

# Intent and Action in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*

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**Abstract:** Based on T.S. Eliot's verse drama *Murder in the Cathedral*, this work aims at demonstrating whether intent means action. In fact, the answer to the question, "did king Henry II really want Thomas Becket dead?" has been the subject of diverse interpretations. Some advance that Becket was his own cause of death regarding his spiritual pride or desire of martyrdom for false reasons. Others support that the king's four knights were to blame no direct and clear order was given to them by the sovereign to slay the man of God, to mention only these ones. But, in the light of the different interpretations of the king Henry's exclamation, "Will no one rid me of this turbulent prelate?", we strongly believe that the sovereign not only intended to have the Canterbury archbishop murdered, but paved the way for the occurrence of that awful assassination of Becket as the result of their on-going conflicts about the Constitutions of Clarendon (16 articles issues in January 1164 by king Henry II defining Church-State relations in England.) and the coronation of prince Henry as the successor to the English throne. To do this, recourse to Biographical criticism is needed, especially in the common interest it shares with New Historicism in the fact that all literary works are situated in specific historical and biographical contexts from which they are generated.

**Keywords:** intent, action, murder, Becket, king Henry II.

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**Résumé:** Basé sur *Murder in the Cathedral*, pièce de théâtre en vers de T.S. Eliot, ce travail vise à démontrer si l'intention signifie l'action. En fait, la réponse à la question « le roi Henry II voulait-il vraiment la mort de Thomas Becket? » fait l'objet de diverses interprétations. Certains avancent que Becket était sa propre cause de mort en se basant sur son orgueil spirituel ou son désir de martyr pour de fausses raisons. D'autres soutiennent que les quatre chevaliers du roi étaient à blâmer, vu qu'aucun ordre direct et clair ne leur a été donné par le souverain de tuer l'homme de Dieu, pour ne citer que ceux-là. Mais, à la lumière des différentes interprétations de l'exclamation du roi Henry « qui me débarrassera de ce prêtre ennuyeux ? », nous croyons fermement que le souverain avait non seulement l'intention de faire assassiner l'archevêque de Canterbury, mais avait ouvert la voie à ce terrible assassinat de Becket à la suite de leurs conflits en cours au sujet des Constitutions de Clarendon (16 articles publiés en janvier 1164 par le roi Henry II définissant les relations entre l'Église et l'État en Angleterre.) et le couronnement du prince Henry comme successeur au trône d'Angleterre. Pour ce faire, le recours à la critique biographique est nécessaire, notamment dans l'intérêt commun qu'elle partage avec l'approche dite New Historicism en ce que toutes les œuvres littéraires se situent dans des contextes historiques et biographiques spécifiques à partir desquels elles sont générées.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the debate to establish responsibilities as to the murder of Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, little are those who associate king Henry II in that assassination. In fact, other agents are referred to in the process of finding who was to blame. But, the exploration of the king's intention and action in Becket's death deserves a scrutinized attention in order to shed light on his guilt or not. So, from the king's and archbishop's encounter to their enmity, there can be a link between intent and action to various extents, which is the aim of this work.

The topic 'Intent and Action in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*' needs revisiting owing to its ambiguities especially when it comes to discuss the 'guilt' of king Henry II. Many reviews have tried to address the issue though indirectly.

During a colloquium held at the Université de Poitiers in 2003, Martin Aurell presented a communication entitled "Le meurtre de Thomas Becket: Les gestes d'un martyr" during which he declared that in spite of appearances, the dispute the king and the archbishop presents a big complexity. The complexity of King Henry II's intent and action in Becket's murder of in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* is because the king is not a character who speaks and acts in this play. One could say that all that is said and done about him but is derogatory intentions lent to him. There is no justification for his involvement. However, we need critical approaches to understand a literary work, especially for such an historical play as Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. The term 'historical' is used here not in the sense of anteriority, but in the sense of telling a past and real event. As such, Aurell's communication was not meant to answer say whether it was Henry's intent to have Becket murdered or not.

Despite its tentative title, the aim of José Antonio López Sabatel's *The Understanding of the Conflict between Henry II and Thomas Becket in the Political Context of the Legacy of the Reign of King Stephen*. (2022) is but to tie the key features that marked this controversy between Henry II and Thomas Becket to the legacy of the previous reign of King Stephen.

Janet Elizabeth Smith's thesis '*The Thomas Becket: An Emotional Journey*' defended in 2021 traces the flow of emotions through the contemporary letters to establish what participants were thinking, saying and doing at points throughout the crisis between Thomas Becket and Henry II in the mid-twelfth century, but does not incriminate any protagonist.

In his thesis, "*The Lion's Roar: Anger in the Dispute between Henry II and Thomas Becket* (2014), Meghan Woolley purposes to analyse representations of king Henry II's anger in the sources on Becket's life and the place of anger in the dispute, and to assess what that suggests about understandings and uses of anger in twelfth century English politics.

John Guy starts his review *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel* (2012) with "Was Thomas Becket a saint or sinner?", a rhetorical question which numbers the review among the above-mentioned. A clear answer to this question would have directly or indirectly answered the research question of the on-going work. Among other purposes, in "Shame, Masculinity, and the Death of Thomas Becket" (2012), Hugh M. Thomas intends to study the use of threats, confrontations, and acts of limited violence as tactics by the king and his followers in the Becket controversy.

Michael Staunton's "*Thomas Becket and his Biographers: Studies in the History of Medieval Religion*" (2006) and, more importantly "*The Lives of Thomas Becket*" (2001) are of paramount importance in this on-going study since they most likely answer the research question thereof.

Based on the original sources and informed by the most recent scholarship, Frank Barlow's "*Thomas Becket*" (1990), is a biography that reconstructs Thomas's physical environment and entourage at various stages of his career, exploring the nuances and irregularities in the story that have been ignored in other studies. However, like the aforementioned presentation, the purpose in this study was not to answer the research question of the on-going study.

In spite of the large number of related literatures which cannot be enumerated here for the economy of space, the topic of Henry II's 'intent and action' has not yet received the critical attention it deserves in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. From the foregoing, when exploring Eliot's poetic drama, does Henry II's intent mean action? On the basis of limited evidence as a starting point for further investigation, there is a great likelihood that king Henry II intended to eliminate Thomas Becket as the result of their numerous conflicts that boil down to the Constitutions of Clarendon and Coronation of Prince Henry.

To address this issue, recourse to biographical criticism is needed, especially in the common interest it shares with New Historicism in the fact that all literary works are situated in specific historical and biographical contexts from which they are generated. This recourse unfolds through such points as conflicts, the king's exasperation, interpretation of the king's exasperation, and establishing responsibilities.

## 1. Conflicts

In influencing the appointment of his right-hand man, king Henry II intended to reassert the authority of the realm over that of the church. Under his predecessor, King Stephen, the kingdom had lost its authority over that of the church. Prelates had certain privileges which were in contrast with the interests of the sovereign's power.

To have his best friend as the clerical leader would help solve that problem. But, unfortunately, soon after Thomas Becket had been appointed archbishop of England, he resigned the office of chancellor and devoted himself to prayer in an ascetic way in order to be up to his new clerical responsibilities. After his time of prayer drew ended, the new archbishop of Canterbury changed his focus and interests from the kingdom to fully devote himself to the ones of the church, which implied that he was going against the projects of the king for the reasserting of the realm. That brought about a series of conflicts between the two protagonists, each one keen on defending his own interests to the point of ending to the man of God exile for seven years in France and finally to his death. But the scope in which the conflicts took place and evaluated is difficult to be fully understood from a modern standpoint. Staunton (2006, p.97) draws our attention on the subject as follows:

Undergraduate students of the Becket conflict will be familiar with an examination question of this kind: ‘ “The Becket conflict was primarily a clash of personalities”. Discuss.’ The word ‘personalities’ may be replaced by ‘jurisdictions’ or even ‘ideologies’, but the question remains essentially the same: What was the Becket dispute about? A thoughtful answer will usually acknowledge the participation of all these elements in the dispute to varying degrees, and might also discuss the role of Canterbury rights.

Although it is a subject which divides scholars as to their interpretation, the sheriff’s aid is among the first issues in the long-lasting conflicts which opposed them. Barlow (1990, pp.88–89) describes this incident in these terms:

In July 1163, Henry of England proposed in Woodstock, Oxfordshire that sheriff’s aid should be paid not to the sheriffs, but into the royal treasury, in order to levy a sort of Danegeld (which wasn’t being levied as such at that time because of its unpopularity) and at the same time reduce the sheriffs’ profits. Thomas Becket, [...] opposed the expedient, arguing that sheriff’s aid was a free-will offering and declaring that not a penny should be paid from his estates or churchlands.

This was officially considered as their first conflict, but a long series of contradictions was still to come until the exile of the archbishop of Canterbury.

The other contradiction was about the ratification of the Constitutions of Clarendon (16 articles issued in January 1164 by king Henry II defining Church-State relations in England.) which aimed to subdue the religious power to the temporal or political power in suppressing the Church courts, which Becket refused sign. The last major bone of contention was over the coronation of prince Henry as the successor to the English throne. Traditionally, it is the prerogative of the archbishop of Canterbury is the one authorised to conduct the coronation of the English and now the British sovereign. It looked a disrespect to Becket have Prince Henry crowned as the next successor in his absence. Informed of this on his return to England, Becket excommunicated all the bishops who participated in the coronation ceremony. This could but get on the king’s nerves and make him vent his anger on Becket.

It is also important to note that the exile of Thomas Becket did not bring their opposition to an end. Some attempts of reconciliation by the pope and other political and religious representatives brought an illusion of peace between the two protagonists. But, when the holy man returned to England, the conflict having been seemingly resolved, it re-emerged.

This state of on-going conflicts created a lugubrious atmosphere in the Canterbury cathedral to the point that the chorus of women in Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* expressed their preference not to see the archbishop return in regard of the misfortune that was awaiting him in case he came back home. That future death of the holy man would tear their heart apart and leave them in deep sorrows. In Eliot’s verse drama, Becket declares:

Now I fear disturbance of the quiet seasons:

Winter shall come bringing death from the sea, Ruinous spring shall beat at our doors, Root and shoot shall eat our eyes and our ears, Disastrous summer burn up the beds of our streams And the poor shall wait for another decaying October.

Why should the summer bring consolation?

For autumn fires and winter fogs?

What shall we do in the heat of summer?

But wait in barren orchards for another October?

Some malady is coming upon us. We wait, we wait, And the saints and martyrs wait, for those who shall be martyrs and saints. (p.12)

This singing in resignation before the future martyrdom of the archbishop of Canterbury draws our attention on the intensity of the conflicts which opposed the two protagonists and of which the only issue was the physical elimination the Christians' shepherd.

## 2. The king's exasperation

Soon after Becket had come back from his exile, he excommunicated the archbishops who had coronated the young king Henry, the son of the king Henry II who, by having his own descendent crowned king of England during his life-time was assuring the stability of prosperity of the kingdom after he will be gone.

Becket's reaction in excommunicating those prelates was having it right that the king's coronation was official and legal if only it had been done by the Canterbury archbishop he was.

On their side, they reported what they considered as the misdeed of the Canterbury archbishop to King Henry II one night as he was dining in France. The reaction of the king did not delay as he burst into anger and cried out 'will no one rid me of this troublesome prelate?'

Upon his angry reaction, four of his personal knights sailed nightly back to England to execute what they understood as a direct order for the physical elimination the archbishop.

## 3. Interpretation of the king's exasperation

The scrutiny study of that famous sentence of King Henry II when he said 'will no one rid me of this troublesome prelate?', sheds light on his real intention in relation to the murder of Thomas Becket, his ex-best-friend.

As a matter of fact, a great number of literary productions had established responsibilities as to the murder of Becket as a misinterpretation by the knights of the intention of the king. Almost no one had taken the risk to ponder on the real intent and guiltiness of Henry II in that matter.

But, when analyse the interpretations of that sentence which said, 'will no one rid me of this troublesome prelate?' as reported by Lord Lyttelton in his *History of the Life of King Henry the Second*, was originated in 1767. But other translations render it more vividly and accurately in relation to our subject matter which is the expression of the king's intention with regard to the murder of the archbishop. One of them is "What miserable drones and traitors have I nourished and promoted in my realm, who let their lord be treated with such shameful contempt by a lowborn clerk!" by Edward Grim reported by John Guy in *Thomas Becket warrior, priest and rebel* (2012, p.328). Here, Henry is clearly inviting his courtiers to take action against a humanly low-class person who dares treat the king shamefully. By so doing, their absence of reaction as to the king's command will be considered as disloyalty to the crown. It is well-known that no one would permit something to change the king's view of them. They want to be seen as faithful people and not to be put in the same board as Becket, the very traitor to the realm. The sovereign is playing with their emotions in order to have them respond consequently. The king's desire to terminate the life of Becket is openly demonstrated through his order.

Likewise, is the following translation by the chronicler Gervase of Canterbury, reported by Guy (2012, p.328) as follows, "How many cowardly, useless drones have I nourished that not even a single one is willing to avenge me of the wrongs I have suffered!" The interpretation of this sentence unveils an appeal for vengeance against all the wrongs he had been undergoing. In order to have them react, we notice the mention of the expression 'not even a single one' for the king to tease their pride so that not even the whole group will react but be sure that a certain number will. It is also important to note that the king begins his sentence by a direct accusation of cowardice and uselessness so as to make them feel brave and valiant while they will eliminate the archbishop. The last one is Guernes's assertion:

A man who has eaten my bread, who came to my court poor and I have raised him high—now he draws up his heel to kick me in the teeth! He has shamed my kin, shamed my realm. The grief goes to my heart, and no one has avenged me!" (qt. John Guy, 2012, p.328).

With this one, it has become more than obvious that the order is clearly an appeal to revenge. His courtiers had convinced him as for the danger and the threat Becket represented for him, his family and the whole realm. He was considered as a

low born, and the fact that such an insignificant man who had been nourished by king and brought up to higher positions by himself would be the source of unceasing troubles was a disgrace to the majestic family. Therefore, it had become legitimate to the sovereign to openly and purposely express his intention with regard to the termination of the archbishop. Now it was his turn to lean upon them in order to wash the honour and the survival of the kingdom. The enemy was identified, what remained to them was the high duty to execute him. As a consequence, four knights sealed to England in response to the royal command.

Although recorded in variant versions, their intention is the same. All translations above go in the same direction, that is, a clear command to the murder of Becket. As a consequence of that order, four knights who thought that it was their duties as defender of the kingdom to execute that command, secretly set for England and smote the archbishop of Canterbury.

Another description of the scene of the king's anger by Michael Staunton brings further light to the scene which pushed him to lose his self-control and appeal for vengeance. This denudes the sovereign's intention with regard to Becket's murder after the report he received from the three prelates of their excommunication. The king then, losing his temper, became pale with anger, and by the way accused his courtiers of neglecting him whereas he had fed them, loved them and behaved like an attentive father. Upon this, they promised him to do whatever possible to have him be rid of his cares and sorrows. He had simply to give orders and they would react consequently as it is illustrated in *The Lives of Thomas Becket* by Staunton (2001, p.189)

He went away into his room, white with fury, and said that he had brought up evil men and cared for them, he had given his bread uselessly to an evil people, not one of those nearest him took any share in his grieves. All this terrified his people. 'Why', they said, 'does the king distress himself so dreadfully? If he were to see his sons or his wife being buried, and all his lands in flames, burning, he ought not to grieve like this. If he has heard anything he ought to have said what it was. Besides, one ought not believe everything one hears. We are ready to carry out his orders, to assault and batter down cities and castles, to risk our bodies and our souls as well. He is wrong to complain to us, when he will not say what it is.

Henry, in response to his courtiers who were ready to sacrifice their own lives for the sake of the king, his families and the kingdom were now ready to take immediate action as to put that on-going threat out of the realm by Staunton (2001, p.189):

'A man', the king said to them, 'who has eaten my bread, who came to my court poor, and I have raised him high – now he draws up his heel to kick me in the teeth! He has shamed my kin, shamed my realm; the grief goes to my heart, and no one has avenged me!' Then the whole court stirred and murmured; they began to blame themselves severely and to utter fierce threats against the holy archbishop. Several men started to bind themselves together by oath to take swift vengeance of the king's shame.

Becket who was now considered as an evil man and a dangerous enemy of the kingdom whom had been nurtured and received all kinds of rewards to the highest position in political and religious matters had turned to be the worst betrayer of the king and the realm. All this had happened before Henry II's courtiers to the point of feeling forsaken and let aside levelled a specific charge of treason, saying that Thomas had declared war on him in defiance of the peace terms agreed to at Fréteval and with the malicious intent of depriving the younger Henry of his crown. And in a further litany of charges sent to the pope Arnulf of Lisieux condemned Becket as the aggressor, who had damaged the church by not tempering his excess of zeal to suit the times and breached his duty as a good pastor by not first allowing those about to be excommunicated enough time to repent.

#### 4. Establishing responsibilities

Unlike all the defenders of the king Henry II, his intentions as demonstrated above were clearly directing to the murder of Thomas Becket. To do so, the response to the question, who killed Becket, had almost always tended to incriminate the four knights, to the ignorance of the sovereign's responsibility. It is obvious that no one would dare to accuse the sovereign of that awful murder. But, all in all, with profound insight, Henry's responsibility as to Becket's assassination would not have occurred should the king not have loudly shouted his anger, the knights would never have taken any action.

## II. CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, the purpose from the foregoing has been to demonstrate whether the intention of Henry II matched his action, that the murder of Becket, his ex-best friend. Many critics have in fact exonerated the king, asserting that he did not intend to have Becket literally killed, but, on the contrary, he was misunderstood by his knights who thought that the



order was literal. Unlike those assertions, we have clearly put to light with the help of the other translations of his well-known question that the sovereign obviously expressed his real intention, which was to send anyone available and faithful to him to end the archbishop's existence as he had become the subject of king Henry II's disgrace, the enemy of the realm and a danger for the rest of the kingdom.

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