



**‘Will No One Rid Me of this Meddlesome Priest?’
Becket and Movie Medievalisms**



Overview:

- 1. *Becket* discussion**
- 2. The Middle Ages (According to the Movies)**
- 3. Umberto Eco and Semiotics**
- 4. 'The Return of the Middle Ages'**



- What is the plot of *Becket*?
- How would you characterise the actors' performances?
- Is there anything notable about the film from a cinematographic and/or artistic standpoint?
- What do you make of the film's take on history? What sources might have informed it?
- What other medieval films are you familiar with?

‘Looking at the Middle Ages in Cinema’

“ ... Despite the encouragement provided by film-literate scholars like Natalie Zemon Davis Stephen Bann and Robert Rosenstone, I must still confess to feeling a **certain embarrassment** when discussing [medieval films] in the presence of fellow professional medievalists.’

David John Williams, ‘Looking at the Middle Ages in the Cinema: An Overview,’ *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 29:1-2 (1999), p. 8.

**‘THE MIDDLE AGES’
(ACCORDING TO THE MOVIES)**

Once again the screen
explodes with rage, passion
and greatness!

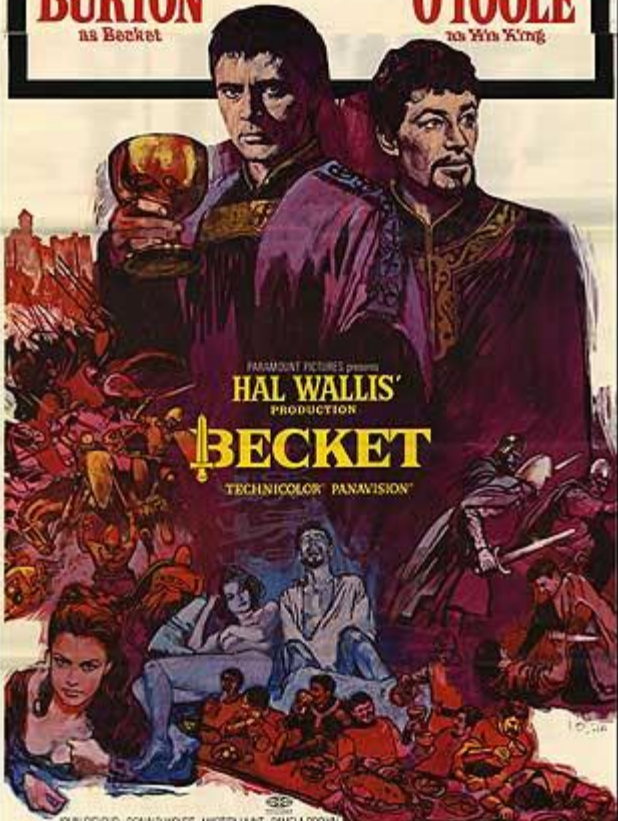
"A LUSTY, BOLDLY PROVOCATIVE FILM"!
LIFE MAGAZINE

**RICHARD
BURTON**
as Becket

**PETER
O'TOOLE**
as King

PARAMOUNT PICTURES presents
HAL WALLIS'
PRODUCTION

BECKET
TECHNICOLOR® PANAVISION®



with JOHN GIELGUD DONALD WOLFE MARTITA HUNT FANGELA BROWN
DIRECTED BY **PETER GLENVILLE** SCREENPLAY BY **EDWARD ANHALT** BASED ON THE
PLAY "BECKET" BY **JEAN ANOUILH** 

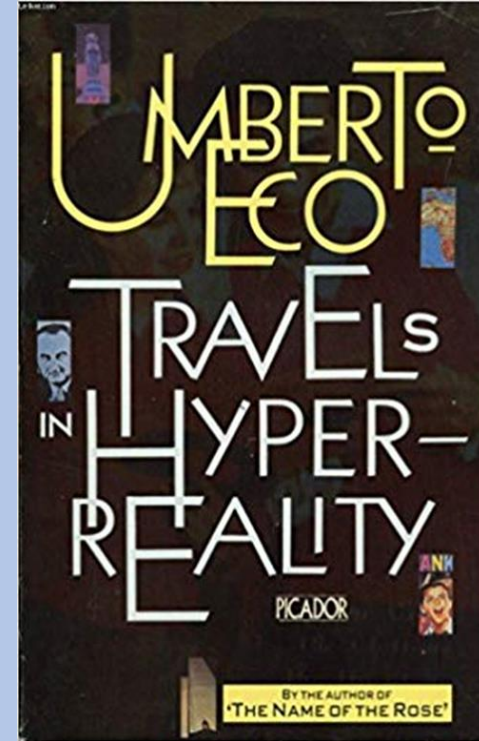
**‘THE MIDDLE AGES’
(ACCORDING TO
BECKET)**



Umberto Eco (1932–2016)

- Medieval historian; postmodern philosopher and theorist; novelist; semiotician

Professor of Semiotics at Milan Polytechnic, then University of Bologna



What is Semiotics?



Science of Signs

SEMIOTICS

Semiotics is the study of signs. It is both the theory & analysis of signs & signifying practices.



Ferdinand de Saussure
(1857-1913)

Saussure was a French linguist that was one of the first to produce a semiotic theory during work in the early 1900's. Saussure stated that a sign is made up of two parts, the SIGNIFIER and the SIGNIFIED.

Charles Sanders Peirce, was an American philosopher that also formulated a semiotic theory around the same time as Saussure, the early 1900's. Peirce stated semiotics to be the relationship between a SYMBOL, ICON and an INDEX.



Charles Sanders Peirce
(1839-1914)

SIGN

A successful, understandable form of communication.

SIGNIFIER

Any motion, gesture, image, sound, pattern, or event that conveys meaning and communicates.



CONNOTATION

The feelings, ideas and cultural meanings which are associated with the word or object. Not the literal meaning.



Rose



SIGNIFIED

The concept that a signifier refers to, the meaning it conveys.

DENOTATION

The literal or primary meaning of a word, in contrast to the feelings or ideas that the word suggests.



ICONS

Signs where the signifier resembles the signified.



SYMBOLS

Signs where the relation between signifier and signified is purely conventional and culturally specific.



INDEXES

Signs where the signifier is caused by the signified.



Filmic Semiotics

- What might all this have to do with film studies?
- How might semiotics play a part in film analysis?

A Semiotics of Medieval Films

- What might all this have to do with medieval films?
- What denotations and connotations might we associate with the phrase 'medieval'?

Medieval (according to OED)

medieval, adj.

1. of or relating to a period of time intervening between (periods designated as) ancient and modern; *spec.* of, relating to, or characteristic of the Middle Ages.

1817 T. D. Fosbroke *Brit. Monachism* (ed. 2) I. Pref. p. vi, The Author... professes to illustrate mediæval customs upon mediæval principles.

1848 Webb *Sketches Continental Ecclesiol.* 22 Open grills were not uncommon in mediaeval times instead of close screens.

1876 Stubbs *Early Plantagenets* Weapons drawn from the storehouse of medieval English history.

1882 S. F. A. Caulfeild & B. C. Saward *Dict. Needlework* 344/1 *Medieval embroidery*, this is a modern Embroidery worked in the same stitches as are used in Church Embroidery, [etc.].

2. *humorous*. Of a person: middle-aged. *Obsolete. rare*.

Medieval (according to OED)

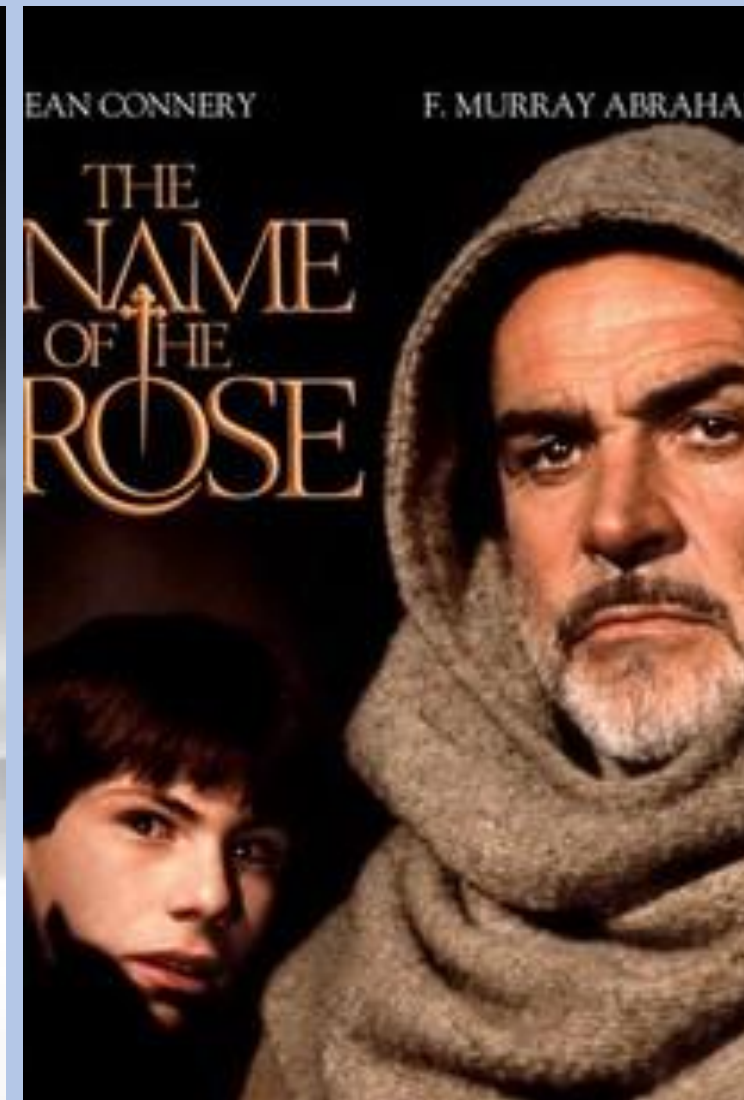
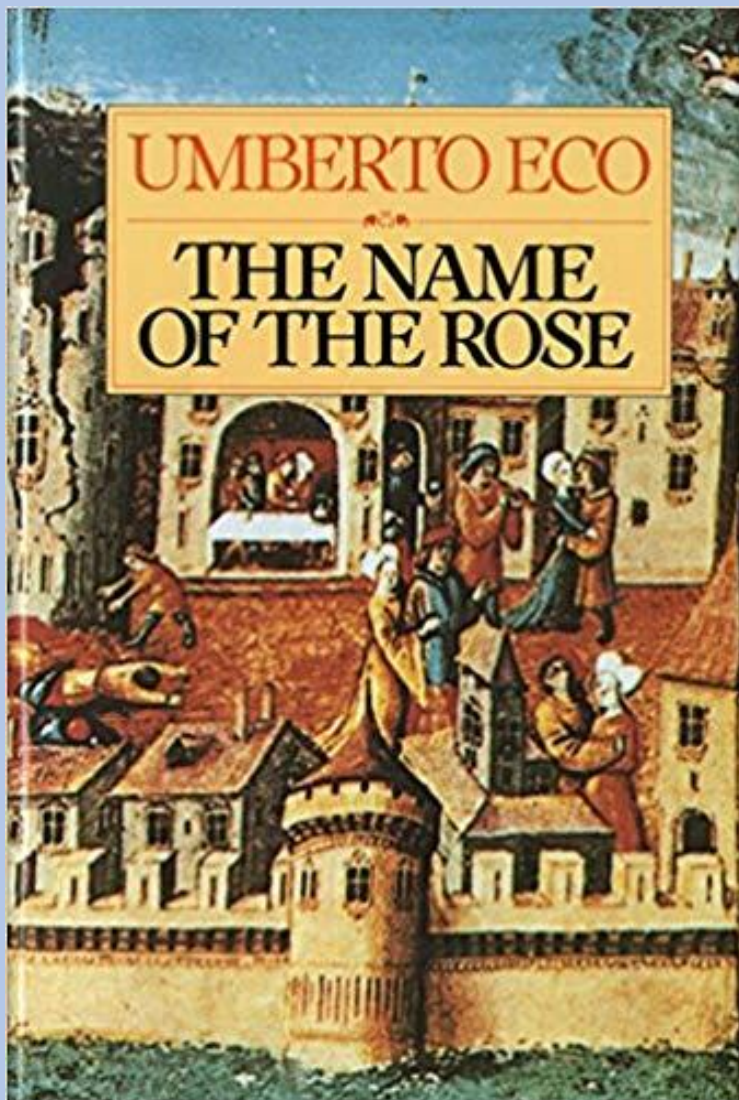
medieval, adj.

3. a. Exhibiting the severity or illiberality ascribed to a former age; cruel, barbarous.

- [1883 *Mem. Vol. Rev. A. M'Lean* 231 A curious mixture of mediæval rigidity and modern spasmodism.]
- 1917 *Church Times* 26 Oct. 335/4 When military officers inflict upon him cruelties almost mediæval, our sympathy goes with him.
- 1979 P. THEROUX *Old Patagonian Express* (1980) vi. 122 The medieval sight of small children binding up bouquets of flowers with bleeding fingers and being shouted at by cruel old men.

b. U.S. to get medieval: to use violence or extreme measures on, to become aggressive.

- 1994 Q. TARANTINO & R. AVARY *Pulp Fiction* 131 I ain't through with you by a damn sight. I'm gonna git Medieval on your ass.
- 1996 *Rolling Stone* 13 July 85/3 And with the metal-on-metal grinding and old-school synth whoops..Faust and O'Rourke really get medieval.
- 2000 *N.Y. Times* 5 May E8/1 The teenage crowd screamed and cheered—but only when Macbeth got medieval on someone.



The Name of the Rose – a medieval detective story
(much like the ‘science’ of semiotics)

Medievalism

(Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms)

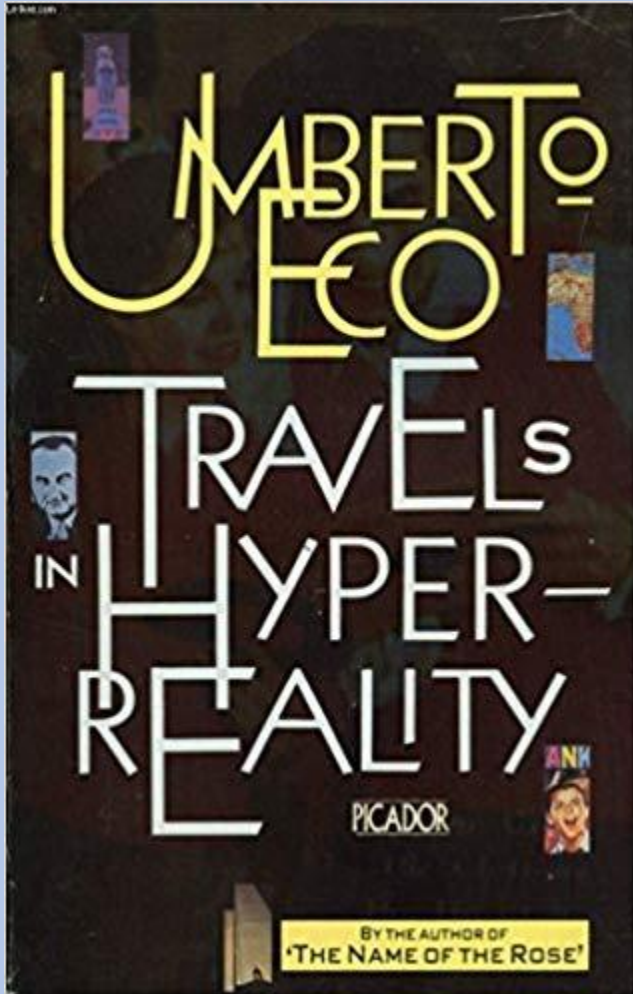
Enthusiasm for or imitation of the arts and customs of Europe during the Middle Ages—that is, from about the 8th century to the 15th. In literature, this may manifest itself in the use of archaisms, in the choice of medieval settings for narrative works, or more broadly in an ideological attachment to values associated with medieval societies (e.g. chivalry, religious faith, social hierarchy).

Medievalism

(Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms)

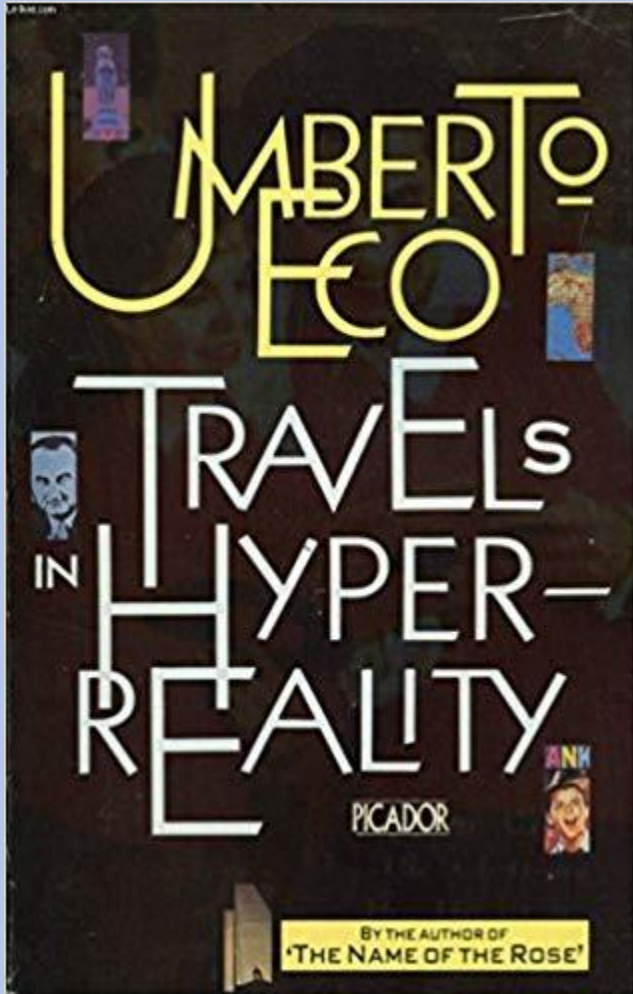
Antiquarian interest in [ballads](#) and other aspects of medieval art grew in the late 18th century, influencing the [Gothic novel](#) and the strongly medievalist nostalgia of [Romanticism](#). Medievalism is a significant current in 19th-century literature from Walter Scott's novel *Ivanhoe* (1819) and Keats's poem 'The Eve of St Agnes' (1820) to the prose and verse [romances](#) of William Morris. Important works of Victorian social criticism, notably Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843) and John Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* (1851–3), contrasted medieval social conditions favourably with those of the modern industrial city.

Umberto Eco, 'The Return of the Middle Ages,' *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1986), pp. 61-85



“.. We are at present witnessing, both in Europe and America, a period of renewed interest in the Middle Ages, with a curious oscillation between fantastic neomedievalism and responsible philological examination”

Umberto Eco, 'The Return of the Middle Ages,' *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1986), pp. 61-85



WHAT IS NEOMEDIEVALISM?

Neomedievalism

Meaning 1:

Political Theory

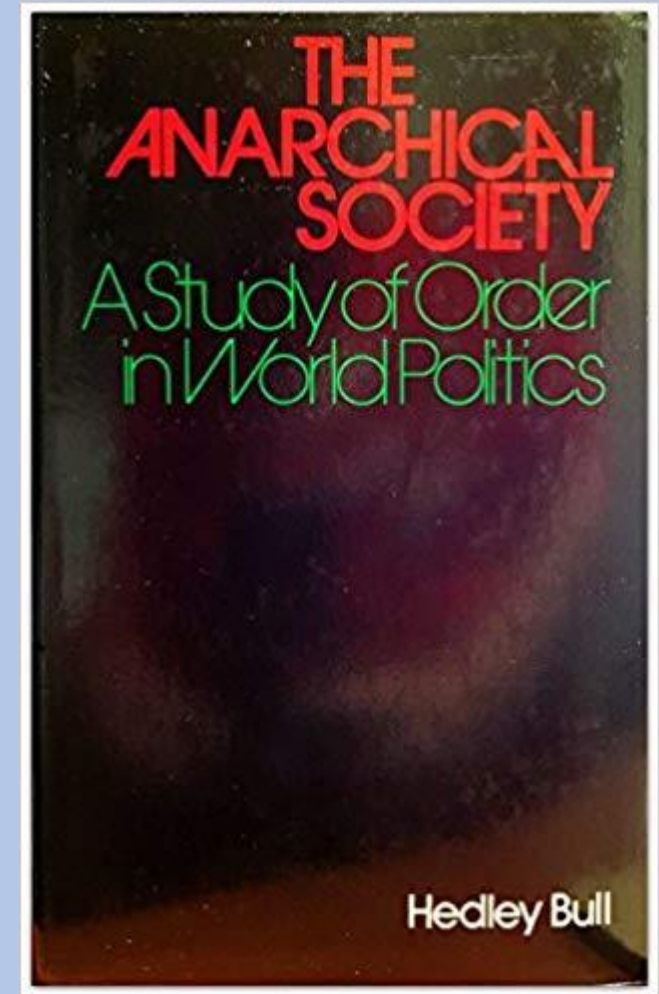
The belief that Late Capitalism of the post-WWII era has led to a reversion to a socioeconomic and geopolitical situation characteristic of the Middle Ages.

Neomedievalism

Diminishing power of individual nation states:

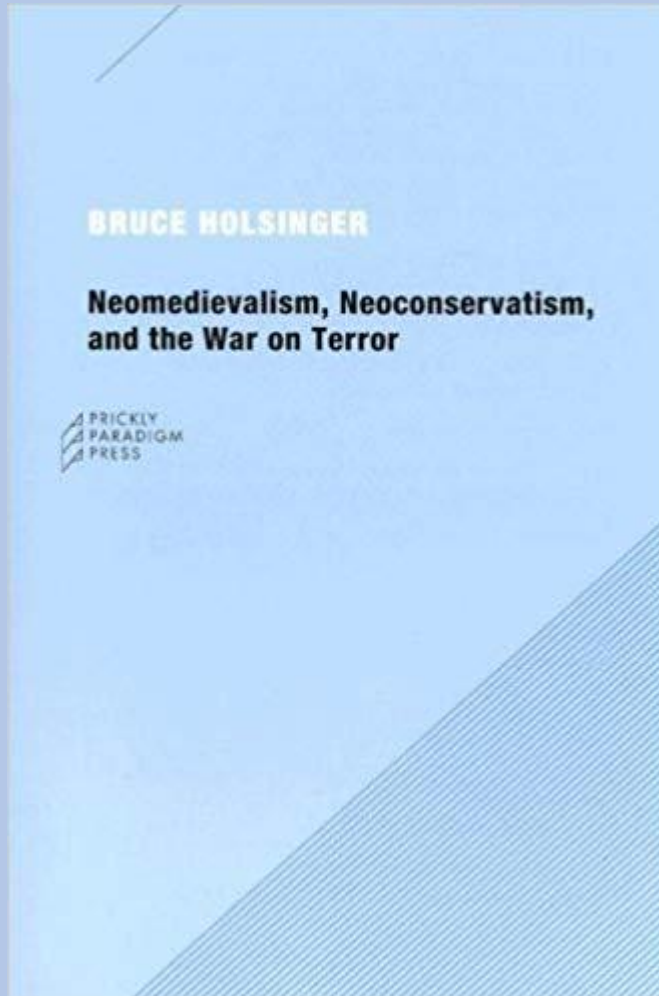
“It is conceivable that sovereign states might disappear and be replaced ... by a ... secular equivalent of the kind of universal political organisation that existed in Western Christendom in the Middle Ages. In that system, no ruler or state was sovereign in the sense of being supreme over a given territory and a given segment of the Christian population; each had to share authority with vassals beneath, and with the Pope and (in Germany and Italy) the Holy Roman Emperor above. The universal political order of Western Christendom represents an alternative to the system of states which does not yet embody universal government.”

- Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (1977)



Neomedievalism

Links to late C20/early C21 neoconservatism:



Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror

BRUCE HOLSINGER

President Bush was roundly criticized for likening America's antiterrorism measures to a "crusade" in 2001. Far from just a gaffe, however, such medievalism has become a dominant paradigm for comprehending the identity and motivations of America's perceived enemy in the war on terror. Yet as Bruce Holsinger argues here, this cloying post-9/11 rhetoric has served to obscure the more intricate ideological machinations of *neomedievalism*, the global idiom of the non-state actor: non-governmental organizations, transnational corporate militias, and terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda.

Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror addresses the role of neomedievalism in contemporary politics. While international-relations theorists promote neomedievalism as a model for understanding emergent modes of global sovereignty, neoconservatives exploit its conceptual slipperiness for their own tactical ends. Holsinger concludes with a careful parsing of the Bush administration's torture memos, which enlist neomedievalism's model of feudal sovereignty on behalf of the abrogation of human rights.

Bruce Holsinger is professor of English and music at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture* and *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory*, the latter published by the University of Chicago Press.

Neomedievalism

‘Neomedieval’ society divided where the superrich (‘the 1%’) lord over the rest of society (‘the 99%’) as per the Middle Ages:

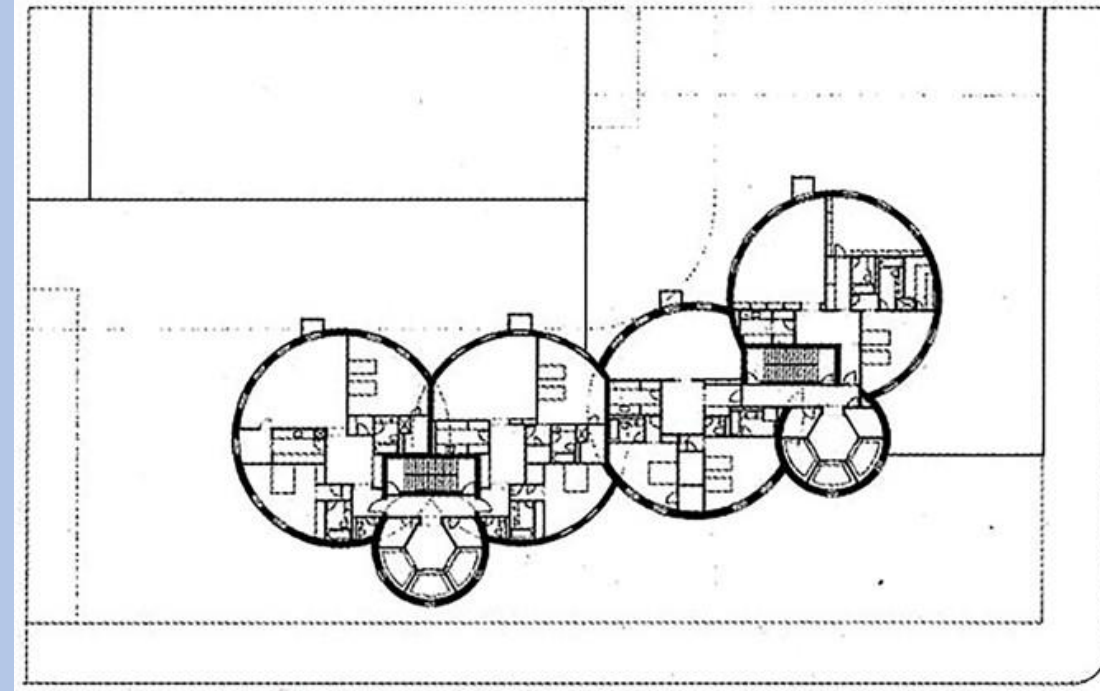
“Not to mention such postmodern Manhattan new castles as the Citicorp Center and Trump Tower, curious instances of a **new feudalism**, with their courts open to peasants and the well-protected high-level apartments reserved for their lords.”

- **Umberto Eco, ‘The Return of the Middle Ages,’ *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1986), p. 62**

Trump Castle, Madison Avenue

Born: 1983. Died: 1984.

“Lunacy.” That was real-estate brokers’ contemporaneous description of Trump’s intended follow-up to his flagship Trump Tower, on Fifth Avenue in New York: a 60-story luxury residential complex, designed by the renowned if erratic Philip Johnson to mimic a medieval castle. The project included six cylindrical towers with crenellated tops, spires, and gold-leaf adornment, plus, at street level, a drawbridge and a moat. Announced in 1983 for a site on Madison Avenue between 59th and 60th Streets, it was to be called—inevitably—Trump Castle. Prudential Insurance had bought the land, on which sat an eight-story building, in 1981. The company then brought Trump into the project and gave him a 49 percent stake for free because, as a Prudential executive later explained, “his name had magic in it.” While Johnson’s castle design was, as architecture, a world away from Trump Tower’s black-glass slickness, Trump was enthusiastic. As “a source close to the developer”—probably Trump himself—told *New York* magazine, “After Donald did Trump Tower, there’s not a lot left for him to do in this business, so he just wants to do something great.”



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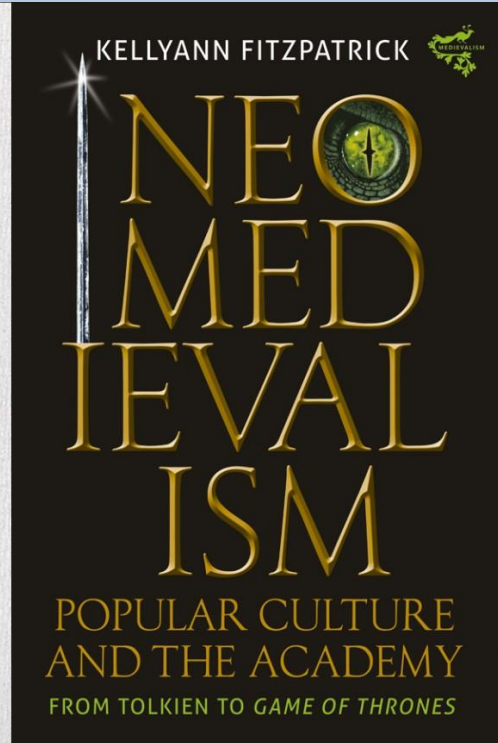
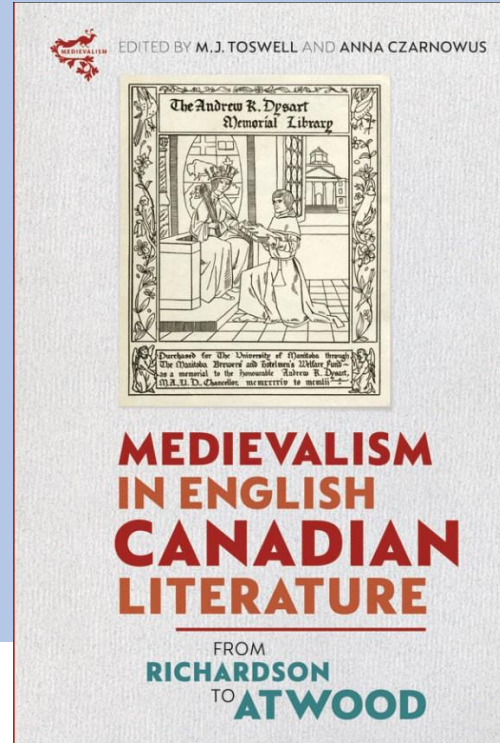
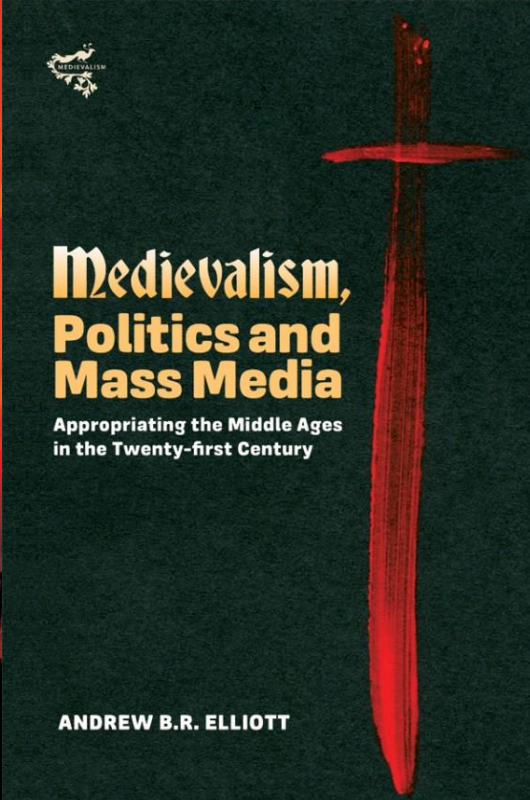
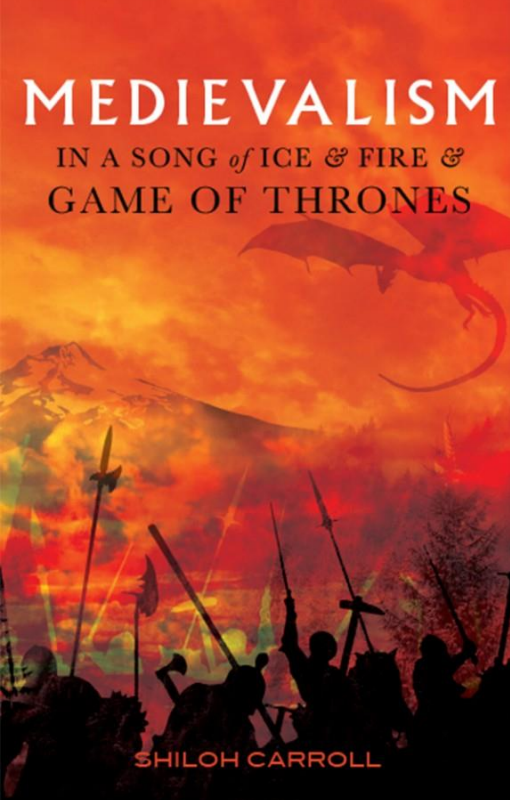
Neomedievalism

Meaning 2:

Literary and cultural theory:

A revival of interest in tropes associated with the Middle Ages in literature and popular culture. Often medieval imagery acts as an evocative backdrop for a fantasy narrative (or conversely characters and events from the Middle Ages are transplanted to a modern or future setting).





BOYDELL & BREWER



Medievalism aims to provide a forum for monographs and collections devoted to the burgeoning and highly dynamic multi-disciplinary field of medievalism studies: that is, work investigating the influence and appearance of "the medieval" in the society and culture of later ages. Titles within the series will investigate the post-medieval construction and manifestations of the Middle Ages - attitudes towards, and uses and meanings of, "the medieval" - in all fields of culture, from politics and international relations, literature, history, architecture, and ceremonial ritual to film and the visual arts. It welcomes a wide range of topics, from historiographical subjects to revivalism, with the emphasis always firmly on what the idea of 'the medieval' has variously meant and continues to mean; it is founded on the belief that scholars interested in the middle ages can and should communicate their research both beyond and within the academic community of medievalists, and on the continuing relevance and presence of 'the medieval' in the contemporary world.

How are the two linked?

Meaning 1:

Political Theory

The belief that Late Capitalism of the post-WWII era has led to a reversion to a socioeconomic and geopolitical situation characteristic of the Middle Ages.

Meaning 2:

Literary and cultural theory:

A revival of interest in tropes associated with the Middle Ages in literature and popular culture. Often medieval imagery acts as an evocative backdrop for a fantasy narrative (or conversely characters and events from the Middle Ages are transplanted to a modern or future setting)

Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991 [essay version first published 1984])

- postmodernism = more than an aesthetic trend in art, architecture and literature
- = inextricable from the post-World War Two, 'post-industrial' global economic order.
- = the cultural logic of late capitalism

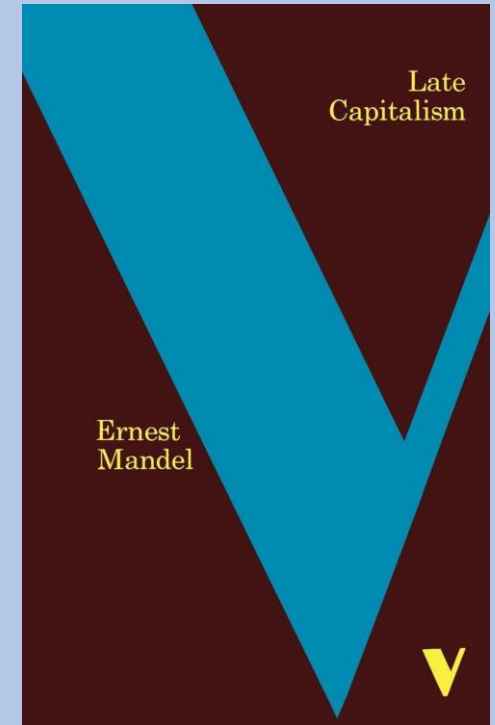


Late Capitalism

belief held by social/cultural/economic theorists (generally of a Marxist persuasion) that capitalism entered

Ernest Mandel (1923–1995)'s *Late Capitalism* (1972) theorised three major transitions in capitalism since the Early-Modern period:

- *Freely Competitive Capitalism*, c. 1700–1850, characterised largely by industrial capital in domestic markets
- *Monopoly Capitalism*, c. 1850–1945, linked to colonial exploitation of overseas territories
- *Late Capitalism*, c. 1945 onwards, new phase of capitalism characterised by multinational corporations, globalised (or transnational) markets and labour, mass consumption, free flows of capital across national borders.



What is Postmodernism (anyway)?

‘POSTMODERNISM’

- What (if anything) is your understanding of the term ‘postmodernism’?
 - Is it a term you are familiar with?
- In what contexts have you seen/heard the term used?
 - What is ‘**hyperreality**’ and how might it relate to postmodernism?

JEAN BAUDRILLARD



SIMULACRA
AND
SIMULATION



“The **hyperreal** manages to efface [any] contradiction between the real and the imaginary.

“ ... Hyperrealism ... functions **entirely within the realm of simulation.**

“ ...In fact, we must interpret hyperrealism inversely: today, *reality itself is hyperrealistic*. The secret of surrealism was that the most banal reality could become surreal, but only at privileged moments, which still derived from art and the imaginary. **Now the whole of everyday political, social, historical, economic reality is incorporated into the simulative dimension of hyperrealism; we already live out the ‘aesthetic’ hallucination of reality.**”

JEAN BAUDRILLARD



SIMULACRA
AND
SIMULATION

UMBERTO ECO
FAITH IN FAKES



ESSAYS

Jean Baudrillard, 'Hyperreal and Imaginary,' *Selected Writings*, [originally published in French 1981], pp. 171–172. From *Simulacra and Simulations* (University of Michigan: Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1994 [French 1981]), translated by Sheila Faria Glaser.

Simulacrum (OED)

1. A material image, made as a representation of some deity, person, or thing.
2. a. Something having merely the form or appearance of a certain thing, without possessing its substance or proper qualities.
b. A mere image, a specious imitation or likeness, of something.

Additional connotations explored by Baudrillard:

- A copy of an original which *exceeds* and *surpasses* the qualities and potentialities of the original
- A copy of an original – but an original which may be lost or which may never have existed in the first place

Jameson sees postmodernism as constituting a fundamental reorientation of how space and time are perceived and experienced in the age of neoliberal, global capitalism. He suggests there has been:

- **A flattening out of distinctions between different geographical locations** (“Our now postmodern bodies are bereft of spatial coordinates and practically – let alone theoretically – incapable of distantiation” Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 48–49)
- **A flattening out of distinctions between different historical epochs** (“A waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 21).



Semiotics:

Assumption that there is no inherent relationship between signs and the objects (i.e. things or events) to which they refer, or that they share an automatic likenesses with their objects.



But how new is neomedievalism?

But how new is neomedievalism?

“The Middle Ages have never been reconstructed from scratch: we have always mended or patched them up, as something we still live.

“ ... Modern ages have revisited the Middle Ages from the moment when, according to historical handbooks, they came to an end ... immediately after the official ending of the Middle Ages, Europe was ravaged by a pervasive medieval nostalgia. In Italy, the great poets of the Renaissance returned to the themes of the Knights saga ... In Spain, Cervantes told the story of a man unable to reconcile the intrusion of reality with his love for medieval literature. Shakespeare borrowed and reshaped a lot from medieval narrative.”

- Eco, 'Return of the Middle Ages,' pp. 65–68



But how new is neomedievalism?

“The Middle Ages are the civilization of vision, where the cathedral is the great book in stone, and is indeed the advertisement, the TV screen, the mystic comic strip that must narrate and explain everything, the nations of the earth, the arts and crafts, the days of the year, the seasons of sowing and reaping, the mysteries of the faith, the episodes of sacred and profane history, and the lives of the saints (great models of behaviour, as superstars and pop singers are today, an elite without political power but with great charismatic power).”

- Eco, ‘Return of the Middle Ages,’ pp. 81–82

Erwin
Panofsky (art
historian),
'Style and
Medium in
the Motion
Pictures'
(1934)

It might be said that a film, called into being by a cooperative effort in which all contributions have the same degree of permanence, is **the nearest modern equivalent of a medieval cathedral**; the role of the producer corresponding, more or less, to that of the bishop or archbishop; that of the director to that of the architect in chief; that of the scenario writers to that of the scholastic advisers establishing the iconographical program; and that of the actors, cameramen, cutters, sound men, makeup men and the divers technicians to that of those whose work provided the physical entity of the finished product.

Erwin
Panofsky,
'Style and
Medium in the
Motion
Pictures'
(1934)

For the public of around 1910 it was no less difficult to understand the meaning of the speechless action in a moving picture, and the producers employed means of clarification **similar to those we find in medieval art**. One of these were printed titles or letters, striking equivalents of the medieval tituli and scrolls

St. Thomas Becket Window (detail), made in 1919 from fragments of 13th-century glass, Canterbury Cathedral.

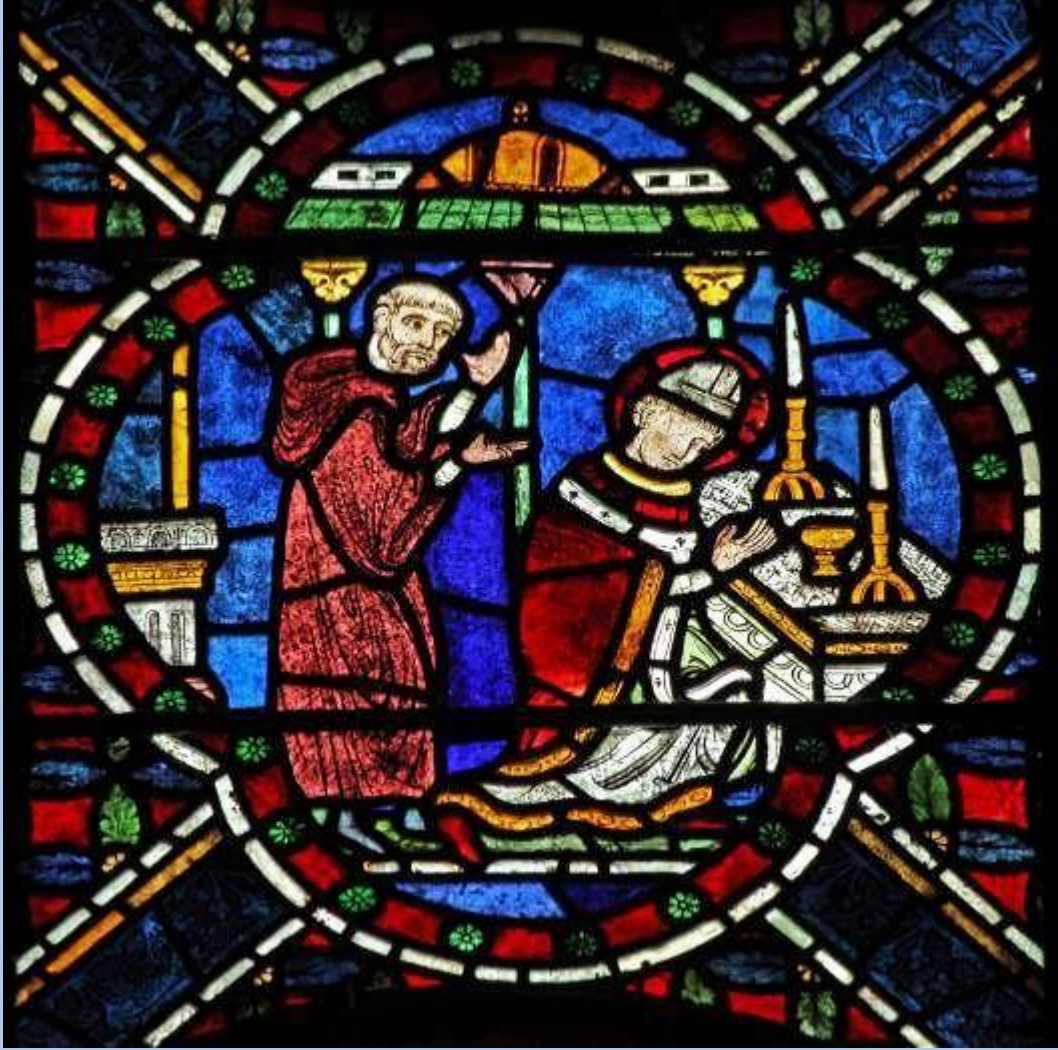




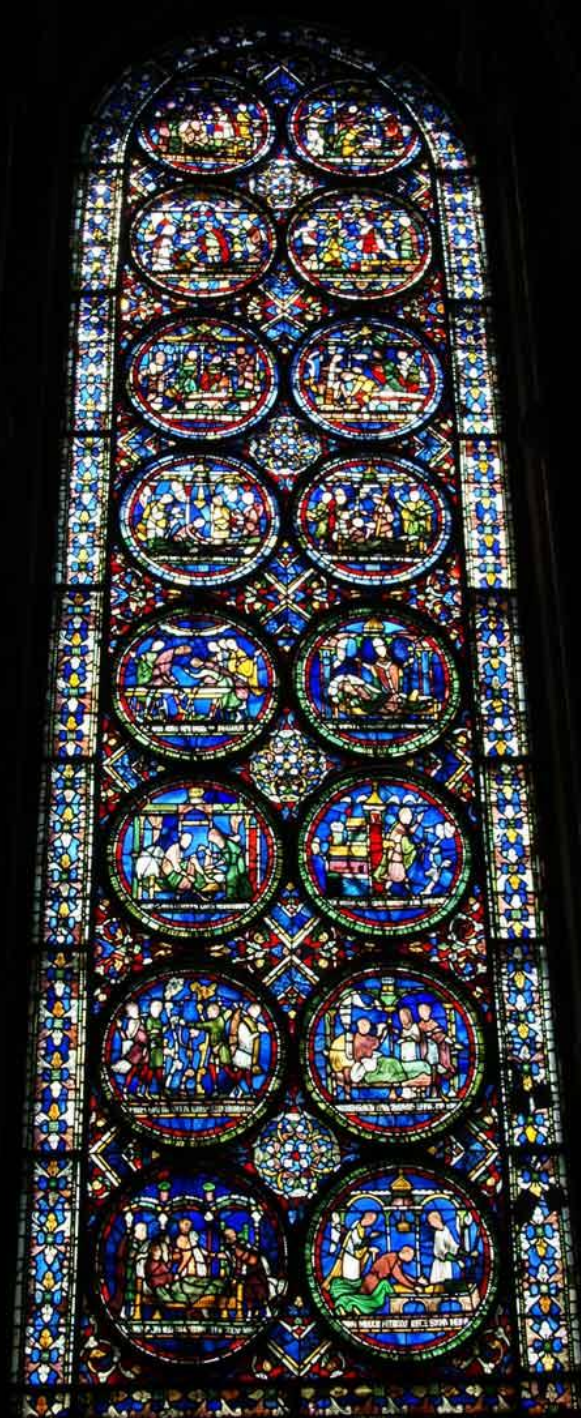
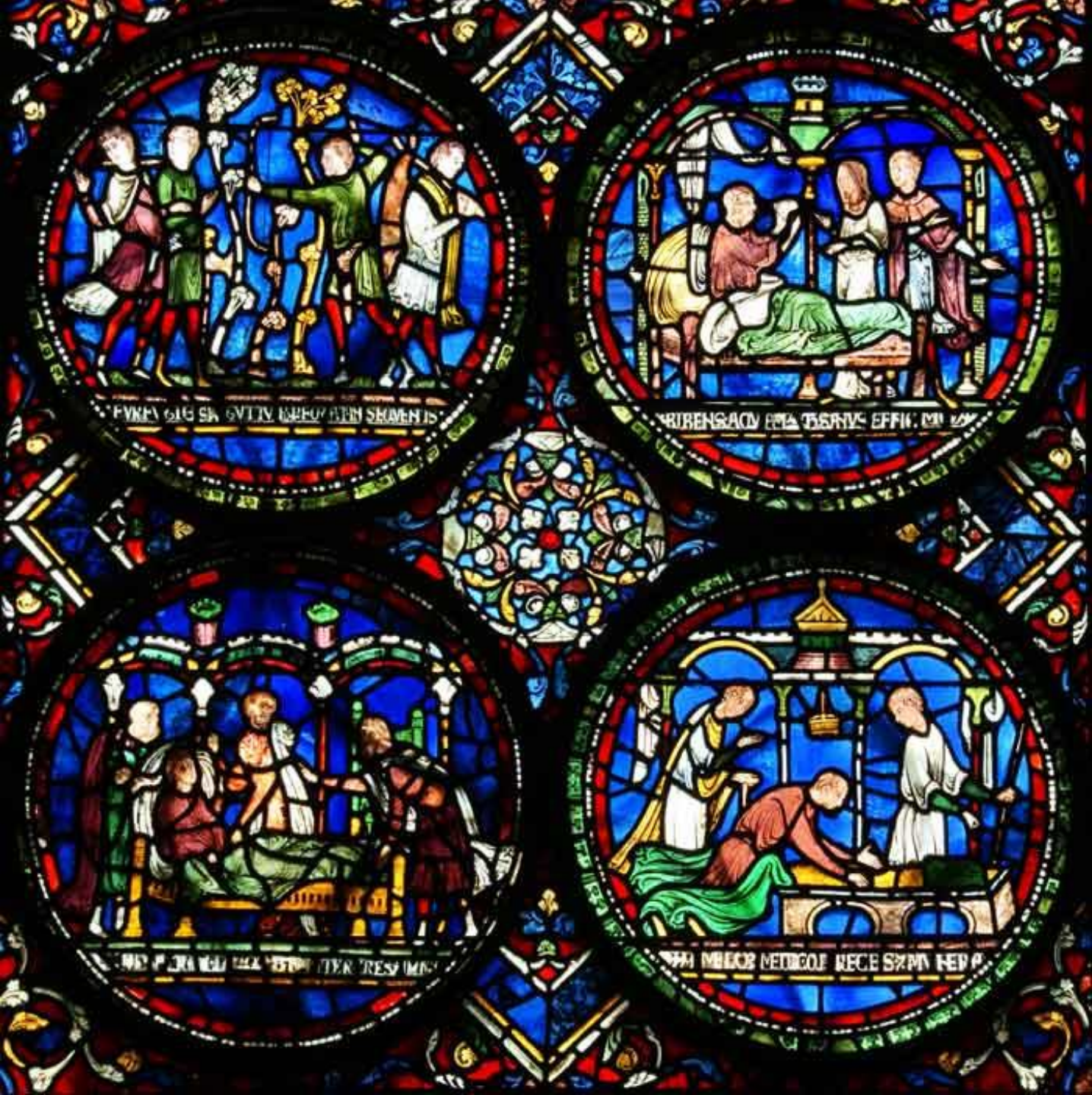
The martyrdom of St Thomas Becket appears in a fourteenth-century stained glass interpretation, which is known as the Becket Window, in Christ Church, Oxford

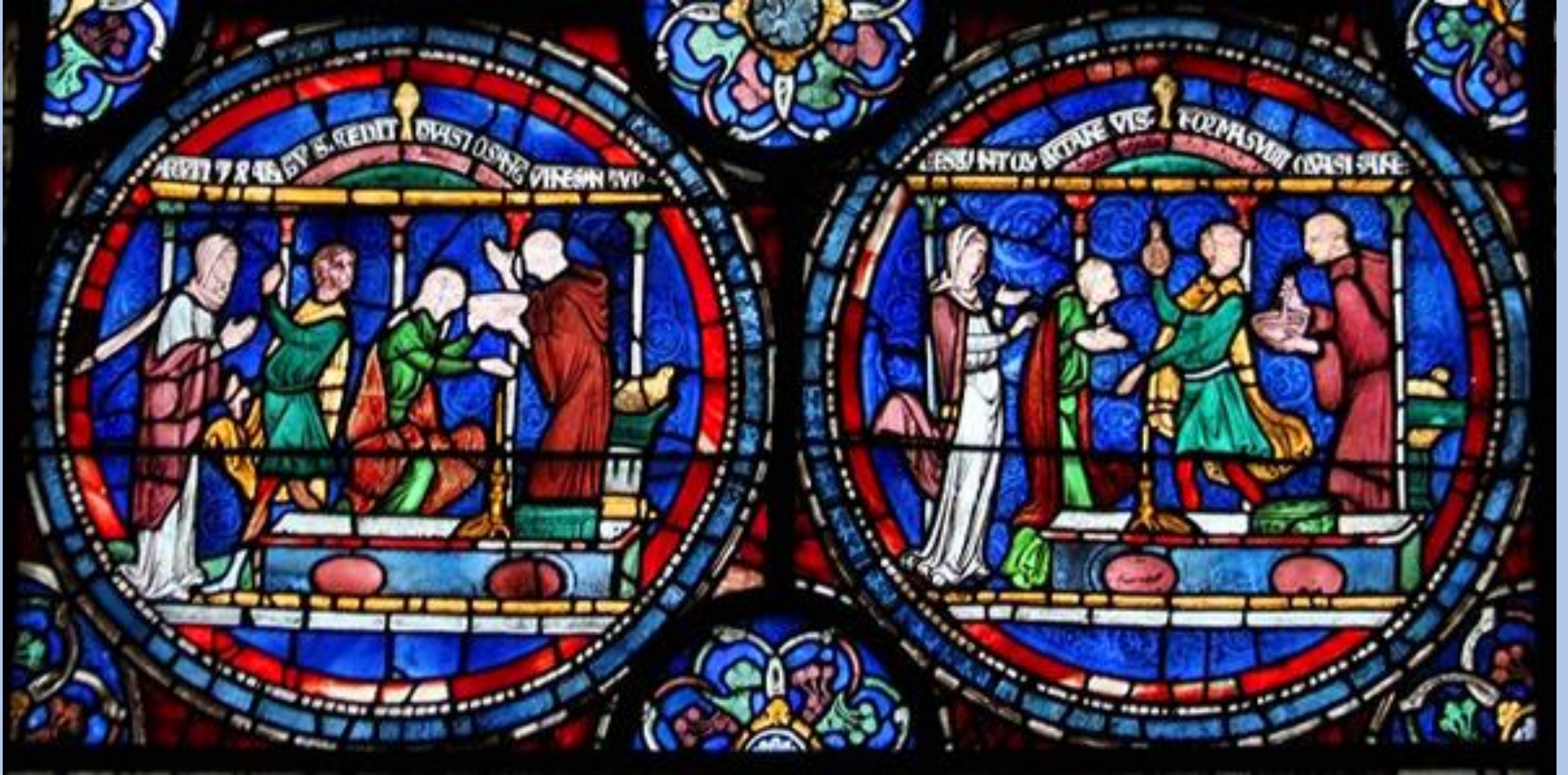
Martyrdom of Thomas Becket by Alan of Tewkesbury, c. 1174–1176



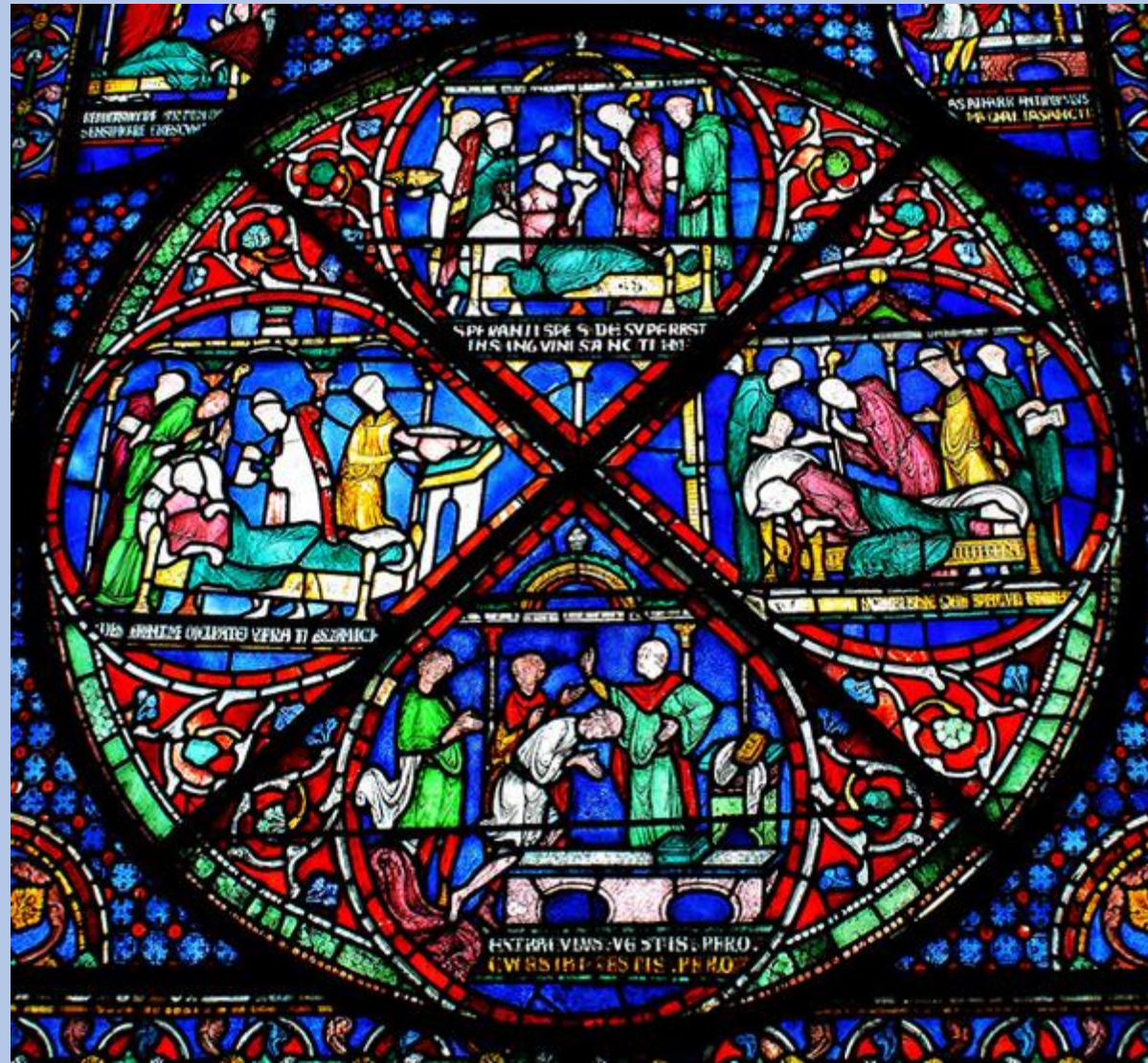


St. Thomas Becket Window, Becket at altar (detail),
Trinity Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral





Ethelreda, north ambulatory window (detail), Trinity Chapel,
Canterbury Cathedral





T.S.ELIOT

MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL



\$1.95 A HARVEST/HBJ BOOK

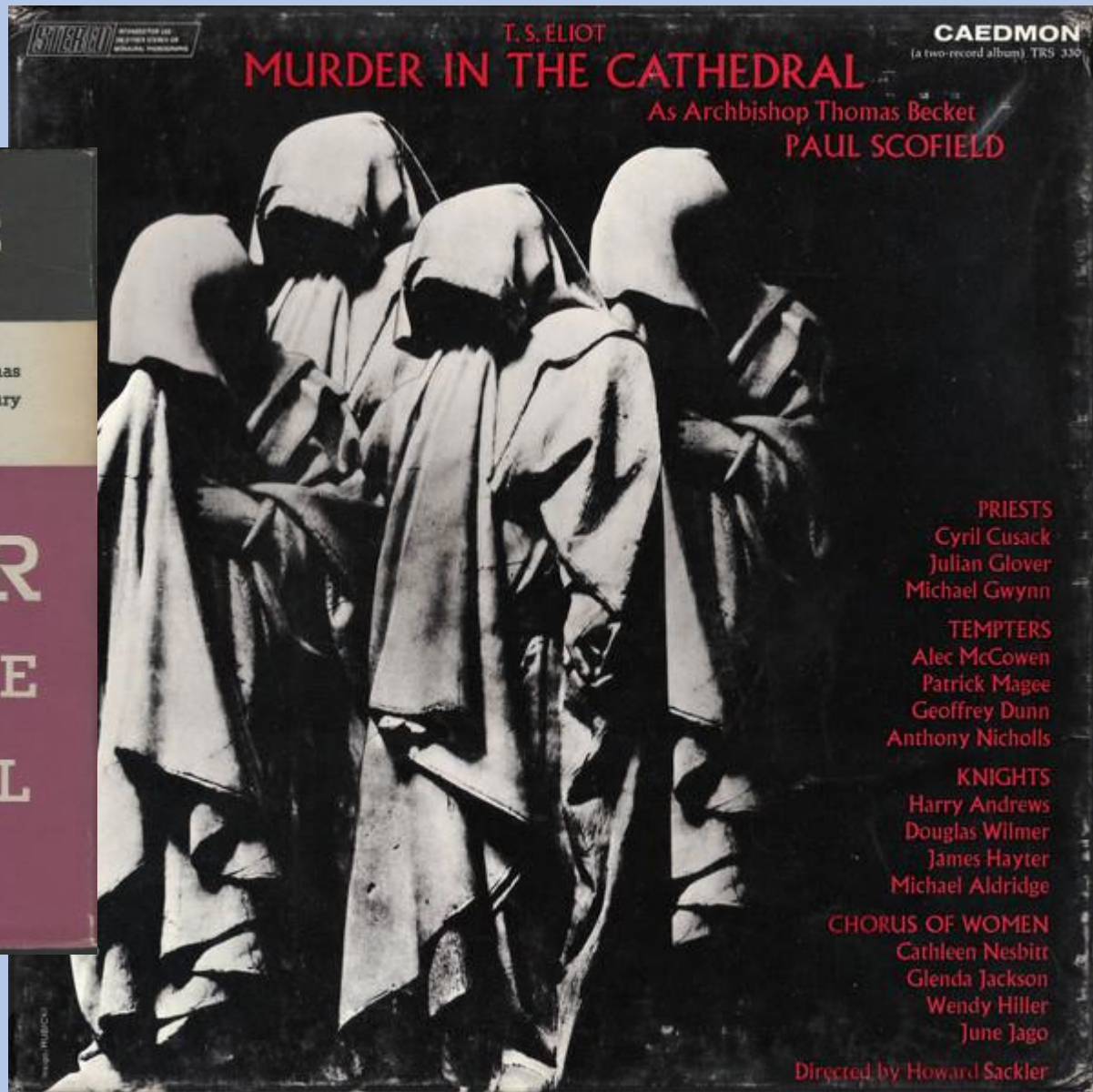
T.S. Eliot

A dramatization of the murder of Thomas
Becket at Canterbury

MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL

T.S. ELIOT
MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL
As Archbishop Thomas Becket
PAUL SCOFIELD

CAEDMON
(a two-record album) TRS 330



PRIESTS
Cyril Cusack
Julian Glover
Michael Gwynn

TEMPTERS
Alec McCowen
Patrick Magee
Geoffrey Dunn
Anthony Nicholls

KNIGHTS
Harry Andrews
Douglas Wilmer
James Hayter
Michael Aldridge

CHORUS OF WOMEN
Cathleen Nesbitt
Glenda Jackson
Wendy Hiller
June Jago

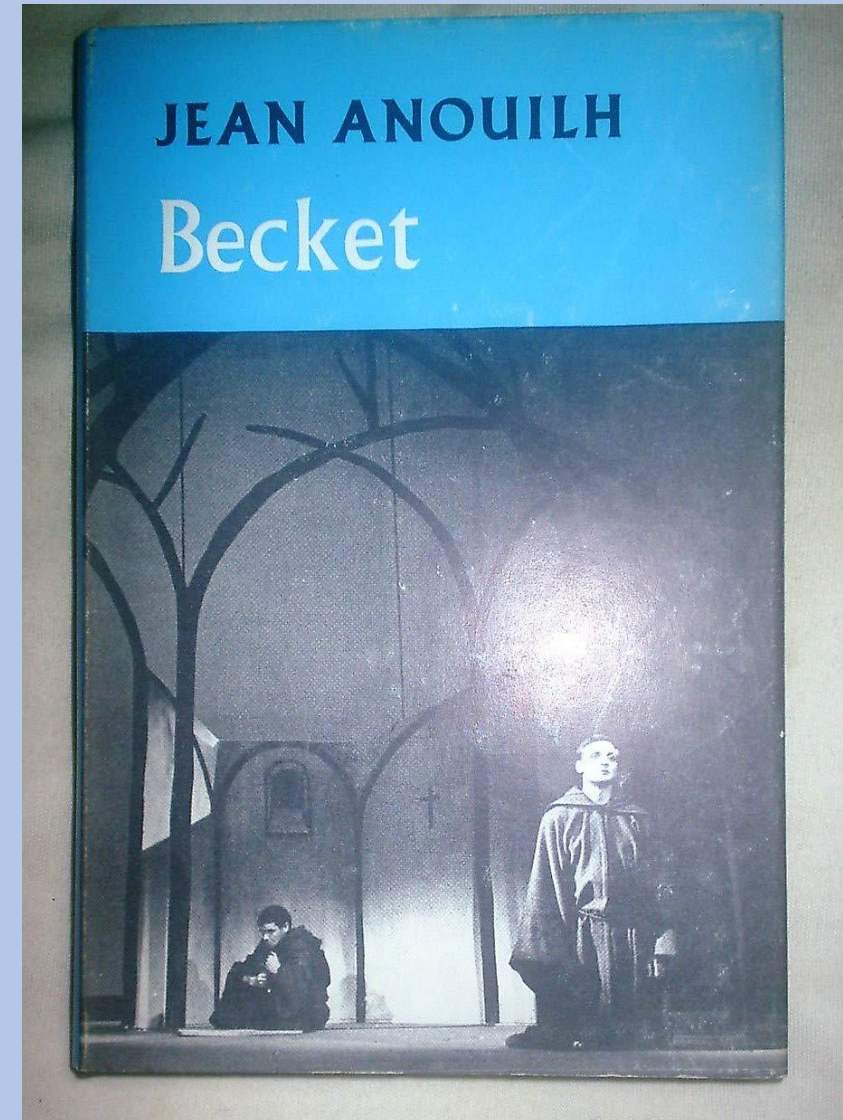
Directed by Howard Sackler



Jean Anouilh
(1910–1987)

***Becket* as Resistance parable**

Becket or The Honour of God
(*Becket ou l'honneur de Dieu*, 1959)





Marc Bloch
(1886–1944)

Volume 2 - Social Classes and Political Organization

FEUDAL SOCIETY



MARC BLOCH

The ANNALES SCHOOL

An Intellectual History

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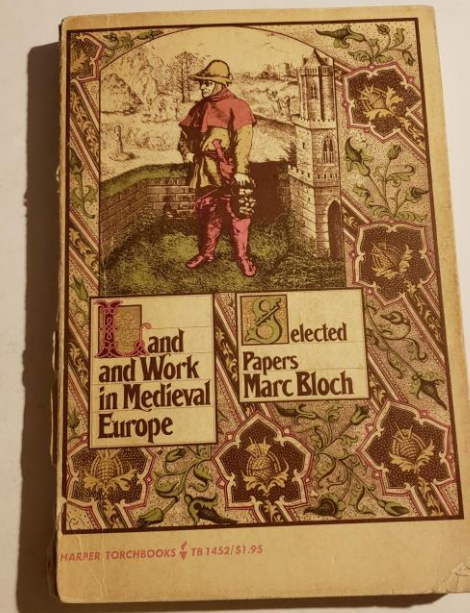
Translated from the French by
JANE MARIE TODD

Foreword by
TIMOTHY TACKETT

Marc Bloch The historian's craft



with a preface by Peter Burke



THE ROYAL TOUCH

Monarchy and Miracles
in France and England

Marc
Bloch

