John of Salisbury and Thomas Becket

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Nearly 850 years after his death, Thomas Becket remains one of the most controversial and enigmatic figures in English history. As chancellor to King Henry II, as Archbishop of Canterbury, and ultimately as a martyr and saint, Becket has taken hold of the historical imagination, among scholars and students as well as in the popular consciousness through literature, theatre, and cinema. Much of the problem with making sense of Becket’s career stems from his wild swings of allegiance and behavior. Although Becket had been an apparently dedicated servant of Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury, his transfer to the court of King Henry II occasioned a fundamental change of loyalty from ecclesiastical to secular causes, which in turn was contradicted by his conduct when appointed to the archbishopric following Theobald’s death. A plethora of interpretations, none entirely satisfactory, has been advanced over the centuries to make sense of the twists and turns that characterized Becket’s life and death.

One of the most important contemporary sources for understanding the trajectory of Becket’s career is found in the writings of John of Salisbury, an active and prominent member of Archbishop Theobald’s court from 1148 to 1161 and a partisan of Becket while he was exiled from England during his conflict with Henry II. John’s close association with Becket is documented by the fact that his two major works, the *Policraticus* and the *Metalogicon*, were dedicated to the future martyr, as well as by the proximity in which they worked over a period of many years. John was identified by another of Becket’s advisors, Herbert of Bosham, as among the so-called *eruditi* who served the Archbishop’s cause. John later took a leading role in the push to canonize Becket in the 1170s following the infamous assassination at Canterbury Cathedral, evidence for which is found in both his second letter collection and in his *Vita* of Becket. In sum, John’s writings provide significant evidence for the course of Becket’s life from about the time he became Chancellor in 1155 until (and beyond) his murder in 1170.

Oddly, there has been no sustained scholarly investigation focused on the intertwined careers of Thomas Becket and John of Salisbury. To be sure, John’s works (especially his correspondence and his *Vita* of Becket) are commonly

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employed by historians as a central primary source for the study of Becket. Yet little attention has been paid to the role Becket played in the development of John's literary endeavors. The present chapter aims to remedy this lacuna. Specifically, we concentrate on the question of how John's attitudes toward Becket as a person and as a political figure, reflected in the range of his writings, shaped the broader contours of his thought and activity. Our main hypothesis is that "the Becket problem," as we term it, was decisive at every stage in John's intellectual evolution, as well as formative in his own decisions about how to behave when confronted with serious political choices before, during, and after Becket’s conflict with Henry II. By tracking the role played by the figure of Becket, we hope to illuminate a key feature of John's writings and career.

The general characterization of John's relationship with and opinion of Becket has varied widely. Those who have not made a careful study of the subject tend to assume that they were personal friends or intimates. Scholars who have investigated the nature of the private relationship between John and Becket in great depth have tended to propose more nuanced views. Summarizing the state of the literature about John's "personal attitude toward Becket," Anne Duggan accurately observes that some (such as Beryl Smalley) have "called it ambivalent; others have considered it circumspect; while a hostile critic might question its general integrity." 2 In contrast to the preceding scholarship, we hold that, from at least the mid-1150s, John articulated principled doubts about Becket's character, concerns that did not abate over the course of the latter's career. Even when John, during their mutual exile, chose to serve Becket's cause against Henry, he did so not out of personal loyalty to the Archbishop (from whose household he had voluntarily departed3), but rather out of devotion to the liberty of the Church and the supremacy of Canterbury. However, we also maintain that, once Becket lay slain on the floor of Canterbury Cathedral, John's view of his erstwhile colleague and superior changed dramatically. Whereas Becket's behavior in life was morally and politically problematic for John, he became in death a very useful saint for promoting the ecclesiastical agenda dear to John's heart.

The Early Years

When did John of Salisbury first become acquainted with Thomas Becket? Scholars have sometimes speculated that they may have known one another

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3 See The Later Letters, pp. 23 (Letter 139) and 49 (Letter 150).