

The Ends of the Law in Christopher Fry's *Curtmantle* (1962)

"The play has two themes: one a progression toward a portrait of Henry, a search for his reality, moving through versions of 'Where is the King?' to the unresolved close of 'He was dead when they came to him.' The other theme is Law, or rather the interplay of different laws: civil, canon, moral, aesthetic, and the Laws of God; and how they belong and do not belong to each other. . . .

"Just as the caterpillar pursues the shape of the butterfly, and the musician or poet is trying to express the form of the hidden order, so the human being is struggling to achieve the end, or form, which already exists for him. You can't move towards an end if the end isn't there already."—Interview with Christopher Fry

Christopher Fry suggests that there are at least five types or expressions of law in his 1962 play, *Curtmantle*. The main characters represent these:

- Civil (Henry II/ Curtmantle)
- Canon (Thomas Becket)
- Moral (Marshal and Roger)
- Aesthetic (Eleanor)
- Divine, i.e. the Laws of God

Fry also suggests that these differing expressions of law represent the ends of human purpose and development, to which they are moving as characters and as societies. The divine law is finally, at some level only partially knowable, so the various human forms have an often imperfect relationship to the laws of God. Yet as ends, or *teloi*, they do exist and are meant to guide the human search.

Exploratory

- How much can we know about God's laws? Explain your answer.
- Should the law that supports the church be separate from that which undergirds the nation?
- What should be the relationship between the moral law or the aesthetic law and that of civil and canon law?
- Are they at odds with each other, as Fry suggests?

Discussion

1. Why does Henry II not understand what motivates Becket after he becomes Archbishop?
2. Does Becket understand the dialectic of church and state better than Henry?
3. How much wisdom does Eleanor have to offer Henry and Becket? Is she wholly admirable?
4. Why does the play end with Marshal and Roger? What do they understand?
5. Does Henry develop as a character? Why or why not?
6. What are we to make of Henry's children and their violence?
7. How does Fry's play compare with Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*?