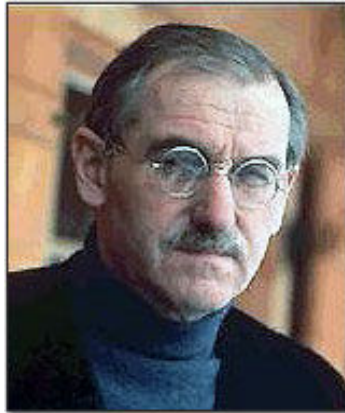


# BECKET

by Jean Anouilh



## THE AUTHOR

Jean Anouilh (1910-1987) was born near Bordeaux, France, the son of a tailor and a violinist. He showed an interest in writing at an early age, writing plays while still in his teens. He studied law briefly, then found work as a writer of advertising copy. At age 21 he married actress Monelle Valentin and four years later decided to devote himself entirely to a writing career. His early works were unsuccessful, but he soon gained public notice with *The Traveller Without Luggage* (1937). He was a prolific writer, turning out a play almost every year, most of which dealt with widely varied themes. Among his most famous efforts are *Antigone* (1944), an adaptation of the play by Sophocles that excoriated in allegorical style those Frenchmen who collaborated with the Nazis; *The Waltz of the Toreadors* (1952); *The Lark* (1953), about Joan of Arc; and *Becket, or The Honour of God* (1959). He also wrote screenplays and translated works by other authors into French.

Anouilh was influenced by existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre and early absurdists such as the Italian Luigi Pirandello, but his popularity waned when the Theater of the Absurd reached its peak in the sixties and seventies. His plays often deal with the struggles of a pure-minded idealist to cope with a world full of corruption and the corruption he finds within himself.

*Becket* was written after Anouilh picked up a used book because the binding would look good on his bookshelf. After reading a chapter about Thomas à Becket, he decided, with his wife's encouragement, to write a play on the subject. Only after he prepared the first draft did he discover that the book he had used as his source was full of historical inaccuracies (among the most notable are the notion that Becket was a Saxon - a conflict at the heart of the play - and the idea that Henry's father had been king before him). As far as the portrayal of the characters is concerned, Henry II may have been a lover of pleasure, but he surely was stronger than the dependent creature pictured by Anouilh. Becket may have been a rake before his elevation to the primacy of England, and undoubtedly his new office caused him to take his stewardship over the church seriously, but he was no Saxon, and the motives and behaviors ascribed to him by Anouilh would have been unlikely in a Norman nobleman. Perhaps the most inaccurate portrayal in the play is that of Eleanor of Aquitaine (the Young Queen), who was no inept nag, but one of the most

powerful women in Europe even before her marriage to Henry. One should also note that history gives no basis for the strong hint of homoeroticism that Anouilh builds into the relationship of his two protagonists.

## **MAJOR CHARACTERS**

- Henry II - King of England, he appoints his friend Thomas à Becket as Archbishop of Canterbury and later has him murdered when he stands up for his oppressed Saxon countrymen and insists on the prerogatives of the church.
- Thomas à Becket - A Saxon who is Henry's best friend, he becomes Lord Chancellor of England and later Archbishop of Canterbury, in which office he is martyred for opposing the wishes of the king.
- Archbishop of Canterbury - An old and wily Norman prelate who initially showed favor to Becket, and predicted when he became Chancellor that he would ultimately help the church.
- Gilbert Folliot - Bishop of London, he is a Norman aristocrat who conspires with the king to lodge false charges against Becket and get him removed from office.
- Louis VII - The sly king of France who tries to use Becket as a political pawn to make life difficult for his English rival.
- Saxon girl - Rescued by Becket when Henry tries to bring her to the palace to be a prostitute, she comes there anyway when Henry claims that Becket had forgotten to fetch his prize.
- Gwendolen - Becket's mistress, coveted and taken by Henry; she commits suicide when the king takes her away from Becket.
- Young monk - A Saxon, he intends to assassinate the king, but Becket prevents his torture and eventually makes him his personal aide; he dies defending Becket when the barons from the king come to murder him.

## **NOTABLE QUOTATIONS**

"Everything but the honour of God." (Becket, Ii, p.1)

"All wars are holy wars, Bishop. I defy you to find me a serious belligerent who doesn't have Heaven on his side, in theory." (Henry, Iiii, p.8)

"One has to gamble with one's life to feel alive." (Becket, Iiv, p.12)

"England will be fully built when the Saxons are your sons as well." (Becket, Iv, p.14)

“The populace must live in fear - it’s essential. The moment they stop being afraid they have only one thought in mind - to frighten other people instead.” (Henry, Iv, p.15)

“What looks like morality in you is nothing more than aesthetics.” (Henry, Ivi, p.23)

“But where is Becket’s honour?” (Becket, Ivi, p.26)

“If I become Archbishop, I can no longer be your friend.” (Becket, Iiii, p.40)

“You’ve sent me back the three Lions of England, like a little boy who doesn’t want to play with me any more.” (Henry, IIIi, p.45)

“Becket is my enemy. I am forced to fight him and to crush him, but at least he gave me, with open hands, everything that is at all good in me.” (Henry, IIIiii, p.49)

“We loved each other and I think he cannot forgive me for preferring God to him.” (Becket, IVi, p.59)

“I’m waiting for the honour of God and the honour of the King to become one.” (Becket, IVii, p.62)

“We must only do - absurdly - what we have been given to do - right to the end.” (Becket, IVii, p.63)

“I should never have seen you again. It hurts too much.” (Henry, IVii, p.64)

“Will no one rid me of him? A priest! A priest who jeers at me and does me injury. Are there none but cowards like myself around me? Are there no men left in England?” (Henry, IViii, p.69)

“Here it comes. The supreme folly. This is its hour.” (Becket, IViv, p.71)

## NOTES

**Act I, scene 1** - King Henry II is in Canterbury Cathedral at the tomb of St. Thomas à Becket, about to be flogged by monks as a penance for the murder of the man who was once his best friend. He begins to reminisce about the past and his relationship with the dead man.

**Act I, scene 2** - Henry and Becket have been carousing all night. They discuss the animosity between the Normans and the Saxons while Becket, who is of Saxon extraction, massages the king’s back.

**Act I, scene 3** - Henry and Becket go to a meeting of the Privy Council, where Henry surprises everyone by announcing that he is reviving the ancient office of Lord Chancellor and appointing Becket to the post. He then demands from the gathered clergy funds that he needs to pursue his

wars. The clergy object, but Becket uses the analogy of a ship of state to support the king's demands, causing the clergy to consider him a traitor because he is a deacon in the church. After Henry and Becket leave, the Archbishop of Canterbury calms his fellow clergy by contending that Becket will not always remain the enemy of the church.

**Act I, scene 4** - Henry and Becket are hunting when a thunderstorm blows up suddenly.

**Act I, scene 5** - The two take refuge in a Saxon hut, where Henry is amazed at the squalor of the people and the surroundings. He seems surprised when Becket tells him that the Saxon peasants are forbidden to gather enough firewood to warm themselves and are forbidden to move from the forest. He orders the owner around, caring little for his humanity and referring to him as a dog. Becket treats the family much more kindly. While Becket retrieves something to drink from his saddlebags, the king discovers a young girl hiding in the hut and decides to take her back to the palace and make her his mistress. Becket, seeing that the old man's son has a knife, takes him out of the house with him, where the boy attacks him. Becket lies to the king about the wound, and the king offers him a reward for being hurt while in his service. Becket asks for the girl as a reward and the king yields only after extracting the promise of a favor in return, but after Henry leaves, Becket tells the old man that his daughter will not be brought to the palace and that he should hide her better in the future, and that his son will be safer if he flees and joins one of the forest's outlaw bands. The Saxon girl, however, seems disappointed that she is not to be taken to the palace to become the mistress of the handsome man who tried to save her, at which point her father beats her.

**Act I, scene 6** - At Becket's palace a banquet is going on. Becket, bored with the company, has come aside with Gwendolen, his mistress. The two obviously care for one another. Meanwhile, the barons, given forks for the first time, have begun fighting with them. Henry enters and demands that Gwendolen sing for the guests. As she sings, Henry caresses her, then demands that Becket give her to him as the promised favor he had demanded in the forest. Becket, though in agony at the thought of losing her, has no choice but to comply. Henry leaves and Becket says farewell to Gwendolen, telling her that he won't be able to take her back even if the king tires of her. After she leaves, a soldier brings the Saxon girl into the room. Henry follows and tells Becket that he had fetched her for him, rebuking him for having forgotten. He then tells Becket that, soon after Gwendolen entered his carriage, she pulled out a knife and killed herself. He then insists that he spend the night with Becket because he has been frightened by her suicide.

**Act II, scene 1** - Henry and Becket are now in France with the English army. The English have suffered heavy losses in victory, and Becket has fought heroically in defense of the king. After a brief conversation with some boorish barons, Becket enters the king's tent and finds him in bed with a French girl. Becket tells him that the clergy are gaining power at home, and if the king doesn't seek victory in France more aggressively, they will soon in fact rule the kingdom. A young monk captured in the camp carrying a knife is then brought to Becket. The Chancellor recognizes him as a Saxon, and deduces that he has come to murder the king. Becket sees in him the shadow of himself as a young man and decides to release him rather than allowing him to be tortured. He gives orders to send him back to his monastery in England under close guard to be examined when the army returns home.

**Act II, scene 2** - The army enters the conquered French city, and Becket reminds the king that he needs to make the proper impression on the French archbishop. Henry cares nothing for good impressions and spends his time looking at all the pretty girls in the crowd, even after Becket informs him that the citizens had been bribed to come out and cheer the conquerors.

**Act II, scene 3** - Henry and Becket enter the French cathedral to meet with the bishop, but their entrance is delayed because Becket has cleared the building, having heard of a planned uprising. The king then receives a letter from England indicating that the Archbishop of Canterbury has died. Becket is sorry to hear it because the old man was the first Norman who took an interest in him. Henry then has a sudden brainstorm - he decides to appoint Becket as the new Archbishop of Canterbury. Becket, who is not even ordained, is appalled at the idea, but Henry insists, telling him that he can be ordained the following week and promoted to the archbishopric within a month. Becket fears a conflict of interest and warns Henry that, should he follow through with his crazy scheme, that the two can no longer be friends.

**Act II, scene 4** - Back at Becket's palace, the servants are cleaning out the place in order to give everything away. Becket enters and says that the banquet given that night is to be for the poor. He is clearly taking pleasure in divesting himself of his possessions, and finally stands in a simple monk's robe in an empty room. He worries that he has enjoyed giving things away too much, that his sacrifice has been far too easy.

**Act III, scene 1** - In the royal palace, Henry waits for Becket to join him. He is surrounded by family - his mother, his wife, and two of his sons, all of whom he heartily detests. He complains that he hasn't had any fun in months because Becket has been traveling to fulfill his new office. The women scoff at Becket as a pretentious fool for giving everything away and criticize Henry for trusting him. A messenger then arrives with a letter from Becket along with the seal of the Lord Chancellor. He has resigned his political office in order to give his full attention to his spiritual one, and Henry suddenly feels dreadfully alone.

**Act III, scene 2** - At the episcopal palace, the young monk who had been arrested in France is brought in. His superiors report that he continues to be obstinate, but Becket insists on being alone with him. He tells the young man that he must observe the coming council and make his judgments about Becket then. When the bishops of London, Oxford, and York arrive, Becket tells them that he will stand by the excommunications of two of the king's favorites - one had murdered a priest and the other had insisted on trying a priest in a civil court. The king has struck back, accusing Becket of misappropriation of funds, an obviously absurd charge. When the young monk hears of Becket's willingness to stand even against the king, he is impressed.

**Act III, scene 3** - In the king's palace, Folliot, Bishop of London, is telling Henry that he intends to charge Becket with conducting a Black Mass at the instigation of the Devil. Becket is seriously ill, but he answers the charge by forbidding the court to issue a judgment against their spiritual father. He then calmly walks out of the court while his enemies fume helplessly. He intends to leave the country and seek asylum in France.

**Act III, scene 4** - In the court of Louis, King of France, ambassadors have come from Henry to demand the extradition of Becket. Louis claims to have no knowledge of his presence in France, but as soon as the ambassadors leave, he summons Becket from the next room. He is pleased to do anything possible to make things more difficult for the King of England, and thus offers Becket his protection. Becket asks for safe conduct to visit the pope in Rome, but Louis warns him that the Bishop of Rome is not to be trusted.

**Act III, scene 5** - In the papal palace, the pope and one of his cardinals are discussing Becket. The Primate of England wants to be relieved of his duties because his office was conferred upon him illegitimately without papal authority. The two churchmen weave plots within plots and decide to accede to Becket's request, then immediately reappoint him to the office in the proper manner, figuring to embarrass Henry in the process. They then intend to send Becket to a very strict Cistercian monastery in France.

**Act III, scene 6** - Becket is praying in the monastery. He sees that the strict lifestyle of the monks is nothing more than another form of pride, and he determines to leave the cloister and return to England to do the task God has assigned him - to defend the Church of England against the English king as Archbishop of Canterbury.

**Act IV, scene 1** - Back in Louis' palace, the French king tells Becket that the interests of France now require that he send Becket back to England. He fears that Becket faces martyrdom and offers to try to bring about a reconciliation between Henry and his wayward subject.

**Act IV, scene 2** - Henry and Becket meet on a windswept plain in France. They discuss trivial things, then get down to business. Becket refuses to ratify the three articles accepted by the bishops in his absence that required compromising the independence of the clergy, but agrees to the other nine. He also refuses to lift the excommunications of the English nobles. Henry, anxious to see his friend restored, agrees to allow Becket to return to England, but Becket knows the king and assures him that the two of them will never meet again.

**Act IV, scene 3** - Henry is in his palace in France with his family and his barons. He announces his intention of promoting his young son to the throne as co-regent and having him crowned by the Archbishop of York solely for the purpose of humiliating Becket. He then ejects his family members from the room in a fit of rage. The barons tell him that Becket has not only arrived safely in England, but has been given a hero's welcome, and he demands of them if any men remain who can rid him of this troublesome priest. In some confusion, they leave the room, and the king cries in agony when he realizes where they have gone.

**Act IV, scene 4** - The young monk dresses Becket in his regalia. They know the murderers are on the way, and the young monk wants nothing more than to take one of the attackers with him. When the barons arrive, Becket calmly goes on with the service. As the nobles approach, the young monk seizes the heavy silver cross and prepares to defend his master, but is quickly cut down, after which Becket is brutally murdered. The play then returns to the opening scene, where Henry is being flogged by Saxon monks. After the flogging has ended, the king is told that the Saxons have come to his aid and have put down the rebellion being led by his young son. He then

orders that Becket be revered as a saint, and entrusts one of the barons who murdered him with seeking out his friend's killers and bringing them to justice.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Compare the treatment of the conflict between Normans and Saxons in Jean Anouilh's *Becket* to that in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. The two narratives take place a generation apart - Richard the Lion-Hearted was the son of Henry II, yet both share similar views of the cultural climate of England in the late twelfth century. How do the two writers assess the conflict similarly, and in what ways do they portray critical differences?
2. Men in places of great authority are often very lonely. Certainly this is the case for the two protagonists in Jean Anouilh's *Becket*. Why do you think this is true? Need it be true? Use insights from the play to support your conclusions.
3. In Jean Anouilh's *Becket*, both main characters are pictured as struggling with serious moral weaknesses. What are the chief moral flaws of the two protagonists, and how do these flaws influence the action and contribute to the themes of the play?
4. In Jean Anouilh's *Becket*, to what extent are the two main characters foils for one another? Support your conclusion with specific incidents and quotations from the play.
5. Jean Anouilh's *Becket* portrays a close friendship between two men, Henry II and Thomas à Becket. When we see such friendships pictured on the stage or screen, our minds tend to go immediately to thoughts of homosexuality. Do you believe this was the playwright's intention? Are we supposed to read a homoerotic subtext into the play, or are we expected to see a close friendship more along the lines of that of David and Jonathan in the Bible? Use quotations from the play to support your conclusion.
6. Analyze the motives for Becket's stand against the king in Jean Anouilh's *Becket*. Is he right to take the stand he does? Include in your moral analysis both the issues on which he chooses to be inflexible and his motives for doing so, and be sure to support your answer from Scripture.
7. In Act I, scene 5 of Jean Anouilh's *Becket*, Henry II says, "The populace must live in fear - it's essential. The moment they stop being afraid they have only one thought in mind - to frighten other people instead." Is this an accurate assessment of human nature? Is it a valid justification for absolute monarchy? Support your conclusions from the play and from Scripture.
8. In Act I, scene 6 of Jean Anouilh's *Becket*, Henry II says to Becket, "What looks like morality in you is nothing more than aesthetics." Is Henry right? Is Becket more concerned with how things look than with what is right and wrong? Support your conclusions with specific quotations from the play.

9. In Act IV, scene 2 of Jean Anouilh's *Becket*, the Archbishop of Canterbury says, "We must only do - absurdly - what we have been given to do - right to the end." Anouilh was strongly influenced by existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, as this quotation indicates. What other evidence do you see in the script of existential philosophy? Be specific.
10. Often those who pen historical dramas anachronistically incorporate modern ideas into the plays, especially through the dialogue they give to their main characters. Discuss ways in which this is true in Jean Anouilh's *Becket*. What ideas and themes that would have been totally foreign to the men of the twelfth century but were quite central to the thinking of those in the middle of the twentieth century can be found in the dialogue of the play? Choose three specific examples and analyze why they are anachronistic.
11. Often those who pen historical dramas anachronistically incorporate modern ideas into the plays, especially through the dialogue they give to their main characters. Compare and contrast the incorporation of modern themes as it occurs in Jean Anouilh's *Becket* and Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* - two plays that were written one year apart. One might expect that the two would address similar thematic material. To what extent is this true? Consider especially the struggles of the title characters with issues of morality and responsibility.
12. In Jean Anouilh's *Becket*, both of the main characters express doubts about Becket's ability to love anyone. Is this a valid assessment within the context of the play? Use quotations and incidents to support your conclusion as to whether or not Becket is capable of real love. Note that you will also have to state clearly the definition of love that serves as the basis for your answer.
13. To what extent do historical inaccuracies influence one's ability to appreciate a work of literature? Jean Anouilh's *Becket* contains many such inaccuracies (see last paragraph under the section on the author). Once you know these things, do they decrease your ability to enjoy the play? Why or why not? Deal specifically with the different inaccuracies that are cited in the introduction.
14. Jean Anouilh's *Becket* contains many historical inaccuracies (see last paragraph under the section on the author). This is not unusual in historical dramas. Consider the extent to which such historical dramas can create in those who read or view them a mistaken understanding of the past. Is this a serious issue? Why or why not? Address specifically those inaccuracies that are found in Anouilh's play.
15. One of the central conflicts in Jean Anouilh's *Becket* is over the right of royal courts to try clergy who have been accused of criminal acts. Becket's refusal to yield this aspect of judicial oversight ultimately led to his death. Why was this such a controversial matter that it could lead to murder between best friends? Draw from the text of the play indications of the seriousness of the issue and why it was so divisive in the twelfth century. You may also incorporate your knowledge of church-state relations during the Middle Ages into your answer.

16. Discuss the theme of the consequences of military conquest in Jean Anouilh's *Becket*. The playwright pictures conquest as poisoning both the conqueror and the conquered. Why is this the case? Do you think he is right in his assessment? Why or why not?
17. Discuss the transformation of the title character in Jean Anouilh's *Becket*. To what extent is the change in Becket's character after he becomes Archbishop of Canterbury credible? Does the playwright give the reader or viewer adequate insight into the motivations of Becket to justify the change in our minds? Why or why not? Use specific quotations to support your conclusion.
18. In Jean Anouilh's *Becket*, which of the two central characters do you consider the more sympathetic? Why? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
19. Thomas à Becket was canonized by the Catholic Church in 1173, three years after his death. Based on the portrayal of Becket in Jean Anouilh's *Becket*, do you believe that he was a saint? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
20. When Henry II cries out, "Who will rid me of this meddling priest," do you believe that he intended that his barons murder Becket? Answer the question using the characterization of Henry found in Jean Anouilh's *Becket*. What about the psychology of the king pictured in Anouilh's script led you to your conclusion?
21. Evaluate the portrayal of the medieval Catholic Church in Jean Anouilh's *Becket*. Consider not only the character of Becket himself, but also the bishops who interact periodically with the main figures. To what extent is this an accurate portrayal of the Middle Ages, and to what extent is Anouilh expressing his view of the church in the middle of the twentieth century? Support your conclusion with historical information as well as details from the play.
22. Jean Anouilh, though he usually avoided political issues, was much affected by the Nazi occupation of France during World War II. The play that is usually considered his best, *Antigone*, was written in 1944 and specifically addresses the issue of collaboration with the enemy in allegorical terms. To what extent is the issue also addressed in *Becket*, written in 1959? Discuss dialogue in the play that reflects on the playwright's memories of the horrors of the Second World War.
23. Jean Anouilh's *Becket* is essentially a two-man play with forty bit parts. Consider especially the roles of the women in the story. Which of the female characters comes across to the audience as the most authentic? Choose three women from the play and explain why the one you have chosen deserves the distinction of the most authentic, while also indicating why the others are not deserving of such an accolade.
24. In Jean Anouilh's *Becket*, the title character clearly undergoes a significant change over the course of the play, but does the king? Discuss the extent to which Henry II is presented as a static character. Does he change at all? If so, does the change represent growth or deterioration? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.