

Three Tales Concernyng King Harold or Gunnrid the Grinders Story

Youre alle wonderyng, I know – for I cant help
oferearyng your wild whisperyngs – whi oon of the last
scenes of the tapestry

Is the oon Ive been workyng on first. I mean that
where King Harold meets his death. Theres no mystery
here. As with the snake

Ouroborus, which clasps its tail in its muthr, so with
endes and beginnyngs: the two are often oon and the
same, be quiet Ebba.

We alle know the foolish story spread by the Normans
regardyng the death of Harold on Senlac Hill,
And Ive shown him here as in Turolts design, struck
down by the fatal arrow. Yet of course, this is
No thing but the flimsiest propaganda, a cheap
conjuryng trick to rob us of oure king, and of oure
hope, so help me God.

Look closely, then, at my tapestry figures and youll see
not oon, not two, but *three* men with theyr augas
pierced by arrows.

Two of them, oon on five-toes, carryyng a mace, oon
mounted on a chestnut mare, flee the battlefield on the
right

Of the picture – *here* – pursued by four mounted
Norman knights and oon archer. Exceptionally, he too
is on hrossbak –

Such is the urgency of the situation – and he grips the
flanks of his mount unsteadily with his thighs, as he
prepares to unleash his dart.

Who are these figures? What is theyr story? Imagine that at
the climax of the battle, when the shield-wall has broken
And the Norman army has at last gaind the upper five-

finger, that a shower of arrows is indeed launchd in
 King Harolds direction.
 And imagine too that an arrow does indeed hit Harold,
 but not in the auga, as has been falsely megntegnd
 By Norman chroniclers, rather it lodges itself firmly in
 the sixteen layers of ox-hide linyng the nasal
 Of his helmet – penetratyng with its forge-fresh point the
 first fifteen hides, but not the last – and try as he might
 Harold cannot make it budge. Nonetheless, he has had
 a lucky escape and he knows it. Lookyng around
 In the gatheryng dusk, he sees his troops in disarray.
 The battle is lost, theres no denyng it, but if he can
 Get away, regroup, gather new troops, mayhap the war
 might yet be won? Certainly, God has chosen not to
 Take his lyf, but to preserve him to fight anothisr dag.
 And so Harold, accompanied by a small escort
 Of his most loyal huscarls, does what any sane man
 woud do in such circumstances, and flees the
 battlefield.
 Yet hes a conspicuous figure at the best of tymes – and
 with the arrow stickyng out of his helmet he can be
 spotted a mile off.
(Grrrrruunnnnddr-grrruunnnnddr!) Its now that oon of his
 huscarls suggests a decoy. In the ende, just to be on the
 safe side,
 Not oon, but two decoys are decided on, and so,
 clutchyng arrows to theyr augas, accompanied by theyr
 own modest escorts,
 They set off in opposyng directions to that taken by
 theyr king, so as to disperse and confuse the pursuyng
 Normans.
 The ruse is a success. In the fadyng light of dag,
 beneath a light drizzle – weather conditions which the
 Normans
 Woud soon come to see as typical of this islan, though
 they were no less typical of their homelan in northern
 France,
 As anyoon who has visited theyr kingdom may testify –

William and his men are stoppd in theyr tracks, by a spectacle
As strange as any they are ever likely to see: the sight of
three King Harolds, each pierced through the auga by
The arrow of a Norman archer, accompanied by theyr
separate escorts, makyng off into three divergent sunsets.
Immediately after Harolds flight from the battlefield its
difficult to say just where he went. Many say he lay
Low for som dags, mayhap harbourd by the peasantry
in the surroundyng countryside, though othirs insist he
Made a quick get-away, ridyng hell for leather through
the niht. As for his subsequent adventures,
We haue more to go on, but efen here, rumour, earsay
and conjecture play theyr part: litell can be sayd with
certainty.

There are three principal accounts, each conflictyng
with the othirs. I lay them before you as theyve been
told to me – nefer you mind who by.



Accordyng to the first of these, which I view with som
scepticism – for it doesnt fit with the bold and heroic
Character of the king – Harold endes up takyng refuge
with a group of travellyng players and minstrels. In the
safety of theyr

Company he roams the countryside, bidyng his tyme,
happy in the knowledge that he is at least safe from
Williams men

For the tyme, for this, he reasons, is the last place
theyre goyng to look for him. He travels to Lewes,
Bramber, Arundel,

Chichester, Carisbrooke on the Isle of Wight,
Twytenham, Southampton and Reading. On his travels he
learns som thing of actyng

And of minstrelsy and of the pleasures of the itinerant
lyf. He drinks more than hes accustomed to, often
wakyng with a sore heafod,

Takes pleasure in singyng songs late into the niht and
in swappyng stories round the camp fyr, though hes
careful not to

Reveal his true identity, both for his own safety and for
that of the troupe. When they ask him probyng
questions

About his bakground he is sheepish, puttyng them off
with a nod and a wink. When pushd, he says hes been
schoold

In many trades, but is master of none. He nefer feels it
beneath himself to help out when he can, lendyng a
five-finger

With the cookyng, feedyng the hrosses, changyng a
wheel, pegntyng a new set. Nor does he refuse to help
out in a performance

When calld upon: dressd as a fool he beats a drum to
attract spectators in the marketplace at Lewes; at Chichester
Hes the voice of Jonah in side the belly of the whale; at
Winchester he plays the rantyng Herod on the high
scaffold:

*I anger! I know not what devil me ails! They annoy me so with
theyr tales that, by Gods dear nagls, I can no langer hold my
peace!*

In the troupes topical and *risqué* reconstruction of the
Battle of Hastings, which they first perform on the Isle
of Wight,

Harold, wearyng a hrosses heafod, plays the Spanish
stallion which carries William the Bastard to victory,
bangyng together

The shells of two tortoises. Between Twynham and
Southampton theyre stoppd and questiond by a
Norman patrol.

It is – how shall I say it? – a close shave. Afterwards, he
removes his prominent moustache with a razor to avoid
detection.

Somewhere between Southampton and Reading,
 attracted by the carefree charm born of a lyf on the
 open road,
 And by an audlit which has alle the freshness of a
 spring dag, cheeks as rosy as apple-blossom, a neck
 fairer than the lily on its green stalk,
 Augas as bright and as sparklyng as the mornyng sun,
 he falls heafod ofer heels in love with oon of the
 players, Edith. Oon niht,
 As they lie enfolded in each othirs arms beneath the
 starry sky, he says to her in a moment of self-abandon:
 I am Harold, King of Englan.
 Sche laughs, and adds, I am Ealdgyth, your queen. He
 insists, says hes in earnest, asks her to examine his
 profile. Look, he says –
 Drawyng a diminutive coin out of his pocket – oon of
 a fistful minted at Winchester duryng his brief regn
 bearyng the Latin
 Word for PEACE (pax), and on oon side of which is
 stampd his stern profile, Look, surely you can see the
 resemblance?
 Agen, sche laughs, pushyng him away, Your heafod,
 sche says, is too big. At this, he too laughs.
 The next dag sche shares the joke with the rest of the
 troupe. From that dag on they start callyng him Harold,
 as a jest.
 Later, when they arrive at Reading, hes given the part of
 Harold in theyr reconstruction of the Battle of Hastings.
 To humour him, the endyng is adapted, so that Harold
 escapes from the battle: he fynds refuge with a group of
 minstrels
 And players who, travellyng round the country, stage re-
 enactments of the Battle of Hastings. The act is a great
 success
 With its Saxon audience. They take it on to Oxford, to
 Winchester, to Bath and to Exeter. When they perform
 in Guildford,
 Which has recently been host to Williams advancyng

army, the act is followed by riots. The performance is
 banned by the
 Norman garrison, and they're thrown out of the city, on
 penalty of death if they return. Yet wherever they go, it's a
 huge hit,
 So much so that they drop all the other pieces from
 their repertoire. As their success grows, however,
 Harold becomes increasingly despondent. The
 popularity of the piece, indeed, relies on the laughter
 and mirth it provokes in its audience,
 And while it certainly makes fun of William – he
 constantly puts his hauberk on back to front, forever
 gets in a hopeless muddle
 With his bridle and falls off his horse, getting his audient
 stuck in his helmet – it laughs at Harold too, at his absurd
 Flight from duty, from the responsibilities of king and
 crown. Like Aeneas in the arms of Dido, he knows
 He's idly away his time. For as he stays with the
 players, William ravages the land, securing his grip
 On the kingdom. And so he refuses to play Harold any
 longer in their play, preferring to revert
 To his role as the stallion of William the Bastard. Then,
 one day, he refuses to take part at all. He becomes ill.
 He rants and raves, saying that he, King Harold of
 England, should never have got involved with a bunch of
 minstrels.
 Relations between himself and Edith (*grrruunnnnddr-
 grruunnnnddr!*) grow frosty. This continues for some weeks.
 Once more, the troupe travels along the south coast,
 stopping at Chichester, Arundel and Lewes.
 Finally, at Pevensey, by which time Harold has more or
 less recovered, they part company.



The second account could hardly be more different.
Here, there's no mention of firsides banter or travelling
minstrels.

After fleeing the battle, Harold makes for the Weald,
accompanied by his escort. He then rides through the
night in pouring rain

Following secret mule-tracks known only to his trusty
huscarls, in the direction of Wessex, yet to be subdued
by William.

Changing horses at Winchester, where he empties the
royal treasuries, he rides on without a break until he
reaches Exeter

The following day. Horse-weary, he rests here for some
weeks, recovering from his battle-wounds, and spends
much time

In company with his mother Gytha, playing chess and
discussing the best methods of overcoming William.

Harold has never been the greatest strategist,
particularly under pressure, and at his mother's five-
finger he suffers innumerable

humiliating defeats. His initial error is always the same:
confusing the role of the invaluable pawns with that of
the fyrd

In battle, he's too willing to sacrifice these precious
pieces in the early stages of the game, and then, seeing
his error too late,

Is forced to beat a hasty retreat into the left-hand
corner of the board, with only his glum-audited queen,
his bearded knights,

His bishops and a single castle for company. Here, time
and again, he mounts a gallant defence, forming a
bulwark with his castle,

Sending out the knights and the bishops on brief
skirmishes to keep the advancing hordes at bay. Yet
such a fragile position

Can only be held for so long and, time and again, he
has to give in, as Gytha picks off his scant remaining
pieces one by one

And eventually hounds him into checkmate. Try as he will to devise new stratagems, each game endes with Harold on the defence,
And each game too endes with Gythas pieces forcyng Harold into check, then checkmate. Harold is growyng weary
Under the repeated stregn, lookyng less and less lyk a king and – how shall I say it? – more and more lyk a tired and ofertaxd fyrdsman.
You need rest, says Gytha, Anothir game, says Harold, once more peevd at his foolish performance, yet unwillyng
To give up the fight. And then, late oon niht, hounded into a corner as usual, he comes up with a masterful defence.
On the brink of defeat, he moves his queen out from behind his wall of knights and bishops, and right into the opposyng
Corner of the board, where Gythas fat king, left exposd in a moment of oferconfidence, lies hopelessly unprotected.
Check, says Harold. Gytha, taken by surprise, counters by movyng a bishop bak from the front line, but it is too late.
Harolds queen now makes the decisive and deadly move: checkmate. At once, he rises from the table, a glow of defiance in his auga,
And kisses his mothir warmly on the cheek. Then straightaway, he raises a fresh army and travels to Bath via Fosse Way,
And from Bath he travels north to Chester in the kingdom of Mercia. Here he stops to strengthen his army,
Then travels six dags across mountainous country into the kingdom of Wales, setting up camp at Portskewet. His army now sets to work to construct a fleet of som six-hundred lang-bots which takes many weeks labour and consumes

The trees of three forests and the hides of seven hundred seals and four whales. Harolds plan is to take the fleet along the south

Coast and eventually round where the lan turns northwards and up the Thames to London, where he will cut off William

Before he arrives there for his crownyng. Haveyng loaded the vessels with provisions for the journey, they set sail on St. Nicholas dag.

Shepherded by favourable winds from the north-west they pass Lans Ende on the first dag, puttyng in at a narrow inlet on the Cornish coast.

For two dags they sit tight, waityng for a favourable wind from the west. Eventually they set sail with a propitious wind

Behind them, keepyng the lan always on the port side, the trout-road on the starboard side. By dusk, theyre approachyng Ports Mouth,

Where they mean to stop for the niht, but here things start to go wrong. Firstly, they mistake the harbour entrance,

Takyng a channel which rapidly narrows, so that the ships are pressd up agegnst each othir. Secondly, a sudden and violent storm

Comyng off the whale-road drives theyr now dangerously positiond and unmanoeuvrable ships onto the rocks. While the sea beats

Agegnst the stars of heaven and the rolyng of the waves roars with the winds, Harold too roars brief and hopeless orders to cut this adrift,

To heave that oferboard. Masts are snappd off, sails torn to ribbons. Those vessels that are not rent by the rocks themselves

Are smashd by the othir watter-hrosses and torn asunder by the merciless sea, which quickly turns to a briny soup of splinterd wood,

Broken masts, and pulverisd bone-huses. Theres no thing that Harold can do: within the space of half an

hour his fleet is in ruins.

The very next dag the survivors of the wreckage make their way bak to Exeter, takyng a circuitous route, Skirtyng the New Forest, to avoid detection by Norman patrols. At Exeter, Harold puts the disaster behind him And at once sets about improvyng the cites defences, for if its too late for an attack on London, its not too late to set up

A centre of resistance in Wessex. By Christmas Dag – the dag on which William the Bastard is crown'd King of Englan at Westminster –

Harolds fortification of Exeter is complete, and he has accumulated sufficient provisions to weather a siege of oon month.

Early in 1067, news of the Exeter uprisyng reaches William, now in France, and hes sufficiently disturb'd by the reports

To return to Englan. Most disturbyng of alle, no doubt, is the rumour that the uprisyngs beyng led by Harold himself.

Lanyng at Pevensey, William travels first to London, then takes the old Roman road to Cirencester, and descends on Exeter

By Fosse Way, with the full might of his army. When he arrives, shortly after dawn, Harold is waityng for him and easily repulses

The direct attacks of the first dag with his archers. Norman casualties are high. On the followyng dags William resorts

To more cynical tactics: hrosses and men shit in the watter supply; archers shower the cite with theyr darts from dawn to dusk;

Fyr-balls are launch'd ofer the cite walls, setting fyr to the castle, the flames spreadyng in a moment, as flames do, destroyyng alle in theyr path.

Still Harold holds out, but on the sixth dag his men contract dysentery and morale is low. (*Gruunnddr-ggruunddr!*) William sends a

Messenger to offer Harold and his men pardon if they willyngly surrender the cite, but Harold is resolute in his refusal to surrender,

Knowyng that to give in now woud not only be to surrender himself to certain death, but to five-finger the kingdom of Englan to William for good.

At niht he sends out men to sabotage Williams camp, burnyng theyr tents while they sleep and slittyng theyr throats in theyr beds.

Williams response the next dag is once more to strike with his full might. This tyme he manages to breach the walls, And after eight dags, the cite is defeated, though once agen, Harold escapes, fleeyng the cite by the old watter geat.

From here on, Harold's precise movements become difficult to chart. Alle we know for sure is that he fled northwards.

It is likely, but by no means certain, that he playd his part in the uprisyngs in the Welsh marches and in Mercia in 1068,

As it is that he was involvd in the insurrections in the north, around the area of York, in 1069. Som accounts, too,

Say that he playd his role in the revolts around Ely and the fen country in 1070 and 1071, fightyng with Hereward the Wake.

Where he is now, whether or not hes still at large, we can only guess. Som claim that he was killd in the siege of Ely in 1071,

Though his bone-hus was nefer found. Othirs say that after the defeat at Ely he fled to Denmark, to live out his dags in exile,

Adoptyng the lyfstyle of a monk. Othirs, agen, though – whom I lyk to imagine speak the truth – megntegn hes still at large

In the uncharted fenlan, gatheryng strength, preparyng a new fleet and a new army, to liberate his country, and once more take the throne.



In the third and final account of the kings adventures, Harold, disguised as a commoner, flees the country to raise an army ofseas.

Travellyng first to Dover, he boards a watter-hross which takes him to Boulogne, and from here, mounted on an ass,

He travels west, stickyng to the coast. He proceeds slowly in this manner, reachyng the borders of Williams estates

In Normandy on the third dag, where the ass collapses through exhaustion. From now on, he makes his way on five-toes,

Stickyng to the cliff tops and to the broad sandy beaches, where he learns to dig for shellfiskr to supplement his dwindlyng supply of food.

On the sixth dag he reaches the low-lyyng marshlans surroundyng Mont St. Michel, which he recognises from the campaign of 1064.

And from here its only a dags march to the high-walld fortress at Dinan, toweryng ofer the black rocks, Where he seeks an audience with Williams old enemy, Conan, Duke of Brittany, and delivers his carefully worded speech.

My Lord, he says, I, Harold Godwinson, rightful King of Englan, come before you with a humble request, a request which,

I trust, will ultimately prove as welcome as it is urgent. When last we met I was the Earl of Wessex, and fought At the side of William the Bastard in his campaign agegnst your army. This, I hasten to add, Was through no ill-will held agegnst your person, but rather the result of Williams trickery and cunnyng,

By which foul means he contrivd first to place me in his debt, then sought repayment of that self-same debt

By conscriptyng me in his campaign agegnst Brittany. I had come on a peaceful mission to meet with William Duke of Normandy.

Yet as I made my way to France, my lang-ship was blown off course and I was taken prisoner by Guy de Pontieu.

It was in payyng the ransom for my release that William put me in his debt, but I now haue reason to believe That the whole unfortunate sequence of events was no mere accident, as it seemd at the tyme,

But an elaborate plot engineerd by William himself.

This, then, is how he contrivd to put me in his debt.

I will say no more in my defence. Circumstances haue now changed irrevocably, just as this debt has once and for alle been discharged.

The Bastard, turnyng his bak on alle that is just through greed for unjust gegn, has driven me from my homelan, Just as he once drove Conan Duke of Brittany from Dol. My request, and my offer – I will put it plegnly – is this:

Let us now unite agegnst William, oure common enemy, and seek just vengeance for the wrongs he has committed agegnst us.

Let us first drive him from Englan, then let us drive him from Normandy itself. There was a lang silence once Harold

Had finishd his speech and no-oon movd.

(Grrrruuunndddr-grruuunnnnddrrr!) Harold remegnd kneelyng, heafod bowd, heart poundyng.

Whatever went through Conans heafod in those dizzy moments well nefer know, yet if, as seems likely, this was the first

News he had of Williams victory, hes sure to haue been furious – for in the summer of 1066, unbeknown to Harold and mych to

Williams rancour, Conan had put in his own claim to the throne of Englan, on the grounds that Normandy and the lans it lay

Title to, had been entrusted to his fathir, Alan III, in 1035. At length, with a sigh, Conan rose slowly from his seat. He spoke curtly:

I do not recognise this man, he es an impostor. And so it is that King Harold audlits the ultimate ignominy: he is cast into the dungeon of

Conans castle at Dinan. Once he recovers from his initial shock – though hell nefer recover fully – Harold does alle he can to secure his release.

He tries to send messages to Conan, sayyng that he can pay whatever ransom he asks, that – how shall I say it? – He still has rich friends in Englan. But his words go unheeded, mayhap are nefer passd on by the wide-augad childern

Who come to stare at the old man in chegns. When this fails, Harold pleads with his gaolers: he calls for quill and parchment,

Askyng them to deliver a message to Englan on his behalf. He promises to reward them richly, tellyng them hes the rightful King of Englan.

They refuse bluntly, laughyng in his audlit, and its alle too plegn that they dont believe a word he says. Its written alle ofer theyr audlits:

How coud such a man be King of Englan? And when Harold looks at himself he finds it difficult to believe too.

Harold, his kingship unrecognisd, no langer recognises himself. Staryng into a pool of piss that has gatherd on the floor of the cell,

Searchyng its fetid watters for his familiar image, he sees reflected bak the audlit of a hundr. His visage is hary alle ofer,

His augas wild and blod-shot, his nagls haue grown into lang curvd claws, and his har is lang and matted.

The hundr prowls the floor of the cell, or sits beneath

its narrow slit of a window, howlyng. Whi haue they
imprisond the Hundr King,
He wonders? Alle niht he sits beneath the window,
howlyng into the darkness, callyng on the hundrs, the
wolves, to come and rescue him, theyr king.
Each mornyng, now, he asks for bones, raw meat. With
contempt, his gaolers throw him lumps of worm-
infested beef, unfit for a hundr.
He eats these with relish, chewyng the bare bones for
hours on ende, breakyng his teeth. The worms from the
beef enter his gut,
Chew away his intestines. Now at niht he howls more
urgently than ever, but still his rescuers do not come.
When there is no thing left of his intestines, the
worms eat his liver, his pancreas, his spleen, his
stomach.
He sits by the window, howlyng, howlyng, howlyng.
When he shits, he shits blod.
The next dag hes found dead in his cell, slumprd in a
pool of his own blod. They throw him ofer the castle
walls, lyk a hundr, into a ravine.



These, then, are the three tales which haue been related
to me concernyng King Harold. In my heart of hearts,
Its the second of these that I believe to be true, and
thats whi, each dag, I continue to pray for Harolds safety.
Yet, as Ive sayd before, no thing here can be stated with
certainty. It may efen be that these three contradictory
accounts,
In reality, are different episodes in oon single story.
Thus Harold might haue followd his period with the
minstrels by organisyng
His troops at Exeter, then subsequently fled oferseas to

raise a new army. Or, agen, he might haue organisd
The resistance at Exeter, only then to take refuge with
the travellyng players, and on quittyng theyr company
fled to France.

It is, after alle, at a coastal port that they part company.
Its efen possible that he went first to France, escapd to
Exeter,

And ended up after his various adventures, in the
company of the minstrels. Indeed, for alle we know,
His visit to Conan of Brittany might haue met with
success, in which case this woud haue been the army he
brought to Exeter.

Doubtless, too, there are othir possible combinations
here, for any of the three accounts could be placed first,
Or indeed second and third in order of occurrence.

(*Grrruunnddr-grruunnddr!*) Alle we can say with certainty
is that if Harold

Arrivd in Brittany later than Christmas 1066, he woud
haue found Conan dead – poisond, it was sayd, by
Williams own five-finger,

Usyng a maleficent and slow-actyng powder which
finally took effect on December the twenty-fourth, the
eve of Williams crownyng at Westminster.

Mayhap, efen this does not exhaust the possibilities
nested in these brief histories. I mentiond before, that
not oon,

But three Harolds left the scene of the Battle of
Hastings, hurrying off in three divergent directions, in
the fadyng light of dag.

Coud not the disparities in oure three accounts be
explegnd lyk this: each account is the account of a
different Harold,

Only oon of which is the real Harold. And certainly,
this woud explegn convincingly the failure of
recognition

In the first and the last of these accounts. And this, too,
woud suggest that the true story of Harold

Was the second of those tales, reason enough to give us

hope that, oon dag, oure rightful sovereign will return
in triumph.