

## Friendship and Betrayal in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*

Armel MBON, Garel NGATSONGO, Sylviède Nephtali MOUTATI-KABOU, Myrlin ILOTO

Université Marien Ngouabi, Brazzaville, Congo.

**\*Corresponding Author:** Armel MBON, Université Marien Ngouabi, Brazzaville, Congo.

**Abstract:** This paper explores the themes of friendship and betrayal as seen in *Murder in the Cathedral*, a verse drama by T.S. Eliot. The paper endeavours to prove that friendship cannot stand as before after betrayal; and very often reconciliation after depression seems to be a risky option. The analysis of the theme under scrutiny is carried out with reference to biographical criticism in the common interest it shares with New Historicism, which serves as an interaction between history and literature. From this assessment, it results that Henry II and Thomas Becket were bosom friends as the king appointed his friend as Lord Chancellor then as the Archbishop of Canterbury so that he could be authoritative in both politics and religion. Out of a clear sky, when Becket came to the archbishopric of Canterbury, he went against the king's projects. As a result, the king was disappointed, angry and shameful because he felt betrayed by his right-hand man. In the long run of time, the contradiction that aroused between the two men caused deterioration in their relationship as shown in the following schema: first, from unreal friendship to real friendship; then, from real friendship to exile; next, from exile to unfriendly friendship; finally, from unfriendly friendship to death. In the last analysis, the study states that when a relationship suffers from treason, subsequent negative emotions such as disappointment, anger and shame often provoke lugubrious consequences in the life of individuals. So, distrust should be avoided so that one may live in peaceful climate.

**Keywords:** friendship, betrayal, trauma, Henry II and Becket, rivalry, death.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

*Murder in the Cathedral* is a verse drama written by T.S. Eliot and published in 1935. The play depicts the assassination of the Archbishop of Canterbury—Thomas Becket—by the soldiers of King Henry II after the former had opposed the monarch's decisions through his refusal to sign the Constitutions of Clarendon (16 articles issued in January 1164 by King Henry II defining Church–State relations in England) in order to protect the independence of the Church. This matches with the words of Hammad (2022, p.1677) when he says:

In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot portrays the murder of the most prominent figure of the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the history of cathedrals. Becket whom Henry II appoints as Lord Chancellor and Archbishop of Canterbury is murdered by the King's knights immediately after Christmas Day.

From Hammad's words, one strongly suspects that Becket and Henry II were two good friends only by the fact that the king had appointed him Lord Chancellor and then Archbishop.

Indeed, this paper mainly endeavours to show that friendship or relationship cannot stand as before after betrayal or violation of trust, and very often reconciliation after depression seems to be a risky option.

Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that, since the publication of *Murder in the Cathedral* until today, numerous scholars have explored it in various ways. Ngouami et al. (2023) demonstrate whether intent means action in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. Hammad (2022) analyses the characters of T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* by casting light on the symbolic value of presenting nameless characters who are full of allegorical values. Das (2022) emphasizes the historical, religious and formalistic aspects in *Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral*. Nkengasong (2019) makes a comparative study of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Soyinka's *Dance of the Forests* by highlighting why rituals become important elements for historical construction in these two works. Naheed (2019) tries to tell the events and incidents which refer to the theme of power, that is spiritual

power and secular one. Finally, his study considers the play as a political one. Kohzadi and Azizmohammadi (2011) attempt to scrutinise *Murder in the Cathedral* by focusing mainly on the traditional image of the turning wheel and the still point.

However, the topic under scrutiny has not received yet the focus of attention that it deserves. Based on these existing masterpieces, the question that this paper seeks to answer is the following: how does friendship result in treason in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*? A supposition could be made that King Henry II had appointed Thomas Becket as Chancellor and then as Archbishop of Canterbury so that he would have a total control over political and religious matters in the kingdom. Once appointed, Becket changed his mind and decided to obey only God's will. The position taken by the latter angered the king and broke any good relationships between them. After the clash, Becket decided to spend some years in exile precisely in France, because he was convinced that his life was in danger. Later on they were reconciled, and Becket returned to England. But unfortunately, the king, in his heart, was still angry with Becket since he considered him as a traitor. Finally, he wanted Becket's assassination.

To reach the objective of this research work, biographical criticism has been resorted to in the common interest it shares with New Historicism. In fact, New Historicism serves as an interplay between history and literature as Ramadan (2019, p.34) put it, "(...) New Historicism foregrounds the way literature and history interact. The New Historicist approach provides a profound scrutiny to the social, historical, cultural and anthropological potentials that underscore power relations and ideology. New Historicism focuses on historical narratives." Therefore, the analysis of this paper is unfolded through the following points: Origin of Henry II and Thomas Becket's friendship and Becket's appointments, factors leading to schism between Henry II and Thomas Becket, and Betrayal's aftermath between Henry and Becket.

## 2. ORIGIN OF HENRY II'S AND THOMAS BECKET'S FRIENDSHIP AND BECKET'S APPOINTMENTS

To begin with, it would be opportune to define the word 'friendship' as it is the backbone of the subject under discussion. In fact, Merriam-Webster's Advanced Learner's English Dictionary (2008) defines friendship as "the state of being friends: the relationship between friends." According to Hayes, friendship is "a voluntary independence of two persons over time involving companionship, intimacy, affection, and mutual assistance intended to facilitate the socioemotional goals of both parties" (King et al., 2016, p.249).

In effect, it is crucial to say that Thomas Becket was a man who devoted most of his life to studying. His early studies were based on secularism and spiritualism. He was secularly formed away from home, and his mother decided to be his spiritual guide. In the 1140's, London was viewed as the centre of a civil upheaval, which boiled over between King Stephen of Blois and Matilda (daughter of Henry I). Over time, Becket was convinced that the Church was a peaceful place in the middle of political instability, and with letters of introduction, he succeeded in finding a place in the Canterbury's Archbishop Staff of that time. Then, attracted by intellectual abilities of the young clerk, Archbishop Theobald sent Becket to deepen his studies in civil and canon law at Bologna and Auxerre. Ten years later, the Archbishop elevated Becket to the post of archdeacon, which is the key legal and administrative position in the diocese of Canterbury.

Moreover, when King Stephen died, Henry succeeded him to the throne. But Theobald was not sure of the capabilities of this youthful foreign king to rule the kingdom. He believed that it was important to establish in the court of the king a skilful administrator who could advise him. Therefore, the conviction of the Archbishop led him to propose the thirty-seven-year-old Thomas Becket for the position of chancellor. The proposal of Theobald was approved by the king; and by January, 1155 the two men—Henry II and Thomas Becket—embarked on the journey of in-depth friendship (Wenger, 1969, pp.3; 5-6). In addition, Teng (2015, pp.6-7) states:

The relationship between Henry and Becket went beyond that of king and chancellor; the two men were also close friends. As such, Henry came to trust Becket. This trust laid the groundwork for Henry's decision to elevate Becket to become Archbishop of Canterbury after the death of Theobald.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to recall that when Becket was appointed as chancellor, he completely changed his cost of life. He, in fact, fell in love with luxury as Wenger (1969, p.7) describes it:

The chancellorship afforded Becket opportunity to cultivate his taste for luxury. Since the king cared little about his appearance, Becket made himself personal representative of the king and set up a magnificent household. His table was set with choice wines and delicate foods; he himself dressed in splendid robes. He wanted his presence to testify to the greatness of the king he served.

Through this description, one can understand that when Becket was still chancellor, he was attracted by worldly glory, which was seen in his arrogance.

Moreover, upon the death of Archbishop Theobald on 18 April 1161, the king decided to elevate his friend to this post after more than a year of vacancy (Wenger, 1969, p.9). Why did Henry II resort to Becket to occupy the position of Archbishop? Wilson (2016, p.171) enlightens the King Henry II's determination to appoint Becket as Archbishop as a "(...) plot to make himself the supreme power in England by consolidating political and ecclesial authority and property under his thumb, which led to Chancellor Becket's becoming also Archbishop of Canterbury (...)"

From the inner motivation of the king, it is understandable that the appointment of his friend to assume archbishop's functions resulted from his personal interests to have totalitarian power in the country in order to manipulate his agents. In the meantime, Becket told the king that this elevation would break them apart as Wenger (1969, p.9) says, "(...) he [Becket] warned Henry this office would force a division between them." But the king remained firm on his plan believing that it would work. From this instant, the two friends were on the slippery slope. From Giles's and D.C.L's explanation (1846, p.50), one comes to this understanding:

The whole course of English history presents us with no similar instance of an attachment between a king and his subject — alas! that it should present us with such an awful instance of the closest friendship turned into deadly hate and that so fatal a result should have flowed from a quarrel of which religion was the cause!

This paved the way to factors leading to schism between Henry II and Thomas Becket.

### 3. FACTORS LEADING TO SCHISM BETWEEN HENRY II AND THOMAS BECKET

Having now the destiny of the Church in his hands, Becket abruptly gave up all earthly posts and entirely devoted himself to the service of God only in order to avoid future conflicts between them. This led him to resign from the chancellorship immediately to everyone's surprise. To cast light on this situation, Das (2022, p.339) declares:

Henry decided to appoint his good friend and right-hand man, Thomas Becket, to the post of archbishop so that he would have an insider in the church. But to everyone's surprise, Becket became a devout Catholic entirely devoted to Rome, which infuriated Henry. Becket refused to compromise on any issue (...)

It was Becket's resignation from chancellorship which gave birth to intense dispute between him and King Henry. This point is considered to be the most important far-reaching cause according to Wenger (1969, pp.9-10), "The resignation was a crucial cause of the quarrel which would erupt between Henry II and Becket within two years."

The chancellorship provided Becket with higher and paramount political privileges, which helped him be an influential administrator, especially when it came to decide on matters in the realm. Hence, Teng (2015, p.41) pinpoints:

As chancellor, Becket occupied one of the highest offices in the realm and had important and judicial responsibilities. Becket sat in the Exchequer, where taxes and feudal dues were collected, as well as the royal courts of justice, where he sat with barons and bishops to decide legal cases in the *curia regis* [the king's court or royal council].

It is for this reason that Becket opposed Henry, in July 1163, when he suggested that sheriff's aid should be paid directly into the royal treasury (Ngouami et al., 2023, p.52). Consequently, Becket's refusal for that demand intensified the controversy between the two men. Wenger (1969, p.11) evidences the issue in these terms:

The first real clash, however, occurred over financial matters; Henry demanded a tax of the "sheriff's aid," money which sheriffs used for their own benefit, and Thomas opposed the king. Apparently, Becket thought he could act in his former role as the king's advisor; but Henry misinterpreted the opposition as the beginning of rebellion.

Apart from that, the king and his friend also quarrelled over the recognition of the "Constitutions of Clarendon" as formal and official in January 1164. The Constitutions were a series of 16 articles which aimed to reduce Church power or privileges (Mohammad and Hasan, 2017, p.2). Furthermore, Teng (2015, pp.7-8) clarifies that:

(...) Henry's proposed legal reforms in the Constitutions of Clarendon were to prohibit the clergy from leaving England to make ecclesiastical appeals to the papal court without royal permission. The most controversial stipulation in the Constitutions, however, was about "criminous clerks." The king wanted to punish these wayward ecclesiastics who, he felt, were not punished harshly enough by the Church. Any cleric who committed a felony, such as murder faced only Church sanctions—banishment from the clergy—and not royal court punishment—death. Becket opposed this proposal, quoting the Bible: "God will not judge twice for the same offense."

In the same direction of ideas, the last issue which aggravated the conflict between Henry and Becket was the coronation of Henry's eldest son, Young Henry the Prince, as the right successor to the English throne. Away from England, the bishops of York, London, and Salisbury crowned the king's son in the absence of the Archbishop. This led Becket to excommunicate all the bishops who took part in that coronation ceremony on his return to England, because that event is a traditional prerogative confined to the Archbishop of Canterbury (Wilson, 2016, p.171).

#### 4. BETRAYAL'S AFTERMATH BETWEEN HENRY AND BECKET

Friendship is proven to be more stable and stronger when it is mainly based on trust. When one betrays the other, the relationship becomes weak and worthless; and the violation of the psychological contract may cause negative feelings leading to diverse disastrous effects between individuals. Indeed, Lee and Selart (2015, p.154) shed light on this fact in the following words:

Feelings aroused from betrayal normally involve a number of negative emotions. First, when we are betrayed, most of us may feel disappointed or upset because the other party failed to meet our expectations. Second, anger is also aroused because of the disappointment due to the unfairness of the act. Third, a person may also encounter shame when betrayed because he or she thinks that his or her trust has been exploited.

With regard to T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, as said above, Henry started feeling betrayed by his close friend since his resignation from the chancellorship after he was elevated to the archbishopric of Canterbury. Consequently, the life of Becket was seriously threatened when he firmly resisted the king's projects to have supreme authority over the Church of England. The direct consequence of that disloyalty was the exile of the Archbishop in France for seven years, because the king felt depressed or upset by the sudden change in the behaviour of his good friend (Naheed, 2019, p.72).

Arriving in France, the Archbishop was well received by Louis VII, the King of France, and was given a secure place during all the years he had spent there, and he seized this opportunity to handle their opposition as Wenger (1969, pp.13-14) attests it:

Louis VII received Becket, granted him security, and made handsome financial provisions for the exiles. Given this peace Becket began to direct the activities that would occupy his time in exile: he set about to justify his argument with King Henry. The prime object of these activities was Pope Alexander [III], likewise an exile in France.

After several attempts at reconciliation, in 1170, the Pope and other personalities, finally succeeded in finding a compromise which helped the two protagonists to be friends again. But, in reality, the reconciliation was not really effective. This is the reason which pushes Ngouami et al. (2023, p.52) to argue:

It is (...) 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.

Anyway, partial signs of peace being somewhat visible, the Archbishop went back home after spending seven years abroad. He was furious on his return because of the making of Prince Henry as the right next successor to the throne of his realm in his absence. As his traditional right was usurped, he decided to severely sanction all the bishops who made this ceremony possible. After the news of excommunication had reached the king's ears, he was extremely vexed and pronounced these words (Das, 2022, p.339), "Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?" The four soldiers of the king understood these infuriating words as an order and nightly sailed to meet the Archbishop in Canterbury.

Once the four knights arrived at Canterbury, they met first the priests with whom they exchanged. They told them that they came for urgent matters on the king's instruction and they had to see the Archbishop in no more time (Eliot, 1935, pp.54-56). When they were still discussing, Becket himself entered and said to the priests:

However certain our expectation  
The moment foreseen may be expected  
When it arrives. It comes when we are  
Engrossed with matters of other urgency.  
On my table you will find  
The papers in order, and the documents signed. (p.56).

After Becket had welcomed the king's men, he ordered the priests to leave the place. Then the four knights took the floor and fiercely intimidated the Archbishop in these words:

You are the Archbishop in revolt against the King; in rebellion to the King and the law of the land;  
You are the Archbishop who was made by the King; whom he set in your place to carry his command.  
You are his servant, his tool, and his jack,  
You wore his favours on your back,  
You had your honours all from his hands; from him you had the power, the seal and the ring.  
This is the man who was the tradesman's son: the back-  
Stairs brat who was born in Cheapside;  
This is the creature that crawled upon the King; swollen with blood and swollen with pride.  
Creeping out of the London dirt,  
Crawling up like a louse on your shirt,  
The man who cheated, swindled, lied; broke his oath and betrayed the King. (pp. 56-57).

However, Becket refused to recognise that he was traitor to the king. He argued that he was literally loyal to his king whatever the circumstances. Therefore, he responded to the knights as follows:

This is not true.  
Both before and after I received the ring  
I have been a loyal vassal to the King.  
Saving my order, I am at his command,  
As his most faithful vassal in the land. (p.57).

Afterwards, in a lengthy discussion, the knights charged the Archbishop with treason and ungratefulness because when he returned to England after the settlement of their conflict, he never thanked the sovereign for the peaceful climate that reigned after the said event. Despite their means of persuasion, Becket never felt guilty and always defended himself. After threatening Becket, they left for a while as to come again for the King's justice (pp. 57-63).

In similar vein, when the knights were coming back to the cathedral, the priests precipitately closed the door to prevent the danger from taking place. But to their surprise, the Archbishop ordered them to open the doors. Once the doors were open, they entered by calling Becket the traitor to the king. Yet, Becket replied to them that he was not traitor to the king; he was a priest. They then asked him to annul the excommunication he made upon the bishops who participated in the coronation ceremony of Prince Henry, to abandon the powers that he usurped, to give back to the king the money he took and to renew the loyalty he broke up. Whatever the proposals they made, Becket simply said that he was ready to die so that the Church of God could be free and at peace. Finally, the rejection of these proposals by Becket led the knights to murder him at once (pp. 66-75).

Based on these arguments, one can declare without hesitation that the death of Thomas Becket is the result of the shock that Henry II endured after being betrayed by his close friend. As a reminder, it is of great importance that one take care of their relationship seriously because the violation of trust may cause unmeasurable damages of any sorts. When something bad happens within a relationship, even reconciliation cannot restore it to the state it was before disappointment. That is the reason why the third tempter told Becket that “Unreal friendship may turn to real / But real friendship, once ended, cannot be mended (p.31).”

These lines can also be explained using the example of a mirror. When a mirror is broken into pieces, one can continue to look at themselves inside. But, in fact, the reflex will no longer be what it used to be in the initial shape of the mirror. In one word, it means that the mirror automatically loses its value. In other words, all this can be summarised by William Blake's words: “It is easier to forgive an Enemy than to forgive a Friend!” (Maclagan and Russell, 1904, p.113).

Furthermore, Lee and Selart (2015, p.153) draw people's attention on the significance of trust in organisations and relationships as to avoid the worst. In doing so, they argue:

Trust is an important issue in organizations since it has been observed to be connected with positive processes and outcomes. Gargiulo and Ertug summarized the benefits of trust in an organization under three broad headings. First, trust can reduce the cost of monitoring and thus the number of safeguards. Second, it can reinforce commitment in a relationship. Third, it can lead to more open communication and to a richer exchange of resources among people.

The relationships between Henry II and Thomas Becket had always been very complex. In his “Letter to All the Clergy of England” (Giles, J.A. and D.C.L., 1846, p.347), Becket himself evokes friendship and enmity for the reasons that go beyond our understanding, for he writes, “better are the blows of a friend than the false kisses of an enemy” in reference to Proverbs 27:6, and perhaps in a pointed reference to his disagreement with the king over church matters. Is this reference his *mea culpa* in this dissension? The avowal or the indictment is not clear. This is all the complexity raised by Aurell (2003).

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper was an endeavour to explore friendship and betrayal as seen in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. The objective has been to show that friendship or relationship cannot stand as before after betrayal or violation of trust, and very often reconciliation after depression seems to be a risky option. In fact, it is a revelation from the study that Henry II and Thomas Becket were bosom-friends as the king appointed him as Lord Chancellor then as the Archbishop of Canterbury to have supreme authority over the Church and avoid possible future conflicts between political and religious powers. Out of a clear sky, when Becket came to the archbishopric of Canterbury, he totally devoted himself to the service of God only. As a result, the king was disappointed, angry and shameful because he felt betrayed by his right-hand man.

In the long run of time, the contradiction between the two men resulted in the exile of Becket in France where he spent seven years until the conflict was solved. After a possible reconciliation, Becket returned to England just to be killed by the king's four soldiers, for the king always wanted to get his revenge. Facts being presented, it is no wonder that Henry and Becket's friendship was very complex if one considers the following schema: first, from unreal friendship to real friendship; then, from real friendship to exile; next, from exile to unfriendly friendship; finally, from unfriendly friendship to death. In the last analysis, the study states that people should care for their relationships seriously.

Simply because it is evidenced that when a relationship suffers from treason, subsequent negative emotions such as disappointment, anger and shame often provoke lugubrious consequences in the life of individuals.

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#### AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY



**Armel MBON**, was born on 9<sup>th</sup> March 1976 in Etoro, a small village in the township of Gamboma, Republic of Congo. He is a lecturer of English Literature, Civilisation, and Stylistics at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, and Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines (Université Marien Ngouabi).



**Garek NGATSONGO**, was born on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1996 in Impfondo, the county town of the Department of Likouala, Republic of Congo. He is a PhD student in British civilisation at the Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines (Université Marien Ngouabi).



**Sylviède Nephtali MOUTATI-KABOU**, was born on 27<sup>th</sup> June 1994 in Pointe-Noire. He is a lecturer at the Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines (Université Marien Ngouabi) where he teaches English Literature and Civilisation, Spanish, Reading-Comprehension, and English for Specific Purposes



**Myrlin ILOTO**, was born on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1994 in Dolisie, the county town of the Department of Niari, Republic of Congo. He is a Master student in English literature at the Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines (Université Marien Ngouabi).

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