

Julie Carol Yates

Ervinton High School

A.P. English

October 31, 2000

### The Murder of Thomas á Becket

"Who will rid me of this turbulent priest" (Blanche 2). These are the famous words purportedly stated by King Henry II that triggered a gruesome chain of events concerning the murder of Thomas á Becket in 1170. The murder of Becket is shrouded in mystery, philosophy, and the critical analysis as to whether or not the committed act was correct in its purpose and given explanations. Richard Brito, the loyal Fourth Knight of King Henry II, has a very unusual yet persuasive, sound, and logical argument that holds the martyred Becket accountable for his own death (Eliot 83).

The background of Thomas á Becket was very controversial and demanding concerning his position in the Church and his unpredictable and fiery relationship with Henry II. Becket began his life in the Church as the Archdeacon of Canterbury, which led to his introduction to the king. The two men took an instant liking to each other. In the back of Henry's mind was the idea of increasing his own power through Becket. After the death of Archbishop Theobald, Becket became the Archbishop of Canterbury within two days time. He insisted upon upholding the best interests of the Church and not Henry II, although his previous behavior was not an indication of his newly found priorities. This difference between the two men resulted in the flight of Becket to France for six years. Becket eventually returned to Canterbury under the false pretenses that the issues between King Henry II and himself were laid to rest. Thomas á Becket's life ended on the altar of Canterbury Cathedral at the hands of four loyal knights claiming allegiance to the crown ("Murder of Thomas Becket").

After Richard Brito and his three companions killed Thomas á Becket, the crowd eagerly waited on them outside for an answer. The first three knights gave their explanations, and then Richard Brito gave a very interesting answer. He asks the crowd, "Who killed the bishop?" and responds with a verdict of "Suicide while of unsound mind" (Eliot 83-84). Richard Brito adamantly claims that Becket was determined to be a martyr and would take no precautionary measures to secure his own life, but Becket

may have had his own moral and spiritual reasons for doing so (Eliot 83-84). Still one must admit that murder of any kind is a terrible, sinful act that carries moral inclinations.

There are many indications present that allow one to think that Thomas á Becket allowed himself to be murdered for fame and glory. The most disturbing aspect of this situation is the dramatic change in the way Becket acted before rising to the post of Archbishop of Canterbury. Thirty years ago, Becket searched all the ways that led to pleasure, advancement, and praise and becoming a servant of God was never his wish (Eliot 44-45). However, Becket states, "All my life they have been coming, these feet. All my life I have waited" (Eliot 69). One begins to think how Becket could even have time to fear, think, or even concern himself with death while participating in immoral acts with King Henry II by his side. However, Becket did claim to have experienced "a tremor of bliss, a wink from heaven, a whisper" (Eliot 70). Nevertheless, these previous actions of Becket make one wonder if his actions were truly sincere.

Before Thomas á Becket's death, the knights encircled him and chanted, "Come down Daniel to the lion's den, come down for the mark of the beast" (Eliot 74). This is precisely what Becket proceeded to do. During this time period, the Church was a sacred, sanctimonious place where individuals could seek refuge in times of distress. The doors of the Church were always considered open and welcome. Instead of Becket attempting to spare his own life, he demanded the other priests to unbar the door, which became an invitation to his enemies inflamed with wrath (Eliot 73). One wonders why Becket could not have left the doors barred and why he was so eager to embrace death.

Another indicator that Thomas á Becket's intentions were not solidly moral can be suggested in the following passage.

The knights initially just grabbed at Thomas, but he pushed them away and actually knocked Fitz Urse to the floor. At this point Fitz Urse, who had been called "a pimp" by Thomas in this shoving match drew his sword and called "strike! strike!" to the others and delivered the first blow. It took three more wounds before Thomas went down, but then Brito delivered an almighty blow, which actually severed the top of the cranium,

spilling the brains of the priest on the floor. The tip of the sword came off with the strength of the impact. (Blanche 3)

After reading the account of Thomas' behavior at his death, one begins to infer that Thomas may not have been so confident or fearless in his death. One also begins to reason that if Thomas knew this was his fate and destiny that he would not have attempted to fight with the knights or result to immoral name-calling.

Throughout history, the details of the murder of Thomas á Becket have remained shadowed by obscurity. The argument by the Fourth Knight that Becket is responsible for his own undoing is a liable possibility that can be reinforced with many facts. No harm will come or no penance will be required for mere speculation on this terrible death because the outcome will not change. One may feel free to have their own opinions since King Henry II will still have paid penance wearing a sackcloth in Canterbury and Thomas á Becket will remain a martyred saint who rules from the grave (“The Murder of Thomas Becket”).

### Works Cited

Blanche, E.P. The Story Behind Thomas á Becket. Kent Resources: Canterbury Cathedral--Thomas á Becket. 29 Oct 2000 <<http://www.digiserve.com/peter/becket.htm>>

Eliot, T.S. Murder in the Cathedral. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1935.

The Murder of Thomas Becket, 1170. Eyewitness--history through the eyes of those who lived it. 28 Oct 2000 <<http://www.ibiscom.com/becket.htm>>