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Who Put the 'a' in 'Thomas a Becket'? The History of a Name from the Angevins to the 18th Century

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This article examines the history of Becket's name from his birth to c. 1800, through detailed corpus analysis, with a particular focus on the varying popularity of the 'Becket' and 'a Becket' forms from the 16th to 18th centuries. The analysis goes beyond positivist attempts to decide on the 'correct' name to look instead at naming conventions in the context of their use. There is some evidence to suggest that, until his ordination at least, Thomas was known by the family surname 'Beket' during his lifetime, and this name for him occurs in some medieval chronicle traditions. Yet for the most part he was 'St Thomas of Canterbury', and the 'Becket' surname was revived by Protestants at the Reformation as a slur to emphasise his unworthiness. The form 'a Becket' was invented by the satirist Thomas Nashe in the 1590s to turn the archbishop into a figure of fun, and by the 1700s may have been the predominant form in popular, verbal, use, largely thanks to its more appealing rhythmic form. By the 1760s the 'a Becket' form had also become the academically accepted 'correct' form. This in turn gave rise to debate, continuing to this day, about the correct nomenclature and to a host of theories about the etymology of both 'types'.



Introduction

Names are intimately connected to memory. For an individual, the name of a person, place, or thing may conjure up a huge range of memories, images, and emotions. Societies have memories of a sort too, which theorists have termed ‘communal’ or ‘cultural’ memory (Assmann, 2006; 2011: 5–141). While precise memories communicated orally rarely have a lifespan of more than a couple of generations, in literate societies the knowledge or memory of the past is largely based on the interpretation of texts, a process subject to control and curation by social elites. This process generates ‘cultural memory’, which in turn impacts and inflects how individuals within the group ‘remember’ the history of their society. It may seem as if the job of the historian is to reconstruct ‘what really happened’, yet, as historians themselves have long been aware, what people thought happened, and how they (often inaccurately) remembered the past, is just as worthy of study. Furthermore, since the 1970s the field of medievalism has examined the reception and reinterpretation of the Middle Ages in post-medieval society, tracing changes in a cultural memory of the past, and how the ‘medieval’ has been invoked, recalled, or reimagined for present-day purposes (D’Arcens, 2016). The importance of names is a process of this kind, and what they denote and connote has been the subject of long and rigorous study since Plato and Aristotle (Deseriis, 2015: 20–23). Yet with a few notable exceptions, the study of medieval names has largely been restricted to prosopography, genealogy, and social naming trends (Beech, Bourin and Chareille, 2002).

The various names used by medieval individuals and groups should be of interest to cultural historians. The way in which particular names have come down to the modern period from the medieval past, in both their popular and academic uses, is also worth closer scrutiny. We might think of the enduring cognomens of English kings—for example ‘Lionheart’ and ‘Lackland’ for Richard I (r. 1189–1199) and John (r. 1199–1216) respectively—in shaping the initial perceptions of their characters, which then become difficult to dispel. Cliff Davies’ (2012) work on the Tudors shows that ‘Tudor’ was intended by contemporaries as a slur against the royal family’s relatively common Welsh roots. Not only did the monarchs of this dynasty never adopt ‘Tudor’, but they also considered it borderline treasonous. Indeed, as Davies noted, while we might think of the ‘Tudor dynasty’, a contemporary dynastic name is ‘conspicuously absent’ (24). Nonetheless, despite Cliff Davies’ protestations, the heirs of Henry VII (r. 1485–1509) are now indelibly Tudors. Even if diligent scholarship is unable to overturn the weight of popular usage, the study of the origin of names and sobriquets, who used them and in which contexts, and why particular names might stick in cultural or popular memory, are worthwhile lines of inquiry for historians to pursue.

The memorialisation of Thomas, archbishop of Canterbury (r. 1162–1170), now commonly known as Becket, has received close attention from historians. Several studies have charted the dramatic politicisation of Becket’s memory during the Reformation (Scully, 2000; Roberts, 2002; Parish, 2005: 92–105; Aston, 2016: 361–401; Marshall, 2020; Emery, 2022), while Kay Slocum (2018) has traced receptions of Becket’s legacy and memory through the whole period from his life to the present day. To date, however, there has been no study focused particularly on the names given to Thomas by his contemporaries or those remembering him in their own subsequent sociopolitical contexts. The issue of Becket’s name is a live one and not a mere bagatelle of academic interest. It became abundantly clear during the recent 850th anniversary commemorations of Thomas’ death that, in popular usage at least, there is no agreement on whether the form ‘Thomas Becket’ or ‘Thomas a Becket’ is the correct one, while another line of argument is that ‘Becket’ was an insult and the correct form is ‘Thomas of Canterbury’ (Nickson, 2020).

Becket was, and remains, a contentious and controversial figure, and to quote the great 19th-century Church historian Dr Hook (1862: 356): ‘The controversies with respect to Becket commence with his very name’. It was his Victorian contemporary James Cragie Robertson, co-editor of most of the 12th-century source material for Becket’s life in his *Materials for The History of St Thomas Becket* (1875–1881), who was one of the first to attempt to untangle the problem of the ‘Becket’ and ‘a Becket’ names. He wrote in his biography of the archbishop: ‘The prefix a, which is sometimes invested with the dignity of an accent (á) and sometimes cut short by an apostrophe (a’), has no countenance from the old writers, and appears to have originated in vulgar colloquial usage’ (Robertson, 1859: 14). On the other hand, Dr Hook (1862: 357) was sanguine about the á, which he noted had no medieval origin ‘[b]ut still here it is. I use it as a distinction, conventionally conferred upon a man whom we regard as one of the heroes of our country ... I also employ his name Becket, not as any mark of disrespect, but because it is convenient to adhere to that which is customary’. Biographers of Thomas continue to nod to this problem, usually including a brief discussion of the name Becket and what it means, noting that the ‘a Becket’ form is wrong, and then moving on (Knowles, 1970: 4; Barlow, 1986: 12; Guy, 2012: 5).

Rather than trying to identify Thomas’ ‘correct’ name and cast aside the ‘wrong’ ones, in this article I examine the evolution of his names over time and show how the names applied to Thomas reflect the writers’ particular contexts and their relationship to his memory. There were three main periods of development in the history of Thomas’ name which I treat chronologically in this essay. Both during and after the Angevin period (1154–1216) Thomas was known by several different names depending

on context. His father's nickname 'Beket' became, briefly, an inherited family surname almost certainly used at some point by Thomas. Although the knights who murdered him shouted this name at him as an insult, it also appeared in non-pejorative contexts throughout the later Middle Ages, particularly in the prose *Brut* chronicle and by its continuators. It is only in the mid-1530s that Protestants came to use 'Beket' as an occasional derision of his sainthood, a practice which became widespread following Thomas Cromwell's 1538 decree that the former St Thomas of Canterbury was to be known henceforth as 'Bishop Becket'. The final stage of development began in the 1590s with Thomas Nashe's coining of 'Thomas a Becket' in his satirical prose. From here, the prevalence of 'a Becket' in published works grew slowly, although there were hints that by the mid-17th century it may have been the more popular form in oral culture. Despite the protestations of a handful of antiquarians, by the late 18th century the 'a Becket' form was overwhelmingly recognised as 'correct' in even the most serious publications. I argue that this development shows how critical the writers of the post-Reformation period were in shaping the construction of the Angevin past by focusing on the name 'Thomas Becket', then adapting it (as 'Thomas a Becket') to fit their own aims. Following James Cragie Robertson's mid-19th century work, the pendulum has now swung back, and academics have increasingly settled on Thomas Becket as the accepted nomenclature—but 'Thomas a Becket' has proved difficult to dislodge from common parlance.

This study takes the close of the 18th century as its end point. This research focuses on a corpus analysis of *Early English Books Online*, for the period up to c. 1700, as well as *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* covering c. 1700 to c. 1800, which offer clearly delimited parameters for understanding the progression of names applied to Thomas. This also means that the study is largely based on the types of text included within those corpuses: generally higher-status and consciously literary works, particularly in the earlier period. The quantitative and qualitative analyses employed here suggest not only the frequency with which particular names are deployed to describe Thomas, they also give a sense of the contexts within which they are used. As I note, many of the texts comment on the perceived popular or oral use of particular names, offering potential insights into wider non-literary cultural engagement with Thomas' memory.

The endpoint of c. 1800 has been deliberately chosen. In purely practical terms this is the cut off point for *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, and any similar corpus analysis for the 19th and 20th centuries would require far more substantial time, resources, and funding, and it would take a project team to do the material full justice. This later material also presents a qualitatively as well as quantitatively different challenge. Prior to c. 1800, Thomas tended to be referenced in a handful of clearly

defined contexts, mainly as a historical figure or as the target of a religious polemic. From the 19th century onwards, literary, religious, and dramatic portrayals of Thomas multiplied rapidly in England, in an increasing variety of media and highly nuanced contexts. A flavour of this can be gleaned from the studies of Clare Simmons (1990: 113–139) and Nicholas Vincent (2017), among other historians, who have looked at the image of Thomas Becket in religious, academic, and popular circles over the course of the long 19th century. The names applied to Thomas by the re-established Catholic Church in England, or in Tennyson's hugely popular play *Becket* (1884), or the manifold works of the Oxford Movement, or (moving into the 20th century) T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and the 1964 film *Becket*, would all in and of themselves provide fertile ground for study. The sheer proliferation of references to Thomas after the 18th century means that any attempt to include the more modern period in an article-length study of this kind could only fail to do justice to the available material.

This article began, quite simply, as an attempt to unravel the question of who first put the 'a' in 'Thomas a Becket', but it soon became clear that the name of 'Becket' or indeed 'Beket' had a complicated and highly political history of its own. As such, while I offer an answer to the original question, I have also attempted to write the history of a name down to c. 1800, with the intent that my methods and framework may, perhaps, provide the spark for further analysis of the contexts in which the names of historical figures are used, changed, and discarded to suit the ever-changing needs of the present.

The Medieval Picture: from Thomas Beket to St Thomas of Canterbury

The name of Thomas' father is not in doubt: he was Gilbert Beket, a native of Normandy who became a wealthy citizen of London (Barlow, 1986: 11–13). He served as sheriff of the city in the 1130s and owned a large amount of property around Cheapside. The exact meaning of his byname has been a source of some debate. It has generally been accepted that Beket is a variant of Bek, which has at least three possible meanings of three different surname types. It could reference a topographical feature: a 'bequet' in the sense of a brook or stream, or someone who lived by one; it could refer to a place name: someone from the Bec region of Normandy; or, it could be a nickname: someone with a 'beque' or 'beaky' nose. All three of these hypothesised meanings could apply to Gilbert Beket. He almost certainly came from the Bec region of France, from the Risle Valley with its many streams, and the descriptions of his son Thomas point to aquiline 'beaky' features in the family (Barlow, 1986: 12; Robertson, 1859: 13). While historians have generally come down on the side of the 'beaky' explanation, we should recognise that in this case the ambiguity of the name may have existed from the start, as the punning Beaky from Bec.

The practice of hereditary surnames was fairly new to England when Thomas was born circa 1120. It was largely a Norman practice and was not universally adopted until the 14th century. Hereditary surnames tended to be restricted to the more elite property-owning class, although within that group there was apparently no status attached to having a hereditary name, and many families even of noble status had no fixed inherited surname at this point (McKinley, 1990: 31). No type of name appears to have been passed down more readily than others, and there appears to have been no stigma attached to particular types of inherited bynames. Some of the most exalted families in the country bore potentially insulting nicknames which had first been given to an ancestor, such as the Bassetts—meaning short or of low stature—and the Giffards—‘fat cheeks’.

Thomas’ first appearances in the historical record were not as Thomas Beket but as Thomas of London (Jenkins, 2020). The impression of his personal seal is still attached to a charter of the early 1160s. It is an antique intaglio, probably of Mercury, with the inscription ‘SIGILLUM THOME LUND’ [‘the seal of Thomas of London’] (Hallam and Prescott, 1999: 8; The National Archives, London, E 40/4913). Whilst serving as a clerk in the household of archbishop Theobald (r. 1139–1161) from around 1145, then as archdeacon of Canterbury and prebend of St Paul’s Cathedral amongst other positions, he was frequently named in charters and registers as Thomas of London (Greenway, 1968: 73–74; Saltman, 1956: 170). Even while serving as Chancellor between 1153 and 1162 to Henry II (r. 1154–1189), prior to his elevation to archbishop of Canterbury, he was officially known as ‘Thomas the Chancellor’ but retained the use of ‘Thomas of London’ in his continued capacity as archdeacon.

We might question whether Thomas was ever known as Beket, given his clear choice of a locative ‘London’ byname. Yet it would certainly make sense if he was, at least until entering the service of Theobald. Thomas was a popular name, and so while he was living and working in London, initially as a moneylender’s clerk, being called ‘Thomas of London’ would not distinguish him from the many other Thomases in London; why, indeed, would a Londoner be known by the surname ‘of London’ while they lived and worked in London? Locative surnames usually only make sense when they identify a person who has come from another place. Furthermore, that he was known as Beket may be inferred from another name he was certainly given. On his first appearance at Theobald’s court, Thomas was accompanied by a man named ‘Baillehache’ [‘Hatchet’]. Roger de Pont l’Evêque (c. 1115–1181), then a member of Theobald’s household and later Thomas’ antagonist as archbishop of York, conferred the nickname on Thomas instead (Robertson and Sheppard, 1875–1885, vol. 2: 362; vol. 4: 10). This is another instance of the multi-punning nickname, potentially referring, amongst other

things, to Thomas' hatchet-like nose, his incisive and direct manner, and alluding to the low status of those he associated with. The bestowal of the name was attested by two of Thomas' hagiographers in the 1170s, so it may well have been in continued, if purely verbal, derogatory use by Roger and his circle. We might imagine a scene where 'beaky' Beket arrives at court with 'Hatchet', and Roger makes a cruel joke: 'With that nose, beaky's more like a hatchet!'

Returning from the realms of imagination to those nearer historical certainty, there were two known instances of Thomas being called Beket by contemporaries or near-contemporaries. Roger of Howden (Stubbs, 1868–1871, vol. 1: 213), writing his chronicles in the 1190s, matter-of-factly states in the entry for 1154 that 'Theobald archbishop of Canterbury made Thomas Beket his clerk archdeacon of Canterbury'. Michael Staunton (2016: 97) has noted that, in his treatment of Thomas, Howden makes several additions and expansions to the standard *vitae* which suggest he drew from sources that no longer survive. Howden was also the first to attempt to place the events of Thomas' life in a chronology with specific years and dates, and arguably was attempting to avoid anachronisms or foreshadowing by using context-appropriate nomenclature. In the chronicle, at each stage of Thomas' career progression, Howden calls him by his correct title: first, Thomas Beket the clerk; then, Thomas the Archdeacon; and last, Thomas Chancellor and Archdeacon (Stubbs, 1868–1871, vol. 1: 213–219). Although Thomas was signing and sealing himself as Thomas of London, Howden's careful succession of names suggests that he was also known as Thomas Beket, or Thomas Beket of London, at least before becoming archdeacon.

The other instance of Thomas being called Becket comes from the eyewitness account of his death composed by Edward Grim around 1172. On bursting into the cathedral, the knights shouted 'Ubi est Thomas Beketh, proditor regis et regni?' ['Where is Thomas Beketh, traitor to the king and realm?'] (Robertson and Sheppard, 1875–1885, vol. 2: 364–365). Only Grim recorded this, but we should give it credence as he was present at the murder. It has usually been considered by historians as a slur reminding Thomas of his non-noble parentage, 'a deliberate use of Becket's lowborn surname that hints at an entire world of social disdain', and not as evidence that it was a name by which he was commonly known (Vincent, 2003: 244). As Nicholas Vincent (2003: 221–222) has pointed out, however, three of the murderous knights—Reginald Fitz Urse, William de Tracy, and Hugh de Morville—appear to have previously pledged fealty to Thomas while he was chancellor, and dramatically renounced this to his face in the hours before killing him. Should we then see this personal name-calling as an insult not (or not only) to his low birth, but as the deliberate use of his pre-official name, shorn of any ecclesiastical dignity? Having renounced their fealty to him, they no longer recognised

his titles: he was just an ordinary person, and a traitor who was owed no honour. This would be the first use of 'Beket' to degrade Thomas' status, but far from the last.

The family name Beket was not intrinsically shameful. Thomas' response in one of his letters to the accusation that he had been raised by the king from poverty contained his own statement that '[m]y parents, they were indeed citizens of London, not by any means the lowest' (Duggan, 2000, vol. 1: 433). Pont de Guernes-Maxence's verse life, completed by 1174 and which he tells us he composed while staying with Thomas' sister Mary at Barking Abbey, probably has some echo of family pride in its statement that 'Archbishop St Thomas... was actually born in the city of London. He belonged to a family of honourable citizens...' (Short, 2013: 27). It is quite probable that Thomas was known as Thomas Beket of London during his life, alongside other professional names. He may have finally relinquished the 'Beket' name in 1154 when he was made archdeacon. One reason for propertied classes using hereditary surnames at this point was to claim land. In lieu of a written record, an inherited name could provide proof of title. In this period, often only the direct heir retained the surname while other non-inheriting siblings had their own bynames. Up to the point at which Thomas was made archdeacon at the age of 34, he could have still inherited his father's properties, married, and produced heirs himself. On becoming archdeacon, he was sworn to celibacy according to the newly enforceable rules of the Church, and his claim to his family's property became less important.

Thomas is known to have had at least three sisters—Agnes, Rohesia, and Mary—and at least six nephews (Round and Powell, 2000; Barlow, 1986: 13). Only Agnes was ever given the surname Beket. She had probably been married as she had at least one legitimate son, although her husband is never mentioned so she may have been widowed at a fairly young age. Once Thomas had entered the church, or perhaps after his death, and in the absence of any brothers, Agnes inherited the family home in Cheapside along with the surrounding properties and the Beket name (Keene and Harding, 1987: 490–492). She posthumously appears as 'Agnes Beket' in three charters of the 1230s and 1240s concerning the properties she had owned on the site of the Hospital of St Thomas of Acre, built on the Beket home (Mercers' Company Archives, London, Register of Writings 1: fos. 4r, 48r, 50r). Her named heir, Theobald of Helles, was probably her son but either kept his father's name or adopted a byname from the chief manor of his inherited lands, and it would seem the direct line of the Beket name derived from Gilbert died out with Agnes.

In Agnes' retention of the family name there is evidence that the heirs of Gilbert Beket did, for one generation at least, use his byname as a surname. We have seen that there is some evidence of Thomas having used it alongside other professional names at least until he became archdeacon, and Agnes most likely used it as a title for her inherited properties. Certainly, Thomas' contemporaries were aware that it was one of

the names he was known by. Even if Thomas had decided that he no longer wanted to be known as Beket, a change of name is not sufficient on its own to change what a person is called by others. From both the pointed and casual use of Beket by the knights and Howden, it is evident that 'Beket' remained a name by which Thomas the archbishop was identified, even against his will, until his death.

In keeping with his status as one of the most important and popular saints in Britain, references to Thomas were extremely frequent in the medieval period. Although his cult was dynamic, and artistic representations of the saint can be shown to have responded to local or historical contexts, the names given to St Thomas remain markedly static from the 12th century to the Reformation (Jenkins, 2020; Hampson and Jenkins, 2021). Throughout most of the medieval period, Thomas was St Thomas of Canterbury, or St Thomas the martyr, or simply St Thomas Occisus ['The murdered St Thomas']. Yet Howden's naming of Thomas as 'Beket' in the 1190s was continued in the chronicle tradition of the Anglo-Norman prose *Brut* of the later 13th century. From the very first manuscripts of this chronicle, when the reader first encounters Thomas' elevation to Chancellor, he is named as 'Thomas Beket de Loundres' (Marvin, 2006: 256). Translated into both Latin and English, published and republished, the *Brut* was one of the most popular histories of the later Middle Ages. In all of them, as far as has been possible to ascertain, Thomas is referred to as Thomas Beket of London up until he is made chancellor, and in some later cases, such as in the edition by the publisher William Caxton (1480: fo. 6), up until he is made archbishop ('Thomas Beket his Chaunceler'). So there was a continued, albeit very specific, usage within some medieval texts referring to Thomas as 'Thomas Beket' until he was made chancellor, or even archbishop; and that point, at which Thomas' life entirely changed on his appointment as archbishop, was further marked by the shedding of ties to his family, including his family name, and becoming a man of God, a martyr-saint.

There are some sporadic instances of Thomas being named as 'Beket' in a medieval text outside of the direct traditions. The early 15th-century Beverley Minster Provosts' Book (Beverley, East Riding Archives, PE 129/150) contains a history of the provostship, a position which Thomas held from 1154 to 1162. In the history he is called Thomas Beket when he appears as provost (fos. 1r and 82r), and this appears to be following the usage in the *Brut*, delineating his pre- and post-archiepiscopal identities. A more unusual case occurs in a manuscript of 1320 × 1340, an account of Thomas' vision of the Virgin Mary while he was in exile at Sens, and in which she bestowed upon him a holy oil for the anointing of kings, begins 'Quando ego Thomas Beket Cantuariensis Archiepiscopus exul ab Anglia' ['When I, Thomas Becket Archbishop of Canterbury, was exiled from England'] (British Library, MS Royal 12 C XII: fo. 16v). Several versions of this vision

survive in manuscript form, always with Thomas relating it in the first person, although mostly they have him referring to himself simply as ‘Thomas Archiepiscopus’ (Legg, 1901: 170). The use of ‘Beket’ appears to be idiosyncratic and was perhaps following the use of the name in the *Brut* tradition. The author clearly did not intend its use to be pejorative, and it may be the only medieval instance of Thomas introducing himself as ‘Beket’. Given that it was not amended or glossed by medieval readers of the manuscript, and given its use in the *Brut* tradition and texts such as the Beverley Provosts’ Book, it seems to have been generally accepted in the later Middle Ages that this was one of the names that the historical Thomas would have used to identify himself.

It should not surprise us that there was little in the way of medieval development in the names applied to Thomas. Throughout the period, his ecclesiopolitical and sociodevotional roles remained largely static, albeit fluctuating in prominence in response to wider events or personal preferences. Pilgrim footfall in Canterbury Cathedral was highest in the immediate aftermath of the translation of Thomas’ remains to a golden shrine in 1220, and peaked again in the half century after the Black Death. But even outside of these boom periods, he was generally seen as England’s most prominent healing saint and was venerated, patronised and promoted by each king in succession (Nilson, 1998: 147–154, 234). There was no obvious institutional threat to the memory of St Thomas, and as such the names that he was known by at the end of the 12th century became written canon, subject to much repetition but little variation.

The exception to the generally stable nomenclature of St Thomas in the Middle Ages comes from the handful of voices of dissent about his cult that arose prior to the Reformation. His very position as the saint at the heart of one of the most popular pilgrimage destinations in the country, the ubiquity of his cult throughout England, and the potentially controversial nature of his death for defying his king, meant that he was more likely than most saints to be the focus of critical views. Most notably within England in the early 15th century, the loose agglomeration of religious dissenters—popularly known as the ‘lollards’—repeatedly attacked the cult of St Thomas for various reasons, including the pointlessness of pilgrimage to his relics or prayers directed to him, or that his ‘martyrdom’ was instead the justified killing of a truculent traitor: he was ‘a false traitor and damned in hell’ (Tanner, 1977: 45). In their denunciations, the lollard voices were unanimous in rejecting ‘St Thomas’ as an appellation, although they were almost equally unanimous in styling him simply ‘Thomas of Canterbury, who the people call St Thomas’, or, if in particularly scathing mood, ‘Thomas of Cankerbury’ (Davis, 1963; Tanner, 1977: 45, 53, 57, 71, 74, 96, 148).

Perhaps surprisingly given the continued currency of ‘Beket’ as a potential name with which to strip the dignity of the saint, this did not appear to have been utilised

by medieval critics of the cult. Instead, their ‘Cankerbury’ was in keeping with wider medieval trends of insultingly punning nicknames being used to excoriate perceived lapses in religious standards. It is reminiscent of the ‘Order of Brothelyngham’, who seem to have put on a satirical series of performances against the friars in Exeter in 1348 (Hingeston-Randolph, 1897, vol. 2: 1055–1056). The name ‘Cankerbury’ points to a recasting of the pilgrimage site as a ‘canker’, a malign presence in popular religion, and is coupled with similar sentiments directed at the pilgrim destinations of Woolpit (‘Foulpette’) and Walsingham (‘Falsyngham’) (Tanner, 1980: 148). When ‘Beket’ was used by the murderous knights it was, as we have seen, applied in such a way as to strip him of all authority, and the name was revived and applied to similar effect during the Reformation. Many lollards and other medieval critics of Thomas’ cult seem to have been concerned with Thomas simply as one of the more prominent and popular focal points of a pilgrimage practice they despised, and as chief among a multitude of false saints, rather than having any particular views on the memory of the historical figure of the man. Of those few who called him a ‘false traitor’, they seem to have condemned him based on his support for the endowments of the Church—a particular lollard bugbear—and attacked the righteousness of his death rather than his status or legitimacy (Davis, 1963; Hudson, 1978: 27, 153–154). All that can be further said at this juncture is that I have been unable to find evidence of ‘Beket’ being used as a slur against the archbishop’s name in medieval England between his martyrdom and the early 16th century, and that if it was used it must have been in a purely oral culture which was, for whatever reason, not recorded by the interrogators of the lollards.

The Reformation: Thomas Cromwell and Thomas Becket

One problem with assessing the usage of ‘Beket’ or ‘Becket’ as a name for the archbishop in the period before the Reformation is that historians have long used the name, and continue to use it, as a signifier which will be familiar to their audience, heedless of the specific contemporary descriptor or nomenclature which was actually used. Where ‘Becket’ appears as an apparently contemporary pejorative in historians’ discussions of dissent to Thomas’ cult in the period before the 1530s, it has, on inspection of the original documents, always proved to be a modern interpolation, or on occasion the use of a post-1538 text altered from its pre-1538 wording. For example, Margaret Aston (2015: 388) cited John Skelton’s 1522 poem ‘Colin Clout’ as containing the phrase ‘Their lessons forgotten they have / That Becket them gave’, but this was an emendation for the 1545 edition, with the original having ‘Saynt Thomas of Canterbury’ (Fox and Waite, 1987: 113). In terms of the use of ‘Beket’ to describe Thomas the archbishop (as opposed to his specifically pre-archiepiscopal identity), the earliest, confirmed example I have

been able to find is from William Marshall's translation of *The Defence of Peace* from 1535. In a marginal rubric, Marshall (1535: fo. 71v) wrote 'As obstynat Thomas of Canterbury otherwise called Thomas Beket'. Marshall was a Protestant publisher and associate of Thomas Cromwell (1485–1540), and clearly used 'Beket' pejoratively here, but in such a way that implied Thomas of Canterbury was the more recognised usage.

As late as 1530, the division between pre-archiepiscopal 'Thomas Beket' and post-archiepiscopal 'Thomas of Canterbury', as seen in the *Brut* tradition, was scrupulously observed by even the most Protestant writers. William Tyndale's *Practyse of Prelates* (1530: fo. 41r) is excoriating in its discussion of Thomas as a 'man of warre' and of 'worldlye fassyon', noting that in his early life 'Thomas Becket was first sene in merchaundise temporall', highlighting his unspiritual origins. Yet it is only at this point in the text that 'Becket' was used, retaining the distinction between his life stages. At all other points, Tyndale used 'Thomas of Canterbury'. 'Becket' was clearly in pejorative use by Protestants at this point in the 16th century, but it would seem only in passing, and in the contexts established by chroniclers since the late 12th century. Tyndale's *Practyse of Prelates* does, however, mark one of the earliest uses of Thomas Becket as commonly spelt today, with a 'ck' instead of a 'k'. The change in spelling reflects a general trend among print typesetters to adopt as standard 'ck' in place of 'kk' or 'k' when it came after a short vowel from around the 1500s (Condorelli, 2022: 199–211). Following this, the trend seems to have been adopted in surnames more widely. Names such as Haket, Piket, Waket, and Beket (as they appear in 14th-century subsidy rolls) are by the 1530s commonly being spelled Hacket(t), Picket(t), Wacket(t), and Becket(t) (Hanks, Coates and McClure, 2016).¹

The change of spelling is thus not in itself particularly significant, and it is more than likely that 'Becket' would have become the common spelling at around this time anyway in line with the general trend. Yet in the case of Thomas 'Beket', the particular timing of the change from 'Beket' to 'Becket' in textual sources, and the speed of its adoption, is very revealing. As late as 1535, Protestants such as William Marshall continued to use 'Beket', and Tyndale's 1530 'Becket' was an outlier. But on 16 November 1538, a famous royal proclamation was issued, printed by Thomas Berthelet of London, stating that 'the sayde Thomas Becket shall not be esteemed, named, reputed, nor called a sayncte, but byschop Becket'. The demand that his name be officially changed was key to the whole endeavour of discrediting Thomas' status or, as Margaret Aston has said, was intended 'to demote him from all veneration to the rank of mere Bishop Becket' (Aston, 2015: 368). Much like the knights who murdered him, referring to Thomas as Bishop Becket was to make him just another bishop; an ordinary man, and not, as with the title Thomas

¹ My thanks to Dr Becca Gregory for this point.

of Canterbury, exalting him above the other Thomases who have been archbishop. The proclamation was drafted by Thomas Cromwell, Principal Secretary and Chancellor to Henry VIII (r. 1509–1547), whose personal role in the attack on Becket’s cult has been made increasingly clear by historians in the last few decades (Roberts, 2002; Aston, 2015: 362–410; Slocum, 2018: 151–157). On 8 September, King Henry and his court were treated to a play by John Bale (1495–1563), a propagandist closely linked to Cromwell. This was almost certainly either his *Kynge Johan* or the now-lost play *De traditione Thome Becketi* or *De Thomae Becketi Impostuni* (Houliston, 1993: 45; Aston, 2015: 366).² Both of these plays included scathing attacks on Becket, and also consistently spelled his name with a ‘ck’: ‘Thomas Beckett ye exalted without reason’ (Collier, 1838: 99). Whether it was Bale’s influence or, combined with the new typographical convention, evidence of a particular decision around the spelling of Becket within Cromwell’s circle, in Bale’s plays and Cromwell’s proclamation the use of ‘Becket’ not only referred to the archbishop in general terms, but also with a new spelling that established the modern naming convention for the historical figure of Thomas Becket.

The speed at which the proclamation was adopted, quite literally to the letter, is traceable in texts composed after 1538 and in the adaptation of pre-1538 works. While an imperfect method for measuring this change with any precision, the general trend can be shown through a search of the corpus of *Early English Books Online* for ‘Becket(t)’ and ‘Beket(t)’, where they refer to the archbishop between 1540 and 1619, filtering out multiple instances of the same edition. This shows that in general the ‘Becket’ form, practically unknown prior to 1538, almost immediately became the commonest spelling (Table 1).

Decade	‘Becket’	‘Beket’
1540	17	2
1550	5	1
1560	17	1
1570	18	0
1580	35	0
1590	21	0
1600	43	2
1610	42	1

Table 1: Instances of ‘Becket’ and ‘Beket’ as names for Thomas, archbishop of Canterbury, from a corpus search of *Early English Books Online* (University of Michigan, 1999).

² This title is sometimes given by historians in English as *Against the Treasons of Thomas à Becket*, although there is no evidence of it having been called this by contemporaries, and the ‘à Becket’ in particular seems to result from a translation of the title by Seymour Baker House (1995: 189).

While the ‘Becket’ form can be seen in a royal letter of December 1538 (Aston, 2015: 380), referring to ‘bishop Becket of Canterbury’, within a couple of years authors and printers who had read the proclamation almost unanimously followed its naming convention from the date of its issue. This sudden change supports Margaret Aston’s (2015: 368) claim that the 16 November proclamation amounted to ‘a rewriting of [Becket’s] history, a definitive new political correctness’.

As Jan Assmann (2006: 21) has noted, conflicts ‘typically derive their irreconcilable emotional force from the way the past is anchored in the group memory of the warring parties’. Historians of the Reformation have shown how that period was a fruitful time for the often-politicized reconstruction of cultural memory by competing Protestant and Roman Catholic elites (Parish, 2005; Aston, 2015). As Benjamin Guyer (2022) has argued, the politicization of this period extends to the very meaning of the term ‘reformation’, which only became fixed to the religious changes of the mid 16th century, and also capitalized as The Reformation, during the 1640s, when Anglicans used a carefully-curated account of the past in their defence of the Church against the contemporary Scottish ‘reformation’. Prior to this, in an English context ‘the reformation’ was mainly used pejoratively and mockingly by both Catholic and Puritan opponents of Anglicanism (Walsham, 2012: 920–922). Other recent studies have shown how Reformation figures were ‘remembered’, particularly by Protestant and Roman Catholic factions at the time and in the centuries since, notably in Hornbeck’s (2019) study of the presentation of Cardinal Wolsey in literature and media from 1530 to the present day, and in the two volumes of essays produced by the ‘Remembering the Reformation’ project (Walsham et al., 2020a, 2020b).

For much of the medieval period, Church and state were united in memorialising Thomas as a martyr for the Church and as a sainted healer, and this was reflected in the names applied to him. Yet, rather than demanding his name be scrubbed from the record in a *damnatio memoriae*, Henry VIII, Cromwell, and their Protestant circle retrieved, recast, and affirmed as central to their vision of the past, present, and future of the English Church a negative interpretation of the historic figure of Thomas that was inherent within the readily available source material. For Henry VIII and Cromwell, the knights were correct in removing their homage from the archbishop and reducing him to the private citizen ‘Becket’, to whom no honour was due, and any right-thinking Englishman with a proper sense of the relationship between Church and state should naturally agree with them (Aston, 2015: 363–401). It is this curation and reinterpretation of the records of the past—particularly by elites for political ends—that Assmann suggests is one of the main drivers of shaping ‘cultural memory’. His description (2011: 107), of how ‘each canon lays claim to being the best

or indeed the only true tradition...[w]hoever subscribes to it, automatically subscribes to a normative definition of one's self or to an "identity" that will be in harmony with the demands of reason or revelation' applies quite clearly to the adoption of 'Becket' as a Protestant shibboleth at a time of great cultural polarization. Linking the literary culture as revealed by the tabulation of printed books and the far more elusive but widespread oral usage is, as ever, fraught with difficulties. Yet the very act of saying 'Thomas Becket' in late 1538 would have been enough to mark oneself as Protestant, or at least as a supporter of the Crown. For those still adhering to the Roman Catholic faith, the archbishop was still always St Thomas of Canterbury (Gibbons, 2009). Yet perhaps the historicity of 'Becket' proved beguiling even in some Catholic circles, as by the 1580s even his staunchest defenders, such as Thomas Stapledon (1588: 47–48; Houliston, 1993: 48, 51), author of *Tres Thomae*, can be found referring to him as 'Th. Becq. Cantuar', which would have been barely thinkable merely 50 years before.

Post-Medieval: Thomas Nashe and Thomas á Becket

The final evolution of the name Thomas Becket to Thomas a Becket, with or without an accent over the 'a', is one that has long puzzled historians. The picture is muddled by the latter form's popularity, such that, for example, the Latin 'Thomas Beckettus' in a 1556 letter of theologian Thomas Sampson (c. 1517–1589) was translated into English as 'Thomas a Becket' by a Victorian editor (Robertson, 1846: 177). More recently, historians have tended to agree that the 'a Becket' form of the name was a post-Reformation invention. As to how it arose, the most commonly advanced explanation is that it came through imitation of the name of the German-Dutch theologian Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471) (Barlow, 1986: 11–12). But the first appearance of the phrase 'Thomas à Kempis', in an edition of his *Following of Christ* from 1613, postdates the first appearance of 'Thomas a Becket' by almost 20 years (Kempis, 1613). More generally, an 'a' middle name is a contraction of either 'atte' or 'of', so we might expect this to be a variant on 'Thomas of Becket' or 'Thomas atte Becket'. The first recorded use of 'Thomas of Becket', however, also postdates 'Thomas a Becket' by over a decade, and there is no usage of 'Thomas atte Becket' before the 19th century, when it was proposed as an etymology of the 'a' (Bardsley, 1815: 111). Thomas of Becket also makes no sense and seems to be a back-formation from Thomas a Becket, as does the 'Thomas de Becket' that occurred sporadically in the 17th century.

The earliest usage of 'Thomas a Becket', and probably also the coinage of the phrase, comes in 1596 by the poet, essayist, playwright, wit, and occasional collaborator of Shakespeare, Thomas Nashe (c. 1567–c. 1601). In his *Have With You to Saffron Walden*, an attack on his literary enemy Dr Gabriel Harvey, Nashe (1596: 73) hectoring him by

claiming Harvey's father had prophesied that he 'would prove another St Thomas a Becket for the Church'. Nashe also provided the second instance of this form in print in *Nashes Lenten Stuffe* of 1599. There, he mockingly described the erection of a chapel in Norwich after people had flocked there 'as it had beene to the shrine of Saint Thomas a Becket' (Nashe, 1599: 10).

Nashe was a highly stylistic, playful writer, who carefully employed his language to mock and ridicule his subjects (Brown, 2004: 53–101). In terms of the date of this evolution of Becket's name, the use of 'a' for 'atte' or 'of' as a middle name in print was a development of the late 16th century. Nashe would certainly have known the popular 1590 play *George a Greene the Pinner of Wakefield*, wherein George a Greene is a stout yeoman shoemaker attached to the Robin Hood legend (Anon, 1599). The 'a' middle name had rustic, 'Merrie England' connotations in the late 16th century, and George a Greene may have been a proverbial figure before he was the subject of a play (Dobson and Taylor, 1976: 146–149). Alan-a-Dale and Arthur a Bland, characters associated with the Robin Hood legends, are less likely candidates for Nashe's inspiration as their first appearances in print were in broadside ballads of the 1660s and 1670s, although they could feasibly have had a longstanding presence in oral tradition prior to those dates (British Library, 1987: R233658; Dobson and Taylor, 1976: 165–175). Nashe seemed to deploy the rustic 'a' to turn Becket into a slight figure of fun—a folkloric figure, hinting at a brawling, comedic character as a form of irony, in response to Becket's saintly legacy. It also pointed to Becket's supposedly lowly birth, something of which, in the 1590 play, George a Greene was proud: 'Let me live and die a yeoman still/ So was my father/ So must live his sonne' (Anon, 1599: 44). Furthermore, the new metre of the name 'Thomas a Becket' gave it something of a mocking jingle. It was the sort of creative literary absurdity that Nashe loved, and as such it did not matter that 'a Becket' or 'of Becket' made no sense within surname conventions.

We can trace, beginning with Nashe's work in the 1590s, the rise in popularity of 'Thomas a Becket' to the end of the 17th century through works available in the database *Early English Books Online*, and then to the end of the 18th century with another searchable repository, *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Table 2 and Figure 1).

Searches were applied for the terms 'Becket(t)', 'a Becket(t)', and 'of Becket(t)', and duplicate instances of the same edition or text were excluded. Even bearing in mind that this only represents the literary rather than the oral use of the name, occasional references to 'popular' use and the types of text under discussion, which include sermons and popular polemics, point to trends beyond the literary sphere.

	Becket	a Becket	of Becket
1590	21	2	0
1600	43	0	1
1610	42	2	1
1620	33	3	2
1630	25	1	4
1640	39	3	0
1650	59	3	3
1660	37	3	6
1670	65	14	6
1680	79	25	12
1690	41	8	6
1700	56	23	3
1710	93	50	2
1720	110	56	6
1730	115	85	17
1740	100	80	6
1750	114	85	3
1760	153	123	10
1770	214	203	14
1780	204	219	14
1790	231	393	17

Table 2: Instances of works using ‘Becket’ vs ‘a Becket’ and ‘of Becket’ to refer to Thomas, archbishop of Canterbury, 1590–1790, from a corpus search of *Early English Books Online* (University of Michigan, 1999) and *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale Group, 2003).

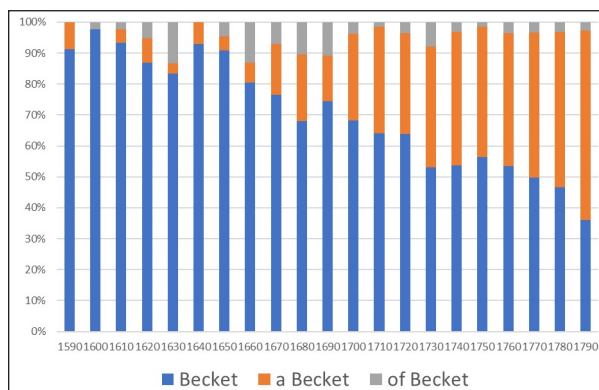


Figure 1: Relative popularity of ‘Becket’ forms in printed books, 1590–1799, from a corpus search of *Early English Books Online* (University of Michigan, 1999) and *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale Group, 2003).

While ‘Thomas Becket’ remained by far the most used name in printed texts until the 1770s, both ‘a Becket’ and ‘of Becket’ were firmly established as conventional by the 1680s. The first appearance of ‘Thomas of Becket’ was in 1609, in a defence of conformist Anglican ministers by the otherwise obscure John Freeman (1609: 5): ‘as once Thomas of Becket foolishly did’. That this occurred only a decade after Nashe’s use of ‘Thomas a Becket’ might point to a popular oral usage that pre-dated Nashe’s work and to which both Nashe and Freeman were responding, although it is more likely that Nashe had popularised the mocking name amongst London’s playwrights and polemicists, and the nonsensical ‘of Becket’ form became a variant of ‘a Becket’.

Most of the earliest uses of ‘a Becket’ or ‘of Becket’ were in polemics and sermons where Becket’s name and medieval cult were mocked as frippery or used in throwaway, derisory references. It is only by the 1670s that antiquarians and historians began to adopt the ‘a Becket’ form, in works such as Comeius’ *Generall Table of Europe* (1670), Logan’s *Analogia Honorum* (1677) and Howell’s *Medulla Historiae* (1679). In some texts, both ‘Thomas Becket’ and ‘Thomas a Becket’ were used because the two forms imparted different meanings to the reader. In Gilbert Burnet’s *History of the Reformation* (1679: 165), for example, Burnet uses ‘Thomas Becket’ to refer to the archbishop as a historical figure. Yet, when describing the death of James Baynham, a protestant martyr in 1532, Burnet has Baynham proclaim ‘that Thomas a Becket was a murderer’. This was a pointedly chosen use of the name by Burnet, as in Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* (1583, bk. 8: 1053), which was Burnet’s source, Baynham denounces ‘Thomas of Canterbury’, not ‘Thomas a Becket’. Even though Burnet was an anti-Catholic churchman who was later appointed bishop of Salisbury, he dealt with Thomas Becket as a historical person in a sober manner, throwing into sharp relief his portrait of a protestant martyr’s denunciation of ‘Thomas a Becket’. Similarly, we might see a differentiation between the literary ‘correct’ name and the oral ‘popular’ use of ‘a Becket’ reflected in Burnet’s choice.

The first apparent pushback against the ‘a Becket’ form, as well as the first antiquarian reflections on how Thomas should be correctly named, was by Henry Wharton, a meticulous antiquarian most famous for his compilation of episcopal biographies published as *Anglia Sacra* in 1691. In his observations on John Strype’s *Memorials*, Wharton writes of Becket:

He is also stiled Thomas a Becket ... this is a small Error; but being so often repeated, deserveth to be observed and corrected. The name of that Archbishop was Thomas Becket ... If the Vulgar did formerly, as it doth now, call him Thomas a Becket, their mistake is not to be followed by Learned men. (1694: 256–257)

Wharton's correction here suggests that, as the corpus data confirms, the 'Becket' form still accounted for most usages, but in oral culture the use of 'a Becket' was firmly established, perhaps because of the greater musicality of the metre. Daniel Defoe, in his *Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724: 39), pointed to the existence of both uses, and hinted at a similar division between literary and oral use: 'That Thomas Becket, or Thomas a Becket as some call him'.

The crossover point where 'a Becket' overtook 'Becket' in published works (as well as in oral culture) came in the 1760s and 1770s. While it is difficult to pinpoint any one work as giving final, academic credibility to the 'a Becket' form, from at least the 1740s it was adopted by many of the popular reference texts of the time, such as the 1741 edition of Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* (Chambers, 1741, vol 1: 1070). In Samuel Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*, the entry for 'A' states 'it also seems to be anciently contracted from *at*, when placed before local surnames; as, Thomas a Becket' (Johnson, 1755: 50). Robert Lowth's (1769: 114) highly popular primer *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* explained the name 'Thomas of Becket, by very frequent and familiar use, became Thomas a Becket'. Although 'Thomas Becket' was still in use, by the start of the 19th century 'a Becket' was widely accepted as the correct form of the name. Even so, occasional voices in academic circles still protested the anachronistic name. In the 1803 edition of *The British Critic* (Anon, 1803: 171), an anonymous review of Samuel Pegge's 1801 *Historical Account of Beauchief Abbey* complained that '[w]e usually call the celebrated prelate Thomas a Becket, but this is erroneous: his proper appellation was Thomas Becket'. Against this, however, can be placed Bardsley's *English Surnames* (1815: 111), stating with confidence that 'Thomas a Becket' was 'literally, I doubt not, "Thomas atte Becket" – that is, the streamlet'. This brings us full circle to the literal meanings of 'Beket', as explanations of Thomas' father Gilbert Beket's name: one of the meanings of 'Bek' is a stream, 'Beket' can be a streamlet, and 'a Becket' could quite feasibly be 'by the streamlet'. Thus Bardsley, an armchair expert on name studies despite the authoritative 'doubt not' which prefaces his remarks, was able to rationalise the name according to a few simple principles. As we have seen, however, the long development of the name was considerably more complex.

Conclusion

This essay has traced the history of the names of Thomas, now commonly known as Becket, from his birth to the end of the 18th century. In so doing, I have shown that a common thread throughout has been the importance of particular names, used by particular interest groups or individuals in expressing their relationship to, or opinions of, the memory of Thomas. Even during his lifetime, Thomas was known by

many names, one of which was Beket. This usage was continued in some chronicles to emphasise the different life stages of the saint, prior to his installation as archdeacon and, later, archbishop. The availability of this name as a shorthand for his worldly nature, delegitimising his sainthood and reducing him to the status of a flawed and traitorous mortal who was owed no honour, was if anything more important in its royally-mandated imposition by Protestants in 1538 than any suggestions it carried of low birth. The rapid adoption of 'Thomas Becket' by English writers, rather than the previously popular 'Thomas of Canterbury', points to the effectiveness of the decree, and to the clear understanding that the particular form of the name went hand-in-hand with how political figures were to be memorialised.

Perhaps the most important new argument advanced in this essay is that the long-debated 'Thomas a Becket' form was invented by Thomas Nashe as a satirical jibe in the manner of other rustic comedic figures of the 1590s. It was this link to folk comedy which appears to have accounted for its uptake in oral usage, even if it took a century to gain academic credence. Why does the incorrect 'a Becket' form remain so persistent in the modern era? For one, it is very pleasing to say. The metre is a dactyl (a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed) and a trochee (a stressed and an unstressed). An anonymous contributor to the American magazine *The Atlantic* in 1888 on 'The Science of Names' stated that this was 'the best form of name' (although erroneously stating spondee instead of trochee) and people with such names 'reap all the fame' because of their phonic value. Furthermore 'if the surname is not one that can be treated according to the above rule [of dactyl-trochee], it should be fitted with a given name, such as to bring the combination as nearly as possible to the above length and cadence' (Anon, 1888). While this theory has dubious merit, it does perhaps offer a clue as to the enduring popularity of 'Thomas a Becket'. What is certain is that, while the historical Thomas may have railed against, or simply not recognised, the names by which we now best know him, they are testament to his complex and controversial legacy and his consistent place within the public eye. While his name, and his memory, underwent the most dramatic changes in the religious strife of the Reformation period, the evolving popular image of this Angevin archbishop led to his rustic reinvention as 'Thomas a Becket', a figure more of popular legend than historical fact.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests.

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