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## 'Normans' vs. 'Saxons': Cinematic Imaginaries of Race and Nation in Angevin England, 1938–1964

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Building on Benedict Anderson's idea about the nation being a fictive construct—an imagined community of people who see themselves as sovereign, exclusive, and one with a shared history—this article examines how the race-based opposition between 'Saxons' and 'Normans' in histories about the Angevin period was popularized in the 19th century, and how this idea was integrated into the stories of three popular films in the following century: *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), *Ivanhoe* (1952), and *Becket* (1964). To better understand this phenomenon, this article uses the term 'cinematic imaginary' to convey how the shared institutions, values, and histories that constituted 'medieval' nationhood were depicted in film. This article argues that, much like how historians and novelists of the 19th century imagined how people of certain races in medieval England—particularly during the period of the Angevin Empire (c. 1154–1216)—operated according to set of values and embodied certain attributes, so too did filmmakers in midcentury Hollywood bend the categories of 'Saxon' and 'Norman' to align with their conceptions of race, nation, and class conflict in the 20th century. Through an examination of these imaginaries in popular cinema, this article illuminates how 20th-century interpretations of history were presented to audiences to convey a set of ideas about a medieval past in light of modern class struggle, imperialism, racism, and nationalism.

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## Introduction

Students enrolled in my Medieval Hollywood course (<https://medievalhollywood.ace.fordham.edu/>) at Fordham University several years ago raised an intriguing question: Were the seemingly violent and racist clashes between ‘Normans’ and ‘Saxons’, as shown in popular movies made in the 20th century, grounded in any historical truth? My first instinct was to say, ‘No—not in the way they are seen in film’, but could not adequately expand further. My students were responding to the films that popularized the ‘Norman’ and ‘Saxon’ opposition—namely, *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), *Ivanhoe* (1952), and *Becket* (1964)—that were produced in the middle of the 20th century by American studios for primarily American audiences. These films were huge box-office hits in their respective years, and dramatized, however loosely, the period of the Angevin kings (1154–1216). Why did these films present the Normans and Saxons (short for ‘Anglo-Saxons’) as distinct racial categories in the 20th century, and to what extent did filmmakers interpret medieval sources that referred to Normans and Saxons as rival groups with their own distinct identities?

The driving inquiry of this essay was spurred by the lively discussions and incisive critiques of ‘medieval’ film that my students engaged in when I taught the course, but it also builds on my broader scholarly interests in medievalism, or how artists, writers, filmmakers, and historians (among others) have recreated the medieval in modern media. Because of the way the discipline of history is arbitrarily demarcated within the academy as either ‘modern’ or ‘premodern’, this essay also demonstrates how an examination of modern popular culture through the lens of critical race studies can connect histories that otherwise would not intersect.

The professionalization of the historical discipline in the 19th century was coincident with historians’ tendency to examine past societies in terms of contemporary ideas about nation and race. Historians looked to the Middle Ages for the origins of burgeoning nation-states and national identities that supposedly had long histories, in some cases going far back into the period of the ‘barbarians’ of the early Middle Ages. In so doing, scholars connected a seemingly primitive heritage to fully articulated (and modern) notions about being, for example, a German, French, or English citizen (Geary, 2002: 1–14). Taking this view, historians of this period also assumed that categories of race and nation remained relatively stable over time. When nationalism became a dominant movement in the 19th century, the thinking was that the boundaries of national communities would tighten once again around classifications of race that were considered to be very old and, in some cases, ‘medieval’.

The ‘nation’ became one of the chief organizing principles through which people and governments came to be identified. When scholars and politicians sought to justify

the existence of modern nation-states, the historical examination of a people's national 'origin' dovetailed neatly with the contemporary enthusiasm for scientific racism, which sought to categorize people according to certain traits believed to be observable, immutable, and hereditary (Barczewski, 2000: 179–207). The essentialization of people based on race, 'to demarcate human beings through differences [in order] ... to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups', as Geraldine Heng (2018: 27) has defined it, was often entangled in the violent project of nation-building in the 19th century.

Adapting Benedict Anderson's idea (1983) about the nation being a fictive construct—an imagined community of people who see themselves as sovereign, exclusive, and one with a shared history—this essay analyzes how modern scholars and literary luminaries popularized the Saxon and Norman dichotomy in histories about the Angevin period, and how this antagonism filtered into midcentury film. Anderson's definition of a nation was concerned with the material aspects that gave modern communities the tools, such as museums and print capitalism, with which to imagine their shared, national heritage across time and space.<sup>1</sup> Though Anderson was not the first social theorist to put forward the concept of the 'social imaginary', he did give it currency as a critical framework to understand how people imagined their institutions, values, and histories as constituting the foundational building blocks of their national communities (Calhoun, 2016: 12).<sup>2</sup>

Echoing the 'social imaginary', I use the term 'cinematic imaginary' to describe the depiction of nationhood within the narrative medium of cinema.<sup>3</sup> Here, I am particularly interested in the instrumentalization of the medieval past in cinema—how filmmakers framed certain histories as belonging to certain people through plotting, dialogue, and characters.<sup>4</sup> The 20th-century cinematic interpretations of Angevin history were rooted in modern ideas about class struggle, imperialism, racism, and

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<sup>1</sup> For a critique of Anderson's paradigm from a medievalist's perspective, see Lesley Johnson's 'Imagining communities: medieval and modern' in *Concepts of national identity in the Middle Ages* (1995).

<sup>2</sup> Anderson and several of his contemporaries, however, did not believe that there existed the concept of nationhood prior to the Enlightenment. See Kathy Lavezzo's 'Introduction' in *Imagining a medieval English nation* (2004: vii–xxxiv).

<sup>3</sup> This is to differentiate it from Nickolas Haydock's 'medieval imaginary', a theoretical concept to examine more broadly the alterity of the Middle Ages and its particular manifestation in historical or fantasy film that may speak to audiences' assumptions about this period. Haydock also discusses the relationship between nationalism and the 'medieval imaginary' as one of these manifestations. See Nickolas Haydock's *Movie medievalism: the imaginary Middle Ages* (2008: 5–35, at 18–19).

<sup>4</sup> The only recent instance that I can find of the term 'cinematic imaginary' being used is in Wouter van Gent and Rivke Jaffe's 'Normalizing urban inequality: cinematic imaginaries of difference in postcolonial Amsterdam' (2017: 553–572). The term, however, is not concretely defined, though van Gent and Jaffe's article is one of many that covers nationalism and history in film, and much of this scholarship alludes to 'historical imaginaries' in the context of filming historical nationalisms.

nationalist movements that had crystallized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this essay I argue that, just as historians and artists of the 19th century imagined the people of medieval England were grouped into ‘nations’ defined in terms of racial difference, so too did filmmakers bend the categories of ‘Saxon’ and ‘Norman’ to fit their understandings of race and nation in the 20th century.

### Normans and Saxons in Medieval and Modern Literature

The period of the Angevin rulers—covering the reigns of Henry II and his sons Richard and John—provides a rich, archetypal setting for the artistic and literary themes that have come to define the English Middle Ages in popular culture. Henry II (r. 1154–1189) as the lawgiver and mercurial politician represented two sides of one archetype, as did Richard I (r. 1189–1199) as the ‘noble’ Crusader and bloodthirsty knight, and John (r. 1199–1216) as a calculating prince and feckless king. Henry II’s wife Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122–1204), imperious and rebellious as queen but maternal and jealous as a woman, was also an important forerunner to how novelists and historians framed the wielding and consequences of female power (Evans, 2016: 1–18; 125–148). And as historian Kay Slocum (2018) has shown, the shifting perceptions throughout history of Henry II’s chancellor-turned-archbishop Thomas Becket (d. 1170) as overly prideful and partisan to saintly and persecuted reveal the elasticity of these archetypes, able to be molded to new perspectives over time. The Angevin period was the time of tyrannical forest laws as well as that of the Magna Carta and its gestures towards a particular vision of English liberty (Blackburn, 2015). The period of Henry II, his family, and his contemporaries was a crucial historical setting that allowed white audiences, especially those who claimed Anglo-American ancestry, to see it as a formative time of race-making in England.

Beginning in the 19th century, particularly with the work of historian Augustin Thierry (1795–1856) and Sir Walter Scott’s (1771–1832) novel *Ivanhoe* (1820), the opposition between Normans and Saxons came to define stories that were told about post-Conquest England, including the Angevin period.<sup>5</sup> It is not difficult to see why. The historical record—medieval chronicles and the *Domesday Book*, for example—at least superficially supported the racial and class divisions that existed between these groups. Scholars of England usually divide the history of the realm in the medieval period at the Conquest of 1066, when William, the Duke of Normandy, who later became King William I (r. 1066–1087), defeated two rival claimants to the throne after he successfully invaded the island with his French (Norman) army. Though crowned

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<sup>5</sup> *Ivanhoe* was released in late 1819 but published in 1820. As such, most scholars date it to 1819.

in December 1066 after his victory at the Battle of Hastings, William the Conqueror's subjugation of England took many years, though he began to immediately reward his Norman vassals at the expense of the defeated English. Evidence from the *Domesday Book*, a type of census of the English realm compiled late in William's reign, shows that the English land-owning aristocracy had been replaced by William's Norman vassals (Faith, 1999: 178–223; Thomas, 2008: 93–118). Peasants, of course, continued to work and pay taxes as an exploited underclass. Whether in bondage or free, most of these peasants, who eked out harsh livings on the land, had English names.

In the anonymous *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, written in early English until the 12th century, there were clear distinctions made between the peoples who populated the realm, whether Danish, English, or French. Depending on the context, the differences between these groups were predicated on a mixture of custom, points of origin, language, and military allegiances. These were less 'imagined' communities—that is to say, a people connected across vast distances by the shared idea of national sovereignty—than groups at war for territory. In differentiating between the English and Normans after the Conquest, chroniclers were most interested in the tell-tale markers of social status: whom the King favored, which man was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury, and who held the titles of the great landed estates (Foot, 1996: 28–9).

Beginning in the 12th century, medieval chroniclers writing about the Conquest were more direct in their assessments of the divisions that existed between the English and their new overlords, a phenomenon in chronicle-writing that Elisabeth van Houts has attributed to the trauma of the Norman Conquest subsiding in the English consciousness a few generations after the invasion (1996: 9–15). How did English authors at the time write about the Conquest in terms of race and nation? In his description of the Normans and the English at the time of the Battle of Hastings, for example, the English chronicler William of Malmesbury, author of the 12th-century *Gesta Regum Anglorum* [*Deeds of the English Kings*], spoke of a deep divide characterized by differences in custom, appearance, learning, and culture. The English were physically distinct as well—tattooed, shaven, and bedecked in gold jewelry. The Normans, on the other hand, were a people or 'race inured to war [*gens militiae assueta*], and [could] hardly live without it', while also being loyal and particular in their dress and consumption of food; the use of 'race' here being a common translation for the Latin *gens* in the 19th century (Giles, 1847: 280; Malmesbury, 1596: 57v). Though they were a people with definable characteristics, Malmesbury noted that the English began to adopt Norman customs over time, implying that at least some cultural assimilation had occurred by the time he sat down to write his chronicle in the 12th century. Moreover, Malmesbury credited the devout Normans with revitalizing church building and religious life in England, which

had, according to his estimation, fallen by the wayside under English rule—though he was quick to point out that he did not intend to impute this irreligiosity to all English people (Giles, 1847: 279–80).

The subject of Norman piety, according to English chronicler William of Newburgh's 12th-century history, also characterized the violent transition of power that occurred at Hastings. Newburgh paints a penitential picture of how Normans came to spiritually resolve their crimes against the English, writing that:

In the place where the vanquished English were slain, a noble monastery, called St. Martin of Battle, was built by the victors, to be a lasting monument, at once to man as a memorial of the Norman conquest, and also to God as a propitiation for the effusion of so much Christian blood. [T]he spot where the greatest slaughter of the English was made ... exudes real, and as it were recent, blood, as though it were evidently proclaiming by this circumstance, that the voice of so much Christian gore still cries to the Lord from the ground ... (Stevenson, 1861: 403–4).

The Normans may have been Christian brethren of the English, but they were ultimately foreigners, interlopers, and invaders of their lands. The difference, as it appears to me, between the medieval chroniclers' descriptions of the Norman and Saxon conflict, and how that hostility manifested in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, is based on 19th-century ideas about race and national identities remaining unchanged over time. This meant that the military campaigns and aristocratic landgrabs which characterized the Norman Conquest reverberated somehow in the 'racial' memories of the descendants who lived afterwards in the Angevin period. In the opening pages of *Ivanhoe*, Scott describes vividly the unbreachable divide between Saxon and Norman:

Four generations had not sufficed to blend the hostile blood of the Normans and the Anglo-Saxons, or to unite, by common language or mutual interests, two hostile races, one of which still felt the elation of triumph, while the other groaned under all the consequences of defeat (1820, vol. 1: 4).

In Scott's version of history, this was akin to a blood feud, a conflict that pitted Saxons—described as an oppressed underclass—against the Normans, regal and out of touch with their new subjects. According to historian John Gillingham (2000: 4), the Norman Conquest *did* initiate an age of social division, though Gillingham contended that the Norman rule over the English was no longer a source of ethnic tension by the 1140s. Of course, Scott's *Ivanhoe* is fiction, but that does not mean the novel was any less



influential on historians of this period. As historian Nicholas Vincent has said, *Ivanhoe* was the ‘foundation charter of Victorian medievalism’, and the novel’s influence on histories, literature, and neo-medieval art produced during the 19th century was widely apparent (2016: 100).

What Scott popularized in *Ivanhoe* was the ‘Norman Yoke’: the idea that the Saxons, prior to the Conquest of 1066, enjoyed the fruits of equal citizenship and benefited from institutions that represented their interests (Brownlie, 2013: 111–130). The Conquest not only replaced Saxon leaders with a French-Norman aristocracy, but also imposed a tyrannical government that destroyed the Saxons’ proto-democratic institutions, thereby yoking them to the rule of their Norman lords (Hill, 1997: 57). According to this view of history, the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 represented a progressive push towards the restoration of civil rights that the Saxons once had before the Norman invasion.

Traces of the Norman Yoke were found in the works of some medieval chroniclers but eventually the concept itself transformed into a rich metaphor for royal despotism during the English Civil War in the 17th century, and then further propagated in historical and literary works of the 19th century, such as in *Ivanhoe* (Slocum, 2018: 247–8; Simmons, 2020: 69–70; Jenkins, 1999: 320–5). Even the American ‘founding fathers’, no strangers to looking backwards into the premodern past to promote their vision of a new American republic, argued that the 1763 Proclamation of their former King George III (r. 1760–1820) exemplified the Norman Yoke. This royal Proclamation was deemed an unacceptable overreach that had prohibited British-American colonial efforts to settle violently on westward Indigenous lands (Williams, 1987: 165–94; Vernon, 2018: 4).

As one might imagine, the Norman Yoke was a powerful metaphor with multiple, interpretive possibilities. It was a paradigm that could center binary difference in various ways—freedom and bondage, native and foreigner, or peasantry and lordship—similar to how medieval ideas about Blackness were framed as oppositional to various conceptions of whiteness, as Cord Whitaker has shown in his book *Black Metaphors* (Whitaker, 2019: 6–7). According to Scott and some of his contemporaries, it was not just that the Normans had been ruthless victors and the Saxons the unfortunate victims of their national sovereignty being violated: it was that, as different racial groups who were inherently at odds, the clash between the Normans and Saxons was as inevitable as England going to war with France for imperial control, and also a precursor to the type of domination the British Empire would later exert over the peoples it subjugated.

In his 1883 memoir, American novelist and humorist Mark Twain noted Scott’s unseemly influence on the antebellum South and *Ivanhoe*’s brand of romantic chivalry in

particular—the ‘Sir Walter Scott disease’, as Twain called it, that inflated Southerners’ misplaced sense of gentlemanly honor that led to the American Civil War (Leonard, 1993: 667; Twain, 1917: 375). *Ivanhoe* was an international bestseller, but exceptionally so in the American South, where reenactments of the novel’s tourneys and popular theatrical performances that adapted the story, which expunged the Jewish heroine from the narrative, occurred after the Civil War (Rigney, 2012: 106–126). In addition to having a hand in causing the war, Twain blamed Scott for imbuing Southern culture with an excessive silliness; the admiration for ‘Middle-Age sham civilization’ and its ‘bogus decorations’ was acutely distressing (1917: 376). Furthermore, Scott’s works perpetuated pride in a premodern ‘rank and caste’ system that held back progress in the South even after the Confederacy lost the war. Admittedly, this was a lot of criticism to lay at the feet of one dead novelist, as Twain himself confessed. Yet even Peter Schmidt’s postcolonial critique (2003: 545–54) of Scott’s works has argued for his outsized influence on Southerners and their voracious appetite for Scott’s nostalgic vision of a bygone world. This world was populated by haughty Normans (embodying Northerners), unpretentious Saxons (standing in for Southerners), and the ‘dangerous but necessary’ Jews (559), who become African Americans in this analogy. Conversely, Matthew Vernon has noted in his book *The Black Middle Ages* that Scott’s *Ivanhoe* ‘cast a long shadow’ on African American medievalism and how Black writers reinterpreted medieval romance on their own terms (Vernon, 2018: 136).

Even so, Scott’s medievalisms gave shape to Southern ideas of chivalry, from the white supremacist violence of the ‘knights’ of the Ku Klux Klan to the melodramatic clichés found in Thomas Dixon’s racist trilogy of anti-Reconstruction novels in the early 20th century (Schmidt, 2003: 549–50). In fact, as Ritchie Watson has argued (2008: xxvi), the Southern admiration for the romance of a chivalric age extended past the Middle Ages to the 17th-century English Civil War, with King Charles I’s (r. 1625–1649) very own ‘lost cause’ of aristocratic Cavaliers mirroring the Confederacy’s ‘lost cause’ that was the American Civil War. To Southerners, the English Cavaliers were the ancestors of their ‘noble’ culture, and the romantic historicization of this culture helped legitimize their honor and thus their status as slavers (Cobb, 2005: 22).

The medieval, as the imagined time and place for the origins of groups segregated along racial lines and split by competing class interests, has a storied tradition in American culture. Clearly, if *Ivanhoe* was the foundational text of 19th-century conceptions of the medieval, then it stands to reason that the novel’s ideas about Normans and Saxons persisted into the next century in cinematic treatments that either adapted *Ivanhoe* or took inspiration from it indirectly.



### ***The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938) and Ivanhoe (1952)***

If the Norman Conquest was the event that cracked the foundations of a homogenous Saxon England, then the ascension of the Angevins represented the colossal stone castles built atop these ruins, integrating them as part of a larger foreign empire that included most of France and parts of Ireland. For this reason, the Angevin period was as an important time for artists, historians and, later, filmmakers in defining an authentic ‘Englishness’ that emerged from this perceived colonial oppression. The cinematic adaptations of Robin Hood and *Ivanhoe* began early in the silent era, but it was the colorful midcentury, American-made adaptations of these stories that allowed filmmakers to visualize these histories in response to political concerns that resonated with their times. Arguably the definitive Robin Hood picture of the 20th century, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, leaned heavily onto the Norman and Saxon binary as it did the 17th-century garlands and Elizabethan retellings of the famous outlaw. The Robin Hood character also appeared in the opening scene of 1952’s *Ivanhoe*, seemingly bridging the world of these two films with one iconic character.

Much has been written about *Adventures* as a positive commentary on the Depression-era politics that favored the New Deal programs of President Roosevelt’s administration (Aberth, 2003: 167–170). Less, however, has been said about the film’s appropriation of the Norman and Saxon categories, which shaped the cinematic imaginary of medieval class antagonism along racial lines. This version of Robin Hood in effect supplanted its most prominent predecessor, the smash hit of 1922, *Douglas Fairbanks in Robin Hood* (also titled *Robin Hood*), which was heavily influenced by *Ivanhoe*, 19th-century versions of the Robin Hood story, and 1920s slapstick and romantic comedies (Nollen, 2015: 93–96). In this silent film, Douglas Fairbanks as Robin Hood is the aristocratic Earl of Huntington, who fights alongside King Richard (Wallace Beery) and is mainly concerned with wooing Lady Marian (Enid Bennett) and defeating his rival, Guy of Gisbourne (Paul Dickey). Though the Earl eventually becomes Robin Hood and steals from the rich to give to the poor, the main story plays out like a contemporary romance, largely unconcerned with the oppressed peasantry. The Robin Hood in *Adventures* is also high-born, though this film’s Sir Robin of Locksley (Errol Flynn) is different from the other nobles because Locksley himself is a Saxon and thus shares a racial, though not the same class, identity with his fellow Saxons.

In *Adventures*, the class divide between Robin of Locksley and his fellow Saxons is reconciled when Robin assumes the life of a forest brigand, an act that eliminates the markers of his elevated status and fosters racial solidarity with his compatriots (Harty, 2000: 92–93). Stealing from the rich to give to the poor also takes on new

meaning within the context of Depression-era America, when the distribution of New Deal benefits disproportionately went to white people. *Adventures*, in its subtle way, promoted the idea of the redistribution of wealth in troubled times, but reinforced the largely accepted view that this type of aid mattered only to the white working classes, who are in essence represented by the Saxons in the film. Though some prominent African Americans praised the New Deal for providing much-needed relief to Black communities, and the program boosted African American membership in the Democratic party during the 1930s, many New Deal administrators—especially in the South—favored white relief over economic justice (Sklaroff, 2009: 19–20).

There are other references in *Adventures* to the Norman and Saxon feud that hint at the history of American racial politics and the oppression of African Americans. One of the opening sequences of the film is a montage of various injustices committed against hapless Saxons by Norman soldiers under the command of the evil Prince John (Claude Rains), who had been plotting with his Norman barons to take over England while his brother, the good (and Norman) King Richard (Ian Hunter), is being held captive by Duke Leopold of Austria. In one scene, a friar comes to the defense of a Saxon who is being held down by Norman soldiers, saying: ‘This man is freeborn! He’s a landowner. You can’t make a slave of him!’. The audience, immediately familiarized via the opening title cards with the racial hierarchies in the film, begins to associate the Saxons not only with medieval England’s underclass but also with an embattled race in danger of being enslaved. In the famous banquet scene where Prince John ends up meeting Robin of Locksley for the first time, John asks his Norman barons if there were any objections to the tax imposed on Saxons to raise money for King Richard’s ransom. One of the Norman barons responds, with a laugh: ‘Objections, your Highness? With a Saxon dangling from every gallows tree between here and Charnwood?’.

American audiences would have picked up on the cruel injustices of a Norman system working against the Saxons, but one wonders how African American audiences may have interpreted that line, given its ability to conjure images of extrajudicial lynching? *Adventures* was released a year before Billie Holiday’s rendition of ‘Strange Fruit’ (1939), which at the time was a controversial protest song about anti-Black lynching in the United States that some consider to be the inaugural anthem of the civil rights movement (Margolick, 2001: 4). The Saxons, standing in for the American working classes who had been crushed for decades under the economic injustices of Robber Baron decadence and Gilded Age politics, could also have represented the struggles of African American liberation. The United States in the 1930s was an apartheid state, racially segregated by Jim Crow laws in the South and largely by custom everywhere else. The Norman and Saxon divide was likely compelling because it was *legible* to

some, if not many, Americans, and commensurate with their experiences of race in the 1930s.

Robin of Locksley's eventual union with Maid Marian Fitzwalter (Olivia de Havilland), the Norman ward of Prince John, represents the union of two peoples which could occur under the restoration of the rightful (and democratically minded) King Richard, following the defeat of the fascist Prince John. Though the film can be seen as an allegory commenting on Roosevelt's New Deal policies, the coming of war in Europe also influenced the filmmakers when they made the picture. If the Normans, then, looked like Nazis, that is because they were. In an interview given years after the release of *Adventures*, de Havilland spoke of the political climate when making the film, only a year or so before the invasion of Poland that started World War II: '... I suppose, unconsciously, we were preparing for another terrible conflict, because there really were the good guys and there really was a bad guy—and that was Hitler...and anyone who fought him became a kind of Errol Flynn' (Hark, 1976: 4). The Normans, in this framing, were the fascists who subjugated the proto-democratic Saxons, enslaved them, and went to war with them—fears that were made palpable in the film's narrative (Brownlie, 2013: 124–5). But we must keep in mind that, in the Angevin world of Robin Hood, the Normans had already won. The fight here was akin to resistance and for continued survival until 'Normans and Saxons alike will share the rights of Englishmen', as said in the film by a newly returned King Richard the Lion-Heart.

The release of *Ivanhoe* almost 15 years later, in a postwar period that saw an economic boom in the United States and a lurching recovery in Europe, took many of the elements that made *Adventures* a successful film: Olivia de Havilland's sister, Joan Fontaine, played one of *Ivanhoe*'s main love interests, the Saxon heroine Rowena. Though there is a character called Robin Hood in the film (as well as in the novel), the titular *Ivanhoe* (Robert Taylor) is a Robin Hood-like figure as well; a Saxon noble resisting the rule of his Norman lords. The element of difference in *Ivanhoe*, of course, is the presence of Jews, whom Scott had included in his novel but in the 1952 film adaptation occupy a far less ambivalent space, given that Jewish producer Pandro Berman wanted to enhance the roles of the Jewish characters to draw attention to their oppression in the postwar period. Felice Lifshitz has emphasized the significance of the 1952 adaptation in carving out a cinematic space for medieval Jewry, who were absent in medieval film and mostly non-existent in previous *Ivanhoe* adaptations from the early 20th century (2019: 375–97). In 1952, the producers and filmmakers wanted to make a compelling statement about religious intolerance and the outsider status that Jews occupied, both in the medieval and modern periods, but also, as Lifshitz has noted, on Jewish assimilation that occurred through interfaith marriage in midcentury America (2019: 378–9; 389).

If the movie *Ivanhoe* was supposed to be a positive appraisal of the possibilities of interfaith marriage, then the actual story that plays out is one that ultimately undermines that message. Rebecca, played by a young Elizabeth Taylor, is quite clearly an object of desire; she is both exoticized and eroticized, a dark-haired beauty in form-fitting dresses adorned with a large Star of David, a picture of womanhood in stark contrast to the gentile and fair-haired Rowena. Rebecca falls desperately in love with Ivanhoe, who returns her attraction but not a commitment to marriage. The daughter of a prominent and respected Jew, the film depicts Rebecca (and, by extension, the rest of the Jewish community) as having some wealth and the ability to exert political influence through it. But the Jews remain cultural outsiders, impervious to assimilation into a larger society split among the Normans and Saxons who see them as sexually tempting or useful because of their wealth. Michael Ragussis has observed that, in *Ivanhoe*, Scott positioned medieval Jews as prominent minorities, which reflected their status in English society at the time he wrote the novel. In so doing, Scott highlighted the boundaries of an English nation that excluded Jews, a notion that would have been familiar to most of his readers (1993: 478). One can see this same impulse at play in the 1952 film, which draws attention to how Jews occupied a liminal space between the Normans and Saxons in the same way they did as minorities with conditional acceptance in American society. The intention of the filmmakers, especially those of producer Berman, may have been to eliminate the more anti-Semitic elements from Scott's novel and adapt the source material that resonated with how Jews were beginning to assimilate more fully in postwar America, but the film also perpetuated the insidious stereotype of excessive Jewish wealth and influence—a stereotype that can be traced back to the Middle Ages (Stubbs, 2009: 6–19; Lipton, 2014: 66–71).

The overwhelming consensus about the depiction of Rebecca's witchcraft trial that leads to the final duel—a trial by battle between Ivanhoe, fighting as Rebecca's champion, and Bois-Guilbert (George Sanders), who lusts for Rebecca but must fight on behalf of Prince John (Guy Rolfe)—was that it commented on the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)'s political persecution of suspected communists (Stubbs, 2009: 407–14). In fact, one of *Ivanhoe*'s screenwriters, Marguerite Roberts, was blacklisted in 1951 and was forced to take her name off the film's credits. The prosecution of the film's most prominent Jewish character for witchcraft, if anything, spoke to the challenges that Jewish people faced in a postwar America that often rejected the idea that Jews could be fully American or successfully assimilated into American society. As scholars of Jewish-American history have noted, HUAC and Senator Joseph McCarthy's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations (PSI) targeted well-known Jewish writers and artists for being un-American. Six of the famous Hollywood Ten, the name given

to those who refused to testify before HUAC in 1947, were Jewish. According to Joseph Litvak, the Jews called before HUAC were not only suspect because of their politics and religion but were also valuable counterexamples to the 1950s model citizen—raced, in that sense, as gentile, patriotic, and white (2009: 107). The anti-Semitic accusation that Jews in postwar America held ‘dual’ loyalties—split between their ‘adopted’ homeland, America, and to a global Jewish community that ultimately undermines it—was addressed in the film itself: Rebecca’s father, Isaac (Felix Aylmer), is shown as dedicated to *Ivanhoe*’s patriotic cause and contributes funds to King Richard’s ransom. Jews are outsiders, the film shows, but that does not mean they do not deserve to be considered full citizens or suspected of harboring dual loyalties.

### ***Becket* (1964)**

The dramatic tension that could arise from harboring dual loyalties was also a major thematic element in *Becket* (1964), though this film framed Thomas Becket (Richard Burton’s) divided loyalties as a problem of Becket’s Saxon identity coming into conflict with the interests of his Norman king, Henry II (Peter O’Toole). When *Becket* was released, it no doubt built on the popularity of medieval films that had come before it, such as *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and *Ivanhoe*. The significance of the Angevin period to the plotting of *Adventures* and *Ivanhoe* demonstrated this historical setting’s vitality in foregrounding larger conversations about race and nation in pre- and postwar America. The Norman and Saxon division not only represented class struggle and economic inequality, but also how these issues intersected with anxieties about cultural assimilation and racial integration. *Becket*, in many respects, dramatized all these themes.

*Becket* was based on Jean Anouilh’s French play *Becket ou l’honneur de Dieu*, which was first performed in Paris in October 1959 and made its Broadway debut, in English, as *Becket, or the Honor of God*, the following year with Laurence Olivier and Anthony Quinn in the lead roles (Anouilh, 1960: 9). In the foreword to his play, translated by Lucienne Hill, Anouilh mentions that his interest in the Henry and Becket drama came initially from reading the prolific historian Augustin Thierry’s work *Histoire de la Conquête de l’Angleterre par les Normands* [*History of the Conquest of England by the Normans*], which had been published in several volumes beginning in 1825 (1960: 3). Thierry’s scholarly priorities were born from 19th-century French liberalism, which embraced historiographies of social progress, ones that mapped out narratives arching towards representative governments that embraced and protected civil liberties. Thierry’s historical interpretation of medieval England involved many of the tropes that were common in the Norman Yoke paradigm, including the destabilizing effect the Norman Conquest had on burgeoning Saxon institutions that promised protections



of Saxon freedoms. One crucial element that Thierry added, inspired from his reading of Romantic literature (such as *Ivanhoe*), was racializing Becket as a Saxon (Becket was likely born in London to parents of Norman descent c. 1120).

When the film adaptation was released in 1964, almost 20 years after the war but only four years after the play debuted on Broadway, its depiction of the Norman and Saxon conflict took on new significance. For Anouilh, his reading of Thierry's history of the Normans echoed a more personal and painful history. The Nazi occupation of France was a mere 15 years earlier, and the collaboration of the Vichy government with the Nazis as a puppet regime was still a fresh wound. The dramatic themes that Anouilh explored throughout his career as a playwright were almost singularly focused on how people navigated their way through moral quandaries in politically dangerous times. His characters often contemplate the extent to which they can compromise their values and still retain their sense of morality. With much success, Anouilh had already wrestled with this premise in his adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, which was performed in Paris in 1944 (and then, after the war, in Washington D.C. and London in 1946 and 1949, respectively). Anouilh adapted the classic Greek play by modernizing the dialogue and highlighting how, within the bounds of Nazi censorship at the time, *Antigone's* rejection of Creon's authority in Thebes mirrored the French Resistance's actions during the Vichy regime (Lifshitz, 2014: 217–8; Sams, 2002).

He further elaborated on the theme of political compromise in his play *Becket*, though the central dilemma here was in the Saxon Becket's eventual resistance to the Norman King Henry's demands that Becket should compromise the 'honor of God' in service of the King's more temporal needs. The play was adapted by screenwriter Edward Anhalt, who had a knack for cutting down the longer scenes in the play to fit the relatively brisker pace of a feature film. Anhalt was also responsible for writing one of Henry II's most famous lines in popular culture, 'Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?', which neither was said in the original play nor in histories of the conflict (Guerry, 2021). Although Anhalt and director Peter Glenville kept Anouilh's depiction of the disagreement between Becket and Henry as philosophical, the screen adaptation also suggested, in stronger terms than in the play, that the historical enmity between the Saxons and Normans as members of different races and nations was ultimately unresolvable. Here, race and nation in the cinematic imaginary of *Becket* were one and the same—fused together as a uniform Saxon identity not necessarily marked by physical difference from the Normans, but one characterized by wide-ranging tribal and class loyalties in post-Conquest England.

An expository scene at the beginning of *Becket*, latent with homoerotic subtext, is crucial to establishing the King's friendship with Becket as well as the racial and class hierarchies that inform the relationship between subject and ruler. Becket rubs down



the King after a bath, taking over from a servant who is coded as Saxon and whom the king calls a 'pig'; this shows the intimacy between the two men in these formative years of friendship. Their bond transcends the barriers of race and status, and they proceed to have a conversation about Becket's willingness to 'collaborate' with the Normans:

King: I made you a nobleman, why do you play at being my valet?

Becket: I am your servant, in the council chamber or here in the bath.

King: My Norman barons resent it; they feel it's your Saxon way of mocking their nobility.

Becket: Nobility lies in the man, my prince, not in the towel.

This exchange establishes not only Becket's identity (a Saxon and trusted friend of the king), but also that the King and his fellow nobles are Norman, they rule over Saxons, and Becket has found a way to ingratiate himself in a world where the rules of racial segregation do not apply to him. At this point in the film, he does not care whether nobility truly lies in the towel or the man, but rather that he is the man holding the towel and able to exert his influence over the King. In recounting the fraught history between their people, Becket lays out for the audience a picture of medieval England torn apart by racial violence: 'When you Normans invaded England you seized our Saxon lands, burned our Saxon homes, raped our Saxon sisters. Naturally, you hate Saxons'. Despite the King's protests that he is an 'old resident' of the country he now rules, and that the perpetrator of these crimes was his 'great grandfather William, called the Conqueror', even the Normans being 'old residents' of England has not sufficiently blended the two societies. This cinematic imaginary of nationalist division reflects a pessimistic perspective, no doubt informed by the effects of modern imperialism: these groups remain stubbornly at odds with each other, a race of conquerors against the race that was conquered, their differences too vast to ever be reconciled.

The scene ends with an establishment of the dramatic stakes for the rest of the film, with the King earnestly asking Becket how he reconciles his identity as a Saxon with his role in a Norman court. Becket, the King observes, would have to combine two opposing forces—his honor and his collaboration. Becket responds:

I don't try. I love good living and good living is Norman. I love life. And the Saxon's only birthright is to be slaughtered. One collaborates to live.

This is perhaps the sharpest comparison that the film draws between medieval history and recent trauma. In this equation, the Normans stand in for Nazis, the Saxons for the occupied French, and Becket a Vichy collaborator.

Becket's reference at the beginning of the film to the Normans' historic rape of 'our Saxon sisters' foreshadows the attempted sexual assault of the film's two Saxon women, whom Becket fails to protect from Henry's rapacious tendencies. Besides Becket, the other notable Saxon characters are these two women—the aristocratic Gwendolyn (Siân Phillips) and a disheveled peasant woman (Jennifer Hilary)—as well as the would-be assassin Brother John (David Weston), a Saxon monk who tries to take Becket's life before becoming his faithful acolyte. Though Becket's spiritual realignment towards the Church and the protection of the 'honor of God' occurs when he is anointed Archbishop, the King's attempted rape of both Saxon women also dramatizes a turning point for his character. The King's crimes against these women lay bare the mental toll of his unflinching loyalty to his Norman lord.

Violence against women is used frequently in cinema and literature to motivate men to embark on their heroic journeys and, in this regard, *Becket* is no stranger to this trope. Historically, the rape of women—considered to be part of an inferior racial group—served to enact a type of national humiliation that denigrated the masculinity of the men belonging to a conquered or colonized group. Despite the eugenicist streak in Nazi policy and anti-miscegenation laws, Nazi soldiers and officials regularly engaged in the sexual assault of women whose communities they destroyed (Flaschka, 2020: 469–85). *Becket* thus fuses a cinematic cliché with historical reality, highlighting how anxieties about both the violation of women's bodies and a community's national borders became refracted in the mirror of Angevin England that Anouilh and the filmmakers held up to a postwar audience.

The humiliation of the Saxons eventually returns to Henry, who appears as a penitent before Becket's tomb at the beginning of the film to reveal the film's other bookend: it concludes with Henry, at the same tomb, stripped of his shirt, being beaten by Saxon monks as part of his penance for Becket's assassination. That Becket's monks at Canterbury are raced Saxon like Becket himself also suggests the film's particular medievalism that imagines a racial hierarchy within the Church. The Saxon monks are part of the rebellious underclass and Norman bishops, like Foliot and others in the film, occupy positions at the top. This social organization seems necessary to introduce the film's other prominent Saxon character: the monk Brother John, who dies a martyr trying to protect Becket's life, personifying the French Resistance during World War II. The Saxon monks, as Henry observes in the film, delight a little too much in his downfall and take pleasure in administering their harsh penance. Even after Becket's death, the King has been defeated and humiliated by Becket's honor—a nod to the fate of the Nazis at the conclusion of the war. In the end, the French Resistance persisted and was able to see the downfall of the Vichy government.

## Conclusion

Midcentury cinema such as *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *Ivanhoe*, and *Becket* were prestige pictures that presented a type of historical realism to its audience, built entirely on modern interpretations of Angevin history, consequently popularized in literature and film. The categories of ‘Norman’ and ‘Saxon’ could bend to fit certain ideas about race and nation in the modern period. The fascination with the Norman–Saxon division in the modern period stemmed from Sir Walter Scott’s novel *Ivanhoe*, which told of the historic enmity that existed between these groups. The tension between Normans and Saxons, born from war and economic subjugation, was also imagined as being part of a long history of colonialism that predicted modern British imperialism. Certainly, some medieval chronicles *suggested* these dynamics even though the Norman occupation of England is not entirely analogous to modern imperialism. The Angevin Empire was, indeed, a vast territory that encompassed England, parts of Ireland, and almost all of France. The Normans (though not the Angevins) also conquered Sicily, the southern Italian Peninsula, and Antioch in the Levant. But the Angevin domination looked like something quite familiar; their subjugation of the Saxons reflected the violence of modern imperialism, which destroyed Indigenous cultures, devoured local economies, and dismantled social bonds. Although the transference of one kind of lordship to another in the Middle Ages was simply not the same, that did not make this comparison any less powerful.

The Middle Ages is not just a historical period, but a conceptual space in which artists, writers and filmmakers have projected their own fantasies about the past and their anxieties about the challenges of modernity. The Anglo–American heritage in particular—in stories about Robin Hood, in fantasies about legal equality enshrined in the Magna Carta, in modern histories about Saxon origins that eventually ‘transformed’ into a recognizable English identity—was based on beliefs about racial classifications being natural to the human condition, because imagining a world without such hierarchies seemed impossible. In midcentury cinema, modern race relations, nationalism, and contemporary politics were believed to have been natural outgrowths of very old conflicts that originated in the Angevin period. As such, Angevin history was still relevant, and its cinematic imaginaries influential on modern understandings of the medieval past.

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