



Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

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Module code: HPMS7006 Module title: Thomas Becket	Student ID number: 2113119	Educational support needs: No
Module tutor: Janet Burton Assignment due date: 17 March 2023		
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Thomas Becket Imagery Commentary
Sarah Wolek, HPMS 7006 Spring 2023

The 1170 murder and martyrdom of Thomas Becket was so impactful to England that his memory and influence endured for centuries. This is evidenced by an image from a mid-fifteenth century book of hours depicting Becket's murder at the altar of Canterbury Cathedral (see Figure 1 in the Appendix). The book is dated to circa 1455 and is believed to have been made in Bruges.¹ I selected this work, catalogued as MS 35 (Book of Hours, use of Salisbury) at Chicago's Newberry Library in the United States, because it quite literally illustrates the perseverance of Becket through the ages to have found its way so far from Canterbury.² The importance of Thomas as a religious figure is evident by the fact that his is one of only 27 full page depictions of Saints and Biblical events selected for inclusion in the book.³

The image depicts a tonsured Thomas kneeling at an altar. He is dressed in a vibrant blue and gold robe, hands in prayer, with his head illuminated by a gold halo to designate that he is a Saint. His posture is penitent and stationary, and he gazes upwards with a serene look on his face. By contrast, three knights behind him are in a state of motion as though they have just burst through the open door which can be seen in the background. The knight positioned behind Thomas is shown with his right arm drawn back, sword in hand, one knee slightly bent and his feet positioned as though he is still in motion or otherwise shifting his weight in order to

¹ Chicago, Newberry Library, MS 35 (Book of Hours, use of Salisbury), folio 23v-24r.

² A book of hours was intended to guide the reader through prescribed prayers and reflections throughout the day as well as providing a calendar of holy days and feasts to be observed. They would have been expensive to produce and only owned by those rich enough to afford one and literate enough to read it. MS 35 is about the size of a person's hand, so it would have been easy to travel with and reference per its intended use.

³ Other figures depicted include Christ with angels, John the Baptist, the Virgin Mary, Adam and Eve, Saints George, Christopher, Catherine, Barbara and Margaret, as well as other significant events such as the Last Supper and several scenes from the crucifixion. It is among this elite group of the most significant and widely known individuals and events of Christendom that the murder of Thomas Becket is included.

deliver the fateful blow. All three knights are shown wearing armour under their tunics, and two of them wear metal helmets. Being thus armed suggests that the men arrived with hostile intentions and were not making a peaceful call at the cathedral that day.

It is interesting that only three knights and Thomas are depicted. It is known that four knights and at least one monk were present at the time of the murder. Perhaps the artist felt he did not have space on the page to include all of the figures, though on other folios in the same book, up to 13 individuals are included in a panel the same size as the one with Becket.⁴ It may have been that the artist was unaware of the details given the time which had passed, or more likely, perhaps he felt they were irrelevant. The martyrdom and resulting “cult of St. Thomas” stemmed from his shocking murder by knights in his church, which is what the image shows. Details of how many knights or who else may have been present was likely deemed unnecessary to include.

In searching for contemporary images for comparison, I came across a book review of a collection of Becket images. The reviewer made mention of the fact that the author “rightfully refrained from [including] ... martyrdom pictures in the fifteenth century books of Hours. They are, with few exceptions, quite uninteresting, and the number of them is very great.”⁵ What may seem a harsh criticism seems justified when looking at another fifteenth century book of hours, known as Harley 5312, made in the Netherlands and today held by the British Library in London. The imagery is strikingly similar to MS 35 with three knights, no witnesses, and even

⁴ See MS 35 folio 61v depicting Christ carrying his cross to the crucifixion, with two women following and a crowd of 10 people watching.

⁵ M. R. James, *The Iconography of St. Thomas Becket* (Review of ‘St. Thomas Becket in Art’ by Tancred Borenius), *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 61(352) (1932), p. 47.

the same checked green tile floor (see appendix, Figure 2).⁶ Given this realization, it would indeed seem the details of the murder were not as important as the emotion intended by viewing the murder of an Archbishop by armed knights in his church while praying. Clearly the reader is expected to contemplate the events about to unfold and feel they should emulate the sacrifices made by the faithful for God.

Aside from the features within the image, the decorative borders deserve mention as well. The margin depicts a natural motif of flowers, insects, and what appear to be berries or small fruit. This is a common theme for border decorations in these works, as discussed by art historian Anne Margreet As-Vijvers. As-Visjvers does not discount the possibility that these borders were solely for decorative purposes, but she explains that flowers often had symbolic meaning in the Middle Ages and were thus purposefully selected for inclusion in religious manuscripts.⁷ Indeed, the same border pattern is found throughout MS 35 where a saint and their prayer are included.⁸ Given this pattern, it is very likely that the flowers or fruits chosen had religious significance and go beyond decoration. Colors used in the main image are vibrant, with blue, red, green, pink, and gold all bursting forth from the page. The same colors are used, although more sparingly, in the border but the effect serves to focus the eye on the scene at hand.

⁶ London, British Library, Harley 5312 (Book of Hours), folio 28v.

⁷ Anne M. W. As-Vijvers, 'More than Marginal Meaning? The Interpretation of Ghent-Bruges Border Decoration', *Oud Holland*, 116(1) (2003) pp. 3-33 [pp 12-14].

⁸ For example, within the MS 35 Book of Hours, folio 19v-20r depicts Saint George slaying the dragon and folio 21v-22r shows Saint Christopher helping a traveler cross a river. In each of these images, the border uses the same colors, patterns and vegetation to the one surrounding the Thomas Becket image and prayer. Interestingly, some images of Christ use a slightly different border. In these images, the border uses the same colors but the patterns and plants depicted are of a different style. See folios 7v of Christ with angels, 35v of Christ in the Garden and 99v of Christ on Judgement Day. This further supports that the border design was a conscious decision by the author and not necessarily a boilerplate decorative standard.

One final aspect of the border I found noteworthy is that the image's border itself is bordered by a thin red line, which separates the artwork from the rest of the page, which is left white and untouched. This is repeated in other images of the book as well. Given the expense of parchment, it is at first puzzling that such a large margin would have been left blank and not fully utilized. In considering the dimensions of this border, however, the bottom border is four or five times wider than the border along the top and exterior edges of the image. In addition, there is no white border left near the spine on either folio which serves to connect the two pages into a single picture.

The size of these margins, or lack thereof, begin to suggest their purpose. The intended use of a book of hours was to guide the reader through regular devotional prayers. Likely, the person would have been holding the book open at the bottom of the page. The author likely did not wish to have the image smudged or marred over the years of contact with the reader. The border in Harley 5312 does extend to the edge of the page, likely a necessity given that this book is a miniature, described as only 90mm x 60mm, and the ink along the border is very worn and faded. This supports the theory that the MS 35 artist chose to include blank space to allow for the reader to hold it without causing damage to the artwork.

Where the MS 35 image becomes even more interesting is through the text opposite the image. Folio 24r contains a *memorium* to St. Thomas but it has been defaced with four transverse lines crossing through the entirety of the text as well as the title.⁹ Other references

⁹ The phrase "*memoria a sancto thoma cantuariensis*" (in memory of St. Thomas of Canterbury) is written in red at the top of the page with a single line striking through it.

to Thomas throughout the book have been similarly defaced.¹⁰ Clues to what prompted this event can be found within inscriptions inside the manuscript. Attributed to a former owner, one inscription includes the designation of being written in the “sixt yere of our sayde souuerayne lorde King Henry the Eight”; the sixth regnal year for Henry VIII having been from April 1514 to April 1515.¹¹ The book also contains a variety of names of children born to the family through to 1607, so we know that the book remained in use at least through the Reformation.

It was during this period, in November of 1538, that Henry VIII issued his proclamation which required “images and pictures” of Thomas as well as “prayers in his name...[to be] put out of all books”.¹² While full compliance at the Shrine of St. Thomas at Canterbury and other religious institutions would have been required due to their public view, individual mementos such as pilgrim badges, relics, and personal images could be more easily concealed and preserved; and clearly they were given the volume of material which survives past this period. In books, several examples can be found where only faint lines or glued paper can be found over references to Becket but the content is still discernible.¹³ This is likely the case with MS 35. By striking through the text, the owner could claim compliance with the order but still render it quite accessible and legible. In addition, the image itself looks to be in no way defaced, so the edits seem to have been carried out without much enthusiasm.

¹⁰ The Translation of Thomas on July 7 and his feast day on December 28 have been struck from the calendar (see folios 1-7) and his name is again marked out in other sections of the manuscript text (fol. 48-53, 108-115). Thomas was not the only casualty; there is a section where Pope Clement’s name is also struck through (fol. 87-89). https://i-share-nby.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01CARLI_NBY/i5mcb2/alma998194758805867 [accessed 25 February 2023].

¹¹ C. R. Cheney, ed., *Handbook of Dates for Students of English History* (London: Butler & Tanner Ltd, 1955) p. 24.

¹² Robert E. Scully, ‘The Unmaking of a Saint: Thomas Becket and the English Reformation’ *The Catholic Historical Review*, 86(4) (October 2000) pp. 579-602 (p. 595).

¹³ Scully, ‘Unmaking of a Saint’, p.597

The sheer volume of items depicting Thomas Becket's life and martyrdom which survive some 850 years following his murder are a testament to the importance of the event which has reached far beyond the walls of Canterbury Cathedral. The MS 35 book of hours image was included as a reminder that only God can judge men and that eternal life is only accessible through Him, as message that continues in the church today. The image has outlasted the many hands which held the book in prayer, the wrath of King Henry VIII, and even a journey across the Atlantic to its current residence in Chicago. Thomas has certainly proved to be resilient.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

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Appendix



Figure 1: Chicago, Newberry Library, MS 35 (Book of Hours, use of Salisbury), ca. 1455, Bruges; Martyrdom of Thomas Becket (folio 23v) and Prayer to St Thomas (24r)



Figure 2: London, British Library, Harley 5312 (Book of Hours, use of Sarum), fifteenth century, Netherlands; Martyrdom of Thomas Becket (folio 28v)