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Sex, Politics, Religion: Teaching Challenging Medievalisms with *Becket* (1964) and *The Lion in Winter* (1968)

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This essay explores how the films *Becket* (1964) and *The Lion in Winter* (1968), both starring Peter O'Toole as Henry II, can start conversations about medieval sexuality, politics, and religion in the undergraduate classroom. All three of these topics are frequently imagined by students as monolithic in the medieval period; sex and sexuality, for example, can be reduced to heterosexual practices joylessly regulated by church law. Insofar as students have a conception of medieval political systems, these are usually imagined as both strictly hierarchical and inescapably oppressive. Medieval religion — usually Christianity — is also often imagined as an instrument of oppression and control. All these negative assumptions can be productively interrogated using these films. This essay explores how the films — colorful, tightly scripted, and featuring arguably some of the twentieth century's most celebrated actors — are useful teaching tools, both in an undergraduate course on the Middle Ages in cinema, and in a general medieval survey course. *Becket*, with its characteristically Anouilhian theme of realism vs. idealism, is a good starting point for discussing the complexities of medieval law, church politics and the church's social functions with students. The films also help to start useful conversations on the visibility and invisibility of medieval women in film. Finally, both films depict queer sexualities in ways that are at odds with much popular medievalism. Whether in *The Lion in Winter*'s multiple transgressive sexual relationships, or in the visually explicit erotic tension between Burton's portrayal of Becket and O'Toole's Henry II, this essay examines how these films challenge students' preconceptions and create opportunities for analyzing relevant primary sources. As such, this essay discusses both pedagogical strategies and assignment options related to the two films. I argue that both films can encourage analysis of the Angevin Empire and its afterlives in popular culture, and that this analysis is broadly relevant to popular medievalisms.

The priests write all the history these days, and they'll do me justice. Henry, they'll say, was a master bastard. — Henry II, *The Lion in Winter* (1968)

Introduction

'Kings grow back', says Thomas Becket in the second act of Jean Anouilh's play *Becket, or the Honour of God* (Anouilh, 2004: 47). Henry II (r. 1154–1189), the first of Plantagenet kings, has proved particularly prone to such metaphorical resurrection. The films in what might be called the Plantagenet Cinematic Universe — *Becket* (1964) and *The Lion in Winter* (1968), both starring Peter O'Toole — can be used to start productive, open-ended discussions in the undergraduate classroom. The primary focus of both films is on the lives of individuals within their historical context rather than the enormously complex and vivid 12th-century Angevin world itself. Still, they are at pains to evoke this historical context, if to varying degrees: intergenerational politics are discussed at *Lion in Winter*'s fictionalized Christmas court, and *Becket* features more journeys across the English Channel — and acknowledgment of international relations — than many films set in medieval England. Both films provide good entry points for discussing medieval politics, sexuality, and religion: all three topics are frequently imagined by students as monolithic in the medieval period. As Scott Alan Metzger argues, medieval history in particular is likely to be reduced, for many students, to 'simplified claims, colorful stories and disconnected activities' (Metzger, 2010: 346).

Students may enter medieval history classes without much real knowledge of the period, but they almost invariably enter with a robust sense of what medieval Europe was like. These impressions are informed by the long history of medievalism: imagining the medieval past as a site of contrast with the present (Brown, 2000; Pugh and Aronstein, 2021). Insofar as undergraduate students generally understand medieval political systems, these are usually imagined as strictly hierarchical and inescapably oppressive. Sex and sexuality can be reduced to heterosexual practices that are joylessly regulated by church law. Religion, usually Christianity, is often imagined as imposing strict teachings and a moratorium on independent thought. Obviously, not all these negative medievalisms are directly challenged by the films under discussion, but all of them can be productively interrogated using these films. In evoking comparisons between the medieval and the modern, *The Lion in Winter* and *Becket* are both serious and playful. When paired with medieval primary sources, they can destabilize students' preconceptions of the Middle Ages, and help to cultivate what Tanya Clement terms 'multiliteracies' in inviting students to become creators, rather than merely consumers, of knowledge (Clement, 2012: 376–80; Dotolo and Nicolay, 2008).

At the risk of stating the obvious, the vision of the Middle Ages presented by these films is highly stylized and deliberately — even conspicuously — artificial. I do not view this as a drawback. Instead, it opens theoretically rich conversations about the work of historical interpretation and what is possible, and what is excluded, in the popular imagination of the Middle Ages. As the characters in both films meditate on their histories and their legacies, they implicitly invite the audience to do the same. While the influence of Jean Anouilh's works on the popular reputation of both Henry II and Becket has been critically examined, of the two films, *The Lion in Winter* has received more scholarly attention from medievalists and film critics (Jones, 1978; Sobchack, 1997; Williams, 2010). My aim is to have both films participate in what Geraldine Heng has called a 're-education of desire' for students, involving an expansion and revision of our fantasies of the Middle Ages, and interrogating to whom those fantasies are open (Heng, 2019: 275–90).

The Middle Ages are frequently reimagined across multiple media formats, even as disciplines grouped under Medieval Studies occupy an increasingly beleaguered place in university curricula, particularly in the United States (Eisenberg et al., 2021). Using medievalism to teach can facilitate thoughtful and rigorous engagement with the medieval past (Barnhouse, 2020). This is perhaps a particularly good opportunity in the case of the Angevins, who are richly documented, widely studied, and colorfully represented on film. The films under discussion here, engaging as they do with both modern and medieval anxieties, offer vivid depictions of debates concerning Angevin politics, gender and sexuality, and the role of the church in the 12th century. In doing so, they have themselves become part of layered historiographical discourses (Sobchack, 1997).

Political Medievalism and Angevin Politics in Film

Both *Becket* and *The Lion in Winter* present Henry II, for good or ill, as a political innovator, desirous of making kingship mean something new. The degree to which this was so, and the ways in which Angevin kingship particularly was debated and imagined during his reign, are topics with rich scholarly histories (Slater, 2018; Ashe, 2013). Introducing students to these topics can provide a useful introduction to historiography (Dotolo and Nicolay, 2008). Henry's 'Angevin' temper, infamous in the primary sources and much dissected by scholars, is conspicuous in both of O'Toole's performances as the king. Henry's mentorship of — and desire to be acknowledged by — the youthful Philip of France (r. 1180–1223) in *The Lion in Winter* is also fruitful to explore (Keefe, 2003). The dramatic climax of that film involves nothing less than Henry's understanding of his own kingship: 'Who's to say it's monstrous?' he asks rhetorically, referring to his planned murder of his rebellious sons. 'I'm the king and I call it justice' (Harvey, 1968).

Henry's legal innovations and reforms, though vital to his legacy as understood by scholars, are a lacuna in the films, allowing a good illustration of what factors affect political medievalism, or the construction of imagined medieval politics. In *Becket*, Henry arrives at his own morning council meeting late and languid, leaving bureaucratic duties to his chancellor. In *The Lion in Winter*, by contrast, the king gets a moment to reflect on his work in trying to hammer out a vision of kingship in which knives can be lowered and kings, freed from the obligations of perpetual war, can 'sit in judgment on which peasant gets the cow' (Harvey, 1968; Goldman, 1981: 19.) Legal reforms, however, are not good theatre.

The political dynamics of *The Lion in Winter* are clearly influenced by the Cold War, and Anouilh's imagined conflict between Normans and Saxons in his play *Becket*, which influenced the film, was based on a theory outdated before the play was first performed in 1959. Both films provide a superb view of medieval politics as expressing modern anxieties, showcasing the medieval as what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen calls the 'inexcluded middle at the pulsing heart of modernity' (Cohen, 2000: 5.) When Katharine Hepburn, as Eleanor, says of her tempestuously in-fighting family, 'we're all jungle creatures', students are often ready to take this as representative of how violent and chaotic things were 'back then'. One may ask students to consider what this elegiac resignation might mean to an American audience in the period of the Space Age, surrounded by the self-congratulating commercial and scientific successes of modernity, and dealing with the realities of intergenerational conflict and unpopular foreign wars.

One of the film's greatest lines, to my mind, is: 'Of course he has a knife, we all have knives; it's 1183 and we're all barbarians!' While comedic, this line also raises the opportunity to consider what happens if we substitute, for knife, 'nuclear bomb'. *The Lion in Winter* was, after all, a film made at the height of the Cold War, and a film about, among other things, the risks of peace and the risks of being the first to put down one's knife. Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman interpret the film as presenting a view of politics that was psychoanalytical and reductive, one that opposes an atavistic Middle Ages to the imagined liberal subjectivity and freedom of modernity (Finke and Shichtman, 2009: 71–108). My students are usually readier to concur with this interpretation before seeing the film than after seeing it, and debating this interpretation is one of the activities that I ask them to undertake in class. It is indubitably true that *The Lion in Winter*, while an intensely political film, is also inexorably focused on politics as a familial affair, illustrating both the infamous tensions between Henry II and his sons, and what Elizabeth A.R. Brown describes as Eleanor's 'determined control over her offspring' (Brown, 1976: 19). James Goldman, the playwright, said there was 'a sense in which [*The Lion in Winter*] is a family play', but it also has other functions (Goldman, 1981: iv).

Notably, *The Lion in Winter* has been invoked in scholarly discussions of Angevin politics. Bernard S. Bachrach opens a 1984 essay by remarking that, while it would be easy to suppose that the film exaggerates 'the intensity and extent of hostility among the members of Henry II's family', this is one case where historical reality is 'even more virulent than the fictionalized version' (Bachrach, 1984: 111). Bachrach ultimately rejects the suggestion that the internecine fighting of Henry and his sons participated in a pattern that had acquired a kind of political legitimacy through both family precedent and Angevin history-writing. But the fact that such a hypothesis has proved attractive to scholars, as well as screenwriters, speaks to the hold of the Angevin dynasty over the imagination. The past as well as the future of this dynasty is made insistently present throughout *The Lion in Winter*. In *Becket*, it is made secondary to the power struggle between king and church; however, Henry is shown planning the coronation of Henry the Young King (d. 1183), if primarily as an act of spleen rather than strategy (Glenville, 1964)

The infamous dynastic tensions of the Angevins have understandably provided irresistible dramatic fodder. The larger-than-life personalities evoked on screen can be compared with those described in primary sources (Internet Medieval Sourcebook, 1996c). One scholar, quoting from Gerald of Wales' contemporary assessment, dryly observes that Henry's relationship with his sons 'could not have been further away from a family idyll' (Plassmann, 2014: 149–50; Internet Medieval Sourcebook, 1996b). Another goes so far as to identify Henry's failure to manage relationships with his sons as undermining his success in maintaining the Angevin Empire (Trimble, 1958).

And *The Lion in Winter,* in turn, has proved irresistible to historians dissecting this family history (Brown, 1976; Bachrach, 1984; Nakashian, 2014). Historically, Henry's sons fought for various kinds of power, and arguably for independence most of all. As Laura Ashe observes, no post-Conquest king of England until Edward I (r. 1272–1307) succeeded to the throne unchallenged (Ashe, 2013). In *The Lion in Winter*, Henry refuses to divide his considerable empire; all three of his surviving and — to him — unsatisfactory sons know that they are fighting for kingship (Plassmann, 2014). And aspects of political power that are often treated, in popular representations of the medieval, as too arcane to hold audience interest, are here dramatized as key both to political futures and the interpersonal dynamics of this tempestuous family. Richard's role as Duke of Aquitaine, the importance of particular provinces to dynastic marriage, and the nuanced obligations of royal diplomacy are all given significant time — if not detailed exploration — in the film. In *Becket,* Henry wishes his family to the devil from whom they were rumored to be descended (Glenville, 1964; Internet Medieval Sourcebook, 1996b).

In the case of *Becket*, the contrast between the central conflict of the film and the central conflict of the primary sources makes a productive starting point. After reading the Constitutions of Clarendon (Internet Medieval Sourcebook, 1996a), which marked an attempt to define the boundaries of royal and clerical authority under English law, I invite students to discuss competing understandings of royal privilege, and the ways in which the church afforded freedom to its members, undermining hierarchies of royal power over law. I usually point out at this stage that the very existence of multiple systems provided potential liberties for those claiming benefit of clergy: the right, granted to all those in holy orders, to be tried by an ecclesiastical rather than a secular court, and the ways in which it could safeguard, in theory, against aristocratic abuses. (This often confuses students who are accustomed to thinking of the medieval church as tyrannical and abusive, and thus likely to be scheming to acquire unmerited privileges). In the film, of course, the legal debate is only intermittently dealt with. In political terms, we are informed by the first title card, and repeatedly thereafter, that the key issue is the post-Conquest struggle between Normans and Saxons.

We also see formulated, in anachronistic terms, a conflict between church and state. While the presentation of the church as institution is largely cynical, the characteristic Anouilh theme of idealism vs. realism, dramatized in *Becket*, is central. We can read Brother John, the political activist and would-be assassin-turned-monk, as the idealist who is able to remain an idealist in this world, while Thomas Becket needs to negotiate his honor. As the sequence in France particularly demonstrates, this requires political and religious compromise, and these compromises will not allow him to avoid his death at the hands of Henry's knights.

The historical realities and contingencies of the conflict between Becket and his king are, while richly documented, also challenging to analyze. This ambiguity itself — alongside the vivid personalities involved — makes the conflict a good case study to use in introducing students to historical interpretation. Students often come to historical research with an expectation that they should be able to reach certainty concerning both what happened in history and its broader implications. Learning that such certainty may not be possible, they are prone to proclaiming, in despair, the unknowability of history and, especially, of medieval history. Navigating between these two extremes poses challenges that can be obviated by teaching historical and filmic narratives side by side. This approach enables students to develop and exercise their own skills of interpretation as they analyze films as works of historical interpretation and learn to approach the medieval past with more confidence. Working with translated sources on the life of Thomas Becket, for instance, can make the selection process of playwright and filmmaker clearer (Staunton, 2001).

The tension between clerical and masculine honor, the subject of an increasingly rich historiography since the 1990s, can also be productively explored using *Becket* and its script (McNamara, 1994; Elliott, 1999; Cullum and Lewis, 2004; Rasmussen, 2019). Anouilh's play contains more discussion of ecclesiastical and secular jurisdiction than does the film. In both the play and the film, Becket is the ultimate negotiator; he is even described, in Henry's formulation, as a 'collaborator' (Anouilh, 2004: 10; Glenville, 1964). Becket says of himself that 'he must improvise his honor from day to day' (Anouilh, 2004: 36). And, on a textual level, one of the central conflicts of the film is what happens when he finds something concerning which he is unwilling to negotiate. 'What would happen', he muses aloud, 'if Becket were to come face to face with the honor of God?' (Glenville, 1964). Before the fateful excommunication of the lord responsible for condemning a priest under common law, Becket maintains to the dubious bishops that 'the kingdom of God must be defended like any other' (Anouilh, 2004: 72–75; Glenville, 1964; see also Nakashian, 2016). In the film, the chancellor-turned-archbishop is seen embracing a range of roles successively, and even stepping out of the pattern of politics in temporary retreat into a monastery, seeming to delight in embracing another set of options. What this negotiation may cost him is something of which he never fully loses sight. Henry, meanwhile, is acting with a dual end in view: to bring Thomas back to his side and under his control. Hugh M. Thomas has argued that Henry 'engaged in a very high-stakes form of brinksmanship in the Becket controversy' (Thomas, 2012: 1075). While the sparking, sometimes explosive, anger of Peter O'Toole's Henry often seems more reactive than calculating, his performance provides a good starting point for discussing what we expect of on-screen medieval kingship (Elliott, 2011: 86–112). As Roger Ebert famously observed, O'Toole's Henry 'rules a world in which kings still kicked aside chickens on their way through the courtyard, and he wears a costume that looks designed to be put on in November and shed layer by layer during April' (Ebert, 1968).

While the first conflict within the film *Becket* concerns how Becket himself negotiates his own position, the second, central conflict is between Thomas and Henry. The degree to which the clash between these two forceful personalities affected the complex political struggles in which they were engaged has provoked much historical debate, for good reason. In the context of the film, the intimacy between the two men, its unresolved tensions, and its unspoken promises, form a vital driving force of the drama. Henry's first words in the film, as he kneels in the crypt of Canterbury, are directed to Becket. Becket's last words, as he lies on the steps of the altar, are for Henry, or at least about him, turning, at the very end, away from his own honor — and even God's honor — to the thought of the man who was his king. This license is partly enabled by a departure from the extremely well-documented historical reality in how the assassination took

place. As such, it facilitates a possible reading of the climactic martyrdom as an outcome of the relationship between Becket and Henry, foregrounding their dissension rather than Becket's sacrifice or the knights' sacrilege (cf. Hayes, 2004: 190–215). A similar emphasis is chosen in the scene when Henry — echoing an 18th-century medievalism — asks aloud if no one will rid him of the turbulent priest who was his friend, the man he confesses to still loving (McGovern, 2021: 266).

Gendered Medievalism and Queering Angevin Kingship

As Carolyn Dinshaw has written, 'the medieval' is often inaccurately imagined as a time and a place that makes gender, sex, and bodies immediately visible and intelligible (Dinshaw, 1999: 183–206). Against this medieval fantasy, reinforced in *Becket* by the gleefully bawdy scene following the frame narrative of Henry's penance, the relationship between Thomas and Henry is presented as insistently queer (Dinshaw, 1999: 39). Theirs is an easy intimacy, but it is also — we are told in the men's first dialogue with each other — one regarded as unseemly. The queering of Henry and Becket's relationship in the film is reinforced when the Empress Matilda tells her son that he would behave no differently if Becket were a woman who had proved a faithless lover. In the same scene, Eleanor tells him that she will not tolerate his relationship with Becket as she tolerated his mistresses (Glenville, 1964). This framing of the relationship between king and chancellor is reinforced by the ways in which it is explicitly contrasted with Henry's relationship with his wife. It is worth noting, too, that *The Lion in Winter* has Eleanor frame Becket alongside the Fair Rosamund as one of her rivals for Henry's affection and attention (Goldman, 1981: 29).

Eleanor is a figure for whom scholarly and popular interpretations have long been unusually interdependent and mutually influential; the popular apocryphal story of her riding on Crusade as an Amazon is but one illustration (Harvey, 1968; Brown, 1976: 10; Evans, 2009: 252–55; Evans, 2014: 19–44). So magnificently present in *The Lion in Winter*, she is rarely visible in *Becket*. In the latter film, she is a petulant, petty, and sexless figure, curiously distant from either the scholarly or popular image of Eleanor as a figure of power. This is worth exploring both because of what it suggests about mid-20th century imaginings of stifling domesticity, and because of its exceptional status among popular representations of Eleanor. As Michael Evans has wryly observed, Eleanor is usually depicted as 'an outstanding figure, whose remarkable career distinguishes her from any other woman in what is assumed to be a backwards and misogynistic age' (Evans, 2009: 244).

Medieval queenship barely makes a dent in Hollywood's representations of political authority, despite the widespread presence of female lords in medieval Europe *and* the ways in which noblewomen were always inextricably engaged in the business of

doing politics (LoPrete, 2007; Duggan, 2002; Wheeler and Parsons, 2003; Evans, 2009). Andrew Elliott, in *Remaking the Middle Ages*, has suggested that the difficulties of theorizing medieval queenship might play a role in their relative exclusion (Elliott, 2011: 83). This hypothesis is undermined, however, by the fact that medieval queens have remained marginal figures on the screen even as scholarship on queens and queenship has expanded and diversified (Mitchell, 2018; Beem, 2016). Moreover, the realities of female authority in the Middle Ages do not fit easily with what Nickolas Haydock has called Hollywood's 'medieval imaginary' (Haydock, 2014: 5–35). *Becket*'s longest scene featuring Eleanor takes place in what appears to be her solar, a private room where she is embroidering: a characteristically female activity in a feminized space (cf. Brown, 1976: 12, 17, 24). Moreover, this scene presents Henry's relationship with Becket in direct opposition to 'the joys of family life' (Glenville, 1964).

I should observe that my students often do not perceive the sexually charged nature of the relationship between Henry and Becket (or are, at least, less than willing to engage with it). I have had students overtly express disgust in response to my explication of how this relationship can be read as erotically charged or even 'queer'. Nevertheless, I believe that analysis of this relationship is productive to pursue, in part because the visuals of the film — and the acting choices — make the sexual tension more explicit and insistent than it is in the script. Moreover, even acknowledgment of students' emotional responses can help the class engage with an assigned work (Lang, 2016). Using discussion questions to guide students' viewing, and having students do individual or small group work in class, can be effective ways of directing analysis of an unfamiliar topic. Writing exercises to formulate a thesis, or small group discussion with the task of generating such a thesis, could play such a role (Bean, 2011). The use of women as thinly-veiled narrative pretexts for semi-erotic relationships between men is hardly uncommon in Hollywood, but rarely are such situations so explicit as here. They are also more obvious in the visuals than in the text. The first spoken line of the script, eliding several lines of the play, is Henry saying, 'Well, Thomas Becket? Are you satisfied? Here I am, stripped' (Glenville, 1964; Anouilh, 2004: 7).

In many of *Becket*'s scenes, women's bodies are interposed between the two men; or, sometimes, occluded by Thomas and Henry's proximity. First, there is the daughter of the respectable parents who has clearly been having a fine time with both men, presumably simultaneously. There is the cheerful French prostitute who is invisible at first, and later half-crushed under the bedclothes. There is the anonymous peasant girl whose fate is a playing piece between the two men, as Henry affects not to understand Thomas' attempts to give her a degree of the autonomy from which she is triply excluded by gender, class, and ethnicity. And there is, of course, Gwendolyn, Becket's invented

Welsh mistress, played by Siân Phillips. The play makes her and Henry's relationships with Becket explicitly parallel (Williams, 2010). Her suicide brings Henry — beautiful, sprawling, sensual Henry — directly into Thomas Becket's bed. Both *Becket* and *The Lion in Winter*, while centering other narratives, demand that viewers contemplate what Helmut Puff has called 'same-sex possibilities' in the medieval world (Puff, 2013). Over 50 years after both films were made, such possibilities remain much rarer in Hollywood's Middle Ages than in the historical Middle Ages.

The Lion in Winter, by contrast, explores sexual consent and desire as affairs of high politics. This is also the case in its depiction of the dissolution of consent and the waning of desire. In the opening scene of the play, Alais — a political and sexual pawn, but never merely biddable — asks: 'If I decided to be trouble, Henry, how much trouble could I be?' (Goldman, 1983). All the characters arguably spend the play asking the same question of themselves and each other. The final exchange, nothing so straightforward as a reconciliation, belongs to Henry and Eleanor. Having spent the film at each other's throats, they discuss their loss of each other as the ultimate loss, and Henry describes the survival of their relationship as the closest thing to hope they have. The nature of what they desire of each other is unclear, but the passionate nature of that desire is unmistakable (Harvey, 1968).

In my experience, the most challenging relationship for students to dissect is the ferociously intimate one between O'Toole's Henry and Hepburn's Eleanor. The dangerous and decidedly queer chemistry between Anthony Hopkins' Richard and Timothy Dalton's Philip of France is easier to handle, in part because the primary sources concerning their diplomatic and interpersonal relationship can be excerpted and used to examine the irreducibly personal nature of medieval politics. Roger of Howden's account of the diplomatic visit which they discuss as the beginning of their love affair, for instance, has been edited and translated (Riley, 1853). While, in the film and play, Philip refers to 'sodomy' as something to be excluded from the body politic, historical categories tended to evade such decisive category-making (Burgwinkle, 2004; Karras, 2017).

Religious Medievalism: Seeing and Hearing Medieval Christianity

The question of how politics is — or might be — related to medieval religion and its structures is present in both films, if much more prominent in *Becket.* The question of what Henry's repeated penances at Canterbury meant both to the king and his audience is a fraught one, and the deliberate theatricality of it did not go unnoticed by contemporaries (Internet Medieval Sourcebook, 1996d; Keefe, 2003; Duggan, 1998). The public penance depicted in the opening sequence of Becket, moreover, took place

in the context of the wars of 1173–74, in which Henry's sons joined with rival monarchs to rebel against him in what Anne J. Duggan has described as 'the most widespread challenge to his authority'. In other words, 'the "Angevin empire" had blown up in his face' (Duggan, 1998: 282; cf. Riley, 1853). These external pressures are acknowledged in Anouilh's play; the script of the film omits this political consideration (Anouilh, 2004: 8, 110–11). 'Oh Thomas', says O'Toole's Henry, kneeling at the archbishop's tomb and waiting to be scourged, 'I'm ashamed of the whole silly masquerade' (Glenville, 1964). Despite the film's presentation of both the penance and Henry's attitude towards it, the king's recognition of the archbishop's sanctity served primarily not to bolster the latter, but to enhance Henry's own kingly reputation (Oppitz-Trotman, 2014; Internet Medieval Sourcebook, 1996d). Acknowledgement and promotion of the cult of Becket, it has been argued, enabled Henry to burnish his own image as the ideal Angevin sovereign. As a king who could humble himself before God and his Church, Henry could be compared to King David and Charlemagne, the latter viewed as a particularly important model by Anglo-Norman rulers (Oppitz-Trotman, 2014: 214–16). Thomas Keefe has claimed provocatively that, following his sons' rebellion in 1173, Henry 'found his most gratifying moments of affirmation [...] at the shrine of Thomas Becket' (Keefe, 2003: 115).

In *The Lion in Winter*, religion is marginal and subservient to politics, with Henry bellowing 'Somebody dig me up a priest! Fetch me a bishop!' when he seeks to have a marriage ceremony (canonically dubious at best) performed on the spur of the moment (Harvey, 1968). The presence of the hastily summoned clergy, in the following scene, is used as visual comedy: the richly-robed Bishop of Durham, despite his power, is made a mere audience member for the Plantagenets' fierce family quarrels. Even the pope is invoked as a potential pawn in the Angevin game of inheritance (Harvey, 1968). Most of the characters, moreover, appear relatively unconcerned either with the judgment of God or their immortal souls. When a bitterly resentful Philip tells Richard, 'I looked for you on every street in hell', it is a lover's reproach, not an evocation of eternal torment. That this is not meant to carry with it any suggestion of sin is borne out by the fact that Richard's equally bitter reply to Philip precipitates something like a reconciliation (Harvey, 1968). At the film's conclusion, Henry and Eleanor plan almost cheerfully to live forever, implicitly outwitting God, the devil, and — not least — their sons.

Exploring the markedly different relationships of the protagonists to religious belief and practice can be instructive and productive. In a pivotal scene in *Becket*, Henry opens a council meeting by declaring that 'We must come to an understanding about who rules this kingdom: the church or me?' (Glenville, 1964). He is interrupted in the middle of this declaration by the elderly archbishop of Canterbury, giving point to the

sentiment. In the same scene, Henry remarks — dryly but pacifically — that 'no one is questioning God's authority'. Thomas Becket, meanwhile, suggests that God 'has more important business' than managing the affairs of men and kingdoms (Glenville, 1964). These scenes are a good discussion starter, as students often assume not only that everyone in medieval Europe took Christianity extremely seriously at all times, but that any failure to do so was swiftly and mercilessly punished.

Analyzing the cathedral and the scenes which take place within it can open discussion of the material culture and embodied ritual of medieval Christianity. The ceremony of Becket's consecration as archbishop — on the built sets of Shepperton Studios in Surrey outside London, standing in for Canterbury Cathedral — is visually stunning, as is the magnificent excommunication scene. Interior and exterior shots of the cathedral sets are also used to bookend the theatrical trailer, suggesting that its architecture furnishes a proof of historical authenticity (**Figure 1**).

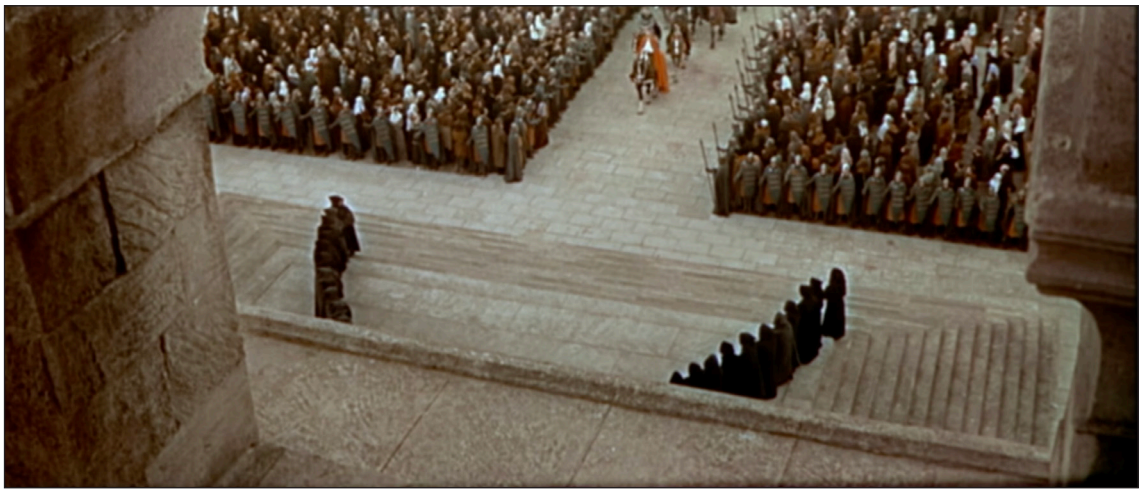

Figure 1: Canterbury via Shepperton: Henry arrives to do penance. Paramount trailer for *Becket*, 1964 [video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFQi8tD-NeU [Last Accessed 13th March 2023].

When Becket is crowned in the nave, it is ablaze with light and color, in a ceremony crowded with spectators as well as gorgeously-robed participants.

The excommunication scene, in which Becket asserts the power of the church against Henry's law and England's political elite, takes place in the same space when it is empty and dark. This darkness is interrupted only by the (artificial) illumination of the high altar, while the silence is broken only by the canons' chanting of the *Tuba Mirum*, anticipating the shattering trumpet that heralds the final judgment of God. Becket and Brother John descend, first, from the vestry to the choir. The bishops who still resist Becket and his policies intercept him on the way, warning him that the Bishop

of London is waiting in the sacristy to arrest him. Costumed only in dark robes and pectoral crosses, with no insignia of their ecclesiastical office, they appear like figures in a medieval allegorical painting. This is contrasted with Becket, who is wearing an alb (a form of white tunic), stole (scarf), and cope (a long cloak), with his mitre on his head and the ring of office on his hand, carrying the crozier which symbolizes his duty of pastoral care (**Figure 2**).

Figure 2: Burton's Becket as priest and bishop. Paramount trailer for *Becket*, 1964 [video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFQi8tD-NeU [Last Accessed 13th March 2023].

This almost claustrophobic scene forms a stark contrast with the long panning shots that follow the canons and Becket into the nave and up to the high altar, to begin the ceremony of excommunicating the man guilty of murdering a priest. When Becket pronounces the excommunication, the camera looks down on him from the level of the clerestory before shifting to a close-up, suggesting divine omniscience and scrutiny.

Becket's script is clearly preoccupied with both faith and religion, so I will focus, for my final point, on the visual and aural elements of both films that evoke medieval Christianity. In the scene where Henry proposes Thomas' elevation to the archbishopric, they are in a painted cloister walk. The scenes visible behind them depict: the Annunciation, that startling proclamation of the will of God and its startling acceptance; St. Peter, first among bishops, holding the keys to the Church granted him by Christ; a devil's fall into hell; and an angel weighing souls. Henry is blithely confident of a future in which he is aided by his closest friend and ally, a man who is exceptional in not fearing God. Becket, framed by those ominous images, does not share his confidence.

In the first scene where Becket is asked to exercise archiepiscopal authority, the image painted on the wall of his study is that of Peter, anachronistically robed as bishop, being released from prison by an angel. It is in front of the same image that Henry and Becket have their first encounter — and first confrontation — following Becket's election as archbishop. Chiseled into the fireplace before which they sit on the same bench are the words: 'Thus pass away all glories of the world'. In this pivotal scene, just before the film's intermission, Becket also hands back the ring of the chancellor of England. Notably, this scene is an invention of the film; the play has Becket send the ring to Henry by messenger, and Henry's expression of regret — 'I loved you; and you didn't love me' — is delivered in soliloquy (Anouilh, 2004: 64). In the film's scenes of the ring's bestowal and its removal, and in the scene when it is commented on by the Bishop of London, it is treated visually and thematically as the equivalent of a marriage ring, suggesting vows made before God.

In *The Lion in Winter*, bishops are summoned for emergency purposes — as is everyone else, if Henry feels like it — and perfunctory prayers are said before meals. The rituals surrounding Christmas, meanwhile, gleefully blend the medieval and the modern. In an early sequence, a gigantic Christmas tree is carried through the courtyard of Chinon castle. Later, Henry and Eleanor prepare gifts by the distinctively Victorian tree while discussing their past and future: 'What shall we hang', asks Henry, 'the holly or each other?' Alice's song, meanwhile, references the later medieval gift-opening practice of King Henry VI (r. 1422–1461, 1470–1471) and his queen consort Margaret of Anjou (1430–1482) in saying 'We'll spend the day the lovers' way / unwrapping all our gifts in bed'.

The music of the films also provides rich grounds for discussion. While John Barry's splendid opening title music for *Lion in Winter* commences with an idiosyncratic Latin play on the words for king and justice, students generally assume that, because it is chanted and in Latin, it must be religious. This assumption is not entirely without foundation; the dramatic use of brasses in a minor key deliberately evokes post-medieval settings of the *Dies Irae* of the requiem Mass. The text is that of an early medieval poem attributed to St. Cuthbert, which has been edited and translated (Waddell, 1948). Through omitting the final stanza, however, the text deliberately refuses to anticipate an end to worldly strife (Music by John Barry, 2015; Waddell, 1948; cf. Ifft-Decker and Morales, 2019). What happens when the approaching day of wrath is linked, not to final judgment, but to the passions of earthly kings?

Laurence Rosenthal's main title music for *Becket*, meanwhile, does in fact contain both a hymn and a part of the Mass. The 'Veni creator spiritus', a 9th-century hymn invoking the Holy Spirit, plays over the credits. This could be interpreted as providing a 'generic' medieval atmosphere, or it could be read as a provocative meditation on

divine inspiration and commentary on the potentially chaotic consequences of a man allowing his mind to be transformed by God. The same hymn is later sung at the moment of Becket's investment and enthronement as archbishop. Christ in judgment, too, is centered at the conclusion of that ceremony, as the choir sings 'Sacerdos et pontifex', meaning 'priest and bishop' (Montani, 1920).

Visually, the film suggests that Becket's emergence from the cathedral, splendidly robed as archbishop, is the mirror episode to Henry's later entrance, half-naked and beneath a scarlet cloak of kingly dignity. Both make use of Shepperton Studios' matte painting department to evoke the cathedral's medieval context (NZPete, 2011). The history of Henry's incredulous and resentful grappling with Becket's actions as archbishop and posthumous reputation for sanctity is richly documented and studied, so that scholarly analysis can easily be juxtaposed with the film's treatment (Duggan, 2016). In the opening scene of the film, as Henry enters the cathedral to make his penance, the choir switches to foreshadowing the final judgment, like the painted Christ in the apse: it sounds the final trump at the same time as it announces the opening of the drama. It makes for a particularly neat commentary on the ways in which medievalism can superimpose moments of time, as well as layering meanings (Eco, 1990; Dinshaw, 1999; Lees and Overing, 2019).

Conclusion

One of the most effective of these films' many medievalisms is the explicit concern with historical legacy and even, perhaps, historical immortality. While Charles Tashiro has commented on the alleged 'unfathomable strangeness' of the medieval while analyzing the films' approach to lighting, costuming, and set design, and pointing out their anachronisms, I argue that both films can encourage historical imagination and analysis (Tashiro, 2004: 41). *Becket* dramatizes the ways that competing narratives swirl and coalesce around complicated figures. Becket himself is both clearly influenced by medieval narratives — of honor, kingship, sanctity — and faintly aloof from them, self-conscious to the end. Henry, with Becket as his chancellor, resists when asked to perform kingship. The film suggests that it is an attempt to consolidate that kingship that most cruelly reveals the limits of that power. *The Lion in Winter*, set almost a decade later in his reign, and released a mere four years after *Becket*, shows him snapping and plotting in service of preserving his empire, and wishing, with Eleanor, that they might endure 'tusk to tusk through all eternity' (Goldman, 1981).

The press photographs for the film, showing both the Fontevraud tomb effigy and Hepburn and O'Toole's emulation of it, collude in the creation of this image of their reign as — if not eternal — at least capable of repeated resurrection (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3: O'Toole and Hepburn, press photograph, undated. From the author's collection.

This determined insistence on the endurance of the medieval, and on the power of our interventions in how medieval history is imagined, contributes to how both *The Lion in Winter* and *Becket* can be used to introduce students to both medievalism and the Middle Ages. The films can be taught in a variety of ways. They can be linked to distinct topics in a course on medieval film or taught as part of a larger Plantagenet Cinematic Universe, stretching from the kingly rivalries of Cecil B. DeMille's *Crusades* to the international politics of Richard and John in Ridley Scott's *Robin Hood* (DeMille, 1935; Scott, 2010). Both of these films, like those discussed above, feature rich political medievalism, relationships open to queer readings, and complex portrayals of a medieval Church too often imagined as monolithic. Since both *Becket* and *The Lion in Winter*, and the plays on which they are based, belong to the same anxious decade of the 20th century, they can function particularly well when taught together. Asking what it means for the Middle Ages to be imagined in a particular set of ways in a particular historical and cultural moment allows the construction of a case study of the workings of medievalism, using the rich histories of the Angevins.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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