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## THE THINGNESS OF THE THING: THE ROLE OF EVERYDAY OBJECTS IN BECKET MIRACLE WINDOWS

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**Abstract:** In “*The Waning of the Middle Ages*”, J. Huizinga has pointed out that “all things would be absurd if their meaning would be exhausted by their function and their place in the phenomenal world, if by their essence they did not reach into a world beyond this.” (1924:201) Starting from this assumption, I purport to analyze the role/roles played by everyday/ordinary objects in the miracle stories depicted in the Trinity Chapel glazing and argue that their individuation/haecceity is subject to practices of ritualistic and artistic encodings.

**Keywords:** ampulla, artefact, Canterbury water, ex-voto, relic

### 1. Introduction

Soon after the murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket, as the fire of 1174 gutted the great Romanesque choir of Canterbury Cathedral, it became clear that the space which awaited reconstruction was destined to house the relics of the recently canonised saint. To the monastic community of Canterbury, the fire was seen as a sign of divine retribution and restitution to counteract the murder of the Archbishop and the desecration of the cathedral by the spilling of his blood. The incident allowed the monks to link the canonisation of St Thomas to the refurbishment of the cathedral and re-establish Canterbury as a force to be reckoned with by the secular authorities.

The dramatic account *On the Rebuilding of Canterbury Cathedral* (1174-84) given by Gervase of Canterbury, a twelfth-century acute observer and able writer and chronicler, testifies to the retributive justice God had bestowed both on the monastic community of Canterbury and on His viciously slain and martyred Archbishop:

In the year of grace one thousand one hundred and seventy-four, by the just but occult judgment of God, the church of Christ at Canterbury, in the forty-fourth year from its dedication, that glorious choir which had been so magnificently completed by the care and industry of Prior Conrad was consumed by fire. (...) [William the Englishman] laid the foundation for the enlargement of the church at the eastern part, because a chapel of St. Thomas was to be built there; for this was the place assigned to him; namely the Chapel of the Holy Trinity, where he celebrated his first mass — where he was wont to prostrate himself with tears and prayers, under whose crypt for so many years he was buried, where God for his merits had performed so many miracles, where poor and rich, kings and princes, had worshipped him, and whence the sound of his praises had gone out into all lands. (qtd. in Robert W. Willis 1843:145)

According to Gervase, the reconstruction that followed took account of provision for a new chapel and shrine dedicated to the martyr who was to bring an unsurpassed worldwide fame to the cathedral. The chapel was designed to shimmer with light, colour and reflective surfaces not only in the contrasting marble used for the main piers and shafts but also in the glossy inlaid floor tiles and the large stained glass windows circling around the ambulatory, which narrated the stories of the miracles of St. Thomas Becket.

The subject of numerous books and articles, the stained glass at Canterbury Cathedral has long been a popular topic for art historians, and yet there are still avenues left to explore. I hope to contribute to the discussion by employing a new approach to the examination of the Miracle Windows, one that focuses on the role/roles played by everyday/ordinary objects in the narrative structure of the glazing panels.

## **2. Classification of artefacts and their function in practices of healing**

In an attempt to organize the corpus of objects/artefacts the stained glass windows display, I have identified several types of objects which I have roughly distributed in two large classes/categories:

1. containers i.e. objects capable of holding especially liquids (vessels): ampullae, flasks, mazers, basins, bowls, cups, chalices, jugs;
2. objects of confinement/restraint and chastisement/punishment: rope or wire coils, clubs and sticks associated with the 'healing' of the mad, crutches and boots for the crippled, axe, knife for offenders or transgressors; these objects are often made into ex-votos or offerings. Of interest for this analysis is the votive value of everyday objects which are often placed at the tomb of the martyr in fulfilment of a vow/pledge or because they have been used during a cure.

Most of the objects represented in the visual narratives on glass belong to the first category of artefacts (containers or vessels). The explanation is very simple. The most powerful relic associated with Thomas Becket was his blood which the monks at Canterbury collected immediately after the murder. The monks seemed to have initially feared to allow the faithful to consume the martyr's blood for evident theological reasons. "Although miraculous healings were frequently effected by saintly relics, no hagiographic precedent existed for the consumption of a martyr's blood. The Old Testament book of *Leviticus* specifically prohibited the drinking of blood and the only person whose blood figured prominently in Christian doctrine and ritual was Christ himself." (Jordan 2009:482) At the same time, as Alyce Jordan has rightfully observed, there were other practical reasons to hinder the proliferation of the relic: "large scale distribution of blood, however, posed numerous problems, among them issues of limited supply and means of preservation." (ibidem.)

However, the solution to both the problem of supply and that of blasphemy was easily solved by dilution. In her book, *Comparing Pilgrim Souvenirs and Trinity Chapel Windows at Canterbury Cathedral*, Sarah Blick gives a dramatic account of the way in which the blood of Saint Thomas came to be used as a powerful thaumaturgical instrument despite the prohibitive resemblance to the Eucharistic miracle:

Within a week of Becket's martyrdom in 1170, the first blood miracle occurred. A man dipped his garment in the martyr's blood, diluted it in water and gave it to his paralyzed wife to drink, curing her instantly. Accounts of this extraordinary healing power spread very quickly, and soon sick people were 'lying in pain all about the church.' The monks of Canterbury were initially reluctant to allow access to the blood, as hitherto, the only blood associated with church practice was the Eucharistic wine/blood of Christ. The monks' objections were quickly overcome as a mob broke into the church demanding access to the blood and its healing powers. The monks yielded and provided in a small vial or pilgrim ampulla the first Canterbury Water, water tinged with the blood of St. Thomas Becket. (Blick 2001:7)

Henceforth, the Canterbury water or "the water of St. Thomas" (and not his blood to avoid any association with the Eucharist) became the universal panacea for afflictions of the body and spirit. Once the shrine became a popular pilgrimage site, Canterbury monks started to "dispense spoonfuls of 'St. Thomas' water' or applied sponges soaked in the tincture to affected parts of the body." (Blick 2001:483)

The proliferation of the relic became as intriguing as the use of ordinary profane objects used in the preparation and administration of the miraculous potion was. If we agree that artefacts are intentionally made to serve a given purpose and that the nature of an artefact lies in its function i.e. an artefact has a functional essence, then to what extent does the association between a sacred substance/energy change/alter the essence of an object? Do ordinary objects have a latent propensity towards assimilating the sacred through proximity or contiguity? Are they ontologically inferior to those deemed sacred e.g. liturgical or ceremonial objects?

### **3. Becket Miracle Windows: activating the sacred energy of everyday objects**

A telling example is given by the story of Petronella of Polesworth, the nun who appears to suffer from epilepsy. The story is visually narrated on two adjacent roundels. The first shows, in the very centre, two nuns tenderly leading a third, a weak stooping figure in utter disarray. Other three sympathetic nuns urge them to leave the convent and make for Canterbury where St. Thomas, the true physician, could appease their companion's distress. The second panel depicts Petronella seated at the tomb, having her feet bathed in the holy water of St. Thomas which three sedulous monks had carefully prepared.

The first thing that drew my attention was the lack of symmetry or balance in the second panel. The image is intentionally off-centred as the protagonist is no longer the ailing woman, who has been reduced to a passive thanks-giving recipient of the cure. The eye is purposefully drawn to the scene where the three monks are mixing water poured from a flask or ampulla with drops of blood held in a spoon. The two candlesticks carefully arranged on the tomb slab guide the eye to a particular point of focus: the bowl or basin where the tincture is being prepared.

Despite the fact that artefacts rely wholly on human agency to exist (they have an essential anthropological dimension which I do not intend to argue against), it is not the human agency that is valued in this panel. "The thing put before our mind or sight" (as this is the meaning of the Latin word *objectum*) is the bowl where the miraculous sublimation of water and blood into sacred protean energy occurs. Container and contained have become one single ontological entity whose function is to cure, to heal. Likewise, the small ampullae or pilgrim souvenirs one would buy after praying at the tomb of the martyr did not just store the precious liquid for later use, as any ordinary container or vessel would do. They were believed to have been endowed, better said imbued with the force of the relic they contained. They turned into relics themselves inasmuch as they metonymically stood for the entire force of the sacred they had absorbed.

Another example comes from the cure of Ethelreda which depicts the miraculous healing of a woman who suffered from malaria. The inscription suggests that "she had grown pale through loss of red blood cells, but, when she imbibed the blood of St. Thomas mixed with water, she recovered." The roundel clearly shows two monks actively involved in the preparation and administration of the miraculous cure. One of the monks raises an ampulla which has supposedly been filled with a combination of the saint's blood and water which the other monk is diligently mixing in a bowl. Their seemingly hasty manner of conduct is once more contrasted with the restraint of the second pair of women. One of them is kneeling on the saint's tomb chest, hands almost clasped in supplication, while the other, probably a nun, stands apart with aloof dignity, her hands pointing in the direction of the miserable supplicant. The focus is obviously laid on the transfer of sacred energy from the concocted remedy (blood-tinged water) safely kept in the ampulla strategically raised a little above the imaginary central point of the image to the suffering woman who, lips parted, awaits to drink the miraculous potion which promises to restore her health.

In contrast to the previous scene which depicts the cure of Petronella, the ampulla containing the miraculous concoction has been assigned a central role and an elevation which reminds one of the ritual raising of the consecrated elements of bread and wine during the celebration of the Eucharist. The ontological status of the object has changed dramatically. In the story of Petronella, the ampulla was a simple vessel which contained one of the ingredients used in the preparation of the cure: water. No further hints were given to a special status the ampulla might carry as a ceremonial or ritualistic object. On the contrary, the object looks like any ordinary vessel for holding or pouring water or wine at the table.

A famous scene from the Bayeux Tapestry gives us some insights into the rituals of dining and feasting in the eleventh century. The episode illustrates the banquet held by the Normans after they landed in England. Presiding over the table is a bishop, probably Bishop Odo who took part in the Norman Conquest. The legend above reads: "And here the bishop blesses the food and the drink." One can easily spot a central clerical figure raising his right hand over a cup or mazer in benediction while other five seated characters help themselves to food and drink and a servant kneels within the inner arc of the table carrying a basin probably for the washing of hands and a piece of cloth for wiping them. The pictorial representation of utensils helps us identify many of the drinking vessels common during the eleventh and twelfth centuries but of interest is the elongated object which resembles a drinking flask (ampulla) similar to that used in the preparation of the Canterbury water.

That an ordinary/everyday object may, under certain conditions, acquire properties which exceed the boundaries of the phenomenal world proves that sacredness is not a 'frozen' characteristic of a ritualistic object. It is a protean energy which may 'contaminate' the whole world and make it sacred. Nevertheless, Durkheim (1976:322) is not entirely right in affirming that "even the most superficial or indirect contact is enough for it [sacredness] to spread from one object to another." The transfer of sacredness is not the outcome of a rudimentary process of contamination by contiguity. In most of the cases it involves a double agency and a mutually agreed on manner of conduct. On the one hand, there is the agency of the sacred-curator, mainly monks whose alleged spiritual perfection and inner cleanness make them the exemplary preservers of uncontaminated unpolluted sacredness. Their task is to preserve, administer and effect the transfer of sacred energy from the holy relic to the recipient-object or person. On the other hand, there is the agency of the faithful beneficiary who cannot partake of the sacred energy unless he/she is a true believer.

On an ampulla found on Thames waterfront in London, proven to be a thirteenth century holy water container from Canterbury, along with the image of the saint, a short Latin text is inscribed which reads (in translation): "Thomas Becket is the best doctor for the pious sick" - in this case "through the miraculous power of the water once held in the vessel" (Spencer 1998:52). So, what the sacred object catered for was bodily sickness but only for those who were spiritually sound.

The agency of saints has been likened to radioactivity: the invisible residue of divine power could be transferred to objects through touch or proximity. The simple pilgrim badges that were purchased from saints' shrines drew their potency from a combination of these factors: physical proximity to the saint's relics, anthropomorphic representation of the saint and often the inscription of their name. (...) These objects served as proxies for the saint, storing thaumaturgical power that could later be used for healing in the home ... (Gilchrist 2012:227)

One beautiful example to illustrate the second category of objects (objects of confinement/restraint and chastisement/punishment) is given by the cure of Mad Henry of Fordwich. The two roundels which illustrate his story are carefully designed to reflect the differences in the protagonist's attitude and composure which precede and follow his 'cure'. The first roundel shows poor Henry, hands tied behind his back, being dragged and forced to

kneel at the saint's tomb by two chastising men. Working along the scene, the seemingly punitive action of the two men is clarified by the inscription running along the arched top of the architectural setting: AMENS ACCEDIT ('He arrives out of his mind').

However surprising and disquieting a scene of such brutality may seem, the practice of exacting corporeal punishment on the mentally destitute was endorsed by the Bible and actuated by the Rule of Saint Benedict: "The fool is not corrected with words" (Prov 29:19). And again: "Strike thy son with the rod, and thou shalt deliver his soul from death" (Prov 23:14). Understandably enough, the two 'friends' are at great pains to elicit the salvation of their mate's soul by forcibly beating him up with sticks or rods. The sense of drama is increased by the way in which the monastic figure, represented on the right side of the image, protectively shields a book (probably the Bible) displayed on a reading support. The image of the worried monk who seeks to protect the Holy Book from the threatening approach of Mad Henry of Fordwich is illustrative of the belief that a sacred energy must be cautiously contained for fear of improper contagion leading to desecration. The monk seems to fear that the irrational and evil-possessed man, ranting demonically and struggling vigorously to free himself from the hands of his companions, could reach a dangerously close proximity to the sacred object and defile it. Body language is particularly telling in this situation. The two enter a visual-gestural combat whose nature and intensity restate the mystical clash between good and evil. To the fixed vicious and defiant gaze of the madman, the even-tempered monk responds with a gesture of restrained amplitude; he barely outstretches his right arm in the direction of the aggressor to prevent him from advancing. Conversely, his left arm is represented unnaturally outstretched, extended to an impossible length, in an overstated gesture of ludicrous protection.

In the second roundel, a dignified Henry is shown kneeling at the tomb, his hands gathered in prayer while his friends and the now collected monk marvel in awe at the miraculous healing scene they had been witnessing. The coil of rope and the clubs used to bind and beat him, the instruments of his enforced healing, are placed in the foreground "as an *ex voto* or offering" (Michael 2004:112). The emphasis in "images on the 'votive' value of everyday objects which are often placed at the tomb" (Michael 2004:18), though less obvious to a modern audience, is perfectly intelligible in the context of the medieval understanding of the value of the sacred. Once used in a ritual of corporeal chastisement with a healing connotation in store, simple objects of correction become instruments of faith which mediate the transfer of sacredness from the holy source (here the tomb of the martyred archbishop) to the beneficiary in need (Mad Henry of Fordwich, in this case). Dawn Marie Hayes (2003:14) is of a similar opinion when noticing that: "the sacred charge of a place (or a person or object) could transfer to an ordinary object and render it more than it was." Thus, the essence of an object, its 'thingness', is not immutable and is not a question of phenomenological loading either. When exposed to the supernatural force of the sacred, even an ordinary uninspiring thing may acquire properties or characteristics which inevitably alter its nature, its quiddity. Once more, the meaning of the entire scene is elucidated by an inscription placed above the festively adorned arch: ORAT SANUSQUE RECEDIT ('He prays and departs sane').

A similar example is given by the cure of Mad Matilda of Cologne. The poor woman is said to have gone mad after she heard that her brother killed the man she dearly loved. In a fit of anger she killed her infant child, baptized only the day before, with a single blow of her hand. No doubt her illegitimate child was the cause of her lover's murder. According to the story recounted in the twelfth century by Benedict, one of the two monks appointed to compile Becket's canonisation dossier, she was so dangerous "she would even have strangled a young boy, who ran up to her, had he not been quickly snatched out of her way by those standing near her. Bound hand and foot, she raved for some four or five hours before the tomb

of the Martyr until he offered her healing. The evil spirit was indeed driven out of her but it left behind foul traces.” (www.medievalscribbles.com)

In the first panel, Matilda is shown being brought to the tomb of St. Thomas by two men who beat her into submission with sticks/clubs. Her eyes stare widely, her hair is unkempt, her clothes are ragged and torn, her limbs are contorted. The ‘therapeutic’ ordeal continues once they reach the tomb of the martyr. In the second panel she is shown hands tied while her attendants and a monk, probably take turns in inflicting upon her the harsh disciplining treatment. In the last panel she is seen bowing down to the ground, fully collected and submissive, hands clasped in grateful prayer, thanking the saint for freeing her from the Devil’s bondage. Equally indebted, her ‘wardens’ appear to present their clubs as an ex-voto or offering to a monk who places a candle on the tomb, in recognition of the miracle they have just witnessed.

#### 4. Conclusions

To conclude, I believe that the role played by most of the ordinary/everyday objects which are depicted in Becket’s stained glass miracle windows is not merely instrumental. In other words, these objects which elicit hardly any veneration in day-to-day contexts of social or domestic activity, when transferred to a liminal ritualistic space, acquire properties which cannot be accounted for in the world of functional phenomenology. Ultimately, I must agree with Martin Heidegger when concluding that: “the thingness of the thing remains concealed (...) the nature of the thing never comes to light ...” (Heidegger 2001:168)

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