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## A STUDY OF CHRISTOPHER FRY'S *CURTMANTLE*

*"Sceptre and crozier clashing, and the mitre  
Grappling with the sword . . ." (Tennyson, Becket)*

There is a true and living  
Dialectic between the Church and the state  
Which has to be argued for ever in good part.  
It can't be broken off or turn'd  
Into a clear issue to be lost or won.

THE HISTORICAL TENSION between the Church and the state, a tension so often seen as embodied in the clash of Henry II and Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, is here voiced near the beginning of Christopher Fry's latest and most ambitious play. *Curtmantle* (given its world première at the Edinburgh Festival, September 4, 1961) presents the story of England—the story of England's "dawning knowledge of herself", as Fry's Henry would have it—between 1158 and 1189, a period stamped stringently with one of the earliest and most significant incidents in the "Dialectic between the Church and the state."<sup>1</sup> If we discount the historical elements in the *Firstborn*, this is Fry's first attempt in the writing of a history play.

In his foreword to the play, Fry touches lightly on some of the problems of the dramatist who seeks to drag "out of a sea of detail a story simple enough to be understood by people who knew nothing of it before; and to do so without distorting the material he has chosen to use." In many of his earlier plays, Fry has not always been able to avoid an indiscriminate handling of plot and structure. Denis Donoghue makes this point in his essay, "Christopher Fry's Theatre of Words" (*Essays in Criticism*, IX, 1959) when he remarks, somewhat extravagantly, that Fry often lacks "discrimination, discipline, the ideas of order and decorum . . . the urge to find relationships, thence order, thence value, in experience." If this is so, as it is to some extent, then we are within reason in suggesting that the writing of

a history play was, to Fry, a severe test of discipline. He comments further in the foreword:

Between these two dates [1154-1189] there is a seething cauldron of events, conflicts, purposes, errors, brilliance, human endurance, and human suffering, which could provide, in those thirty-five years, all that we need for a lifetime's study and contemplation of mankind. No single play could contain more than a splash from the brew. What to use and what to lose out of this feverish concentration of life? How far should fidelity to historical events be sacrificed to suit the theatre? . . . . To try to re-create what has taken place in this world (or, indeed, to write about life at all) is to be faced by the task of putting a shape on almost limitless complexity.

T. S. Eliot approached these same years in a different manner. In *Poetry and Drama* he writes, "I did not want to write a chronicle of twelfth-century politics, nor did I want to tamper with the meagre records as Tennyson did . . . . I wanted to concentrate on death and martyrdom." In form, the two plays can be distinguished here. Fry's play is, in fact, a loosely constructed chronicle of events; Eliot's is an intensive treatment of death and martyrdom. Fry suggested in the foreword that the form of his play was one of "memory and contemplation." The stage, he says, "is William Marshall's mind, as though he were remembering the life of Henry." (This method may have been suggested by Jean Anouilh's use of the "flash-back" in *L'Alouette* and *Becket*.) Yet only three times is the mind of Marshall very important to us, and then he resembles a chorus, which can bustle us through a few years in a moment, rather than a person. As such, the character of Marshall serves well to indicate the important stages of the action. Despite the attempt to create in Marshall's mind a dramatic focus, the play remains as a series of episodes united only by the overriding theme of law, and by the predominating portrait of Henry.

Henry is seen by Fry as "simple and royal . . . direct and paradoxical, compassionate and hard, a man of intellect, a man of action, God-fearing, superstitious, blasphemous, far-seeing, short-sighted, affectionate, lustful, patient, volcanic, humble, overriding." It would appear from this account that Fry was as troubled trying to draw the appropriate "splash" from this "brew" as he was in "shaping" the limitless complexity of events. In fact, Henry appears less complex than Fry's words would suggest; this is because he becomes merged with the theme of law. He is everywhere the strong king, forging for England a "new order" as Becket strives to maintain "the will of God, and the laws and dignity of the Church." In this respect Fry's play resembles Anouilh's *Becket*, which is chiefly concerned with the confrontation of two kinds of power, man's and God's.

*Murder in the Cathedral*, on the other hand, is more sharply focussed, and goes much beyond the immediate concern of either Fry or Anouilh in its examination of martyrdom. Dramatically, Eliot centres all of the "events" of this "seething cauldron" in the mind of Becket, who stands in alarming isolation. Louis L. Martz, in "The Saint as Tragic Hero: *Saint Joan* and *Murder in the Cathedral*",<sup>2</sup> is right in underlining this particular quality of the figure:

Eliot's Becket is a contemplative figure, ascetic, withdrawn to contemplation, holding within his mind and reconciling there alone, the stresses of the world. His immobility is his strength, he is the still point, the centre of the world that moves about him, as his sermon is the centre of the play.

Martyrdom, in *Curtmantle*, is a recorded phenomena, and its manifestation is a changed man. The intense spiritual struggle which Eliot depicted is merely related to us by William Marshall:

. . . he prepares himself to find a success  
Beyond argument, like an act of God.

It is echoed by Eleanor (who, like Marshall, often acts as a discerning chorus):

His argument has become a pure statement,  
Absorbed into the persuasion which men call providence.

Only once does the inner friction of Becket's mind truly manifest itself and play an important part in the drama; this is in the central scene of the play where Fry telescopes the tensions and complications of the Council of Clarendon in 1164.

At this Council the entire area of conflict between Church and state was outlined as Henry attempted to force Becket's consent to the old "customs" which gave the King's court jurisdiction over clerics who committed crimes against the common law. Amy Kelly's account of the respective positions of Henry and Becket is general, but representative of most versions, and it is closely followed by Fry (indeed Fry has made considerable use of the "shape" which Miss Kelly has given to the life and times of Henry in *Eleanor of Aquitaine*):

The King's own mind was single and his course was clear. At Clarendon Henry called on Thomas to assent to the old "customs" of rendering justice as these prevailed "aforetime in the realm." But Becket was every way divided: he owed allegiance to the Pope, for whom conflict with Henry meant the loss of indispensable support; yet more truly than the Pope, he realized that Henry would now reach beyond the "customs" to abridge ecclesiastical rights, such as the appeal to Rome. He hesitated ill at ease, and uncertain to what extent Henry had suborned the Bishops, among whom were some who had opposed his elevation to the primacy.

This scene is one of the most effective in *Curtmantle*. The magnitude of the struggle is registered in the play of distorted shadows in which the affair is depicted; the stage directions suggest the picture:

An unnatural light begins to penetrate the fog. Faces are distorted by it. Shadows gesticulate at a great height above the MEN of the Court, who rage against the PRIESTS, some advancing towards them waving axes. The BISHOPS harry BECKET in extreme anxiety.

This world of change, distortion, and unreality is the vision behind Eleanor's speech to Becket:

Look at the unreality of the light  
 And the unreality of the faces in the light.  
 You and he, you told him, would reach a place  
 Where you might not know what was being made of you,  
 Or understand the conclusion when it came.  
 Certainly the familiar world has departed.  
 A death-world here, where every move  
 Is magnified on to the fog's blind face  
 And becomes the gesture of a giant.

Amid this, Becket grants his consent to the "Fifteen Paragraphs" of Henry's demand; but this consent is soon revoked when he realizes the enormity of the consequences, both as far as he, as a priest, is concerned, and as far as the Church is concerned. Becket's suffering and his eventual isolation in martyrdom are foreshadowed in the following lines:

You see

The pit that's dug for us under the spread branches  
 Dreading that I should be cast out and alone  
 I was leading the Church to a broken back,  
 Betraying all heaven's charge that was entrusted in me:  
 A poverty of spirit please God I never  
 Approach again. Harder the forgiveness  
 Which I now need to find. For now indeed  
 I'm alone. The knowledge of my fault  
 Is my only companion.

Except in this central scene, where the change in Becket determines to some extent the direction of the conflict from this point on, Fry has given the figure of Becket little dramatic vitality. This, I think, diminishes somewhat the interest of the first part of the play. Becket fails to attract attention as a human being, engaged, during this part of the play, in a *human* struggle with Henry. His speeches

are largely colourless statements divorced from the requirements of the play's emotional as well as intellectual *movement*. In these speeches of Becket, Fry seems to relapse into the serious defect found in many of his earlier plays, what Donoghue calls "the spurious rhetoric of 'style'." This defect is observable in the following passages:

As time is contained in eternity  
So is temporal action contained in eternal truth.  
And that truth can't be put at the mercy of time.

What a man knows he has by experience,  
But what a man is precedes experience.  
His experience merely reveals him, or destroys him;  
Either drives him to his own negation,  
Or persuades him to his affirmation, as he chooses.  
The vehement liberty of terror, which ignores our flesh,  
Is not the will,  
But it knows the will, returns to it in calm.  
Even when in rebellion it keeps  
The signature of light.

Such verbal conciseness suits, perhaps, the tightly woven intellectual and emotional pattern of Eliot's *Quartets*, or even the sense of isolation and spiritual intensity found in the Becket of *Murder in the Cathedral*, where the dramatic pattern is more prominently ceremonial and formal; however, its power in *Curtmantle* is not felt within the context of a purely human entanglement of motives and personalities which I take to be the dramatic basis of the Henry-Becket clash during the first part of the play, up to the Council of Clarendon. Becket does not appear "human" enough to justify Eleanor's statement of events when she says:

We shall see the kicks and blows of men in a rage,  
Both losing sight of the cause. The high names  
Of God and the state are now displaced  
By hurt pride, self-distrust, foiled ambition,  
And the rest of our common luggage.

Eleazer Lecky, in his article "Mystery in the Plays of Christopher Fry"<sup>3</sup>, suggests that Fry's emphasis on mystery (which is certainly an important theme throughout his work) sometimes leads him to "exaggerate the importance of one source of dramatic interest at the expense of an even more important one—the changing tensions within and between people . . . . Fry's characters awaken our interest in the unique properties of an experience, but sometimes they neglect to make them rele-

vant to the enveloping action." As far as *Curtmantle* is concerned, this criticism has validity when we examine the character of Becket in the first part of the play. The creation of a dramatic form which embodies language as an integral part of meaning and structure has not been Fry's achievement. This failure explains, to a large measure, the failure of Becket as a dramatic figure in *Curtmantle*.

In the important scene of the Council of Clarendon, however, because of the complex of tensions (reflected in the shadowy distortions of the various groups on the stage) and because it is here that Becket's position acquires spiritual intensification, Becket rises in stature and we truly sense something of "considerable moment", as Marshall interprets it. From this point on, the great issues are released, and

no longer controlled by men  
Themselves take over the command.

There is, from here until the end of the play, the working of a "universal argument" which transcends human comprehension and control. This later movement of action was presaged by Becket soon after Henry's offer of the primacy:

You're dividing us, and what is more, forcing  
Yourself and me, indeed the whole kingdom,  
Into a kind of intrusion on the human mystery,  
Where we may not know what it is we're doing,  
What powers we are serving, or what is being made of us.  
Or even understand the conclusion when it comes.  
Delivering us up, in fact, to universal workings  
Which neither you nor I wish to comply with  
Or even to contemplate.

It is within this larger perspective that Fry now directs the action. He depicts the tragedy, not of Becket, who is "absorbed into the persuasion which men call providence" (an absorption which does not, in *Curtmantle*, contain anything of the tragic mood evident in Eliot's handling of Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral*), but of Henry, who suffers both as an agency of earthly power and as a victim of the conflict which arises from, yet transcends, the limitations of that power. His awareness of this dual aspect of his suffering, a feeling of responsibility associated closely with a feeling of powerlessness in the face of events he had hoped to control, informs his cry after the departure of the Four Knights—which signifies the inevitable death and martyrdom of Becket:

Dear Christ, the day that any man would dread  
 Is when life goes separate from the man,  
 When he speaks what he doesn't say, and does  
 What is not his doing . . .

the unattended

Moment sweeps away the whole attempt,  
 The heart, thoughts, belief, longing  
 And intention of the man. It is infamous,  
 This life is infamous, if it uses us  
 Against our knowledge or will.

At the very moment of his secular victory, Henry suffers spiritual death: the world for him becomes "Foul and corrupt . . . contagious. All due for death."

Fry is not endeavouring to resolve in any way the "universal argument" between Church and state. The argument remains as a "true and living dialectic . . . Which has to be argued for ever in good part." It is just this irresolution, however, that informs, yet transcends, the tragic substance of Henry's position. As A. C. Bradley suggests in his study of Hegel,<sup>4</sup> mere human suffering is not enough for tragedy; it must come of a special kind of "tragic conflict." Bradley's account of this conflict suits the conditions of *Curtmantle*:

The essentially tragic fact is the self-division and intestinal warfare of the ethical substance [powers that rule the world of man's will and action] not so much the war of good with evil as the war of good with good.

Tragedy is the outcome when each side, justified within itself, makes claims on the other which belong rightly to neither. "The end of the tragic conflict", Bradley continues, "is the denial of both the exclusive claims. It is not the work of chance or blank fate; it is the act of the ethical substance itself, asserting absoluteness against the excessive pretensions of its particular powers." The inevitability of paradox, of opposites stationed, from the human point of view, in a mysterious and insecure balance, is a concept central to much of the work of Fry. (Fry avoids the dogmatism of Claudel, yet, like Claudel, he perceives the strength, in Christianity, and in art, of the principle of contradiction.<sup>5</sup>)

In *Curtmantle*, the outcome of Henry's demands for "absolute sway" is the separation of life from the man. A new world of justice arises through the efforts of Henry; as Roger says late in the play to a delirious and dying Henry,

Sir, believe what you've accomplished.  
 Your laws are fixed on England . . .

The people have become  
 Their own law, in the twelve men representing them.  
 Unparalleled in Christendom, this new nature of the island.

But this "good" was created at the expense of another kind of "good." The synthesis, a balanced "ethical substance", is envisaged by Eleanor yet is impossible of achievement once "sides" overreach certain "human" limitations. As the quarrel begins to grow, she warns Henry:

Consider complexity, delight in difference.  
 Fear, for God's sake, your exact words.  
 Do you think that you can draw lines on the living water?  
 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. Neither of you  
 Will dare to understand it.

## II

The above analysis is, of course, a simplification of the action of *Curtmantle*, but it serves to illustrate the pre-eminent thematic structure of the play. Considering the main theme as the "universal argument" of Church and state, and the relationship of this "living dialectic" to the actions of men and to mankind's awareness of the full consequences of action, the play falls into two major parts. The first movement leads up to the Council of Clarendon; the second phase depicts the political and human consequences of the struggle which, from here on, possesses qualities which transcend active human control. During the first part of the play, Henry's concern is the creation of a "fair and governable England. One justice, not two." His enemies are the

crozier-clutching monkeys  
 Ramming home their shutters against the common  
 Light of day.

At the Council of Clarendon, however, Becket acquires the greater initiative, and the quarrel is lifted more prominently on to the spiritual level. The "crozier-clutching monkeys" become Becket, who becomes "the persuasion which men call providence." The appointment of Becket as Archbishop was a matter of statesmanship, but also a crucial misjudgment of character. The extent and importance of the division which resulted from this misjudgment was foreseen by Becket, but Henry was blinded by his vision of a new and mighty world. Marshall's summary of the events suggests the imperious quality of Henry's action:



What was one had become two. The simple and reasonable action, at the moment it came to life, was neither simple nor limited to reason. There it is. The logic of the events has never been argued in the schools, as far as I know. There was the morning full of life, like an unbroken colt; but the moment the King, with a good will and strong knees, got astride it, God only knows what whistle it was answering; but it made history, whatever that is . . . .

Fry is more successful in this play in creating a fabric of imagery which does not, as in earlier plays, perform some sort of autonomous function outside the cross-currents of theme and action. The general movement just described is reflected in the tendency of the imagery from the clear, bright "morning full of life", a morning, as Eleanor says, when "every man in London appears to be smiling . . . . As though there were something of obscene pleasure in the world outside", towards the sensations of obscurity and division reflected in the fog imagery of the second act, where we see and hear (Eleanor again speaking),

Only sounds and voices, and half creations of the fog  
Which move like men but fade like spirits.

This movement is climaxed in the expressionistic play of distorted shadows which, as we have noted, constitutes the dramatic atmosphere of the Council of Clarendon:

A death world here, where every move  
Is magnified on to the fog's blind face  
And becomes the gesture of a giant.

This fog becomes a winter darkness as Henry suffers a spiritual death at the close of Act II, when "life goes separate from the man" and he hears "the ice creaking on the river" and "the horses on the frozen roads." Experiencing self-mortification after the death of Becket, Henry's "unbroken colt" and the "morning full of life" become perpetual night:

you never know,  
Crouching in prayers in this holy cellar,  
Whether the light has broken  
Or the night's as dark as ever.

Images of light appear again upon the entrance of Eleanor; at her court in the land of Poitou she proposes a third kind of law and peace:

There we can make laws for poets, and govern  
As music governs itself within,  
By the silent order whose speech is all visible things.  
And we shall make laws for sport and love,  
And put a little light in the eyes of Europe.

The concluding images are those of heat; the burning of Le Mans, the King's birth-place, becomes, to Henry, God's final action on his soul, as well as an act for which he must assume partial responsibility:

I've seen what God's mind is.  
 He knew I loved this city,  
 He knew if he ever looked into my heart,  
 He knew I loved the city I was born in . . .

I have burned away my city, I have burned away  
 My own beginning, the one place in the world  
 Where memory could return untroubled . . .

I meant the fire to save us! Do you think I kneel  
 To a God who can turn a brutal wind  
 To eat us up in fire?

Midst the fire, Henry's final cry is a challenge to God, as his appointment of Becket was, on that bright London morning, a challenge to "crozier-clutching monkeys."

Despite the relative success of this integration of the central images with the principal *phases* of the play's action, Fry's dramatic verse (as I suggested earlier with regard to the character of Becket) does not fully succeed in revealing the inner tensions of the characters; the human confrontation of Becket and Henry is to some extent blunted because of this, and so is the Henry-Eleanor relationship, which is, in this play, of considerable importance. Eleanor's vision of the world has its place in the thematic structure of the play, but it is often expressed as pure statement, at times, as we have seen, as a sort of choric commentary. Such commentary fails to embody the "inner shaping of the character", as Fry terms it in an essay, "Talking of Henry" (see note 5). Fry seems to be aware of the various problems to be met in the writing of verse drama for the contemporary stage,<sup>6</sup> yet he has not surmounted the most challenging of these problems, which is the matter of fashioning a medium entirely suitable to the speaking voice and, beneath the speaking voice, the more subtle movements of thought and emotion.

In *Curtmantle*, much of the desultory and reckless tendency found in the verse of the earlier plays (considered by some as a virtue in a theatre ripe for the introduction of poetic "ebullience", by others as a serious defect, the product of an imagination too superficial and irresponsible to be taken seriously) is toned down. The more frugal quality seen in the verse of *The Dark is Light Enough* is, it would seem, the starting point for the pattern of the present play. In "Talking of Henry",

Fry touches on the problem of the dramatist's development in the use of verse in the contemporary theatre: "As there is", he suggests, "no established tradition of verse in the theatre, you have to start to make it every time you start a play: not only creating the finished article, as it were, but also the tool you're going to create it with." This absence of an established tradition is perhaps the most serious problem facing the dramatist who elects to use verse as the dramatic medium. Fry has not succeeded, in *Curtmantle* (nor has he in his earlier plays), in establishing a verse form that suits his dramatic ends. Indeed, no single modern playwright has had great success in this attempt. Furthermore, the kind of drama being talked about now—the drama of Becket, Ionesco, Pinter, and Albee—suggests a completely different attitude towards language, a great respect for which lies at the heart of Fry's notions of poetic drama. As R. J. Kaufman points out ("On the Newness of the New Drama"),<sup>7</sup> the subject of the new drama is "the suffering culture itself", and language, a part of this culture, shares in the general malady.<sup>8</sup>

Like that of Giraudoux, Fry's theatre is essentially a theatre of language; both authors have written in defence of the supremacy of language in the theatre, and both make similar use of language as a means of *defining* positions in a dramatic conflict which often takes the form of a "debate". (Giraudoux's influence on Fry is, I think, especially noticeable since Fry's translation of *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*.) Around the same time that Giraudoux was formulating his ideas of the theatre, however, Antonin Artaud was coming to quite different, indeed opposite, conclusions. Artaud urged the recovery in the Western theatre of a "concrete physical language." This "physical language", he asserted, would permit "the substitution, for a poetry of language, of a poetry in space which will be resolved in precisely the domain which does not belong strictly to words."<sup>9</sup> The theories of Artaud lie at the basis of many recent developments in drama, whereas the ideas of Giraudoux, and to a lesser extent, those of Anouilh, are fundamental to the concepts and practice of Fry. Thus the search for a modern "poetic drama" runs along two different courses, and these two courses can be distinguished according to the respective views of language as the basis of dramatic communication.

In *Curtmantle*, Fry has succeeded in presenting a portrait of Henry as a tragic figure; his vitality rests, however, not so much upon what Fry has captured of his personality as upon his relationship to the theme of law (God's and man's) which is, for the most part, well defined and effectively integrated with the play's structure. As "poetic drama", however, the play is weakened, as all of Fry's plays are weakened, by the use of diction and rhythm which have little concrete immediacy. There is, in *Curtmantle*, the dramatic tension of contradictory definitions, to which kind

of tension, we might say, Fry's language accommodates itself. It fails, however, to communicate those realities which lie outside the province of *words*, and which are basic in human nature. Fry's language continues to blur and conceal the "human image" rather than illuminate it.

## NOTES

1. The primary material dealing with the personalities of the two chief figures and the issues raised during the course of their conflict is to be found in the seven-volume *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket*, ed. J. C. Robertson and P. B. Sheppard (1875-1885). See also E. A. Abbott's *St. Thomas of Canterbury* (London, 1898), Mrs. J. R. Green's *Henry the Second* (London, 1892)—cited by Fry as his "starting place", and Amy Kelly's *Eleanor of Aquitaine* (Boston, 1950).
2. *Tragic Themes in Western Literature*, ed. Cleanth Brooks (New Haven, 1955).
3. *Tulane Drama Review* (March, 1960), pp. 80ff.
4. *Oxford Lectures in Poetry* (London, 1909).
5. See David I. Grossvogel's examination of this notion in *The Self-Conscious Stage in Modern French Drama* (New York, 1958), pp. 160ff. For a study of Fry and Claudel as Christian dramatists in a non-Christian age, see the essay by David Bulwer Lytyens, "The Dilemma of the Christian Dramatist: Paul Claudel and Christopher Fry", *Tulane Drama Review* (Summer, 1962), pp. 118 ff. Some of Mr. Lytyen's ideas concerning Fry as a Christian artist appear sound; however, his examination of Fry's poetry within this religious context is entirely superficial and promiscuous. What may be considered Fry's answer to some of the points made by Lytyens can be found in his essay, "Talking of Henry", *The Twentieth Century* (February, 1961), pp. 185 ff.
6. See, for example, Fry's *An Experience of Critics* (London, 1952), pp. 26-7.
7. *Tulane Drama Review*, Summer, 1962.
8. See Ionesco, "The Tragedy of Language", *Tulane Drama Review* (Spring, 1960). For a useful study of the "new drama", see Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York, 1961).
9. Antonin Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double* (Paris, c. 1938). Translated by Mary Caroline Richards as *The Theatre and its Double* (New York, 1958).