

Book Reviews



John Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel: A Nine-Hundred-Year-Old Story Retold*, New York: Random House, 2012.

John Guy's careful examination of Thomas Becket's life questions hagiographical commonplaces about the Archbishop, about Henry the Second, his king, and about their friendship. Becket is described as stubborn and self-righteous: Guy observes that "he assumed that everyone shared his values and had the same ardor in pursuing them" (343). Henry is similarly stubborn: Guy notes, moreover, that he was also "utterly self-assured" and "did what he wanted when he wanted, night or day, rather than pleasing others for the sake of it or working to a plan" (81). Both men are presented as impulsive yet cleverly strategic: Becket's breathtaking betrayal of his fellow clerics at the Council of Clarendon is matched by Henry's sacrilegious oath breaking that undermined his nobles and clergy, and both men's actions suggest their brinkmanship rather than their malice. Both are not only intelligent—having "highly retentive" memories—but also impressively athletic: Thomas is described as "unusually tall," "good-looking," and an "accomplished horseman" who as a boy participated in "martial exercises [that] were integral to Anglo-Norman male bonding"—most notably the "mock tournaments ... held at Smithfield every Sunday in lent" (83, 14,17); Henry is "well above average height" although shorter than Beckett, his "complexion ruddy," and "dressed for much of the time in riding gear, his legs were bruised constantly from kicking his horses" (81). Their common interests and temperaments seem to have enabled a sound manly, chivalric camaraderie.

The historical basis of their legendary friendship, Guy argues, is, however, unconvincing:

Henry “found Becket useful, amusing, and companionable, indulging him and treating him as a favorite, but knowing that such privileges could always be withdrawn”; Thomas, according to Guy, was “n ive and experienced enough to believe it was something unique, even a relationship of near equals, whereas in reality it was a partnership of convenience” (121). This corrective argument is augmented by the author’s skillful collation of documentary evidence gleaned from contemporary authors such as Becket’s friend, John of Salisbury (who notes Becket’s constantly having to “contend ...against the king himself” [345]) and his critic, Peter of Celle (whose dry rejoinder to Becket’s request for his friendship—“what common ground is there between the Abbot of Celle and the chancellor of the English king?”—baldly lays bare Beckett’s real relationship with Henry [173]). Indeed, Guy’s strength lies in his judicious use of such evidence, augmented by concise lessons in English and Norman dynastic politics and history (most skillfully integrated into chapters four, six, seven, and eleven). His typical thoroughness is evident in his examination of the circumstances occasioning Henry’s apocryphal outburst, “Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?” (310): Guy provides three separate documented accounts of it before concluding that “it was undoubtedly ‘for’ him, if not ‘by him, that Thomas was murdered” by Reginald Fitz-Urse, William de Tracy, Richard Brito, and Hugh de Morville (311).

This disciplined use of documentary material often satisfies the reader’s curiosity about what motivated Thomas the Archbishop and Henry the King; however, its inevitable inability to provide satisfying accounts of Thomas and Henry as fully embodied men (rather than contending minds), because of a scarcity of reliable information, is most apparent in the treatment of their desire. Guy more convincingly describes Henry’s limbic-brained sex life as “tainted by bouts of debauchery (83),” but his diffident examination of Thomas’s sexuality seems obfuscatory.

Becket’s body features prominently in his biography as the source of his painful colitis, of his physical pleasure in sports, and of his mortification. When Guy deals with Becket’s sexuality, he acknowledges what John of Salisbury delicately termed Becket’s “indulgence in the rakish pursuits of youth” including “uttering the words of lovers” (127) as well as his mature celibacy; however, what was arguably Becket’s most formative relationship as a young man, that with Richer de l’Aigle, is interpreted as merely homosocial. Characterized as one of “fast friends and fine fellows” (21) by Robert of Cricklade, this relationship was sufficiently intense—with Richter, “the world offered him her sweetness somewhat more freely than before” according to Prior Robert’s illusive account”(22)—to necessitate their separation and result in Becket continuing his education in France. Guy’s training as a historian lead him to argue that had evidence of Becket’s homosexuality been apparent, it would surely have been used by King Edward the Second in his persecution of the clergyman once they began to quarrel. An alternative reading of Becket’s sexuality might find a suitable theoretical framework in James Eli Adams’s research that interprets Walter Pater’s discreet celibacy as “the reclamation of the body from the antagonisms of an orthodox Ascetic morality” (“Pater’s Muscular Aestheticism” in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* 215). Such a reading might meaningfully contrast Becket’s youthful somatic celebration with his later physical mortification, as the result of a process enabled by a gradual surrender of a discreet homoerotic celibacy (that accommodates physical enjoyment) into an ascetic morality whose culmination was his martyrdom. The Archbishop offered up his strategic mind and muscular body to secure the autonomy of the Church from what he thought was royal tyranny. In spite of its diffidence to acknowledge an embodied homosexual Thomas, John Guy’s life of Becket insists that “not just a legend, Thomas Becket was also a man,

however repressed his sexuality, however ambiguous his relationship with Henry” (131). Becket’s mission was embodied intellectual and spiritual service. In the best possible meaning of the phrase, John Guy’s Becket was a crafty muscular Christian.

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