

MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL

Preliminary Lecture Notes

Dr Subrata Sahoo

“Division”

Part I: The Historical Thomas a Becket

Part II: T. S. Eliot

Part III: Modernism

Part IV: Reflections on *Murder in the Cathedral*



Part I:

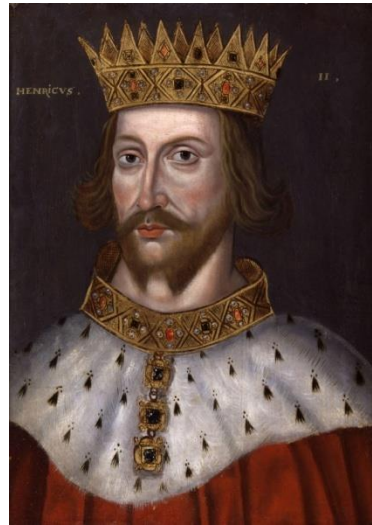
THE HISTORICAL THOMAS A BECKET

Early years.

- Born in 1118 or 1120.
- Worked his way up.
- Studied canon law, but was not a priest...
- In 1154 (in mid-30's) was named Archdeacon of Canterbury by Bishop Theobald.

1155: Chancellorship of England

- A position of great power.
- Very close to the king of England.
- Helped collect revenues – land taxes.
- King Henry II sent his son to live with Thomas, and the son saw Thomas as a king of foster-father.



← King Henry II

1162: Archbishop of Canterbury

- (in his early 40's)
- Was ordained a priest on June 2, and an archbishop on June 3.
- After his ordination, Thomas did an about-face. He took his religious life seriously, and quit the post of Chancellorship.



The Trouble Starts...



Early 1164:

The Constitutions of Clarendon

- The King wanted all the clergy to sign off a document giving the State more power, the Church less.
- In particular, it said that priests should be tried in a civil court and given over to civil punishments – including mutilation and execution.
- Becket refused to sign.

October 1164

- Becket was tried at Northampton Castle.
- Was convicted of criminal charges.
- Stormed out of the room, and fled to the Continent.
- King Louis VII (France, of course) offered him protection.

June 1170

- Henry is crowned Young King at York by three bishops.
- This had always been the right of the Canterbury bishop.
- Becket excommunicated all three.
- When Henry heard about it, he is reported to have said...

Contd...

"What miserable drones and traitors have I nourished and brought up in my household, who let their lord be treated with such shameful contempt by a low-born cleric?"

Four Knights Take a Hint

1. [Reginald fitzUrse](#)
 2. [Hugh de Morville](#)
 3. [William de Tracy](#)
 4. [Richard le Breton](#)
- All head to Canterbury to fulfill the king's wish, and kill Becket.



As reported by Edward Grim, who was himself wounded in the attack:

“...The wicked knight leapt suddenly upon him, cutting off the top of the crown which the unction of sacred chrism had dedicated to God. Next he received a second blow on the head, but still he stood firm and immovable. At the third blow he fell on his knees and elbows, offering himself a living sacrifice, and saying in a low voice, 'For the name of Jesus and the protection of the Church, I am ready to embrace death.' But the third knight inflicted a terrible wound as he lay prostrate. By this stroke, the crown of his head was separated from the head in such a way that the blood white with the brain, and the brain no less red from the blood, dyed the floor of the cathedral. The same clerk who had entered with the knights placed his foot on the neck of the holy priest and precious martyr, and, horrible to relate, scattered the brains and blood about the pavements, crying to the others, 'Let us away, knights; this fellow will arise no more.'^[14]”

The aftermath:

- The monks prepared Becket for burial; he was found to be wearing a hair-shirt, etc..
- In two years he was canonized by Alexander III.
- The four knights were excommunicated, and served for 14 years each in the Holy Land in reparation.
- In 1173 – 1174 Henry II did public reparation at Canterbury.
- Canterbury became a site for pilgrims to travel throughout the Middle Ages.



End.