

Land, Women, and Power: The Bayeux Tapestry and the Secular Epic

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Jane Bouch

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Professor Bent, Advisor

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I. Introduction

As an artifact and representation of the Anglo-Norman period of English history, the Bayeux Tapestry stands unparalleled. The only surviving work of its kind, the Bayeux Tapestry provides information for scholars with interests as diverse as medieval shipbuilding and animal husbandry. For an art historian, however, the characters and events portrayed in this enormous piece of linen provide clues about the way contemporary society viewed the interactions between different segments of that society, and the way that these people were expected to operate within it. In this thesis, the role of women as it is depicted within the Bayeux Tapestry will be explored in order to show that the Tapestry exists as a thoroughly gendered work of art. The women are not only depicted as being inferior to the men who populate the Tapestry, but they can be seen to occupy certain roles within the pictorial narrative, roles that render them as stock character types rather than straightforward representations of individuals. These stock character types inhabit scenes within the Bayeux Tapestry that take on this same nature; they can be interpreted as recurring episodic units that are found not only in this pictorial epic, but in written epics of the time as well. The Bayeux Tapestry predates the earliest of these surviving epics by decades.

I have examined the relationship between these recurring stock episodes in the Bayeux Tapestry and those found in several of the secular epics written during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in order to put forth a new argument. The Bayeux Tapestry served as an image-based influence upon the development of the secular epic tradition of the centuries that follow, lending structure and content to these fictional, written histories and stories. As these epic tales influenced the development of the early modern literary tradition in the West, this renders the Bayeux Tapestry an incredibly influential source for written as well as pictorial accomplishments.

II. Overview

The surprises contained within the Bayeux Tapestry begin with the actual name of the object, for the Bayeux Tapestry is not a tapestry at all; rather, the story has been embroidered in wool yarn on linen instead of woven as a typical tapestry would have been. There are eight colors of yarn used: red, yellow, grey, dark green, light green, and three shades of blue. Only twenty inches tall, the entire piece stretches 230 feet long when fully unfurled, though its creators achieved this length by stitching together many smaller linen panels. The last scenes of the Tapestry were detached and disappeared sometime before the eighteenth century, and only speculation remains as to what this section of the work showed (See Figure 1).¹ The entire piece depicts the events leading to the conquest of England by the Norman Duke William the Conqueror, and the extant portion culminates with the Battle of Hastings in 1066. For the most part, the story is similar to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* and the Norman chronicles of Guy of Amiens and of William of Poitiers. Above the images, text identifies some of the main characters and describes some of the action.² These inscriptions are in Latin and use a mixture of Norman and Anglo-Saxon terms.

The story revolves around King Edward the Confessor's successor to the English throne. Both Harold the Anglo-Saxon and the Norman Duke William have claims to the crown, as well as Harold Hadrada from Norway.³ The story begins with Harold, Earl of Wessex, travelling to Normandy to consult with Duke William in 1064, apparently to relay to him Edward's wishes

¹ Lucien Musset. *The Bayeux Tapestry*. Trans. by Richard Rex. (New York: Boydell Press, 2005), 266.

² Suzanne Lewis. *The Rhetoric of Power in the Bayeux Tapestry*. (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11. Suzanne Lewis claims that these Latin inscriptions indicate that the Bayeux Tapestry was meant to be read aloud by or to an audience.

³ Lewis Thorpe. *The Bayeux Tapestry and the Norman Invasion*. (Chatham, UK: W &J Mackey, 1973), 15. Harold's own brother Tostig, Earl of Northumbria, joined Harold Hadrada in fighting him for the throne. Both Harold and Tostig died at the Battle of Stamford Bridge.

that he still wanted William to assume the English throne after his death (See Figure 23).⁴ Upon landing in France, one of Duke William's Norman counts, Guy of Ponthieu, promptly captures Harold, and holds him hostage (See Figure 16). Duke William rescues Harold from the Count and brings him back to Normandy, where they feast (See Figure 28). Harold and William then travel to Brittany, where Harold heroically helps William subdue one of his unruly vassals, Count Dol (See Figure 31). After they return from Brittany, Harold swears an oath of fealty to William upon the sacred relics of Bayeux Cathedral, where Harold promises to support William in his claim for the English throne (See Figure 4). Harold then returns to England, and King Edward dies (See Figure 32). Promptly following King Edward's deathbed scene and funeral, Harold's own coronation scene appears (See Figure 19). In doing so, he has broken his oath to William, and the first known artistic representation of Halley's Comet appears in the sky above Harold on his throne, a bad omen of things to come (See Figure 18).⁵ The next scenes depict William and Odo deciding to embark on a military expedition to England, and the Tapestry shows the assembling and sailing of the Norman fleet across the English Channel. Upon landing at Pevensey, the Norman army pillages the English countryside before engaging Harold at the Battle of Hastings, which ends with Harold's death after an arrow wounds him in the eye (See Figure 22). Some historians believe that the missing end of the Bayeux Tapestry likely showed William's coronation scene, but one can only speculate as to the length or the nature of this lost section (See Figure 1).⁶

⁴Gerald A. Bond. *The Loving Subject: Desire, Eloquence and Power in Romanesque France*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 21. English sources say that Harold went to Normandy to free a brother and an uncle held hostage by William since 1052, when he helped Edward himself to the throne.

⁵Thorpe, 12. Halley's Comet appeared from April 24-30, 1065. Florence of Worcester wrote, "In this same year on 24 April, the comet-star was seen, not only in England, but, or so they say, throughout the entire world, shining for seven days with great brightness."

⁶Roger Sherman Loomis. "The Origin and Date of the Bayeux Embroidery." *The Art Bulletin*, 6, no. 1 (September, 1923), 7. Roger S. Loomis claims that the Tapestry was purposely cut down to fit around the nave of the Bayeux

The Tapestry was also affected by Charles and Anna Stothard's restoration in the nineteenth century, during which the couple attempted to repair frayed or rotten sections on the basis of needle holes evident on the back of the linen.⁷ This effort may have resulted in the distortion of some images and text within the work, particularly in words in which both the Norman and the Anglo-Saxon version were very similar.⁸ This problem has resulted in ambiguous textual veracity, an issue for those historians attempting to verify the place of origin of the basis of the inscriptions.

Today, the Tapestry rests behind glass casing in a museum in Bayeux specifically designed for its display. However, the history of the object stretches back many centuries, and no documentation regarding its origins, patron, or original location remains. Despite this gap in the historical record, scholarly consensus firmly identifies Bishop Odo, half-brother to William the Conqueror, as its most likely patron.⁹ Odo was born around the year 1036 to a woman called Herleva, who was also the mistress of Duke Robert I of Normandy and mother of William the Conqueror, making them half-brothers. He held the bishopric of the Norman city of Bayeux from 1049-1097, but journeyed to England with William when the latter travelled to battle for the throne.¹⁰ Odo spent large sums on lavish decorations for monasteries and churches, which suggests an acute awareness of the power of patronage, particularly in an era of political upheaval. Called "a slave to worldly trivialities" by the twelfth-century chronicler Orderic Vitalis,

Cathedral. He bases this assertion on the fact that there is a border present in the first scene of the work, which shows Edward on the throne, and that there is no border by the end of the extant piece.

⁷ Andrew Bridgeford. *1066: The Hidden History in the Bayeux Tapestry*. (New York: Walker and Company Press: New York, 2005), 36.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Loomis, 5. Loomis posits that Odo's vassals Tuold, Wadard, and Vital actually commissioned the Tapestry to flatter their patron Odo, and through him William. Loomis claims that this is the reason that these vassals, alone among all others, are named in the work. However, the scale of the Tapestry renders it a monumental undertaking, one suited only for a man of incredibly high status.

¹⁰ David R. Bates. "The Character and Career of Odo, Bishop of Bayeux (1049/50-1097)." *Speculum* 50, no. 1 (January 1975), 5. Odo received the bishopric in 1049 or 050. As the canonical age was then 30, even his appointment flouted church rules.

Odo engaged in the secular lifestyle of a feudal lord, and even had a son, John.¹¹ After the defeat of the Anglo-Saxons, Odo quickly became the second largest landholder in England after King William himself. He frequently journeyed between his new earldom in Kent and Normandy, and even served as regent of England in William's absence. However, Odo soon became power-hungry, and in the early 1080s he bizarrely built a grand palace outside of Rome and hatched plans to march on the Vatican and to usurp power from the Pope in 1082.¹² This, combined with his growing independence from William in England, caused William to imprison him and to confiscate his English lands in 1082. Odo remained in prison until William's death in 1087, when a dying William was persuaded by his other half-brother, Robert, to release him. In 1088, he played a large part in the revolt against William II "Rufus", who had succeeded King William I, and the failure of this revolt resulted in his being forced to depart England for good.¹³ He participated in the First Crusade, but died in Sicily before reaching the Holy Land in 1097.

The Tapestry shows Odo in a far more central role than he likely occupied during the Conquest; it shows him at the right hand of William, occasionally braver and more steadfast than the monarch.¹⁴ According to the Tapestry, he is the one who urges William to begin building ships to cross the Channel, and the one urging on the Norman troops during the Battle of Hastings after William takes a (nonfatal) fall from his horse (See Figures 2 and 3). William of Poitiers recounts that it was William who reassured the troops, saying, "Staying their retreat, he took off his helmet, and standing before them bareheaded he cried, "Look at me well. I am still alive and by the grace of God I will yet prove victor!"¹⁵ The Tapestry, however, allows Odo to

¹¹Bond, 19.

¹² Ibid. According to Gerard Bond, Odo may have tried to buy the papacy outright, which suggests enormous wealth and power, along with an enormous ego. The pope at the time was none other than Hildenbrand. It is certainly hard to think of a more incongruous replacement for the fiery reforming Gregory VII than Odo!

¹³ Bates, 2.

¹⁴ David M. Wilson. *The Bayeux Tapestry*. (London: Thames and Hudson LTD, 1985), 184.

¹⁵ David J. Bernstein. *The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 41.

occupy this place, granting him a visibility he likely did not enjoy during the battle. Though he is seen in several of the battle scenes, holding weapons and acting as a source of military inspiration, the chronicler William of Poitiers writes that Odo did not take part in any fighting.¹⁶ Most tellingly, Bayeux Cathedral and its relics play a central role in the narrative and are depicted at length (See Figure 4). Bishop Odo supervised the building and decoration of the Cathedral, and presided over its consecration in 1077 as well. As several other locations in France claimed to be the site where Harold swore his historic oath of fealty to William, the Tapestry's insistence upon Bayeux as this place pointed to its bishop's involvement.¹⁷ In addition, records identify three of the only non-royal named figures in the entire work as vassals of Odo: Turol, Wadard, and Vital (See Figures 29 and 30).¹⁸ Wadard and Vital both appear in battle scenes, whereas Turol, a dwarf, appears with Harold's rescuers at the castle of Count Guy of Ponthieu in France, who was holding Harold hostage (See Figure 16).¹⁹ The feast in Normandy before William decides to invade England borrows from Last Supper illustrations, but places Odo at the center rather than William the Conqueror, therefore comparing him to Christ (See Figure 26).²⁰ From what is known about Odo, few apart from him and those seeking to flatter him would have thought it an apt comparison. The undue position accorded to this cleric in the Tapestry points to him as its patron, and certainly the commissioning of an enormous decorative embroidery fits the legend of Odo.

¹⁶ Bates, 6.

¹⁷ Bond, 20. Lewis Thorpe also mentions that Pope Alexander II issued a bull in favor of Duke William's claim, as well as a ring and a consecrated banner. This is not shown, likely to convince the viewer that it was the relics, not the Papacy, which had caused Harold's downfall. Lewis Thorpe. *The Bayeux Tapestry and the Norman Invasion*. (Chatham, UK: W & J Mackey, 1973), 13.

¹⁸ J. Bard McNulty. *The Narrative Art of the Bayeux Tapestry Master*. (New York: AMS Press, 1989), 62. See

¹⁹ Andrew Bridgeford. *1066: The Hidden History in the Bayeux Tapestry*. (New York: Walker and Company Press: New York, 2005), 229. This Turol is often claimed by scholars to be the same Turolus who is named as the writer of the *Song of Roland* in the final paragraph of that work.

²⁰ Bernstein, 140.

Further evidence supporting Bishop Odo as the patron of the Bayeux Tapestry includes his contributions to the Cathedral of Bayeux itself, which was consecrated in 1077. Odo not only presided over the consecration, but he contributed vast sums of money to the construction and decoration of this cathedral. In addition, some even identify Odo as a possible patron of the earliest written version of the *Song of Roland*, which can be dated to the late eleventh century, likely two or three decades after the Bayeux Tapestry was likely completed.²¹ Not only will this connection between Odo and the *Song of Roland* prove to be very important when examining the relationship between this text and the Tapestry itself, this possible patronage when analyzed in combination with the Cathedral of Bayeux and the Tapestry indicates a pattern of patronage that contributes to the identification of Odo as the Tapestry's patron.

If Odo can be identified as the patron, then the dates within which the Tapestry could possibly have been commissioned become far narrower. Certainly the piece could not have been fully completed too soon after the Battle of Hastings in 1066, both because the work would have taken quite some time and because most of England was still consumed by violence and rebellion, which lasted until the 1070s. As Odo lost his lands and his freedom in 1082, the Tapestry could likely not have been commissioned by him after this date, as the immense amount of money needed to fund it would likely not have been possible during his incarceration.²² Therefore, it can be stated with some certainty that embroiderers created the Bayeux Tapestry

²¹ David C. Douglas. *William the Conqueror: The Norman Impact Upon England*. (Berkeley, CA: the University of California Press, 1964), 129.

²² The Tapestry also glorifies William the Conqueror, which perhaps Odo would not have been disposed to do during his imprisonment. The possibility remains that the commissioning of the work could have been a ploy to regain favor with the King, but it is still more likely that Odo would have been able to pay for and oversee a work commissioned while he was still free.

between 1066 and 1082, though Odo's death in 1097 serves as the final endpoint for possible dates of completion.²³

With regards to the country of origin, the fame of Anglo-Saxon female embroiderers had reached international proportions by the eleventh-century, with much of continental Europe interested in acquiring this *opus Anglicanum*.²⁴ Works by the women were even commercially traded internationally during this point, which underlines the desirability of these pieces and the extent to which they were known. Goscelin of Flanders, a French chronicler during the early eleventh-century, wrote extensively praising the exquisite work of the Anglo-Saxon embroideresses, stating that their work was unparalleled.²⁵ Some of the most highly regarded of these embroidering women resided in Canterbury, within the domain of Bishop Odo, who was named Earl of Kent after the Conquest. Therefore, it seems unlikely that he used Norman embroiderers when he had such conquered talent well within his grasp. The vegetable dyes used in the threads also indicate that the Tapestry was created in England rather than France, as they were more commonly used in Anglo-Saxon creations.²⁶ Popular legend once held that Queen Matilda, the wife of William the Conqueror, embroidered the entire work by herself, but this has been firmly discounted as myth, likely stemming from similar stories that revolve around embroidery by women as signs of virtue.²⁷ Many of these stories frequently surface in hagiographical accounts that attribute the skill to saints.²⁸

²³ Wolfgang Grape. *The Bayeux Tapestry: Monument to a Norman Triumph*. (New York: Prestel, 1994), 23. An inscription with several missing letters has been identified by some as reading EUSTATIUS, or Eustace of Bologne. This would mean that the Tapestry was completed before the early 1070s, as he rebelled against Odo and William in 1069, and remained in disgrace at court until 1077. This attribution, however, is based on a Stothard restoration.

²⁴ Bond, 21.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Wilson, 218.

²⁷ Charles H. Gibbs-Smith. *The Bayeux Tapestry*. (London: Phaidon, 1973), 5. In France, the Tapestry is still known by the name La Tapisserie de la Reine Mathilde.

²⁸ Carola Hicks. *The Bayeux Tapestry: Life Story of a Masterpiece*. (London: Chatto and Windus, 2006), 29.

The design, however, would not have been drawn by the team of embroiderers, and the propagandistic nature of the Tapestry, as well as the continuity within it, points to a single Norman designer, possibly a transplant from Bayeux to Canterbury.²⁹ The incredible detail seen in the scenes of Norman shipbuilding and the depiction of the Battle of Hastings point to an eyewitness designer, one familiar with military maneuvers and Norman naval practices (See Figure 5).³⁰ A scene where a woman flees from the approaching Norman army while clutching her child also suggests that the designer witnessed the action, rather than just gathered information solely from the accounts of chroniclers (See Figure 6).³¹ There are also many details within the Tapestry which point to a Norman, rather than an Anglo-Saxon, designer. For example, the many battle scenes show fighting taking place on horseback, yet the Anglo-Saxon did not yet employ cavalry during battle at this time, and it is unlikely that an Anglo-Saxon designer would have had the knowledge of equine warfare that the Tapestry shows (See Figure 7).³²

Additionally, every structure depicted in the Tapestry is pure fantasy architecture except for two: Mont-Sainte-Michel and Westminster.³³ Mont-Sainte-Michel is in Normandy, and a Norman designer would have had some familiarity with the church to show it in such detail (See Figure 8).³⁴ Mont-Sainte-Michel had special meaning for Anglo-Norman relations, as Edward had given the abbey St. Michael's Mount in Cornwall, linking this property within William's

²⁹ Bridgeford, 171. It is possible that the inscriptions were designed by a Norman and that the images were designed by an Anglo-Saxon, the two collaborating on the work. It is also a possibility that a Norman immigrant, long established at Canterbury and familiar with its vast library, was responsible for the work, which would explain the perceived similarities on the parts of some historians between the Tapestry and some English illuminated manuscripts. Of course, no concrete documentation exists to clear up this mystery, so comments about collusion between the Anglo-Saxon and Norman artists must necessarily remain open-ended.

³⁰ Grape, 25.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

domain and England together by the wishes of King Edward.³⁵ Westminster was the first Norman church on English soil, built during the time when many Normans lived in England (See Figure 9).³⁶ These Normans were displaced by Harold's father, Earl Godwin.³⁷ For Westminster to come back into Norman hands through the defeat of the Earl's son must have been a particular source of pride for the Normans. Other clues include the depicted use of four-wheeled carts (the English used two) and the use of horses as beasts of burden (the English used oxen) (See Figure 10).³⁸

Finally, the eleventh-century continental style of manuscript illumination has the same stylization and rigidity as the Bayeux Tapestry, whereas the eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon manuscript illumination was very different.³⁹ As some designers were also manuscript illuminators, these similarities in style serve as a good clue as to the nationality of the Bayeux Tapestry's designer.⁴⁰ The designer of the Bayeux Tapestry may have been inspired by the classical columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, both of which depict military campaigns and their preparation.⁴¹ The frieze around the Parthenon and Trajan's column both serve as ancient examples similar to the Bayeux Tapestry, if they could be laid out flat (See Figures 11 and 12).⁴² In the column of Marcus Aurelius, there is a scene of a woman and a child fleeing as the Romans burn their house, which appears in the Tapestry as well (See Figures 12 and 13).⁴³ It cannot be proved that the designer ever saw those, or that there is any direct correlation, but an awareness of the monument could have influenced the designer. The moralistic undertone of the work,

³⁵ Lewis, 89.

³⁶ Meredith Clermont-Ferrand. *Anglo-Saxon Propaganda in the Bayeux Tapestry*. (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), 10.

³⁷ Musset, 77.

³⁸ Grape, 28.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴² Bernstein, 14.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

which shows William as a rightful ruler and Harold, the Anglo-Saxon candidate for the throne, as a treacherous usurper indicate that the version of events being relayed promotes the victors, and it follows that one of these victors designed the historical document legitimizing their present rule over the kingdom of England.⁴⁴

England, or more specifically Canterbury, may be the most likely place for the design by the anonymous Norman designer to have been executed, but the very nature of the Tapestry suggests that it did not stay in Canterbury long. Not only could the individual linen segments be taken apart for travel and then stitched back together, but the Tapestry could have easily been rolled up, placed in a trunk or chest of some sort, and moved from place to place. Odo could have traveled with the Tapestry as he moved from one estate to the next, and we know that the Bayeux Tapestry decorated the Bayeux Cathedral by 1476, the earliest documented date regarding the location of the Tapestry.⁴⁵

While the Tapestry did eventually end up at Bayeux Cathedral, several factors indicate that Bishop Odo intended its original place of display to be a secular hall. The length and width of the piece suggests that it would have hung continuously along the wall of a feasting room, possibly below windows that would allow the designs to be seen in the light.⁴⁶ The design does not indicate that it would have originally been intended to hang in a Cathedral, for to be placed above columns in the nave in a frieze-like position would have rendered all of the design much too small to be seen (See Figure 14).⁴⁷ The secular nature of the work suggests this as well, for the thematic elements of the narrative depicted concern a war where even clerics wield arms. Though certainly military works hung in cathedrals, and this one eventually did, its creation

⁴⁴ Grape, 31.

⁴⁵ Shirley Ann, Brown. *The Bayeux Tapestry: History and Bibliography*. (Wolfeboro, New Hampshire: The Boydell Press, 1988), 3.

⁴⁶ Bernstein, 105.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

coincided with the eleventh-century Truce of God and Peace of God.⁴⁸ The Church, concerned about the effects of constant feudal warfare on the stability of society, passed these efforts in order to curb this violence. The message of the Tapestry would therefore have been at odds with stated church goals at this time.

In the midst of these ecclesiastical reforms, it is unlikely that a work of this kind would have been intended for a religious space. Odo likely had something similar to Dover Priory as one of his estates. The dining room with its 254 foot perimeter and twelve-foot high walls beneath a row of windows would have been perfect for showcasing the Tapestry.⁴⁹ The feast scene in the Bayeux Tapestry where Odo says grace may have even been designed to hang over Odo himself as he dined in his hall.⁵⁰ In Bayeux Cathedral, church officials displayed the Tapestry in the nave of the church only on feast days, which likely accounts for its survival. This sparing presentation also suggests that it was better suited for a secular hall; it was shown on the feast days of the relics because of the special importance it granted them, but at all other times it was stored, indicating that its overall subject did not meet with canonical approval.⁵¹ Little embroidery from the time survives at all, and it is the only piece of this magnitude.⁵²

If the Tapestry followed Bishop Odo on his wanderings around England and Western Continental Europe, only Odo's intimates and guests would likely have seen it. However, the mobile nature of the object means that this small audience would have been comprised of people

⁴⁸ The Peace of God gave immunity to noncombatants during feudal warfare, including people such as the woman fleeing from her burning house in the Bayeux Tapestry. The Truce of God set aside certain days of the year on which no fighting could occur for Christian men. This was intended to keep Christians in warring feudatories from fighting with each other, as the list of days on which warfare was prohibited grew to include almost the entire year. These measures did not in actuality prevent much, but were pushed by Church officials during the period. Interestingly, knights were made to swear oaths to uphold both of these on sacred relics such as the ones used in the Bayeux Tapestry.

⁴⁹ Lewis, 6.

⁵⁰ Berstein, 107.

⁵¹ There are obviously secular works, even ones dealing with military and sexual topics in cathedrals. However, the design of the tapestry in conjunction with this type of subject matter would certainly make the selection of a cathedral nave as an original place of display a strange one.

⁵² Musset, 9.

of several different nationalities, stations, and occupations; nobles and clerics may have seen the Bayeux Tapestry, as well as French and English families, servants, and vassals. While at Bayeux Cathedral, that number would have been limited again to those attending mass and visitors. Overall, the group of people exposed to the Bayeux Tapestry prior to its so-called rediscovery in the eighteenth-century would have been necessarily very small, but would have included those best-placed to disseminate its story and style.

III. Interpretations, Main and Marginal

Interpretations of the Bayeux Tapestry as a whole are varied and complex. While some historians have argued that the work consists of a pro-English point of view, the idea that Odo and others remained blithely unaware of a work designed to mock them requires the enormous assumption of a thoroughly uneducated Norman viewer.⁵³ More likely, the Bayeux Tapestry served as a work of pro-Norman propaganda, an attempt to legitimize William's rule over the Anglo-Saxon realm. Throughout, Harold is depicted as treacherous; he betrayed William by breaking an oath sworn on sacred relics and, as the Tapestry posits, deserved to lose his throne and to die because of this. Additionally, a good portion of the tapestry shows the personal relationship, even friendship, between Harold and Duke William.⁵⁴ William rescues the hostage Harold, they go on a quest together, they feast, and Harold swears an oath of loyalty to William. William of Poitiers recounts, "[The Duke] then led Harold with all due honor into Rouen, the capital city of his principality, where various kinds of courteous hospitality refreshed in a most entertaining manner those who had suffered through the effort of the journey."⁵⁵ This emphasis

⁵³ A particularly interesting theory, although tangential to this paper, is that put forward by David J. Bernstein in his *The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Bernstein posits that the Norman Conquest of the Anglo-Saxons is comparable to the Babylonian Conquest and Captivity of the Jews. In the Bible, the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar puts a man named Zedekiah in charge of Judah. Nebuchadnezzar required Zedekiah to swear an oath of loyalty to him, but Zedekiah rebelled after nine years. He was defeated, forced to watch the execution of his sons, and then blinded. The Babylonians laid waste to Judah, sacking Jerusalem and burning down the Temple. The status of the Jews was reduced to almost that of slaves. Bernstein notes the parallels between this Biblical story and the Conquest of England, with Harold as an eleventh century Zedekiah. However, this reading assumes a thoroughly uneducated Norman viewer. It is highly unlikely that Bishop Odo possessed a fiery work of pro-Anglo-Saxon propaganda without being aware of it, and even more unlikely that he would have continued to possess such an object if he was aware of it. Bernstein argues that the Anglo-Saxon embroiderers encoded secret messages into the work that would have been obvious to fellow Anglo-Saxons yet undetectable by Normans. Again, this is assuming an ignorant Norman owner, and if the symbolism is overt enough for Bernstein, in the 20th century, to discern it, one can assume that a contemporary Norman would have realized it.

⁵⁴ Thorpe, 6. Chronicles even recount that William sent envoys to Harold, reminding him of that oath, after he had been crowned. Harold ignored them.

⁵⁵ Bond, 21. As the reader may recall, William of Poitiers was one of the chroniclers whose text the story may be partly based on. This chronicle would naturally assume a pro-Norman point of view as well, so the statements of William perhaps cannot be taken at face value.

on the time Harold took advantage of William's hospitality places even greater weight on his broken oath, casting him as the archetypal (and quintessential) bad guest, a stock character frequently seen in the literature of the following century. Before the bad character of Harold is established, however, he is elevated by the Tapestry's designer to a status equal to that of William: he is referred to in the work by the inscription *dux*, though he was but an Earl.⁵⁶

The Tapestry also shows Harold's capacity for bravery and strength during the expedition to Brittany, which serves to make him a worthy adversary for Duke William and to underline the nobility of William's victory over him.⁵⁷ Indeed, Harold is portrayed as strong and cunning, not a man whom William could defeat easily (the Battle scene occupies most of the work, suggesting that it was no easy fight). In fact, it is William who initially is portrayed as too trusting and in a weaker position through this faith in the oath sworn by Harold. However, William had his own reputation as a warrior. Of the warlike impulses of the Normans, William of Malmesbury wrote, "They are a race inured to war, and can hardly live without it."⁵⁸ Their prowess on the field of battle is well displayed in the work, as their military tactics are far more advanced than those of their Anglo-Saxon foes.

Most of the main action, including all of the depictions of William and Harold, takes place within the main part of the Tapestry. However, the border has bits of information pertinent to the study of the Tapestry, and may provide clues as to how it should be read. The border of the Bayeux Tapestry runs almost the length of the work, top and bottom, though it disappears during the extended battle scene (See Figure 7).⁵⁹ The construction of the border consists mainly of animals and plants, though several figures can be found amongst the foliage. The stylized plants

⁵⁶ Lewis, 24.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Patricia Terry, trans. *The Song of Roland*. (New York: MacMillan, 1965), xv.

⁵⁹ The lower border in this image has completely disintegrated, though the stylistic quality of the upper border is still maintained.

and trees serve as punctuation marks for the beginning and end of scenes, and also as separation between the various animal vignettes and human figures.⁶⁰ In the border, the ties between it and the main section can be seen by the way that the marginal line can be overrun.⁶¹ Spears, lances, and other objects thrust up into it, and some of its animals struggle to free themselves (See Figure 24). Unique among the border figures, and indeed in Western art up until this point, is the depiction of Halley's Comet, which appeared in 1065, right after Harold assumed the throne, in doing so breaking his oath to William.⁶² In the section of the Tapestry in which the Comet appears, Harold sits newly crowned upon the throne, while his attendants marvel and stare at the heavenly apparition above them. Several ships appear in the margin below Harold in the main section (See Figure 18). In a conflation of literary technique and medieval superstition, the Comet's appearance serves as a bad omen, foreshadowing the landing of the Norman ships in England and, ultimately, Harold's downfall. Here, the price to be paid for the broken oath made upon the relics of Bayeux becomes evident to the viewer, underscoring not the power of God, however, but specifically the power of the relics of Bayeux.⁶³ Hunting metaphors also populate the border: below the scene in which Harold is captured by Guy of Ponthieu, a goat, a lion, an ox, and a lamb hunt and capture a deer (See Figure 16).⁶⁴

Not only does this reinforce the identification of Odo as a likely patron, it further exaggerates the abundance of his possessions and his own feudal and ecclesiastical power. In essence, because of the worthiness of the relics housed in the cathedral Odo built, the monarchy was saved for Duke William. Additionally, this provides an example of a literary technique being

⁶⁰ McNulty, 44.

⁶¹ Bernstein, 83.

⁶² Lewis, 25. Interestingly enough, Lewis points out that this same foreshadowing device is seen in the *Song of Roland*, where it becomes dark at noon before the battle.

⁶³ Lewis, 100.

⁶⁴ Bernstein, 125.

employed in a visual medium, the unique narrative format of the Tapestry allowing for story development that was uncharacteristic of most pictorial works of the era. Though no definite link can be discerned, it perhaps provides another instance of the close relationship between the Bayeux Tapestry and the written word.

Many animal scenes populate the borders of the Bayeux Tapestry, with the number of animals totaling 450. These have been identified as representing popular folk tales of the time. Eight of Aesop's fables are illustrated in the borders, randomly distributed and occasionally repeated. This intentional placement of certain stories below specific scenes, as well as the repetition of some of the fables, suggests that they bear on the scenes below which they appear. The tales are: the Fox and Crow, the Wolf and Lamb, Bitch and her Litter, Wolf and Crane, Wolf-King, Mouse and Frog and Kite, the Lion's share, and Goat and Wolf.

At three representations, the story of the Fox and Crow appears the most in the Tapestry. In the fable, a fox challenges a crow to sing while high in a tree, with a piece of cheese in his mouth. When the crow opens his mouth to do so, the cheese falls out and down into the waiting jaws of the fox. In the first representation, under the scene in which Harold feasts at his home in England before journeying to England, the cheese is mid-air (See Figure 17). In the second, below Harold and William journeying together to Brittany, the fox has the cheese (See Figure 20). In the third, under Harold's return to England, the crow once again is in possession of the cheese. If the cheese represents the upper hand in the fight for the English throne, it belongs to Harold when he is safe in England, away from William, and to William when Harold is in his power on Norman soil. When Harold is in the process of leaving his secure seat of power at Bosham, the possession of the cheese is thrown into flux.⁶⁵ The crow eventually loses the cheese to the fox, ultimately because he attempts to sing like other birds, to be something he is not. The

⁶⁵ Lewis, 64.

fable's moral, then, cautions against unwise ambition, a comment upon Harold.⁶⁶ This switching back and forth of power, which of course ends with the death of Harold at the Battle of Hastings, served as a powerful device with which to win over Anglo-Saxon viewers to William's side.

Harold is shown in the Tapestry as being first blinded by an arrow, then cut with a sword through the thigh, a fatal blow (See Figure 21 and 22). Blindness is associated with sinfulness and with moral darkness, just as light is associated with virtue. There are also links between blindness and avarice.⁶⁷ Harold's greed for power leads him to break an oath sworn on relics in the Bayeux Tapestry, and the punishment of blinding is appropriate. Additionally, in 1036, Harold's father Earl Godwin was involved in quelling a rebellion to put the part-Norman Alfred on the throne.⁶⁸ He ordered the blinding of many of his troops and of Alfred himself, who was then killed by Godwin's men. The Normans were outraged by this, and in his chronicle William of Poitiers writes that, since Earl Godwin spilled the blood of Normans, Normans would one day spill the blood of his children.⁶⁹ They did, and in a perfect biblical fashion illustrated the concept of an "eye for an eye."⁷⁰ Blinding was also the form of punishment most favored by William the Conqueror when he was trying to establish order in England.⁷¹ Harold, after he is blinded, is shown being killed by a sword to his thigh. The thigh is connected to oath-making, as in the Bible men would swear oaths by placing a hand under the thigh of another.⁷² There are also European proverbs which equate the leg with honesty, such as "lies have short legs."⁷³ So,

⁶⁶ Ibid., 68.

⁶⁷ Bernstein, 153.

⁶⁸ The introduction of Alfred brings even more complicated genealogy into play. Alfred was a son of Emma, second wife of King Cnut the Dane, by her first husband King Aethelred the Unready. His brother was Edward the Confessor. William the Conqueror was the great-nephew of Emma, whose brother was Duke Robert I of Normandy (William's father was Duke Robert II).

⁶⁹ Bernstein, 158.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 159.

⁷² Ibid., 160.

⁷³ Ibid.

Harold is wounded in both the eye and the thigh, symbolically important placements for the punishment of a perjurer.

The fable of the Dog and her Litter appears below the scene where Harold journeys to Normandy, and under the scene where William is shown inspiring his troops (See Figure 17). The fable involves a pregnant bitch asking another dog to let her use her den to give birth. After her puppies have been born, she and her litter refuse to relinquish the den to its original owner, who cannot fight all of them. The fable indicts Harold's ingratitude as a moral flaw, as the usurping bitch represents the usurping Earl.⁷⁴ The fable shows how Harold had to resort to warfare to try and keep his ill-gotten gains, and emphasizes the way that he has taken advantage of William's generosity and hospitality.

The earliest compilation of the fables represented in the Tapestry is attributed to Marie de France, a twelfth-century French poet, but the fables in question apparently originally came from the collection of the tenth-century Anglo-Saxon king Alfred and would have been very familiar to contemporary viewers.⁷⁵ All of the fables represent some type of deceit or treachery, with one animal using cunning to trick another.⁷⁶ Tellingly, these fables appear below William and Harold at crucial moments in the story, and can be interpreted as signals indicating which man had most successfully employed that cunning to get the upper hand at the moment.⁷⁷ This is another instance of the border, long considered by many to be strictly decorative, acting as a gloss upon or even an active piece of the main narrative. The way that these fables seem to morph and change directly links them to the action above; if they were merely decorative, there would be no such need for asymmetrical reversal.

⁷⁴ Bernstein 130

⁷⁵ Grape, 42.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 43.

In this identification of William and Harold as alternatively victim and assailant, controller and controlled, the masculine/feminine juxtaposition quickly jumps to mind. As the border images alternatively portray either William or Harold as having control over the other, this puts the other man in an inferior, or feminine, position.⁷⁸ The trickery or deception at which these fables hint relates, of course, to the acquisition of the English throne, or the property of England. The idea of rape is very important in a work that essentially depicts the passage of possessions, in this case England or land, from one family to another. Women in this period, literally through dowry systems and in a more figurative sense, also functioned as objects or as the property of the men in whose households they resided.⁷⁹ The rape of a woman was seen as a crime against the property of a man, and any extra-marital sexual activity of a woman as an act that rendered unstable the day's inheritance patterns of the time, particularly the Norman institution of primogeniture.⁸⁰ Rape, then, involved the desecration or abduction of a form of property, and this shifting of victimization seen in the fables relates to the feminization of the man who was being taken advantage of. By allowing Harold to dupe him with his false promises, William finds himself in the position of the female rape victim or her male relatives, swindled out of property. The narrative climax of both the main section of the Tapestry and of the fables portrayed below comes when William claims what is rightly his, and the positions of the animals in some of the fables switch.⁸¹ This climax is directly portrayed in terms of warfare, with William's victory couched not in terms of counter-rape, but as the sexual conquest of a just victor. This switch from rape to sexual conquest also shifts the context of the action from illegal

⁷⁸ Lewis, 60.

⁷⁹ Kathryn Gravdal. "Chretien de Troyes, Gratian, and the Medieval Romance of Sexual Violence." *Signs* 17, no. 3 (Spring, 1992), 567.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 583.

⁸¹ Lewis, 64.

to legal, suggesting that William's legal or true right to the throne prevailed over Harold's illegal, unjust one.

Sexual imagery is found throughout the Bayeux Tapestry, and its presence justifies and even encourages the relation of its under-narrated vignettes to gender and contemporary ideas regarding the division between the sexes. Most of these erotic figures appear in the border of the works at sporadic intervals. In an early section, a nude man approaches another nude woman, arms outstretched (See Figure 25). The man is clearly in the throes of sexual excitement, and the woman seems to respond to, or at least does not discourage, his advances. The next two nude figures in the Tapestry are located below the same scene: the episode with Lady Aelfgyva and a cleric (See Figure 15). A priapic figure stands directly below the Lady Aelfgyva, while another nude male figure to his left bends to chop wood. These marginal figures bear greatly on the interpretation of this scene, which occupies an important place in the story.

The importance of the border of the work cannot be denied in light of the fableaux commentary and the relation of images such as Halley's Comet to the main narrative action. However, some historians have argued that these borders must be taken as purely decorative, devoid of any meaning other than that of entertaining optic diversions.⁸² Mention of the borders are left out of many scholastic compilations on the subject, casting into doubt the validity of much of the existing literature on the Bayeux Tapestry.⁸³ As their connection to the main dialogue proves, the borders are as much a part of the work as the main section. They were designed and executed with a specific purpose in mind, with their complexity and variety disproving the notion that they are purely decorative. The borders may function as an effective commentary on the part of the "other": they betray the thoughts of a third-party observer,

⁸² McNulty, 2.

⁸³ Ibid.

indicating to the viewer how they should think about the story.⁸⁴ The main section may just show the straightforward, chronological action of the Norman Conquest, but the borders say what is important, which cause is right, and give important background information.

By the end of the Tapestry, the integrity of the border disintegrates, as the action from the Battle of Hastings completely spills over into it.⁸⁵ By the end of the extant section, there is no more border at all. This could indicate that the designer needed more room for the battle scenes, or it could show that no outside commentary or gloss was needed, as justice was in the process of prevailing through battle. The borders bear heavily on the interpretation of the Bayeux Tapestry as a gendered work of history as well, placing much of the action into the context of a masculine/feminine dichotomy.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 23.

IV. Women in the Tapestry

Though the Bayeux Tapestry is a gendered work of history, only three women merit treatment in the main narrative. The identity of the first of these, the mysterious Lady Aelfgyva, has caused much speculation.⁸⁶ She is the only woman pictured full-size in the Tapestry (See Figure 15). As Harold, in the preceding scene, points to Aelfgyva and the cleric, their actions are bound with the interaction between William and Harold, who are shown feasting together in Normandy (See Figure 27).⁸⁷ In the piece, a man with a tonsure touches a woman's cheek in what appears to be the doorway of a dwelling.⁸⁸ The inscription above reads, "Where a cleric and Aelfgyva..." (*Ubi unus clericus et Alefgyva*), providing no information about what the cleric and Aelfgyva actually do in this scene. Yet, theories abound as to how the scene should be correctly interpreted. The touching of the cheek typically indicates sexual contact of some kind, as there are examples throughout history of the touching of the cheek as a sexually charged gesture.⁸⁹ If the man in this scenario is indeed a cleric, the assumption follows that the sexual contact is either unwanted or clandestine.⁹⁰ The mystery surrounding this work has been such that many scholars only give it a cursory mention, or omit it from their studies entirely.⁹¹

Some scholars maintain that this scene portrays a clandestine marriage, which could be made legal in the eleventh-century through verbal consent followed by consummation, without

⁸⁶ Clermont- Ferrand, 85. Theories include that she is William's daughter Agatha, betrothed to Harold, or that she is Harold's sister who had been betrothed to William.

⁸⁷ J. Bard McNulty. "The Lady Aelfgyva in the Bayeux Tapestry." *Speculum* 55, no. 4 (October 1980), 664.

⁸⁸ Bond, 18. Though this scene is traditionally interpreted as taking place in a doorway, Bond posits that it could be in an interior, as every other doorway in the work shows a rounded, Romanesque arch.

⁸⁹ McNulty, "Lady", 665.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 664.

⁹¹ Norman Denny and Josephine Filmer-San. *The Bayeux Tapestry: The Story of the Norman Conquest, 1066*. (New York: Athenaeum, 1996), 5. "In short, the scene is a puzzle for scholars, and since it contributes nothing to the story, except a moment of confusion, we have felt justified in leaving it out."

church rites.⁹² The cleric's arm reaches behind the column to touch Aelfgyva, which certainly suggests a secret encounter which resulted in *fornicatio*, breaking vows of both chastity and marriage.⁹³ Others point to the preceding scene, which shows Harold and William enjoying a friendly meal, as an indication that the scene refers to a well-known contemporary sexual scandal which needed no other explanation, a ribald tale over which the two solidified their brief friendship.⁹⁴ Those who maintain this point of view claim that this scandal has been lost over time, which is why historians cannot identify it today.

The most plausible theory presented thus far calls attention to the border figures directly below the embracing cleric and Lady Aelfgyva.⁹⁵ A man with an enormous penis stands nude directly below the couple, his member pointing up at the two. To his left, another nude, sexually aroused man bends to chop wood with an ax. Those who advance this theory reach back into Anglo-Saxon history to King Cnut the Dane, who ruled England in the early eleventh-century. Harold Hadrada, the third claimant to the English throne other than Harold and William, traced his claim through Cnut and Cnut's first wife, named Aelfgyva of Northampton. Aelfgyva gave birth to two sons. These sons were later suspected of illegitimacy due to rumors that held that Aelfgyva had conceived one by a clergyman and one by a woodsman, because she and Cnut were unable to have children. Cnut cast Aelfgyva aside and took a new wife, Emma, who brought him extensive lands as well as local legitimacy, for she was the widow of the previous Anglo-Saxon king, Aethelred the Unready. If the two sons had indeed been conceived illegitimately, Harold Hadrada would have had no legitimate claim to the English throne.

⁹² R. Howard Bloch. *A Needle in the Right Hand of God: The Norman Conquest of 1066 and the Making and Meaning of the Bayeux Tapestry*. (New York: Random House, 2006), 120.

⁹³ Lewis, 87. Contemporary Norman viewers would recall the legislation put into effect by William during the 1060s to curb clerical sexual activity.

⁹⁴ Grape, 40.

⁹⁵ Bond, 27.

In this interpretation, the man with the enlarged penis below Aelfgyva and the cleric personifies the alter-ego of the cleric and symbolizes this sexual liaison, with the woodsman to his left symbolizing the second lover.⁹⁶ Diagonally to the right in the margin below Aelfgyva, there is a dragon known to the Anglo-Saxons as a firedrake (See Figure 15).⁹⁷ Within ecclesiastical contexts during the time, these firedrakes symbolized both desire and evil. If the nude man below the cleric represents his libidinous alter-ego, then the dragon below Aelfgyva may show hers.⁹⁸ This would be fitting in an age where the sexual appetites of women were supposedly uncontrollable, where the Devil himself was thought to use women as bait to trap men in sin.

As for the preceding scene, surely it is plausible that William and Harold could be portrayed discussing a potentially false contender for King Edward's throne, as Harold would later fight a battle against Harold Hadrada for that crown at the Battle of Stamford Bridge. The location of the Aelfgyva scene, right before the oath taken by Harold, underlines its importance. This grants the scene iconographic, rather than historically contiguous, meaning.⁹⁹ The structure of the house is much different than the other buildings shown in Normandy, with the large dragon heads atop the columns indicating an Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Scandinavian location.¹⁰⁰ This again serves to underscore the idea that the scene is not meant to be read in chronological sequence, but refers to an event which took place at another time. The way that the figure of Aelfgyva floats off of the ground also suggests that she is not to be interpreted as "present."¹⁰¹ The scene with Aelfgyva appears just before a scene where an oath that is destined to be broken

⁹⁶Bond, 22.

⁹⁷Bond, 27.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹McNulty, "Lady", 663.

¹⁰⁰Bond, 28.

¹⁰¹Lewis, 88.

is made, possibly linking Aelfgyva's broken oath with Harold's, to leave William as the sole deserving monarch.¹⁰²

Emma was the sister of Duke Richard I of Normandy, and was the second wife of King Cnut the Dane of England after Aelfgyva, who died in 1035. She commissioned the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, a panegyric legitimizing the rule of her son, Harthacnut, as heir to the English throne over the son of Aelfgyva and Cnut. In the *Encomium*, as in the Tapestry, an oath is the central point on which succession rests and, as in the Bayeux Tapestry with Halley's Comet, a storm wreaks havoc.¹⁰³ While a different genre of literature altogether, the *Encomium* seeks to legitimize rule in a time of political and social upheaval, much like the Bayeux Tapestry.¹⁰⁴ Though the Tapestry shows the Normans achieving victory after the Battle of Hastings, the actual process of implanting Norman culture and assimilating the Anglo-Saxon population took years and was marked by violence.¹⁰⁵ The process of Normanization was brutal: by 1087, only one monastic abbot remained who was of Anglo-Saxon origin.¹⁰⁶

This interpretation of the Aelfgyva scene, of course, portrays women in an incredibly unflattering light, as the first depiction of a woman in the Tapestry shows her committing adultery. Here, the fact that Aelfgyva appears in a doorway becomes important. In the tenth-century, women typically constituted part of the possessions of a household, whether their father's household or their husband's.¹⁰⁷ For another man to take possession of that property sexually constituted nothing less than outright theft, with the offense becoming all the more egregious as this transgressor belonged to the clergy.¹⁰⁸ For a woman to engage in such an act

¹⁰² McNulty, "Master", 57.

¹⁰³ Lewis, 26.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 27.

¹⁰⁶ Bernstein, 54.

¹⁰⁷ Gravdal, 567.

¹⁰⁸ Gravdal, 566.

voluntarily, as Aelfgyva with her open arms seems to do, stood as a grave offense. It was the ultimate betrayal of husband and family, whose house or lineage is represented by that door.¹⁰⁹

In an era before the availability of paternity testing, sexual impropriety of this nature caused an inability for a man to distinguish his true heirs. In a society with incredibly strict inheritance patterns, this became even more important, especially in this case when the family involved was the royal one. The tapestry tells a tale of a dangerous, treacherous woman, and the consequences of that betrayal for the whole family. This corresponds neatly to the restrictions Norman laws later placed upon the status of women after the Conquest, which placed them under tighter male control. Aelfgyva's very presence within the story denotes both status and royal succession; she represents not herself, but the subversion of the family line.¹¹⁰

The next woman that the tapestry depicts is Edith, the Queen of King Edward the Confessor (See Figure 32). She is shown as smaller than other characters, barely discernible next to the men around her. She appears in King Edward's deathbed scene, standing calmly by the foot of the dying king's bed. In contrast to Aelfgyva, Edith appears as the good wife, the saintly queen. She faithfully remains by her husband's side until his death, and her presence at his deathbed suggests that she has been a loyal and dutiful wife. Indeed, historical sources regarding Edith, though scant, portray her as such and attribute a chronicle of the life of King Edward to her patronage.¹¹¹ Edith appears nowhere else in the Tapestry apart from this one minor role, which again implies the negligible status of women (even royal ones) in the Medieval world.

The third woman treated in the main body of the Bayeux Tapestry appears to run away from a burning house, clutching a child (See Figure 6). She also is shown as smaller than the male characters. This scene follows the Norman landing in Pevensey, and shows their

¹⁰⁹ Bond, 26.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Frank Stenton, ed. *The Bayeux Tapestry: A Comprehensive Survey*. (Greenwich, Connecticut: Phaidon, 1965), 11.

destruction of the town and their terrorization of its inhabitants. The woman clearly represents the fate of the entire Anglo-Saxon population, and perhaps the victimization of women specifically, for they proved to be easy targets for sexual assault in times of war. However, given the tone of the rest of the piece, it is arguable that the scene also represents a just punishment for Harold's betrayal of William, a direct consequence not of Norman aggression but of Anglo-Saxon treachery.¹¹² As a potential rape victim, she underlines the inability of Anglo-Saxon men to protect their property from William, a slight upon them and their power by comparison. Of course, this sexual conquest is cast in terms of acceptability: Harold broke the oath and therefore he, and by extension his people, were to suffer punishment. The woman represents not herself, but is a foil for the overarching story.¹¹³ This harkens back to the Aelfgyva scene, and the idea that women function as objects of male possession. The woman, the child, and the burning home all likely belong to an Anglo-Saxon man, absent due to military service on behalf of Harold. The Normans take all of this man's possessions away from him due to this support of the usurper, just as Emma and her sons took away the possessions of the sons of Aelfgyva.

All of this has direct ties back to Bishop Odo of Bayeux, the presumed patron of the work. The largest female landholders prior to the Norman Conquest were Harold's female relatives.¹¹⁴ Almost all of this land was later appropriated by bishop Odo, as accounted in the Domesday Book.¹¹⁵ After the Conquest, only Queen Matilda and seven or eight wives of powerful men held property outright, and only that land which was given to them in dower.¹¹⁶ These women were lucky: the dower land which women by and large previously had control over under Anglo-

¹¹² Bernstein, 160.

¹¹³ Bond, 26.

¹¹⁴ Pauline Stafford. "Women and the Norman Conquest." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series, 4 (1994), 226.

¹¹⁵ Bates, 8.

¹¹⁶ J.C. Holt. "Presidential Address: Feudal Society and the Family in Early Medieval England: IV. The Heiress and the Alien." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series, 35 (1985), 4.

Saxon rule was placed under male control by the end of the process of Normanization.¹¹⁷ Odo had a vested interest in legitimizing his own gains as a result of the Conquest, as well as legitimizing William.

This scaling back of the rights of women also coincided with an increase in overall misogynistic practices; the tendency to represent women allegorically as Eve the Temptress can be observed.¹¹⁸ As Odo stood as a direct beneficiary of the fall of the English aristocracy, it comes as no surprise that the Bayeux Tapestry features at its core the treachery of woman in general and a justification of this appropriation. Norman culture was a much more misogynistic one than the Anglo-Saxon society; women were not considered fit to own property or to have control of themselves as they had been under the Anglo-Saxons.¹¹⁹ Indeed, in the event that a daughter had to inherit due to a lack of suitable males, primogeniture among females went into effect, ensuring that once the girl married, the land could pass whole to the control of men, in this case her new husband.¹²⁰

This depiction of women as dangerous and treacherous falls in neatly with the chronicle of Orderic Vitalis, who later wrote of the Anglo-Saxon men as being weak and feminine.¹²¹ A clear instance of pro-Norman propaganda, this view held that the Normans had to reign in the lusty, adulterous Anglo-Saxon women, while replacing the effeminate, ineffective Anglo-Saxon male system of control with a form of their own. This coincides with the introduction of stricter laws of primogeniture, which began in earnest soon after the Conquest.¹²² Stricter inheritance laws placed even more importance on the fidelity of wives, and so women's ability to assert any

¹¹⁷ Sharon Farmer. "Persuasive Voices: Clerical Images of Medieval Wives". *Speculum* 61, no. 3 (July 1986), 518.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Stafford, 223.

¹²⁰ Holt 4.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Stafford, 223.

kind of independence outside of the home deteriorated. Under the Anglo-Saxons, women enjoyed some legal status, were able to own property, and could inherit land along with their male siblings. For the most part, the introduction of Norman customs changed all of these things, and these changes remained in place for hundreds of years.¹²³ Indeed, nineteenth-century commentators on the property rights of English women under Anglo-Saxon rule were astonished to find that Anglo-Saxon women had more legal rights than most contemporary English women.¹²⁴ The introduction of Norman feudal law stripped all of this away from women, rendering them as thoroughly passive subjects.

The Bayeux Tapestry, constructed from an ostensibly Norman point of view, makes certain pictorial generalizations regarding men. The Normans appear clean-shaven and with shorter haircuts (See Figure 27). Anglo-Saxons, by contrast, typically appear with long hair and wispy mustaches, both of which connote feminine qualities, as Orderic Vitalis had said.¹²⁵ The Anglo-Saxon men are portrayed as women: they resort to treachery and deceit in order to gain power, and are not fit to maintain control of their land, just as women supposedly were not able to do. The Tapestry may imply, by way of the distinctions between the hairstyles of the two cultures, that the Normans conquered the Anglo-Saxons due to their weak, feminine nature. Just as the invading Norman troops conquer or subdue the peasant woman who flees her burning dwelling, the Normans invade, conquer, or subdue the male Anglo-Saxons when they defeat them at the Battle of Hastings. The conquest, in these terms, can be seen as essentially a drawn-out sexual metaphor; the manly Normans steal the land and possessions of the womanly Anglo-Saxon soldiers, rendering them passive victims of their virile sexual conquest. In fact, the

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Stafford, 222.

¹²⁵ Holt, 4.

Tapestry makes other statements about gender roles and the way that different characters occupy archetypal positions within the genre of conquest literature, particularly with regards to women.

V. Gender Roles

In the Bayeux Tapestry, both the male and female characters occupy certain gender roles, in many cases representing not themselves as individuals, but rather stock character types that serve to underline the main points of the story. They either emphasize the just nature of the Conquest itself, the need for the harsh period following the Battle of Hastings during which Norman culture was swiftly and violently imposed upon the Anglo-Saxon peoples, or they further legitimize William's own claim to the throne in the first place. The stock types assigned to women, however, pervaded literature for centuries to come, and while only some of the men in the story act as generalized characters, all of the women in the work do.

The first of these different roles, that of the whore or lusty woman, can be deduced in several different places throughout the narrative. The first of these, the vignette in which the mysterious Lady Aelfgyva appears, serves as the most poignant example of the whore stereotype. The distinct possibility that the Lady Aelfgyva could represent an adulterous woman, or the adulterous wife of the King of England, certainly places her within the category of the whore or sexually uncontrollable woman, perhaps the most archetypal incarnation of that gender role. Though no evidence appears of any sort of monetary transaction with regards to the likely sexual activity between Lady Aelfgyva and the cleric, the figure certainly conducts herself in a manner inconsistent with the sexual mores of the time. In an age where wives seem to be peculiarly expendable, Aelfgyva attempts to use sex in order to maintain her status, which will likely deteriorate should she fail to produce an heir. Whether she actually is complicit or whether the act takes place against her will is of no consequence; as a woman and a wife, she is blamed regardless.¹²⁶ The presence of another lover below the scene in the margins, as well as the visibly aroused male below, certainly suggests inappropriate yet voluntary copulation. The stereotype of

¹²⁶ Bond, 26.

the whore, or the sexually depraved woman, is again alluded to in the margins when a nude man, sexually aroused, appears and in the act of grabbing the nude woman (See Figure 25). She turns to him, and appears complicit in the act. They do not yet touch, but one is given to understand that much touching will soon occur.

The role of the “Madonna” serves as an appropriate counterpart to the role of the whore discussed above. The most obvious incarnation of the woman as “Madonna” can be seen in Edith, the wife of King Edward the Confessor. Present at her husband’s deathbed, she serves as an example of lifelong fidelity, of wifely stability and loyalty. Emma, the second wife of King Cnut, can fill this role as well, for she remained with him until his death, and escaped the rumors of infidelity that dogged her rival. Though neither Emma nor Cnut both do not appear in the Tapestry, the presence of Lady Aelfgyva alludes to both in their absence. If the Lady Aelfgyva serves to remind the viewer of the whore, Emma as her rival can be seen as the “Madonna,” the faithful wife who did not make a cuckold of the King. Undoubtedly Lady Aelfgyva’s very presence in the Tapestry underlines Emma’s own goodness in contrast.

The two of these stereotypes combined give an overall representation of the different gendered ideas regarding the wife, both good and bad. Obviously, the Lady Aelfgyva represented the bad wife, the unfaithful woman who attempts to put a bastard child on the throne of England, and threatened the status of her husband by doing so. This likely became exaggerated by Norman standards, as its society placed a higher value on the obedience of women and their control by their male relatives.¹²⁷ As a contrast, both Edith and Emma may have represented the good wife. They fulfill the “Madonna” role through the same mechanism: their sexual fidelity and the restriction of their sexual activity to marital relations makes them role models of idealized behavior.

¹²⁷ Stafford, 223.

This brings us to another gender role for women, that of the Mother. Three others are depicted or alluded to in the Tapestry: Aelfgyva, Emma, and the peasant woman. The peasant woman is the only character in the Tapestry who appears as a mother outright, as she clutches her child in her arms. Aelfgyva, in her position as the mother of bastard sons, probably cannot be placed within the realm of purported good mothers; yet her ambition on behalf of those sons renders the position of Aelfgyva more nuanced. Emma, alluded to by the presence of Aelfgyva, gives birth to sons who perpetuate the line of Cnut, certainly securing her place as the archetypal good mother, if it can be quantified by the number of legitimate male offspring. All of these depictions underline the principle role and expectation of women at this time: women were expected to have children, and these children were supposed to be legitimate and male. The occupation of this role represents the culmination of their earthly existence in terms of value in the eyes of society.

A woman's worth in this time was determined by sexual activity, and in essence by the success of each coupling with regards to childbirth. However, within the Tapestry different depictions of the nature of that sexuality appear. The rape victim, as a gender stereotype, appears in many places in the Tapestry. The most obvious could be Aelfgyva; no clues are given as to whether her crime was committed voluntarily or whether she suffered as a victim of clerical misconduct, but either way a crime has been committed against the property of her husband. Clerics possessed rather lusty reputations at the time, and later served as stock character of sexual aggression in literature.¹²⁸ The peasant woman also likely represents a rape victim, or a potential rape victim. She can be seen as one of the victims of the war, but through the Norman view a victim of Harold's treachery in usurping the English throne. Along these same lines, England itself can be seen as a victim of sexual conquest, as plundered and victimized by the

¹²⁸ Bond, 37.

invading male Normans. This victimization of the country leads back to the main conflict of the narrative of the Tapestry: that of the betrayal of Harold. Harold, of course, initiates the process of victimization by first betraying, or metaphorically raping, Normandy and William. In swearing his oath on the relics of Bayeux and befriending the Duke William, Harold places the authority of Duke William in a weak or feminine position of which he takes advantage. Of course, William eventually avenges this by placing Harold in the ultimate position of weakness by the end of the narrative by killing him.

Just as women in the Tapestry fill archetypal roles regarding the status of women in the eleventh-century, men fill these roles as well. Norman men in the Bayeux Tapestry appear in the guises of hero, knight, and soldier. Likewise, Harold and his Anglo-Saxon army represent the anti-heroes, with Harold as the central villain, the tragic, flawed character. Finally, the work shows both Norman and English men as priests and clerics, most notably the cleric shown with Lady Aelfgyva and Bishop Odo himself. Indeed, the majority of the characters are male and anonymous, and they serve as foils much as the women in the Bayeux Tapestry do: they are on the field of battle, constructing ships, or sailing across the English Channel. This suggests that, within the framework of an actual historical event, the Tapestry also concerns the interplay of interchangeable, stock character types, both male and female.

VI: Episodic Units in the Bayeux Tapestry and in Medieval Secular Epics

Women also constituted a presence in contemporary poetry, though typically they functioned as peripheral characters, as they do in the *Song of Roland*. The men in the Bayeux Tapestry also occupy similar roles to those played by the men in the *Song of Roland*: they feast, they fight, and they function as feudal lords and vassals. Indeed, William's conquest of England involves much of the same ethical and political troubles as the fight between Charlemagne's loyal and errant vassals in *Roland*, and would have catered to much the same class or audience.¹²⁹ The *Song of Roland*, considered by many to be the first chivalric, secular epic poem, appeared about 1090-1100, not long after the dates earlier posited as the ones during which the Tapestry was most likely created.¹³⁰ The *Song of Roland* likely was composed after 1086, the year in which the battle of Zalaca took place. Many believe that the tripartite organization of the Battle of Roncesvalles in *Roland* comes from this historic battle's own three-part structure.¹³¹ The *Song of Roland* is known to have been written by a Norman, the language in which it is composed being a conflation of both the Anglo-Saxon and Norman tongues, based on the old French that the Normans brought to England during the Conquest.¹³²

A man named Tuoldus is often thought to have written the *Song of Roland*, for the last section of that work states, "Here ends the poem, for Tuoldus reclines."¹³³ While there is no evidence that this Tuoldus is the same Tuold the dwarf named in the Tapestry, the fact that Odo may have commissioned the first written version of the *Song of Roland* is even more intriguing

¹²⁹ Lewis, 22.

¹³⁰ Terry, xvii.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., xiii. Apparently, this language now has far more in common with modern Spanish or Italian than French.

¹³³ Ibid., 146.

when one considers that a man named Turolde was purported to be in his service at the time (See Figure 30). In the Bayeux Tapestry, the dwarf Turolde's clothing identifies him as a *jongleur*, a sort of combined minstrel, artist, musician, and jester in courtly society.¹³⁴ It is unclear in whose service this *jongleur* is held, but sources indicate that a Turolde of Rochester was a vassal of Odo.¹³⁵ As Turolde's name appears in the text, one of the only non-central names to do so, this dwarf Turolde must be no ordinary *jongleur*.¹³⁶ It is said that the *Song of Roland* was recited on the battlefield at Hastings, and that would have been done by a *jongleur*. Could this *jongleur* have later written down the *Song of Roland*, influenced by the Tapestry in which he appears, and which may have been commissioned by his lord? More intriguingly, if the Bayeux Tapestry was not in fact designed by a monk at Canterbury, could this Turolde be the eyewitness designer of the Bayeux Tapestry as well? The dwarf motif is one that can be found in many medieval *chansons*; Chretien de Troyes's *Erec et Enide* (1160) features an evil dwarf as a chief antagonist.¹³⁷ Medieval culture was fascinated by dwarfism, and dwarves were employed by many wealthy households. It must be remembered, that Turolde was a fairly common name.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, it still stands that if both of these epics, written and visual, came from the same person, this epic tradition could have originated from the same source, and this could explain the similarities between the two works. Indeed, in the *Song of Roland*, Charlemagne is said to have "crossed the sea to England and won the poll-tax for Rome's own use" and that "England became his domain."¹³⁹ Charlemagne never did either of those things, but William the Conqueror did,

¹³⁴ Bridgeford, 229.

¹³⁵ Bloch, 121.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Bridgeford, 229.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 234.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 240.

suggesting that the author of the *Song of Roland* was either consciously or unconsciously appropriating material from the Norman Conquest, and the Bayeux Tapestry by extension.¹⁴⁰

The story of *Roland* comes from the *Vita Caroli Magni* of Einhard, which was written between 814 and 821. In it, a short description of the Battle of Roncesvalles can be found, though it was much embellished in the epic that followed.¹⁴¹ In this epic, women act as dramatic foils for either husbands or male relatives, the men in control of them. This bears on the tapestry precisely because of the possibility that Bishop Odo, patron of the Bayeux Tapestry, may have commissioned the first known textual version of the *Song of Roland*. This affinity suggests that there may be a link between the way women are shown in the Bayeux Tapestry and in the *Song of Roland*. If the Bayeux Tapestry, with its battle narrative and visual secular epic formula, preceded the penning of the *Song of Roland*, and was in the possession of the commissioner, does it not logically follow that the Tapestry may have served as a visual influence on this written tradition? Of the *chansons-des-gestes*, it is agreed that the *Song of Roland* is the earliest extant, and likely the absolute earliest.¹⁴² Over 100 of these epics from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries still survive.¹⁴³ The chivalric secular epic tradition began to flourish principally in the twelfth-century, due to the works of Chretien de Troyes, who wrote the Arthurian romances based on earlier oral collections of legends and stories. Just as in the Bayeux Tapestry, rape and the threat of rape played an incredibly important part in Chretiens' narrative.¹⁴⁴ It has been argued that this rape theme was used to signify the "other"; knights from different kingdoms or men from non-noble backgrounds, whose crimes against the French aristocratic men and their

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Terry, xv.

¹⁴² Ibid., xviii.

¹⁴³ Bridgeford, 233.

¹⁴⁴ Gravidal, 567.

households threatened the authority of lower feudal lords.¹⁴⁵ This theme can be traced from its apparent literary inception with the work of Chretien de Troyes through the development of the romantic genre, informing notions of courtly love for centuries.

One of these writers in the courtly tradition, Baudri of Bourgeuil describes a tapestry in the possession of Adele of Blois, the daughter of William the Conqueror, in his *Adelae Comitassae*.¹⁴⁶ He describes the tapestry as depicting the Norman Conquest of England, made of gold and silver and strung throughout with precious jewels, and as hanging in the bedchamber of the Countess Adele. Though the Bayeux Tapestry certainly consists of much humbler materials, and was too lengthy to have fit inside a bedchamber, could Baudri have come into contact with the Bayeux Tapestry and then added considerable embellishment in his account? Certainly the phenomenon of medieval exaggeration is not unheard of. This would place the Bayeux Tapestry in France during the twelfth-century and present in a secular, courtly setting, and would seem to suggest that writers and poets had some access to it. Baudri describes this Tapestry as ending with William the Conqueror's coronation on December 25, 1066, a hint that this may be what the end of the actual Tapestry showed.¹⁴⁷ The Tapestry must have been in Normandy by 1100 in order for Baudri to have written about it in the *Commissae*.¹⁴⁸ It likely journeyed back with Odo in 1088 when he was finally expelled from England.

The interplay between these interchangeable stock characters in the literary works of Chretien and others seen earlier echo those in the Bayeux Tapestry's scenes that also take on an interchangeable, stock nature. These scenes characterize the literary tradition that followed the creation of the Bayeux Tapestry as well, forming the backbone of the narrative structures which

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 563.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Bridgeford, 26.

¹⁴⁸ Richard Gameson, ed. *The Study of the Bayeux Tapestry: A Monument to a Norman Triumph*. (Wolfeboro, New Hampshire: Boydell Press, 1997), 151.

pervaded secular written epics.¹⁴⁹ That narrative structure, like in the the Bayeux Tapestry, described the feudal order and promoted its legitimization, maintenance, and protection.¹⁵⁰

Certainly others that cannot be discerned within the Bayeux Tapestry can be cited, but those present in the work function as symbols outside the bounds of this particular story. In the *Song of Roland* (c. 1100), *Yvain* by Chretien de Troyes (c. 1170), and *Silence de la Rose* by Heldris of Cornwall (c. 1210), three secular epics spanning two countries and two centuries, these stock scenes can be seen again and again, confirming that the same structure is present in all four.¹⁵¹

The most prominent of these undoubtedly is the trope of the battle, which physically occupies the most space in the work and serves as the climax to which all prior action is focused.¹⁵² Certainly, in the *Song of Roland*, the Battle of Roncevalles occupies the same narrative position that the Battle of Hastings does in the Bayeux Tapestry, occurring near the end of the work. However, this battle is couched in slightly different terms. At the beginning of *Roland*, the Saracen king states, “For Charles has come, the ruler of sweet France/To seize our lands, and bring us to our knees.”¹⁵³ Here, as in the Bayeux Tapestry, an invading army seeks to conquer another kingdom. The moral impetus is not due to a broken oath, or over the succession to the throne; rather, the *Song of Roland* is presented in terms of a religious struggle, pagans versus Christians. Battles and duels also have their place in *Yvain*. “Each one carried a stiff, stout lance, with which they dealt such mighty blows that they pierced the shields about their necks,

¹⁴⁹ Gravdal, 564.

¹⁵⁰ Lewis, 21.

¹⁵¹ Sarah Roche Mahdi, ed. *Silence: A 13th Century French Romance*. (East Lansing, MI: East Lansing Press, 1992). xii. Nothing today is known about Heldris of Cornwall, other than she was a female writer from Cornwall who identified herself in the introduction and epilogue of *Silence of the Rose*. Though Heldris describes herself as being from Cornwall, her work is written in the French language, suggesting that she may have moved from England to France. The work is dated from the thirteen century.

¹⁵² Gravdal, 564.

¹⁵³ Terry, 4.

and cut the meshes of their hauberks.”¹⁵⁴ The battle also appears in *Silence de la Rose*. The tale opens with a description of a battle currently being waged: “Between him and the King of England/ A war had lasted a very long time/ It began over something trivial/ Then many houses were set on fire...”¹⁵⁵ This conflict between the kings of Norway and England is resolved through the exchange of property, and not unlike the theme in the Bayeux Tapestry, that property is women. The troubles between the two monarchs are solved in the end through marriage, as so many are throughout history. However, before peace can be made the battle must be fought, both here and at Hastings. This epic also hints that the fighting between England and Norway in the eleventh-century provided fodder for fictional tales long after the dust had settled on the battlefield at Hastings. No epic could be complete without a battle scene. It is the climax to which all epics build, the one way that feudal societies saw fit to settle most conflicts. Whether involving clashing armies or a duel between two single knights, the battle occupies the heart of every epic tale, whether it be through the space dedicated to the Battle of Hastings or through its placement at the center of its written counterparts.

Following this, one of the most important thematic elements is the quest or journey. The quest or journey appears twice in the Bayeux Tapestry, both when Harold voyages to Normandy to meet with Duke William, whose rescue of Harold resulted in their Journey to Brittany to suppress an errant Norman vassal, and again when William comes to England to take the throne from Harold. In Chretien’s *Yvain* (c. 1170), the story revolves around a tale of the knight, Calogrenant, and a journey he once took. The tales of this journey inspire the title character Yvain to undertake the same quest as this Calogrenant. In *Silence de la Rose* (c. 1210), several

¹⁵⁴ Troyes, Chretien de. *Arthurian Romances*. Trans. and ed. W.W. Comfort. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons LTD, 1958), 190.

¹⁵⁵ Roche-Mahdi, 9.

journeys are also made. In a genre of literature which necessitates conflict between different communities or kingdoms, the journey or quest often serves to set up conflict.

The *Song of Roland* and the Bayeux Tapestry have a special similarity in that they both depict bishops occupying secular, central roles in a military campaign. They both even feature their respective clerics, Archbishop Turpin and Bishop Odo, in principal advisory roles.

“Beneath a pine the Emperor takes his place/ And calls his barons to say what they would do/
Duke Ogies, Archbishop Turpin came...”¹⁵⁶ In the Bayeux Tapestry, Williams calls together Odo, his other half-brother Robert, and other nobles in Normandy to discuss whether he should voyage to England to reclaim his throne from Harold. In the *Song of Roland*, Charlemagne consults his nobles in much the same manner, including Archbishop Turpin, who can be seen as the fictional counterpart to Bishop Odo, who is shown in the Bayeux Tapestry as the one who convinces William to invade.¹⁵⁷ Not only does this attest to the position clerics could occupy in feudal territorial affairs, it would again underline Bishop Odo’s own status and importance if he did, in fact, have anything to do with the commissioning of the *Song of Roland*. The Archbishop Turpin is also seen spurring on the troops during battle, just as Bishop Odo is pictured doing in the Bayeux Tapestry. The *Song of Roland* reads, “Archbishop Turpin comes forward then to speak/ He spurs a horse and gallops up a hill/ Summons the Franks and preaches in these words/ “My noble lords, Charlemagne left us here/ And may our deaths do honor to the king!”¹⁵⁸ This theme of the battling bishop places these men, with their benefit of clergy, in possession of skills and traits that the laity is without. “Then the archbishop, blessing them in God’s name/ Told

¹⁵⁶ Terry, 9.

¹⁵⁷ Bernstein, 137. According to William of Poitiers, Duke William actually gathered all of his vassals together for council, and Odo and other clergy did not occupy positions of prominence during that council.

¹⁵⁸ Terry, 45.

them, for penance, to strike when battle came.”¹⁵⁹ This quote also shows that the canonical warriors operated on a different plane, and shows the absolute intertwining of the secular and the sacred that pervaded the feudal order. Perhaps the image of Bishop Odo on the field at Hastings influenced the way in which the author of the *Song of Roland* drew the character of Archbishop Turpin: “Now through the Battle Archbishop Turpin rides/ No tonsured priest who ever sang a mass/ Had such high courage to do heroic deeds.”¹⁶⁰ This passage demonstrates again how the archbishop’s religious and feudal lives had merged into one. The archbishop is capable of both performing mass and performing heroically in war.

Another stock piece in medieval epic literature is the oath or knight dubbing ritual. The oath or knight dubbing forms the basis of Harold’s betrayal of William, and also the motivation for Bishop Odo’s personal involvement in both the campaign against Harold and his commissioning of the Tapestry itself, due to the fact that the oath was sworn on the relics of Bayeux Cathedral. This same treachery can be seen in the *Song of Roland*, as the deceitful vassal Ganelon makes a deal with the enemy. First, Ganelon swears an oath to the Saracens that he will help them to defeat Roland. In the *Song of Roland*, the narrator describes this oath, “Then says Marseile, “There’s one more thing to do/ since all good counsel depends on perfect trust/Give me your oath that Roland is to die/ He swore by the relics carried in his sword.”¹⁶¹ Ganelon then aids in hiding this newfound alliance from the Frankish Emperor. The *Song of Roland* then continues: “The envoys mount, and as they ride away/ Each in his hands holds high the olive branch/ They go to Charles, who rules the Frankish land/ He will not see the treachery they’ve planned.”¹⁶² In the *Song of Roland* (c. 1100), of course, betrayal comes at the hands of a

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 46.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 62.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 26.

¹⁶² Ibid., 7.

fellow Frank rather than a foreign Anglo-Saxon, as happens in the Bayeux Tapestry. However, this element of treachery is similar in that Harold established a friendship with William before he betrayed him; this trust of a person destined to deceive is a crucial part of the justification for the punishment of that betrayal. Death or funeral scenes, apart from the many included within the battle, include the deaths of Edward the Confessor, which leaves the throne unoccupied, and of Harold himself, which ends the Battle and puts William on the throne. Here, Ganelon swears upon holy relics that he will help the Saracens to kill Roland. In this case, the oath is carried out rather than broken, but the oath itself is of a treacherous nature. The oath is one of the most integral parts of the secular epic, and one of the episodic units invoked most often.

Indeed, an oath appears at the center of *Yvain* (c. 1170) as well. Yvain swears an oath to his new bride that, though he must go off questing with his Lord Gawain, he would return to her within one year. Yvain breaks his oath, and his love dies of sadness. The importance of the oath is not to be underestimated in feudal culture, particularly since in the absence of written contracts, the honor-bound exchange of words was the surest means of security. This concept of honor, and the consequences for those who break this bond, form one of the most common reasons for conflict within these tales. In *Silence de la Rose* (c. 1210), written by a woman, two orphaned heiresses marry two counts within the King's domain. Their husbands duel rather than divide the patrimony, and both are killed. Because of this, the King issues a decree that prohibits property from following in the female line. The oath taken here directly bears on the disenfranchisement of women in eleventh-century England. The oath sworn by the King reads, "But by the faith I owe Saint Peter/ No woman shall ever inherit again/ in this kingdom of England/ As long as I reign over the land."¹⁶³ This quote not only attests to the property rights of women that were lost after the Norman Conquest, but shows the way that women were systematically disinherited. In

¹⁶³ Roche-Mahdi, 9.

this epic, a new viewpoint emerges through the hand of a female poet: that of one of these women who was deprived of a right historically enjoyed by her female ancestors. While this particular epic eventually demonstrates why this is unjust, it must be taken as an anomaly, due to the fact that few of these epics were written by women. What this does demonstrate, however, is that both the Bayeux Tapestry and these epics concern the transfer of property, both the correct and incorrect ways in which this can happen. The Bayeux Tapestry and this epic show that land was one of the most important things in society at this time, and the form another source for many of the battles that populate these stories.

Another stock part of the epic tradition is the crossing of water. The crossing of water occurs twice over the English Channel in the Bayeux Tapestry, and accompanies the journey as a way that the epic narrative throws safety and security into doubt. In *Silence de la Rose*, a long account of the journey of the English king's new bride from Norway appears. "He had his ships made ready/ masts and sails and spars/ and had collected and placed there/ whatever was needed for ocean voyage."¹⁶⁴ Here, the daughter of the Norwegian king leaves her secure home and family to journey to England, where one must assume she will soon be drawn into conflict (she is). This departure from a land of safety to a land of conflict happens for Harold when he goes to Normandy, and for William when he sails to England.

Yet another stock theme is the hospitality of a squire. When Harold arrives in Rouen, he is treated to the hospitality of a squire, in this case William. The same hospitality occurs in *Yvain*, for while on his quest, Yvain recounts, "That night, indeed, I was well lodged/ and as soon as the morning light appeared, I found my steed ready and saddled/ as I had requested the night before."¹⁶⁵ As Harold enjoys the hospitality of William, so Calogrenant and Yvain enjoy the

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶⁵ Terry, 183.

hospitality of a different squire on their journey. While combining elements of charity and generosity, this hospitality also functioned as a way for hosts to demonstrate their power, in a beneficent manner. Not only did it show that the host felt secure enough militarily to allow another possible rival into his home, it demonstrated the largesse of his table by providing the visitor with food.

The Feast forms the last of these stock episodes, and occurs many times in the Bayeux Tapestry: there is a feast before Harold departs for Normandy, a feast when Harold arrives in Rouen, a feast before William gives the order to invade England, and a feast when the Normans land in England. These, present in the Bayeux Tapestry, also occur in all or most of the secular epic poems in the tradition that was to develop in the twelfth-century. In *Yvain*, the story opens with a feast as well. "Arthur, the good king of Britain... held a rich and royal court upon that feast-day, which is always known by the name of Pentecost."¹⁶⁶ One may remember that the Bayeux Tapestry, at Bayeux Cathedral, once formed the visual centerpiece of the celebration of just such a feast day. The feast represented the epitome of social interaction (other than the battle) in these epics, and seems to be a frequent device used by authors to begin an epic.

Apart from these stock scenes and episodes, it can be argued that scenes of rape, both overt and hidden, pervade these works. Rape, in this sense, functions as a narrative device, much in the same way that the presence of the women in the Tapestry mentioned earlier do.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, the treatment of women in these epics indicates that they are to be interpreted as such.¹⁶⁸ In *Yvain*, for example, the wife and love of the title character is never named, and she exerts as much influence when she is dead than she does when she is alive. Her presence serves as a foil for the actions of *Yvain*, just as the women in the *Song of Roland* do for the characters in that epic. As

¹⁶⁶ Troyes, 180

¹⁶⁷ Gravdal, 559.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

this attitude about women was a mainstay in the literature of the early modern period, the same attitude is taken toward the rape scene. Chretien de Troyes links rape with romance, which is grounded in ideas of gender inequality.¹⁶⁹ These Arthurian romances transformed the nature of how couplings are written about, and therefore, if these rape scenes can be traced back to the Bayeux Tapestry, it can be argued that the Bayeux Tapestry helped to influence how women and rape are handled throughout the history of Western literature.

Chretien frequently casts rapists in terms of the “other,” they are knights from distant kingdoms or men from lower classes.¹⁷⁰ The rape imagery of the Tapestry follows these same conventions, with the violent transfer of property, whether land or women, occurring between two different cultures. The threat of rape and the loss of status that accompanies the crime also impels characters to protect against it, and presents an opportunity to showcase power similar to the hospitality of a squire. Chretien often lets rape scenes function as a representation of power in this way, as the threat of rape by a villain showcases the virtue of the man who rescues the woman.¹⁷¹ In doing so, it also underlines the previously stated need for controlling women: such control helps to protect them from the “other”. It serves as a way to make romance more masculine: when Erec in Chretien’s *Erec et Enide* (c. 1170) steps in to save Enide from rape, it becomes as much a display of aggression and his power as a protective urge.¹⁷² In the Bayeux Tapestry, absence of virile masculinity of the part of the Anglo-Saxons is attested to through the scene with the woman fleeing from the burning building, with its overt suggestions of the threat of rape. No man comes to save the woman, which reflects on the power of the Anglo-Saxon men

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 562.

¹⁷⁰ Gravdal, 559.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

to guard their property. Again, the woman is a plot device, designed to say something about the Anglo-Saxon enemy more than to represent an individual.

These same scenes make a visual presence in the Bayeux Tapestry and appear throughout the works penned by those writing in the courtly love tradition. And similar stock characters inhabit these scenes. Clearly, the presence of such similar scenes and subjects indicates a relationship, and it is entirely probable that the Bayeux Tapestry served as a prototype. During the twelfth century, written works became much longer, another possible indication that the extraordinary lengthy Bayeux Tapestry may have influenced the development of secular epics.¹⁷³ It predates the earliest written Arthurian romances and the earliest known version of "The Song of Roland" by decades. Baudri of Bourgeuil, and other poets at least through his work, had knowledge of the Tapestry, which indicates that the narrative flow of the image could have provided a pattern for these poems. As the Tapestry was easy to transport and likely moved a great deal (including at least one Channel crossing,) the potential viewership would have been quite large. Though it would not have been initially displayed in a public setting, courtly audiences unquestionably had access to it.

Furthermore, the cultural blending set in motion by the Norman Conquest of England provided a basis for the widespread dissemination of ideas. Many knights who had accompanied William to England returned to Normandy; William and Odo themselves moved back and forth between England and the continent. Normans moved to England to partake in the acquisition of lands of former Anglo-Saxon nobles. This greater mobility only increased with the onset of the crusades a few years later, creating a shared cultural milieu. Indeed, Odo himself joined the First Crusade, and the Tapestry may even have traveled to Italy, where he had a castle.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Grape, 23.

¹⁷⁴ Bernstein, 108.

One can easily imagine the astonishment and awe that many of the early viewers felt when they saw the piece for the first time. Even modern viewers, inured to size through the proliferation of billboards and other large-scale images, feel these same emotions when confronted with the work. The chance to see a mobile monument of this kind would have been an event for courtiers, and the nature of the Tapestry as both a text and an historical document surely would have attracted those who were interested in the epic retelling of history. If the Tapestry was indeed read aloud for an audience, it becomes highly likely that its structure, its themes of treachery and betrayal, and the construction of its narrative had an impact upon these future writers.

VII. Conclusion

The world in which the Bayeux Tapestry originated was perfectly placed to ensure its widespread dispersal, across England and Continental Europe. Its importance in light of its mobility and the interest piqued by its unique status as a work of art cannot be denied. This thesis has sought to explore the historical origins of the work, placing it in its own historical context regarding patron, designer, location of display, and date of creation. As a whole, the Tapestry can be seen as an extensive work of pro-Norman propaganda, both legitimizing the conquest of William and an attempt on the part of its patron, Bishop Odo, to legitimize his own place of power as well. The gendered nature of the Tapestry emerges fairly quickly, with weakness and strength being cast in terms of masculinity and femininity, particularly when examined in conjunction with the border images. Though many scholars have discounted the borders as mere decorative influences, without a thorough study of their content no complete vision of the Tapestry can emerge.

The status of women under Anglo-Norman rule emerges from the Tapestry as being particularly low, with women losing many of the rights that they had enjoyed under Anglo-Saxon kings when William took the throne. As the Tapestry is constructed from an exclusively male, Norman point of view, it seeks to legitimize the systematic disinheritance of women beginning in the eleventh-century. The picture that the Tapestry paints of women is incredibly misogynistic, portraying women as deviant creatures who need to be under the control of men. The men who previously had control of these women, the Anglo-Saxons, are also discredited: they are seen as incapable of protecting their property and restraining their women, and therefore the Tapestry asserts that they, too, deserve to lose their positions of control.

The way in which this loss of status and control is depicted within the Tapestry suggests that it is employing archetypal gender roles in which to cast these characters; these roles inhabit scenes which demonstrate the same archetypal nature. These episodic units can also be found throughout the literature of the following centuries; the secular epic tradition is built upon the repetition of the same events which make up the body of the Bayeux Tapestry. As the Bayeux Tapestry predates even the earliest of these literary works by several decades, the possibility that the Bayeux Tapestry could have served as a visual predecessor for these works cannot be ignored.

Furthermore, the relationship between the Bayeux Tapestry and the *Song of Roland* is such that a direct connection can be posited. Not only are they rumored to have been commissioned by the same man, the *Song of Roland* may have been written by a man who appears in the Bayeux Tapestry itself. The influence of this first secular epic has been well documented; the Bayeux Tapestry's influence upon it has not. The Bayeux Tapestry was designed to be moved about, and crossed the English Channel at least once. The potential courtly audience to which it was exposed is sizable, and composed of those people to whom such a Tapestry would have had considerable affect: writers, artists, and poets. The literature which emanated from the courts of Western Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries forms the cornerstone of the fictional tradition which has come down to modern authors through centuries; the idea that a work of art put these conventions into motion is both exciting and remarkable.

Illustrations



Figure 1. Missing End Piece.



Figure 2. Odo urging on the Norman troops at Hastings.



Figure 3. William falls from his horse.



Figure 4. Harold swears an oath on the relics.



Figure 5. Shipbuilding.



Figure 6. Woman flees from house.



Figure 7. Battle on Horseback.



Figure 8. Monte-Sainte-Michel.



Figure 9. Westminster.



Supplies being carried to the Norman ships in 1066, from the Bayeux Tapestry.

Figure 10. Norman four-wheeled carts.



Figure 11. Parthenon Frieze.



Figure 12. Trajan's Column.



Figure 13. Marcus Aurelius's Column.



Figure 14. Inside Bayeux Cathedral.



Figure 15. Aelfgyva

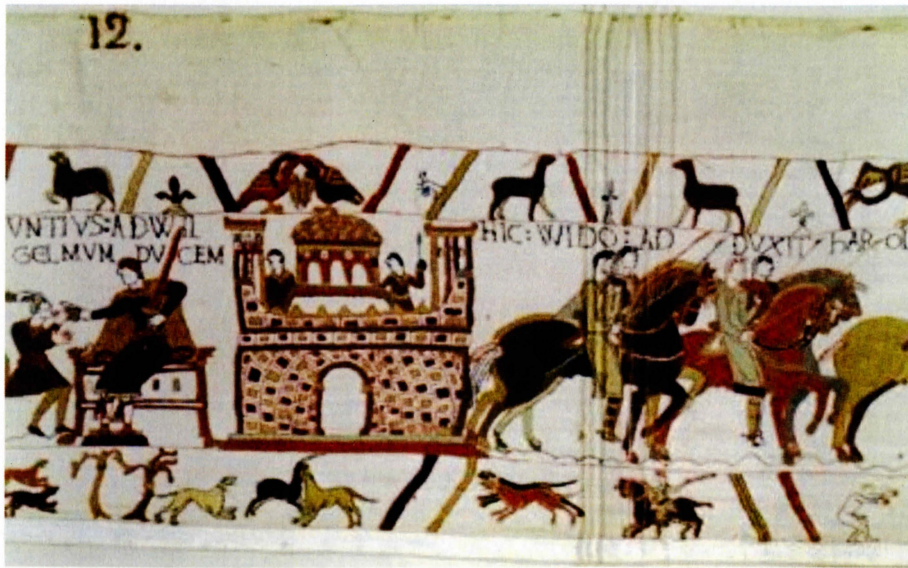


Figure 16. Harold's Capture.



Figure 17. Cheese in Flux and The Bitch in Pup.



Figure 18. Halley's Comet.



Figure 19. Harold's Coronation.

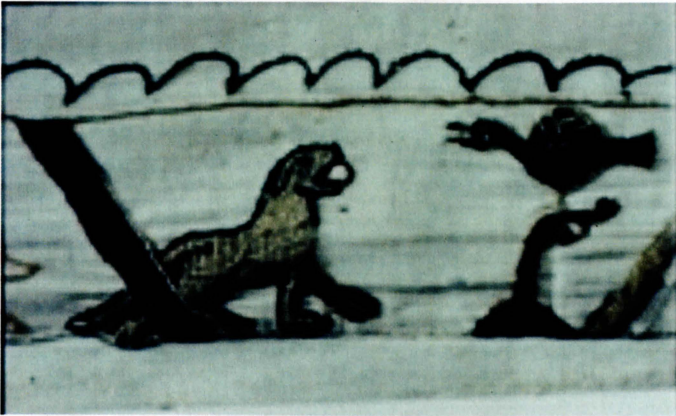


Figure 20. Fox With Cheese.



Figure 21. Harold wounded in the thigh.



Figure 22. Harold wounded in the eye.



Figure 23. Harold sails to Normandy.



Figure 24. Lances Pierce the Border.



Figure 25. Erotic Figures.



Figure 26. Odo's Feast.



Figure 27. Harold points to Aelfgyva.



Figure 28. Harold's Rescue from Count Ponthieu



Figure 29. Wadard.



Figure 30. Turolld.



Figure 31. Expedition to Brittany.



32. Death of Edward and Edith.

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