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978-0-521-63238-6 - The Rhetoric of Power in the Bayeux Tapestry

Suzanne Lewis

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THE RHETORIC OF POWER IN THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY

The Bayeux Tapestry has long been recognized as one of the most problematical historical documents of the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. As contemporary viewers are drawn into a medieval world of unresolved tensions and conflicted loyalties, they are still affected by the work's compelling but enigmatic "voices." More than a reinterpretation of the historical evidence, Suzanne Lewis's study explores the visual and textual strategies that have made the Bayeux Tapestry's narrative such a powerful experience for audiences over the centuries. *The Rhetoric of Power* focuses on how the Tapestry tells its story and how it shapes the responses of reader-viewers. This involves a detailed analysis of the way the visual narrative draws on diverse literary genres to establish the cultural resonance of the story it tells. The material is organized into self-contained yet cross-referencing episodes that not only portray the events of the Conquest but locate those events within the ideological codes of Norman feudalism. Lewis's analysis conveys how the whole 232-foot tapestry would have operated as a complex cultural "fiction" comparable to modern cinema.

Suzanne Lewis is a professor of art history at Stanford University. She is the author of *Reading Images: Narrative Discourse and Reception in the Thirteenth-Century Illuminated Apocalypse* (Cambridge, 1995), and *The Art of Matthew Paris* (Berkeley and London, 1987).

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PREFACE

The Bayeux Tapestry is one of the most powerful pieces of visual propaganda ever produced; it is also one of the few medieval works of art familiar to almost everyone in the Western world. Given the ready availability of several thoroughly admirable books on the subject, as well as a steady output of highly informative articles on various aspects of the work, why another book on the Bayeux Tapestry? Scholarly books are generally written for one of two reasons – revision or innovation. Authors either seek to redress a perceived flaw in the extant literature or feel they have something new to say. This volume falls into the latter category. I have no quarrel with the splendid studies by Michel Parisse (1983), David Wilson (1985), David Bernstein (1986), J. Bard McNulty (1989), or Wolfgang Grape (1993). As the references cited in my text make abundantly clear, my book is built upon a thick foundation of extant work. Indeed, given the ready accessibility of so many complete reproductions of the work, I have limited my illustrations to the episodes and details analyzed in the text.

My present project takes another close look at a unique medieval work of art, both fascinating and still problematic to late-twentieth-century viewers. By focusing on the art of narrative, particularly within the framework of recent film theory, I want to show how history is not reflected in images but produced by them. The pictorial narrative of the Bayeux Tapestry presents not so much an illusion of reality but reality itself. Rather than attempting to explain the narrative in terms of historical “truth,” I propose to explore the work as problematic fiction, shot

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through with inconsistencies and ruptures. The narrative is analyzed not only in terms of what it presents but also in terms of what it leaves out. I argue that the Bayeux Tapestry's most powerful rhetoric lies in its silences and empty spaces.

I am interested in exploring how the narrative as a whole operates as a complex cultural saga rooted in strategies of storytelling. How did the Bayeux Tapestry make itself accessible to contemporary audiences by establishing the cultural resonance of its story within the framework of such well-known literary genres as epic, chronicle, and panegyric? Framed in terms of its reception, both then and now, the Bayeux Tapestry can be seen as a fabric woven into patterns of contingency and ideology. The events of 1066 are shaped according to the most basic codes of Norman feudalism.

Assaulted at every turn by sounds and images, words and pictures, we live in an age dominated by electronic and print media. Although medieval experiences of visual and verbal messages, especially those of "stories," were perhaps less relentlessly ubiquitous than ours, they were nonetheless both powerful and influential, shaping the ways in which people felt and understood their world. As I attempt to create a sense of an embodied "reader" within the narrative of the Bayeux Tapestry, I do so in the realization that the medieval world of communication was a realm not of mass media but of specialized, privileged discourses, addressed to small, targeted, elite groups within the hierarchy of the feudal system. Although we can draw meaningful analogies to techniques of mass media familiar to late-twentieth-century audiences, the Bayeux Tapestry was not a vehicle of popular culture but an elitist work addressed to a *culture savante*. As we shall see, the Bayeux Tapestry's rhetoric of power was dependent not only upon the operation of a complex culturally coded apparatus, both verbal and visual, but also, and perhaps even more critically, upon the active engagement of its contemporary audiences as producers of meaning.

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