

Becket, or the Honor of God Study Guide

Becket, or the Honor of God by Jean Anouilh

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Plot Summary

Before his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket's loyalties are to the King. He fights as a soldier in the King's wars, and offers advice to the King. He also helps the King arrange for the Church of England to pay some taxes to the throne, which the Church balks at forcefully. Becket, by the end of Act One, reveals his loyalty is an opportunistic loyalty; he is not exactly sure where his honor lies in life. While in the King's employ, he does serve the King well.

Thomas Becket is appointed as the Archbishop of Canterbury in Act Two of the play. The predecessor Archbishop has died and King Henry wishes to control the Church by having his own man in place at the helm of the Church. That man is Thomas Becket. Becket at first is very apprehensive about taking on this role and great responsibility. When he does relent, he embraces the position whole-heartedly. He renounces his riches and former lifestyle. Becket embarks on a journey of discovery about himself and what he must do to further the honor of God. This furthers the main conflict in the play; Becket will defend the honor of God, while the King defends the honor of the realm.

In Act Three, King Henry takes ruthless action against Becket's priests. This is in retaliation against Becket, who excommunicated three of the King's officials. King Henry laments the deterioration of his relationship with Becket. He feels betrayed by Becket's allegiance to God and the Church of England. Becket has a new purpose in life, and at the expense of his past friendship with the King is committed to his goal of defending the honor of God. Both men employ tactics to advance their ideologies.

In Act Four, both men come to a better understanding of each other's position when they have a face-to-face meeting on a vast plain. However, this understanding does not make either one back down from their position. Therefore, the plot reaches its inevitable conclusion; without compromise, there must be a confrontation - one side will win, while the other loses. The King of England, by indirect order, is ultimately responsible for the murder of Thomas Becket. While he mourns for his murdered friend, he also knows he has secured his position as leader of the kingdom.



Act One

Summary

Two Sentries, followed by King Henry II of England enter the cathedral; a Page follows at a distance. The King is wearing his crown and a cloak – he proceeds to stand before the tomb of Thomas Becket. The King drops his cloak and falls, naked, to his knees, to pray before this tomb. He is talking to the tomb.

Thomas Becket, in his Archbishop of Canterbury robes, enters at the side, as an apparition. He talks softly to the praying King. The King says Thomas Becket taught him the slogan "In all save the honor of the realm." Becket says he answered to the King, "All save the honor of God." The King talks about their time together as younger men, when they enjoyed a few fine summer evenings together with girls. The King asks Becket if he hated the King when the King took Becket's woman, Gwendolen, from him. The King believes for this Becket could never forgive him; Becket says he has forgotten this. Becket tells the King to continue praying and not talk so much.

Becket disappears into the darkness as the King speaks. The King says he has come to make his peace with the peoples' Saint, Thomas Becket. He needs to have the people on his side as he tries to thwart the efforts of his son, who he believes will take over his kingdom. Becket appears and draws aside a curtain to reveal the King's room. The scene shifts into the past when the King and Becket were younger. Becket is dressed as a young nobleman. He speaks of his devotion to the King – to serve him faithfully in all ways. The King responds others have said (upon hearing the King was taking Becket into his service) he would knife the King one day.

The scene shifts to the Privy Council meeting in the Council Chambers. The King indicates he wants to discuss the issue of taxation with the Church of England. The King wants to settle the issue of who rules the kingdom – the King or the Church, and he wants the Church to pay taxes to finance the King's wars. The King announces he has revived the office of Chancellor of England – keeper of the Triple Lion Seal. He bestows this office on Thomas Becket. Becket is surprised and he feels he is not worthy - that he's too young and maybe frivolous. The King tells the Council Becket is a thinker.

The Archbishop of Canterbury salutes Becket, his archdeacon. The Archbishop believes Becket's new appointment will gain the Church favor with the throne. The Church leadership is balking at the idea of having to pay taxes. The Bishop of Oxford, the Bishop of York, and the Bishop of London are present at this meeting. However, Becket is siding with the King, saying that England is his Mother now. The Bishop of London wants Becket excommunicated from the Church, he wants to render him ineffective in his endeavors to serve the King and advance the King's agenda. Becket is insolent towards the clergy present at the meeting and the Archbishop feels Becket is searching for his real self.



The scene shifts to the Hunt. The King and Becket are in the countryside hunting with hawks. They talk, and the King wants to know if Becket loves him. The King also wants to know if Becket loves Gwendolen. She is Becket's mistress. Becket doesn't give a straight answer to either inquiry. A deluge of rain descends on the region and the men seek shelter in the hut of a Saxon peasant. The King informs Becket he loves him. The King decides he wants something to drink and asks Becket to find something. Becket leaves. The King proceeds to examine the hut and finds a kind of trapdoor at the foot of a wall and reaches in and pulls out a girl. He calls for Becket to come back in, and Becket does so. Becket says the girl is pretty. The girl is terrified by them.

Her father then enters the hut. The King grabs hold of the girl and she tries to run away. Next, the girl's brother enters the hut. Becket does not have a good feeling about the brother; he lures the brother outside to help him fetch some juniper juice he has in his saddlebag. This is a ploy to get the boy's knife away. He hurls himself onto the boy to get the knife away. The boy escapes into the forest. Becket cuts his hand in this incident. He goes back into the hut and tells the King his hand is hurt because his horse bit him. The King says he will present Becket with a gift in the evening. He will tell everyone Becket defended him against a wild boar. Becket indicates he would like the pretty girl as a gift. The King likes her as well. He says favor for favor – Becket can have the girl. The King leaves. Becket tells the father no one will come and take the daughter away. Becket departs. The girl says to her father she thinks Becket is handsome. The father calls her a whore and savagely beats her.

The scene shifts to Becket's palace. In the background, there are the silhouettes of guests enjoying a banquet. Gwendolen sits playing music on a stringed instrument in Becket's chambers. As they talk, Gwendolen's deep love for Becket is apparent. He says he doesn't like being loved- -he's apprehensive. The King enters the room. He tells Becket to go quiet the banqueters who are jostling over a new invention Becket has brought them – forks. The King goes to Gwendolen; he talks to her, caresses her, and she's ill at ease with this.

Becket and four Barons reenter the room as the King has summoned them. The King wants Gwendolen to perform some music for them all. The King goes to Gwendolen when she finishes her song and caresses her again. The King asks for his 'favor for favor' wish. He wants Becket to give up Gwendolen to him. Becket, having refused to back down on his word, relents, and gives up Gwendolen. She is terrified at this. The King exits. Gwendolen talks with Becket, and he says, answering her question, he will not take her back if the King sends her away tomorrow. Gwendolen says Becket cares for nothing in the whole world and Becket agrees he doesn't. He says there's a gap in him where honor ought to be. Gwendolen exits to go to the King.

Unbeknownst to Becket, the King has arranged for the peasant girl from the hut to be brought to Becket. She is brought in and she recognizes Becket and smiles, as she desires him. Becket doesn't want her now. The King abruptly comes stumbling in. He informs Becket that upon lying down with Gwendolen she took out a little knife and killed herself. The King is in shock. He sends the girl out as he has decided he will sleep in Becket's room tonight.



The King lies down to sleep and Becket lies beside him, covering the King with a coverlet. Becket says they will face the King of France's army in a week. As Becket lies beside the King, who is now sleeping, he talks aloud of how he cheated his way into the King's ranks. He talks of how he will serve the King as long as he is obliged to improvise his honor. Becket wonders where his honor is.

Analysis

The play begins with King Henry II of England remorseful over the death of Thomas Becket. The play reveals early on the experiences these two men shared. They engaged in carousing together, late nights, drinking, and such. At the beginning, the hint of friction is apparent though; the King talks of saving the honour of the realm, while Becket talks of saving the honour of God. Furthermore, foreshadowing of trouble occurs when the King talks about taking Becket's mistress, Gwendolen, from him.

The King's trouble with the Church of England is at the forefront of the story. A conflict of interest is readily apparent here, as Thomas Becket, an archdeacon in the Church, now has a high position in the King's government. The King wants tax money from the Church. The Church wants to rely on Becket's influence, but Becket declares his loyalty to the King. This does not sit well with the Church, and the seeds of discord and confrontation are planted.

Act One brings forth the complicated nature of Thomas Becket. He devoted time to the Church, but is willing to serve the King, and while dubious, does accept the new role King Henry II has for him. He declares his loyalty to the King, while others are unsure of his loyalty and conveyed that message to the King upon his appointing Becket to his service. Becket claims Gwendolen is his mistress, but he does give her up without much of a fight and says he would not take her back. He also fancies the peasant girl, and then seems uninterested when she is brought to him – as if Gwendolen's departure to the King is weighing on his mind ponderously.

Additionally, Becket, at the end of Act One, reveals his deceitfulness in his dealings, and it is obvious he is putting on an act when it comes to his honour for the King. Becket is truly searching to find out what is important to him, what he really stands for, as the Archbishop so accurately surmised. Becket does not know where his honour lies and this indicates he has some soul-searching to do in his life. It's apparent his forthcoming decisions will cause turmoil in relation to his dealings with King Henry II and the Church of England.

Vocabulary

amorphous, blithely, contrived, frivolous, preponderant, venial, belligerent, mutinous, excommunication, cravenly, insinuations, inviolable, coercion, sycophant, intransigence, prudence, insolent, impudence, gauntleted, obtuse, trollop, condescends, inscrutably, maliciously, aesthetics



Act Two

Summary

Act Two opens on a forest in France. The four Barons of the King crouch around a campfire. The King's tent is among the trees and he's inside. A Baron queries the others as to who this Thomas Becket is – who is he really as a man. The Baron asks this because he confides he doesn't like Becket. Another Baron replies he doesn't like Becker either. However, they do agree Becket is a good fighter – a good soldier for the King's army's battle against the French army.

Another of the four Barons' says he's waiting for Becket to show himself, to reveal his true self. Becket approaches the four Barons and asks them if the King is still asleep. He informs them he needs to wake the King, so the King can get ready for their entry into the city and their subsequent meeting with the French Bishop and his clergy. The King and his army have won the battle with the French at a great cost of life. Now, the King wants to affirm the English conquerors are in good grace with the populace. He seeks to do this via his meeting with the French Bishop.

Becket opens the flap to look into the King's tent. He sees the King's in bed with a girl. Becket needs to have a meeting with the King so he goes inside and sits on the bed with him. The girl, a French one, sits in between the two men. The King asks if Becket loves the people of England. Then the King states Becket doesn't love anything or anybody. Becket states he loves doing what he has to do and doing it well.

Becket tells the King reports from London indicate the clergy of the Church are growing more powerful. He warns the King if the situation is left unchecked there will be two rulers of England – the King and the Church – then eventually, just the Church. This is a possibility even though they did succeed in getting the Church to pay some taxes. Becket says the Church realizes paying a little tax pacifies the throne. He says the Church will make sure they get back what they give. The King sends the French girl out of the tent. The King decides to prepare for his meeting with the French Bishop.

Two soldiers arrive, escorting a little Monk. They enter the King's tent. The Monk's hands are tied. He's been found loitering around the camp and he had a knife under his robe. The Monk wounded a sergeant as soldiers tried to take the knife away from him. Becket tells the soldiers to leave the Monk with him. The soldiers move away out of earshot. Becket questions the Monk. The Monk is from Hastings in England. This is Becket's jurisdiction as Chancellor of England.

The Monk alludes to the fact he came with a single small knife to kill the King. Becket tells the Monk he wants to keep him alive so they can continue their conversation another day. Becket calls in the Provost Marshall. Becket orders the Monk be sent back to England and be placed in a convent where he can be kept under supervision until Becket gets back to England. There is no charge against the Monk at this point.



The scene shifts to the French city. The King and Becket advance into the city on horseback. They ride through the cheering crowds along with their entourage. Becket paid some of the poorer populace to be there to liven up the procession. He has also made sure some of the King's soldiers are interspersed throughout the crowd as well, to promote the liveliness of the crowd. The King calls Becket amoral for fixing the crowd this way.

The scene shifts to the interior of the cathedral in the city. The King, the Barons, a Priest, and a Choirboy wait for Becket in the sacristy of the cathedral. Becket comes in; he informs the King a French uprising was about to break out during the King's ceremony with the French Bishop. He says the King is safe in the sacristy, and adds he has put guards on all the doors. Becket has also called for extra troops to enter the city. He's also having the cathedral evacuated. Becket goes out to supervise the evacuation.

The King receives notification that William of Corbeil has arrived from London with urgent letters. The King glances through the letters. Becket comes back in. The King tells him the urgent news is that the Archbishop of Canterbury is dead. Becket seems remorseful. He says the Archbishop was a true father to him. The King is happy the Archbishop is dead. The King informs Becket he has the right to choose who he wants to be Archbishop if he finds another candidate displeasing. This right is called the Royal Hand. The King doesn't have to let a free election of an Archbishop proceed.

The King announces to Becket he wants Becket to take over as the new Archbishop of Canterbury. Becket is shocked at this announcement. He tells the King he cannot be his friend if he becomes Archbishop. Becket says he cannot serve both God and the King. Both men proceed into the cathedral and to their meeting with the French Bishop and his clergy.

The scene is now later – in Becket's room. Servants are packing up Becket's wardrobe. The wardrobe is to be sold and the money given to the poor. Becket enters his room wearing a plain grey dressing gown. He relates he is holding a banquet in the evening for the poor and he wants them treated this night as one treats princes. Becket feels joy in giving away all his riches. He changes into a monk's woolen robes and dons sandals. He doesn't regret parting with anything. He finds all of this so easy to do and he asks God if He is tempting him. Becket drops to his knees and prays.

Analysis

Act Two reveals more about the true character of Thomas Becket and King Henry II. This revelation hints at greater conflict undoubtedly to arise between the two men. The talk between the Barons indicates Becket is not liked by all. Their talk does show Becket is a brave man who will risk his life to defend King and country against the French army. When one Baron says he's waiting for Becket to reveal his true colors it indicates Becket may be putting on false airs in some of his dealings with others. This presents Becket as a puzzling, contradictory person.



More of Becket's character (or at the very least what others perceive as his character) is revealed when the King says Becket is amoral, and that Becket loves no one or no thing. Becket's contradictory way is highlighted when he confronts the little Monk. The Monk hints he was there to kill the King. Becket doesn't tell the King and doesn't have the Monk charged. He has him sent back to England as he wants to talk to him at some future time. Does Becket have plans for the Monk? Does he need to obtain more information from the Monk for future use?

Becket seeks to protect the King from a French uprising, but it's puzzling that he does not have the Monk punished for his plot. In addition, when Becket is ordered by the King to take the position of Archbishop of Canterbury, Becket readily gives away his riches to assume his new responsibilities. He has no second thoughts about doing so – he is making a significant change in his lifestyle. He will now have to give his all to his new position, and this foreshadows trouble he will have with the King, inasmuch Becket has already said he cannot serve God and the King.

The King is revealed as a wily ruler in Act Two. He understands the wisdom in gaining favor with the French Bishop, which will help him win favor with the citizenry he has just conquered. The King is a ruler watching for any advantage to keep his hold on power secure, and his conquests in line. The King's character as a womanizer and lover of pleasure is apparent in this Act as well. He takes a young French Girl as a lover even while he is pursuing conquests – this is just a conquest of another sort.

The King's desire always to have the upper hand in all his dealings is made more apparent with his decision to appoint Thomas Becket as the Archbishop of Canterbury. He knows if he has his man in place as Church leader then his position is more secure; he can advance his agenda without trouble. If he controls the man, he controls the Church. However, Act Two indicates he may have trouble controlling Thomas Becket.

Vocabulary

placidly, repulsive, platoons, sententiously, conjuring, flippant, dishevelled, venomously, imbecilic, vintage, polyglot, acclamations, amoral, immoral, virility, sacristy, provocation, guffaws, infinitely, edifying, unction, compunction, alms, impeccable



Act Three

Summary

Act Three opens in a room in the King's palace. Present are the King, the Queen Mother, the Young Queen and the King's two sons. The adults talk of Becket. The Queen Mother says the King misplaced his confidence when he placed it with Becket. The King defends his actions saying Becket is ten times more intelligent than all of them put together. The Queen Mother says she never liked Becket. She's wary of Becket acting so saintly so abruptly. The King says Becket is his friend; he's waiting for a meeting with Becket.

The King and his Queen argue. She says Becket lured the King away from her and to the warehouses. An Officer enters and informs the King that a messenger from Archbishop Becket has arrived. The King is enraged – he summoned Becket (The Archbishop Primate) to come in person. The King tells the Officer to send the messenger in. A Monk enters; he is William, secretary to Becket. The Monk gives the King a letter and the seal (the three Lions of England) that the King had previously given to Becket. The Monk leaves. The King is distraught over the letter. He orders the two Queens and the children away. He moans for Thomas Becket, whom he believes now doesn't love him even though the King moans he would have done anything to defend Becket. Now, the King says he will learn to live alone.

The scene is now in a church. The King is waiting behind a pillar in a dark cloak. The Bishop of London enters, followed by his clergy. The King tells the Bishop he would like to make a confession. The Bishop motions the clergy away. The King tells the Bishop he repents of his mistake of ordering the Bishop to vote for Becket as Archbishop of Canterbury. The King tells the Archbishop his friendship with Becket is dead, and he hates Becket now. The King needs to work with the Bishop now. He alludes he will make sure some of the taxes the Church pays finds its way back to the Church via the Bishop. He tells the Bishop if the Bishop helps him, he helps the Church at the same time. The King moans for Becket however, admitting he does really still love the man. The King tells the Bishop he will pay him to rid the King of Becket.

The scene is now the Episcopal palace. A Priest, two Monks, and the Little Monk from Hastings enter. Becket is going to meet the little Monk as previously planned. Becket enters and dismisses the two Monks, but the Priest stays. Becket asks the Priest to send in the Bishops. The Bishop of London says Becket insisted on attacking the King openly in defiance of all the Bishops wishes. Becket excommunicated three officials of the King's government. They notify Becket he has received a summons to appear before the Grand Justicer. Becket has twenty-four hours to appear in order to answer the charges against him. The King has accused Becket of prevarication.

The King is demanding 40,000 marks in fine gold, which he says is owed from Becket's time as administrator of the Treasury. Becket believes they have altered the books to



come up with this charge against him. The King is striking back at Becket for the excommunications. Becket says that the King had one of Becket's priests murdered and another indicted. Becket says he won't let the King attack his priests and try them in a secular tribunal. Becket conveys he was a worldly man but is now a defender of the Church. He stands by his decisions on the excommunications issue and says he will appear before the Court of Justice. The Bishops leave, surprised at Becket's decisions. Becket and the little Monk leave.

The King enters followed by the Bishop of London. The Bishop tells the King Becket has not appeared for his date with the Court even after three summonses. He says in a moment Becket will be condemned 'in absentia'. The King moans for Becket again. The Bishop says it's not too late to stop the attack against Becket. The King, torn, still wants to proceed with his plan against Becket. The Bishop leaves and the two Queens come in. The young Queen gloats at Becket's impending doom. The King is furious with her. He says Becket has betrayed him but Becket is better than she and is responsible for all that is good in the King. He says, except for the Queen Mother giving him life, neither of the women gave him anything in life. He says only Becket has loved him.

A Page enters. He relates Becket did show up at the Court. Becket was in full pontifical regalia. Becket forbade the Council from pronouncing judgment on him, and then left. The Page says Becket is having a dinner at his house this evening for the city's beggars. The Queen Mother says Becket must be stopped before he seeks asylum in France through King Louis.

The scene shifts to France in the Court of King Louis. The King of France sits on his throne. The King of England's ambassadors have arrived in France to meet King Louis. The Bishop of London and the Duke of Arundel enter the Court. The Bishop reads a letter from King Henry stating Becket has been found guilty of fraud, perjury, and treason against the King and he is a traitor. King Louis says a reply to the letter will be drafted and delivered tomorrow. He says he has no knowledge of Becket being in France despite the Bishop of London saying he is in France. King Louis dismisses the Bishop and the Duke. He then orders a Baron to send Becket in. Becket comes in and the Baron leaves. Becket and the King are alone. Becket states he's in exile. King Louis assures Becket he grants him protection. Becket says he intends to go to Rome to see the Pope. The King warns him to be careful of the Pope.

The scene shifts to a room in Rome. The Pope and a Cardinal are together. King Henry of England has offered the Pope 3,000 silver marks for Becket. The Cardinal advises the Pope to take the money and at the same time meet with Becket. Becket has been waiting in Rome for a month, wishing to meet the Pope. The Cardinal wants the Pope to play both ends against the other. The Pope says Becket's here to have himself relieved of his duties as Archbishop of Canterbury, whom the Pope controls. Becket says his election was not a free one; to honour God properly, without taint, he just wants to be a priest. The Cardinal says the Pope should relieve Becket of his duties – thus eliminating the taint – then reinstate him the proper way. The Cardinal advises the Pope to send Becket to a French Convent.



The scene is now a cell – Becket and the little Monk are in it. Becket prays; the little Monk plays with a knife. Becket talks to the Lord trying to get answers. He acknowledges God is not a respecter of persons – he looks upon the rich and poor the same. Becket decides he will continue on as Archbishop of Canterbury and go back to England and fight the King face-to-face.

Analysis

Act Three highlights the King's inner turmoil concerning Thomas Becket. Evident is his love for and need of Becket and his fury at Becket for betraying him. In this Act, the audience also gains more insight into what others think about Becket. The Queen Mother reveals she never liked the man. Also evident in this Act is the less-than harmonious marriage relationship between King Henry and the Young Queen. It's obvious the King has been habitually unfaithful to the Queen. The Act also highlights the King's feelings concerning those close to him; he believes none of his family has loved him or given him anything worthwhile. He believes only Becket has given him anything in life and the King's loneliness comes through in Act Three.

The King's connivances to have nothing erode his grip on the Kingdom are evident as well. He is revealed as a shrewd monarch as he seeks to influence the Bishop of London in order to advance his plans against Becket. The King, while lamenting the deterioration of his relationship with Becket, nevertheless will not let his emotions prevent him from defending his throne. The King's nerve and tactics are further revealed when he offers money to the Pope in Rome.

Becket's character is further revealed in Act Three through his meeting with the little Monk. Becket is a man who plans, and then carries out on his plans. He previously sent the little Monk away, all the while planning a future rendezvous with him. Now he fulfills his plan by meeting up with the little Monk in England. Becket is also ruthless; he provokes the King by excommunicating three officials in the King's government. Becket is not afraid to take tough action to advance his goals. He is also shown as a man of courage, as he's not afraid to face the charges against him. He does not back down from his decision to excommunicate these officials – he's willing to face the consequences resulting from his actions. Becket is also shown as courageous when he forbids the Council from pronouncing judgment on him, and when he decides he will continue as Archbishop of Canterbury, go back to England, and fight the King face-to-face.

The Papacy in Rome is revealed as a force to be reckoned with in this play. The Cardinal and the Pope talk about ways to confront the issue of Becket and the King. The Catholic Church wishes to remain in control. This is evident when the Cardinal recommends the Church play one side against the other – Becket against the King. Therefore, Act Three conveys the machinations of three distinct groups who wish to advance their aims...the King, the Church of England, and the Church of Rome.



Vocabulary

ostentation, debauchery, nettled, insidiously, prerogatives, absolution, inscrutably, temporal, benevolent, superfluous, cupidity, prevarication, pretext, excommunication, tonsured, profligate, repudiation, sacrilegious, insipid, ironic, vindication, subversive, dilettante, diadem, vapid



Act Four

Summary

The scene opens on the King of France's Court. King Louis and Thomas Becket enter. They discuss King Henry of England's vendetta against Becket. Becket says he thinks the King cannot forgive him for preferring God over the King. King Louis states he is going to send Becket back to King Henry, to maintain good relations with England, as he believes he may need England's support as he pursues his struggle with the Emperor in the east. However, Becket informs him he is going back to England of his own free will, even if it means he may be killed. King Louis says he is meeting King Henry in a day or two to seal their agreement. He says he will try to persuade King Henry to talk to Becket.

The scene is now a vast arid plain. The King and Thomas Becket face each other on horseback in the middle of the plain. They engage in small talk at first, at the King's urging, so they don't argue right away. The King asks Becket if he loved Gwendolen. Becket says he's forgotten her. Becket says in his soul and conscience he did not love Gwendolen. The King says then Becket never loved anything. Becket states he's waiting for the honour of God and the honour of the King to become one. The King says Becket will be waiting a long time. Becket in essence says he must resist the King with all his might when what the King does is against the honour of God. Becket informs him he's been entrusted to serve God.

The King, in memory of their former companionship, says he will allow Becket to come back to England. Becket says he meant to go back and give himself up to the King's power – adding he owes the King obedience in all that concerns this earth. Becket says as much as he was capable of love, he did love the King. Becket says he started to love the honour of God. Becket says he will sail back to England tomorrow and he knows he will never see the King again. The King is offended by this comment, as he believes Becket doesn't trust him.

The scene shifts to a palace of King Henry's in France. Present around a dinner table are the King, the two Queens, the Barons and one of Henry's sons. The King bestows the honour of kingship onto his son. The son will become a second King, a colleague of King Henry, and will share responsibilities. King Henry has made this appointment to show Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury they can do without him. Typically the Archbishop anointed and consecrated the Kings of the realm. Here, King Henry says he will have the Archbishop of York consecrate the boy King tomorrow in the cathedral. The Queen Mother argues with the King proposing he's letting his vendetta against Becket cloud his judgement. She's afraid others will influence the young King and cause him to rise up against his father and divide the kingdom.

The Barons inform the King Becket landed in England. The King wonders why no one attacked Becket when he landed. The Barons tell him native Englishmen from all the



coastal towns armed themselves to form an escort for Becket. Peasants, artisans, and small shopkeepers cheered Becket's return to England. The King is enraged. He believes as long as Becket's alive he will never be able to do a thing. He wants to know if anyone will rid him of Becket. The Barons leave. The King suddenly realizes why they have left.

The scene is now the Canterbury cathedral. The little Monk is dressing Becket in his vestments. Becket tells the little Monk today will be the day; Becket intuitstoday the King's men will try to murder him. The little Monk says he wants a chance to kill one of the attackers against Becket. A Priest comes in and warns them four armed men are outside. They told the Priest they must see Becket on behalf of the King. The Priest barricaded the door, but the Barons are trying to break it down. The Barons break through and come in. They draw their swords. They approach the King. The little Monk leaps at them to attack one with a heavy silver cross. One of the Barons hits the little Monk with a sword and the little Monk falls to the ground. The Barons proceed to attack Becket and they kill him.

The scene is now the opening scene of the play. The King is naked, on his knees before Becket's tomb. Four monks are whipping the King with ropes. The King asks Becket if this settles their account. The King asks Becket if the honor of God has been washed clean. The monks finish their whipping and then kneel and bow their heads. A Page brings a cloak to the King; the Barons help him dress. The Bishops and the clergy in the cathedral form a procession and move away. The King says Becket should from now on be honored and prayed to in the kingdom as a saint. He says tonight they will determine in Council what posthumous honors to bestow on Becket and what punishment to deal out to his murderers. The Baron, slyly, says the murderers are unknown. The King says he entrusts the Baron to find out who the murderers are; the King wants no one to doubt the King's desire to defend the honor of God and the memory of Thomas Becket.

Analysis

Act Four is the culmination of the conflict between two strong-willed characters. It is apparent King Henry and Thomas Becket, despite their shared past and friendship, are set on defending their beliefs. The King believes his kingdom, and his power over it is non-negotiable and he will not let anything erode the Royal institution nor his Kingship. Thomas Becket has newfound loyalties; he is loyal to the honor of God, the Church, and to his clergy. He will not let past loyalties to King Henry sway him from what he believes is his proper purpose in life. Becket will honor the King as long as it is not at odds with his commission to serve God and the Church.

A key part of Act Four is the meeting on the vast plain between the King and Becket. At this meeting, the men state their positions and why they must hold to them. What comes through in this scene is the inner turmoil of both men. The King longs for reconciliation and for Thomas to be loyal to him, on the King's terms. Becket conveys in this scene respect for the office of the King and respect for the King's authority on earth over his subjects. There's a sense in this scene that Thomas does have some affection for the



King, as he still calls the King his prince, and talks respectfully to him. He may have had a hint of love inside him for the King. However, the ideals of each man are etched-in-stone; they will not compromise to any significant extent as they both fear they will be rendered ineffective in their authoritative roles.

Becket is further revealed in Act Four as a man who finds it difficult to love to any great degree. He confesses he never really loved Gwendolen. The thing he misses the most of his old life are the horses available to him as part of the King's inner circle. It is evident Becket's quest for a truly meaningful life has been found in the Church. He seems fulfilled with purpose. Becket wishes the honor of God and the King's honor could be one and the same. The King does not wish this, which exemplifies his steadfast desire to remain totally in control. The King wants his desires, not God's, the main focus of the realm.

Act Four reveals Becket as a wise judge of character. He knows he will never see the King again, and one way or another the King will be responsible for his death. The King is revealed as hypocritical and manipulative. He loves Becket but his passionate nature and his resentment towards Becket for not cowing to him make him want to exact revenge on Becket in some way. The King is further revealed as a conniver when he appoints his son a second King, with the intention of letting the Bishop of York consecrate his son. Here, the King is trying to usurp the power of the office of the Archbishop. The King bemoans his conflict with Becket in front of his Barons. The King, without directly ordering the murder, is responsible for the murder of Thomas Becket by the King's Barons.

Furthermore, the King and his Barons' deceitful complicity are apparent in Act Four. The King knows the Barons killed Becket. Yet, he orders an inquiry into who killed Becket and entrusts the investigation to one of the Barons. The Baron plays along. The King is also revealed as a hypocrite. He now wants to have Becket honoured as a saint and he wants the people to believe he is defending the honour of God and the memory of Thomas Becket.

Vocabulary

negligible, chilblains, dirge, affectation, churlishly, maliciously, indignantly, consecrate, victuals, filial, catafalque, faction, rancour, relinquish, homage, disconcerted, reproach, hypocritical, loutish, posthumous



Characters

King Henry of England

King Henry is a monarch who demands allegiance to his authority. As King of England, he looks to subdue any threats to his power. At the same time, despite his high office and responsibilities, he remains a lover of sensual pleasure even as he grows older. He has a rich history of friendship with Thomas Becket – one that involved drinking, womanizing, and adventurous nights.

King Henry is an opportunist who jumps at the chance to install Thomas Becket as Archbishop of Canterbury. This is to further his agenda as King and to have the Church completely under his control. His robust temper and vindictive personality comes out when he realizes Becket has changed. The King cannot accept that Becket's mission is the honor of God, not the honor of the King and his kingdom.

Thomas Becket

Thomas Becket is a man in search of himself in this play. He was loyal to the King and defended him mightily, prior to being appointed the Archbishop of Canterbury. He also was a lover of sensual pleasures. However, none of this completely satisfied Becket. Even his attempts at love bore no fruit, as evidenced by his relationship with Gwendolen. Becket is a man searching for purpose in his life and he eventually finds it in his role as Archbishop of Canterbury.

Thomas Becket is a complex character. He has a drive in him when he believes in what he is doing. This serves him well as a soldier in the King's army. It serves him well as he defends the Church later on. When he doesn't totally believe in what he's doing, he is uninspired. This is evident in his relationship with Gwendolen. He admits he never loved her, in any deep significant way. This explains his immediate turning over of her to the King, without a fight, and his saying to her he doesn't like being loved.

Archbishop of Canterbury

The Archbishop of Canterbury that precedes Becket is a frail man. However, he is of a strong will and he seeks to uphold the traditions of the Church and their privileges. He defends the Church's privilege not to have to pay taxes. He says King Henry's forefather, William, granted these certain privileges to the Church of England. He is prepared to battle the King on this and such issues.



Bishop of Oxford

The Bishop of Oxford is a man who seeks to uphold the wishes of the Archbishop of Canterbury and to do his part in advancing the interests of the Church. He is a more prudent man than the other Bishops, who wish to strike back at the King for his attempts to get the Church to pay taxes. He doesn't want to resort to the excommunication of Becket (Chancellor of England under King Henry). He believes excommunication must be enacted with great prudence.

Bishop of York

The Bishop of York is more of a fiery character. He is the Bishop that brings up the subject of excommunication. He wants the Church to be proactive in defending itself.

Bishop of London

The Bishop of London is a shrewd character. He also believes excommunication of Becket is appropriate. When Becket becomes Archbishop, he advises him in courses of action. He also gives his ear to the King, and listens as the King says he may have tax money the Church paid, funnelled back to the Church through the Bishop.

Gwendolen

Gwendolen, as Becket's mistress is a fragile character who desires true love. She is artistic, musically, and yearns for Becket's affection. She sees death as a better alternative to a life without Becket.

The Four Barons

The Four Barons are gluttonous characters who typically do not think for themselves. They are followers, not leaders, and do the King's bidding as he desires and commands. They seek to advance the King's wishes and resort to murder to make sure they accomplish the King's will.

Queen Mother

The Queen Mother is a forceful character who questions her son, King Henry, at every turn. She is nobody's fool and speaks her mind when and where she pleases. She comes across in the play as a mother who did not devote time to, nor shower affection upon, King Henry in his youth.



Young Queen

The Young Queen is revealed as a woman who desires her husband, King Henry, to change his wandering ways. She desires a dignified, loving family life as befits a royal couple with children. She is not afraid to voice this opinion to King Henry, despite his enraged reactions to her concerns.

Little Monk

The little Monk is a conniving character of no great intelligence. He gets caught in his plot against the King; he fails in his plot to kill at least one of the Barons who attacks Becket at the end of the play. He is a poor man from Hastings with unfulfilled ambitions and dreams.

King Louis of France

The King of France is a ruler with strong ambitions like the King of England. He seeks to defend his position and is only willing to protect Becket if it serves his purposes. When it serves his purpose to give Becket up to appease King Henry he decides he will do just that. He has expansionist thoughts, as he says he is preparing to advance on the Emperor of the east.



Objects/Places

Crowns

The King of England and the King of France wear their crowns, which are symbolic of their office and power over their respective realms.

Knife

The little Monk had a knife when he made his attempt on the King in France and also had the knife once back in England.

Stringed Instrument

Gwendolen played a stringed instrument for the King, Becket, and the Barons.

Ball

The King plays at cup-and ball in his palace; he's in one corner while his two sons play in another corner of the room.

Mitre

The Bishop of London and other religious leaders wear this headgear.

Trumpets

These musical instruments were used in the play to signify the entrance of royalty.

Forks

This is a new device for eating food Becket introduced to King Henry's court.

Parchment

This is a type of material letters were written on, and then rolled up.



London

This is a city in England and the seat of the King and the Archbishop of Canterbury's power.

Hastings

This is a town in England and the home of the little Monk.

France

This is the country in Europe where Becket exiled to from England.

Abbey of St. Martin

This is where Becket took refuge in France, it is near St. Omer.



Themes

Lust

Lust is a dominant theme in the play. King Henry lusts after power and conquest in the political realm. He lusts after women continually and takes his lust to the next level by continually engaging in sexual relations with women even though he's a married man. Becket, prior to his religious conversion, lusted after women as well. He partook in his share of women in concert with King Henry – two carousing fellows in their younger days.

The Pope and the Cardinal in Rome lust after power. They desire to keep their hold on governments and populaces, evidenced by their desire to manipulate the drama concerning King Henry and Thomas Becket. The little Monk lusts after revenge and this prompted his plot against King Henry. The Barons lust after much food, drink, and revelry. In social situations such as Court banquets, they are not discreet about their appetite for these delights.

War

War is a powerful theme in the play. On the world stage, England wages war against France. The King of France reveals later in the play he has plans to wage war against the Emperor in the east.

On the national front, a war of minds is taking place between King Henry and Thomas Becket. It is a different kind of war, one that matches two strong wills against each other; it is a significant battle nonetheless. In this war – because of the robust egos of both men – there will definitely be one winner and one loser.

A war of ideology is apparent in the play. The King believes all must uphold his kingdom, with no compromise. Becket, on the other hand, believes one must advance the Kingdom of God over the King's kingdom. It is a secular versus religious war.

Love

King Henry constantly talks of love. He, on many occasions, talks of his love for Thomas Becket. He questions whether Becket really loves him. He questions Becket's love for Gwendolen. It is obvious that Gwendolen truly loved Becket. She took her own life when Becket surrendered her to King Henry. She could not accept being with the King, whom she abhorred, and could not accept Becket giving her up.

The Young Queen loves her husband King Henry, despite his adulteries and the shabby way he treats her. She longs for a true family life with the King and their sons. Her desire is that the King change his wandering ways.

Becket struggles with love. He is aware of his lack of capacity to love properly. He does find love of a sort upon his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury. For the first time in his life, he believes and feels he is doing something he loves and that is important and meaningful.



Style

Point of View

Being a play, Becket: Or, The Honour of God does not have a Point of View, as one would expect as in a novel. The play is a performance, delivered by each character (actor) directly to a viewing audience. Therefore, the dialog and actions, as directed by the play script are according to each character's perspective.

The audience/reader is not getting a strict point of view from one individual. In essence, the audience/reader gets a well-rounded view of the world of the play from the actions and dialog of the acting ensemble as a whole. The performance as a whole is akin to Third-Person Omniscient Point of View.

Setting

The setting of the play is England and France in general, and the palaces, churches, and battlefields of the time in particular. Consequently, the various settings of the play contribute to setting the mood of the play and frame the play within its historical perspective. The settings give the play its realism and accuracy, as this is a fictionalized account of true events.

The settings, such as the King of England's palace, the vast plain in France, the cathedral, and such, are the backdrops where the truth of the play acts out. The settings transport the audience/reader to a point in history and contribute to the willing suspension of disbelief necessary to experience fully a fictional work, which has its basis in fact.

Language and Meaning

The language of the play is heightened conversational English as befits a dramatic play. The language is often playful and comedic at times, which contributes to tension relief in dramatic sequences. The language is straightforward plain English peppered with the jargon of the era of the play. Therefore, some terms exist in the play script, which the reader may not be familiar with, however, the context of the words and the actions associated with the words makes for easier understanding.

The language of the play is direct, because of its association with action on the stage. Combined, the language and the action advance the plot clearly. The directness of the language propels the plot forward. The rich dialog delineates the characters well, their innermost thoughts and beliefs, and the lively use of language holds the audience/readers attention.

Structure

The play is divided into four Acts. Within each act are scenes, not formally marked, which move seamlessly one to another via quick set changes. The story unfolds using scenery, dialog, music, and the action of the characters.

Within this structure, the main plot of the novel is the conflict between King Henry and Thomas Becket. Subsidiary plots include the relationship between the King and the Young Queen, the relationship between Becket and Gwendolen, and the little Monk's plot against the King. Another sub-plot is the Church of Rome's concerns with regard to the King and Becket.



Quotes

I answered you ' All save the honour of God'. We were like two deaf men talking.
(Chapter 1)

No big words, Bishop. You know as well as I do that all that's at stake is its money. I need money for my wars. Will the Church give me any, yes or no? (Chapter 1)

Did you love me when I made you Chancellor? I wonder sometimes if you're capable of love. Do you love Gwendolen? (Chapter 1)

You belong to a conquered race too. But through tasting too much of the honey of life, you've forgotten even those who have been robbed of everything, have one thing left to call their own. (Chapter 1)

You are, today. But one must never drive one's enemy to despair. It makes him strong. Gentleness is better politics. It saps virility. A good occupational force must not crush, it must corrupt. (Chapter 2)

One can only buy those who are for sale, my prince. And those are just the ones who aren't dangerous. With the others, it's wolf against wolf. I'll come back straight away and set your mind at rest. (Chapter 2)

I don't doubt it, my Lord. But we all know your bishops. Which one of them could you rely on? Once the Primate's mitre is on their heads, they grow dizzy with power.
(Chapter 2)

There. Farewell, Becket. I wish there had been something I had regretted parting with, so I could offer it to You. Lord, are you sure you are not tempting me? It all seems far too easy. (Chapter 2)

It's a bit sudden, but nothing he does ever surprises me. God knows what the brute is capable of, for good or for evil. Bishop, let us be frank with each other. Is the Church very interested in holy men? (Chapter 3)

William of Aynsford, incited by the King, struck down the priest I had appointed to the parish of his Lordship's see, on the pretext that his Highness disapproved of my choice. Am I to look on while my priests are murdered? (Chapter 3)

The fools! I am surrounded by fools and the only intelligent man in my kingdom is against me! (Chapter 3)

Sire, we loved each other and I think he cannot forgive me for preferring God to him.
(Chapter 4)

You know I am the King, and I must act like a King! What do you expect of me? Are you hoping I'll weaken? (Chapter 4)



A miserable wretch who ate my bread! A man I raised up from nothing! A Saxon! A man I loved! I loved him! Yes, I loved him! And I believe I still do! Enough, O God! Enough! Stop, stop, O God, I've had enough! (Chapter 4)

Are you satisfied now, Becket? Does this settle our account? Has the honour of God been washed clean? (Chapter 4)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Discuss King Henry II of England. What motivates his actions against the Church in general? What motivates his actions against Thomas Becket in particular? Does the King have true remorse for his actions against Becket? Does the King truly look upon Becket as a saint by the end of the play?

Topic 2

Discuss Thomas Becket. Is his transformation as a defender of the Church a genuine one? Discuss why he doesn't have the capacity to love completely. What are his reasons for saying he will not take Gwendolen back from the King if the King chooses to send her away? What do you feel in Becket's past contributed to his contradictory character?

Topic 3

Discuss the role of the State in religious affairs. Discuss the role of religion in affairs of the State. Should there be a separation of Church and State? Do the institutions in the play, the Monarchy and the Church of England, as well as the Church of Rome desire power for the wrong reasons. Does this cloud their judgment and cause them to lose track of their real purpose?

Topic 4

Discuss the role of the women in the play. Do the men in the play take women seriously? Are the Queen Mother and the Young Queen truly happy in their defined roles? How does the behavior of the two Queens influence King Henry?

Topic 5

Discuss War in the play. Is the taste for war based on geopolitical issues or is it just a manifestation of lust for power? Do you believe Thomas Becket embraced the Church because he tired of war – his physical war against the French, his emotional war against King Henry, his internal war over what he should do in life to make a difference?



Topic 6

Discuss sensual pleasure and how it affects the behavior of characters in the play. How does adultery affect the King and those who love him? How does carousing and womanizing affect King Henry and Becket? How does gluttony and excessive strong drink affect the King, the Barons, and others?

Topic 7

Discuss the essence of friendship as it applies to King Henry and Thomas Becket. Were they ever true friends? Was their friendship a matter of convenience throughout their lives, to advance their respective goals? If they were true friends, why could they not resolve their differences? What are valid reasons for ending friendships?