

The Guardian

Becket: forking Normans and a not so turbulent priest

Misplaced Saxons, rubber swords ... they even got the cutlery wrong in this error-strewn drama about the sainted Archbishop of Canterbury and King Henry II



Friends and enemies ... Peter O'Toole as Henry II and Richard Burton as Thomas Becket. Photograph: Kobal

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Becket (1964)

Director: Peter Glenville

Entertainment grade: B-

History grade: D

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Thomas Becket became chancellor to Henry II of England in 1155, and Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162. He fought bitterly with Henry over various legal issues. In 1170, he was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral.

People



Courtly etiquette ... Photograph: Kobal

Life at the court of King Henry is a circus of boozing and wenching, with Henry occasionally tearing himself away from the bedchamber to belch, shout at archbishops, complain about his sore bottom, and patronise Thomas Becket, whom he calls "my little Saxon". Henry and Becket go hunting, and stumble across a comely Saxon peasant girl. "She stinks a bit, but we could wash her," observes Henry. "I fancy her," says Becket. "That's very tiresome of you," replies Henry. "I fancy her myself." Grudgingly, he lets Becket take the girl, whereupon Becket, demonstrating his Saxon solidarity, quietly

lets her go without molestation. Which would be fine, only Thomas Becket was a Norman, just like Henry II. Writer Jean Anouilh knew this, but he thought Norman-Saxon tensions made a good story. Indeed they do, but so do cowboys in space or monkeys v robots, either of which would be approximately as accurate here as making Thomas Becket a Saxon.

Technology

Becket mentions to Henry an exciting new invention - the fork: "It's for pronging meat and carrying it to the mouth." Henry's amazement is justified, for the fork did not actually arrive in England until over 400 years after his death. The only people using forks in the 12th century were the Byzantines and a few Italians, and they were teased mercilessly for it. In the middle ages, real men ate with spoons.

Casting

Richard Burton, as Becket, delivers a performance that is subtle and restrained to the point of lulling the viewer into a gentle snooze. By contrast, Peter O'Toole as Henry II seems to have escaped from a pantomime, and leaps around the screen throwing tantrums and howling. "I am the law!" he bellows, like a camp, medieval Judge Dredd. He is ridiculous, and brilliant. Moreover, the act is no less bizarre than historical descriptions of Henry, a colossal, passionate monster who would reportedly get so angry that he would froth at the mouth, drop to the ground and start chomping furiously at bits of straw. In the middle of all this, John Gielgud wafts in as Louis VII of France, is arch, and wafts out again.

Family

Henry walks in on his children playing. "Which one are you?" he asks the biggest, who replies, "Henry III." In fact, Henry III was Henry II's grandson. It's true that Henry II's home life with Eleanor of Aquitaine was dysfunctional: she led a rebellion against him, and he had her locked up. But one would think the real Eleanor could have zinged back a few snappier retorts than the wishy-washy one in this film does. "You have never given me anything except your carping mediocrity!" Henry screams at her. "I gave you my youth!" she cries, somewhat inaccurately, seeing as she married him at the grand old age of 30, which in the 12th century was virtually dead. "I gave you your children!" she adds. He explodes with rage: "I don't *like* my children!"



The howler, the wafter, and the snooze-inducer ... Peter O'Toole, John Gielgud and Richard Burton in Becket. Photographs: Kobal

Violence

Fed up with his meddlesome priest, Henry expresses his frustration in front of four knights, who make their way to Canterbury Cathedral and do Becket to death in the middle of vespers. Edward Grim, one real-life witness, lived up to his name by describing at great length the precise appearance of bits of brain and blood all over the cathedral floor. The film's budget obviously didn't stretch to cutting Becket's head in half, and instead there are lots of unconvincing sideways shots of rubber swords being jabbed between arm and body. Very disappointing.

Verdict

Thanks to O'Toole's daft but thoroughly enjoyable performance, it's tempting to root for Henry II in this error-ridden account of Thomas Becket's career.

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Not so turbulent priest ... Photograph: Kobal