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A Critical Study of Historical Depiction in Lord Tennyson's play *Becket*

Abstract

History plays a very vital role in literature. Its presentation in the works depends upon the artistic mind of the authors who turn them into literary flavor and make the myths real and convincing. There are my English writers who infused history in their works. From Chaucer to Eliot, there is array of writers who used historical events and legends to maintain loftiness and realism in their literary works. This research paper deals with the life, mind and thoughts of Tennyson with emphasis on the treatment of historical elements in his play *Becket*.

Key words: Lord Tennyson, history, myth, historical description and historical elements.

Lord Tennyson is the leading and representative Victorian poet of English literature. He is recognized today not only a representative poet delineating the doubt and dilemma of his age, but also as a great poetic figure who has discussed extensively historical elements and myths in his works. Tennyson's love for the past is visible in his poetry of his adolescence. Between his eleventh and fourteenth year he translated the first ninety three lines of Claudian's "De Raptu Proserpine". He wrote a number of poems on the mythological themes and old English legends.

Like the Romantic poets, Tennyson too had a great love of the past, Grierson aptly calls him, "the heir of the Romantic Revival" (Grierson 383). Apart from this influence of the romantics, love for the past was ingrained in him from his very childhood. It can be said that there was a very strong personal bond between the poet and these myths:

...Far, far away had from his earliest memory, a strange charm for him, a charm which before long began to illumine the distant in time breeding in him that 'passion for the Past' which was to be one of the main springs of his early poetry (Tennyson Alfred *Tennyson* 25).

Tennyson had a passion to see the past linked with the present. His play *Becket* has been written on the backdrop of historical legend. The subject matter of Tennyson's play *Becket* seems to be borrowed from William H. Ireland's Henry II and other sources. The legend of Becket's sainthood for the first time came into literature with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The 29 pilgrims in Chaucer's *Tales* assemble at the Tabord Inn in Southwark to go on a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury and seek his blessings. Thus, the legend of Becket as a saint became the part and parcel of medieval life and literature.

The following details from The New Encyclopaedia are given about Thomas Becket on whose martyrdom Tennyson wrote his play *Becket*:

Becket, Saint Thomas, also called Thomas A Becket, or Thomas of London (b.c.1118, Cheapside, London-d, Dec. 29, 1170, Canterbury, Kent, Eng: Cannonized 1173, feast day December 29), Chancellor of England (1155-62) and archbishop of Canterbury (1162-70) during the reign of king Henry II. His career was marked by a long quarrel with Henry that ended with Becket's murder in Canterbury cathedral (Robert 31).

The story of Thomas Becket is very interesting. Thomas Becket was born in London of French parents. He was introduced by his father to Archbishop Theobald, who took him to Rome and Rheims. Between the years 1143-48 he visited Bofogna and Auxere, where he studied Canonical law. It was Theobald again, who appointed him as an archdeacon of Canterbury in 1154. In the same year Henry Plantagenet was crowned, who thus became Henry II of England. Thomas Becket distinguished himself as a good administrator. As an award to his services. Theobald recommended him to Henry as Chancellor. This was a post of highest importance, and carried a power second only to that of the king. Henry trusted Becket fully and he became his intimate friend both at court and in his hunting expeditions. Becket helped the king in amassing all power into the hands of monarchy. This historical Becket neglected his duties as archdeacon, extracted payment in lieu of military services at a high rate from ecclesiastical fiefs. He even refused to visit his dying master Theobald. Thus he was, as far as public affairs were concerned, the King's man.

During this time Georgian reform has reached England via Italy and France. The programme of this reform included free elections to clerical post, control of the church over church property and freedom of appeal to Rome. Henry II wanted to suppress these reforms and exercise complete control over the church. In this work he was aided by Thomas who after the death of Theobald in 1161, was appointed Archbishop. It was after his election that Thomas changed his way of life. He became devout and accepted completely the Georgian reform and its programme. This sudden change in his behaviour has baffled many historians. There are suggestions that it was his ambition that made him change his way of life. It is also possible that finally he paid attention to his spiritual duties which he had ignored as Chancellor. He resigned as Chancellor but retained his archdeaconary until forced by the king to resign.

Henry's hostility to the clerical spirit brought Becket into opposition. One of the main causes of the conflict with the king was on the matter of 'Criminous Clerics'. The judiciary laws of the church and state were conducted separately. Nearly all educated people could have some official connection with the church, so they could be tried in the church courts. The greatest judgement the church could pass as punishment was ex-communication. Henry wanted the criminal clerics to be judged by the Lay Courts and not by the ecclesiastical courts. Henry's motifs were authoritarian and administrative and Thomas opposed these. In 1163 Thomas opposed a tax proposal too and ex-communicated a Baron. From the moment Becket became Archbishop, he put the church before the king and thus became the equal of the king. This led to two insurmountable difficulties. The king felt that his kindness in raising Becket to the power had been exploited. Becket's growing pride felt his ability was worthy of the position he claimed.

The final issue between the two great friends was the constitution of Clarendon in which the king demanded a global assent to all his royal rights. The constitution contained a body of English laws, in some sixteen points, issued at Clarendon, 1164, by which Henry II tried to settle the issues at stake between the church and state. This included the king's right to punish the criminal clerics, forbade ex-communication to royal officials. Becket opposed the declaration. After much pressure, Becket signed the declaration but did not seal it. He penanced for his signature by fasting and appealed to the Pope who supported him. The king summoned the Archbishop and intended to imprison him or to force him to resign. He was supported by some of the Bishops specially Gilbert Foliot, Bishop of London.

Apprehending his arrest Thomas fled to France where the Pope “Alexander III welcomed him. His exile lasted for six years (Nov, 2 1164- Dec. 2, 1170). Henry seized his properties and exiled all his close relatives. In 1169 there were attempts for reconciliation, the king and the Archbishop met but departed in anger. Thomas distrusted the king and the king hated him.

In 1170, the king had his eldest son crowned co-king by the Archbishop of York, who was an old enemy of Becket. Thomas excommunicated all those who were responsible for this crowning because it was the right of Canterbury to crown the king. The king, afraid of being ex-communicated, met Thomas and a reconciliation took place. Thomas came back to England but refused to lift the ex-communication of the Archbishop of York. On 29th December four knights (Fitz Urse, de Trace, de Morvelli and Brito), incited by some violent words of Henry, came to the Archbishop and on his refusal to absolve the Bishops, followed into the cathedral and murdered him.

Tennyson’s *Becket* primarily rests on certain major historical events of the twelfth-century. In his two principal personages, Henry and Becket, Tennyson has embroidered upon the historic canvas with force and fidelity. There is an outward conflict in *Becket*, but the conflict is not for the throne, it is for the supremacy between the church and the crown.

The plot structure of *Becket* is skillfully condensed for the sake of dramatic effect. The Prologue and the first scene of Act I are closely connected in time. Theobald’s dying wish puts an end to Becket’s hesitation and although in history the lapse of time between the nomination and investiture was more than a year (i.e. 18th April 1161-2nd June 1162). The drama represents it as a short time only, too short for Henry to have seen a change in Becket.

Similarly, the events at Northampton which in reality covered two and half years, are condensed into a very few days. Then again, the scene in Rosamund’s bower supposes Henry to have been in England after the time of excommunication of Viselary 1166, whereas history informs us that he was not in England between March 1166 and March 1170. Condensation and simplification of motives and of political events also occurs frequently. The scene in Northampton Castle combines facts which took place at three different places—the talk with Philop de Elaemasyna at Harrow where Becket was persuaded to give the king his oral consent to the customs; then the counsel at Clarendon where Robert was to honour his promise in public, and where after long protest he gave in. But when the laws were written down he firmly refused to seal them and left the assembly. At the council at Northampton where Becket was accused of high treason for the position he had taken with regard to John

Marshall, the king's claims with regard to the customs were dealt with on the last day. In the drama all the stress is laid on the customs, and all other points are left out. Thus the action is simplified and strengthened; and the king's wrath is made more striking. Elaesmasyna clearly serves to lay some of the blame of Becket's mistaken consent at the door of Rome.

Tennyson was not only concerned with the historical facts but he also wanted to cater to the needs of the popular demand for the romantic element. That is why he inserted sub-plots dealing with situations of love and made them subsidiary to the main political plot. These sub-plots intensify the gravity of the main plot. The love of Rosamund and Henry adds to the intricacy of the main plot. Rosamund's love for Henry had been mute till the end. Even when she has no chance of carrying on her love with Henry, she pleads with Becket against the ex-communication of the King. These love episodes invariably are in despair and the innocent woman is victimized through the forces of external events. These subsidiary plots partly give relief from tense situations and partly heighten the main conflict. In the end the noble woman sacrifices her love for the sake of the man she loves and for the sake of her country.

Tennyson in his play makes use of usual dramatic devices soliloquies, songs, irony, asides etc. These devices serve various purpose of depicting character, of filling the gaps in the dramatic narrative and of intensifying the tragic atmosphere of the play. The soliloquy is used as a special medium for giving useful information about events to come and for unfolding characters. Tennyson makes frequent use of this device. The soliloquies in his plays can be divided into three classes. The first group consists of expository soliloquies, which on the one hand enable us to understand the plot, and on the other, highlight action rather than emotion.

The tone of the plot has been further sharpened by tragic irony. It helps in creating a proper atmosphere in the tragedy. In the 'Prologue' Henry makes future plans, but all his schemes and thoughts lead to a situation full of dramatic irony. He plays chess with Becket, and is lost in dreams about the future. After hearing the news of the death of Archbishop Theobald, King Henry says to Becket while playing chess. He little knows that when a mightier man like Becket, takes over the charge he will not be in a position to tolerate him. All the tragic events in the play arise from his intolerance. Not only this but in the next breath he says:

The Church in the pell-mell of Stephen's time

Hath climb'd the throne and almost cluch'd the crown

But by the royal customs of our realm.

The church should hold her baronia of me

Like other lords amenable to law.

I'll have them written down and made the law.

(Tennyson

210)

Similarly, the conversation between Geoffrey and Eleanor has deep ironical implications. Geoffrey tells his mother Rosamund that he has brought a lady who would make her sleep comfortably. Geoffrey's words 'Good fairy', 'I don't like her looks', 'find you asleep' have ironical suggestions. But for the timely intervention by Becket, Geoffrey would have actually found his mother eternally sleeping.

Tennyson's *Becket* covers all details. The relationship between Henry and his queen, the noble's jealousy of the upstart Becket, national rivalry with France, the personal struggle between Henry and Becket and the political tussle between state and church, are all examined. The main scenes and incidents remarkable for the accuracy of representation of personages and times are such that the spirit of outward conflict is felt throughout with its scenes of passion and pathos. The play is full of froth and foam which has great dramatic effect.

As a human being Becket appears hard-hearted outwardly but inwardly he is soft. Hatred for anyone is alien to his nature. His enemy, King Henry knows that Becket does not hate him but his ways. Even for a lady, like Rosamund, whose life, according to some critics, embodies moral laxity, he has no contempt. The Rosamund episode highlights his kindness towards those who are helpless and who have fallen victims to the evil designs of powerful persons like King Henry. He rescues Rosamund from the bloody knife of Eleanor, the disgruntled queen of King Henry. The conversation between Becket and John of Salisbury in Act V, Sc. ii, displays the warm hearted humanity and infinite tenderness of the Archbishop, not only where he speaks of the dead bird sitting on her nest, but especially in his evident delight in discussing small details of the looks of little Geoffrey and in his wistful expression of regret that the love of wife and child should be denied to the priesthood. Thus, Tennyson's Becket as an archbishop preserves the dignity of his rank, the dignity of the church and the dignity of true Christian merit.

Apart from the central character lies another figure that is of King Henry. It is one of Tennyson's greatest achievements in this drama that his evident love for Becket has not made him unjust to King Henry. The King is hasty given to light pleasures, short tempered and not always honest. Henry, who has already taken a decision in Becket's favour, for the next Archbishop of Canterbury, gets angry, when Becket suggests that there are three or four priests, a thousand times fitter than himself for the grand function. The King says: "Thou angerest me, man" (Tennyson 211). Those close to the King feared his occasional outbursts of wild anger. The Queen is also aware of the King's anger. At one occasion she says: "The King plucks out their eyes who anger him" (Tennyson 211). When John of Oxford reads a bill to Becket which stated, "Laymen or clearics, shall be tried in the king's court" (Tennyson 211), Becket rejects to sign the bill. At this De Broc says: "The king is quick to anger if thou anger him, we wait but the king's word to strike thee dead" (Tennyson 212). John of Oxford tells Henry that Becket has signed the document but not sealed it, to this Henry replies, "The man shall seal, Or I will seal his doom" (Tennyson 213). The change which Herbert sees in Becket, 'Thomas thou art moved too much' (Tennyson 240) haunts the King too. The King, even while sitting with Rosamund in the bower, is obsessed by Becket's thought. He calls upon his son Geoffrey and tells him what means to be the Chancellor of England.

Like Shakespeare and Hardy, Tennyson inserts into his play some minor characters who generally appear in groups. For example, beggars in Becket. These characters, though not fully developed portraits, are dramatically significant in more than one way. First, they are used by the dramatist to communicate some information to the audience by narration, if this is not possible through presentation. These characters through their rattles and gossips serve as a connecting link between the two parts of the story, furnishing readers with some useful information indispensable for comprehending the theme properly. It resembles the technique of Hardy as these humorous characters mitigate the tension of the serious situation. Tennyson proved through them dramatic relief which is missing in the plays of Browning. The scene where the beggars are taking their meals in the feast arranged by Becket, sufficient relief is provided by the non-serious talk of the beggars, particularly after the high pitched conflict between the archbishop and the King. As the life of Becket is obviously in danger, these beggars actually mislead the four knights with their funny freaks.

Tennyson wrote his plays after the model of Shakespeare's English History plays. Like Shakespeare Tennyson also wanted to write chronicles. His *Becket* seems more history than drama. From the technical point of view one can find a few weaknesses in Tennyson's play. First of all there are too many events to mar its dramatic presentation. Secondly, the

poetic element surpasses the dramatic. The rich imagery is independent of action and character.

The whole play is built on 'time sequence'. Time is constantly marching, events are coming and going like bubbles. The events come to a close in a patronized manner. Further, there is more emphasis on character rather than on events, on events rather than on action which constitutes the soul of tragedies. There is an attempt at blending the romantic, the poetic, the realistic, and the spectacular all in one. That was the popular technique of the Age. In technique Tennyson could not make any headway.

Tennyson's *Becket* is a developed story. The Becket of Tennyson remains much on the earthly level. He is still a human being. The play begins with becket still in his office of Chancellor who is very friendly to the king. Tennyson is forced to bring in the change in his chancellor so that a saintly Archbishop emerges. This transformation in Becket is done too abruptly by the dramatist. The change is so fast that even the king does not notice it. Tennyson has the gross outlines of Shakespearean tragedy so deeply imprinted upon his mind that he tends continually to reproduce them. It is on account of this model that he presents his Becket as proud and willful. He also brings in his past to show that Becket was a human being full of weaknesses. But on the other hand, he has to present the protagonist as a saint too. If Becket is arrogant he cannot be a martyr and his death, as that of a Shakespearean hero is merely a downfall with no religious implications. If he is a saint it is not just to represent him as impetuous and headstrong. Tennyson in paying much attention to Becket's personality makes him human.

Tennyson gives enough space to the knights. He individualizes them, names them, makes them speak their personal grudges. He does so because he is interested in them as historical characters. Tennyson's *Becket* is superb action but it is dated. It signifies particular period. Tennyson tries to work within the framework of time. Tennyson presents the external conflict between the Church and the State as well as the inner conflict in the mind of the protagonist himself. The versification of Tennyson's *Becket* echoes the Shakespearean blank verse. The language which Tennyson uses in *Becket* is archaic. He lived in an age conscious of 'period'. This consciousness was reflected in an attempt to secure accuracy in period costume on the stage, and it spread to language. The play is ornamented with 'thee' thou yea' and 'nay', a hundred antique words and phrases in order to give it a mediaeval authenticity.

Thus, this brief critical study of Tennyson's *Becket* shows that their works are richly and profoundly suffused with the various historical elements. The beauty of his presentation lies in the fact that they have lived up to the ideals of poetry and has tried their best to

integrate both poetry and history together creating a poetic whole out of their great power of imagination.

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