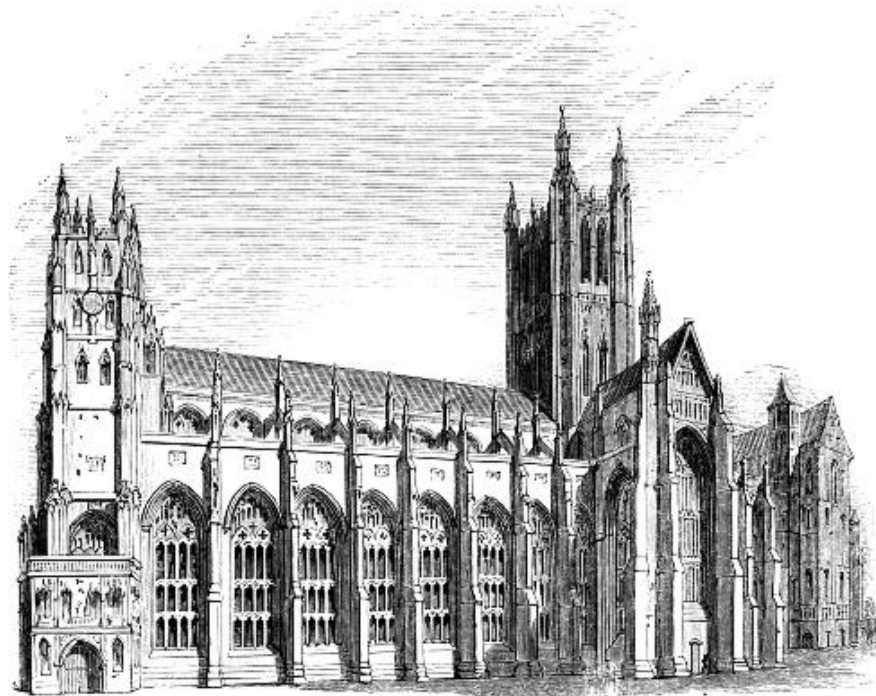


An Introduction to *BECKET*, the Film (1964)



Canterbury Cathedral, England

St. Thomas Becket – Archbishop of Canterbury

Thomas Becket was born in Cheapside, London, in 1118. He was of Norman descent on both sides and was proud of his heritage. He was educated at Mortar Priory, various other schools, and finally, in the School of Theology at Paris. He also learned law and practiced the use of sword and lance, traditional knightly exercises. His study of law helped him in his quarrels with the king. His expertise in the use of the sword and the lance helped him in the campaign of 1159-1160, when he defeated a French knight in man-to-man combat.

In 1141, Theobald, the Archbishop of Canterbury, took Becket into his household. From then on, his rise was rapid. In 1154, he was ordained and appointed the Archdeacon of Canterbury. King Henry II gained the throne in the same year, making Becket's future even brighter. Becket became Henry's favorite religious leader. Henry would often entertain Becket, as well as seek his advice. The King also increased Becket's importance. He first appointed Becket to the position of **Chancellor**. On the death of the **Archbishop of Canterbury** in May 1161, King Henry saw his chance of bringing the Church to heel, by promoting his best friend Thomas to the newly vacated post. With the donning of his archbishop's robes however, Becket's whole demeanor seems to have changed, as he appeared to have experienced a religious conversion. 'Born again' Thomas changed completely – from then on he wore a sackcloth shirt which reached to his knees, and swarmed with all forms of wildlife. He had a very sparse diet, and his accustomed drink was water.



Martyrdom of Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral

After 1162, the relationship between Henry and Thomas Becket, both men of strong character, became more and more bitter. Henry wanted to reduce the power of the clergy, and Becket fought fiercely against it. Henry wanted criminal priests to be tried in the civil courts while Becket wanted them to be tried in the ecclesiastical courts. The quarrel went on. In 1164, Henry, in the Constitution of Clarendon, tried to define **the relationship between the Church and the State**. Becket quibbled, quarreled, made promises he did not intend to keep, and sacrificed his principles to retain his power. To protect himself, Becket fled to France, forfeiting his worldly goods to the Crown.

Becket returned from his exile after seven years. Preaching from the cathedral on Christmas Day 1170, Thomas again displayed his stormy temperament when he excommunicated some of his fellow bishops with the words ... "May they all be damned by Jesus Christ!" Henry became incensed when he heard of this outburst and is said to have uttered the fateful words "**Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest!**"

Four of Henry's knights, probably not the brightest of men, took this as a summons to action, and left for Canterbury immediately. They reached Canterbury Cathedral on December 29th, where they found Becket before the High Altar, as he had gone there to hear Vespers. One of the knights approached him, and struck Becket on the shoulder with the flat of his sword. It seems that the knights did not at first intend to kill Becket, but as he stood firm after the first blow, the four attacked and butchered him. It is recorded that they cracked open his skull spilling his brains onto the cathedral floor!



St. Thomas Becket

Henry was horrified when he heard the news as he believed that it was his words that had been the cause of Becket's death. As an act of penitence he donned sackcloth and ashes, and starved himself for three days. Becket was immediately hailed as a martyr and canonized in 1173. His shrine in Canterbury Cathedral became famous throughout Christendom. Unfortunately, this shrine was totally destroyed during the Reformation in 1538, but his tomb can be seen in St. Thomas's in Trinity Chapel behind the high altar.

St. Thomas Becket was immortalized in literature for the first time by Chaucer in his "Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*. As you will recall, in the first eighteen lines, Chaucer mentions that at the beginning of spring, people go on pilgrimages, particularly to Canterbury, to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket. The pilgrims seek to honor the holy blessed martyr who had helped them when they were sick.

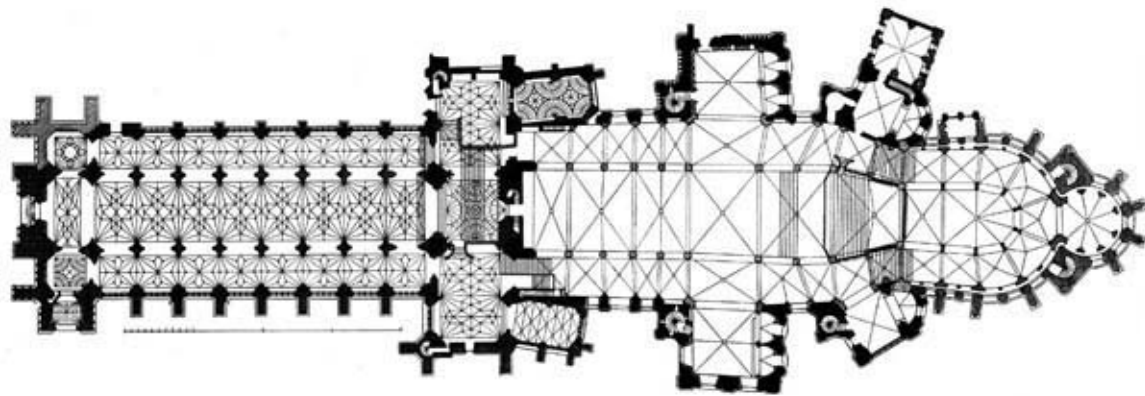
In his play *Murder in the Cathedral*, T. S. Eliot portrays the struggle between the Church and the state, depicted in the struggle between Becket and Henry II. In truth, King Henry's reign was a **reign of terror**, causing misery and ruin to the common citizens. This is depicted in the words of the chorus at the beginning of the play. The people found in Becket hope and sustenance. **The king found this undesirable and got his supporters to tempt Becket with various baits**. In fact, the knights come in and tempt Becket during the course of the play. When Becket refuses to be tempted, Henry II has him murdered in the cathedral.

Canterbury Cathedral

Canterbury Cathedral is one of the oldest Christian churches in England, and it continues to play a central role in English Christianity. Originally founded in 602 AD by St. Augustine, it still functions as the cathedral of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion since the time of Henry VIII.

Canterbury was an important spiritual center ever since Augustine, but it became a major pilgrimage destination after the martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket in 1170.

The grandeur of the architecture reflects Canterbury's historic and religious importance, as does the magnificent collection of medieval stained glass windows depicting miracles experienced at Thomas' shrine, biblical scenes, prophets and saints.



i. CANTERBURY: KATHEDRALE.

Canterbury Cathedral Plan, from G. Dehio and G. von Bezold, *Die Kirchliche Baukunst des Abendlandes*, Stuttgart, 1887-1902

The history of Canterbury Cathedral begins with St. Augustine, a Roman missionary sent to England by Pope Gregory to convert the heathen Anglo-Saxons. The mission was a success: In 597 AD, Augustine baptized King Ethelbert of Kent.

In 602 AD, Augustine dedicated a cathedral church on this site to Christ the Savior. It was in fact probably an existing church building from Roman times, re-hallowed by the missionary saint. A monastery was also established in connection with the cathedral. Around 750 AD, Archbishop Cuthbert added a baptistery-mausoleum to the north of the church, but none of this survives.

In 1011, Canterbury was among the many English towns devastated by marauding Danes, who traveled up the rivers killing and pillaging from their longships. The city was destroyed, the cathedral was set on fire, and Archbishop Alphege was taken hostage in hopes of ransom. Alphege reportedly refused to allow anyone to pay for him, and was pelted to death with oxbones at the Danish camp in Greenwich. The archbishop became a martyr and a saint and his life story is told in a medieval stained glass window in the cathedral.

Another disastrous fire broke out in 1067, the year after the Norman Conquest, destroying what was left of the Saxon cathedral. When the Norman Lanfranc was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury in 1070, the ceremony had to be held in a temporary shelter. But Archbishop Lanfranc was a motivated and highly capable leader. He immediately set about reorganizing the monastery, asserting the primacy of Canterbury over York, and rebuilding the cathedral.

Before coming to Canterbury, Lanfranc had been the abbot of St-Etienne in Caen, Normandy, where he had supervised the reconstruction of the abbey church. The strong influence of the earlier building can still be traced in Canterbury Cathedral. Lanfranc's new Norman cathedral was dedicated in October 1077.

In 1093, a man named Anselm became Archbishop of Canterbury. Anselm was a quiet scholarly type, known for his wisdom and piety. But it is to him, along with the priors Ernulf and Conrad, that we owe much of the Romanesque architecture and art that survives today. Most notably, Anselm built the huge and beautifully decorated crypt beneath the east end, which still survives fully intact. An extensive choir with ambulatory, consecrated in 1130, was then built over the crypt.

Critical to the history of Canterbury Cathedral was the murder of St. Thomas Becket on Tuesday, December 29, 1170, by order of King Henry II. The king later performed penance there in 1174. On September 5 of that same year, the great Romanesque choir was devastated by a fire. The income from pilgrims visiting the Shrine of St. Thomas, which was reported almost immediately to be a place of miraculous healing, largely paid for the subsequent rebuilding of the cathedral.

The highly talented William of Sens began the rebuilding work on the choir in 1175, but tragically fell from faulty scaffolding in 1178 and died shortly after. William of Sens is credited with pioneering the Early English Gothic style in his choir at Canterbury Cathedral. His successor was William the Englishman, who contributed the Trinity Chapel and Corona at the east end. These were designed specifically to house the relics of St. Thomas Becket, which were originally interred in the crypt. The work was completed in 1184.

Meanwhile, numerous artists, who had probably worked in France, were hard at work on the stained glass windows. The first stained glass panel to be completed was "Adam Delving" in 1174 or 1175, the first of more than 80 ancestors of Christ placed in the clerestory windows.

This creative activity was rudely interrupted in 1207, when Canterbury's archbishop and monks were exiled by King John. Work resumed immediately upon their return in 1213, and St. Thomas was moved to his new home in the Trinity Chapel in 1220. Prior Thomas Chillenden (1390-1410) rebuilt the Nave in the Perpendicular style of English Gothic. In 1430 the short central tower was demolished and rebuilt at a height of 297 feet.

The medieval greatness of Canterbury Cathedral and its monastery came to an end in 1538. King Henry VIII, who had recently declared himself head of the Church of England, ordered the Shrine of St. Thomas destroyed and despoiled. Many cartloads of treasure, representing gifts from centuries of grateful pilgrims, were carried off and appropriated by the king. One such treasure was the Regale of France, a great ruby donated by Louis VII, which Henry had made into a thumb ring. Today a candle burns at the site of the former shrine.

It ceased to be an abbey during the Dissolution of the Monasteries under King Henry VIII when all religious houses were suppressed. Canterbury surrendered in March 1539 and reverted to its previous status of "a college of secular canons."

During World War II, the cathedral's beautiful stained glass windows were removed for safekeeping from Hitler's air raids. It was a wise decision - the replacement windows were blown in. A large area of the town of Canterbury was destroyed, as was the cathedral library, but the main body of the cathedral remained intact.

MOVIE REVIEW

March 12, 1964, *New York Times*

Adaptation of Drama by Anouilh Opens

By BOSLEY CROWTHER

ON the surface, the film made from "Becket," Jean Anouilh's king-baiting costume play, has a look of stately substance and historical authenticity. It is crowded with aptly convincing 12th-century scenic displays, Plantagenet ostentation and ecclesiastical pageantry. The characters in it are bulky, they talk intelligently, and it is photographed in splendid color, which looks mighty fine on the big screen.

Furthermore, this magnificent picture, which America's Hal Wallis has produced and Britain's Peter Glenville has directed, and which opened last night at Loew's State, lays out an agonizing drama of conflict between two men that seems to be making us privy to a very intimate episode in English history.

It is, of course, the conflict between King Henry II and his former chancellor and friend, Thomas Becket, who became an adversary when he was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury and took on the responsibility of defending the church against the endeavors of Henry to impose the authority of the crown.

That was the classic conflict, and that is essentially what it is in this presentment, which has been adapted—religiously, one might say—by Edward Anhalt from the Anouilh play. But here the corroding factor is not so much the division of wills of two men over the issue of civil and ecclesiastical power. That is indicated, but not very forcibly; the manner gives the impression that the king is entirely in the wrong.

Here the thing that causes Henry to turn upon Becket wrathfully, to charge him with treachery and finally to call down destruction on his head, is the intolerable fact that Becket has ceased to be his loyal friend, to be the obliging companion of their drinking and wenching days. Far more invidious to Henry than Becket's resistance to the authority of the crown is the shattering realization that his love has been spurned.

This rather intimate insight into the nature of the clash exposes to us a Henry who is not in the history books. This is a flabby, ranting monarch who is played by Peter O'Toole with a vast range of wild and frightened feelings chasing across his face and through his eyes. This is a man tormented by insecurity, bothered less by concern for what is happening to the crown than by concern for what is happening to himself. His curious fixation on Becket might, indeed, be "unnatural," as the Queen Mother scornfully ventures. He is a sad and frightened man.

This is certainly not the brutish Henry whom Anthony Quinn portrayed on the Broadway stage. The difference is apparent in the sensitive acting of Mr. O'Toole.

Against him is ranged a Becket whom Richard Burton makes a creature of contradictory nature and frigid, inflexible will. He is ready to compromise, to bargain in his early days with the king, but he assumes stoical rigidity when he takes on "the honor of God." There is little give in Mr. Burton's performance, little spirituality, little warmth. He is probably very close to the Becket of history.

While the rollicking of these two characters is bold and magnetic at the start, the nature of their relations tends to become tedious after they clash. That is because the excitement of their conflict cannot be sustained, with Henry's deterioration as an inferior character.

We might fully thrill to the conflict of the two if Henry were the king, the strong and aggressive monarch, he is in history — champion of peace in England, a uniform common law and a clear and accepted distinction between the lay and clerical courts. Then, with a man of stature, we might have a dramatic clash. It is hard to be impressed by the discomfort of what is called a "perennial juvenile."

Surrounding the two are others of assorted strength and dignity. Sir Donald Wolfit makes the Bishop of London a relentless, deceptive bargainer. Martita Hunt is a termagant Queen Mother. John Gielgud is a prissy French king. But Eleanor of Aquitaine, the wife of Henry and one of the most intelligent and forceful women of the age, is made a simpering nincompoop by Pamela Brown.

With much confrontation and conversation, there is little violent action in the film, except for the ugly murder of Becket at the end. That lack is felt in a picture that runs for almost three hours. There are some stunning scenes, however, such as the final meeting of the antagonists on a beach, the wind and the surf booming loudly against their pathetic words.

In sum, "Becket" shows us a conflict that has more meaning for the heart than for the head. It is not a conflict to stand as a tempest violent and unforgettable, after 800 years.

Becket: Re-release is a theater-to-film gem

By BARRY PARIS

T.S. Eliot called it "Murder in the Cathedral." Jean Anouilh called it "Becket." Shakespeare would have called it "Henry II." By any name, in any season, the epic struggle between a 12th-century English king and a courtier-turned-conscience of his realm makes for a majestic movie, currently -- and thankfully -- being re-released for the first time in 40-plus years.

The time: less than a century after the Norman conquest. The problem: high-spirited Henry II (Peter O'Toole) is having trouble with still-restive Saxons and church officials. Of great aid in both matters is his beloved drinking-and-wenching pal, Thomas Becket (Richard Burton), a wiser and cooler head than Henry's crowned one. When the troublesome Archbishop of Canterbury finally does him the favor of dying, Henry's bright idea for his replacement is Becket, a confidant loyal to Henry, not Rome.

But to the king's chagrin, Becket takes God and the job seriously.

Edward Anhalt took home the 1964 Oscar for best screenplay adaptation for "Becket" and deserved it. His script captures the full power of Anouilh's play, whose language is declaimed by Burton and O'Toole with mesmerizing eloquence. "I have something far worse than a sin on my conscience," says Henry, with a perfect pause before, "... a mistake."

Few plays have been turned into films with such a love of words intact. Originally produced on Broadway in 1959 with Laurence Olivier as Becket and Anthony Quinn as King Henry, "Becket" contains one significant factual error: Contrary to one of its main plot lines, the real Thomas was a Norman, not a Saxon -- something Anouilh said he discovered only after finishing the play.

But never mind. It brings history to life with magnificent performances by the most exciting actors of the day. Of the two principles, it is O'Toole's dynamic rage rather than Burton's piety that is more riveting. Equally fine in support are John Gielgud as foppish Louis XII of France, along with Martita Hunt as Henry's mother and Pamela Brown as his carping wife Eleanor of Aquitaine, a pair of queens constantly beaten by the king's royal flush.

"Who are you?" shouts the King to his cowering young son.

"Henry III," the boy answers.

"Not YET!" the father retorts, later addressing the boy as "you witless baboon!"

Suffice to say, this is not the most functional of royal families.

"Becket" and its historical circumstances foreshadow the bigger case -- and church-state split -- to come, six Henries later, with another Thomas immortalized in another epic film: Fred Zinnemann's *Man for All Seasons* (1966) would pit Henry VIII against Sir Thomas More. Two years later, "Lion in Winter" (1968) allowed O'Toole to reprise Henry II opposite Katharine Hepburn as a much more formidable Eleanor.

If there's a better British history trilogy than this trio, I can't name it. It's one of many things to thank the much-maligned '60s for.

While we're doling out retro-thanks, let's thank the gorgeous Panavision cinematography of Geoffrey Unsworth for the look of "Becket." The chance to enjoy it on a big screen again (at the Manor) is well worth sharing with your kids. Its 2 1/2 hours fly by, although you'll miss the nicety of an intermission, which was de rigueur back in those salad days of its theatrical release.

Director Peter Glenville was a London and New York stage director, whose precious few films included a dull 1967 rendering of Graham Greene's "The Comedians," which inspired Bosley Crowther's shortest, cruelest, funniest-ever review: "The Comedians': Ha ha." After notices like that, you could see why Glenville swore off movie-making. But *Becket* is the (one and only) gem in his diadem.

The story's only "weak" point is a matter of historical accuracy: That catalytic issue on which Becket took his stand -- a jurisdictional dispute between ecclesiastical vs. civil court authority -- strikes us as not so terribly compelling in today's world of fast-and-loose creative judicial solutions. Why didn't Henry just declare Becket an anti-crown combatant and let him rot in the Tower of Londtanamo?

Becket and Henry represented nearly identical willfulness on opposite ends of the spectrum. "Humility is the most difficult of the virtues to achieve," wrote T.S. Eliot. "Nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself."π