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Ford Madox Brown's *The Body of Harold*: Representing England at Mid-Century

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Abstract:
Ford Madox Brown's interest in the relationship between national identity and class has long been recognized in paintings of the 1850s such as *Work*, *The Last of England*, and *An English Autumn Afternoon*. This essay examines an earlier work, *The Body of Harold Brought Before William the Conqueror*, whose depiction of a key event in English history suggests radical affiliations and throws new light on the genesis of Brown's later paintings.

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Ford Madox Brown is best known for three paintings begun in the early 1850s: *Work* (1852–65, fig. 1), *An English Autumn Afternoon* (1852–53, fig. 2), and *The Last of England* (1852–55, fig. 3). The three works chart the nation's social landscape, offering a vivid picture of labor, leisure, and emigration, and in each painting class plays a key role in the artist's vision of England.[1] *Work* and *The Last of England* comment on the relationship between the classes as they meet on Hampstead's Heath Street or as they share deck-space on a ship bound for one of Britain's colonies. *An English Autumn Afternoon* depicts the particularities of middle-class leisure on the outskirts of London. Brown's attention to class underlines that what we see here is absolutely up-to-date. Not only the contemporary subject matter but also the style represent the artist's response to the latest works of his Pre-Raphaelite friends. The attention to effects of outdoor light and to the smallest details of the material world follow the lead of artists such as William Holman Hunt and John Millais, who since the late 1840s had been exhibiting paintings of similarly preternatural clarity.

Fig. 1, Ford Madox Brown, *Work*, 1852–65. Oil on canvas. Manchester City Art Gallery. [larger image]

Fig. 2, Ford Madox Brown, *An English Autumn Afternoon*, 1852–53. Oil on canvas. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. [larger image]

Fig. 3, Ford Madox Brown, *The Last of England*, 1852–55. Oil on canvas. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. [larger image]

The sunlit brilliance of Brown's work in the 1850s marked a new departure in his oeuvre, but other aspects of these paintings reflected what were long-standing interests of the artist. This is particularly true of their attention to the relationship between class and English identity, which manifested itself in germinal form in his work from the mid-1840s on. Stylistically, as we shall see, the earlier works were very different. Thematically, too, we seem to be in a different world, not contemporary England but a series of far-removed moments in English history: *Chaucer at the Court of Edward the Third, Wycliffe Reading his Translation of the Bible*, and so forth. Nevertheless, an interest in the question of class—or more specifically, in how class inflects Englishness—runs through these earlier paintings. This interest, which laid the ground for Brown's Pre-Raphaelite masterpieces, throws new light on the genesis of those later works.

One of the most significant of Brown's early efforts was *The Body of Harold Brought Before William the Conqueror*, which survives both as a cartoon (1843–44) and as a large painting (1844–61; fig. 4). The color of the painting was completely re-worked in 1861 in keeping with the artist's later preoccupation with natural lighting effects, but its design remained unchanged, and it is to this aspect of the work that I will pay most attention here. The theme reflects Brown's training on the continent, where the Romantic taste for the English Middle Ages still rode high.[2] The immediate impetus for the image, however, was the competition to decorate the newly re-built Palace of Westminster. After the home of the British Parliament had been destroyed in a spectacular conflagration in 1834 (memorably recorded by Turner), Charles Barry had won the commission for a new edifice and, with the help of Augustus Pugin, had designed the neo-Gothic structure that stands to this day. In 1841, it was decided that the new building should be adorned with allegorical and historical scenes relating to the nation's past and with episodes from its literature (Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton were initially the officially sanctioned authors, though Chaucer and others soon made their way into the reckoning).[3] A series of competitions were held from 1843 to 1847 under the auspices of a specially created Fine Arts Commission, and it was for the 1844 contest that Brown designed the cartoon for *The Body of Harold*. He worked in Paris for much of 1843 on what was by far his largest undertaking to date; the competition rules

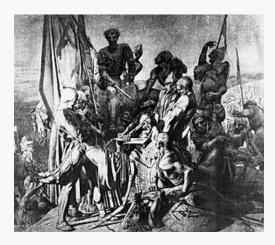stipulated that all figures must be life-size, and Brown's cartoon measures an impressive 13' x 15'.[4]

Fig. 4, Ford Madox Brown, *The Body of Harold Brought Before William the Conqueror*, 1844–61. Oil on canvas. Manchester City Art Gallery. [larger image]

When the Queen opened the exhibition of competition entries in Westminster Hall in June 1844, *The Body of Harold* might not have struck the visitor as unusual. The subject was not on the face of it particularly surprising: in both 1843 and 1844 many artists chose to depict historical events from the Saxon period, even if Roman Britain and the post-Conquest period were more commonly represented.[5] Nor would the style of his cartoon have stood out much from the crowd. Its debt to the conventions of history painting (pyramidal construction, emphatic musculature) and its close attention to details of costume and weaponry were all par for the course. Edward Armitage's *Caesar's First Invasion of Britain*, a prizewinner the year before, employs a similar combination of the academic nude and quasi-archaeological exactitude (1843; fig. 5). Nevertheless, both the episode that Brown chose to represent and the way in which he depicted it were carefully calibrated to speak to a particular vision of English identity. Indeed, this was true of all the entries to the Parliament competitions. From our vantage point, the works might appear rather monotonous: a repetitive series of national, even nationalist, episodes. But in the 1840s there were competing stories being told about the nation—about who its people were, what Parliament's role might be, and so forth—and Brown's painting participated in this debate.

Fig. 5, Edward Armitage, *Caesar's First Invasion of Britain*, 1843. Medium and current location unknown.
[larger image]

The Fine Arts Commission certainly understood the necessity of carefully orchestrating which subjects would appear in the Palace and where. In the monarch's Robing Room, for example, William Dyce's Arthurian themes were chosen to illustrate the virtues of an idealized monarchy in an archaicizing style that bespoke the agelessness both of the myth of Arthur and of royal institutions more generally.[6] An image such as *Mercy: Sir Gawain Swears to be Merciful and "Never to be against Ladies"* (1854; fig. 6) was particularly appropriate here, given that the incumbent on the throne at mid-century was Victoria. The scenes that would decorate the corridors along which Peers and Members of Parliament passed on their way to and from business focused, in contrast, on events from the 17th century, a critical period during which Parliament asserted its power in the face of royal resistance. In order to emphasize the subsequent harmony of England's constitutional arrangements, care was taken to show both king and parliamentarians behaving honorably—as in Charles West Cope's *Charles I Raising his Standard at Nottingham, 1642* (1861; fig. 7). Here the style was rather more naturalistic and matter-of-fact than in Dyce's Arthurian images, in keeping with the Whiggish view of progress to which the scenes in this part of the building spoke.[7]

Fig. 6, William Dyce, *Mercy Sir Gawain Swears to be Merciful and "Never to be against Ladies"*, 1854. Fresco. London, Palace of Westminster. [larger image]

Fig. 7, Charles West Cope, *Charles I Raising his Standard at Nottingham, 1642*, 1861. Oil on canvas. London, Palace of Westminster. [larger image]

The Robing Room and Corridor programs had not yet been decided upon when Brown submitted his image of a slain Saxon king to the 1844 competition, but the Commission was already thinking quite carefully about the meanings that both subject and style needed to convey in specific locations within the Palace. For the chamber of the House of Lords, three pairs of frescoes had been commissioned, each comprising an allegorical and a narrative scene that together represented a value appropriate to one of the three branches of the Lords. For the Law Lords, *The Spirit of Justice* was to be paired with *Prince Henry Acknowledging the Authority of Justice Gascoygne*; for the Lords Spiritual, *The Spirit of Religion* would complement *The Baptism of Ethelbert*; and for the Lords Temporal, Daniel Maclise's highly-acclaimed *The Spirit of Chivalry* (1847; fig. 8) would be twinned with *Edward the Black Prince Receiving the Order of the Garter*.[8] The six images projected just the right mix of idealism and historicism: at the official opening of Parliament in 1847 the Queen looked across at the allegorical representations while the Lords looked back towards narrative images of their predecessors engaged in suitably honorable action. The scheme also carefully signaled the balance in power between the monarch and the Lords. Henry's interaction with Gascoigne is particularly telling here: a magnanimous ruler, possessed of sufficient authority to recognize the authority of others; power *given* by the monarch rather than seized by the Lords.

Fig. 8, Daniel Maclise, *The Spirit of Chivalry*, 1847. Fresco. London, Palace of Westminster. [larger image]

What, then, would Brown's image of a slain Saxon king have signified at mid-century? His was not the only representation of the Saxon period on view in the Parliament competitions, but its depiction of the moment at which Saxon rule ended was unusual. When it came to images of Saxon rulers, the most popular theme was the conversion of Ethelbert by St. Augustine. Eleven of the 140 or so cartoons in 1843 had depicted this theme, with both J. C. Horsely and William Cave Thomas (a close friend of Brown's) winning prizes for their versions of the subject.[9] Ethelbert and Augustine would continue to appear in subsequent years—most famously in William Dyce's *Baptism of Ethelbert*, the first of the frescoes to be completed for the House of Lords (1846; fig. 9). This was an eminently suitable subject, illustrating the venerable roots of Christianity in England and underlining the piety of the nation's rulers.

Fig. 9, William Dyce, *Baptism of Ethelbert*, 1846. Fresco. London, Palace of Westminster. [larger image]

Alongside representations of Ethelbert, the second most popular Saxon theme was that of the Witenagemot, or Saxon parliament. In the first competition in 1843, John Bridges won a prize of £100 for *Alfred Submitting his Code of Laws for the Approval of the Witan*.[10] The theme continued to receive official sanction. In 1847, an advisory committee including among its

members no less a figure than Thomas Babington Macaulay proposed *A Sitting of the Witenagemot* as the first of a series of small historical scenes for St. Stephen's Hall.[11] Here the suitability of the theme was constitutional rather than religious, for the Witenagemot occupied an important place in the mythology of English democracy. Since at least the sixteenth century it had been argued that England's Saxon roots were the source of the nation's cherished institutional freedoms, and in particular of the reining in of royal power by the legislature.[12] At times this notion had been mobilized for explicitly radical purposes: it was popular, for example, during the English Civil War, when those opposed to Charles I evoked the idealized image of an earlier, more democratically ruled England. By the nineteenth century, however, the idea was most often used by those who admired the constitutional arrangements of modern England. Saxon liberty, that is to say, was fêted as the source of current liberties rather than being used to critique present-day repression. This congratulatory account was given voice most famously in David Hume's perennially-reprinted *History of England*: "Of all the barbarous nations . . . the Germans . . . carried to the highest pitch the virtues of valour and love of liberty. . . . Kingly government, even when established among the Germans . . . possessed a very limited authority; and though the sovereign was usually chosen from among the royal family, he was directed in every measure by the common consent of the nation over whom he presided."[13] Hume went on to argue that the modern English Parliament found its roots in the Witenagemot. This, together with an allegedly inborn love of liberty amongst the English, meant that parliamentary democracy was the natural form of government in the British Isles.

A number of paintings proposed for the Palace of Westminster reflected this view of English history. The answerability of the ruler to the people was celebrated in Bridges' *Alfred Submitting his Code of Laws for the Approval of the Witan*; and the Saxon roots of England's allegedly egalitarian legal system were depicted in Cope's *The First Trial by Jury* (1843; fig. 10), a prize-winner in the first competition. There is, needless to say, an element of nationalist pride here, even of jingoistic hubris. Earlier arguments about the historical legitimacy of representative government in England were by the 1840s being displaced by the proto-imperialist claim that the English, because of their respect for justice and love of freedom, were inherently suited to rule over others. Liberty for the Saxons but not for their colonial subjects: this would become an all-too-familiar refrain as the years passed. The idealization of Saxon liberties also implicitly excluded those who had inhabited the islands before the arrival of the Saxons and other Germanic peoples. The original Britons and their Celtic descendants were not often seen as a natural component of this self-aggrandizing story.

Fig. 10, Charles West Cope, *The First Trial by Jury*, 1843. Medium and current location unknown.
[larger image]

However, although the idea of Saxon liberty had largely been incorporated by the 1840s into a eulogizing account of England's system of governance, it could still speak to a rather more liberal politics. As in the seventeenth century, when roundheads had claimed for Parliament what were held to have been the powers of the Witenagemot, in the nineteenth century the notion of a now-lost Saxon freedom was mobilized by those critical of the current system, and in particular of the power wielded by the aristocracy. Here the moment depicted by Brown takes on its full significance, for William's defeat of Harold figured centrally in this radical take on England's early history. The argument was that the freedoms enjoyed under Saxon rule had been crushed by the "Norman yoke."[14] Not particularly accurate as history, this view nevertheless enjoyed a resurgence at mid-century. It was propounded most forcefully by John MacGregor, Member of Parliament. Strongly in favor of a powerful House of Commons whose roots he traced to earlier traditions of Saxon governance, MacGregor underlined the venerable ancestry of Parliament in terms that constantly pit Saxon liberty against Norman repression. Before William's arrival, he claimed, the English possessed "a sturdy spirit of independence, which the Norman power afterwards degraded, but could never subdue."[15] The *true* nature of the English eventually reasserted itself, as the people freed themselves from the Norman yoke: "[T]he English nation, though long humbled and degraded, regenerated its traditions, its laws, and its force, until its power gradually overcame despotism, and finally secured to the people of Britain the blessings of civil and political freedom—of moral and religious liberty."[16]

Similar views were expressed by Macaulay in his monumental *History of England*. The defeat of Harold at Hastings, he proclaimed, "gave up the whole population of England to the tyranny of the Norman race."[17] Norman rule, in turn, was out of step with the fundamental values of England: "The subjugation of a nation by a nation has seldom, even in Asia, been more complete. . . . During the century and a half which followed the Conquest, there is, to speak strictly, no English history."[18] Thus for an Englishman to celebrate William's rule was "as absurd as it would be in a Haytian negro of our time to dwell with national pride on the greatness of Lewis the Fourteenth."[19] Macaulay, in keeping with his optimistic vision of the nation's rise towards a balanced constitution that enshrined liberty and freedom of belief (his famously Whiggish interpretation of history), argued that this moment of division was later overcome. Faced with King John's inadequacy as a leader, Normans and

Englishmen had recognized their shared interest and begun the process of amalgamation. [20] But he still saw the initial contact between Norman and Saxon as a vicious suppression of indigenous rights by an alien invader.

Such opinions did not go unchallenged. There were some—most often conservative in outlook—who presented the impact of William's invasion in far more positive terms.[21] But the myth of the Norman yoke continued to resonate. This was particularly true in radical circles, where the initial damage done by the Normans was held never to have been righted. Tom Paine's *Common Sense* (1776, but reprinted in 1819 in London) set the tone, suggesting that the English monarchy and aristocracy found their origins in a "French bastard [William was illegitimate] landing with an armed banditti and establishing himself King of England."[22] The over-simplification of the argument—other dynasties had, of course, later displaced William's on the English throne—was part of its appeal. Kingship as armed robbery was a hard image to resist. Thus in the year in which Paine's work was reprinted, the short-lived reformist periodical *The White Hat* expanded upon the theme with its "Reformers' Creed": "That our ancestors enjoyed, in its fullest extent, the right of framing laws for their own government by their representatives; and that at various periods of our history this right has been contended for and maintained against arbitrary power."[23] The Norman Conquest was seen as the prime example of such arbitrary power, and would continue to be described by radicals as an example of the violent origins of class power. The English Civil War, from this perspective, had been waged between the descendants of William's Norman aristocracy and the Saxon commoners, a quasi-racial divide that still structured English society. The Chartists, among others, made use of the theory of the Norman Yoke to attack the political and economic privilege of the landed aristocracy; and in 1832 the *Poor Man's Guardian* memorably characterized the aristocracy as "A most tremendous host / Of locusts from the Norman coast; / A beggarly, destructive breed, / Sprung from the Bastard's spurious seed."[24]

Given Brown's liberal politics, we would expect him to sympathize with this tale of Saxon liberties crushed by a foreign nobility that 800 years later continued to control the land.[25] Certainly his diary makes clear his bitterness about the aristocracy: "To what pitch is England destined to soar in the History of the world. Externally a far shining glory to all the Earth and an example, internally a prey to snobbishness and the worship of gold and tinsel —a place chiefly for sneaks and lacqueys, and any who can fawn or clutch, or dress clean at church, & connive. . . . [T]he Government with our boasted nobility the greatest in the world takes the lead in all that is dullest and stupidest."[26] We are listening to a familiar contradiction: patriotism when it comes to the image of the nation abroad, disgust for certain aspects of the domestic sphere, particularly where individual freedom is stymied by the unjust social hierarchy embodied in England's aristocratic class. Thus Brown reserved his strongest invective for the non-meritocratic system of promotion in the army, where an incompetent aristocracy still held sway (Brown wrote these lines in 1854, blaming Britain's problems in the Crimea on the bungling leadership of the English upper-classes). "[T]he Aristocracy of the Country," he continued, "presses with Torpedo influence on all classes of men and works."[27] A year later he would deride the aristocracy's taste on a visit to Stafford (now Lancaster) House: "Oh how strange a place is this world, only those seem to possess power who dont know how to use it. What an accumulation of wealth and impotence is this which is gained by stability and old institutions. Is it for this that a people toils & weared out its myriad lives, for such heaping up of bad taste, for such gilding of hidiousness, for such

exposure of embicility as this sort of thing is. Oh how much more beautiful would 6 model labourers cottages be, built by a man of skill for £100 each."[28]

These comments were written a decade or so after Brown first worked on *The Body of Harold*, and we have little written evidence of his views during the earlier period. However, the painting itself offers the most eloquent testimony. The subject, focusing on the displacement of Saxon rule by Norman, would in itself have suggested the theme of the Norman yoke. How Brown chose to depict the event would have added to this impression. In certain respects, he followed mid-century accounts of the Battle of Hastings fairly closely. William wears on his breast the relics upon which Harold, shipwrecked in France and made prisoner, was routinely said to have earlier sworn support for William's succession to the English crown upon the death of Edward the Confessor (it was with this oath that William justified his invasion after Harold went back on his word). The banner bearing an image of the Crucifixion and blessed by the Pope when he sanctioned William's venture also matches what we read in most nineteenth-century texts. In other respects, however, the artist departed from the standard account. The unblemished body of Harold, most notably, contradicts the oft-repeated story that the two Saxon monks sent to collect the corpse had difficulty identifying it, so badly disfigured had it become in death.[29]

Brown's presentation of a body still perfect even in death is significant. The Saxon king's corpse weighs heavily, three men struggling to support his massive frame ("Harold," Brown explained in the catalogue he wrote to accompany his 1865 retrospective, "was a more than usually large and athletic man, even among Saxon heroes").[30] Though dead, his body still seems possessed of great force, as Brown again stressed in 1865: "One of William's attendants . . . catches a silly camp-boy by the fist, and exhibits its puny proportions alongside of the dead Harold's hand, still with the broken battle-axe in its iron grasp."[31] William, in contrast, looks relatively ineffectual, elevated by his horse but a less palpable presence than Harold. Note how William and the officers closest to him are cast into shadow, while Harold catches the last rays of the dying sun. Brown would write in 1865 that "the effect is just after sunset," but when he crafted the image he had been careful to allow Harold the full illumination of a sun not yet sunk beneath the horizon.[32] Note also how William's pose, right hand lying limply across his left thigh, turns his body in on itself and denies it any sense of active virility. The relics on his breast, although drawn directly from standard versions of the event, begin to suggest a certain deathliness that contrasts with the domination of the scene by Harold's inanimate frame.

In 1865 Brown would explain that he had shown Harold in the Saxon costume of an earlier period in order to distinguish him as fully as possible from William.[33] The longer we look, the more we sense that the opposition has indeed been underscored, and not only in sartorial terms. William stands as a muted counterpoint to the Saxon hero, to whose body the picture insistently directs our attention. All lines lead to the slain warrior's head: the broken scabbard on the ground to the left; the wounded Norman who turns in awe to glimpse the king ("regardless of the fact that his body is gashed pretty freely with wounds, [he] twists about to get a sight of Harold"[34]); the straining arms of the two men who support his weight; and the standard upon which hangs the image of the crucifix to the left. Note, too, the empty central axis above Harold's head: no figure is allowed to stand directly above him, or to displace him from the center of the image. And while his corpse is given

free rein to expand across the lower half of the scene, the zone behind him is densely compressed. William's horse barely has room to stand atop the small mound, and its rider seems precariously perched, balanced in unstable torsion against the direction in which his mount seems ready to move.

There was little in the way of critical response to Brown's painting, but one writer did notice the cartoon—ironically, or perhaps tellingly, a German critic. Ernst Foerster, whose *Kunstblatt* review was translated in the *Art Union* the following year, sensed what was peculiar to Brown's effort. First, the sheer dominating bulk of Harold's body (for Foerster, a "huge human monster," a "dead giant"). Second, the downplaying of William, though the critic saw this as a weakness. Brown's mistake, he opined, lay in the lighting: "Concerning the arrangement it is to be regretted that the top of the centre group, William the Conqueror with his attendants, is thrown into shadow, and appears too far distant from the lower portion (the giant)." He was equally concerned by the composition: "even a more suitably selected light could not have corrected the mistake of placing the standards of victory, or trophies, brought before William in a manner that they cover the neck of the steed, and thus make the head appear to be separated from the trunk."[35]

Foerster was right on almost all counts: the most striking aspects of the painting are Harold's immensity and the way in which William is pushed back into the shadows. But rather than weaknesses, these were Brown's way of indicating his partisanship, his loyalty to the vanquished Saxon king. Harold remains the hero even in death; William recedes, his horse effectively decapitated, even at the moment of his victory. At mid-century, as we have seen, such taking of sides implied a particular politics. The painting suggests that Brown sympathized with the tale of Saxon freedoms crushed by the Norman nobility. Note in this regard a chilling detail at bottom left. A Norman, locked in death with a fallen Saxon, "has bitten his adversary's throat like a dog," suggesting a Saxon nation bled dry by the vampiric bite of the Norman oppressor.[36] Again, given Brown's opinions, it does not seem unlikely that he might have had this kind of meaning in mind, one that linked 1066 to radical attacks on the injustice of aristocratic privilege.

None of this, we might note, is conveyed explicitly by the painting. Or, rather, the taking of sides is not absolute. The sneering courtier who supports Harold's legs and the mocking figures in the shadows between Harold and William present as ignoble the attitude of the victors, but other aspects of the painting serve to even up the score somewhat. The way in which the wounded Norman warrior twists to see Harold's body may suggest that he is in awe of the Saxon king, but the warrior is himself a conventionally heroic figure: athletic, unaffected by pain, and so forth. The armored soldier who supports his injured compatriot to the right of William also implies a positive view of Norman honor.[37] Nevertheless, the emphasis given to Harold and the downplaying of William's presence hint at an underlying politics that perhaps explains why the Fine Arts Commission declined to reward Brown's effort. Other scenes having to do with the death of Harold seem to have been more acceptable. F. R. Pickersgill's *The Burial of Harold at Waltham Abbey*, which won a £500 prize in the 1847 competition, illustrated only one side of the conflict and thus avoided staging the scene as one in which the ancestors of the modern-day English were locked in combat.[38] As with images of Ethelbert and Augustine, Saxon history is reduced to an example of Christian piety. With no troubling image of William looming over Harold's dead body, there

was presumably little to remind viewers of the potentially radical resonance of the theme. Brown's image, in contrast, because it depicted the precise moment when Saxon rule ceded to Norman, unavoidably suggested the tension between descendants of the two sides—a tension that some claimed still structured the English class system.[39]

Brown's vision of the felled Saxon king takes on its full significance when we recall that another king would soon be in the ascendant in the Palace of Westminster decorations: Arthur. The great cycle of Arthurian poems that Tennyson began to publish in 1842 had much to do with his new popularity, but conservative political factions were also actively promoting the Arthurian myth. As Debra Mancoff has argued, Arthur's resurgence in the 1840s was tied to the efforts of Disraeli's Young Englanders to keep the government of the island in the hands of a paternalistic aristocracy.[40] The Young Englanders' popularization of the image of the chivalrous king and his knights was part of a wider campaign to improve the public's perception of the modern aristocracy and, thus, curb the power of the Commons and limit the impact of the expansion of male suffrage brought in by the Reform Bill of 1832. The nineteenth-century nobility, the Young Englanders wanted to suggest, were modern Knights of the Round Table, selflessly serving the nation. This, at least, was the claim, and pictures would prove useful in promulgating it. It was convenient, then, that Disraeli's faction wielded some influence in the Fine Arts Commission. Maclise was a close friend of Disraeli, having worked with him on *Fraser's Magazine*, one of the original mouthpieces for proto-Young Englander sentiment. Thus, although no Arthurian themes had been submitted to the first competition for the Houses of Parliament frescoes, the exploits of the King and his knights were, as we have seen, subsequently chosen for the decoration of the monarch's Robing Room. Dyce, close to Prince Albert, suggested the theme, assuming that Maclise would paint it; in the end Dyce himself was chosen to execute the cycle. Brown's image of Harold stood in clear opposition to the waxing of the Arthur cult and the associated glorification of aristocratic chivalry.

After the failure of *The Body of Harold*—no commission, little critical attention—Brown's resolve wavered for a moment. In 1844, his friend William Cave Thomas had won a prize for his archaicizing *Throne of Intellect*, and Thomas's success seems to have persuaded Brown to try his hand at this manner. His cartoon for *The Spirit of Justice* (1845; fig. 11) closely aped both Thomas's *Throne of Intellect* and Maclise's *Spirit of Chivalry*, but fared no better in the 1845 competition than *The Body of Harold* had the preceding year. In the summer, Brown went further, following in Thomas's footsteps to Rome, where his friend had trained with Wilhelm Kaulbach, a minor Nazarene, and visiting the studios of Cornelius and Overbeck. [41] In Rome he designed his most heavily Nazarene-influenced work, *The Seeds and Fruits of English Poetry* (1845–51; fig. 12), an ambitious project that would never reach completion, though a modified version of its central panel was later exhibited as *Chaucer at the Court of Edward the Third* (1845–51, fig. 13). A year or so later Brown began another celebration of the English language: the even more archaicizing *Wycliffe Reading his Translation of the Bible to John of Gaunt in the Presence of Chaucer and Gower* (1847–48, retouched 1859–61, fig. 14).

Fig. 11, Ford Madox Brown, *The Spirit of Justice*, 1845. [larger image]

Fig. 12, Ford Madox Brown, *The Seeds and Fruits of English Poetry*, 1845–51. Oil on canvas. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum. [larger image]

Fig. 13, Ford Madox Brown, *Chaucer at the Court of Edward the Third*, 1845–51. Oil on canvas. Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales. [larger image]

Fig. 14, Ford Madox Brown, *Wycliffe Reading his Translation of the Bible to John of Gaunt in the Presence of Chaucer and Gower*, 1847–48, retouched 1859–61. Oil on canvas. Bradford Art Galleries and Museum.
[larger image]

Despite the apparent conservativism of their style, there are echoes in each of these works of *The Body of Harold*'s take on national identity. The *Spirit of Justice* may echo Maclise's *Spirit of Chivalry*, but it is attuned to the concrete mechanics of power and class. As Brown wrote, we see in the foreground an "unbefriended widow . . . appeal to Justice against the oppression of a perverse and powerful Baron" (an attention to the needs of the downtrodden underscored by the elderly working couple who stand behind her).[42] *Chaucer*, in turn, implicitly repeated *The Body of Harold*'s vision of Saxon-Norman conflict. None other than Macaulay had heralded Chaucer's contribution to English literature as a key factor in England's re-emergence from under the yoke of Norman tyranny.[43] *Wycliffe*, finally, speaks both to questions of class and of Saxon identity (the two, as we have seen, were hardly distinct). Wycliffe's reform movement was often described as the moment when the English church first began to free itself from Papal control and to return to its former Saxon independence.[44] He was equally celebrated for his criticism of the temporal possessions of his fellow churchmen, an attack on wealth for which he had famously been condemned by the ecclesiastical authorities.[45] Brown seems to have had this in mind when he wrote in 1865 that Wycliffe's "reforming tendencies seem to have embraced social as well as religious topics."[46]

Brown's resolve, as I said, had faltered as he struggled for recognition. These paintings suffered as a result, divided between themes that bespoke a liberal politics and a style that, whatever success the artist hoped it might bring, suggested more conservative affiliations. These contradictions would be resolved a few years later when, following the lead of his Pre-Raphaelite colleagues, Brown moved towards the lapidary brilliance of his 1850s naturalism. This, combined with the turn to contemporary scenes, allowed him to locate his feelings about the inequity of the class system firmly in the here-and-now. *The Last of England*, with its middle-class couple forced into exile by economic hardship, conveys Brown's feelings about that system more forcefully than a slain Saxon king ever could. *An English Autumn Afternoon*, in turn, recasts Brown's resentment of the aristocracy in the most concrete and contemporary of terms. The green space towards which we and his viewers look was contested in 1853, under the control of a peer of the realm but soon to be made available to all as public parkland.[47] Here we might recall that in the nineteenth century William's

most unpopular act was often said to have been the enactment of the Forest Laws, which reserved large tracts of the nation's landscape exclusively for the hunts of the Norman nobility.[48]

If *The Last of England* and *An English Autumn Afternoon* make more explicit the class concerns that hovered under the surface of Brown's earlier historical scenes, the same is true of Work. As Tim Barringer has recently noted, *Work* can be seen as an updated version of *The Body of Harold*.[49] In each painting we see a trapezoidal foreground space, sloping up and away from the viewer, to the side of which are glimpsed figures on a lower plane that stretches out into the distance (to both sides in *Harold*, to the right only in *Work*). In each, muscular figures dominate the foreground space while in the shadows beyond stands a horseman (accompanied by his daughter in *Work*) who fails, despite his raised position, to dominate the scene. This, it seems to me, is crucial. In 1844, Brown had depicted the Norman origins of the English aristocracy standing in triumph over the Saxon English. In 1852, he crafted a similar composition that told a rather different story. The nineteenth-century aristocrat—in all likelihood, according to the tenets of mid-century radical myth-making, descended from William's rapacious henchmen—finds his path blocked by English workers. Standing at the heart of the composition, just where the felled body of the Saxon king was supported in *The Body of Harold*, these workers suggest a resurrection of the indigenous English. Rising up, they take control of the national stage once more. Brown's class sympathies in *Work* have long been recognized. The relationship to *The Body of Harold* suggests just how deep-rooted the artist believed these social structures to be, how thoroughly he felt them to suffuse England at mid-century.[50]

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Notes

[1] A note on terminology: Throughout this essay I will be using "England" even though in the nineteenth century the nation was more properly The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Most writers at mid-century continued to talk of England (implicitly excluding the Celts of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland). To avoid confusion I follow—without condoning—their usage.

[2] Brown had studied with Gustave Wappers at the Antwerp Academy in the late 1830s, but always kept an eye on developments in France. At the Paris Salon in 1842 he exhibited an

Execution of Mary Queen of Scots (now lost), a work that looked back to Delaroche's *Execution of Lady Jane Grey*, a sensation of the Salon just eight years earlier. *The Body of Harold* in turn borrows from Delacroix's *Crusaders Entering Constantinople*, shown to great acclaim at the Salon of 1841. See Teresa Newman and Ray Watkinson, *Ford Madox Brown and the Pre-Raphaelite Circle* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1991), 7–17, 19.

[3] On the Parliament competitions, see T. S. R. Boase, "The Decoration of the New Palace of Westminster, 1841–63," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 17 (1954): 319–58; M. H. Port, ed., *The Houses of Parliament* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press/Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1976), 268–81; David Robertson, *Sir Charles Eastlake and the Victorian Art World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 58–77 and 324–44; William Vaughan, *German Romanticism and English Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Janet McLean, "Prince Albert and the Fine Arts Commission," in *The Houses of Parliament: History, Art, Architecture*, ed. Christine Riding and Jacqueline Riding (London: Merrell, 2000), 213–23; and William Vaughan, "'God Help the Minister who Meddles in Art': History Painting in the New Palace of Westminster," in *Houses of Parliament*, ed. Riding and Riding, 225–39.

[4] Newman and Watkinson, *Ford Madox Brown*, 19.

[5] Particular attention was paid to events during the reigns of the first three Edwards, perhaps in an effort to match subject matter to the Gothic style of Barry's building; see Robertson, *Sir Charles Eastlake*, 62. Brown was not alone in painting a dead Harold in 1844. E. Butler Morris submitted *Discovering The Body of Harold*, showing just two figures, the naked Harold and one monk; the painting was given short shrift in the *Art Union*'s review of the exhibition. "Westminster Hall: The Frescoes and Sculpture," *Art Union*, no. 71, August 1844, 212.

[6] Debra N. Mancoff, "Myth and Monarchy: Chivalric Legends for the Victorian Age," in *Houses of Parliament*, ed. Riding and Riding, 241–51.

[7] Vaughan, "'God Help the Minister'," 228–34.

[8] Ibid., 226–28.

[9] Robertson, *Sir Charles Eastlake*, 327–28.

[10] Ibid., 327. The theme was repeated the following year in Henry C. Selous's *Alfred Submitting his Code of Laws to the Wittena-gemot*. For a discussion of Selous's work, see "Westminster Hall," 213.

[11] Religious themes once more took pride of place, most notably in *The Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity – the Preaching of St. Augustine*. The decorations for St. Stephen's Hall were never painted; Maclise was invited to prepare them, but declined. Robertson, *Sir Charles Eastlake*, 332.

[12] Reginald Horsman, "Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain Before 1850," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37, no. 3 (Jul.–Sep. 1976), 387–88; and Hugh MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1982), 45–70.

[13] David Hume, *The History of England*, 8 vols. (Oxford: Talboys and Wheeler; London: William Pickering, 1826), 1:14.

[14] The best history of the idea of the Norman yoke remains Christopher Hill's "The Myth of the Norman Yoke," in *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1958), 46–111.

[15] John MacGregor, *The History of the British Empire, from the Accession of James the First, to which is prefixed a review of the progress of England from the Saxon period to the last year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, 1693* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1852), xlvii.

[16] MacGregor, *History of the British Empire*, lxiv.

[17] Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James the Second*, 5 vols. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1849–61), 1:13–14.

[18] Ibid., 1:15.

[19] Ibid., 1:16.

[20] Macaulay's description of an ultimately peaceful amalgamation between Saxons and Normans echoed what had become a standard refrain in novels of the period. Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819) had led the way: the novel opens with Ivanhoe, a Saxon noble, at odds with England's Norman rulers, but by the final page the conflict is resolved through romantic liaisons and amicable loyalty. Benjamin Disraeli's *Coningsby* (1844) updated the struggle, with Oswald Millbank, a northern industrialist, describing himself as a Saxon whose industrial success would demolish the inequitable social heritage of the Norman Conquest; by the close, as in *Ivanhoe*, resolution will have been found, as Edith, Oswald's daughter, marries the

gentlemanly Coningsby. For a discussion, see Andrew Sanders, "'Utter Indifference?': The Anglo-Saxons in the Nineteenth-Century Novel," in *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 163–65.

[21] Francis Palgrave's four-volume *History of Normandy and of England*, which first saw light of day in 1851, declared that much of the indigenous population (especially those further down the socio-economic scale) had benefited from William's arrival. Indeed, far from crushing the traditional liberties of the English, William had allowed those he conquered to maintain their traditional laws and local freedoms. Francis Palgrave, *The History of Normandy and of England*, 4 vols. (London: MacMillan, 1851–64), 4:5. The political implications of this defense should be clear: note that Palgrave had earlier used the idea of Saxon liberty to support the right of the aristocracy to rule, arguing that Saxon egalitarianism, far from being a model for Parliamentary democracy, in fact underpinned the health and vigor of the English nobility. He argued that, unlike the nobility of certain European nations (pre-Revolutionary France was the primary target here), the English aristocracy, because infused with the spirit of equality, had never become weakened by inalterable hierarchies of rank. Francis Palgrave, *The Rise and Progress of the English Commonwealth*, 2 vols. (London: J. Murray, 1832), 1:33. Sharon Turner had earlier argued even more vehemently against the anti-Norman account. By 1066, "the Anglo-Saxons, originally the fiercest nation of the predatory North, had become changed into a submissive and unwarlike people, by the united influences of property and luxury, of a great landed aristocracy, and a richly endowed hierarchy. . . . [T]he finest island of Europe was becoming the residence of a debased, divided, and ignorant people. England was slumbering in this declining state, when the Norman conquest, like a moral earthquake, suddenly shook its polity and population to their center; broke up and hurled into ruin all its ancient aristocracy; destroyed the native proprietors of its soil; annihilated its corrupt habits; thinned its enervated population; kindled a vigorous spirit of life and action in all the classes of its society; and raised from the mighty ruins with which it overspread the country, that new and great character of government, clergy, nobility, and people, which the British history has never ceased to display." Sharon Turner, *The History of England during the Middle Ages*, 5 vols. (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1830), 1:72–73.

[22] R. Carlile, ed., *The Political and Miscellaneous Works of Thomas Paine*, 2 vols. (London: R. Carlile, 1819), 1:16; quoted in Hill, "The Myth of the Norman Yoke," 90.

[23] Quoted in Hill, "The Myth of the Norman Yoke," 95.

[24] Ibid., 100–102, 107.

[25] Such views were current in Paris when Brown prepared the cartoon there in 1843; see, *inter alia*, Augustin Thierry, *Histoire de la conquête de l'Angleterre par les Normans, de ses causes, et ses suites*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1825). For a discussion, see Sanders, "'Utter Indifference?,'" 158–59. On Brown's politics, see Kenneth Bendiner, *The Art of Ford Madox Brown* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 87–89.

[26] Ford Madox Brown, *The Diary of Ford Madox Brown*, ed. Virginia Surtees (New Haven and London: Yale University Press/Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1981), 98. Brown's bitterness was in part personal: two days earlier he had written about not being wanted by any of the "Commissions of this country [memories, perhaps, of his earlier non-selection by the Fine Arts Commission], Classes sects or cotteries, Nobles dealers patrons rich men or [even] friends" (ibid., 96–97).

[27] Brown, *Diary*, 98. "Torpedo" is a rich metaphor. It is the Spanish term for the stingray, referring to the torpor that the creature's poison produces in its victims, but Brown may also have been thinking of the weapon (an underwater mine placed by a harbour entrance to sink enemy ships, in use since the American War of Independence). "Torpedo influence" thus suggests both the aristocracy's numbing effect on England and the threat that the aristocracy might sink the ship of state. Thanks to Tom Gretton for helpful comments on the various contemporary meanings of "torpedo."

[28] Brown, *Diary*, 148.

[29] Harold's beloved, Edith, was usually said to have been the only one able still to recognize his mortal remains—a story repeated most memorably and poignantly by Edward Bulwer Lytton in *Harold, the Last of the Saxon Kings* (1848).

[30] Ford Madox Brown, *The Exhibition of Work, and Other Paintings, by Ford Madox Brown*, exh. cat. (London: The Gallery, 191 Piccadilly, 1865), 12.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] "Twenty years ago, extreme exactness in matters external and archaeological was less in vogue than it is now. . . . Finding by the Bayeux tapestry that Saxon soldiers, after Edward the Confessor had so Normanized the nation, dressed precisely like Norman ones, I thought it necessary, in order to make the scene intelligible, to dress Harold in the Saxon costume of an anterior period"; ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] "Foreign Criticism on British Art," *The Art Union*, no. 80, May 1845, 127.

[36] Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, 12. One of Brown's early (and now lost) paintings, *Fleming Watching the Duke of Alba Pass*, takes as its theme the oppression of a people by a cruel foreign ruler; *The Body of Harold* stands as an English sequel to this early effort.

[37] It is this that made possible Brown's later characterization of the re-titled painting: "Willelmus Conquistator was originally executed at Paris, in 1844, and with the cartoon of Harold exhibited in Westminster Hall. In 1861 I entirely repainted it, and as the old name Harold had become very much used up (though not the subject), I re-christened it Willelmus, who truly here is the more important of the two" (Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, 12). Perhaps the implication of class conflict now seemed too troublesome. It was therefore, like much of the ideological content of Brown's work, understated or obfuscated in the 1865 catalogue in order to make the paintings palatable to potential patrons.

[38] For details of the prizes awarded to Pickersgill and other artists, see Robertson, *Sir Charles Eastlake*, 328.

[39] In 1847 the advisory committee recommended as one of 18 historical subjects for the Royal Gallery another representation of the death of Harold that avoided any direct representation of the conflict between Saxons and Normans: *Edith Finding the Dead Body of Harold*. Subsequent changes to the plans for the Gallery's decoration meant that this scene was never painted (Robertson, *Sir Charles Eastlake*, 340). Similarly in St. Stephen's Hall, where *A Sitting of the Witenagemot* was to have been the first image, the second would have been *The Feudal System – the Homage of the Barons to William the Conqueror*. The two images would have shown the before and after of 1066, Saxon governance and Norman obedience, but not the moment at which one ceded to the other.

[40] My account of the significance of the Arthurian images at Westminster is heavily indebted to Mancoff's work. See Debra N. Mancoff, *The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art*, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, vol. 1034 (New York and London: Garland, 1990), 56-68, 103, 117-35; Debra N. Mancoff, *The Return of King Arthur: The Legend Through Victorian Eyes* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 38–39; and Mancoff, "Myth and Monarchy," 243–45.

[41] Bendiner, *Art of Ford Madox Brown*, 14.

[42] Ford M. Hueffer, *Ford Madox Brown, a Record of his Life and Work* (London: Longman, 1896), 33, n.1; quoted in Bendiner, *Art of Ford Madox Brown*, 90. The critic for the *Art Union* seems to have understood this aspect of Brown's work: "It is a constitutional, and not a moral, representation of Justice. . . . The spirit of the work differs from every other in the series: it presents a version of Justice in reference to the sources of the executive power of our constitution." "Westminster Hall, the Cartoon Exhibition, and New Houses of Parliament," *The Art Union*, no. 83, August 1845, 258.

[43] Macaulay, *History of England*, 1:17–20. Macaulay claimed—somewhat inaccurately—that if the Plantagenet dynasty descending from William had not fallen, "England would never have had an independent existence. Her princes, her lords, her prelates, would have been men differing in race and language from the artisans and the tillers of the earth. . . . The noble language of Milton and Burke would have remained a rustic dialect, without a literature . . . contemptuously abandoned to the use of boors" (ibid., 1:16).

[44] See MacDougall, *Racial Myth*, 37.

[45] This was the view of James Mackintosh, whose 10-volume *History of England* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, and J. Taylor, 1830–40) Brown consulted in the British Museum reading room as he cast around for suitable national subjects in 1845 (Brown, *Diary*, 1). For further observations on the political resonances of Brown's *Wycliffe*, see Bendiner, *Art of Ford Madox Brown*, 91.

[46] Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, 3.

[47] See my "Suburban Prospects: Vision and Possession in Ford Madox Brown's *English Autumn Afternoon*," in *Collecting the Pre-Raphaelites: The Anglo-American Enchantment*, ed. Margaretta Frederick Watson (Aldershot, UK: Scholar Press, 1997), 185–97.

[48] Even Francis Palgrave, one of William's staunchest nineteenth-century defenders, acknowledged this: "those abuses of the power over the earth and the earth's products . . . have continued to be the source of discontent and resistance from generation to generation. The hateful forest laws assisted in placing our first Charles upon the scaffold: and, in a scarcely mitigated form, continue to embitter the poor against the rich at the present day." Palgrave, *History of Normandy and of England*, 4:8.

[49] See Tim Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press/Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2005), 42.

[50] Note the cast of Irish characters who rest on the grassy bank to the right: "a stoic from the Emerald Island"; "a young shoeless Irishman, with his wife [and] first-born"; and two Irish migrant workers (Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, 27). Occupying a marginal position that parallels the perception of the relation between the English and Irish within the Union at mid-century, these figures further suggest that Brown's vision of England is one that takes into account both class and ethnicity.

Illustrations

Fig. 1, Ford Madox Brown, *Work*, 1852–65. Oil on canvas. Manchester City Art Gallery. [return to text]

Fig. 2, Ford Madox Brown, *An English Autumn Afternoon*, 1852–53. Oil on canvas. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. [return to text]

Fig. 3, Ford Madox Brown, *The Last of England*, 1852–55. Oil on canvas. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. [return to text]

Fig. 4, Ford Madox Brown, *The Body of Harold Brought Before William the Conqueror*, 1844–61. Oil on canvas. Manchester City Art Gallery. [return to text]

Fig. 5, Edward Armitage, *Caesar's First Invasion of Britain*, 1843. Medium and current location unknown.
[return to text]

Fig. 6, William Dyce, *Mercy Sir Gawain Swears to be Merciful and "Never to be against Ladies"*, 1854. Fresco. London, Palace of Westminster. [return to text]

Fig. 7, Charles West Cope, *Charles I Raising his Standard at Nottingham, 1642*, 1861. Oil on canvas. London, Palace of Westminster. [return to text]

Fig. 8, Daniel Maclise, *The Spirit of Chivalry*, 1847. Fresco. London, Palace of Westminster. [return to text]

Fig. 9, William Dyce, *Baptism of Ethelbert*, 1846. Fresco. London, Palace of Westminster. [return to text]

Fig. 10, Charles West Cope, *The First Trial by Jury*, 1843. Medium and current location unknown.
[return to text]

Fig. 11, Ford Madox Brown, *The Spirit of Justice*, 1845. [return to text]

Fig. 12, Ford Madox Brown, *The Seeds and Fruits of English Poetry*, 1845–51. Oil on canvas. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum. [return to text]

Fig. 13, Ford Madox Brown, *Chaucer at the Court of Edward the Third*, 1845–51. Oil on canvas. Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales. [return to text]

Fig. 14, Ford Madox Brown, *Wycliffe Reading his Translation of the Bible to John of Gaunt in the Presence of Chaucer and Gower*, 1847–48, retouched 1859–61. Oil on canvas. Bradford Art Galleries and Museum. [return to text]