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Numerology in the York Creation Sequence

Increasingly scholars have observed the skill with which the York cycle was constructed. Scholars have not observed, however, the occult significance in the structure of *Adam and Eve in Eden* and the other Creation plays in the York cycle as they remain to us – a significance that may well have been obvious to their medieval audience. The audience's recognition of that occult significance would have heightened their enjoyment and sense of religious awe.

The occult significance of numbers, numerology, was central to the medieval concept of the universe.¹ In medieval iconography God is frequently represented at the Creation with a compass because he himself was understood to have been the first numerologist: he thought up his creation in terms of number.² The countless subtle harmonical proportions built into the world were God's poem.³ Poets who created complex numerical patterns in their work were imitating nature and participating in the divine.

Richard Rastall observes that because the York cycle play texts appear to have been very little corrupted since their revision or rewriting in the fifteenth century, they can be successfully subjected to numerological analysis.⁴ And he has analyzed the numerology in seven of the plays in the York cycle particularly relative to his analysis of music in the cycle.⁵ Numerology, Rastall believes, served as a private guide to the playwright and the numerology he finds, given its complexity, was unlikely to have been comprehended by its auditors.

Yet belief in numerology was not restricted to artists and theologians. Vincent Hopper, the seminal and still well-respected scholar of medieval numerology, observes that in the middle ages there was a determination to find numerical significance everywhere and that to many minds the symbolic implications of number had come to be regarded as realities, indisputable and final. Numerology affected science and the pseudosciences of alchemy, astrology, arithmancy, magic, divination, and the Black Arts. Its strongest influence, however, was on the church: numerology was a determinant in church architecture, the offices of the church, its feasts, the canonical hours, the arrangements of the chants, episcopal garments, the penances imposed, and

scriptural exegesis. Sermons often consisted largely of just such numerological scriptural exegesis. ‘To the uneducated and the relatively uneducated’, Hopper remarks, ‘number mysteries and the common numerical groupings must have been accepted as simple fact, or else held in the suspicion with which the common man ordinarily regards learning.’⁶ The evidence of suspicion Hopper provides from *Piers Plowman* pertains to the sciences and pseudosciences, not theology.⁷ In any case, the mystical meanings and powers of numbers appear to have been familiar to the general populace. And the simplest numerological structure in *Adam and Eve in Eden* and in the other Creation plays, unobserved by Rastall, could well have been apparent to their medieval audience.

I direct my attention particularly to the York Fullers’ *Adam and Eve in Eden*, play 4, a play I recently directed.⁸ This is the only play in the cycles remaining to us that focuses exclusively on Adam and Eve in the garden after their creation and before the Fall. Unlike, for instance, the Bakers’ *Last Supper*, there is no obvious connection between the Fullers, who beat wool to clean and thicken it, and their cycle play. The creators of the York Creation plays do not seem to have conceived of *Adam and Eve in Eden* as a discrete play on that account. I believe that it stands as a discrete play because of the numerology it entails.

Adam and Eve in Eden is written in ten ten-line stanzas in the form aabccbdbdb throughout (although line 45 is no longer extant). The first five stanzas are devoted to God’s introduction of the garden to Adam and Eve. The second five are devoted to his prohibition of the tree of knowledge. The split of this play in exactly half is consistent with Rastall’s finding that most of the plays he examined also exhibit such bilateral symmetry.⁹ There is symmetry also in the repeated rhyme scheme. Symmetry, a central principle of organization in the middle ages, was seen as expression of a mysterious inner harmony.¹⁰ While the audience is unlikely to have been conscious of the symmetry in the structure of *Adam and Eve in Eden*, that symmetry would nonetheless have contributed to the sense of balance, order, and musicality the play provides.

The number of lines in the stanzas is something of which audiences in an oral culture attuned to numerology may have been made conscious. The beginning of each stanza is marked by a rhymed couplet. Each is further marked by a new speaker or a new idea or both. God, the primary speaker, speaks whole stanzas, seven of them, each beginning a new idea, providing for an actor a natural point of both verbal and gestural attack. Adam and Eve each speak a stanza; later they share one in which Adam takes the initiative. It would have been quite natural for each speaker to punctuate the beginning of his speaking with a gesture, thus at the same time marking stanza length.

The number of lines in the stanzas of *Adam and Eve in Eden*, ten, in medieval numerology was the number of unity, all-inclusiveness, perfection—in short, of paradise.¹¹ The total number of lines in the play, ten self-multiplied is perfection indeed. Audience awareness of stanza length and of the orderliness and harmoniousness of the play and the perfection of Eden it reflected would have served to increase the poignancy of the impending loss of paradise.¹²

The number of lines in the stanzas of the play which immediately follows, *The Fall*, is eleven, one more than perfection, the number that commonly signified the arrogance of coveting excess, transgression, and sin – precisely the kind of overreaching in which Adam and Eve were involved in eating the forbidden fruit.¹³ It is also the number of lines in the stanzas of the play of *Cain and Abel*, play 7. The number of lines in the stanzas in *The Fall of the Angels*, play 1, is eight, that number representing original unity, a new beginning.¹⁴ Significantly, it is the same as the number of lines in the stanzas of the last play, *The Last Judgment*—history having come full cycle. The number of lines in the stanzas of *The Creation*, play 2, is twelve: a number that signified the universe and, because the sum of its divisors is more than itself, abundance.¹⁵ The number of lines in the stanzas in the play *The Creation of Adam and Eve*, play 3, is four, the number associated with earth and man, particularly in his bodily part. That man is a tetrad is mystically revealed in the four-letter name, ‘Adam’.¹⁶ Because speakers speak almost exclusively in whole stanzas in plays 1, 2, and 3, audience members might well have become aware of these plays’ stanza lengths, particularly in play 3 where stanzas are so short.

In *The Expulsion*, play 6, while twenty-four of the twenty nine stanzas are six lines, five are five lines and their sense is intact and thus the stanza lengths present some problem in my analysis. Neither the speaker nor the placement of the five-line stanzas seems revealing. But I cannot fail to observe that six was the female marriage number and five the male marriage number and that the discord between Adam and Eve in the play specifically points to the fateful dominance of the female: ‘Mans maistrrie shulde haue bene more/ Agayns pe gilte’, argues Eve. To this Adam sharply replies, ‘Nay, at my speche wold pounever spare,/ Pat has vs spilte’ (137–40). That dominance, like that of six over five, is primarily responsible for their expulsion.¹⁷

Such number significance in stanza lengths as I have found in the Creation plays suggests that we need to look at stanza lengths and verse structure across plays to enhance our understanding of the plays’ overall structures, meanings, performances, and effects on the audience. Both Martin Stevens and David Bevington have observed that in York the Creation story is broken into many small parts.¹⁸ If I am correct, the numerous plays at York used to tell the

creation story can be accounted for by the numerology involved in each. Each play reveals the numerologic significance of its story. And both the number of these plays and their structure reveal more sophistication and subtlety in the telling of the Creation story than has heretofore been evident.

Notes

- 1 Useful sources on medieval numerology are: Vincent Foster Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism* (New York, 1938; rpt 1979, 2001); Christopher Butler, *Number Symbolism* (New York, 1970); Caroline D. Eckhardt, *Essays in the Numerical Criticism of Medieval Literature* (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, 1980); Robert L. Surlles (ed.), *Medieval Numerology* (New York, 1993); Alastair Fowler (ed.), *Silent Poetry: Essays in Numerological Analysis* (London, 1970); and Keith Brown, 'Number Symbolism and Structural Patterning', *English Studies*, 53 (1972), 40–47.
- 2 Butler, *Number Symbolism*, 44.
- 3 Brown, 'Number Symbolism and Structural Patterning', 43.
- 4 Richard Rastall, *The Heaven Singing: Music in Early English Religious Drama* (Woodbridge, England, 1996–2001), 1.236.
- 5 Rastall, *The Heaven Singing*, 1.233. Rastall, 233–49, subjects the following plays to numerological analysis: York 1, *The Fall of the Angels*, York 9, *The Flood*, York 11, *Moses and Pharaoh*, York 14, *The Nativity*, York 12, *The Annunciation and the Visitation*, York 35, *The Crucifixion*, York 45, *The Assumption of Our Lady*, and York 46, *The Coronation of the Virgin*. J.W. Robinson is, so far as I am aware, the only other scholar to raise the issue of numerology in the York plays though he concludes that what there was of it was concerned with symmetry and balance; see *Studies in Fifteenth-Century Stagecraft* (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1991), 34.
- 6 Vincent Foster Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 89–135 *passim*, 25.
- 7 Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 125.
- 8 For the text of the play, see Richard Beadle (ed.), *The York Plays* (London, 1982), 62–4. I directed this play as part of the presentation of the entire York cycle under the aegis of the Poculi Ludique Societas in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, in June 1998.
- 9 Rastall, *The Heaven Singing*, I: 236–48 and *passim*.
- 10 Emile Male, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Dora Nussey (New York, 1958), 9.

- 11 The index in Vincent Hopper's *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 235–41, provides a quick guide to the numerological significance of many numbers. Russell Peck, 'Number as Cosmic Language', in Caroline D. Eckhardt (ed.), *Essays in the Numerical Criticism of Medieval Literature*, provides a gloss on numbers 1-12 (58–62). Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 10: 'With the use of a decimal system, it follows naturally that 10, symbol of the entire method of numeration, becomes an important number. In its earliest appearances it is a number of finality or completeness, as in higher ranges are 100 and 1000.'
- 12 In 1529, when York was no longer the prosperous town it once was, it was ordained that plays 3 and 4 be amalgamated: 'Item the said presens haith ordred that the Walkers [i.e. Fullers] & Cardemakers of this City fromehensfurth shall ioyne bothe thayre paiauntes in oone & ichone of the saides Craftes to be like charged in eurerly behalff with the paiaunt Torches & play' (Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, *Records of Early English Drama: York*, (Toronto, 1979), 1.249–50). How this amalgamation was to have been effected is hard to imagine: there is not only a marked difference in stanza lengths between plays but a journey to Eden and a scene change between them. From 1529 on the Fullers did apparently perform both plays. The Fullers but not the Cardmakers, who were originally responsible for play 3, are mentioned in the list exacting the levy for the Creed Play in 1535. So also for the 1585 list of the levy to support the post-cycle interlude by John Grafton (see Johnston and Rogerson, *York*, 1.258, 417). But each play must have remained as a discrete text because play 4 was one of the plays registered in 1558. Thus the 1529 order to amalgamate the two plays and their performance by the two guilds does not seem to have been effected. I am grateful to Kim Yates for this observation.
- 13 Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 131, 234, and Peck, 'Number as Cosmic Language', 62.
- 14 Russell Peck, 'Number as Cosmic Language', 18, observes that as a sign of regeneration and rebirth the baptismal font is octagonal.
- 15 Butler, *Number Symbolism*, 30, observes that 'twelve signifies the universe, being a multiple of four (the corporeal) and three (the spiritual)'.¹
- 16 Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 84, and Peck, 'Number as Cosmic Language', 60.
- 17 Peck, 'Number as Cosmic Language', 24: 'Male numbers are odd (ie, when divided they have a middle part left over).... Female numbers are even and may be split into even or uneven factors. They are thus called weak.' Marriage numbers 'take their meaning from combinations of male and female numbers.'

Five is the first marriage number since it is a combination by addition of the female 2 and the male 3. Six is the next, being the product of 2 x 3.'

- 18 Martin Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles: Textual Contextual, and Critical Interpretations* (Princeton, 1987), 25, 28. David Bevington, 'Discontinuity in Medieval Acting Traditions', in G.R. Hibbard (ed), *The Elizabethan Theatre* 5 (Hamden, Connecticut, 1975), 13–14.