the bishopric of Canterbury. Often, heroes are reluctant to heed the call; they often do not want to take on the mission before them. Likewise, Becket makes it clear to Henry that this appointment may prove disastrous. The hero generally has one or more helpers in his mission, sometimes in the form of sidekicks. The young Saxon monk who wants to murder the king serves this role in *Becket*. There is often in a heroic story a struggle between good and evil and between the hero and the villains. In this case, Gilbert Folliot personifies those who would destroy both Becket and his honor. Generally, in the heroic story there is a final battle during which the hero proves triumphant. Here, Anouilh appears to deviate from the pattern; Becket is murdered by the evil barons. Yet for audiences who know the story, Becket's martyrdom becomes a victory in the same way that Christ's martyrdom can be considered a victory: Although Becket dies, the honor of God remains intact.

### Irony

In their *Handbook to Literature* William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman define irony as "the recognition of a reality that is different from appearances." They go on to note that in drama "irony has a special meaning, referring to knowledge held by the audience but hidden from the characters." Irony, then, becomes one of the most important devices used by Anouilh in *Becket*. Indeed, he layers irony upon irony. At the first level, Henry speaks ironically as he recalls his relationship with Becket in the opening scene. Although it would have appeared that Becket would have been the perfect choice for archbishop of Canterbury due to his close friendship with the king, the reality was that as soon as Becket became archbishop, he ceased being the king's friend. There is, however, yet another level of irony present in the play. The king, in the opening scene, knows that Becket has been murdered, and he believes that he has consequently been able to strip Becket of his

power. What he fails to recognize is that in his martyrdom, Becket becomes a stronger force than ever. Canonized by the Catholic Church, St. Thomas à Becket is known as a worker of miracles. Although Henry believes that he has won the day, the play in which he appears is aptly called *Becket*, not *Henry II*.

## Analysis: Compare and Contrast

**1100s:** England, conquered by the Normans in 1066, is populated by an English-speaking Anglo- Saxon majority and a French-speaking Norman ruling class.

**1950s:** England has just survived the Second World War without occupation. France, however, still struggles with the aftermath of German occupation and rule.

**Today:** England and France are both independent countries and strong members of the European community.

**1100s:** The royal governments of both France and England struggle for legal and economic power with the Catholic Church.

**1950s:** After the Reformation of the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, the Church of England is no longer associated with Rome. By the 1950s, the archbishop of Canterbury leads the state-sanctioned Church of England. France, however, continues as a Catholic country and is still influenced by pressures from Rome.

**Today:** Although the Church of England and Catholicism remain the state-sanctioned denominations of the two countries, the populations of both countries have become increasingly secularized.

## Analysis: Media Adaptations

*Becket* was released on film in 1964. The movie starred Richard Burton as Becket and Peter O'Toole as King Henry II and was directed by Peter Glenville. It is available on both VHS and DVD from MPI Home Video.

## Bibliography: Bibliography and Further Reading

### Sources

Anciman, André, Foreword, in *Becket; or the Honor of God*, by Jean Anouilh, translated by Lucienne Hill, Riverhead Books, 1996.

Anouilh, Jean, *Becket; or the Honor of God*, translated by Lucienne Hill, Signet Books, 1960.

Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton University Press, 1972.

Della Fazia, Alba, *Jean Anouilh*, Twayne Publishers, 1969, p. 37.

Gatlin, Jesse C., Jr., "Becket and Honor: A Trim Reckoning," in *Modern Drama*, Vol. 8, No. 3, December 1965, pp. 277–83.

Harmon, William, and C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 8th ed., Prentice Hall, 2000, pp. 203, 277.

McIntyre, H. G., *The Theatre of Jean Anouilh*, Barnes & Noble Publishers, 1981, p. 88.

Pronko, Leonard Cabell, *The World of Jean Anouilh*, University of California Press, 1961, pp. 165–91.

Roy, Emil, "The Becket Plays: Eliot, Fry, and Anouilh," in *Modern Drama*, Vol. 8, No. 3, December 1965, pp. 268–76.

Thody, Philip, *Anouilh*, Oliver & Boyde, 1968, pp. 2, 54.

### Further Reading

Chiari, Joseph, *French Theatre: The Flight from Naturalism*, Gordian Press, 1965. Chiari gives an analysis of modern French theatre and Anouilh's role in that theatre.

Falb, Lewis, *Jean Anouilh*, Ungar Book Publishers, 1977. Falb provides a well-written biographical and critical study of Anouilh's work.

Kelly, Kathleen W., *Jean Anouilh: An Annotated Bibliography*, Scarecrow, 1973. Kelly provides a list of critical articles on Anouilh along with helpful annotations.

Priest, Stephen, ed. *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings* Routledge, 2001. Priest offers a selection of writings by the influential existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre.

Stroupe, John H., "Familial Imagery in Anouilh's Becket," in *Romance Notes*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Fall 1978, pp. 16–21. Stroupe examines the language surrounding family as a metaphor for the relationship between the church and the state.

## Bibliography

Della Fazia, Alba. *Jean Anouilh*. Boston: Twayne, 1969. A thoughtful examination of Anouilh's theater, with good consideration of the costume plays. Discussion of Becket is brief but perceptive.

Falb, Lewis W. *Jean Anouilh*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1977. Good overview of Anouilh's theater, yet slights *Becket* in favor of *The Lark*.

Harvey, John. *Anouilh: A Study in Theatrics*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1964. Correctly distances Anouilh from the thinker-playwrights of his generation, situating him within the tradition of theatricality along with Molière and Shakespeare. Good analysis of the costume plays.

McIntyre, H. G. *The Theatre of Jean Anouilh*. London: Harrap, 1981. Prepared with Anouilh's life work all but complete, McIntyre's study is perhaps the most useful. It finds continuity where others have seen only confusion.

Pronko, Leonard C. *The World of Jean Anouilh*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961. Perhaps the strongest earlier study of Anouilh's theater, including the costume plays. Authoritative on theme and structure in the plays it covers.

Thody, Philip. *Anouilh*, 1968.

# Teaching Guide

## Teaching Guide: Topics for Further Study

Research the conflict between Queen Matilda and King Stephen. How does Henry Plantagenet come to the throne? What political maneuvering takes place to establish his dynasty?

- Find a print of the Bayeux Tapestry, depicting the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Describe scenes pictured there. Why is this tapestry so important? How does Anouilh draw on the conquest of England by the Normans in *Becket*? What liberties does he take with the historical record?
- Research the relationship between Henry II and Thomas Becket as described in two or three historical accounts. What were the most important conflicts between the two? What larger political issues did these conflicts address?
- Read *Murder in the Cathedral* by T. S. Eliot. Compare and contrast Eliot's depiction of the events with Anouilh's. Using key scenes, present staged readings of both works.

## Teaching Guide: What Do I Read Next?

Anouilh's play *L'Allouette (The Lark)* (1952) retells the life of St. Joan of Arc, focusing on her heroism and her refusal to compromise her own beliefs.

Alison Weir's *Eleanor of Aquitaine* (1999) offers an easily readable account of the life of Henry II's queen. Weir details the relationships among Henry, Becket, and Eleanor during the turbulent years of Henry's reign.

*Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings* (1950), written by Amy Kelly, remains an excellent source for insight into the courts of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. The relationship between Henry and Becket as well as the essential conflicts between church and state are well narrated and accessible.

C. N. Smith's *Jean Anouilh: Life, Work, and Criticism* (1985), part of the Authoritative Studies in World Literature series, offers a brief critical biography of Anouilh's work.