



## Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

**THIS SHEET MUST BE THE FIRST PAGE OF THE ASSIGNMENT YOU ARE SUBMITTING  
(DO NOT SEND AS A SEPARATE FILE)**

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                      |                                         |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <b>For completion by the student:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                      |                                         |
| Student Name:<br><b>Sarah Wolek</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                      |                                         |
| Module code: <b>HPMS7006</b><br><br>Module title: <b>Thomas Becket</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Student ID number:<br><b>2113119</b> | Educational support needs:<br><b>No</b> |
| Module tutor:<br><b>Janet Burton</b><br><br>Assignment due date: <b>7 April 2023</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                      |                                         |
| If your module has multiple submissions please indicate which piece of work this is.<br>1 <sup>st</sup> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 2 <sup>nd</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <sup>rd</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <sup>th</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <sup>th</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <sup>th</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> |                                      |                                         |
| I confirm that this is my original work and that I have adhered to the University policy on plagiarism.<br>Signed .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                      |                                         |
| Email submission: if you are submitting this form via email, please tick this box <input checked="" type="checkbox"/><br>(as a substitute for your signature) to confirm that you agree to the above declaration.                                                                                                                                        |                                      |                                         |

**Assignment Mark**

|                                                       |  |
|-------------------------------------------------------|--|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> Marker's Provisional mark             |  |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> Marker's/Moderator's provisional mark |  |
| External Examiner's mark (if relevant)                |  |
| <b>Final Mark</b>                                     |  |

**NB.** All marks are provisional until confirmed by the Final Examination Board.

**For completion by Marker 1 :**

Comments:

Marker's signature:

Date:

**For completion by Marker 2/Moderator:**

Comments:

Marker's Signature:

Date:

**External Examiner's comments (if relevant)**

External Examiner's Signature:

Date:

**Thomas Becket “Lives” Analysis**  
Sarah Wolek, HPMS 7006 Spring 2023

A shocking event such as the murder of an archbishop at the altar of his cathedral was sure to create emotionally-charged responses from contemporary scholars and later historians, which can cloud judgement and distort facts. To evaluate the historical value of John of Salisbury's life of Thomas Becket, *Vita Sancte Thomae Martyris*, it must first be determined if John is a trustworthy source of information. Provided the source is deemed credible, it is then worth examining John's motivation for creating the work and turn a critical eye to possible limitations of his *Vita*. Through this objective evaluation, historians can better determine if the *Vita Sancte Thomae Martyris* is to be valued as a credible source for the life of Thomas Becket.

John of Salisbury was a long-time friend of Thomas Becket, which imparts credibility to his depiction of Thomas' life. In addition to knowing each other well, the two men also shared many formative life experiences prior to meeting in 1148. John, like Thomas, was born in England, studied abroad in France, and held a position of prominence within the church for Archbishop Theobald. He continued his career with the church beyond the 1170 murder of Thomas Becket and eventually became Bishop of Chartres.<sup>1</sup> As a testament to the strength of his character, John was one of the executors of Archbishop Theobald's will following his death in 1161.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Anthony Brown, 'John of Salisbury', *Franciscan Studies*, 19(3/4) (1959), 241-297 (pp. 246-7).

<sup>2</sup> Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket* (Avon: The Bath Press, 1986), p. 61.

In addition to a personal friendship, John and Thomas worked together for much of their careers. When Thomas was raised to the archbishop position, John was his secretary.<sup>3</sup> In this position, John would have had frequent professional interaction with Thomas and his duties, which would have given John close insight to the tension building between the church and state. In addition, John was at the Cathedral at the time of Thomas' murder, which he documented in letters shortly after the event.<sup>4</sup> A horrifying experience such as that would be hard to forget, but the fact that John captured his experience in letters soon after the event would have also given him more accurate source material from which to describe the murder his *Vita*.

One final aspect to consider when assessing the credibility of John's *Vita* is to look at other works he was responsible for. Were he only known for writing one of the lives of Thomas, it could be questioned how skilled of a writer or historian he was to trust his work. In this area, John was quite prolific. Prior to writing the life of Thomas Becket, he authored a life of Anselm, an earlier Archbishop of Canterbury. Coincidentally, John wrote the life of Anselm at the behest of Thomas Becket in 1163 as part of the effort to support canonization of Anselm.<sup>5</sup> It is telling that John was selected to write such an important document. This indicates that John's contemporaries believed him to be a skilled and effective writer nearly a decade prior to his *Vita* on Thomas. In addition to his hagiographic contributions, John is widely recognized for his

---

<sup>3</sup> Clement C. J. Webb, 'John of Salisbury' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 2(2) (1892-1893), 91-107 (pp. 92-93).

<sup>4</sup> See John of Salisbury letter no. 305, *Ex inspirato. Anselm & Becket*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Anselm & Becket: Two Canterbury Saints' Lives by John of Salisbury*, trans. by Ronald E. Pepin (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2009), p. vii.

collection of philosophical and political works.<sup>6</sup> This large body of acclaimed writing throughout his life does lend credence to John as an author and historian of his time.

The combination of a close personal relationship with similar life experiences, a first-hand account of the murder, and a distinguished career of highly respected works of literature certainly establish John as a credible source to provide testimony to the life of Thomas Becket.

John's capability established, the assessment of his *Vita* now turns to consider the motivation and objectives behind the work which may impart limitations to it as a historical source. Calls for Thomas' canonization began soon after the murder, during the period it is believed John was writing, so it would be reasonable to assume John's goal was to support these calls as he had done for Anselm in 1163.<sup>7</sup>

There are, however, differences between the lives of Anselm and Thomas penned by John which suggest his goal was not canonization of Thomas. In the Anselm work, John shared miracles attributed to Anselm as well as comparisons to other saints to establish him as worthy of joining this anointed group.<sup>8</sup> These details are missing from the *Vita* of Thomas. Indeed, in his prologue, John explains his goal in writing Thomas' *Vita* was to "encourage both present and future generations to virtue".<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> See John of Salisbury works such as *Historia Pontificalis*, *Metalogicon*, and *Policraticus*.

<sup>7</sup> Barlow suggests that John wrote his *Vita* soon after the murders, see his *Becket*, p. 4. However, he does acknowledge that the date of John's *Vita* is debated amongst historians, some who believe it was written following the canonization in 1173. See p. 279 of the same work.

<sup>8</sup> See *Anselm & Becket*, pp. 8-11 for examples of the miracles and saintly comparisons made throughout John's *Life of Saint Anselm*.

<sup>9</sup> *Anselm & Becket*, p. 74. John does recount miracles attributed to Thomas in other documents, however, so while the *Vita* may not have been to justify canonization, John was certainly a supporter of it. See Karen Bollermann and Cary J. Nederman, 'A Special Collection: John of Salisbury's Relics of Saint Thomas Becket and Other Holy Martyrs', *Mediaevistik*, 26(2013), 163-181 (p. 167) for the story of a stone-cutter whose sickness was healed by relics of Thomas.

There is certainly a theme throughout the *Vita* where John portrays Thomas' piety through frequent examples of Thomas as a humble person who had great responsibilities thrust upon him and was, at times, hesitant to accept.<sup>10</sup> John claims Thomas' appointment as chancellor was a move Theobald orchestrated to "restrain the violent impulse of the new king [Henry II]...lest he rage upon the Church" as well as curb government officials who "conspired to plunder the property of the Church".<sup>11</sup> According to John, Thomas had been watching out for the interests of the church throughout the secular portion of his career as "zeal for the faith and nobility of the spirit were thriving in him".<sup>12</sup> Thomas held his chancellor role for a number of years before Henry appointed him Archbishop of Canterbury, so it is unlikely that Thomas would have been as strong of an advocate of the church over the state as John implies. If that had been the case, Henry would probably not have granted Thomas further power in the church through the archbishop appointment, so in this area there is some scepticism to John's assessment of the events.

A second objective John claims for his *Vita* is that he is "[striving] to set forth the reason for [Thomas'] martyrdom", presumed to exonerate his friend of charges levied against him and reprimand those he felt were responsible for Thomas' death.<sup>13</sup>

The first twelve chapters of the *Vita* contain examples of how Thomas exhibited piety and abstinence. John claims that Thomas endured "so many and such great scarcities of

---

<sup>10</sup> John describes how devout Thomas was in his religious proceedings through the donning of a hair shirt and how he refused gifts and wealth. He also claims that Thomas expected conflict between church and state and "concluded very correctly" that he couldn't satisfy both God and the king. It was only once Thomas realized the church was "subject to many dangers...from the wretchedness of so great a servitude" to the state that he agreed to take on the archbishopric. See *Anselm & Becket*, pp. 78-9.

<sup>11</sup> *Anselm & Becket*, p. 76.

<sup>12</sup> *Anselm & Becket*, p. 75.

<sup>13</sup> *Anselm & Becket*, p. 76.

necessities” during his time as chancellor.<sup>14</sup> However, this conflicts with the grand processions and displays of wealth Thomas was known for in England and France. John rationalizes this by claiming Thomas allowed riches, wealth, and lavish clothing because it allowed him to provide the Christian hospitality he was renowned for. Eventually Thomas’ actions were turned against him by his secular critics, as charges leveraged against him included greed, cruelty, arrogance, and the suggestion that his seemingly pious actions were insincere. John claims the accusations against Thomas became so frequent and distorted that the king was persuaded to believe that allowing Thomas to continue would “[destroy] the royal dignity”.<sup>15</sup> John stops short of explicitly stating Henry II was responsible for Thomas’ death, but throughout the document he suggests the king was ill-advised and acted against the interests of the church which Thomas needed to defend.<sup>16</sup>

In further admonishment of the knights who committed the deed, and as a means to further show how much Thomas was wronged, John devotes more of the *Vita* to comparing Thomas’ murder to the crucifixion of Christ than he does in describing the actual murder itself. In fact, John goes as far to say that Thomas’ murder was even worse than the crucifixion, which was done during Ordinary Time while the murder was during a holy period. John also points out that at least Jesus was led out of the city for his crucifixion, whereas Thomas was murdered “not only in the city, but within his church”. Finally, John recalls how Jesus was condemned at an “unjust trial” but argues it was still a trial, whilst Thomas was murdered without having any

---

<sup>14</sup> *Anselm & Becket*, p. 77.

<sup>15</sup> *Anselm & Becket*, pp 80-83.

<sup>16</sup> John claims Theobald was concerned with the “foolishness and malice of the youths and perverse men” associated with Henry II as early as 1154, see *Anselm & Becket*, p. 76. Following Thomas’ return from exile, John again blames the “poisoned tongues of his detractors” for further turning the king against Thomas., see p. 89.

opportunity to explain or defend his actions first.<sup>17</sup> These religious analogies are clearly meant to sway public opinion against secular leaders and in favor of Thomas and the church he was defending, which also calls into question the validity of the content of the *Vita*.

John does not always portray Thomas as the victim, however, and says that Thomas at times was “governed by youthful inclinations” and “excessively courted the popular breeze”.<sup>18</sup> John also did not always seem to approve of the methodology Thomas was adopting during his conflicts with King Henry II. One of John’s biographers states that he would “speak his mind very freely to Thomas on the unreasonable violence and obstinacy” with which he conducted himself with Henry.<sup>19</sup> This observation suggests that John, while a friend of Thomas, could show objectiveness and not be blind to Thomas’ shortcomings. While John’s *Vita* demonstrates his motivation was to show Thomas in the best possible light, examples such as this do offer some balance to his bias, which brings value to his *Vita* as a credible historical record.

John of Salisbury was an intimate contemporary of Thomas Becket and a well-respected scholar of his time who was present at the time of the murder, so there is good reason to believe that his account of Thomas’ life is a fair representation of the events, albeit from the perspective of a close friend and fellow churchman. His work was meant to capture the good deeds of Thomas as a model for others, but also to exonerate Thomas from charges which were leveraged against him leading up to his murder. A strong personal connection to the subject of an author’s work can be both a benefit from allowing for detailed knowledge of the events but can also challenge the impartiality of the author. While John certainly displays a bias in favor of

---

<sup>17</sup> *Anselm & Becket*, p. 91.

<sup>18</sup> *Anselm & Becket*, p. 75.

<sup>19</sup> Webb, “John of Salisbury” p. 93.

Thomas, the fact that John also includes some statements with a critical eye and the close timeframe in which he was writing following the event, supports the conclusion that his *Vita* can be viewed as a credible historical source.

## **Bibliography**

### **Primary**

*Anselm & Becket: Two Canterbury Saints' Lives by John of Salisbury*, trans. by Ronald E. Pepin (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2009).

### **Secondary**

Barlow, F., *Thomas Becket* 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Avon: The Bath Press, 1986).

Bollermann, Karen and Nederman, Cary J., 'A Special Collection: John of Salisbury's Relics of Saint Thomas Becket and Other Holy Martyrs', *Mediaevistik*, 26(2013), 163-181.

Brown, M. Anthony, 'John of Salisbury', *Franciscan Studies*, 19(3/4) (1959), 241-297.

Webb, Clement C. J., "John of Salisbury" from *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1892-1893, 2(2) (1892-1893), 91-107.