

***Winchester Times Bestseller!***

*They were friends, then enemies, brought together on the battlefield  
by an oath betrayed.*



# THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY

BY BISHOP ODO

**Now a major motion picture  
starring Mel Gibson, Heath Ledger  
and Ian McKellen  
as Edward the Confessor**

*“Gripping...a page-turner filled with greed, duplicity, heartache and  
bare-knuckled fighting.” –Newsfortnight*

## The Bayeux Tapestry: A Novel Experience

By Kathy Flake

In a feudal epic of treachery and perjury, a friendship based on deceit falls apart amidst a struggle for power. This searing, compelling story pits William of Normandy, loved by his people, against his one-time friend and battle partner, Harold of England, sworn to allegiance by William in an unforgettably moving scene. Ill-omens abound, including an arrow-like comet, a visitor from the Heavens foretelling doom. But will it be heeded?

*The Bayeux Tapestry* is a tale of greed, power, and deception, an ancient struggle in which justice ultimately triumphs. With an unflinching narrative power reminiscent of *Cain and Abel*, Bishop Odo's *The Bayeux Tapestry* is a thrilling epic that leaves readers shocked and enlightened.

“A real page turner. Rich and vivid in detail.” —*The Winchester Gazette*

If the Bayeux Tapestry had been written in novel form, perhaps the above would have graced its back cover, piquing the interest of Waterstone's browsers. The novel *The Bayeux Tapestry* would have been shelved amongst such authors as Homer, Dumas, Brontë, and Tolkein, and would have sold just as well. Not since *Beowulf* had the world seen such a compelling and entertaining tale.

Although analyses of the tapestry are more often found in history texts than in literary reviews, the tapestry contains many of the elements found in a modern work of popular fiction. An examination of the tapestry as an early graphic novel reveals the techniques used to tell the story of William the Conqueror and Harold II and their struggle for control of England. The narrative choices the unknown storyteller made shed light on the real aim of the tapestry. Was it simply a piece of propaganda, intended to illustrate a significant Norman victory, or did it have a more subversive purpose?

### Origins of the Tapestry

The 900-year old Bayeux Tapestry hangs now in the *Centre Guillaume le Conquérant* in Bayeux, Normandy, its ancient threads protected by a sheet of glass. Visitors today see a fine embroidery, depicting the story of one of the most well-known battles in history, the date of which is etched on the memories of every school test-taker of modern times.

But at one time the tapestry must have been more than a pretty piecework. For the viewers—the “readers”—who once gazed at the fabric, it would have told a story unavailable in any other form. This “graphic novel” as we'd call it today contains almost 2000 Latin words, the language of the educated few. The embroidered scenes, however, could be read by anyone not blinded by the torture later inflicted by William's roughshod rule.

While the exact date of the tapestry is not known, it is thought to have been commissioned shortly after the conquest by William's brother, Bishop Odo, with the actual work done by

English embroiderers at Canterbury. Though it was later hung in the cathedral at Bayeux, it was probably intended for a less ecclesiastical audience. The story told in the tapestry is not believed to be an accurate reflection of events; there are conflicting historical accounts in various texts of the period. However, the conclusion that the tapestry is pure propaganda is equally inaccurate, for its heroes and conflicts are far more nuanced and engaging than the spoon-fed pabulum political expedience would have dictated.

The tapestry portrays greed, misplaced loyalty, and deadly vengeance, all the ingredients for a potboiler bestseller. The story is told coherently and concisely, yet is surprisingly complex. The author is careful to include symbolism: the comet that visits England is eerily reminiscent of the arrows that later pelt the English on the battlefield. Despite the fact the story is told on a flat panel of fabric, there are no one dimensional characters. While not Booker Prize material, the tapestry is unquestionably an entertaining read.

### **Inside the modern novel**

As any popular novelist learns, a novel must contain certain elements. There must be **characters** that the reader cares about—enough to keep turning the page, compelling **conflict** that pits them against one another, a **plot** to organize their actions, a **setting** wherein the reader can imagine the action taking place, and a **theme**—the meaning of it all.

The **characters** of a novel include the hero (or protagonist), the character who changes the most through a figurative journey; and the anti-hero, the villain or antagonist who acts as the agent of change. The hero of the tapestry might logically be thought of as William of Normandy, but in actuality Harold of England is the character most changed by events, while William is the one who brings about his transformation, or the antagonist.

A bestselling novel's hero must be sympathetic, possessing just enough flaws to make him human. The tapestry portrays Harold, particularly in the early scenes, as a gallant fighter, a willing pupil to William's mentorship. In one scene he is depicted pulling Norman warriors out of quicksand, a strong and selfless hero the reader is eager to root for.

The antagonist must be equally strong and resourceful, capable of testing the hero and perhaps even ultimately triumphing over him. William is all this and more. He's shown to be a good and gracious ruler, rescuing Harold from imprisonment by Count Guy of Ponthieu and befriending him, even providing him with a sword for the upcoming battle with the neighboring Bretons. There Harold and William fight side by side, a male bonding experience that would be familiar to readers of Bernard Cornwell's Sharpe series. Nothing forges so deep a bond as hacking away at an enemy.

Any well-drawn character must possess a goal, a desire worth fighting for. Goals may change throughout the novel, as the character encounters and surmounts obstacles. In the beginning of the tapestry, Harold has the simple goal of getting out of Normandy alive. William has the even more powerful goal of becoming king of England, and one man stands in his way: Harold. It is William's motivation to achieve his goal that propels many

of the later scenes in the tapestry, but the conflict arises when Harold's goal changes, and the goals of the two men collide.

**Conflict** is another necessary element to any bestselling novel. Only through conflict can a hero prove his metal, or the antagonist his resourcefulness and cunning. Conflict must be complex and challenging: "how to get out of the mess" is a question the reader must not be able to answer readily, otherwise there is no satisfactory *twang* of tension that compels a reader to turn the page.

Upon Harold's return to England the conflict in the tapestry is intensified, much to the reader's delight. Edward the Confessor lies dying, and Harold is offered the crown. Yet he's sworn allegiance to William, on two holy relics, no less! A decision must be made, which will affect the outcome of the novel, but—it is hoped—not resolve the conflict.

This is where the novelist's mastery of plotting is useful. The **plot** is the organization of a story: the events and the sequence in which they're told. A good novelist will only include those scenes which enhance the other elements of the novel: the characterization, the conflict, the setting and the theme. A well-crafted plot builds slowly to a climax, anticipated by the reader with growing anxiety as events proceed to a satisfying and plausible conclusion.

In the tapestry the plot centers around the relationship between William and Harold, at first seemingly built on mutual trust and respect. Scenes which develop this relationship are prominent in the tapestry, including the march to Mont St Michel and the sacking of Dinan. When Harold gives an oath of allegiance to William the friendship is sealed, and then shattered—to the reader's avid delight—a few scenes later when Harold is shown breaking his oath to William.

It is near this point that the plot takes a backward turn, as Edward is first shown at his funeral and then alive again, in a technique known as a flashback. This is often used by novelists to fill in important details of a character's life, but it is also a useful device for slowing the pace of a novel, particularly at a turning point. A turning point is when a character is forced to either detour from his goal, or accept that the stakes for achieving that goal will be higher. Certainly the death of Edward would be considered the first major turning point in the novel, and the author no doubt wanted to prolong this event with a chronological twist, thus keeping the reader dwelling on the dramatic scene when Harold must make a choice. While rather clumsily done, the point is nevertheless made: with Edward's death, Harold is forced to choose between his sworn loyalty to William and his own ambition.

The climax of a novel is its last turning point, a moment of no return for the characters. A clever novelist also places the climax as near to the novel's end as possible, thus avoiding the rapid drawing down of interest that occurs when there is no longer any burning question to be answered. Originally the tapestry likely contained extra scenes at the end,

probably of William's coronation, but perhaps some medieval editor, or the author himself, chose to delete these scenes, realizing they were unnecessary to achieve a satisfactory ending. (Another explanation is that the scenes were lost to the ravages of time; if so it's hard to imagine how the rest of the tapestry survived in such readable condition.)

A novel's **setting**, the time and place in which the action occurs, serves as a backdrop that can enhance the reader's understanding of the themes of the novel. The action in the tapestry is set partially in France, with key scenes set in England. There is also a bit of high seas adventure thrown in, as the fleet makes its way over the waves to England. Contemporary audiences may not have been familiar with foreign settings or Channel voyages, but just like today's science fiction reader is capable of conjuring up images of interstellar spaceflight with no trouble, early Norman and English readers would have gazed upon the somewhat primitive representations of setting in the tapestry and let their imaginations do the rest.

The mood of a novel is often felt through its setting, and the tapestry is no different. Just as the lonely moors of Yorkshire influence the mood of *Wuthering Heights*, the monster-studded sea of the tapestry lends a frightening aspect to the tale. Backdrops such as castles, palaces, and the towers of London remind the reader of what's at stake should either character fail at his goal. King Edward is shown in opulent surroundings, representing the wealth of England, and the temptation on offer. Pastoral scenes of plowing and sowing are included in the beginning, the status quo that will be shattered at the novel's climax. Perhaps most obviously, the moralizing tone of the Aesop's fable figures in the border hint at the theme of the tapestry, another important novel element.

The **theme** of a novel is its backbone, the underlying message that the author is attempting to convey. It's often a moral lesson, in the tapestry one of honor and integrity: swearing an oath on holy relics and then forsaking that oath will result in your demise. The omen of the comet reinforces this theme; ignoring celestial omens is never a good idea either. (The decision to portray Halley's Comet appearing four months before it actually did was not unintentional. The author deliberately used its ominous presence as a device for foreshadowing Harold's fate.)

A subplot, or a secondary plot, is often included in a novel to further reinforce the theme. The tapestry includes a mysterious scene, the meaning of which has been lost to the modern reader, wherein a female figure is seen being admonished by a priest while a naked man laughs in the border below. This subplot was undoubtedly included to illustrate the theme, that violating an oath doesn't pay; otherwise its inclusion is extraneous. Perhaps the woman cheated on a husband, or with the priest—a double whammy as far as honor and fidelity to oaths is concerned.

The choice of theme gives us a hint as to the overall purpose of the tapestry. As a true-life fable, it was intended to illustrate in graphic detail what happens to those who would violate their sacred oath. Before the days of modern jurisprudence, there was not much to

keep a man to his word except the fear of what would happen were he to violate his oath. This tale of Harold, a good man who erred in accepting the greatest prize of all, the crown of England, serves as a caution to those who would be tempted to abandon their oaths.

There is also a strong theme of friendship betrayed. As bad as it is to violate a sacred oath, the betrayal of a friend and mentor invites doom. The movie *Star Wars* wrestles with this same theme; in fact, the character of Darth Vader proved so popular despite his status as a villain that a new series of films was created to explore the character as hero.

### **Coming soon: the movie?**

The tapestry has all the ingredients to be a bestselling novel: larger than life characters, an intriguing premise, a powerful and sweeping setting, a universally understood theme, and a strong narrative-sustaining conflict. These days, bestselling novels are often made into films, but the tapestry already possessed visually stimulating images, a moving picture ahead of its time. No doubt one day the story depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry will appear onscreen, replayed for a much wider audience than its original author ever imagined.



**Now Showing:**  
**THE TAPESTRY**  
**starring Mel Gibson, Heath Ledger**  
**and Ian McKellen**  
**as Edward the Confessor**

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by an oath betrayed.*

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