

Book Review

Martin K. Foys, Karen Eileen Overby, and Dan Terkla, eds.,
The Bayeux Tapestry: New Interpretations. Woodbridge:
The Boydell Press, 2009. Pp. xvi, 216 ; 35 color plates; 9
black-and-white figures

Marian Bleeke

As the ample bibliography included in *The Bayeux Tapestry: New Interpretations* attests, the tapestry or embroidery has generated a flood of scholarship beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing throughout the twentieth.¹ The stated intent of this volume of essays is to open the gates for continuing work on embroidery into the future (pp. xiv-xv). The title of the volume raises the question of what is new about the work on the Bayeux Tapestry contained in these ten essays: in reading the collection I came to three different answers to that question. Some essays offer new solutions to longstanding questions about the embroidery, in particular those of its patronage and its depiction of Harold Godwinson's death; others look to previously unexamined aspects of its physical form, its back side and apparent "mistakes" in its working, that may provide new evidence for understanding it; and a final group of essays brings new interpretative agendas to the embroidery, including interests in gender, performance, and post-colonialism.

The volume begins with Elizabeth Carson Pastan and Stephen D. White's essay "Problematizing Patronage: Odo of Bayeux and the Bayeux Tapestry" and,

prior to the bibliography, it concludes with Martin K. Foys' contribution "Pulling the Arrow Out: The Legend of Harold's Death and the Bayeux Tapestry." Pastan and White accept the common identification of Bishop Odo of Bayeux as the most likely patron for the embroidery but raise questions concerning his role as patron in its production.² They write that the existing model of patronage, which imagines the patron as projecting his ego and his agenda into the design of the work of art, is a Renaissance model inappropriate for understanding medieval materials. They understand Odo as patron as instigating and supporting the embroidery's production and as determining its overall subject matter, but not micro-managing its design. For authorship of the design and so intentionality in the production of the embroidery, they look instead to the monks of St. Augustine's at Canterbury, as those most likely responsible for its production. For Pastan and White, identifying the monks as the agents behind the embroidery helps to explain why it is not as universally pro-Norman as we might expect it to be, for they had connections with those on both sides of the conflict.³ Foys' essay stands out in a collection intended to open up new work on the embroidery for his stated intent is to close the question of the means of Harold's death. He argues that Harold is not shown in the embroidery as being killed by an arrow shot through his eye, but that he is instead to be identified as the nearby figure cut down by a mounted Norman knight.⁴ The idea that Harold was killed by an arrow in the eye is, Foys argues, a product of twelfth-century textual amplifications that led nineteenth-century restorers to transform the figure of a

guard with a spear above his face into the figure that now seems to receive the arrow shot.

The issue of restorations to the embroidery is also addressed in Gale R. Owen-Crocker's "Behind the Bayeux Tapestry," for they are more obvious on its back side. Owen-Crocker's essay is based on photographs of the reverse side of the embroidery that were taken in 1982-3 but that have had little circulation or scholarly discussion. As well as identifying reconstructions, the back also shows stem stitch in use throughout the embroidery alongside couched work and it reveals the presence of a correcting hand throughout the work. Examination of the back may also speak to the issue of the relationship between the embroidery's main images, its margins, and its text.⁵ Owen-Crocker writes that, from her examination of the photographs, it appears that threads do not cross from one of these areas to the other, which suggests that they were designed and executed independently. However, as she acknowledges, Owen-Crocker's interpretation of the photographs contradicts the published reports of the restorers who investigated the embroidery itself also in 1982-3.⁶ I can only join with Owen-Crocker in wishing that the reverse were more readily available for study by interested scholars. Continuing with a close examination of the embroidery, Michael John Lewis' "Embroidery Errors in the Bayeux Tapestry and their Relevance for Understanding its Design and Production," focuses on what Lewis understands to be mistakes in embroidery itself, more specifically differences between its apparent design and its actual execution that he attributes to

“careless” embroiderers (pp. 135-137). To consider the potential significance of these mistakes, Lewis asks why the designer did not insist on having them corrected and concludes that the embroidery’s design and production were most likely split between two different locations so that the designer was not present to inspect and correct the work. Lewis’ argument, however, seems to be contradicted by Owen-Crocker’s identification of an active correcting hand visible on the embroidery’s reverse side.

The remaining six essays in the volume, those that are most likely to be of interest to readers of this journal because of their engagement with new forms of inquiry, share two common themes. First they consistently move beyond seeing the embroidery as a straightforward historical document and see it instead as a meaningful construction.⁷ As Karen Eileen Overbey writes in her essay “Taking Place: Reliquaries and Territorial Authority in the Bayeux Embroidery,” the fact that the two major saints at Bayeux were contained in a single reliquary and yet are represented as in two reliquaries in the embroidery makes it clear that these images are “more than historical” (p. 43). The doubling of the reliquary gives it more visual weight and, Overbey argues, allows for a meaningful distinction in the forms of the two reliquaries; one represented as a stationary object and so representing Bayeux as a stable center of Norman authority, and the other shown as a portable object and so connected to the practice of using a relic procession as a way of claiming new land. Overbey and Valerie Allen, in her contribution “On the Nature of Things in the Bayeux Tapestry and its World,” both recognize

meaningful similarities between the reliquaries in the scene of Harold's oath and images of King Edward. For Overbey, Edward's form while alive represents him as a stable center of authority but his death pall's likeness to the portable reliquary suggests that English kingship has become portable or transferable. For Allen, Edward's pall's resemblance to the portable reliquary identifies him as a holy man: thus Harold touches the holy twice, touching first the reliquary and then Edward's hand, which suggests that the second touch superceded the first and named Harold as Edward's heir. Allen's general interest is in the performative value given to gestures and to objects the embroidery and Overbey focuses on its depiction of "the taking of places," on the ways in which it shows place as constructed, apprehended, transferred, and owned (p. 39).

This emphasis on the meaningfulness of the embroidery's images, rather than their documentary authenticity, continues into the remaining essays in a number of different forms. Like Allen, Shirley Ann Brown in her essay "Auctoritas, Consilium, et Auxilium: Images of Authority in the Bayeux Tapestry" is interested in the objects represented in the embroidery, from birds and dogs to long axes, which she reads as symbols of power. Also like Allen, Dan Terkla in his contribution "From Hastings to Hastings and Beyond: Inexorable Inevitability in the Bayeux Tapestry" pays careful attention to gestures, noting that Harold frequently gestures with his left hand where William gestures with his right and that this left/right distinction plays into the overall left-right movement of the narrative. In his "Making Sounds Visible in the Bayeux Tapestry," Richard

Brilliant writes of the battle scenes' jagged lines and complex compositions as creating a visual disturbance that may have recalled the aural experience of war for the embroidery's original viewers. Finally, in her contribution "Anglo-Saxon Women, Norman Knights, and a 'Third Sex' in the Bayeux Embroidery," Madeline Caviness looks to the construction of gender within its images. First, she writes of its general exclusion of women and then, in the absence of women, of its construction of two forms of masculinity; distinguishing between the phallic potency of the Normans and the flawed masculinity of the defeated Anglo-Saxons. According to Caviness, the Normans are distinguished as virile by their well-hung horses and their phallic swords, spears, and arrows, while the Anglo-Saxons are feminized by their long hair and Harold in particular is repeated represented as vulnerable and exposed and so unmanly.

A second theme that ties together many of these essays is their interest in post-colonial issues and in particular in the embroidery's construction of Norman identity and so Norman power. Brown's essay reads the details of the embroidery as images of power within specific Norman concepts of power and authority. Overbey's reading of the reliquaries shows the embroidery legitimizing William's rule through religious references. Caviness's essay shows the binary construction of masculinity in the embroidery to be part and parcel of its construction of Norman power. Dan Terkla likewise connects the left/right distinction in Harold and William's gestures to the overall left-to-right movement of the narrative as part of an "inevitability topos" that he identifies in the embroidery's

representation of William's conquest (p. 143). Terkla is also interested in textual comparisons for the embroidery with panegyrics that emphasize the imperial scale of Norman ambitions and in the broad range of pictorial sources used for the embroidery's images as likewise suggesting a imperial scope to Norman power.⁸ This emphasis on the construction of Norman identity and power may be the most fruitful aspect of this collection in terms of suggesting directions for future scholarship on the embroidery. It suggests that the longstanding issue that Pastan and White raise, that the embroidery does not seem to be as straightforwardly pro-Norman as we would expect, is most likely a problem with our expectations rather than with the embroidery itself. We need to use the embroidery to understand the Norman project of power in Norman terms.

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¹ I use the conventional title of Bayeux Tapestry to name the work of art but use the more accurate term embroidery to refer to it. The tapestry vs. embroidery issue is addressed in the volume under review here in Madeline Caviness's contribution, "Anglo-Saxon Women, Norman Knights and a 'Third Sex' in the Bayeux Embroidery," 86-8.

² For a recent contrary opinion that suggests Duke William as probable patron see George Beech, *Was the Bayeux Tapestry Made in France?: The Case for Saint-Florent of Saumur* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

³ This contradiction of our expectations has generated a range of interpretations. Edward Freeman sees it as a lack of exaggeration of Norman claims that bolsters the embroidery's authority as a historical source; see "The Authority of the Bayeux Tapestry," reprinted in *The Study of the Bayeux Tapestry*, ed. Richard Gameson (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1997), 7-15. By contrast, Suzanne Lewis sees the apparent neutrality of the early portions of the embroidery as a way of engaging viewers who are then led to accept a pro-Norman position by its end; see *The Rhetoric of*

Power in the Bayeux Tapestry, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 30-32, 58-9, 67. Meredith Clermont-Ferrand, finally, sees a subversive Anglo-Saxon subtext smuggled into the embroidery by its Anglo-Saxon designer; see *Anglo-Saxon Propaganda in the Bayeux Tapestry*, *Studies in French Civilization*, vol. 33 (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).

⁴ Again the scene of Harold's death has generated a variety of interpretations. N.P. Brooks and H. E. Walker identify Harold as shot by an arrow in the eye, identify the embroidery as the earliest and most authoritative existing account of his death by the arrow shot, and attribute it to now-lost English traditions that were available to the English artist; see "The Authority and Interpretation of the Bayeux Tapestry," reprinted in *The Study of the Bayeux Tapestry*, ed. Richard Gameson (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1997), 90-91. Richard Brilliant associates Harold being shot in the eye with the cleric touching Aelgyva's face and with other hand-to-eye gestures as suggesting that Harold's death was ordained by God; see "A Stripped Narrative for their Eyes and Ears," also reprinted in *The Study of the Bayeux Tapestry*, 118. Suzanne Lewis associates it with the Norman punishment of poaching by blinding as a way of characterizing Harold's misdeeds; see *The Rhetoric of Power in the Bayeux Tapestry*, 128. Finally John Michael Crafton identifies Harold's apparently doubled death, first shot in the eye and then cut down by the knight, as a form of epic amplification; see *The Political Artistry of the Bayeux Tapestry: A Visual Epic of Norman Ambitions* (Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007.), 142-3.

⁵ On the relationship between the central scenes and the margins see, among others, H.E.J. Cowdrey, "Towards an Interpretation of the Bayeux Tapestry," reprinted in *The Study of the Bayeux Tapestry*, ed. Richard Gameson (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1997), 98-9, 106—7; and J. Bard McNulty, *Visual Meaning in the Bayeux Tapestry: Problems and Solutions in Picturing History*, *Studies in French Civilization*, vol. 28 (Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 37-41.

⁶ Isabelle Bédard and Béatrice Girault-Kurtzman, "The Technical Study of the Bayeux Tapestry," in Pierre Bouet, Brian Levy, and François Neveux, eds. *The Bayeux Tapestry: Embroidering the Facts of History* (Caen, 2004), 96-7.

⁷ In their emphasis on the meaningfulness of the embroidery's images these essays follow from a break in Bayeux Tapestry scholarship that is represented by Brilliant's "A Stripped Narrative for their Eyes and Ears," and Lewis' *The Rhetoric of Power in the Bayeux Tapestry*, among other sources.

⁸ For a similar argument see Michael Crafton, *The Political Artistry of the Bayeux Tapestry*.