

AN INTRODUCTION TO PUNISHMENT, PENANCE,
AND REWARD:
THE CASE OF THOMAS BECKET

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Late afternoon Tuesday, December 29, 1170, four knights and one clerk—Sir Reginald FitzUrse, Sir William de Tracy, Sir Richard le Bret, Sir Hugh de Morville, and Hugh of Horsea, alias Mauclerc—assassinated Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, in the north transept of Canterbury cathedral at the foot of the choir stairs near the St. Benedict altar. From eyewitness accounts written shortly after the event by the likes of John of Salisbury, who fled at the start of the attack, and Edward Grim, who sustained a wound in defense of the archbishop, we know the attack itself was violent and swift though the build up to it was long in the making.¹ In the space of a few moments that December afternoon, these men meted out justice as they saw it upon a person whom they considered a traitor to King Henry II. Shortly before the attack, the four knights had confronted Becket in his chambers in the archiepiscopal palace, demanding he lift the sentence of excommunication he had pronounced on three English bishops who in service of Henry II had overstepped the rights of Canterbury the previous June by anointing Prince Henry King of England. Becket refused, arguing with the four as they stormed out of the chambers to recover their weapons. Initially reluctant to leave the palace, Becket allowed his clerks to hustle him off to the cathedral when they reminded him the Canterbury monks had already begun to sing vespers. Now armed, the knights forcefully regained entrance to the palace and pursued the archbishop to the cathedral, where they accosted and killed him. News of his death spread quickly and, while the killers and accomplices plundered the palace and made good their escape, clerks and monks secured the body for burial, and townsfolk—some flocking from the community, some already present in the nave at the time—sopped up blood and gore from the cathedral pavement. Worried that enemies of the archbishop would return to desecrate his body, rightly so as it turned out, the Canterbury monks buried him in the cathedral crypt early the next day under maimed rites as the murder itself had desecrated the cathedral.

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Thomas Becket's story illustrates well many dimensions of punishment, penance, and reward, the theme of this collection of essays. The ideas of punishment, penance, and reward center on human behavior and form a nexus around the idea of control in both social and individual spheres of action. Control in this context is based on codes that distinguish right behavior from wrongdoing with penalties (punishment) for wrongdoing, restitution (penance) as compensation for wrongdoing, and recompense (reward) for right behavior. The traffic law requiring automobile drivers to stop their vehicles at octagonally-shaped red signs marked S-T-O-P in white letters is an instance of this kind of code established by social agreement to control individual behavior. In general, society rewards drivers who observe the code with unhampered, safe operation of their vehicles (i.e., as a reward for good driving practices, drivers get to keep driving); drivers who do not observe the code risk punishment (i.e., a penalty in the form of arrest) and penance (i.e., restitution in the form of a fine), as well as harm to themselves or others through their driving. Modulating personal behavior, most individuals living in a society regularly, often unconsciously, submit to codes like this one in an effort to live with others in relative harmony. As a result, society as a collective rewards these individuals. Conversely, others regularly, often quite consciously, refuse to submit to such codes, thereby disrupting the social harmony the codes are intended to maintain. In these cases, when society—or more properly its agent—apprehends the individual, it typically imposes punishment and penance in some form to restore social harmony. Similarly, individuals exercise control over themselves (i.e., self-control) to establish personal harmony or achieve a goal: thus, the diabetic maintains a strict diet, the ascetic follows stringent spiritual exercises, the athlete trains rigorously, the musician practices daily. In the case of the individual *per se*, punishment, penance, and reward center on self-regulated behavior in relation to a code that measures achievement—physical and spiritual health for the diabetic and the ascetic; keen, accomplished performance for the athlete and the musician. Whether for individual ends, societal ends, or both, people use punishment, penance, and reward to modify or control human behavior. In complex societies such as twenty-first century North America or twelfth-century western Europe, competing codes can lead to conflict for individuals striving to behave rightly within limits society imposes. Such competition seems to have been the case for Thomas Becket in his conflict with King Henry II.

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Born into an Anglo-Norman merchant-class family on December 21, 1120, the Feast of St. Thomas the Apostle, Becket was the youngest of four children.² Although not particularly talented as a scholar, he attended school with sufficient success to advance, including study in Paris, before dropping out when his mother died in his twenty-first year. Following the death of his father shortly later, he worked as a clerk in London for a few years before eventually joining the staff of Theobald of Bec, Archbishop of Canterbury, where he honed his skills as an administrator. Recognizing his particular abilities, Theobald sent Becket to study law at Bologna and Auxerre. Becket later helped with negotiations in Rome that secured Henry, son of Geoffrey of Anjou, as successor to England's throne. Upon King Stephen's death in October, 1154, Henry II became king and, with Archbishop Theobald's encouragement, named Becket his chancellor in January, 1155. For the next seven-and-a-half years, Becket served Henry well as personal secretary, administrator, and war leader while also serving as archdeacon of Canterbury. In April 1161, Theobald of Bec died, and Henry pushed to have Becket elected to the See of Canterbury presumably to join the positions of royal chancellor and archbishop in one person and as a reward for his service and friendship. Once elected, Becket was ordained priest on June 2, 1162, and archbishop of Canterbury the following day. Ordination led to a conversion of sorts for Becket, and instead of the ally the king expected Henry found in Becket a formidable foe in matters concerning relations between church and state. As one of his recent biographers remarked, "throughout his life he tried to play to the full the role in which he found himself" (Barlow 32). Clerk, archdeacon of Canterbury, royal chancellor, priest, and archbishop of Canterbury—Becket seems to have embraced each role in turn with little or no sentimentality about previous positions or patrons. No longer working directly for the king, Archbishop Thomas set aside former loyalties in an effort to serve God and the church as he saw fit.

Much has been written about the conflict between Becket and Henry II.³ For our purposes, it is sufficient to mention two key events, each centering on issues of punishment, penance, and reward. In January 1164, Henry convened a conference of ecclesial and secular leaders at Clarendon in an effort to clarify state and ecclesial jurisdiction. With the "Constitutions of Clarendon," a sixteen-article document detailing what Henry argued was the custom of the land prior to King Stephen's reign, Henry sought to reduce ecclesiastical privilege

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and power and assure that criminous clerks receive punishment to the full extent of secular law. Initially resistant, Becket finally acquiesced to the king's argument and ordered his fellow bishops to do the same. Later, however, the archbishop changed his mind, particularly regarding the third article:

Clerks charged and accused of any matter, summoned by the king's justice, shall come into his court to answer there to whatever it shall seem to the king's court should be answered there; and in the church court to what it seems should be answered there; however the king's justice shall send into the court of holy Church for the purpose of seeing how the matter shall be treated there. And if the clerk be convicted or confess, the church ought not to protect him further. (para. 5)

In Becket's reading, this article established a double trial for clerks. After Becket withdrew support, he commenced a personal period of penance to atone for agreeing to the "Constitutions" by suspending himself from saying Mass until the pope absolved him (at this time he also likely began the secret penitential practices—revealed at his death—of wearing a hair shirt undergarment and undergoing frequent flagellation). Angry, Henry turned on Becket and, through a series of attacks culminating in charges of corruption leveled in October at Northampton, sought to punish the archbishop. Becket fled to the continent and so began a period of exile lasting over six years, an exile that included further punishment in the expulsion from England and confiscation of property of all Becket's family members and servants. Among other points, such as Henry's insistence that clergy attain royal permission before leaving England (Article 4), at issue was who had the right to try and to punish clerical lawbreakers (Articles 1 and 3) and who had the authority to mete out a sentence of excommunication on a royal officer (Article 8): Henry insisted that the church, which could not inflict corporal punishment (mutilation or death), was too lenient on clergy in capital crime cases; Becket insisted that the state had no jurisdiction in ecclesial matters. As David Knowles notes, the conflict arose "between two conceptions of the relations of Church and monarchy" (92).

The second event centered on the coronation of Prince Henry on June 14, 1170, at Westminster. Though such royal coronation was reserved for the archbishop of Canterbury, Roger, Archbishop of York,

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performed the ceremony in the presence of Gilbert, Bishop of London, and Jocelin, Bishop of Salisbury, among most other bishops of England and Wales. Henry had wanted this coronation to take place for some time, and both Thomas and Pope Alexander had hoped this desire would lead to reconciliation between the king and archbishop as a precursor to the ceremony. By moving ahead without Becket, however, Henry asserted his will over the church, in effect sending a message to both pope and archbishop. Still, wishing to avoid censure from the church, he sought concord with Thomas almost immediately after the coronation, and on July 22 the two met and reconciled at Fréteval. The peace between the two was fragile at best, and Henry demurred to give Thomas the kiss of peace—a ritual gesture of concord—in part because he had sworn earlier never to offer it to Thomas (though Pope Alexander had released him of the oath). In spite of the shaky concord with the king and outright opposition to his return, organized by the archbishop of York in league with royal officers, Becket returned to England on December 1. Declaring he did not oppose the coronation itself, Becket still insisted on disciplining the three chief bishops who presided at the ceremony: he had Osbert, his chamberlain, deliver papal writs of excommunication on the archbishop of York and the bishops of London and Salisbury just prior to his return to England. Henry II, celebrating Advent and Christmas in Argentan, Normandy, began receiving reports about Becket's actions in England. Driven to a fury, on Christmas day he ordered a party led by William de Mandeville, Earl of Essex, to return to England to confront Thomas and, presumably, arrest him if need be. Meanwhile, the now infamous group of four conspirators—the above-mentioned knights—deputized themselves with support from Roger of York for a similar mission (Urry 69). These four made the trip quickly to Canterbury, and their confrontation with Becket ended in his murder, again what they perceived as just punishment for an obstinate traitor.

Henry II heard the news on Friday, January 1, and immediately entered a three-day period of grief-stricken seclusion. Though the king obviously wanted to restrain and even arrest Becket for his efforts to punish the three bishops, among other perceived insults, he did not want him murdered. In the aftermath of the murder—an event even the killers themselves came to see as a crime—punishment and penance followed (Knowles 150-55; Urry 150-68; Barlow 316-30). On January 25, 1171, the archbishop of Sens imposed an interdict on Henry's continental lands, a sentence the pope affirmed in April while also

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imposing a personal interdict on Henry; on March 25, the pope excommunicated the murderers and those who directly aided them; the pope also upheld the sentence of excommunication Becket had issued in his name on the three bishops. These sentences remained in effect until such time as the pope or his appointed legates were satisfied by the party's humility and remorse. In the case of the four knights, it is hard to determine exactly what happened to each. As Barlow describes their position, they seem to have hidden in the north of England for a year before submitting themselves in 1172 to the pope, who sentenced them as penance to crusade in the Holy Land for fourteen years: historians assume each died either *en route* or in the Holy Land, but it is impossible to know definitively (324-26). Meanwhile, Henry II avoided addressing the papal legates in 1171 and early 1172 by busying himself with Ireland. Finally, on May 21, 1172, in a reconciliation ceremony held outside the abbey church at Savigny, Henry publicly admitted in the presence of the pope's legates to be the "effective cause" of Becket's death through his anger and speech but swore he did not order nor desire the murder. As penance, the legates imposed the following: to obey the pope in spiritual matters, to assume maintenance expenses of two-hundred Templar knights for a year, to take the cross himself for three years, not to impede lawful appeals to the pope in ecclesiastical cases, to abolish customs injurious to the church in England, to restore to the church of Canterbury all its possessions, and to restore all clerks and laity who had been punished because of the archbishop's actions (Barlow 329). After his assent, the legates absolved Henry and welcomed him back into the church. This gesture of remorse was not the end for Henry, however. On July 12, 1174, in the midst of quelling his sons' open rebellion in England, Henry performed public penance in remorse for complicity in Becket's murder: he walked barefoot in the rain from Harbledown to the cathedral—about one mile—where he visited the site of the murder and Becket's tomb and submitted to flogging at the hands of English prelates and some eighty monks. He completed his self-imposed penance with an all-night prayer vigil at the tomb. Though he did not know it on the day, the rebellion was effectively quashed the morning of July 13 when royal forces captured William, King of the Scots. For Henry, once he learned on July 18 of these events, the direct cause-and-effect was clear, and he felt rewarded by Thomas (Urry 159-65). As Henry interpreted events, his own penitential actions in conjunction

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with Thomas' intercession restored social harmony in England, even if only temporarily.

Though the murderers saw themselves in action as justly punishing a traitor, it was not long before Becket himself gained reward, albeit posthumously, as a martyr for the church. Almost immediately, in fact, stories of miracles resulting from his post-mortem intercession began to be recorded, and biographers cast his final actions within the framework of Christ's passion and death, viewing Becket's final days and moments as *imitatio Christi*. On Ash Wednesday, February 21, 1173, Pope Alexander canonized the archbishop. When Henry made his penitential pilgrimage to his old friend's tomb in 1174, he made the journey to the death and burial sites of one whom the church had officially declared a saint. The cult of St. Thomas Becket expanded, and his story – particularly his death – became the subject of manuscript illumination, sculpture, stain glass, hagiography, and literature (Backhouse and de Hamel 11-12; Borenius *passim*; Rigg 77-83).⁴ In about 1190, the Knights of St. Thomas of Acre, a crusading military order, was founded in Becket's honor: their English headquarters was in the Becket family home in Cheapside (Backhouse and de Hamel 6-8). Church leaders named two particular feast days in his honor in the *sanctorale*: his death day (December 29) and the feast of his translation (July 7), marking the day when his bones were moved from the crypt and re-interred in a tomb near the cathedral's main altar. A rich collection of liturgical offices, sermons, and hymns developed around these feast days as liturgists, preachers, and poets sought to celebrate the saint's life and memorialize his death (Slocum *passim*; Roberts 14-45; Hughes 62-69).

The cult of St. Thomas flourished throughout Europe, but particularly in England where pilgrimage to his tomb began shortly after his death. In part to address the press of pilgrims, the Canterbury monks moved his remains in 1220 from the relatively inaccessible crypt to the Trinity chapel behind the main altar. It was to this tomb that Chaucer's fictional pilgrims made their way down the road Thomas himself traveled on his final journey from Southwark to Canterbury on December 23, 1170. Devotion to St. Thomas remained strong in England until the 1530s. Recognizing in Becket a model of opposition to royal power, Henry VIII actively suppressed his cult when on November 16, 1538, he proclaimed,

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From henceforth the said Thomas Becket shall not be esteemed, named, reputed nor called a Saint, but Bishop Becket, and that his images and pictures through the whole realm shall be put down and avoided out of all churches, chapels and all other places: and that henceforth the days used to be a festival in his name shall not be observed, nor the service, office, antiphons, collects and prayers in his name read, but erased and put out of all the books. (qtd. in Backhouse and de Hamel 10-11)

In a sense, Henry VIII sought to punish Becket a second time for his obstinate behavior in the face of royal demands. Agents of the king dismantled the tomb, destroyed sculptures and glass, and defaced liturgical texts and illuminations. Henry VIII's reformed church had no room for a saintly Becket. Yet, in spite of Henrician suppression and subsequent centuries of neglect, Becket's story was given new life, one might even say a new reward, in the twentieth century with T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, Jean Anouilh's *Becket au l'honneur de Dieu*, and director Peter Glenville's Oscar-winning 1964 film *Becket* (based on Anouilh's play).

Thomas Becket's story is, again, one very much tied to issues of societal and personal control. The ideas of punishment, penance, and reward permeate the events of his life as he was frequently both agent and recipient of all three. Though his was not quite a rags-to-riches life, Becket achieved great worldly success and reward himself as he moved from the merchant class to become chancellor of England, where exercising political power and control he regularly doled out punishment and reward in the king's name. His move from the secular to the ecclesiastical realm also initially brought great reward, but humiliating punishment and exile soon followed. Finally, charged with treason for issuing yet again a series of punishments in the form of excommunication, he was punished by assassination. Yet, in the wake of his death, Becket received in sainthood perhaps the greatest reward society of his day could grant, as most considered him a martyr defending the church's rights. Becket's story offers a case study of how punishment, penance, and reward are interrelated in a given life. Literary artists, too, found the theme fruitful to explore in relation to other subjects as well. Who better than Dante Alighieri in his *Commedia*, for instance, illustrates the medieval passion for detailed

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accounts of punishment, penance, and reward, of those who received them, and why they did?

The following essays—many of which began as papers in Medieval Association of the Midwest-sponsored sessions held at the 2008 M/MLA Convention, at the annual MAM conference, or at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo—treat the theme of punishment, penance, and reward in early literature. The collection opens with R. W. Hanning's essay, "Prudential Penance," delivered as a plenary lecture at the 2009/10 joint conference of the Medieval Association of the Midwest and the Illinois Medieval Association at Dominican University. Hanning considers how the sacrament of penance took shape in medieval Europe and how the prudential and rhetorical components of penance (either in their proper practice or in their intentional subversion) inspired elements of Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

From Hanning's in-depth, yet wide-ranging discussion of penance and late medieval vernacular literature, the next two pieces focus on Latin texts exploring the theme of eastern decadence in relation to punishment and reward. Turning us briefly first to the classical world, Drew Mannerer examines the *Aeneid*—which had such powerful influence on medieval literature—in his essay, "Zeus's Reward and the Ambiguity of Eastern Decadence in Virgil's *Aeneid*." Addressing the questions of punishment and reward, Mannerer argues that Turnus, not Aeneas, receives the true reward, because Rome will derive more fully from Italic blood and virtues than from Trojan decadence or excess. Shifting to twelfth-century epic, but working in the same East-West vein as Mannerer, William F. Hodapp in "Conquered by Babylon: Fate, Fortune, and Reward in Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis*" treats the popular "de casibus" history of Alexander the Great as an instance of eastern decadence overcoming the hero: ironically, as the epic concludes, little reward follows the extreme labors and victories of a world conqueror. Walter's epic thus warns against decadence and excess rather than providing traditional praise of martial heroism.

With the next two essays, we shift from East-West engagements depicted in Latin epic to justice in Icelandic saga. In "Disposable Outsiders and Narrative Liability in *Njáls saga*," Nichole Sterling asserts that sagic punishments deriving from blood feuds may depend on who struck the first and last blows or who dealt the mortal wound, but retribution may well fall on those only peripherally involved in the violent events. Authors of the sagas, she contends, used the shifting of

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blame—varying attribution of responsibility for the course of events—to create and exploit narrative tensions. Exploring a different vein in “Last Laughs: Torture in Medieval Icelandic Literature,” Stefan Hall observes that torture scenes appear rarely in medieval Icelandic literature, although writers do not explicitly condemn torture as a practice. Torture does not, however, conform to the accepted modes of punishment, Hall argues, and in fact the tortured rather than the torturer often gets the last laugh.

Using such texts as *Piers Plowman*, Dante’s *Commedia*, and *A Revelation of Purgatory by an Unknown, Fifteenth-Century Woman Visionary*, Edward Ridsen brings us back to England and the continent in “Plowing, Bowing, Burning, Journeying: Penance and Subverting Penance in Medieval Literature.” Ridsen suggests that medieval folk negotiated the suffering and fear of daily living through penitential visions. While pardon might subvert punishment, Ridsen notes, satisfaction for sin might require active rather than passive replacements: journeys, acts of humility, or even physical labor.

The next two essays focus attention on the late-medieval English poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In “Breaking the Romance: Identifying Sin, Earning Redemption, and the Gift of Mercy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” Mickey Sweeney argues that the poem compares two Gawains: the romantic and the imperfect human. She re-reads the ending of the poem with Camelot as refuge: Gawain receives neither penance nor punishment, but perhaps mercy and forgiveness instead. Mel Storm, also working with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in his essay, “The Green Knight and Other Medieval Dismemberments,” shows that the poem exemplifies a tradition of human and animal mutilations or dismemberments, and those images or instances, oddly enough, rather than embodying horror, instead contribute finally to social healing.

The collection rounds off with Stephen Yandell’s essay, “Bearers of Punishment and Reward: Ahab’s Prophets in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” in which the author shifts focus to poets themselves. Yandell demonstrates how in the fourteenth century court poets such as John Gower, dependent on Plantagenet patronage, faced punishment or reward for their work, yet, prophet-like, they might speak or advise or even challenge a ruling voice above and beyond the censure of a king, especially with apt use of biblical narratives.

These essays provide small steps into three large, even overarching concerns of medieval life, concerns aptly illustrated in Thomas

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Becket's experience from merchant's son to Church's saint as depicted in *vitae*, liturgy, and art. We hope they will contribute to the occasionally systematic, occasionally desultory, but always stimulating discussion of the blending of religious and secular issues in medieval studies. We hope also that they will encourage continuing discussions that help us all clarify and extend the matter of our teaching and scholarship.

The College of St. Scholastica

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Notes

¹For editions of Edward Grim's and John of Salisbury's biographies of Thomas, see Robertson. Urry (100-68) offers an engaging discussion of the assassination and its immediate aftermath.

²For complete modern biographies, see Knowles and Barlow. This summary of Becket's life is based largely on these two biographies as well as readings of Edward Grim, John of Salisbury, and William FitzStephen's *vitae* of the saint.

³Smalley (160-89) succinctly reviews the issues at stake in relation to emerging twelfth-century ideas of *regnum* (secular) and *sacerdotium* (church) politics. Knowles (77-134) and Barlow (109-247) thoroughly treat the issues and persons involved.

⁴Literary responses to Becket's story and martyrdom are numerous and wide ranging. Walter of Châtillon, for instance, a former courtier of Henry II and author of *Alexandreis*, the subject of an essay in this collection, lamented in a couplet, "rex qui perdit presulem in prodicione / re vera neronior est ipso Nerone" 'the king who killed the bishop through treachery is in this deed truly more Nero and Nero himself' (qtd. in Rigg 78).

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Saint Thomas Becket, chancellor of England and archbishop of Canterbury during the reign of King Henry II. His career was marked by a long quarrel with Henry that ended with Becket's murder in Canterbury Cathedral. Learn more about his life, career, and martyrdom. Thank you for your feedback. Our editors will review what you've submitted and determine whether to revise the article. Join Britannica's Publishing Partner Program and our community of experts to gain a global audience for your work! Share. SHARE. Facebook Twitter. Introduction & Quick Facts. Early life and career. As chancellor.