

**“Noble knights, bold, proud, valiant”:
The Behavior of Romance Literature in Thomas Becket’s Defense of the Church**

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One Thomas Becket Through the Ages: The Becket Controversy and Its Historiography	3
Chapter Two King Henry II and His Governance: The Political Background	19
Chapter Three Romance and the Turbulent Priest: Literature, Chivalry, and Behavior	39
Thomas Becket Through the Ages: Epilogue	69
Bibliography	74

Introduction

This thesis argues that the twelfth-century literary and court culture of King Henry II of England played a larger role in the so-called conversion of Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, than previous scholars have acknowledged. Literature and culture created a basis and standard of behavior for the ideal and virtuous nobleman, and Becket throughout his career as chancellor and archbishop followed these standards.

Thomas Becket began his political career as Henry II's chancellor and, while in this position, acted always in Henry II's favor, such as raising taxes to fund the crown's war efforts and leading troops into battle. Henry II later appointed Becket to the see of Canterbury in hopes of exerting control over the Church through Becket, but Becket resisted the king, eventually causing a far-reaching controversy involving multiple European kings and the pope. Becket eventually died in 1170 at the cathedral in Canterbury at the hands of Henry II's overzealous knights. Historians have typically explained Becket's switch from Henry II's ally to staunch defender of the Church as a matter of either religious conversion or political ambition, but have overlooked the cultural world from which Becket came, and the court culture that enabled him to succeed.

The death of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, marked the end of a life and the beginning of legend and debate. What was ostensibly a feud between two powerful men, spanned over a decade, crossed national boundaries, and involved many important figures of the day. The powerful figures, compelling issues, and dramatic events have attracted much historical attention. In particular, many modern scholars have wondered at the apparent and abrupt transformation of Becket, from King Henry's loyal friend to the Church's loyal

defender. Becket's conversion has been attributed to sudden piety or to politics. However, past scholarship, while enlightening, has overlooked the role of court and literary culture of Becket's time, also important sources of perception, attitudes, and morality.

Rather than simply understand Becket's behavior in terms of either politics or religion, this thesis looks at the cultural vocabulary present at the time, as manifest through the chivalric romances that were becoming popular at the time. In these stories, we find implicit and explicit discussions of the necessity of performing a role to achieve worldly success. At the same time, these romances valued consistent internal values, which, in Becket's case, need to be understood as Becket's emphasis on loyalty. In the end, the behavior of performance and loyalty I argue influenced Becket as he started his career in Henry's court. This value of performance would shape his career, even as he left the court for the archbishop's palace.

As Becket rose through the ranks, he spent his days in illustrious and powerful courts; as a favorite, a friend, and the chancellor of King Henry, he was an active member of the royal courts. As such, he was very much immersed in the arts, literature, and poetry flowing through that rarified circle. Furthermore, Becket's time at court coincided with the arrival of King Henry II's queen from France, Eleanor of Aquitaine, who brought with her the culture of the troubadours and romance chivalry from the duchy of Aquitaine in the south of France.

The influence of the surrounding culture on the unfurling of the Becket Controversy has thus far been left unexplored.

Chapter One | Thomas Becket Through the Ages: The Becket Controversy and Its Historiography

The historiography of the Becket Controversy has tackled the question of Thomas Becket's transformation through two dominant views. In attempting to explain the reason behind Becket's shift from courtier and close friend of the king to staunch defender of the Church, against the king's wishes, historians and chroniclers have turned to conversion or politics. Some credit Becket's change of heart to a sincere discovery of God and a surge of piety. Others claim that Becket was conniving and only took on a position against the king to heighten his own stature and fuel his desire for perpetual fame and glory in martyrdom. These views are inadequate, as they omit the influence of literature and court culture. Becket's presence in the court of Henry II was important for more than just his appointment as chancellor or for his camaraderie with the king; it was also important for his exposure to romance literature and tales of chivalry. These stories and the values they espoused were powerful in shaping the way people in court behaved. Becket himself was not immune to these influences. His actions throughout his prominent roles and positions were drawn upon this literature.

The sensational nature of the Becket Controversy has made it a ripe subject for chroniclers, biographers, kings, clergy, and historians since Thomas Becket's death in 1170. The tale has taken on various incarnations and meanings. As I will discuss, later English kings would suppress the memory of Thomas Becket, desperate to quash any examples of clerks overpowering the king. Allies of either King Henry II or Thomas framed their accounts of the Controversy according to their allegiances. Those who sympathized with the crown

depicted Becket as scheming and cowardly, whereas those who sided with the archbishop branded King Henry II as a power-hungry and impious tyrant battling a virtuous priest. These disparate opinions require an analysis of the sources in order to make clearer the underlying story.

Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, was murdered in his cathedral on 29 December 1170 by four knights of King Henry II of England: Reginald fitzUrse, Hugh de Morville, William de Tracy, and Richard le Breton. Becket's death was the final chapter in what became known as the Becket Controversy, which engulfed England and parts of Continental Europe from 1163 to 1170. The conflict stemmed from Henry's appointment of Becket as the Archbishop of Canterbury, and his assumption that Becket, as his friend, would defer to his schemes for strengthening the crown's control over the Church.

Throughout the centuries, the story of the "middle-class" Londoner who rose to the upper echelons of power and his dramatic fall has garnered praise, criticism, study, and analysis. Henry VIII's Reformation was particularly damning of Becket's sanctity and rebellion against the king. Scholars have understood Becket's conversion from hunting partner to selfless defender of Church as either a sincere conversion or a cynical political move, a binary set of explanations that relies on an anachronistic Church-state dichotomy. However, these explanations do not take into account another driving force of the time: that of literature, such as the rise of chivalry and the development of romance.

Thomas Becket was the son of Gilbert, a sheriff of London.¹ As a young man, Becket came under the care of Richer de l'Aigle, a Norman aristocrat, serving, according to John Guy, as his secretary and protégé, where he was first exposed to the world of the wealthy and learned to enjoy the life such wealth afforded.² Becket would become an ostentatious courtier, reveling in his wealth and riches through splendid clothes, hunting, and feasts.³ Herbert of Bosham, a member of Becket's household, who wrote one of the earliest biographies of the murdered archbishop, wrote in 1164 that the modest trappings Becket took on as archbishop were a stark contrast from his time as a courtier:

What a sight to see Thomas, once on chariots and horses, now astride a packhorse, with only a halter around its neck for a bridle and the rags of the poor brothers and lay brothers on its back for a saddle! What a change of circumstances, Thomas! Where are all those horses and knights you used to have, all those rich and ostentatious trappings? Look at all these now reduced to one packhorse and one halter, and not even your packhorse or halter but another's. As you change, the things belonging to you also change, as your old things pass away, and all become new.⁴

As we will see later, even Herbert of Bosham notes the importance of the change of costume and appearance as one inhabits new roles. Although here, the change is meant in a holy context, as Herbert of Bosham attributes the change to God's divine influence and power over the psyche of a formerly lavish man. However, even in that context, appearance is among the main markers of change.

¹ John Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim: A 900-Year-Old Story Retold*. (London: Viking, 2012): 5.

² Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 19.

³ Thomas M. Jones ed., *The Becket Controversy* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1970): 133.

⁴ Michael Staunton, *The Lives of Thomas Becket* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001): 122.

From there, he joined the staff of Theobald, then Archbishop of Canterbury and became archdeacon. Archdeacons were supposed to forego marriage and the bearing of arms.⁵ Thomas, however, only came to adhere the former of these two rules, as he led troops on behalf of Henry II during the siege of Toulouse in 1159 during his tenure as chancellor.⁶ Becket received the command of the troops after all other barons refused the post, thus allowing Becket to, as his William FitzStephen wrote, “achieve his wildest dreams of secular glory.”⁷

As Becket was learning the ways of aristocrats in and out of the Church, England endured what chroniclers would refer to as the Anarchy, the civil war between Stephen of Blois and Empress Matilda, the mother of Henry II, for the throne of England. Thus, when Henry assumed the throne in 1154, he became king of a war-weary kingdom with a disorganized array of conflicting legal codes and overly powerful nobles, used to getting their own way. Henry soon began working to restore royal power, which included reconciling the conflicting legal codes and independent jurisdictions that had come about during the Anarchy. One of his first actions as king was to name Thomas as his chancellor.

The relationship between Henry and Becket went beyond that of king and chancellor; the two men were also close friends.⁸ As such, Henry came to trust Becket. This trust laid the groundwork for Henry’s later decision to elevate Becket to become Archbishop of

⁵ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 71.

⁶ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 1.

⁷ Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986): 58.

⁸ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 84.

Canterbury after the death of Theobald. Henry hoped and believed that Becket would aid in the royal scheme to return the Church to its “traditional” position, since the clergy had encroached on royal power during the Anarchy and Stephen’s reign.⁹ Henry believed that Becket would be able to serve roles in both his royal government and the Church. Henry II’s thinking was not without precedent. In France, Suger, abbot of the powerful and wealthy monastery of Saint Denis, acted as an advisor to both King Louis VI and Louis VII.¹⁰ Rainald of Dassel, archbishop of Cologne, was an active part of the government and administration of Frederick Barbarossa. However, at his consecration, Thomas quickly resigned from his post as chancellor, believing it to be a conflict of interest. The chronicler Roger of Pontigny wrote that Becket had told the king that he could not ignore God’s will in order to serve Henry II’s will.¹¹

Becket’s resignation precipitated a rift between the king and his new archbishop. Soon, the conflict extended beyond just Becket’s conscience. Part of Henry’s proposed legal reforms in the Constitutions of Clarendon were to prohibit the clergy from leaving England to make ecclesiastical appeals to the papal court without royal permission. The most controversial stipulation in the Constitutions, however, was about “criminous clerks.”¹² The king wanted to punish these wayward ecclesiastics who, he felt, were not punished harshly

⁹ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 126.

¹⁰ David Knowles, *Thomas Becket* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1970): 41.

¹¹ Elizabeth Longford, ed. *The Oxford Book of Royal Anecdotes*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989): 73.

¹² Robert E. Scully, “The Unmasking of a Saint: Thomas Becket and the English Reformation.” *The Catholic Historical Review*, 86 (2000): 581.

enough by the Church.¹³ Any cleric who committed a felony, such as murder faced only Church sanctions — banishment from the clergy — and not royal court punishment — death.¹⁴ Becket opposed this proposal, quoting the Bible: “God will not judge twice for the same offense.”¹⁵ When Henry II called Becket ungrateful, the archbishop responded that it was God who is the supreme ruler, above kings; thus, men must obey God rather than other men.¹⁶

The issue became even more dramatic in October 1164 at the Council of Northampton, where historian Dom David Knowles wrote that King Henry II made clear his intentions to destroy Becket.¹⁷ Henry’s royal court was to judge Thomas guilty of contempt of royal jurisdiction after he neglected to obey a royal summons to court. However, the barons of the court refused to pass judgment since they were laymen; the bishops of the court also refused, objecting to the judgment of a cleric in a secular court and to the task of having to condemn their superior. The day after the council, Becket fled England for the Continent, where he found refuge in France at Pontigny, and then at Sens, despite Henry II’s explicit request that Louis VII refuse all shelter to Thomas.¹⁸ While in France, Becket became fast

¹³ Michael Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers*. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006): 98.

¹⁴ Jones, ed. *The Becket Controversy*, 63.

¹⁵ The Old Testament book, Nahum, states that “affliction shall not rise up the second time.” In 391, Saint Jerome interpreted this line as Biblical condemnation of double jeopardy. George Conner Thomas. *Double Jeopardy: The History, the Law*. (New York: New York University Press, 1998): 72.

¹⁶ Longford, ed. *The Oxford Book of Royal Anecdotes*, 73.

¹⁷ Jones, ed. *The Becket Controversy*, 109.

¹⁸ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 41. Henry II to Louis VII, October 1164: “Wherefore I earnestly beg you not to permit a man guilty of such infamous crimes and treasons, or his men, to remain in your realm.”

allies with Pope Alexander III, who was also in self-imposed exile there.¹⁹ When Becket attempted to resign the archbishopric, Alexander III urged Becket not to do so, proclaiming, according to Robert Thomas, “We are brothers in banishment...let us be in fellowship for life.”²⁰

Becket stayed in France for six years. During that time, Louis VII repeatedly attempted to broker meetings and reconciliation between the English king and the archbishop. In each instance, both parties remained stubborn. Louis VII became so exasperated by Becket’s refusal to hear of compromise that he asked if Becket wished to “become more than a saint.”²¹

In 1170, Becket finally returned to England under the guise of compromise and resolution. But upon return, Becket and Henry II sparred over the coronation of Henry’s son, Henry the Young King.²² Henry II wished to crown his son as a co-ruler during his own lifetime, thus establishing the son’s legitimacy and paving the way for a smooth transition of power. Normally, coronations fell under the duties of the archbishop of Canterbury; however, Henry II appealed to Pope Alexander and obtained a papal bull allowing the coronation to be

¹⁹ Cardinal Roland Bandinelli was elected to the papacy in 1159, but the election was heavily disputed. When he became Pope Alexander III, he faced the immediate challenge of anti-pope Victor IV. Pope Alexander would face a total of four anti-popes during his papal tenure, three of them explicitly supported by the Holy Roman Emperor; anti-pope Paschal III would be the rival during the Becket Controversy. Eventually, the enmity of Frederick Barbarossa drove Pope Alexander III out of Rome and to France, where he was sheltered by King Louis VII..

²⁰ Robert Anchor Thompson, *Thomas Becket: Martyr Patriot* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench & Co., 1889): 188.

²¹ Thompson, *Thomas Becket: Martyr Patriot*, 229.

²² Henry the Young King was the only crowned associate king in England after the Normal Conquest. Stephen had wanted to crown his son, Eustace, in a similar fashion, but Theobald, then-Archbishop of Canterbury, halted such plans. Thompson, *Thomas Becket: Martyr Patriot*, 23.

carried out by any bishop of the king's choosing.²³ Soon after, the pope repealed his permission and sent Henry II a letter forbidding the coronation; unfortunately, the letter reached England after the coronation had already taken place in June 1170. The appearance that Henry II had defied the pope thus resulted in the threat of England under interdict.²⁴

Becket was also incensed by the breach of Canterbury's privilege, and he excommunicated the clerics involved in the coronation, Roger de Pont L'Évêque, the archbishop of York, Gilbert Foliot, the bishop of London, and Josceline de Bohon, the bishop of Salisbury. When Henry II heard the news, he is said to have been so frustrated and enraged that he uttered the famous words, "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?" Four overzealous knights heard the king and rode off to Canterbury, slaying Becket at the altar of the cathedral of Canterbury.

Becket's death and the ensuing public outcry immediately damaged Henry II's prestige. According to Arnulf of Lisieux, sympathetic to the king, Henry was personally distraught at the murder of his former friend and at his indirect role in catalyzing the murder; in a letter to Pope Alexander, Arnulf detailed the grief:

At the first words of the messenger, the king burst into loud lamentations and exchanged his royal robes for sackcloth and ashes. Mourning more, it seemed, for a friend than for a subject, at times he fell into a stupor, after which he would again utter groans and cries louder and more bitter than before.²⁵

To allay suspicions that he was responsible for Becket's murder, Henry II sent a representative, Alexander Llewelyn, to the pope to convey the king's innocence.

²³ Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, 68.

²⁴ Austin Lane Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955): 213.

²⁵ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 324

Furthermore, the king was in a politically precarious position, facing rebellions from the Scots in the north. In the midst of these storms, Henry II was forced to do public penance in Canterbury in 1174. When the Scottish rebellion collapsed a few days later, Henry purportedly not only thanked God, but also “Saint Thomas the martyr.”²⁶

Beyond penance, Henry II also compromised with the Church, repealing certain tenets of the Constitutions of Clarendon. The Church was allowed to appeal to the papal *curia* in ecclesiastical cases, as well as apply canon law in England. Despite these compromises, Henry II still retained “the substance of power,” and ensured that his future appointments did not lead personal crusades like Thomas Becket had.

It was the slain archbishop, not the king, who emerged from the Controversy in the best light. There were immediately reports of a wide array of miracles attributed to Becket: According to John of Salisbury and Herbert of Bosham, close associates of Becket’s, there were miracles associated with Becket beginning on the night of his murder. A man from Canterbury restored his paralyzed wife’s mobility with blood from Becket.²⁷ Pope Alexander III, who shared his exile with Becket, canonized Becket on February 21, 1173, on account of the archbishop’s martyrdom and his posthumous miracles. It was an unusually quick canonization. King Louis VII of France even paid a visit to Becket’s tomb in Canterbury in 1179.²⁸ In time, Canterbury became “the main pilgrimage center in northwestern

²⁶ Scully, “The Unmasking of a Saint,” 582.

²⁷ Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, 268

²⁸ In the early 13th century, French students at the University of Paris chose Saint Thomas Becket as their patron saint.

Christendom.”²⁹ By the time the Tudor dynasty was founded in 1485, the cult of Saint Thomas Becket — much like the cult of Saint George — was a fixture in the cultural and religious landscape of England.

It was not until Henry VIII’s break from the Catholic Church that there was a concerted effort to destroy the cult of Thomas Becket. As the king sought to establish himself as head of the Church of England, he also wanted to erase any references tied to the archbishop who triumphed over a king. In 1536, the feast of Becket’s translation, on July 7, was abolished; the next year, his image was removed from the seal of the city of Canterbury.³⁰ His name was scratched out of prayer books and his image struck from church walls and windows. By 1559, during the reign of Elizabeth I, Thomas Becket was decried as a “trayterous byshoppe.”³¹

Contemporary anecdotes from the time of the Becket Controversy claim that Henry II’s knights did not intend to kill Becket. Rather, the knights hit him with a sword and told him to run, but Becket stood firm.³² Henry himself almost certainly did not wish Becket dead. After all, king did, according to Arnulf of Lisieux, “burst into loud lamentations and exchanged his royal robes for sackcloth and ashes” upon learning of Thomas’ fate.³³

²⁹ Barrie Dobson, “The Monks of Canterbury in the Later Middle Ages, 1220-1540,” in *A History of Canterbury Cathedral*, ed. Patrick Collinson, et. al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): 140.

³⁰ Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, 267.

³¹ Scully, “The Unmasking of a Saint,” 600.

³² Longford, *The Oxford Book of Royal Anecdotes*, 74.

³³ Longford, *The Oxford Book of Royal Anecdotes*, 75.

From the beginning, the apparently sudden conversion of Becket from king's ally to Church defender has attracted wide scholarship and speculation about the source of the change. Immediately after his death, numerous biographies of Becket's life appeared, written by men who knew him. Naturally, the authors' relationship to Becket and his death affected the slant of their biographies. For example, John of Salisbury knew Becket well, and his account was very sympathetic to Becket, even going so far as to call Henry II a tyrant. William of Sens, the papal legate from France, was tied to King Louis and thus sympathetic to Becket. He wrote in a letter to the papal curia that the murder of Becket was easily among the most heinous "of all the crimes we have ever read or heard of...exceeding all the tyranny of Nero, the perfidy of Julian [the Apostate], and even the sacrilegious treachery of Judas."³⁴ Although Edward Grim did not know Becket, he was a witness to Becket's murder; as such, his account of the death has been regarded by many historians as the authoritative account. Gilbert Foliot was among Becket's famous adversaries, and his writings on Thomas openly criticized Becket's bullying ways.

Most of the biographies painted Becket as noble and pious. These "Lives of Thomas," as the biographies were called, were written amidst the development of a cult surrounding the slain archbishop, with many people already calling Becket a saint, even before he was canonized in 1173.³⁵ The contemporary biographies showed Becket a martyr defending the Church's rights and freedoms from an evil king.³⁶ These *Lives* were also replete with Biblical

³⁴ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 325

³⁵ Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers*, 8.

³⁶ Phyllis B. Roberts, *Thomas Becket in the Medieval Latin Preaching Tradition: An Inventory of Sermons About St. Thomas Becket, c. 1170-1400*. (The Hague: Nijhoff International, 1992): 12.

references and passages meant to retroactively prophecy Becket's death and greatness.³⁷

However, not all contemporary writers were so flattering of Thomas' legacy. Some within the clergy, such as Gilbert Foliot, Bishop of London, and Roger Pont-l'Évêque, Archbishop of York, criticized the late archbishop. Foliot accused Becket of buying his archbishopric and of jeopardizing "the cause of the Church which he claimed to espouse."³⁸ Pont-l'Évêque went further and denounced Becket as a "damnable traitor worthy of death."³⁹

Despite the influx of biographies, the majority to accounts of Becket's life were written after Becket's canonization, which affected their tone and the grandeur of the writing. For example, his final moments became glorified to depict his dying at the altar at the cathedral in Canterbury, "willingly [embracing] a martyr's death for the liberty of the Church," according to John of Salisbury.⁴⁰ Becket's struggles for the Church in life were portrayed as foreshadowing his martyrdom.⁴¹ Edward Grim, who was a visitor in Canterbury and eyewitness to Becket's murder, published a biography with great detail on Thomas' end. However, since Grim did not know Becket beforehand, his *Life* was less personal and instead made to reflect the lives of previous saints.⁴²

³⁷ Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers*, 15.

³⁸ Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers*, 12.

³⁹ Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers*, 12.

⁴⁰ Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers*, 24.

⁴¹ Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers*, 129.

⁴² Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers*, 30.

These biographies all tackled the question of Becket's apparent fervid conversion upon becoming archbishop. The early biographers lacked consensus when discussing that topic, but they did agree that something extraordinary happened when Becket arrived at Canterbury.⁴³ Most of these early writers maintained that Becket lived a chaste and humble life despite his outward life of luxury as chancellor.⁴⁴ But as Ralph of Diceto, archbishop of Middlesex explained, it was when he donned his archbishop's robes that Becket experienced a change of mind.⁴⁵ Throughout the biographies, Becket's conversion was shown not as a sudden change, but rather a slow evolution of his true nature:

Becket's biographers claim first that his early secular life concealed a more spiritual purpose, and second, that there may be discerned in his early life a gradual progression which laid the basis of his life as archbishop.⁴⁶

This view is not without support. For all of Henry II's trust and friendship with Becket and their mutual enjoyment of hunting and feasting, Becket was still more religious and pious than Henry II perhaps realized. While Henry II was notoriously lacking piety — John Guy writes that the king “was said to enter his private oratory to sketch or whisper to his friends instead of to pray”⁴⁷ — Becket “[retained] two priests specifically for [praying regularly] while he was chancellor and [received] their discipline in secret.”⁴⁸

⁴³ Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers*, 75.

⁴⁴ Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers*, 77.

⁴⁵ Longford, *The Oxford Book of Royal Anecdotes*, 73.

⁴⁶ Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers*, 81.

⁴⁷ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 81.

⁴⁸ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 122.

The interesting part of these biographies is the criticism of Henry II. Although John of Salisbury, one of Becket's ardent supporters, referred to the king as a "tyrant" numerous times, the criticism among other writers was relatively restrained, considering that he was blamed for the murder of a saint.⁴⁹ It was this very negative perception — in addition to the threat of excommunication and interdict from Pope Alexander III — that drove Henry II to promise a crusade (on which he would never embark), conduct a barefoot pilgrimage to Canterbury, and swear to repeal the controversial Constitutions of Clarendon.⁵⁰

Even in Church sermons following Becket's martyrdom and canonization, the content focused less on the evils of Henry II than on the divine virtues of Becket. Early medieval preaching was targeted at a clerical audience, which would thus affect the content of the sermons. Sermons meant for clerks would endorse a famous archbishop who was recently canonized almost immediately after his death. It was not until the latter half of the twelfth century that "popular preaching," preaching to people in a language they could understand, rather than Latin, became more common.⁵¹ Throughout sermons in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Becket was often compared to Biblical figures, and he was said to have achieved perfection in life.⁵² Furthermore, these sermons paid special attention to the

⁴⁹ Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers*, 112.

⁵⁰ Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1986): 261.

⁵¹ Roberts, *Thomas Becket in the Medieval Latin Preaching Tradition*, 17

⁵² Roberts, *Thomas Becket in the Medieval Latin Preaching Tradition*, 55.

generosity and hospitality of King Louis VII after Thomas fled to Pontigny — which both ironic and pointed, given the rivalry between the two kings.⁵³

By the eighteenth century, some historians already posited that Becket’s “conversion” was very suspect and that he only became the champion of the church out of an ambitious desire to demonstrate his power.⁵⁴ Clerical historians depicted Becket as a hero, standing his ground in the face of royal aggression, willing to defy a tyrant bent on absorbing the power and privileges of clergy and nobility.⁵⁵ Historian Raymonde Foreville charged that Henry II’s ambitions for the Church “went beyond the accepted limits of the English monarchy.”⁵⁶ Legal historians saw Henry as the hero in the story, for his desire to create a strong government and for his determination to make specific the vague understanding of ecclesiastical versus royal courts.⁵⁷

It is safe to say that Thomas Becket and the Becket Controversy has attracted widespread scholarly attention throughout the centuries, so much so that Dom David Knowles believed the subject to be “sterile.”⁵⁸ However, the plethora of biographies and histories focus on the imagined dualism of religion and politics in attempting to discern the motivation behind Becket’s actions. Despite nearly a millennium of religious and political

⁵³ Roberts, *Thomas Becket in the Medieval Latin Preaching Tradition*, 29.

⁵⁴ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 65.

⁵⁵ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 80.

⁵⁶ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 103.

⁵⁷ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 89.

⁵⁸ Dom David Knowles, *The Episcopal Colleagues of Thomas Becket*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951): 7.

analysis, the answer to that question remains elusive. An alternative analysis could shed light on the issue.

Thomas Becket came to the court of Henry II during a time of both political and cultural changes, as the new king centralized his power and poets and influences from the South of France via his queen, Eleanor, permeated the nobility. It was the latter that governed and shaped the behavior of courtiers, including Becket. As a member of Henry II's court and inner circle, he would have encountered these influences of romance, chivalry, and knighthood. Thomas would have shaped his behavior to match the expected actions of his role. As chancellor, Becket would have been expected to be brave and knightly. As archbishop, he would have to be pious and ascetic. His loyalties as chancellor and as archbishop would also be different; the former was loyal to the king, while the latter was steadfast to the Church.

Analyzing Thomas Becket in light of the contemporary culture helps to explain his seemingly sudden transformation, while making sense of the change. Indeed, Thomas Becket was most likely neither a Machiavellian politician in search of eternal fame nor a man who suddenly discovered God. Rather, he was a man who lived according to the ideals of the time, following the expected behavior and risks it entailed.

Chapter Two | King Henry II and His Governance: The Political Background

The cornerstone of the Becket Controversy lies in King Henry II and his attempts at administrative reforms during his reign. However, it is important to examine and understand the events leading to and during his reign to better grasp the reasoning behind his proposed changes. Indeed, King Henry II did not arbitrarily decide to reach into the privileges of the Church in the Constitutions of Clarendon. Rather, he was brought up in an environment of political uncertainty, and he came to power amidst the thinning of regnal power. These influences shaped the way Henry approached his rule. Thus, in order to understand the nature of the conflict between Thomas Becket and King Henry II, it is imperative to first understand King Henry's reign and his goals.

When Henry Fitz-Empress ascended the throne in 1154 and became King Henry II, he had already witnessed England in a time of civil war and its ensuing chaos. The struggle centered around his mother, the Empress Matilda, and his uncle, Stephen of Blois, both of whom claimed the English throne. Henry would later paint Stephen as a usurper.⁵⁹ The larger power struggle spawned local skirmishes between the nobles, all working within the context of civil war and lack of royal leadership, which allowed them to augment their own power. The pervasive chaos tore apart England at all levels. Thus, even before Stephen took the throne, England had already begun to fall to a state of disarray and lawlessness. This political

⁵⁹ H. W. C. Davis, *A History of England, Volume II: England Under the Normans and Angevins, 1066-1272* (London: Methuen & Co., 1909): 199.

background shaped Henry's goals in the beginning of his reign and continued to influence him even past the formative years.

Henry II's grandfather, Henry I, died in 1135, leaving his only surviving child, daughter Matilda, as the heir to his throne. Aware of the potential dangers of leaving a woman as the ruler, Henry arranged the marriage of his then-widowed daughter to Geoffrey of Anjou, thus bringing together Norman and Angevin rivalries and forming a strong power base for Matilda to ascend the throne.⁶⁰ He also forced his barons to swear fealty to his daughter.⁶¹ Power was personal, and thus oaths of fealty were considered serious and binding.⁶² However, this loyalty did not last. The deceased king's nephew, Stephen of Blois, quickly moved to claim the crown with the support of his brother, Henry, Bishop of Winchester.⁶³ Stephen also removed from ecclesiastical and government positions, all of Henry I's supporters — knowing that they would back Matilda — and replaced them with his own men.⁶⁴ War erupted between Matilda and Stephen for the crown. In the end, Matilda had lost the support of those in London, her main power base, and of other powerful figures, such as the Bishop of Winchester.⁶⁵ She and her supporters were driven out of England. The

⁶⁰ M.T. Clanchy, *England and its Rulers, 1066-1272: Foreign Lordship and National Identity* (Totowa: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983): 111.

⁶¹ Caroline Bingham, *The Crowned Lions: The Early Plantagenet Kings*. (Vancouver: David & Charles, 1978): 12.

⁶² Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta*, 318.

⁶³ Bingham, *The Crowned Lions: The Early Plantagenet Kings*, 14-15.

⁶⁴ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 33.

⁶⁵ Thomas K. Keefe, "England and the Angevin Dominions, 1137-1204," in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, ed. David Luscombe, Jonathan Riley-Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 556.

English, fearing the continued breakdown of law and order, chose Stephen for their king.⁶⁶

Despite this decision, the civil war had not truly ended, as violence between the two factions continued and Matilda and her son, Henry, maneuvered to guarantee Henry's succession to the throne.

The Anarchy and conflicts over the throne disrupted society and aristocratic power.

As David Crouch explains,

For three generations after the Conquest of England the English magnates had based their followings on the tenants of their lands, bound to them by a miscellany of links conjured up by the phrase 'knight service.' From 1066 through to the reign of Henry II, magnates either relied on families endowed in the first great surge of landed patronage in the reign of the Conqueror, or they raised up new families by further land grants. But during Stephen's reign the flow of land grants began to dry up: magnates no longer had the spare land available to endow new men. As the flow dried up, so relations between magnates and their traditional followers became brittle, and often snapped.⁶⁷

By the end of the twelfth century, the bonds between lords and their followers would have already loosened.

Stephen's reign saw an abrupt end to the growth of royal power fostered by the Norman kings, who had been in power since the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. The Norman Conquest, led by William I, occurred barely four decades before Henry I's reign. The disruption in English rule wreaked havoc on society and order in England. Upon the Norman seizure of power, the existing English nobility of 4,000 thegns were replaced by approximately 200 Norman barons, and only one percent of the "Old English population"

⁶⁶ Bingham, *The Crowned Lions: The Early Plantagenet Kings*, 15.

⁶⁷ David Crouch, *William Marshal: Knighthood, War, and Chivalry, 1147-1219* (Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, 2002): 143.

retained their pre-Conquest estates.⁶⁸ What resulted was the elimination of the old aristocracy. However, strong Norman leaders ensured that they maintained strict control and held onto their power. The Anarchy and the ensuing reign of King Stephen halted that process and actually reversed it.

The Conquest had weakened regional lordships, but they had begun to re-establish themselves under Henry I, thus creating another new dynamic Henry I's successor would have to face.⁶⁹ Where Henry I was active and aggressive, Stephen, on the other hand, was more "passive."⁷⁰ Indeed, James Alexander describes Stephen's reign as "characterized by lawlessness and rebellion."⁷¹ This passivity left a power vacuum, which both the nobility and the Church quickly filled, taking advantage of the waning power of the crown. In an effort to secure his base of loyal nobles, Stephen created a slew of new baronies and peerages.⁷² Stephen was so liberal in his appointments that he more than tripled number of earls between 1135 and 1141.⁷³

The early years of Henry II's reign reversed this trend. Henry's first actions as king were a response to the chaos of the previous reign. He quickly set about organizing statutes

⁶⁸ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 22.

⁶⁹ Clanchy, *England and its Rulers*, 120.

⁷⁰ Joseph Biancalana, "For Want of Justice: Legal Reforms of Henry II," *Columbia Law Review*, 88 (1988): 434.

⁷¹ James W. Alexander, "A Historiographical Survey: Norman and Plantagenet Kings since World War II." *Journal of British Studies*, 24 (1985): 94.

⁷² Richard Barber, *Henry Plantagenet*. (Ipswich: Boydell Press, 1964): 85.

⁷³ Robert Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings: 1075-1225*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009): 208.

and centralizing justice and power.⁷⁴ He transferred jurisdiction over lawsuits and conflicts from local courts to a central body of royal judges, the *curia regis*.⁷⁵ Henry appointed men upon whom he could rely for their loyalty, energy, and efficiency.⁷⁶ He also instituted reforms targeted at incorporating royal law into local disputes, thus widening the scope of his power. Henry also chose not to honor the titles Stephen had created. Rather, he insisted on returning the status quo to the time of Henry I's reign — a theme that would reappear during his confrontation with Becket as archbishop. By reducing the number of barons, Henry could ensure fewer local power bases, such as their mercenary armies and “unlicensed castles,”⁷⁷ thus strengthening the control of the royal government over his subjects. Those who were disinherited from their lands or privileges during Stephen's reigns found these rights restored.⁷⁸ Henry used the writs of the three kings before Stephen — William I, William II, and Henry I — to resolve such claims. These decisions would determine and establish which titles were hereditary in England.⁷⁹

After Henry II centralized jurisprudence in England, statutes were based on feudal law at its core. Thus, as R. C. Van Caenegem explains, for someone to have access to the courts, their complaint “must fit into one of the existing forms of action, i.e. the original

⁷⁴ R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953): 146.

⁷⁵ R. C. Caenegem, *The Birth of the English Common Law*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973): 19.

⁷⁶ Jones, ed. *The Becket Controversy*, 1.

⁷⁷ Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta*, 322.

⁷⁸ Biancalana, “For Want of Justice,” 468.

⁷⁹ Clanchy, *England and its Rulers, 1066-1272*, 121.

writ.” Writs, a grant of land or privileges, were native to Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence and were adopted into Norman legal traditions after the Norman Conquest in 1066.⁸⁰ Over time, writs became broadly applicable as the prototype of most of the diplomatic forms used in England.⁸¹ Writs were also issues of royal instruction. For example, early Norman writs exempted goods in an abbey from customs and tolls.⁸² By the reign of Henry I, writs came to be used as commonly in Normandy as in England; over one thousand individual writs survive in England from 1100-1135.⁸³ Writs of entry were created to supplement the novel disseisin that Henry II created. These writs allowed for a legal challenge to land claims to be brought before a jury, rather than by battle or grand assize.⁸⁴

The careful use of writs was part of Henry’s reforms to enable England to recover from the civil war. Under Henry II, writs called *brevia originalia*, original writs, were used to instruct sheriffs on steps to take in connection with a lawsuit.⁸⁵ During his rule of England, William I issued writs when he was interested in the matter at hand. By the time of Henry II, a systematic and efficient judicial system was already in place, and hundreds of writs were

⁸⁰ Joseph Biancalana, “The Origin and Early History of the Writs of Entry,” *Law and History Review*, 25 (2007): 517.

⁸¹ “Diplomatic” used here refers to a legal formula and written protocols, rather than negotiations between countries. Frank Barlow, *The Feudal Kingdom of England: 1042-1216* (New York: Longman, 1988): 44.

⁸² David Bates, “The Earliest Norman Writs,” *The English Historical Review*, 100 (1985): 267.

⁸³ Bates, “The Earliest Norman Writs,” 267.

⁸⁴ Biancalana, “The Origin and Early History of the Writs of Entry,” 518.

⁸⁵ H. A. Hollond, “Writs and Bills,” *The Cambridge Law Journal*, 8 (1942): 16.

issued.⁸⁶ Henry's legal reforms also meant changes in the writs. The numerous types and categories of writs became routinized and formulaic, each corresponding with a particular legal situation.

Henry's decision not to honor the writs issued during Stephen's reign was a conscious choice meant to convey a clear message: Stephen's reign was not legitimate, and he, the new king, was the rightful heir, by virtue of descending from the last rightful king and his rightful heir. The establishment of Henry II's power and legitimacy was derived from the status of Henry I. It was a message that Henry further emphasized in his Coronation Charter. He promised to honor the status quo of 1135, thereby noticeably omitting any promise to honor the titles recently created under Stephen's reign.⁸⁷ Thus, although Henry did not strip any of the existing nobles of their lands and titles, he was still able to suggest strongly that Stephen was a usurper and his appointments were not valid. Just like his later ambitions with the judiciary, Henry wanted to remove as many competing power sources as he could, in order to ensure that, ultimately, the administration of his realm came back to him. Henry not only restored royal power to his status before Stephen's reign, but he also extended the reach of the central administration far beyond that of Henry I.⁸⁸

Henry came to power with the goal of not just restoring the "rightful" ruler, but also restoring order and repressing lawlessness.⁸⁹ His reign saw a resurgence of Englishmen, such

⁸⁶ Hollond, "Writs and Bills," 16.

⁸⁷ Bingham, *The Crowned Lions: The Early Plantagenet Kings*, 39.

⁸⁸ Biancalana, "For Want of Justice," 434.

⁸⁹ Barber, *Henry Plantagenet*, 123.

as Thomas Becket, studying law in Bologna and in English schools, a trend that was prohibited by Stephen.⁹⁰ One such method of repressing lawlessness was the establishment of the *novel disseisin*. After the end of Stephen's reign, Henry's court sought to re-establish the royal court as the center of legal decisions, rather than private "self-help" dispute settlements.⁹¹ Within English tenurial society, the local lord had the power to discipline tenants who failed to perform services.⁹² The discipline took the form of disseising, or dispossessing, the tenant of their land. A lord "seised" his land to a tenant under this lord-vassal relationship.⁹³ The tenant did not own the land, but rather was given the right to hold the land. However, these lords at times were forced to rely on royal sanction to carry out the discipline. Henry's writ of novel disseisin established the need for a royal writ to take away a tenant's land. This law also prevented the dispossessor from acquiring the profits of the land during the period of wait before a royal sanction was granted. Furthermore, the novel disseisin did not carry over and apply to the heir.⁹⁴ This assize was based on both the secular and the ecclesiastical idea that one could not be disseised without judgment.⁹⁵ Thus, the law was backed by secular precedent, but still readily applied canon law principles. More importantly, the law inserted the presence of the royal court into a local conflict. Land was

⁹⁰ Tate, "Ownership and Possession in the Early Common Law," 285.

⁹¹ Biancalana, "For Want of Justice," 466.

⁹² (BIANCALANA NOTE 160 - S. Milsom, *supra* note 3, at 25-27.

⁹³ Tate, "Ownership and Possession in the Early Common Law," 282.

⁹⁴ Biancalana, "The Origin and Early History of Writs of Entry," 521.

⁹⁵ Biancalana, "For Want of Justice," 467.

the ultimate source of livelihood, and bringing such an omnipresent and powerful unit under royal jurisdiction not only augmented the power of the royal court, but also ensured that Henry and his government were very visible in the lives of all subjects.

Moreover, Henry also wanted to placate the numerous local disputes that characterized the chaos of the previous reign. England was composed of smaller territorial units of counties and shires.⁹⁶ Historically, the crown administered and executed its laws through the local agent in the form of the sheriff.⁹⁷ Each shire was under the watch of a sheriff (“shire-reeve”), who served at the king’s pleasure. The sheriff acted as the linchpin in the close relationship between the crown and the city.⁹⁸ In order to make sure that the office did not become the property of an aristocratic family and thus weaken the power of the king, Henry exercised firm control over his sheriffs.⁹⁹ The king’s court became an authoritative instrument of efficient processes and rational decisions by jury.¹⁰⁰ Henry’s reforms allowed for the royal court to play an increasingly significant role in local law cases, which was previously relegated to regional lords.¹⁰¹ Henry relied on justiciars who were his immediate deputies, and in Becket, he appeared to have found a chancellor willing and able to aid him in his goal of consolidating his power. A month into his reign, Henry appointed Thomas

⁹⁶ Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings: 1075-1225*, 147.

⁹⁷ Pamela Nightingale, “The Intervention of the Crown and the Effectiveness of the Sheriff in the Execution of Judicial Writs, c. 1355-1530,” *The English Historical Review*, 500 (2008): 1.

⁹⁸ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 5.

⁹⁹ Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings: 1075-1225*, 150.

¹⁰⁰ Biancalana, “For Want of Justice,” 434.

¹⁰¹ Richard Huscroft, *Ruling England, 1042-1217* (Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2005): 184.

Becket, Archdeacon of Canterbury.¹⁰² Becket had previously demonstrated his skill in diplomacy at the Council of Winchester in 1153. It was at this meeting that the aged King Stephen accepted the young Henry as his heir. Then-Archbishop of Canterbury, Theobald, acted as a mediator at this meeting, with the aid of his cleric and protégé, Thomas Becket.¹⁰³

Henry also regarded record-keeping and large-scale investigations as vital to his power and control. Henry II was so dedicated and efficient to re-establishing the power of the law and of preservation that, according to James Alexander, his records continue to provide “for the first time...a somewhat full picture of English society and of its ruler, owing to the series of legal, financial, and administrative records that began in, or were for the first time preserved from, this reign.”¹⁰⁴ Among the most significant changes Henry instituted in the English legal system was the expansion of the role of the king’s court.¹⁰⁵ It was this expansion of his rule that would be most controversial and lead him into conflict with Becket. He forced his nobles to state how many knights and fees they had.¹⁰⁶ Such information was recorded in the English *Cartae baronum* and Norman *Infeudationes militum*.

¹⁰² Bingham, *The Crowned Lions: The Early Plantagenet Kings*, 40.

¹⁰³ Bingham, *The Crowned Lions: The Early Plantagenet Kings*, 28.

¹⁰⁴ Alexander, "A Historiographical Survey," 99.

¹⁰⁵ Joshua C. Tate, "Ownership and Possession in the Early Common Law," *The American Journal of Legal History*, 48 (2006): 281.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas K. Keefe, *Feudal Assessments and the Political Community Under Henry II and His Sons (Publications of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 19)* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1984): 13.

The knight's fee — “a fief from which the service of a single knight was due” — became the basic unit of Anglo-Norman feudal organization.¹⁰⁷

Despite the growing power and influence of the royal courts, the Church courts remained independent of the king's jurisdiction. These courts claimed exclusive right to judge and punish their own.¹⁰⁸ The Church courts presided over any and all crimes committed by a clerk, however heinous, and regardless of its religious or irreligious nature, and the harshest penalties the court sentenced were degradation and imprisonment.¹⁰⁹ Unlike the Crown, the Church did not execute. However, these clerks were rarely imprisoned, since penance and a fine were usually enough to satisfy the judgment. Thus, a clerk faced far more lenient sentences for their crimes than did the laity.¹¹⁰

While a common feature of medieval society, the existence of this dual court system and their divergent judgments would have appeared to Henry as thinning his power. It was through these ecclesiastical courts that a crime such as murder could go virtually unpunished, as long as the accused was a clerk or the accused could convince the judge he was a cleric. To Henry, this possibility of leniency would do nothing to deter crime among the less scrupulous clerics within the Church. Thus, he sought to institute the possibility of punishment for those clerics convicted of secular crimes — crimes that violated civil laws, rather than religious and Biblical laws. According to James Alexander, Henry II wanted to strengthen his power at

¹⁰⁷ Keefe, *Feudal Assessments and the Political Community Under Henry II and His Sons*, 1.

¹⁰⁸ Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta*, 201.

¹⁰⁹ Davis, *A History of England, Volume II: England Under the Normans and Angevins, 1066-1272*, 207.

¹¹⁰ Thompson, *Thomas Becket: Martyr Patriot*, 134.

the expense of encroaching papal influence, and “give tangible expression to his natural ambitions as a strong-minded secular ruler.”¹¹¹

Henry’s determination to affect the judgment of the Church courts was not a unique ambition. His grandfather, Henry I, had a conflict with his Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm. Anselm had publicly asked whether the duty he owed to the pope could be reconciled with the obedience he owed to the king, and ultimately Anselm placed loyalty to the pope before the king.¹¹² Henry I and Anselm sparred over the investiture of bishops in England,¹¹³ which was a local version of the conflict motivating the Gregorian Reforms in Continental Europe.

The Gregorian Reforms sparked a number of conflicts between the pope and his monarchs. The most famous of these disputes to come out of the Investiture Controversy was between Henry IV, the Holy Roman Emperor, and Pope Gregory VII, over the proper relationship between secular and priestly power.¹¹⁴ Richard Southern understood the conflict as “the first major dispute in modern history.”¹¹⁵ In particular, Henry IV wanted the right to appoint archbishops, while Pope Gregory VII insisted that it was a privilege of the Church. In Europe, the dispute ended in the pope's favor, with Henry IV’s famed “Walk to Canossa” in

¹¹¹ James Alexander, “The Becket Controversy in Recent Historiography,” *Journal of British Studies*, 9 (1970): 4.

¹¹² Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 24.

¹¹³ Clanchy, *England and its Rulers*, 101.

¹¹⁴ Uta-Renate Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy: Church and Monarchy from the Ninth to the Twelfth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998): 119.

¹¹⁵ Richard Southern is using the term “modern history” as a distinction from classical or ancient history. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 133.

1077, when the emperor appeared in penitential garb before the Gregory VII.¹¹⁶ This submission also signified an increase in papal power: Henry IV's acquiescence was a concession to the pope, acknowledging his right to judge secular rulers and secular affairs.¹¹⁷ The longstanding philosophy of the Carolingian kings that monarchs were immediately accountable to God was replaced with the philosophy that the king was the servant of the Church.

Henry I of England similarly wanted to retain the power to invest bishops to the Church, while Anselm insisted that such an act lay in the hands of the pope. Anselm viewed his role as not subservient to the king, but rather to the pope, as a successor of Saint Peter.¹¹⁸ The clergy in England did not support Anselm, and the pope himself, Paschal III, was reluctant to alienate the English king he needed to back his crusade. The result was a compromise where the king could continue to receive the homage and fealty of the clergy but could no longer appoint them or invest them with the symbols of their office.¹¹⁹ Nonetheless, the issue became so contentious that after Anselm's death, contact between the English crown and the papacy almost ceased, and the see of Canterbury was left vacant until 1114. The shadow of Anselm and his devotion to Rome continued to haunt the archbishopric. It would later appear as if Thomas Becket echoed the actions of Anselm. The legacy of Anselm was

¹¹⁶ Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy*, 123.

¹¹⁷ Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy*, 123-124.

¹¹⁸ Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy*, 155.

¹¹⁹ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 26.

very important and very often cited by Becket and his supporters, especially during the period of his exile.¹²⁰

A twelfth-century author known as “Anonymous of York” wrote in support of the crown; to Anonymous, the king was “on a higher plane than the priest,” and so could rightly interfere in ecclesiastical matters.¹²¹ Henry's own justiciars, Ranulf de Glanvill and Bracton, supported this view, citing the “sacrosanct position of royalty.”¹²² Therefore, Henry entered the conflict with the determination to strengthen the royal courts and the knowledge of past power conflicts with the Church. Henry also believed he had a trump card in the form of the new Archbishop of Canterbury. The see was recently vacated by the death of Theobald in 1161, and Henry quickly appointed Thomas Becket, his able chancellor and loyal friend and Theobald's protégé. Henry's ability to name the next archbishop was a power granted by the Anselm-Henry I conflict.

Becket's role as chancellor was one of strict administration of justice.¹²³ Becket was neither monk nor priest, and so did not appear to be one to place Church allegiance over royal allegiance.¹²⁴ Furthermore, in 1163, Henry had worked well with Becket to assert royal authority over Churchmen.¹²⁵ Becket had acted as the king's devoted servant, and such

¹²⁰ Michael Wilks, ed. *The World of John of Salisbury*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 34.

¹²¹ Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta*, 3.

¹²² Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta*, 4.

¹²³ Thompson, *Thomas Becket: Martyr Patriot*, 107.

¹²⁴ Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta*, 200.

¹²⁵ Clanchy, *England and its Rulers*, 130.

devotion was, to Henry, the most important criteria for selection.¹²⁶ There was also historical precedent of a king controlling the Church via an ally in a powerful position. William I, William the Conqueror, appointed a sympathetic monk, Lanfranc, to the archbishopric of Canterbury in 1070 and was able to exert his influence on the Church.¹²⁷ Lanfranc created a centralized and “national church” that remained into the reign of Henry II.¹²⁸ His creation gave the English king a great deal of power: no one was permitted to receive a letter from the pope “without first submitting them to the king.”¹²⁹ Lanfranc was so loyal to the king over the pope that Pope Gregory VII accused the archbishop of disloyalty in 1080.

It is important to note here that in twelfth-century medieval England, there was no clear division between “church” and “state.” Rather, the Church and the government were understood to be overlapping bodies, as both were part of God’s earthly kingdom, albeit serving different roles. Nevertheless, power struggles between kings and clerics underscored the ways their respective circles were discrete. The Church was concerned with spirituality and morality; the crown was concerned with administration, as well serving the Church in the secular world. Kings often sought to augment their power, at the expense of the Church, which led to great conflicts.

Furthermore, the idea that both Church and crown were extensions of God’s power thus indicated that everyone’s ultimate loyalty was supposed to be to God. However, feudal

¹²⁶ Thompson, *Thomas Becket: Martyr Patriot*, 91.

¹²⁷ Clanchy, *England and its Rulers*, 92.

¹²⁸ Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy*, 153.

¹²⁹ Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy*, 154.

society, as England was at the time, emphasized loyalty not to the lord at the top of the power ladder, but rather to one's immediate superior. For Thomas Becket, the receiver of that loyalty would change as he changed roles and continued to adhere to the ideals set forth in court literature.

Therefore, Henry's expectation of controlling the Church through Thomas Becket would prove to be misguided. Becket, as archbishop, would oppose Henry as early as July 1163.¹³⁰ Henry had wanted payments typically made to sheriffs from the lands under their control to be brought to the exchequer, rather than to the sheriffs. The reasoning behind this demand was to make the sheriffs completely dependent upon the crown by making them salaried officials under the supervision of the exchequer.¹³¹ Becket rejected this plan, claiming that such payments were voluntary and based on good conduct of the sheriffs, and flatly stated that he would not consent to any account being paid to the king.¹³² Becket also petitioned for the restoration of certain tenures that had historically belonged to the see of Canterbury, such as various castles and baronies, the very estates that Becket had helped Henry recover during his post as chancellor.¹³³ Soon, Becket openly opposed Henry's attempts at controlling the Church. The archbishop expressed the right to excommunicate nobles and tenants without consulting the king, and he challenged Henry's demands to try criminous clerks in secular courts. In time, Becket moved to thwart many of Henry's

¹³⁰ Keefe, "England and the Angevin Dominions, 1137-1204," 566.

¹³¹ Louis F. Salzman, *Henry II*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914): 198.

¹³² Salzman, *Henry II*, 197.

¹³³ Keefe, "England and the Angevin Dominions, 1137-1204," 567.

initiatives, ranging from schemes to benefit royal coffers to marriage negotiations to protecting clerks from the king's justice.¹³⁴

Despite these struggles with Becket, Henry remained undeterred in asserting his power. In 1164, he passed the Constitutions of Clarendon. Henry II used the Constitutions to establish the legitimacy of his reign: the Constitutions state that the document is meant to uphold and recognize the customs and rights of Henry II's ancestors, specifically Henry I.¹³⁵ in the present Henry's reign, thus deliberately skipping over Stephen's reign. Just as Henry had ignored Stephen's minting of new nobles, he is also returning to the principles of his grandfather.

Many points in the Constitutions concerned disputes between the relationship between the crown and the Church, as Henry II wanted to assert royal power. The Constitutions insisted on royal permission for a cleric to leave England and for a cleric to appeal to the pope, royal jurisdiction in disputes where a layman is involved, and prohibition on the excommunication of the king's staff and ministers without the king's prior knowledge and approval. Henry II also proclaimed that a vacant see — and its revenues and income — would automatically come under the control of the king.

The tenet about the criminous clerks was the most controversial of the Constitutions. He demanded that clerics who were convicted and degraded in Church courts be handed over without Church protection to face justice at the hands of the king's justiciars.¹³⁶ A charged or

¹³⁴ Salzman, *Henry II*, 63.

¹³⁵ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 12.

¹³⁶ Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta*, 206.

accused clergymen must arrive at court when they are summoned.¹³⁷ Archbishops and bishops could not leave the kingdom without the permission of the king. Vacant sees automatically reverted to the king's oversight.¹³⁸ In passing these laws, Henry requested that archbishops and bishops acknowledge and observe these laws that were in place under Henry I. Again, Henry II was invoking the name of his grandfather in an effort to augment his own power.

These laws in the Constitutions of Clarendon served multiple purposes. At the most basic level, it emphasized the power and finality of the king's court. But achieving that extent of power and control required more than just forcing standards on the ecclesiastical courts. The Constitutions went further and sought to loosen the ties between the Church's presence in England and the papacy.¹³⁹ The Church in England was already separated from the Pope by virtue of distance. Henry, and indeed many English kings, wanted to expand that distance to the advantage of the crown.

The interplay between the king and the Church has typically been an ambiguous relationship. In Medieval England, the Church-state dichotomy that we know now did not exist. At the same time, they were not combined into one entity either. When a king took his coronation rites, he received divine authority. The king was no longer merely a layman, as he embodied a "sacerdotal character." Instead, the king became *dei gratis, rex et sacerdos*, God's

¹³⁷ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 13.

¹³⁸ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 15.

¹³⁹ Alexander, "The Becket Controversy in Recent Historiography," 10.

vicar.¹⁴⁰ As such, the conflict was not “being for or against the Church” or the “king of secular justice that Henry’s reign represented.”¹⁴¹ Furthermore, “secular” did not carry with it the same meaning as we hold to it today. Rather, “secular” simply referred to anything not in Church doctrine. The “Church” and “state” were not neatly discrete societal components.

Richard Southern described the nature of kingship:

The position of a king rested on eternal foundations: he was in the strictest sense God’s anointed, endowed by God with powers which combined important aspects of the powers of bishops and priests, as well as the sanctions of secular rule. He was anointed with the holy oil used in the consecration of priests; he was invested with the ring and staff conferred on bishops, with the power to destroy heresies and to unite his subjects in the Catholic faith; and he received the sword and scepter with words which gave the highest authority to his use of violence. It was by virtue of this consecration that kings could call themselves — as they would without impropriety in the tenth century — *Vicars of Christ*...¹⁴²

However, this idea of Church and crown enmeshed together lost power over the centuries. As powers became increasingly defined with the rise of governmental organization, the powers of the priest and the king became increasingly severed, although the idea that the powers overlapped never disappeared.¹⁴³

The positions of monarch and archbishop also overlapped. As chancellor, Becket was second to the king, as they were both members of the same court-government structure. As archbishop, Becket would be in a different sphere, carrying the divine authority of the

¹⁴⁰ Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta*, 3.

¹⁴¹ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 3.

¹⁴² Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 93.

¹⁴³ “In the time of Henry II and Archbishop Becket, John of Salisbury could still complain of ignorant people who believed that the dignity of priesthood belonged to the royal office, and it is possible that Henry II did something to encourage this belief.” Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 94.

Church.¹⁴⁴ He would view himself as superior to the king. Indeed, Becket does lecture Henry and refer to the king as his “son” in his letters.¹⁴⁵

Despite the dramatic and transnational scale of the Becket conflict, the real conflict was not merely over two “dueling” court systems. In reality, the same bishops and archdeacons presided over both lay and spiritual courts. Prior to the twelfth century, such a conflict between secular and Church courts did not exist. This was because lay courts were willing to compromise with ecclesiastical principles, rather than cause points of tension and disagreement.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, the conflicts between Becket and Henry spanned topics in which there were no ecclesiastical principles at stake, such as the issue of sheriff’s aid.¹⁴⁷ When Henry demanded that convicted clerks be sent to secular courts, he also refrained from calling for another trial to establish that guilt; rather, the purpose of the secular court would be to prescribe another punishment besides the sentence issued by the ecclesiastical court. In doing so, Henry’s demands would circumvent Becket’s, and other clerics’, accusation that Henry was going against Church doctrine and judging a man twice.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Salzman, *Henry II*, 51.

¹⁴⁵ “Medieval Sourcebook: Roger of Hoveden: The Chronicle: On the Disputes between Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury and King Henry II of England.” last modified October 1998, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/hoveden-becket.asp>.

¹⁴⁶ Alexander, “The Becket Controversy in Recent Historiography,” 9.

¹⁴⁷ Alexander, “The Becket Controversy in Recent Historiography,” 7.

¹⁴⁸ Alexander, “The Becket Controversy in Recent Historiography,” 14.

Chapter Three | Romance and the Turbulent Priest: Literature, Chivalry, and Behavior

The guiding principle throughout Becket's career would be that of performance. Rather than adhering to a constant tenet of supreme loyalty to crown or Church, Becket adjusted his actions according to the position he held, even going so far as, Herbert of Bosham noted, to inhabit his role in the form of dress and appearance. Becket did not shy from taking advantage of the Church's wealth when he was chancellor; nor did he shy from reveling in the aristocratic pastimes of hunting, which was frowned upon by the Church. Becket even led troops into battle on behalf of Henry II's desire to claim Toulouse for his queen. However, Becket changed upon becoming archbishop. Historical explanations have thus far been inadequate, since they have not analyzed the importance of performance in the literature of twelfth-century England. Contemporary poetry, notably the *lais* of Marie de France, make clear the expectations of a knight and noble man. Thomas Becket lived according to those principles.

Prior to becoming chancellor, Thomas Becket spent his youth in the households of Richer L'Aigle, a Norman aristocrat, and Theobald, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Becket's fellow clerks were Roger of Pont l'Évêque and John of Canterbury, and all three were clever and ambitious. However, it was Becket who rose to become Theobald's favorite and right-hand man.¹⁴⁹ Even though Becket was not yet in holy orders, Theobald nevertheless generously bestowed church patronage upon Becket, while encouraging other powerful

¹⁴⁹ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 49.

people to do the same.¹⁵⁰ Theobald recommended Becket to the vacant archdeaconry of Canterbury and to the provostship of Beverly, both of which were important ecclesiastical posts.¹⁵¹ Becket also became skilled in secretarial and diplomatic work — work which would first manifest itself in the negotiations to ensure young Henry Plantagenet’s right to eventually succeed King Stephen, and would later prove useful for Becket’s promotion to chancellor.¹⁵²

One person appealed to to speak on Becket’s behalf to King Henry was churchman Arnulf of Lisieux. Arnulf understood Henry’s thought process very well, and he was a skilled politician. He was also despised among his Church colleagues for placing royal interests ahead of Church interests.¹⁵³ Later, Arnulf would defend Henry’s side against Becket in the Becket Controversy. Theobald’s use of Arnulf to demonstrate Becket’s worthiness to the king is an interesting choice, and it perhaps speaks to the way Theobald and Henry would have understood the role Becket would play, as a man leaving the Church for the government.

Becket was previously a member of the household of Theobald, then the Archbishop of Canterbury. Henry admired Becket’s loyalty, administrative skills, and tireless energy, which he had witnessed firsthand when Becket accompanied and prepared Theobald for the negotiations with King Stephen that would ensure Henry’s succession to the throne upon

¹⁵⁰ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 63.

¹⁵¹ Knowles, *Thomas Becket*, 27.

¹⁵² Smalley, *The Becket Conflict and the Schools*, 111.

¹⁵³ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 84.

Stephen's death.¹⁵⁴ When Henry traveled to continental Europe, Becket would accompany him.¹⁵⁵ Over time, Becket became so influential and executed his duties so well that William of Newburgh wrote that Becket gained "such high regard and distinctions from his prince, that he seemed to share the government with him."¹⁵⁶

Becket's rise to a position of high power — the chancellorship — was a rapid ascension. As chancellor, Becket occupied one of the highest offices in the realm and had important financial and judicial responsibilities.¹⁵⁷ Becket sat in the Exchequer, where taxes and feudal dues were collected, as well as the royal courts of justice, where he sat with barons and bishops to decide legal cases in the *curia regis*.¹⁵⁸ He also traveled the countryside as an "itinerant justice," thus aiding in Henry's ambition to widen the scope of royal judicial reach.

He was a man noted for his ambition and intelligence, and these reasons have often been cited throughout history when attempting to explain the apparent change in Becket's behavior as he transitioned from chancellor to archbishop, shifting his allegiances from kingdom to Christendom. Christopher Brooke described Becket's changes as, first, in 1155, a transformation from a "good cleric into a perfect royal servant, and in 1162, by a conversion equally dramatic, a worldly, royal servant was converted into an ascetic, intransigent

¹⁵⁴ Jones, ed. *The Becket Controversy*, 1.

¹⁵⁵ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 84.

¹⁵⁶ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 23.

¹⁵⁷ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 72.

¹⁵⁸ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 99.

archbishop.”¹⁵⁹ This apparently sudden change cast Becket in a less-than-sincere light among some historians.¹⁶⁰ Whereas Becket the Courtier was splendidly dressed and “romped with the king,” Becket the Priest was “proud and austere” while putting on “ostentatious acts of charity and humility.”¹⁶¹

Some have posited that the political savviness he employed to become archbishop was actually inspired by an unquenchable thirst for power, and becoming archbishop was the ideal time for him to assert his power over the king.¹⁶² However, an aspect that has typically been overlooked is the influence of court culture and literature. Henry II’s reign saw not only a change in judicial proceedings and laws, but also in literature, poetry, and ideas of chivalry. As a member of Henry’s court, Becket would have been exposed to these cultural influences. Familiarity with these stories and their ideals, coupled with a desire to emulate these popular stories, would have shaped Becket’s actions and responses to Henry II’s ambitions in relation to Church reform.

Although King Henry II assumed a fractured kingdom in disarray, he maintained a learned court. The artistic influence of his wife, the famed Eleanor of Aquitaine’s, background helped shape the literary culture. The poems and tales that emerged from the population of poets and artists were influential for the mores they espoused. Moreover, they

¹⁵⁹ Michael Wilks, ed. *The World of John of Salisbury*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 16.

¹⁶⁰ Jones, ed. *Thomas Becket*, 133. Here, the author cites the *The Feudal Kingdom of England* by Frank Barlow. Barlow writes: “[Thomas’] intimacy with the king in the past made his motives suspect and his tactlessness unforgivable, while his ostentation both as courtier and as archbishop stamped his as a parvenu...”

¹⁶¹ Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta*, 198.

¹⁶² Louis F. Salzman, *Henry II* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914): 55.

acted as codes of conduct for the noble and virtuous man. Becket followed these guidelines while working in Henry II's government. Part of his adherence to these established patterns of behavior was to inhabit the role, aesthetically.

As a high-ranking courtier, Becket assumed the expected role by living splendidly. His own household was renowned for its splendor and wealth, a fact not lost during diplomatic trips. During a trip to France in 1158 to broker a marriage deal between Henry II's son and Louis VII's daughter, Becket made a grand entrance which left a deep impression on the French. Henry Barber, citing Becket's clerk, William FitzStephen, described the scene:

An escort of more than two hundred rode with him, knights, squires and pages, with vast supplies of every kind of luxury to be distributed to the French court: silk, fur, cloaks and carpets, skins and ermine, 'such as are usually found adorning a bishop's chamber and bed.' Eight large wagons held these treasures, as well as Thomas' own wardrobe which included twenty-four changes of silk robes, his provisions, a portable chapel and kitchen, and equipment for his clerks.¹⁶³

This depiction of Becket — as lavish and pompous — stands in contrast to the hagiography that sprang about his name after his martyrdom. The retinue with which he traveled to France may have been exaggerated and made grander for the purpose of conveying his king's wealth and power, but the makeup of the baggage still speaks to Becket and his conduct. He traveled with a "portable chapel," as many devout would have done, which speaks to his devotion to God, but it does not indicate that Becket was solely focused on his faith. While Becket did keep two priests with him as chancellor for the purposes of devout prayer and discipline,¹⁶⁴ Becket was not the pious ascetic. He did not wear a hair shirt

¹⁶³ Henry Barber, *Henry Plantagenet* (Ipswich: Boydell Press, 1964): 91.

¹⁶⁴ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel Victim*, 122.

or deny himself the luxuries of life. Instead, he traveled with over twenty changes of silk robes.

Beauty and presentation was integral to the persona of knighthood as chivalric romances routinely make clear. In *Lanval*, for instance, Marie de France not only mentioned King Arthur's splendid court and reputation — he was known in his court and throughout his kingdom “for being brave and generous” (*pur sa valor, pur sa largesce*) — but also noted his appearance, as the king was famous “for his beauty and prowess” (*pur sa beauté, pur sa prüesce*).¹⁶⁵ As such, one had to go beyond merely *acting* the part of the knight, but also *looking* the part of the knight. Moreover, the emphasis of appearances in the *lais* speaks to the values of the society in which these poems were produced. It was a society that saw outward appearance as a way to convey not only wealth and position, but the inherent virtues that came in tandem with the position.

Beyond the outward displays of his position, Becket also worked to expand the scope and power of his position, as the office of chancellor was not inherently an office that carried great political influence.¹⁶⁶ As chancellor, Becket made clear that his loyalties were first and foremost to the king. When Henry was facing Continental conflicts against his brother, Geoffrey of Anjou, and King Louis VII of France, it fell to Becket to help Henry raise enough money to fund the campaign. He levied an unpopular tax called ‘scutage,’ which had its roots in the reign of Henry I, when he was raising money to pay for mercenaries. This tax allowed for money payment instead of military service. However, under Thomas Becket, the

¹⁶⁵ Ewert, ed. *Marie de France: Lais*, 58.

¹⁶⁶ Barber, *Henry Plantagenet*, 77.

scutage became a flat tax, regardless of whether a lord provided soldiers or not. In doing so, Becket was able to raise more than enough money to cover Henry's expedition. Despite the surplus, Becket ignored protests and refused petitions for exemptions, even from Theobald, even when Church lands were usually exempt from such taxation.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, Becket taxed the Church heavily to fund Henry's coffers.¹⁶⁸

Becket's insistence on using Church money to finance Henry's military ambitions indicates Becket's priorities and allegiances. He placed his duty to the king — his lord — above any duty owed to prior superiors. He acted, not in terms of his behavior and department as a loyal and accomplished servant to the king, behavior we can argue that was modeled on the courtier expectations in the court. His success in both Theobald's household and the court came from his ability to adopt or perform these social and cultural expectations. Becket seems to have understood the centrality of the performance of a role or identity to fulfill his ambitions. This idea of performance of a role would be continued when he became archbishop.

Beyond his official duties, Becket was also a prolific hunter and falconer. He eventually became renowned for his birds. His appreciation of the sport demonstrated his wealth, since, as John Guy notes, "nothing signaled a person's high status more than the sight of a hawk with its leather hood on, perching on the owner's glove."¹⁶⁹ For all his piety, despite having had two personal chaplains accompany at all times, Becket's affinity for

¹⁶⁷ Barber, *Henry Plantagenet*, 102.

¹⁶⁸ Winston, *Thomas Becket*, 79.

¹⁶⁹ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 19.

hunting further demonstrated his performance of status in service of loyalty. This is especially clear since the Church frowned on hunting and warfare almost equally.¹⁷⁰ Becket not only hunted, but was known for his own stock of hunting animals, thus indicating that he partook in the sport with great zeal. This facet of his life casts doubt on the past crediting of Becket's actions to a sudden discovery religious fervor. Rather, Becket was performing his various roles in different stages of his life. As he transitioned from archdeacon to chancellor to archbishop, Becket merely evolved to fit the expected behavior of those roles.

Romances, for the elite, provided new examples of a social code of conduct.¹⁷¹ This social code entailed "courtly love," a seemingly subversive idea in Medieval Christian society, as it came to include stories about adultery. Romances first appeared as foundation myths for Anglo-Norman noble families, tracing them back to the days of mythical heroes, validating the stature of the family.¹⁷² However, it was not until royals used these stories to trace their lineage that the links to Arthurian and chivalric romance come about. Thereafter, the ideals portrayed in the romances became an ideal for all nobility, not just the royal family. By the time of Eleanor of Aquitaine, chivalry and romance produced another phenomenon: courtly love. Courtly love, or *fin amor*, centered on an idea of love that focused on chivalry

¹⁷⁰ In a letter from Bernard of Clairvaux to Pope Eugenius III, Bernard makes clear that the Church bears the "spiritual" sword, while laymen bear "the material sword," which is only meant to be "unsheathed for the church," in the form of Crusades at the Church's bidding. Non-religious wars were therefore frowned upon by the Church.

¹⁷¹ Roberta L. Krueger, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 5.

¹⁷² Rosalind Field, "Romance in England, 1066-1400," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 161.

and nobility. A knight would strive to earn the affection of a noble lady through brave acts and endurance of various tests.

Historiographically, Henry II's queen has been credited as one of the most potent and widely-credited artistic influences in his court. According to Joan Kelly, Eleanor was able to "make [her] courts major cultural and social centers and play thereby a dominant role in forming the outlook and mores of their class."¹⁷³ When Henry married Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152, the marriage brought a vast region in southern France under English rule. The marriage also brought the culture from southern France. Eleanor of Aquitaine was born in 1124 in the south of France.¹⁷⁴ Her father was the William X, Duke of Aquitaine, whose lands were larger and richer than the lands under direct control of the French king.¹⁷⁵ Her grandfather, William IX, widely regarded as "the first known troubadour,"¹⁷⁶ composed poetry and was a patron of the troubadours, which inspired the *chansons de geste*, epic tales that were sometimes decried as too heroic,¹⁷⁷ that spread throughout the courts of Europe.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷³ Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in *Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly*, Joan Kelly, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984): 184.

¹⁷⁴ Elizabeth A.R. Brown, "Eleanor of Aquitaine Reconsidered: The Woman and Her Seasons," in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003): 1.

¹⁷⁵ Amy Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine, and the Four Kings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950): 4.

¹⁷⁶ Eugenio M. Oliver Merino, "The Queen of Troubadours Goes to England: Eleanor of Aquitaine and 12th Century Anglo-Norman Literary Milieu," in *Into Another's Skin: Selected Essays in Honor of María Luisa Dañobeitia*, ed. Mauricio D. Aguiera Linde, María José de la Torre Morena, and Laura Torres Zúñiga (Universidad de Jaén, 2012): 20.

¹⁷⁷ Field, "Romance in England, 1066-1400," 152.

¹⁷⁸ Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine, and the Four Kings*, 24.

He was also renowned as one of the world's great courtiers, notorious for his womanizing ways.¹⁷⁹ Thus, Eleanor grew up in a court where the culture was free and liberal, and the poetry spoke of illustrious chivalric heroes. This background made her an outcast when she wed King Louis VII of France and brought with her to the Parisian court bands of minstrels and troubadours who sang and recited poetry.¹⁸⁰ Under the influence of the king, the royal court in France was much more pious and tame.

Eleanor and Louis married in 1137, after William X had died while on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.¹⁸¹ Louis was still the *dauphin*, heir to the French throne, at that time, but his father, Louis VI, saw this marriage as the long-awaited chance to bring the vast and wealthy duchy of Aquitaine into the French royal orbit. The marriage was also advantageous to Eleanor: she now had powerful support against ambitious lords in Aquitaine, eager to augment their own power at her expense. The use of strategic marriages for expanding boundaries of the royal domain was very common.¹⁸²

However, the couple was ill-matched. Where Eleanor as “extroverted and vivacious,” as described by Theresa Earenfight, and supportive of romance, Louis was “introverted and serious.”¹⁸³ As the second son, Louis had been brought up with the intention of joining the

¹⁷⁹ Brown, “Eleanor of Aquitaine Reconsidered,” 5.

¹⁸⁰ Hannah Lawrence, *Historical Memoirs of the Queens of England from the Commencement of the Twelfth Century* (London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street, 1838): 190.

¹⁸¹ Brown, “Eleanor of Aquitaine Reconsidered,” 6.

¹⁸² Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013):126.

¹⁸³ Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval England*, 137.

Church, not to reign. As a result of his monkish upbringing, he could not share in Eleanor's affinity for romantic culture.

While Eleanor was queen in France, she acted as a patroness of the arts, and she encouraged the rise of literature written in vernacular.¹⁸⁴ This literature featured tales of chivalry and romance and secular love lyrics. When she left Paris, these artists followed her to her court at Anjou, where she held the title of Countess of Anjou upon marrying Henry, then Count of Anjou.¹⁸⁵ These artists drew inspiration from crusades, life at court, existing poetry from Brittany and Arthurian legend, and from Eleanor herself. Some have mirrored their stories on her life and her decision to leave a dull monkish king in favor of a "bold young knight" in the form of Henry.¹⁸⁶

Beyond just age and kingdom, Henry was different in his approach toward literature and culture. While he was very much focused on government and establishing his authority as king, Henry nonetheless was very much interested in the literature and learning of his age, which led to his christening as "probably the most scholarly man to ever occupy the throne of England" by Michael Swanton.¹⁸⁷ Peter of Blois compared Henry II favorably to the king of Sicily in a letter to the Archbishop of Salerno, noting his quick wit, curiosity, and talent for conversation: "With the King of England there is school everyday, constant conversation of

¹⁸⁴ Richard Barber, *Henry Plantagenet*, (Ipswich: Boydell Press, 1964): 41.

¹⁸⁵ Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine, and the Four Kings*, 85.

¹⁸⁶ Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine, and the Four Kings*, 87.

¹⁸⁷ Oliver Merino, "The Queen of the Troubadours Goes to England," 22.

the best scholars and discussion of questions.”¹⁸⁸ At the English court, Eleanor’s influence was far more considerable than in the French court, now that her new husband matched her love learning and the arts.

Upon Eleanor’s arrival in England, the center of this romantic culture movement shifted to England with her. R. W. Southern notes the significance of the movement of nobility and the culture shifts that move with them:

At a time when the spread of ideas was achieved more through the movement of people than through the impersonal circulation of books, the migration of ladies of noble birth and the small company of advisers who surrounded them were a potent factor in drawing together remote parts of Christendom.¹⁸⁹

At the Poitevian court that Eleanor maintained between the end of marriage to Louis and her crowning as Queen of England, she had invited troubadours and fostered the elements that later defined *roman courtois*: *fin’amors* — chivalry and mythology.¹⁹⁰ Thus, when she came to England, Eleanor brought with her, her influence and status as patroness of the arts. Bernard de Ventadour, a renowned poet and troubadour from Poitou, traveled to England to address his lyrics to Eleanor and Henry.¹⁹¹ Her influence among poets and her position as Henry’s queen aided the spread of courtly love throughout Europe and to

¹⁸⁸ Oliver Merino, “The Queen of the Troubadours Goes to England,” 23.

¹⁸⁹ R.W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953): 78.

¹⁹⁰ Oliver Merino, “The Queen of the Troubadours Goes to England,” 23.

¹⁹¹ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 83-84.

England.¹⁹² Artists at court produced an extraordinary volume and quality of writing.¹⁹³ An 1155, the Anglo-Norman translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* — also known as *Roman de Brut* — was dedicated to Eleanor. This history wove together legend (King Arthur) and fact (pre-Conquest Britain) to create a distinguished history.

After the Norman Conquest, Anglo-Saxon arts in England began to exhibit Norman influences. The resulting Anglo-Norman literature thus also included romances. However, the legendary King Arthur was “conspicuously absent from Anglo-Norman romance.”¹⁹⁴ Instead of revering past heroes, writers chose to glorify local dynastic heroes and legendary figures. Rosalind Field describes the hero of an Anglo-Norman romance as often “a landless ‘bachelor’ often unjustly exiled from his own lands and thereby from his rightful place in society, who in the course of the action wins back his lands and with them his social position.”¹⁹⁵ Over the course of his quest, the hero also “challenges kingship in confrontations which distinguish good from bad rule.”¹⁹⁶ Concurrent with this trend, the royal courts exploited the legend of Arthur. In this instance, the use of Arthur was a political decision. The powerful barons in England were not keen to promote a legend “identified with

¹⁹² Bingham, *The Crowned Lions: The Early Plantagenet Kings*, 42.

¹⁹³ Susan Crane, “Anglo-Norman Cultures in England, 1066-1460,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 41.

¹⁹⁴ Field, “Romance in England, 1066-1400,” 161.

¹⁹⁵ Field, “Romance in England, 1066-1400,” 161.

¹⁹⁶ Field, “Romance in England, 1066-1400,” 162.

the validation of centralized monarchy,” while the kings were very insistent.¹⁹⁷ These stories featured a fabled ancient ideal, all centered around a strong and just king. It was surely an image that the crown was eager to exalt. Furthermore, popularizing the legends of King Arthur would, in the minds of those who heard the story, link the notions of peace and prosperity with strong centralized rule. Such a message is counter to the “ideal” for powerful barons, whose times of autonomy were now gone.

Henry’s reign bought Anglo-Norman literature to its zenith.¹⁹⁸ He and Eleanor were “the leading patrons of poets in Poitou, Anjou, Normandy, and England,” according to John Moore.¹⁹⁹ The court boasted poets who were closely associated with the nobles at court and therefore enjoyed their patronage.²⁰⁰ Indeed, Henry II had sponsored the writing of two famous histories, the *Roman de Rou* by Wace and *Chronique des ducs de Normandie* by Benoît de Sainte-Maure, in French, the language of art, rather than Latin, the language of scholarship and learning.²⁰¹ The term “roman” is a linguistic matter to itself. At the time of writing, Wace meant “roman” in the sense that it was written in the vernacular French

¹⁹⁷ Field, “Romance in England, 1066-1400,” 161.

¹⁹⁸ Oliver Merino, “The Queen of the Troubadours Goes to England,” 23.

¹⁹⁹ John C. Moore, *Love in Twelfth-Century France*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972): 91.

²⁰⁰ Thomas C. Rumble, *The Breton Lays in Middle English*, (Detroit: Wayne State University, Press, 1965): xvi.

²⁰¹ Charity Urbanski, *Writing History for the King: Henry II and the Politics of Vernacular Historiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013): 9.

language. Later, however, the same word would come to be linked to romance, “the principal secular literature of entertainment of the Middle Ages.”²⁰²

The court of Henry and Eleanor employed both *clercs lisant*, writers charged with the task of writing histories, and *jongleurs*, those who wrote and recited poems for entertainment. Both roles were expected to compose and recite rhymed verses about historical events and lives of saints.²⁰³ In the late twelfth century, the distinction between these two genres was more fluid.²⁰⁴ The *chansons de geste* achieved longevity in Anglo-Norman romances, which would indicate a preference for “morally concerned and heroically active type of narrative poetry.”²⁰⁵

However, there was also another shift in Anglo-Norman literature. The artistic hero was still a man fighting for his cause — potentially against an ignoble king — but the man was now a knight. As knighthood attained the status of respectability, the ideal itself inspired literature, which in turn shaped the conduct and manners of society.²⁰⁶ The fact that the knights of literature were lionized and idealized to the point that they were no longer realistic was irrelevant. Instead, these stories of chivalry carried with them “themes of Charlemagne and King Arthur, of the Crusade and the formation of the Christian ruler.”²⁰⁷ However, it is

²⁰² Field, “Romance in England, 1066-1400,” 152.

²⁰³ Urbanski, *Writing History for the King*, 20.

²⁰⁴ Urbanski, *Writing History for the King*, 149.

²⁰⁵ Field, “Romance in England, 1066-1400,” 154.

²⁰⁶ Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 115.

²⁰⁷ *ibid.*

important to note that while these ideals may not have affected society as a whole in a substantial way, they were important for their impact on the individual and in its role in refining the emotions and manners of the individual man.²⁰⁸ Certainly they allowed Becket to imagine himself as playing a role in a romance, even if the heroic role he inhabited was that of an archbishop. He was still able to aspire to the ideals of knighthood through imitating the actions and appearances of the knights in those stories.

Becket himself lived by these guidelines. Under Henry II, he led at least one military expedition,²⁰⁹ and was an organizer for Henry's army.²¹⁰ During Henry's siege of Toulouse, Becket also led hundreds of knights, a large company of mercenaries²¹¹ and controlled the rearguard.²¹² Henry had captured several castles around Toulouse, but he had been hesitant to attack the city itself, since King Louis was within the city.²¹³ In later interpretations, Henry's reservations about capturing the castle King Louis was in was attributed to "chivalrous regard," as Henry had once sworn fealty to King Louis in exchange for the king's recognition of young Henry as duke of Anjou.²¹⁴ However, Becket "pressed his master to assault; it was

²⁰⁸ Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 115.

²⁰⁹ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 1.

²¹⁰ Knowles, *Thomas Becket*, 38.

²¹¹ Thompson, *Thomas Becket: Martyr Patriot*, 67.

²¹² Richard Barber, *Henry Plantagenet* (Ipswich: Boydell Press, 1964): 96.

²¹³ Matthew Paris and J.A. Giles, trans. *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History, comprising The History of England from the Descent of the Saxons to A.D. 1235, Volume I* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1849): 532.

²¹⁴ Robert Anchor Thompson, *Thomas Becket: Martyr Patriot* (London: Kegan Paul, Tench & Co., 1889): 67.

never the Chancellor's habit to respect the obligations of conventional morality when they stood between him and his object."²¹⁵ Furthermore, these were all actions taken while Becket, with his past in the Church, was supposed to renounce bearing arms.²¹⁶

The theme of the noble knight was prevalent in the poetry of Marie de France, possibly a literary figure in the court of Henry II. Throughout history, many have tried to establish her identity. Some have gone so far to claim that this Marie was Marie de Champagne, one of Eleanor's daughters by Louis VII. However, this connection has proven fruitless and inaccurate.²¹⁷ Regardless of the mystery surrounding her identity, Marie de France is generally believed to have written her *lais* in England, although in French.²¹⁸ She appears to have been closely associated with the English royal court, and, consequently, likely had contact with Eleanor.²¹⁹ Scholars have tried to establish the dates her *lais* were composed, but many have placed the dates at "Eleanor's heyday of literary activities."²²⁰ She most likely dedicated her poetry to Henry, as indicated by the designation of "*noble Roi, pieux et courtois.*"

²¹⁵ Davis, *A History of England, Volume II: England Under the Normans and Angevins, 1066-1272*, 205.

²¹⁶ Robert Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings: 1075-1225* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009): 377.

²¹⁷ June Hall Martin McCash, "Marie de Champagne and Eleanor of Aquitaine: A Relationship Reexamined," *Speculum*, 54 (1988): 701.

²¹⁸ Oliver Merino, "The Queen of the Troubadours Goes to England," 27.

²¹⁹ McCash, "Marie de Champagne and Eleanor of Aquitaine," 701.

²²⁰ Oliver Merino, "The Queen of the Troubadours Goes to England," 27.

Marie de France's *lais* were written for a "military society" and she focused on the relationship between knights and the women they loved and their kings. Literature often featured both war and love.²²¹ Glyn Burgess writes that, during Marie de France's active years, chivalry and knighthood had taken hold as a "a crucial aspect of the social aspect of her times."²²² This lionization of militarism is in stark contrast with Church teachings, which frowned on warfare among Christians.²²³ Within her poetry, the favorable characters were almost always knights.²²⁴ She had described the knights as "noble and bold, courtly and fierce."²²⁵ In her *lais*, *Bisclavret*, Marie de France juxtaposes the description of a fearsome beast with that of an upstanding knight. Whereas the beast was described as savage and evil, the knight was the opposite:

En Bretagne maneit un ber, [In Brittany there dwelt a lord]
Merveille l'ai oï loër [Wondrous praise of him I've heard]
Beaus chevalers e bons esteit [A handsome knight and an able man]
E noblement se cunteneit [He was, and acted like, a noble man]
De sun seinur esteit privez [His lord the King held him dear]
E de tuz ses veisins amez [And so did his neighbors far and near]²²⁶

In *Le Fresne*, Marie is equally full of praise of knights:

²²¹ Bingham, *The Crowned Lions*, 43.

²²² Glyn Burgess, *The Lais of Marie de France: text and context*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987): x.

²²³ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 107.

²²⁴ Burgess, *The Lais of Marie de France: text and context*, 71.

²²⁵ Burgess, *The Lais of Marie de France: text and context*, 81.

²²⁶ Judith Rice Rothschild, *Narrative Techniques in the Lais of Marie de France: Themes and Variations, Vol. 1* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina studies in the Romance languages and literatures, 1974), 93.

En Bretagne jadis maneient [In Brittany there lived]
Dui chevalier, veisin esteient [Two knights--they were neighbors, near]
Riche humme furent e manant [Rich men, the sort who do what they want]
E chavelers pruz e vaillant [Noble knights, bold, proud, valiant]

It is clear here that Marie de France intended a link between knighthood and nobility through actions. The knight, with the right behavior inspired esteem and affection from all who knew him, king and peers alike. A good reputation — being loved by one's superiors — was an embodiment of that nobility, almost a spiritual quality borne out of inhabiting those qualities. In Marie's *Lais*, it was not simply birth that led to promotion and high esteem, but the behavior. This would have been an appealing message for Becket, born of a middling family, and who through ambition, luck, and intelligence had moved to the highest levels of political life.

The knights were also shown competing in tournaments and engaging in battle. In addition to a "love of pleasure and dalliance," these knights were characterized by the larger theme of loyalty and conflict, which consequently demonstrates their adherence to the principles of chivalry. Conflict sometimes came in the form of tournaments, wherein knights would strive to prove their valor, strength, and superiority.²²⁷ Furthermore, the knights often faced conflicts with a king or lord who had the power to protect or destroy the knights. This mindset extended to the clergy. Bernard of Clairvaux instructed his former pupil, Pope Eugenius III, that the pope — and indeed all clerics — must act like Moses and wield their

²²⁷ The tenth of Marie's twelve *lais*, *Chaitivel*, tells of a woman sought after by four knights. Since each knight is equally chivalrous and brave, she cannot decide which of the four to grant her affections; therefore, she decides to love all four. Knights from throughout France, including these four lovestruck knights, later compete in a tournament after Easter, held at Nantes. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante, trans. *The Lais of Marie de France*. (New York: E. P. Dunton, 1978): 182-183.

power against tyrants, standing in the way of God's people on their path to righteousness.²²⁸ As Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket inhabited this role prescribed by Holy Writ and elaborated on by Bernard. While he preyed on Church coffers as chancellor, Thomas the Archbishop valiantly used his power against Henry II, often branded a tyrant by Thomas Becket's supporters, to defend his new cause to the death.

The effects of chivalry also extended beyond the dominant literature and art of the time. It was also engrained in English lore. Today, Saint George is often regarded as the patron saint of England, but that distinction did not come until later, around 1351.²²⁹ Although he was not yet elevated to such a status during the time of King Henry II and Thomas Becket, Saint George still enjoyed popularity among the people. Indeed, saints served important roles in society as moral examples of the virtues of "holiness in life and steadfastness in death,"²³⁰ which featured very much in the hagiography of this saint: Saint George's stories often focused on the tortures he sustained for his faith.²³¹ Saint George also bore a clear and widely-accepted connection to chivalry and militarism. During the Crusades, the image of Saint George came to portray him as mounted on a white horse — a symbol of the clarity of his virtues — and bearing a banner with a cross.²³²

²²⁸ I. S. Robinson, "The Papacy: 1122-1198." In *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, edited by David Luscombe, Jonathan Riley-Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 317.

²²⁹ Jonathan Good, *The Cult of Saint George in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009): 1.

²³⁰ Good, *The Cult of Saint George in Medieval England*, 2.

²³¹ Good, *The Cult of Saint George in Medieval England*, 23.

²³² Good, *The Cult of Saint George in Medieval England*, 35.

The virtues of Saint George, the patron saint of chivalry,²³³ were preserved in poems and literature as well. In the twelfth-century poems of Simund de Freine, the saint was described as “A knight, who had resolved/To gain a reputation through knightly deeds,” and as a “a high-born man of noble lineage...and well-versed in the art of chivalry.”²³⁴ In the psyche of twelfth-century romance, “chivalry” and knighthood entailed a prescribed litany of qualities: “*prouesse, loyauté, largesse* (generosity), *courtoisie*, and *franchise* (that is, the self-confident comportment that comes naturally to good birth).”²³⁵ Furthermore, knights were expected to defend the Church, a challenge to which Becket famously rose.

Becket and Saint George were even intertwined in contemporary legends. When Henry III battled Simon de Montfort and sought to quell rebel barons, Simon de Montfort later recounted that he and his troops saw “a soldier, bearing arms and an unknown banner, appeared alongside an archbishop in full pontificals who blessed the rebel army.”²³⁶ The figures were nowhere to be found after the battle, and “it was later adduced that the two men were Saint George and Saint Thomas Becket.”²³⁷

The stories of Saint George and his exemplary chivalric deeds lived in contemporary popular culture through poems. His virtues were extolled and emulated. As a man in the royal court, Thomas Becket was not immune from such influences. Indeed, he fulfilled the

²³³ Good, *The Cult of Saint George in Medieval England*, 47.

²³⁴ Good, *The Cult of Saint George in Medieval England*, 46.

²³⁵ Good, *The Cult of Saint George in Medieval England*, 46-47.

²³⁶ Good, *The Cult of Saint George in Medieval England*, 38.

²³⁷ Good, *The Cult of Saint George in Medieval England*, 38.

militaristic aspect of the knightly persona as Henry's chancellor during the siege of Toulouse in June 1159. Henry wanted to expand the borders of his empire, while Eleanor claimed ancestral rights to the land. Her ancestors had once been acknowledged as suzerains of the counts of Toulouse. The count of Toulouse at the time, Raymond V, was married to the sister of King Louis VII, and thus appealed to the French king for help.²³⁸

The ideals of knighthood and chivalry were also present in the court's — and Becket's — infatuation with the legend of King Arthur. Whereas early works drew their influence from Rome and Byzantium; new work instead drew influence from Britain. The new literature focused on crusade, pilgrimage, and King Arthur. The mythical king spoke to the throne for his strong grasp on power; to noble subjects, King Arthur and his knights embodied a standard to which the men aspired. Becket, with his clerical background, was not immune. Just as William fitz Stephen had written, Becket saw his duty at Toulouse as his chance to live out such knightly dreams. It is clear, therefore, that Becket was very much an active participant of this court culture and ideology. Becket was not a singularly religious or political man, but rather a man living according to the tenets espoused in these widely-known and widely-admired tales. Henry himself was so enraptured by the tale of Arthur that he commissioned excavations in Glastonbury in an attempt to find remnants of the fabled reign.²³⁹ His own fascination with Arthur would spark interest among his court. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, "There was neither king nor powerful lord who did not try to school

²³⁸ Bingham, *The Crowned Lions: The Early Plantagenet Kings*, 46.

²³⁹ Oliver Merino, "The Queen of the Troubadours Goes to England," 22.

himself according to the modes and manners of the men of Arthur.”²⁴⁰ Indeed, Becket would be one of these “powerful lords,” looking to King Arthur as an inspiration for ideal behavior. Becket was in many ways a warrior throughout his entire career, be it for the king or for the Church.²⁴¹ Marie de France also references King Arthur in her *lais*, *Lanval*, opening the poem by describing King Arthur as presiding over a “valiant and courtly estate” (*li pruz e li cuteis*).²⁴²

The longevity of these stories speaks to the power of their values. The heroic and idealistic *chansons de geste* were not fads that were quickly replaced by new genres. Rather, they had continued from the courts on the Continent to the courts in England. Their appeal transcended royal boundaries — aided by the physical transcendence of Eleanor and her circle from Continental Europe to England — and was able to influence a wide array of figures. Furthermore, the effect of the Arthurian tales on the behavior of the men at court speaks to the power of the literature at the court of Henry II. The prevailing poetry, songs, and stories were not merely forms of entertainment; they were also guidelines of ideal behavior.

The Church, especially during the twelfth century, was far from monolithic. The papacy itself was divided. While papal power seemed high after the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV’s Walk to Canossa in 1077, that power quickly fractured after the death of Pope Hadrian. By 1167, the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa, approached Rome with

²⁴⁰ Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine, and the Four Kings*, 100.

²⁴¹ Richard Winston, *Thomas Becket* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968): 81.

²⁴² Alfred Ewert, ed. *Marie de France: Lais* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1944): 58.

his powerful army, ready to defeat Pope Alexander in favor of the anti-pope, Paschal III.²⁴³

Alexander was then forced to flee. Pope Alexander reigned in Avignon under auspice of King Louis VII, while the anti-pope held court in Rome. Meanwhile, Pope Alexander relied on the support of France and England to his claim to the Holy See. The delicate political balance thus affected the pope's ability and willingness to potentially infringe on the king's royal privileges.²⁴⁴

Furthermore, the Church in England was in a unique position compared to the rest of Europe. The Protestant Reformation was still over two centuries away, and the Church was the sole authority on the Christian faith in Western Europe. Nevertheless, England, separated by the Channel from Continental Europe, developed its Church alongside, but not identical to, the Church on the Continent. The English Church was deeply pervasive in daily life. The separation also meant that specter of the pope and his power was not an immediate concern for the English monarchs or clergy. As David Knowles noted, "Neither kings nor bishops had any need to engage in power-politics similar to those of the [Holy Roman Emperors] and the powerful bishops of the empire. The English kings were devout patrons of the church and the bishops were their counselors and allies."²⁴⁵

The political power dynamics of the Church — in Europe and England — played into the Becket Controversy. Becket had turned to Pope Alexander III for guidance and support during the conflict. It is clear in the letters from the pope to Becket that he agreed with the

²⁴³ Christopher Brooke, "John of Salisbury and his world," in *The World of John of Salisbury*, ed. Michael Wilkes (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984): 11.

²⁴⁴ Thompson, *Thomas Becket; Martyr Patriot*, 93.

²⁴⁵ Knowles, *Thomas Becket*, 12.

archbishop, writing in no uncertain terms that “the less,” meaning kings and lay leaders, “cannot judge the greater,” referring to clerics. Nevertheless, the Pope, in the same letter, advised the archbishop to be discreet, “prudent and circumspect.”²⁴⁶ At the time, Pope Alexander III maintained his court in France while battling the anti-pope in Rome, relying on the good will of rulers outside of Germany. This power struggle meant that Pope Alexander needed to strike a delicate political balance in the Becket Controversy. He refused to approve the Constitutions, as Henry had requested, but he also refused to issue a public condemnation, which would signify his support for Thomas Becket.²⁴⁷ The pope could not overtly favor the cause of the archbishop, for fear of alienating King Henry II. The support of the English king would be valuable to Pope Alexander’s quest for authority, especially when the anti-pope boasted the support of the Holy Roman Emperor. Henry II was seen as “the most powerful ruler north of the Alps,” and he was supporting the pope.²⁴⁸ However, Pope Alexander could not abandon Becket’s cause either.

Thus, for Alexander, his stake in the conflict was less spiritual and more political.²⁴⁹ The pope’s letters to Becket demonstrated such a dilemma. Pope Alexander expressed the belief that the king cannot impose his will on the clergy — “the less cannot judge the greater,

²⁴⁶ Brian Tierney, *The Crisis of Church and State: 1050-1300*. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1964): 114.

²⁴⁷ Smalley, *The Becket Controversy and its Schools*, 149.

²⁴⁸ Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, 154.

²⁴⁹ Knowles, *Thomas Becket*, 164.

and especially him to whom he is known to be subject by right of prelacy”²⁵⁰ — while urging Becket to be patient — “Forbear with the king until the following Easter.”²⁵¹

However, Becket did not follow the pope’s advice, which irked and embarrassed the pope. Instead, Becket wrote to his suffragan bishops from exile. Where Pope Alexander called for prudence, Becket wrote that discretion accomplished nothing for his cause.²⁵² Those who did not fight alongside him were accused of choosing loyalty to the Crown over loyalty to the Church.²⁵³

Becket’s strong response against Pope Alexander’s advice again speaks to the archbishop’s living according to performance. On one hand, Becket’s most powerful, albeit tacit, ally and friend stated in plain terms that Becket should be discreet and respectful as he searches for a solution with Henry II. On the other, Becket is well aware of the expected performance: resistant in the face of danger and taking a strong stand for one’s ideals. Pope Alexander was standing in the way of Becket’s ability to perform his role as archbishop. Moreover, Becket’s response shows that he has a clear focus in mind, that of proving his loyalty to his ideal (the Church) and superior (the pope). It is a focus that is blind to nuance and compromise, thus driving Becket to a stubbornness that exasperated King Louis VII.

²⁵⁰ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 31.

²⁵¹ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 32.

²⁵² Scully, “The Unmasking of a Saint,” 581.

²⁵³ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 33.

Becket centered his appeals on his rival for clerical power, Gilbert Foliot, the bishop of London.²⁵⁴ When Theobald died and the see of Canterbury became open, many expected Foliot to be named the new archbishop. He developed a dislike for Becket when Henry chose his chancellor for the position, rather than himself, with his extensive clerical background. Foliot accused Becket of bullying other clerics and of buying his office.²⁵⁵ Foliot spoke up during Becket's election to the archbishopric, mocking the apparent conversion of "a secular and a soldier into an archbishop" under royal command.²⁵⁶ During the Controversy, Foliot was inspired by his animosity toward Becket to ally himself with Henry. Eventually, Foliot would become the Archbishop of London, a position, which had historically competed with the archbishopric of Canterbury for power and prestige.²⁵⁷

In his letter to Gilbert Foliot, Becket scolds him for his obstinacy and refusal to be obedient to the pope. Becket even goes so far as to command Foliot to "abstain from all communion with the faithful; lest be coming in contact with you, the Lord's flock may be contaminated to its ruin."²⁵⁸ However, Foliot responded with a fiercely-worded letter, defending his decision to stand by Henry. Foliot asserted that the bishops all stood by Becket, even though Becket was foolishly stubborn:

²⁵⁴ Gilbert Foliot would go on to publicly side with King Henry II during the Becket Controversy, appealing to Pope Alexander III after Thomas excommunicated the king and any archbishops who disagreed with him. After Becket fled England, it was Foliot who crowned Henry the Young King — a decision that would later cause problems for Henry during the Controversy.

²⁵⁵ Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers*, 40.

²⁵⁶ Thompson, *Thomas Becket: Martyr Patriot*, 102.

²⁵⁷ Bingham, *The Crowned Lions*, 59

²⁵⁸ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 36.

We stood by you because we thought you were standing courageously in the spirit of the Lord. We stood immovable and undismayed. We stood firm, to the ruin of our fortunes, ready to suffer bodily torment or exile, or, if God so willed, even the sword. What man ever succeeded in getting more unanimous support than you did on that occasion?²⁵⁹

Despite this show of support from Becket's suffragan bishops, Foliot charges, Becket capitulated to the demands in the Constitutions and fled England like a coward:

Let the truth be told; let the light of day be shed on what then occurred in the presence of us all. It was the leader of our chivalry who turned his back, the captain of our camp who fled; our lord of Canterbury himself abandoned the society of his brethren and forsook our common counsel ... Furthermore you added to your offences, in that you fled by night in disguise, as if plots had been laid against your life and person, and after some little time you secretly escaped from the realm overseas, although no one was pursuing you or driving you into exile.²⁶⁰

This episode is interesting for multiple reasons. Here, Foliot attacks Becket of cowardice, and he elects to frame the accusation within the ideas of chivalry. Becket's decision to flee England can be analyzed in light of that literature as well. Marie de France's *lais*, *Lanval*, features a brave and upstanding knight in King Arthur's court. Despite his many virtues, Lanval is an outcast at court, due to jealousy from the other knights and because he is from a foreign land. Becket may have felt like an outcast as well, even as chancellor, since he did not come from a wealthy or noble household. Lanval also endured a period of exile, separated from King Arthur's goodwill and the comfort of his beloved, an otherworldly

²⁵⁹ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 37.

²⁶⁰ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 38.

maiden. Lanval's love and desire to protect that love were the causes of Arthur's wrath.²⁶¹ Nevertheless, his loyalty to his cause — the maiden — offered him no solace. It is a situation similar to Becket's: his defense of the Church estranged him from King Henry II, while Pope Alexander III only offered lukewarm support, due to the delicate power dynamics of the time. It is not until later in the *lais* that Lanval is redeemed. The story arc of *Lanval* could have served as an inspiration for Thomas Becket, who assumed the role of the lone virtuous knight, balancing dueling duties to king and cause, and ultimately facing the wrath of the king. By imitating this story, Becket would have also acted with the belief that he would be redeemed.

The clergy was fractured during the time of the Controversy, but Foliot portrays the English Church as a monolith, standing in solidarity with Becket during the initial conflict, "ready to suffer bodily torment or exile" for Becket.²⁶² Foliot claimed that it was not he who abandoned the Church — it was Becket who was the deserter: "It was the leader of our chivalry who turned his back, the captain of our camp who fled."²⁶³

Foliot's use of military terminology, calling Becket the "leader of our chivalry," in his letter is not an accident. Rather, it speaks to the effects and pervasiveness of chivalric and knightly culture in the English court. For Foliot to use such terminology, it demonstrates that

²⁶¹ The maiden instructed Lanval to keep both her and their love a secret, lest she disappear from his life. Lanval reveals their love, but not the maiden's identity, to Queen Guinevere after she accuses him of homosexuality in retaliation for rejecting her advances ("you have no interest in women") ("*Asez le m'ad hum dit sovent/Que des femmes n'avez talent.*"). The insulted queen later told King Arthur that Lanval had insulted her; King Arthur became so angry that he ordered Lanval to be put to trial. Ewert, ed. *Marie de France: Lais*, 65

²⁶² Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 37.

²⁶³ Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 38.

it is a language that Becket would also understand and with which he would identify. It also demonstrates Foliot's perception and understanding of Becket: that of a military man.

However, what Foliot failed to see was that Becket's specific persona of a knight was a role he had inhabited as chancellor. Now that he was in an altogether different role — as archbishop, as Henry II's enemy, as an exile — Becket assumed a different persona, now that of the staunch defender of the Church. A survey of Becket's clothing, what he literally inhabited, makes clear that mindset. His performance was appropriate not just via his actions, but also through the way he chose to present himself. He wore silk gowns and armor for the role of the knightly courtier, before turning to hair shirts and clerical vestments for the role of the pious archbishop. Had Becket followed one dominant and prevailing philosophy throughout his life and career, there most likely should not have been such a dramatic change as Becket transitioned from one role to the next. Instead, Becket underwent such a drastic change in appearance immediately upon his change in stations, an indication that he changed to adapt to his new role and what the roles required of him.

Thomas Becket Through the Ages: Epilogue

In the aftermath of Becket's death, King Henry II was forced to go to great lengths to express his regret at the outcome. Beyond the political defeat of conceding numerous contested clauses in the Clauses of Clarendon, Henry II also faced personal defeats, such as kneeling before papal representatives at Canterbury Cathedral in Canterbury. In time, Henry would associate himself with the cult of Thomas Becket as a way to portray himself as a pious king, championing the cause of an English saint. Future kings followed suit, and Becket's tomb eventually became ornate and elaborate as generations of kings added their own touches to the site. Canterbury itself quickly became a popular destination for pilgrims and visitors, boasting the healing powers of Becket's relics.

The story of Thomas Becket is not merely one of power and loyalty. Indeed, the Becket Controversy, at its most basic level, is a tale of two men, battling for supreme authority in England — King Henry II and the Crown, against Thomas Becket and the Church. However, the issue was much more complicated. Even at this superficial interpretation of the conflict, it is important to note that there was no clear demarcation of “church and state” in twelfth-century England as we do in today's society. The people of medieval England did not conceptualize the two bodies as distinct. Instead, both Church and Crown were both extensions of God's rule over the world, each serving its special purpose. This idea is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the idea that the clergy and laity both bore “swords” (spiritual and material, respectively), all for the purpose of defending God and Christianity.

But beyond the “church-state” understanding of the Becket Controversy, there is another understanding of the conflict. The rift between King Henry and Thomas Becket was not solely the result of a religious conversion, but rather one that was very much influenced by literature and its effects on behavior. That audiences of these popular stories would seek to emulate the behavior described in the stories they admire should not surprise us and such a recognition helps us reframe our understanding of Becket’s actions. Like all good knights, Becket played the roles assigned to him. As a chancellor, he did the king’s bidding and enjoyed a close relationship with the king as a result. Part of playing this role included dressing entertaining and traveling extravagantly. He also defended the king, in terms of financing his ambitions and fighting his wars. These actions were inspired by behaviors prescribed to noble knights in works such as the *lais* of Marie de France. Her knights were noble in action, fierce in battle, and steadfast in their beliefs. The knights were, as described in *Le Fresne*, “bold” and “proud,” traits which could be demonstrated through manners of dress and behavior. Furthermore, the knights frequently enjoyed the favor of their superiors. As we saw earlier, the protagonist in *Bisclavert* was able to regain his status and exact revenge on his unfaithful wife and her scheming lover by remaining loyal to his king even as a wolf.

Ironically, Becket used another interpretation of the knight-parton relationship in his role as archbishop — the knight torn by conflicting loyalties. As we also saw, many romances featured knights who faced conflicts with a power strong enough to vanquish them. As archbishop, Becket indeed lived out this trope. He was knightly in the way that Saint George was, using their valor to defend God. This time, Becket was a knight of the

Church. He abandoned hunting, hawking, and the other leisurely wealthy pastimes he had once greatly enjoyed, in favor of prayer and asceticism. He even changed his costume from silken robes to hair-shirts beneath his clerical robes.

In life, Becket emulated the culture of his time, and in death, Becket became a model for others' behavior as well. Just as Becket drew upon literature of the time, Becket's story also ultimately was transformed into an influential script for pious behavior and conflict with authority. It was such a potent narrative that later kings would endeavor to destroy the memory of Thomas Becket and dissuade bold clerics from following the same path.

Only a decade after Becket's murder, the legend of Saint Stanislaus' martyrdom came to have many features similar to that of Becket's story.. According to his legend the saint confronted the Polish king, Boleslaw over the ownership of land that Stanislaus had purchased. Stanislaus proved his right to the land by resurrecting the seller and bringing him to testify before the king. This dramatic entrance to the royal court echoes Thomas Becket's decision to appear before King Henry II's summons in his archbishop's robes and bearing his own cross standard — a task usually reserved for a page.²⁶⁴ Later, the incensed king had Stanislaus murdered in his church, just as Thomas Becket was slain at the altar by King Henry's knights. Even the order of the murder has similarities with Becket, since many at the time believed that King Henry II was directly responsible for the murder, having sent his knights to Canterbury to murder the intractable archbishop. With few confirmed elements based in historical fact, the story of Stanislaus' martyrdom was very much a choice of the storytellers to mirror Becket's life.

²⁶⁴ Bingham, *The Crowned Lions*, 58

Thomas Becket has engendered fascination and debate through the centuries. His life and actions continue to spur debate. However, this thesis has demonstrated that the debate regarding Becket's reasoning cannot be complete without an examination of the literature with which he was familiar. This element is crucial in understanding the power of performance. The idea of acting in accordance to an established code of behavior is one that would have influenced Becket and others after him. Analyzing Becket in light of literature and adherence to a prescribed role explains and makes clearer Becket's supposed conversion, bringing discussion beyond the prevailing theories of religious conversion or cynical political maneuvering. This element of the study of the Becket Controversy would explain Thomas Becket's sudden change of heart in ways that the dominant theories thus far have not.

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