



Becket

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Places Discussed

*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.

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.

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