

A Life of Thomas Becket in Verse

La Vie de saint Thomas Becket
by Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence

Composed in the immediate aftermath of Becket's murder in 1170, and based, in part, on oral testimony gathered at Canterbury and from Becket's sister, Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence's 6180-line narrative poem is the earliest Life of Becket to appear in the French vernacular. Its account of Becket's life and martyrdom, though heavily biased in favour of its saintly protagonist and the cause he embraced, is informative as well as vigorously polemical. It offers a viewpoint different from that of contemporary Latin historians in that it was written to be listened to by lay men and women. It was also recited at the saint's tomb at Canterbury, and provides therefore a picture of events that would have reached a contemporary French-speaking public avid for first-hand knowledge of their new heroic martyr.

Mediaeval Sources in Translation

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by Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence

Translated with an introduction and notes by
IAN SHORT



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Preface

In 1066, William the Conqueror, known to contemporaries as William the Bastard, brought to Britain, in the words of Gervase of Canterbury, “not only a whole new way of life, but also a new way of speaking.” This imported language is what we refer to today as Anglo-Norman or Insular French. It was the idiolect of a powerful Francophone elite, a language of colonialization that was a spoken vernacular as well as a written vehicle of literature, learning and record. Historiography holds pride of place in the literary production of twelfth-century Insular culture, but while its Latin authors, who include Orderic Vitalis, William of Malmesbury, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Henry of Huntingdon, are well known, its French-speaking historians are less so. They include Geoffrey Gaimar, whose *Estoire des Engleis* (1136–37) provides a national narrative from England’s mythical Trojan origins down to the start of the twelfth century; Wace, a Norman by birth but an Anglo-Norman by adoption, who between 1155 and 1175 composed histories of Britain (*Brut*) and of the dukes of Normandy (*Rou*); and Jordan Fantosme, author of a contemporary chronicle of the 1174 revolt against Henry II. Some add to this already impressive list a history of the Third Crusade, *Estoire de la guerre sainte*, by Ambroise (1190s), and Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s *Histoire des ducs de Normandie*. Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence, though of Continental origin, can also be considered an honorary Anglo-Norman historian, not only by virtue of the subject of his poem, but also because it survives today exclusively in Anglo-Norman copies. Treading the fine and shifting line between historiography and hagiography, Guernes offers us a unique insight into contemporary attitudes to one of the twelfth century’s most dramatic political events.

In preparing, over many years, my translation of his poem, I have been fortunate in having John Gillingham as a colleague, and it is a pleasure for me to thank him here for his careful and expert reading of the first draft of

this book. The Pontifical Institute's readers' reports also made a significant contribution to improving it. Any persistent errors and other shortcomings are, naturally, to be placed squarely at my door, and mine alone.

IAN SHORT
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