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Refutation Essay – Thomas Becket  
Classical Writing Herodotus Wk. 14

Voted the second worst Briton of all time[[1]](#footnote-1), Thomas Becket is one of the most notorious characters in the history of the Church. By defending outdated traditions and grasping for power that did not belong to the church, Becket provoked the anger of the aristocracy in England and was justly condemned. Reading of his inexpedient life and overly praised death is not worthwhile, as shall be here demonstrated.

Becket rose from the position of chancellor to the king to archbishop of Canterbury – a very prominent position. He broke his vows to the church and the king by refusing to submit the authority of the king and the collective voice of the remaining archbishops, and he fled the country in an attempt to frame the king for an unjust excommunication. The king granted him a peaceful return after seven years, and Becket promptly returned the favor by excommunicating several bishops and priests of the church, for trivial offenses. Four loyal knights then executed Becket for his crimes.

Defenders of Becket’s position claim that he never overstepped the bounds of his position as archbishop, but many accounts say otherwise. Opposing many of his peers, Becket contradicted the King’s commands with foolish notions of upholding the traditional distribution of power.

While claiming to uphold God’s laws in his actions, Becket was only solidifying an erroneous system of power distribution. The church had been allocated far too much power; power that interfered with the politics of the day and gave the church and its members power that had nothing to do with them. Though he thought he upheld the morals of the church, the right thing to do would have been to redistribute that power and use some of the authority he had been given to more properly organize the political system. Instead, Becket used his power to apply discipline to those who were not even members of his church, thereby overreaching the bounds of proper church discipline. In addition, Becket repaid the King’s kindness in letting him return to his position as Archbishop by promptly excommunicating prominent and innocent figures in the church who had sided with the king. For all his talk of love and piety, Becket fell prey to the deadly sin of vengeance, forgetting the very statement of the Lord he’d sworn to: “Vengeance is mine declareth the Lord.”

The inconsistency of the tale that defenders of Becket weave is amusing. The blend of moral steadfastness and pious martyrdom don’t quite fit the facts. As just mentioned, Becket’s claims to morality were tainted with a greed for power, but not only that: the story of his martyrdom is twisted. While adamant hagiographers insist that Becket faced an angry set of merciless knights, the four loyal men of the king originally intended to take Becket outside before carrying out their orders. Only when Becket refused to budge even further into the church did the knights, though perhaps cruelly, execute him.

Even if Becket’s actions were fueled by good intentions, hagiographical accounts of his life and martyrdom twist the facts. Reading about good men is a worthwhile activity, but reading a lie is never acceptable.

If all of this is true, these accounts of Becket are not worth reading, and time should not be wasted in reading or writing these hagiographies.

1. BBC News: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\_news/4663280.stm [↑](#footnote-ref-1)