

Thomas Becket and the Quest for Martyrdom

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When studying the history of the Church in England, it is impossible to avoid the discussion of the tension between the Church and the crown. The conflict appeared consistently in England throughout the Middle Ages and permanently altered the country's history. Perhaps the most dramatic turn in the clash in the struggle came just after Christmas in 1170 with the murder of Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Becket. Becket's murder shocked the kingdom and brought the struggle between Church and State to the forefront. The hagiographers and writers of the time believed that Becket's murder was the result of "a typical expression of the familiar, extravagant, Angevin passion."¹ Although they did agree that Henry probably had not meant the fateful sentence that encouraged four knights to attack Becket, it was the general consensus among chroniclers that Thomas Becket was a heroic man who stood up against royal encroachment upon the Church. He was seen as a martyr for the Church's cause and, in fact, was canonized in 1173, only a few years after his death.

What many of the hagiographers failed to see, however, was that Becket's defense of the Church was not altogether unselfish. By reading their works closely, it becomes apparent that the archbishop was actually much more self-seeking in his designs. In reality, "few men have struggled harder to win the name of Saint..." than the archbishop Thomas Becket.² Whatever he did, he did completely—as much to make a statement about himself as the issue at hand. In his dealings as archbishop, Becket was incredibly arrogant, intentionally antagonized King Henry II, and was thoroughly obstinate; the attitude and actions of Thomas Becket illustrate his quest to gain legendary status, even if necessary, through martyrdom.

As chancellor, there is no doubt that Thomas Becket was prone to displays of "pomp and munificence."³ Becket's love of luxurious fabrics was well known; he dressed himself in silk shirts, lavish cloaks, (including one ermine lined cloak detailed in a humorous anecdote of Becket's travels with Henry II), and intricate jewelry. After becoming archbishop, however, Becket underwent a dramatic transformation. At the meeting where Becket resigned his duties as chancellor, he appeared in the simple dress of a priest. His somewhat emaciated body (seemingly as a result of fasting) was covered in a heavy cowl, and he wore simple sandals.⁴ From then on, Becket wore dark full-length robes and never used any furs more expensive than lambskin, thereby giving himself the appearance of a canon priest. He also wore the stole of a priest at all hours of the day.⁵ In a very short period, Thomas Becket underwent a very dramatic and incredibly obvious transformation. Z.N. Brooke came to the conclusion that Becket "was one of those men who, exalting to the full the role they have to play, picture themselves as the perfect representatives of their office, visualising a type and making themselves the living impersonations of it; actors playing a part..."⁶ By changing his mannerisms and his clothing, Becket became what he believed to be the ideal image of an archbishop.

Since Henry and Becket's relationship became strained soon after Becket became archbishop, Henry began exploring ways to force Becket into submission. The first meeting was a disaster. Henry called another council at Clarendon to fully force Becket to agree to his terms. Unlike the first time, Henry formally articulated his wish to establish the rights of the crown over the Church in a document that he would force Becket to endorse. After many delays, Becket did so, but only by saying that he would "observe the customs of the kingdom in good faith," thereby giving himself a small amount of room to maneuver a way out of them.⁷ On his return to Canterbury, Becket was so ashamed at his acceptance of the Constitutions that he suspended himself from his office, exclaiming, "I repent, and am so horrified by my sin that I judge myself unworthy to approach as a priest Him whose Church I have vilely bartered. I will sit silent in grief until the 'day-spring from on high hath visited me,' so that I merit absolution by God and the lord pope."⁸ Becket subjected himself to excessive penance in order to make up for his so-called fall from grace. Word of his expiation spread, as it was intended to; the pope wrote to Becket that he should "consider most carefully how grave a matter this is, especially in a person of your importance, and how great a scandal might arise from it."⁹ Henry may have forced Becket into agreeing to the Constitutions, but Becket's penances and suspension made Henry a villain to the public eye. By stressing the importance of the Constitutions of Clarendon, Becket created a stage to play the devout archbishop, unwilling to give an inch in his stance on the Church. While many may have second guessed his actions, no longer would anyone think to question his devotion to the Church's cause.

After realizing that Becket was going to keep stirring up trouble for him, Henry planned to force Becket to resign from his see. Eight months after the situation at Clarendon, Henry summoned Becket to Northampton once more. This time, however, it was so that Becket could stand trial for failing to appear in the king's court when summoned. For several days, the king came at Becket with accusations, ranging from embezzlement to the motives behind Becket taking out a loan for money. The defining moment, however, came when Henry called upon Becket to produce a record of all revenue received from empty clerical positions while he was chancellor and to repay the crown for the full amount.¹⁰ Becket was understandably outraged and could only respond in the best way he knew how. At morning mass on October 12, 1164, Becket began his sermon with the fitting Introit "Princes also did sit and speak against me; but thy servant is occupied in thy statutes."¹¹ Clearly, Becket did not intend to follow Henry's orders or submit to any punishment he might receive. Becket could not keep himself from preaching the sermon that "was offered like a gauntlet thrown down to the king."¹² The mass he chose was the mass of the first martyr, Saint Stephen, and contained details of the murder of Zachary, which took place

between the altar and the temple.¹³ His comparison of Henry to the persecutors of the revered Saint Stephen allowed Becket to use his office to make a stand while at the same time making himself analogous to the great saints.

This striking gesture was small compared to his next move; later that day, Becket arrived at court wearing the full vestments of his office and carrying the archiepiscopal cross in his hands. He then strode into the building and sat himself at the head of the chamber where the bishops waited for Becket's sentence. When the Earl of Cornwall came to give Becket his verdict, Becket stood and said "You come to speak of a sentence. Do thou first listen to me. The child may not judge his father. The King may not judge me. I will be judged only by the Pope under God and, in your presence, I make my appeal to him. I forbid you, my lord, under threat of anathema, to pronounce your sentence."¹⁴ With that, Becket swept out of the chamber; later that evening, he fled England and remained on the continent for almost six years.¹⁵ With this move, it became clear that Becket "had a theory of what a saint ought to do and tried to do it."¹⁶ Becket refused to subject himself to the king, just as the strongest of his predecessors would have done. In emulating the great archbishops turned saint like Anselm, Becket sought to be placed upon the same level.

Perhaps one of the greatest factors that led Thomas Becket to be so obstinate in his disputes with Henry II was the sheer magnitude of his own ego. Even the kindest of his hagiographers do not omit the fact that Becket "was fundamentally a proud, self-centered man."¹⁷ All of them comment on his arrogance while he was chancellor, but most believe that his transformation into the archbishop eliminated this particularly nasty trait. His modest answers to Henry's overtures on the subject of his promotion to archbishop presumably began the piety that has become legendary. In reality, however, Thomas Becket responded modestly to Henry because he had no other option; since the position was to go to Becket, Becket could not advise the king one way or the other without going outside the limits of decorum. So he wisely evaded giving the king an answer until a full offer of the position was made.¹⁸

If Becket had not wanted the office, he could have easily told the king that he did not wish to take it; since the men had such a long established relationship, Henry probably would have listened. Bearing that in mind, it is obvious that Becket at least desired the office. But why? Perhaps he saw it as the next step in his rise to power. He could have also been aware that Henry probably would not continue to allow him to have such a large degree of power as chancellor. Becket may have considered these things, but many modern historians have argued that Becket sought the office because he believed "that ultimately he of all men in Henry's realm was best fitted to head the English Church, to save her from Henry's potential tyranny, and to guard Henry himself from the perils of conflict with the Church."¹⁹ In essence, Becket believed that he alone could manage the office skillfully enough to navigate the storm of conflict heading towards England. He also saw himself as the man that could save Henry from alienating the Church, a view that demonstrated his arrogant opinion that he would be able to save Henry from himself.

Another draw to the office was the primacy of the Archbishop of Canterbury in England. Thomas Becket's ideas on the primacy of Canterbury were well known. He believed that the church at Canterbury acted "as the head does to the body" in the English Church.²⁰ His place in the seat that St. Augustine had created made him the highest authority in the ecclesiastical domain of England, which, in Becket's mind, placed him above the king himself. In 1166, he wrote to Henry "for it is to my priesthood that God has enjoined the care of the church of Canterbury, and to your rule that he has, for the present, deputed the human affairs of the kingdom."²¹ The Archbishop of Canterbury was the most powerful defender of the rights of the Church in England. To Becket, Canterbury was second only to the Pope on earth.²² For a man of ambition, which Thomas Becket undoubtedly was, the Archbishopric of Canterbury was the next logical step after being chancellor and archdeacon. The ego boost that Thomas received from becoming archbishop permeated his dealings with Henry and with the rest of England during his reign.

The first strike Becket made against Henry was resigning the chancellorship in 1161. Becket purportedly relinquished the office because it was too difficult to hold the two positions at the same time. He had to know, of course, of Henry's plans to merge the offices of chancellor and archbishop. Thomas could have kept the office in an honorary capacity, though, since Henry never officially filled the position again after Becket resigned. According to Frank Barlow, Becket probably resigned, however,

not because he had been converted to austerity or humility, but because as archbishop he was so grand and so rich that he had no need of that office, which would now bring in little revenue and which he may have considered beneath his dignity. He did not want to hold an office of the king. Obviously Thomas as archbishop was in appearance much more splendid than ever before.²³

His placement as archbishop enabled him to surpass his fame as the extravagant chancellor. He could afford to donate awe-inspiring sums to charity (almost double the amount Theobald had given), invite beggars into the cathedral and treat them as royalty, and still host dinners with sumptuous foods served on gold and silver plates. All of this was done with great fanfare, of course, so that people would know how grand their archbishop was. Even his great acts of piety were made known to the public.²⁴ Whereas the king had overshadowed his chancellor, the archbishop had the opportunity to surpass his predecessors and the king. Becket's constant attempts to do things better than the previous Archbishops of Canterbury demonstrate his own vanity. By removing himself from the secular realm, Becket gave himself the opportunity to become the most splendid individual in the ecclesiastical sphere, an idea that greatly appealed to his own sense of self-importance.

One major problem that Thomas Becket had with his appointment as archbishop was the nature of how he secured his position. King Henry had all but pushed the monks of Canterbury to elect Thomas as archbishop.²⁵ It must have rankled Becket that he was beholden to Henry for his election. At Westminster, Henry had asked the archbishop "Have I not raised

you from a poor and lowly station to the pinnacle of honor and rank.”²⁶ To which, Becket replied “I am not unmindful of the favours which, not you alone, but God who dispenseth all things hath condescended to confer on me through you...You are indeed my liege lord, but he is both your Lord and mine, to ignore whose will in order to obey yours would be expedient neither for you nor for me...For temporal lords should be obeyed, yet not against God, as saith St. Peter, ‘We ought to obey God rather than men.’”²⁷ As long as Henry could claim that he had put Becket into office, he held a certain degree of power over him. With that also came a reduction in Becket’s own prestige, for he had received the office through non-canonical means and was, in the eyes of many reformers, not worthy of the title. While in exile, Becket took care of the matter. He appeared before Alexander III and said “recognizing that my appointment was far from canonical and dreading lest the issue become even worse for me, realizing also that my strength is unequal to the burden and fearing lest I should I involve in my own ruin the flock to which, such as I am, was given as shepherd, I now resign into your hands, father, the archbishopric of Canterbury.”²⁸ The pope then reinvested him with his office. No longer could Henry claim he was the hand behind Becket’s position of archbishop. A great weight could then be lifted from Becket, and he could achieve his goal of being above the king since the pope and God had now put him into his position, not Henry.

Since Thomas Becket believed that he was now above Henry, he took every chance he could to antagonize the king. Early on during Thomas’ time as archbishop, he took actions that seemed as though he was intentionally picking a fight with Henry. The situations that arose were not new; in fact, they had come up time and time again and would continue to do so after both of the men’s deaths. Becket could have negotiated an end to most of the conflicts with Henry, just as Theobald had done before him, and could have benefited much more so than he did by quarrelling. Instead, Becket refused negotiation and frequently angered Henry and the rest of the barons.²⁹ Many of the things he did were supposed to win the favor of the monks of Canterbury and other churchmen, and for the most part, they succeeded. But oftentimes what the Church approved of, the king did not. His aggressive ecclesiastical policy alone would have angered the king, but Becket also took steps to ensure that they goaded the king into action. Becket’s obstinacy caused the escalation of the conflict until it resulted in his own death.

As Becket began to recover lands that had been lost by the Church in Kent, he took several opportunities to greatly offend and anger Henry. Becket wrote to Roger de Clare of Hertford that he would be required to do homage for the bailiwick and castle of Tonbridge, which was located in Kent. Had he gone to royal court over the matter, many would have seen Becket’s right to the alienated property. Instead, Becket audaciously required the baron to perform homage, a rash action that angered both the barons and the king, especially since the earl of Hertford already did homage to Henry. Becket guaranteed that he would regain the Church’s lands by trying the cases in his own court and giving the judgments that land be returned.³⁰

He went further still by excommunicating Sir William Eynesford of Kent for expelling a priest Becket sent to the benefice controlled by William that had once belonged to the Church. Henry was outraged since it had long been a custom in England that the bishops would not excommunicate barons without first consulting the king. William FitzStephen wrote that “the king straightway wrote to the archbishop that he should absolve him. The archbishop replied that it was not the king’s place to give orders either to absolve or excommunicate any man.”³¹ What infuriated the king more was the presence of proper legal procedures that Becket could have taken, but instead, he chose to excommunicate William without a trial.³² In getting the land of the Church back, Becket took several opportunities to irritate the king. Instead of using the royal courts or established methods, Becket went out on his own to achieve his objective in such a way that it left Henry outraged and looking for revenge. He also stirred up trouble over the traditional practice of excommunicating barons. There was no need for any of this, but Becket did so because it would gain him favor with the clergy. It was an additional benefit that it would cause more distress for the crown. Perhaps it was because he believed that if he pushed Henry far enough, he would be forced to back down rather than alienate the Church.

After Becket’s return from exile (during which time he continued to conduct the business of Canterbury, much to Henry’s dismay), he took it upon himself to respond to several of the moves Henry had made against him while he was away. Even though the two men had established a truce of sorts in an effort to repair their relationship, Becket almost immediately began to antagonize Henry once more. While Becket was away, Henry had his son crowned as king by the Archbishop of York. Historically, it was the right of the Archbishop of Canterbury to crown the English kings, but Henry received a papal dispensation allowing Roger of York to conduct the ceremony. The Pope, however, withdrew his consent in a letter to Roger after much prodding by Becket; supposedly, this letter was never received so the coronation was carried out anyway. Outraged, Becket sent a small ship ahead of his own vessel to give the Archbishop of York notice of his suspension and the bishops of London and Salisbury their excommunication letters.³³ Becket’s message was clear: anyone who had helped in the coronation of the young King Henry would be excommunicated for violating the rights of the prelate of Canterbury. Such an obvious disrespect towards Henry was more than likely Becket’s intention. It was as though Becket was punishing the bishops for supporting the king. Becket made an incredible scene out of the situation, since it was not every day that the Archbishop of York and several important bishops of England were excommunicated or relieved of their duties. By taking such a bold action, Becket indeed protected his see, but more care could have been taken to avoid alienating the crown and creating more trouble. The purpose of the scene was to be one last jab at Henry II that would push him over the edge and issue the fateful command to have Becket killed.

For Becket, there came a time when he decided that to protect the Church he must push the king until he submitted. When the bishops compromised or backed down from the king, Becket complained that “[t]hey say that this is not the

moment for provoking the king—a subtlety which leads them into servitude.”³⁴ As Henry pushed harder against the clerical orders, Becket wrote to Alexander III saying “[m]ay it please you to deal manfully, for assuredly, if it is your pleasure to put the wicked in fear, you will restore peace to the Church and a perishing soul to God. You have now seen what gentleness can do; now try the other method. In the severity of justice you will most assuredly triumph.”³⁵ Becket took it a step further in another letter, asking the pope “[w]ho shall resist Anti-Christ when he comes if we show such patience towards the vices and crimes of his precursors? By such leniency we encourage kings to become tyrants...But blessed is he who dashed such little ones against the stones.”³⁶ By the time of his death, Thomas Becket had turned resisting the king in a few disputes into a matter of policy. It is no small wonder, then, that Becket was “by his stubbornness, by his angry self-righteous letters, by his sentences of excommunication and his threats of interdict...trying the patience not only of his enemies but even of his intimate friends.”³⁷

Perhaps the most studied event in Thomas Becket’s life is his death, which is the moment historians can see Becket’s obstinacy most clearly. Shortly after his return to Canterbury from the continent, the archbishop preached a sermon that thoroughly distressed his fellow priests; in it, he referenced the murder of Saint Alfege, the archbishop that had been murdered by the Danes a few centuries before. As he left the area, he walked to the high altar and said “[o]ne martyr, St. Alfege, you already have; another, if God will, you will have soon.”³⁸ Becket’s remarks may have been foresight, but when coupled with later statements he made, it appears that he was almost biding his time until Henry sent men to kill him. As the four knights that had come to kill Becket levied charges against him, Becket replied calmly that “you cannot be more willing to kill me, than I am to die.”³⁹ While the monks of Canterbury attempted to safeguard the archbishop from the knights, Becket continually brought himself back into their path. He refused to hide from them; Becket slowly made his way to the Chapel, where evening vespers were going on. As he walked to the front of the room, vespers stopped and many priests ran for safety. Still, Becket calmly marched forward, presumably to the archbishop’s chair. As the knights poured into the sanctuary, Becket calmly waited for them. Thomas Becket’s last words would be “For the Name of Jesus and the protection of the Church I am ready to embrace death.”⁴⁰ He made sure that he “fell decorously, his cloak covering his whole body to the feet, in an attitude of adoration or prayer.”⁴¹ By refusing protection and marching straight into the sanctuary of the cathedral, Becket ensured his own death. By repeatedly making sure that everyone knew he was dying for the Church, he guaranteed his own martyrdom. Even in his death, Becket stubbornly refused to submit to Henry.

For all of the glorification Thomas Becket has received from historians, most of it has not been deserved. Yes, the archbishop defended the rights of the Church, but it was more so the result of his personal quest for greatness than for any particular affection towards the institution that he so vainly guarded. Becket firmly believed that he could defeat Henry in a battle of wills. His own arrogance assured him that he could outsmart Henry and win the dispute. If he could not defeat Henry while alive, though, Becket would defeat Henry with his own martyrdom. If Becket thought that he could defeat Henry by propelling himself toward martyrdom, he was sorely mistaken. Becket believed he knew Henry, inside and out, but if he had, he would have known that there was no way Henry would have given in. He misjudged the king and the situation horribly, and in turn, paid for it with his life. When it became clear to Becket that not even he could win this battle of wills, “[h]e blamed treachery, envy, intrigue, the guile of the king, the machinations of royal agents, papal cowardice, anything; but... his denunciations of the king’s supposed intentions became increasingly detached from reality, and his self-justification ever more hysterical. He brought a violent death upon himself because he could not bring himself to admit that his reading of the situation had been mistaken, his sufferings largely self-inflicted, and his obstinacy misguided.”⁴²

In the end, even his martyrdom did not enable Thomas Becket to defeat King Henry II as he wished. While it is true that Becket became a saint after his ordeal, it was not for being a victorious figure for the Church like Saint Stephen or Saint Theobald, but rather, it was for being a slain fighter in a battle that would continue to rage on after his death. As time went on and scholars began to look critically at Becket, it became clear to historians, such as A.S. Poole that

He had certain virtues: he led a pure life in an age when chastity, especially at court, was rare, and he was of a generous disposition; looked at dispassionately, however, he appears as a vain, obstinate, and ambitious man who sought always to keep himself in the public eye; he was above all a man of extremes, a man who knew no half measures. He did everything with exemplary thoroughness, whether as chief of the king’s secretarial department, or when fighting at the head of his 700 knights, or conducting a delicate diplomatic negotiation; whether in the hunting-field or at a game of chess; whether at a church council, at Mass, or in suffering martyrdom.⁴³

In all things, Thomas Becket allowed his own tenacity and ego to guide him, even as they led him down the road to his own death.

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