The Customary of the Shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral

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INTRODUCTION

THE DETAILS OF Thomas Becket’s life and of the first fifty years or so of his cult are so well-known that they hardly bear retelling.¹ For the fifteenth-century monks who acted as custodians of his shrine there was a handy mnemonic for the most significant events of his path to sainthood—the Seven Wonderful Tuesdays—which they duly copied into the instructions written for their successors in the role.² According to this, Thomas Becket was born on Tuesday, December 21, 1120, the feast day of St. Thomas the Apostle, at a house on London’s Cheapside. Passing over his chancellorship (1155–1162) and institution as archbishop of Canterbury in 1162, the next Wonderful Tuesday took place at the Council of Northampton in 1164, when Becket was condemned by the king and barons; and it was a Tuesday when, following this, he went into exile. During his exile in France, at the abbey of Pontigny, it was on a Tuesday when he received a heavenly vision informing him that he would suffer martyrdom for the Church. He returned to England on a Tuesday in 1170, landing at Sandwich on December 1, and less than a month later he was murdered in the north transept of Canterbury Cathedral on Tuesday, December 29. Finally, fifty years later, on Tuesday, July 7, 1220 he was translated from his original resting-place in the crypt to a glorious golden shrine in the chapel now known as the Trinity Chapel.³

For the next three centuries the shrine was to be the epicentre of the most important and resorted-to cult in England, with pilgrims regularly travelling to it from all over Europe.⁴ It was also the focal point of the monastic liturgy of the cathedral priory of Christ Church, one of the largest Benedictine houses in Christendom. Balancing these two functions was a delicate and difficult task.⁵ We are extremely fortunate in that in 1428 the monastic custodians of the shrine felt it necessary to record for their successors the precise manner in which they and their predecessors in the role had found it best to achieve this balancing act. The document they produced, now British Library,

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