



The Bayeux Tapestry and the *Vitae* of Edward the Confessor in Dialogue

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One of the mysteries of The Bayeux Tapestry is its bias: was this depiction of the events of 1066 meant to be from the point of view of the conqueror or the conquered? Seen from one angle, it seems profoundly Norman, vilifying Harold with his hunched supplicant stance in front of William when in Normandy, his scowl when enthroned as the king, and his ignoble end with an arrow through his eye. On the other hand, scholars have long pointed to Edward's death scene as showing a tendency towards the Anglo-Saxon; here, Edward and William touch hands in seeming mutual understanding about what is to happen next, despite Edward's earlier promise to William of the kingdom, and possibly represents Edward's sanctioning Harold's reign. The power the tapestry has held over scholars and visitors over the past several centuries is partly due to this ambiguity. This, of course, has led to one of the other great debates surrounding the tapestry: which side of the channel was in charge of its production? More than one scholar has concluded that the Tapestry leads the viewer to see one version of events, usually the Norman one, while another is encoded more surreptitiously throughout the images.¹

¹ See, for example, Gail Ivy Berlin's article "The Fables of the Bayeux Tapestry: An Anglo-Saxon Perspective," in *Unlocking the Wordhord: Anglo-Saxon Studies in Memory of Edward B. Irving, Jr.*, eds. Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe and Mark Amodio (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 191-216. Berlin argues that the use of fable imagery in the Tapestry serve "as a counterpoint to the images of the main narrative, and in doing so they produced a covert Anglo-Saxon commentary upon the events leading to their subjugation" (191). Similarly, Andrew Bridgeford's "Who's Tapestry is it Anyway?" argues in *History Today* 24, no. 4 (2004): 5-7, that the Tapestry "subtly undermines Norman propaganda at almost every turn" (5).

I am sorry to say that I am not writing to resolve any of these grand questions. However, I do want to explore some of the ways in which medieval English viewers – both soon after the conquest (when the Tapestry was made) to centuries later – may have “read” the Tapestry. Held against the many widely-disseminated *vitae* of Edward the Confessor, the chameleon-like nature of the Bayeux Tapestry’s bias is even more starkly felt. The *vitae* – which run temporally from mid-eleventh century to the late Middle Ages and linguistically from Latin to Anglo-Norman to English – can be interpreted as a kind of mirror to the changing public view of the events of 1066. In dialogue with the Tapestry, they can show how neither the events themselves or their meanings were ever fixed, on paper or by thread. In this essay, I explore how readers of the *vitae* may have read the tapestry, and how what is depicted there would have molded to each bias and perspective presented in the *vitae*. This is most easily exemplified in the images of Edward’s death and burial in the Tapestry and how these events are interpreted and altered in the various *vitae*.

The first *vita* of Edward was written under the instruction of Queen Edith, and most of it was written while he was still alive and is attributed to an anonymous monk of Saint-Bertin, *Vita Ædwardi Regis qui apud Westmonasterium requiescit*.² This *vita* is in two parts – the first extolling the virtues of Edith and her family more than anything else, and the second part a re-formulation of Edward’s life into that of a saint. The next *vita* was an officially sanctioned one by Osbert of Clare from 1138,³ *Vita beati Eadwardi Regis*. Osbert wrote in an attempt to get

² Frank Barlow, ed. and trans., *The Life of King Edward Who Rests at Westminster* (1962; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). Barlow’s edition is a facing-page translation of the Latin and Modern English. The Latin *vita* can also be found in the earlier Henry Richards Luard, ed., *Lives of Edward the Confessor: I. La Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei. II. Vita Beati Edvardi Regis et Confessoris. III. Vita Æduuardi Regis qui Apud Westmonasterium Requiescit*. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1858).

³ Marc Bloch, ed., “La Vie de S. Edouard le Confesseur par Osbert de Clare,” *Annelecta Bollandiana* 41 (1923): 5-131.

Edward canonized, unsuccessfully, but as a result Edward is truly re-written as saintly as well as the patron of Westminster Abbey. In 1163, two years after Edward was canonized, Aelred of Rievaulx wrote the commissioned *Vita S. Edwardi Regis et Confessoris*,⁴ for the translation of Edward's relics. Later, two Anglo-Norman *vitae* are written: the first by an anonymous nun of Barking Abbey dated somewhere between 1163 and 1189, *La Vie d'Edouard le Confesseur*⁵ and the second by Matthew Paris, dated to around 1230, *La Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei*.⁶ There are also a few Middle English versions spanning from 1300 to the first half of the fifteenth century, both in prose and verse.⁷ The medieval tradition of Edward's life culminates in a 1483 version printed by Caxton in his *Golden Legend*.⁸ In this paper, I am focusing primarily on what I consider the two pivotal *vitae* of Edward: that by Anonymous (upon which Osbert is largely based, and Aelred to a lesser extent), and Aelred's (the basis for all of the *vitae* which follow).

⁴ Aelredus Rievallensis, "Vita S. Edward Regis," in *Patrologia Latina Database*. There are two Modern English translations of this *vita*: Jerome Bertram, FSA, trans., *Life of St. Edward the Confessor by St. Aelred of Rievaulx* (Southampton: Saint Austin Press, 1990) and Jane Patricia Freeland, trans., "The Life of Saint Edward, King and Confessor," in *Aelred of Rievaulx: The Historical Works*, ed. Marsha L. Dutton (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2005), 123-243.

⁵ Östen Södergård, *La Vie d'Edouard le Confesseur: Poème Anglo-Norman du XIIIe siècle* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksells, 1948). William MacBain argues that the *vie* must have been written before 1170, the date of Thomas à Becket's murder because Becket's sister is the abbess of Barking and the life is apparently dedicated to Henry II. Dominica Legge in *Anglo-Norman Literature and Its Background* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963) places the life at 1163, which is the date of Aelred's composition – the basis for the nun's translation (246-247). Jocelyn Wogan-Browne extends the late date that MacBain proposes to 1189 (the death of Henry II) in "Clerc u Lai" 83 n. 39, and writes in *Saints' Lives & Women's Literary Culture c. 1150-1300: Virginity and its Authorizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) that the date may be after Becket's murder because that may be "exactly when a reworking of the Aelred *vita* would be most wanted by the king" (251 n.84). See also Emily Mitchell. "Patrons and Politics at Twelfth Century Barking Abbey," *Revue Bénédictine* 113 (2003): 347-64, who argues that the life was written after 1177.

⁶ Kathryn Young Wallace, ed, *La Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei: attributed to Matthew Paris*. (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1983). The earlier edition is accompanied by an English translation: Henry Richards Luard, ed, *Lives of Edward the Confessor*.

⁷ Grace Edna Moore, ed, *The Middle English Verse Life of Edward the Confessor* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1942).

⁸ Richard Hamer and Vida Russell, eds., *Supplementary Lives in Some Manuscripts of the Gilte Legende*, Early English Text Society, Original Series 315 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Finally, I will look at the two Anglo-Norman versions of the *vita* and see how the citizens of a thoroughly Anglo-Norman society reconstruct the events of 1066.

Most scholars who have looked at the Bayeux Tapestry in conjunction with any of the *vitae* of Edward have focused, understandably, on its earliest incarnation. Indeed, many have argued that the artist of the tapestry must have had the Anonymous life as one of the source texts for the depiction of Edward's death scene because the two mirror each other so exactly. Even the odd chronology of Edward's burial followed by the deathbed scene (left to right in the tapestry) is somewhat confirmed by the *vita* itself. Because of the *vita*'s two-book structure, book one ends with Edward's death, while Book II begins with his deathbed scene.

If there is any question how Anonymous feels about the ensuing events of 1066 after Edward's death, he abolishes them before even describing the scene in detail. Personifying England as an imagined reader of his text, Anonymous outlines the terrible burdens that have come to pass since Edward's death:

And what shall I say about England? What shall I tell generations to come? Woe is to you England, you who once shone bright with holy, angelic progeny, but now with anxious expectation groan exceedingly for your sins. You have lost your native king and suffered defeat, with much spilling of the blood of many of your men, in a war against the foreigner.⁹

Already, the reader of the Anonymous *vita* is viewing the events of the Tapestry, and particularly the deathbed scene, with an Anglo-Saxon point of view. The "native king" is lost and England is in the hands of William, the foreigner. While England is blamed for its own "sins," it is evident that Anonymous sees the conquest as unlawful and the Norman invasion as both a moral and physical defeat.

⁹ Barlow, 110.

Edward's death scene begins with his recitation of a dream vision – known as the vision of the Green Tree – which describes a tree cut off from its roots (perhaps reflected in the vine-like imagery in the bottom borders of the deathbed scene in the Tapestry). This pivotal moment gets interpreted variously throughout the *vitae*, but the central gist remains the same: the tree is the royal line, and it will be violently cut off from its roots after Edward's death. After describing the vision, Anonymous explains who is present:

[T]he queen...was sitting on the floor warming his feet in her lap, her full brother, Earl Harold, and Rodbert, the steward of the royal palace and a kinsman of the king [were there], also Archbishop Stigand and a few more whom the blessed king when roused from sleep had ordered to be summoned.¹⁰

In the Tapestry, Queen Edith is indeed sitting at Edward's feet, a cleric – probably Stigand – seems to be offering the last rites to Edward, an unknown figure stands behind Edward – but through the Anonymous *vita* would be identified as Robert fitz Wimarch – and finally, Harold reaches out and touches Edward's hand. Edward is leaning forward, presumably uttering his last words. Underneath this image, three men are shrouding the now deceased Edward, and Edith is gone (panels 29-32).¹¹

That, of course, is the central dilemma of the death scene in the Tapestry. What, exactly, is transpiring between Harold and Edward? The Tapestry makes it clear that there is some sort of conversation and promise taking place, but whether Harold is promising to take over the kingdom or to cede it to William is unclear, and one of the primary reasons that the allegiances of the Tapestry's makers is so ambiguous. The inscription above the scene is unhelpful, merely

¹⁰ Barlow, 119.

¹¹ For images of the Bayeux Tapestry, I am referencing them by panel in accordance with David M. Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004).

pointing to Edward's illness and death without reference to the words spoken. But a reader of the Anonymous *vita* would have no qualms about what is taking place. With the imagery of the scene described in the *vita* so clearly depicted in the Tapestry – almost to exactness – certainly that reader would see the substance of it translated onto the cloth as well.

Harold is not really an ambiguous character for Anonymous, nor is his right to the throne questioned. The only place where Harold is really “scolded,” by the hagiographer, is in his feud with Tostig (who is vilified throughout the *vita*). Even the contested oath scene in the Tapestry, where Harold seemingly pledges allegiance to William over some holy relics, can be explained away by Anonymous, who laments that he was “rather too generous with oaths (alas!),”¹² while never explicitly mentioning Harold's encounter with William in Normandy. In the *vita*'s deathbed scene, Harold is clearly the inheritor of Edward's crown:

Then [Edward] addressed his last words to the queen, who was sitting at his feet, in this wise: And stretching forth his hand to his governor, [Edith's] brother, Harold, [Edward] said, ‘I commend this woman and all the kingdom to your protection. Serve and honour her with faithful obedience as your lady and sister, which she is, and do not despoil her, as long as she lives, of any due honour got from me.’¹³

While many have argued that Edward's bequest to Harold was temporary and provisional, there is no such implication here. Harold is consistently described throughout the *vita* as a forthright and honest man, even “endowed with mildness of temper and a more ready understanding. He could bear contradiction well, not readily revealing or retaliating – never, I think, on a fellow

¹² Barlow, 81.

¹³ Barlow, 123.

citizen or compatriot.”¹⁴ Harold is described as selfless, acting for the good of his country, not personal glory.

When the readers of the anonymous *vita* arrive at the scene of Harold’s coronation, they read it as a legitimate rulership. The “REX” inscription above him in the Tapestry is accurate; he was a king rightfully installed and the correct heir to the throne. And although the Tapestry does not clearly confirm this reading of events, it never contradicts it, either. The description of the deathbed scene is a near illustration of the imagery in the two *vitae*, and the words from Edward’s mouth as his outstretched hand meets Harold’s are easy to imagine in place.

But a reader of Aelred’s officially sanctioned *vita*, after Edward’s canonization, may see the Tapestry and its scenes and details in a different light altogether. Where the readers of Anonymous are treated to the many qualities of the Godwin line, from which come both Queen Edith and Harold, Aelred makes clear that the line is rotten, and Edith is its only anomalous good fruit. In recounting the death of the Earl Godwin, Edith and Harold’s father, Aelred writes about how divine judgment decided his fate. When faced with Edward’s accusation that Godwin was responsible for the king’s brother’s death, the following ensues:

Godwin was afraid when he heard this, and showed a sad enough face. “I know, my king, I know that you still accuse me of your brother’s death, and you do not yet disbelieve those who call me a traitor to him and to you; but god knows all secrets and will judge. Let him make this morsel which I hold in my hand pass down my throat and leave me unharmed if I am innocent, responsible neither for betraying you nor for your brother’s murder.”

¹⁴ Barlow, 49.

He said this, placed the morsel in his mouth, and swallowed it half way down his throat. He tried to swallow it further, and was unable: he tried to reject it, but it stuck firm. Soon the passage to his lungs was blocked, his eyes turned up, his limbs stiffened. The king watched him die in misery, and realising that divine judgment had come upon him, called to the bystanders: "Take this dog out," he said. Godwin's sons ran in, removed him from under the table and brought him to a bedroom, where soon afterwards he made an end fitting for such a traitor.¹⁵

Whereas for Anonymous, Harold's line is noble and worthy of the crown, for Aelred and his readers, Godwin is a murderer, a traitor, and one whose death was divinely directed. Aelred consistently links the evil Godwin to his sons, Tostig and Harold, as he does here, leaving no doubt that they are all similarly tainted and unworthy.

The deathbed scene for Aelred has the same players as Anonymous, and thus as depicted in the Tapestry, but their words and motivations are vastly different. Any reader of Aelred's *vita* (and most of the ensuing vernacular ones, which take Aelred as their base), would certainly see the death scene in an entirely different light. Here, the description of his attendants' reaction to Edward's prophecy of the Green Tree clearly vilifies the Archbishop Stigand, changing his role in the events of 1066 completely:

While he was telling his vision, the queen sat by him, and also Robert, guardian of the sacred palace, Earl Harold, the queen's brother, and Stigand who had invaded his father's chamber and defiled his bed (for while Archbishop Robert was still alive, he usurped the see of Canterbury – suspended for this by the Supreme Pontiff, a little later he burst open and his bowels all poured out). He was hardened when he heard the king's story, and

¹⁵ Bertram, 75.

was neither afraid of the revelation nor believed in the prophecy, but instead, muttering that the king was senile and raving, he preferred laughter to compunction.¹⁶

Here, Stigand's attendance is menacing. His raised arms in the Tapestry are a mockery of the king's visionary experience rather than a blessing at his death. Of course, this also changes how Stigand is viewed when in the next tapestry scene he is at Harold's left hand, arms outstretched. He becomes an evil enabler of an illegitimate king through Aelred's lens, and it is easy to read his face as scowling as he stands next to Harold's throne.

Aelred is not at all ambiguous about what Harold's responsibilities were. Glossing over the "last words" outlined in Anonymous, where Edward explicitly grants Harold protection over both Edith and the kingdom, here the king is not quoted at all. Instead, Aelred writes that "he...entrusted the queen to her brother and the nobility, and commended her devoted service."¹⁷ In this version of events, the kingdom is not even mentioned, and Edward's outstretched gesture reaching for Harold's hand in the tapestry can be read as his confirmation that Edith will now be protected. Indeed, this scene can seemingly be confirmed with Edith, at the king's feet, weeping. Again, nothing in the Tapestry confirms nor contradicts this version of events, where Edward's last words concern only his wife, not his country.

Aelred continues to make it clear that Harold was acting on his own by taking the crown, writing that Edward's prophecy of a deracinated tree was "no mere imagination of the saintly king when Earl Harold seized the kingdom, breaking the oath which he had made to Duke William. When he was conquered by him in battle he brought the freedom of England to an end and began her captivity."¹⁸ England's post-conquest state is unequivocally due to the actions of

¹⁶ Bertram, 89.

¹⁷ Bertram, 93.

¹⁸ Bertram, 89-90.

Harold, for Aelred, and the Tapestry can bear out this interpretation. Harold's enthronement, which immediately follows Edward's death, is in turn followed by images of William's preparation for war.

There is one pro-Anglo-Saxon element, however, that Aelred does allow concerning the Battle of Stamford Bridge. He begins by re-asserting that Harold should not have succeeded Edward in a passage that is unequivocally pro-William:

Harold ... the son of Godwin, had impiously usurped the kingdom, although he had promised on oath that he would preserve it for William, the cousin-german of King Edward. He had neither legal nor natural right to this, and by breaking faith and ignoring his promise he hastened on the woes which the king had prophesied the Lord was preparing for England.¹⁹

Harold is again linked to his father, Godwin, and for the first time Aelred brings up the fact of the oath which Harold had taken (again, an image clearly supported by the Tapestry's depiction of events). But then Aelred recounts a post-mortem miracle of Edward's where, during the Battle of Stamford Bridge, he aids Harold from heaven in order to insure a victory:

Then one night Saint Edward appeared in a dream to a certain holy abbot, who governed the monastery of Ramsey.... The man was wise enough to be overawed by his majesty, but the king mildly reassured him: "Go," he said, "and tell Harold that he may confidently attack these men who have invaded the territory of this kingdom against all legal right. I myself shall be leader and guardian of the army, for I cannot in justice desert my people, through whose help he will return in triumph over this enemy."²⁰

¹⁹ Bertram, 100.

²⁰ Bertram, 100.

Of course, Edward offers no such help against William. It is only Harold's battle against Tostig and Harald Hardrada where Edward intervenes. But this does shift Harold into a slightly more favorable light than the *vita* had allowed thus far. Here, Harold is worthy of Edward's intervention, and he is postulated as a kind of protector of the land. The key here, for Aelred, is that the Tostig and Hardrada attack are unlawful; William's claim to the throne, though, is uncontested.

This scene is the last we see of Harold in the *vita* and, indeed, of the battles leading up to the conquest. Later, Aelred merely gestures to them; in the beginning of a passage describing other miracles attributed to Edward after his death, Aelred writes that the events took place "when William had subdued the whole island, and all who resisted him had been either driven overseas, secured in prison or bound in slavery."²¹ William's victory is a *fait accompli*, and the events that transpired concerning Harold are not even worth mentioning. Aelred sticks to the formula of a *vita*, and after Edward's death only focuses himself with post-conquest England as far as it concerns miracles attributed to Edward.

Some of the most interesting *vitae* of Edward are the two Anglo-Norman versions, by an anonymous nun of Barking Abbey in the late 12th century and Matthew Paris in the early 13th century. Here, the language confirms the reach and cultural understanding of a Norman England, but the subject matter – the life of Edward the Confessor – reaches back to an Anglo-Saxon past. In many ways these may be the *vitae* in which the Tapestry can be seen in most prominent dialogue. Although later than the Tapestry, they represent the hybridity that the Tapestry has also come to stand for. In addition, they are vernacular lives, meant for audiences beyond an elite clerical minority. Both are dedicated to their English kings – Henry II and

²¹ Bertram, 103.

Henry III, respectively – and although both are based on Aelred, both writers greatly expand and alter the original *vita* into their own.

In the Nun's life, she shifts her focus to Edith more than the other *vitae*. She acknowledges, like Aelred, that her Godwin line is tainted, but upholds Edith as a paragon of chastity and righteousness. At Edward's death scene in the nun's version, he addresses not only Harold, but all of the loyal nobles surrounding his deathbed. His few lines of indirect speech in Aelred, turn into nearly 100 lines of monologue here, and he commits his queen into everyone's keeping, concerned with her welfare most of all.²² Like for Aelred, the keeping of the kingdom is not mentioned – understood, it would seem, that it should go to William. For the nun, the measure of Edward's sanctity is his relationship with his wife, not his relationship to the crown. She is writing in a fully Anglo-Norman world, even in its language, but only a century after William came to its shores.

The Nun also adds more of a postscript than Aelred does, further explaining what happens after Edward's death and the decisive battle that makes William king. The missing end of the Tapestry has been the source of much speculation, with scholars usually arguing it must end with the coronation of William (a neat symmetry with its opening of Edward on his throne). But the Nun's *vita* may offer another alternative to this reading. Here, the *vita* ends with William at Westminster, the abbey and place most closely associated with Edward's reign. The image further underscores a kind of continuity between the Anglo-Saxon king and his Norman successor – a symmetry that the Nun would want to emphasize given her patron, Henry II, also wants that link made in the popular imagination.

Matthew Paris also gives a slightly different spin on the events of 1066 and an idea how these may have been read and understood in early 13th century England. Paris also puts a

²² Södergård, 266-7.

conversation into Edward's deathbed scene, one that goes further than any of the previous *vitae*. Here, Harold makes a clear promise to Edward to give the kingdom over to William:

Then [Edward] sent for Duke Harold,
He says, "Friend, so my God save you,
What is thy intention respecting the kingdom?"
"Sire," said he, "I dare to swear to you
By the holy Trinity,
By my lineage and Christianity,
It has never come into my thoughts
To possess your heritage;
Duke William of Normandy,
Who to it has right and trusts in me,
Shall have it, so as it pleases you;
I have sworn it, and he is sure of it;
I shall keep the covenant and my loyalty,
Against you I shall not trespass;
To the kingdom I have no claim nor right,
Unless with his daughter he give it to me.
I will not do treason or guile;
This I swear to you upon the Gospel."²³

Although this speech takes place before Edward is on his deathbed, a similar one will ensue at that moment, and the reader of the Tapestry is given words here to incorporate into the deathbed

²³ Luard, 281.

conversation. Not only is Edward *not* granting the kingdom to Harold's protection, he is eliciting an additional oath from Harold that he will not interfere with William's right to the throne. If Harold's guile is in question, that is abolished with his consistent swearing on the trinity and the Gospel. Harold may violate his word to William and Edward, but here he is violating his word to God.

Tellingly, Edward does not even commit Edith to her brother's keeping in Paris' version of events. Here, Edith is given to the care of the people of England, "be they English, be they Normans."²⁴ Harold here is an oath-breaker and a liar, and should not be the one to take care of the queen after Edward's death. Instead, Paris postulates an England of two nations, but both working together to honor Edith. As it was with the Nun, a vision of a harmonious Anglo-Norman world is in Paris' best interest here as it is also the vision of Henry III, his patron.

Stigand similarly gets an interesting treatment in Paris' *vie*. At Edward's deathbed, Harold again swears allegiance to William's right to the crown:

"No man through me shall attack
The right of the throne which belongs
To you, sire, naturally,
Who have no issue of yourself,
And have held the kingdom;
You have granted it to Duke William:
I will not have in it sin or blame."²⁵

Then Stigand, present at the deathbed as he is in all versions of the *vitae*, speaks:

"Duke Harold, well you know it,

²⁴ Luard, 288.

²⁵ Luard, 289.

That if you violate this covenant,
I say it for myself, to whom belongs
To perform this holy sacrament,
There will be no prelate in the land
Who will give you unction;
There will be no man of our commons,
Who will put the crown on your head.”²⁶

This course of events drastically alters the reading of Harold’s coronation in the Tapestry. Here, Stigand stands next to him obviously complicit in the crowning that seemingly has just taken place. In dialogue with Paris’ *vita*, Harold and Stigand are false traitors, whose words moments before at Edward’s deathbed were completely lies. Their similar facial expressions link them together in their deception.

Paris’ depiction of Harold continues to get worse as the *vita* discusses the events following Edward’s death. He is described as “so haughty, so fierce and bold, / so violent and covetous, / that before him there was none such, / nor did he anything of what he had promised.”²⁷ This is a far cry from the upstanding and justice-loving Harold of Anonymous’ *vita*. To the 13th-century English viewers of the Tapestry, Harold was an unjust man and a terror of a king, and William, a savior for the English people and the rightfully chosen heir to the throne. Indeed, Paris’ depiction of the Battle of Hastings gives Harold the bloody end he has in the Tapestry while further exemplifying William’s courage and prowess:

Whence the English with King Harold
Are so haughty and bold in consequence,

²⁶ Luard, 289.

²⁷ Luard, 300.

That they are scattered in the plain;
The duke thinks that he can surround them;
So did he as if they were partridges.
Then begins the fight hand to hand,
And the battle was cruel and fierce,
Many wounded and dead
Are there now on both sides.
The king struck in the eye with a dart
Falls and soon is in evil case,
Perished, slain and mangled.
And his standard is beaten down,
And the English host conquered;
....
The English host takes to flight,
And eagerly the Normans pursue.
The duke in all the battle
Lost not a drop of blood:
Three horses that day slain
Were under him in the battle.”²⁸

Harold’s death, along with the English supporting him, is a just one. For Paris, he deserves that arrow in the eye, made so famous by the Tapestry’s depiction. By contrast, William is a warrior who succeeds despite the attacks of the English directed at him. The English host is conquered by William, but Paris sketches this as a kind of mercy for the English who otherwise would have

²⁸ Luard, 308-309.

been ruled by Harold and his haughty compatriots. This moment, for Paris, is the end of Edward's *vie*, and he – like the Nun – ends it with an image of Westminster.

One thing that all of the *vitae* agree on, obviously, is that Edward was a great king and leader of the English. Whom he sanctions as successor is the key to understanding the bias of each hagiographer and how Harold and William are ultimately portrayed. And this, of course, brings us back to the death scene in the Tapestry. The men's hands reach out across the bed, their fingers touched. Harold's and Stigand's left hands are raised in mirror images, confirming that they are in agreement. The king leans forward, imparting his crucial final wishes. But what those words actually are depends on who is seeing the image, and, perhaps, on what that viewer has read.