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Importance of Medieval Numerology
and the Effects Upon Meaning
in the Works of the Gawain-Poet

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English
British Literature

by

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Abstract

An examination of the influence of medieval numerology and number theory upon the works of the Gawain poet, this essay seeks to connect the importance of numbers to the construction of the four poems. By examining such number theories as the Divine Proportion and marriage numbers, as well as Pythagorean number concepts of masculine and feminine numbers, a clear connection between the literature and the number can be found. The poet not only seeks to use numbers to impart important Christian doctrine to his readers in a subconscious way, he also demonstrates an extreme pre-planning of every line and layout of each poem upon the page. Continuing in current critical traditions of examining this manuscript as whole, “Pearl,” “Patience,” “Cleanness,” and “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” are shown to join together in an interweaving of connectivity through number pattern and the repetition of important numerological concepts.

Keywords: medieval literature, Gawain-poet, Pearl-poet, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Patience, Cleanness, numerology, medieval numerology, Divine Proportion, marriage numbe

Introduction

There is a common misconception among people of European descent that the Middle Ages were a completely backwards time. When discussing anything pre-1500, the phrase “the Dark Ages” unconsciously escapes from the lips of many people. This period has been stereotyped as one void of learning and culture, personified by backwards and even illiterate gentry, clergy, and peasantry. Basic knowledge of the period proves this wrong. The medieval period saw progress in theology, the creation of works in pre-established languages showing a move away from Latin, the development of the university system, and many other advances. The literature of the period is full of complications that a modern audience can only grasp through thorough examination of allegorical levels that would have been familiar to contemporary readers: “Allegory and analogy were not for the Middle Ages a way of abstracting, but rather a way of internalizing, making personal, and thus humanizing all that was otherwise lost outside them” (Peck 33). The use of numbers during this surpasses that of a modern time, as it is consciously employed in numerous aspects of creation, including literature.

Numbers during the medieval period held a great significance for all aspects of life. With the Bible being the most widely read work, it can only follow that numbers came to play an important role during this period, as numbers play an important role in the construction of the Bible. A cursory knowledge of the Bible and Christian teachings brings forth numerous numerical patterns and the importance of numbers in general, such as, the Trinity, the six days of creation, the presumed age of Christ at crucifixion as thirty-three (33), the twelve apostles, the ten commandments, the eight beatitudes, the seven deadly sins, and the number of the beast. Within these few important numbers, the number three can be seen to have significant repetition. Number theory of the time connects numbers to the divine; numerology becomes a way to

further interact with and understand God: “Number was the blue-print of a divinely-designed creation (not an eternal, divine cosmos), and was therefore the key to understanding the mind of Creation's God” (Wallis 182). The divine significance of some numbers, such as three for its association to the Trinity and Christ (as well as many other Biblical instances), found its way into more than just theorizing. The architectural construction of many buildings, specifically churches and cathedrals, relies heavily upon such numbers that were perceived to be divine. These numbers held special significance for a contemporary audience, as numerology and the manipulation of numbers was seen as a link to the divine, a way to take a step close to the creator. Not only do these patterns appear within the building this period produced, they also appear in one of the most celebrated manuscripts of the time. Cotton Nero A.x., the manuscript which contains the work of the Gawain-poet, relies upon the allegorical use of numbers throughout, encompassing not only each individual poem but also the very structure of the manuscript itself.

Numerical and geometric patterns appear throughout the works of the Gawain-poet. These patterns play an important role not only in the individual works, but in connecting the works to common authorship. Such patterns are not unusual in the literature of this period, and can be found in works that directly influenced the Gawain-poet, such as the Bible and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. A medieval audience would have been well versed in these structures and numerological patterns. Both numerology and geometry are found in the Bible, which the Gawain-poet not only incorporates into his poems but paraphrases and develops through the medieval technique of *amplificatio*, which can be most clearly seen in *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*. These patterns are important for the medieval period because of the rise in numerology and the incorporation of mathematics as a “[foundation] of all pursuits” (Peck 21). Medieval

numerology saw numbers as the root of all things, and a direct connection to the creator, with “the rhetoric of numbers permeat[ing] all areas of medieval learning” (Peck 15). Russell Peck overviews medieval numerology and cosmology:

The numbers of creation exist apart from mutability and human error, and are closest to the language of the Creator Himself... Because of its purity of abstraction, number offered the cosmic theorist a bridge between the corruptible and the eternal, since in addition to measuring all things it is a language of relationships and proportions. (17)

For this period, number theory and mathematical rhetoric connected man to his Creator. Numerology allowed for a connection to the divine. In literature this elevates the work towards heavenly perfection, or, depending on the character, the lack thereof. Precise and clearly planned allegorical use of numbers, medieval numerology, and divine number theory elevates the four unnamed and unattributed poems of the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript to a work of complex interweaving of meaning and analogy beyond anything seen in a modern author. The author incorporates many different number theories into his works, the most significant of which will be defined in the following section concerning the history of medieval numerology.

History of Medieval Numerology

The basic concepts that medieval numerologists employed developed from Pythagorean theories of number usage and meaning. From antiquity to the Middle Ages, the use of the monad, or one, as a representation of God was developed by many philosophers, and originated from Pythagorean concepts of the one being the creator of all numbers (Schrenk 9). God as one has a direct significance with the dream vision and spiritual theme of “Pearl” as the singularity of the

pearl itself, the perfect circle, relates to the oneness of the divine creator. A further development of the one in the creation of each subsequent number leads to the Pythagorean concept of male and female numbers. The first real numbers were considered three and four, as they are the products of the monad and the asexual reproduction of the monad, two. Pythagorean theory views odd numbers as masculine and strong, as they cannot be divided evenly, and even numbers are feminine and weak, as they are easily split. One and two act as the parent numbers, together creating three, the first real, masculine number. This number directly relates to the Trinity, the corner stone of Christian doctrine as it is “fundamental to the Christian concept of Trinity (eternity expressed or made real in temporal-spatial reality)” (Peck 24). The concept of marriage numbers takes its form from the development of male and female numbers and relates directly to the works of the Gawain-poet through the numbers dominant in “*Pearl*” and “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.” Platonic development of the number theories presented by the Pythagoreans developed into the view that “science and morality are... parts of one and the same discipline. Through number, ethics correspond with created nature” (Peck 28). Boethius’s work on geometry and further development of Pythagorean and Platonic number theory moves the concepts of these constructs beyond the philosophical plane and attempts to apply them to life. In essence, Boethius sought to prove that “numerology define[d] not only the bonds and correspondences of nature, but ultimately also a whole way of life” (Peck 27). It is this melding of number to ethics that Augustine applied to the early Christian church, the ruling religion at the time the Gawain-poet was writing.

Another important aspect of medieval numerology is the development of the Divine Proportion. First called by this name by Kepler (Huntley 62), it is also known as the Golden Section, *Phi*, Mean and Extreme Ratio, and Golden Rectangle, and is intrinsically linked to the

Fibonacci sequence. The Divine Proportion demonstrates number and geometric patterns that are aesthetically pleasing. This proportion appears in nature and represents a concept of “mathematical beauty” (Huntley 60), such as the spiral of sea shells, the arrangement of flower petals, and even cell growth. The influence of this naturally appearing mathematical formula became a topic of interest in the Middle Ages, as “men of the breed of alchemists and astrologers, were fascinated by *Phi*” (Huntley 62). As simplified by Condren, the Divine Proportion “satisfies two equations, $a + b = c$, and $a : b = b : c$. That is, $182 + 294 = 476$ and $182 \div 294 \approx 294 \div 476$. To express this second equation in layman’s language, 294 is the mean between two extremes, the smaller extreme being 182, the larger being 476. Both resulting ratios ... are practically identical: 0.61904 in the first instance and 0.61764 in the second” (7-8). The incorporation of the divine proportion into the structure of the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript as a whole, as well as into the individual poems, demonstrates a premeditated numerological foundation. These number patterns were not the product of accident, but instead of a painstaking attention to line totals and connections. This moves the work from a simple piece of literature to one with a deep connection to divine and natural beauty. Condren demonstrates that the total line numbers of each poem work comprise the Divine Proportion, providing the equation for the work as the “whole MS divided by [*Pearl* + *Sir Gawain*] \approx [*Pearl* + *Sir Gawain*] divided by [*Purity* + *Patience*]” (16). Given the line totals for each of these poems, the equation would be as follows: $6086 \div [1212 + 2531] \approx [1212 + 2531] \div [1812 + 531]$. The entire length of the manuscript (c) equals the combined line totals of “*Pearl*” and “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” (b) plus the combined line totals of “*Purity*” and “*Patience*” (a); simplified, the equation becomes $1.62 \approx 1.59$, both of which round evenly to 1.6. The extreme dedication to line breaks and knowledge of the Divine Proportion of the author of these poems demonstrates an intelligence of

superior quality. The pre-planning of the manuscript demonstrates not only that the author was well versed in the sacred geometry and numerology of the time, but also that the manuscript was meant to be viewed as a whole, not as individual poems lumped together at random. Modern English translations of the poem segments used can be found in the appendices at the end of the essay.

Pearl

The first work of the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript is “Pearl,” an allegorical dream vision of a man mourning the loss of his pearl, which itself stands in for many different things, including a young daughter, a lover, a maiden, the church, and salvation, as well as a physical pearl. Ruled primarily by the number three and permutations of three, this work contains 1,212 lines, 101 stanzas of twelve lines each, and 20 stanza groups. Each stanza group is connected by a link word which repeats at the beginning and end of each stanza; the last word of the last stanza in a group is the link word for the next group of stanzas. The poem begins on the earthly plane, as a man falls asleep on a mound, traditionally associated with fairies, and dreams of the world beyond. His guide throughout his dream, the pearl maiden, becomes the physical representation of the lost pearl which he is mourning before he starts his dreamscape adventure. His dream takes him ever closer to the gates of heaven, the New Jerusalem, though he is unable to enter this place in his dream vision. The dreamer awakes at the end of the poem with a renewed sense of faith and a stronger spiritual connection to God. The goal for his life has been set for him: admittance to the New Jerusalem.

There are three main settings in this poem: the garden the dreamer falls asleep in, the Eden where he first sees the pearl maiden and the New Jerusalem where she leads him. These three settings also connect the work to the concept of the Trinity of Christian theology, a significant number combination which the poet repeats to similar effect in all of the works of this manuscript. The significance of this construction of the work can be directly connected to the threefold structure of the Trinity and Christian concepts of salvation. Jane Chance touches upon the implications of this: “the first and last stanza groups as the ‘frame’ and the dream vision of eighteen groups as divided into three – earthly paradise... theological dialogue... and heavenly

city... relates the triple division to the three stages of the theologian's ascent of the soul to God, corresponding to the three sources of knowledge (sense, intellect, and inspiration)" (31). It is not a stretch to impart the Christian concept of God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus. These relate directly to the physical landscapes presented in the dream vision, with Jesus becoming the physical place upon which the jeweler falls asleep, thus man in flesh; the Holy Spirit connected to the Eden to which the pearl maiden brings the dreamer, explaining how to gain entrance into heaven; and finally God the Father, which connects the New Jerusalem and communion with God. Yet each of these places are contained in the dream, just as each person of the Trinity is contained within the Christian conception of God. Chance ties the numerical symmetry to Christian theology by way of the settings: "In line with this division one might note the three figurative settings succeeding the literal arbor – earthly paradise redolent of the biblical Eden (as in Genesis), parabolic vineyard described in the New Testament (the Gospel), and Heavenly Jerusalem (as in Revelation)" (38). Here the Gawain-poet uses numerological concepts which a contemporary audience would have recognized and used in their interpretation. By relying heavily upon threes, the Trinity imagery is stated without having to be explicit.

There is a roundness to the poem which serves to emphasize the physical roundness of the pearl: "From the beginning the poet emphasizes her roundness, and that, rather than linear analogies, is perhaps the most important quality one should consider, for both Pearl and her poem are indeed round" (Peck 48). The number of lines in the poem adds to this, as well as the repetition found throughout by the use of link words between stanzas. The roundness is defined most clearly by the repetition between the first and last line of the poem: "Perle plesaunte, to prynces paye" (1)² and "Ande precious perlez vnto His pay" (1212)³. This repetition of words makes the poem smooth and seamless, a textual embodiment of the physical pearl. Roundness is

also emphasized in the poem by the settings and their structure. Peck states: “Structurally, *Pearl* is an interlacement of circles. The largest circle is the whole poem, beginning with the poet meditating in his garden and ending where he began...The smallest circles are the individual stanzas, each of which has key words repeated in the first and last lines so that the beginning and end form a round” (49). The poem begins and ends in the garden, creating a circular feel akin to “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” The endlessness of a circle, which constructs “Pearl,” corresponds to the central image of the pentangle found in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” as well as the circular structure of beginning and ending in the same physical place, as “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” begins and ends in Arthur’s court. Both of these works feature an image of endlessness, one focusing on the smoothness of a circle, the other the intertwining of lines in the endless knot of the pentangle.

The concept of marriage numbers explicated by Peck also comes into play with “Pearl,” yet not as clearly as in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” But the structural similarities between the first and last works of Cotton Nero A.x. add significantly to the circular notion of the whole work which is mimicked in the individual poems. A significant number throughout the work is twelve. A product of the heavenly union between three and four, the first two real numbers, this number becomes of extreme significance to the poem and is directly related to the description of the New Jerusalem. The description of the New Jerusalem contains twelve stanzas, which are full of twelves:

As John þe apostel hit sy3 with sy3t,

I sy3e þat cyty of gret renoun,

Jerusalem so new and ryally dy3t,

As hit watz ly3t fro þe heuen adoun.

Pe bor3 watz al of brende golde bryzt,

As glemande glas burnist broun,

With gentyl gemmez anvunder pyzt,

With bantelez twelue on basyng boun,

Pe foundementez twelue of riche tenoun;

Vvch tebelment watz a serlypez ston,

As derely deuysez Dis ilk toun

In Apocalyppez Pe apostel John. (985-996)¹

The use of twelve within the description of this perfect place elevates the description. It is truly divine and closer to the heavenly ideal because of the marriage of these numbers. Half of this is six, the heavenly marriage number of two and three. While the first marriage number presented, five, dealt with the worldly, the product of two multiplied by three, which produces six, becomes a heavenly union because it is the larger product of the pair. This number, “being a product, is the fruitful marriage number” between two and three (Peck 24). Having six, through the division of twelve, be the number most closely related to this text works well with the context of the poem. As the poem deals with the act of acquiring entrance to heaven, so does its number relate to things tied to perfection, and thus the attempt to become one with God and acquire admittance into heaven. As Peck states, “Like 6, 12 denotes a more blessed and fruitful marriage than that produced by mere addition” (24). Both of these numbers are directly related to the heavenly. Beyond its connection to six and its heightened notion because of this, twelve represents a “universal because it is the product of the corporeal 4 [, a weak, female number,] and the spiritual 3,” the first masculine number, and a number directly connected to the Trinity

(Schimmel 22). This number becomes the elevation of the spiritual, combining both the earthly and weak to the heavenly and strong. The very nature of the poem leads to this, as it deals with the movement from an earthly plane to a heavenly one, and though the work returns to the earthly plane, the homecoming is to a more spiritual acceptance of the imperfect as the dreamer returns with a concept of God fuller in his heart and a stronger desire to achieve heavenly reward in rejoining with the pearl maiden.

Cleanness

Considered the weakest of the poems in Cotton Nero A.x., "*Cleanness*," the second work in the manuscript at times referred to as "Purity" gives a homiletic discussion of purity as "clannesse." Though giving this description, the author chooses to define purity by what it is not, "fylthe." Not until recently have critics given credit to the structural sophistication of the poem alone, as well as its significance to the manuscript as a whole. Consisting of 1,812 lines, this work is divided into three main parts consisting of stories from the Old Testament: the flood, the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Belshazzar's feast. Each main section contains link passages between them, each of which has three parts. "*Cleanness*" follows the medieval homiletic tradition of the "three-fold division of subject," a traditional way of dividing sermons during the medieval time into three separate parts which all speak to a unified theme (Spearing 42). This practice relates directly to the Christian concept of the Trinity, with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all residing in the one divine creator. This close connection to Christian doctrine directly relates to the poem, as the work deals with achieving entrance to heaven, a common theme found in the other works of the Gawain poet. "*Cleanness*" demonstrates the need for a pure soul in order to achieve entrance to heaven by comparing this concept to very worldly notions, such as the cleanness of appearance and of action; thus a peasant at a king's feast, not dressed for the occasion, is cast out and compared to Lucifer, whose uncleanness of action, by rebelling and committing the "fyrste felonye" (line 205),¹ is seen as just as harmful to the purity of one's soul. The dichotomous approach to the topic of purity of soul allows for an examination of the ways in which entrance to heaven would be denied based on respect and action, inadvertently showing a medieval audience the correct way to act. The poet works to show moral purity by looking at cleanness of clothing and appearance and cleanness of action allegorically. Many concepts which

are touched upon in this work reappear in the other poems of the manuscript; the beatitudes appear here first, and are then personified in “Patience,” while the pearl and its connection to Mary reappear here after being thoroughly discussed in the poem which precedes this one in the manuscript, “Pearl.”

This work is ruled quite closely by a tight knit pattern of threes. This number appears throughout and is telling of its unity. Just as the Christian Trinity demonstrates a “triad in unity,” so does this work (Schrenk 8). This work looks at Biblical stories and connects their meaning to a deeper, allegorical discussion of purity. There are three main sections to this work, each of which is divided into three parts. Each part connects to the type and extremeness of sin being discussed, though these connections are often loose within each section and are not as structurally sound as other works in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript. The line breaks within this work seem at times to be arbitrary to the poem itself, and show the importance of the number of lines each section contains rather than the strict division of ideas. A study of the manuscript itself displays this, as the larger, decorative letters which depict section breaks appear without regard to their placement in the narrative flow (Condren). The first section, lines 1-556, begins by setting up the dichotomous relationship between “clannesse” and “fylthe” that the entire poem will focus on. The first biblical story is that of a wedding feast. Here the importance of clean clothing becomes an allegory for a clean soul. A poor man attends a wedding feast and is arrested for not being properly dressed. Just as this man is chastised for his unkempt appearance, so will an unclean soul be chastised for attempting to enter the kingdom of heaven. The poem moves with little connection to the story of the fall of Lucifer and Adam, both of which demonstrate uncleanness in action. The language used to describe Adam’s sin, as he “fayled in trawpe²,” (line 236)³ directly relates to the later tale in the manuscript, “Sir Gawain and the

Green Knight,” and Gawain’s own struggles with this knightly concept. The section ends with a depiction of Noah and the flood, the only instance in the work where God punishes out of anger. The flood, of which Noah and his family were the only human survivors, tells of a moment in biblical history at which the divine creator destroys his own creations. Uncleanness of action causes God to destroy all creatures of the earth except for Noah, who had “found favor in the sight of the Lord” (Genesis 6.8). Here the Bible tells of creatures born of woman and “the sons of God” named the Nephilim (Genesis 6.1-4). It goes on to speak of the extreme violence and corruption that filled the world, and the “wickedness of humankind” (6.5-11). In this Biblical scene that the reader is given, it is action which causes the anger of God and the destruction of man.

The second section, lines 557-1156, begins with the story of Abraham and Sarah and looks at the uncleanness of language. Sarah is unclean; she laughs when she should not and then lies. Her “untrauwe” involves her words, which intrinsically connect her actions to distrust of Christ. Though her sin is not as extreme as those represented in the other stories, the poet uses her actions to discuss clean and unclean language. The work quickly moves on to the story of Lot, and discusses the unclean actions of unnatural coupling, which parallels one of the causes of the flood. The section ends with the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah. The uncleanness presented within this section relates not only to language but also to unclean sexual acts. As Condren notes, there is a circular nature to the first two sections, as they begin and end with concepts of natural and unnatural sexual reproduction. The wedding feast at the beginning of the first section denotes a natural coupling, a blessed union created for reproduction. The second section ends with the view of Sodom and Gomorrah, a place of seemingly unnatural sexual union. The third section, covering lines 1157-1812, touches upon the fall of Jerusalem and the actions of

Nebuzaradan, a story found in II Kings. It moves quickly into a description of Baltassar's feast, where all of the sins previously discussed are combined. Here, the worst acts of uncleanness are committed through blasphemy. The section ends with the prophet Daniel interpreting the writings on the wall concerning the destruction of all unclean things by God.

Condren goes into great detail concerning the construction of the poem and its correspondence to the Divine Proportion. He breaks down how the line numbers within each section directly relate to the construction of mean and extreme ratio, though the line breaks are seemingly arbitrary within the manuscript itself. This demonstrates that the poet preplanned the formation of the poem and where each section would break before actually constructing the work itself. The construction of the numbers found in this work seemingly took precedent over the work itself. Beyond the importance of the poem's connection to the Divine Proportion, the natural construction of beauty, the number three is shown to repeat itself numerous times throughout the poem. The three sections of three unite the Christian concept of Trinity to the work, building upon this important concept to demonstrate how to achieve entrance into the kingdom of heaven. The poem also gives three similes for hell, as Spearing discusses:

Pikke þowsandez þro þrwen þeroute,

Fellen fro þe firmament fendez ful blake,

Sweued at þe first swap as þe snaw þikke,

Hurled into helle-hole as þe hyue swarmez.

Fylter fenden folk forty dayez lencþe,

Er þat styngande storme stynt ne myzt;

Bot as smylt mele vnder small siue smokez forþikke,

So fro heuen to helle þat hatel schor laste,

On vche side of þe worlde anywhere ilyche. (220-228)⁴

This use of threes thematically reaffirms the importance of this number. In this scene, the poet moves the reader slowly away from the fall of Lucifer and expands the image to incorporate the entire world (Spearing 66). From this point on in the work the poet deals with earthly constructs of “fylthe.” The image also works to incorporate the three in one concept further, as the three images are all of one destination: hell.

Patience

The third work of the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript is given the title “Patience.” This biblical paraphrase utilizes the medieval technique of *amplificatio*, telling an extended story of Jonah, the central figure in the Book of Jonah found in the Bible. The very nature of its close biblical connection lends numerological significance to this poem. Consisting of 531 lines, divided into five sections, this poem tells not of the patience of man, but of God. The importance of the number three throughout this work, as well as the number five, elevates this poem beyond a simple telling of the nature of God and instead displays a sophisticated and complicated connection between Old and New Testament concepts and traditional biblical numerical patterns. Unlike the other works found in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript, “Patience” does not have a strong connection to one specific number. Instead, the poem demonstrates a linking of many numbers to create a unified whole within the meaning of the work.

The poet begins this work by describing patience as a “point,” linking it not only to many layers of geometrical significance, but also to the pentangle found in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” There, the many points of the pentangle are seen as aspects of Gawain, with the most important being *trawþe*. Here the “poynt” discussed is patience, a concept which has undergone many changes in meaning. A modern view of patience elicits ideas of waiting in line calmly, having patience for a tedious task. The medieval concept of patience is vastly different. In a time of great political and social change as well as constant suffering from plagues and disease, patience inferred more than calmly bearing one's insignificant load in life. Patience was not to be had for trivial irritations, but instead for great sufferings. It implied the endurance of extreme

suffering without complaint to advance one's self spiritually. If one found oneself lacking patience, the medieval mindset would encourage that poor individual to acquire more suffering.

The poet continues with a biblical paraphrase of the eight beatitudes, each of which is connected to eight dames. Through this, a circular notion is created within the work early on, as both the first beatitude and the first dame connect back to each other. By choosing to work with the eight beatitudes early in the poem, the poet sets up the three-in-one structure, as eight is the product of 2^3 . The poet plays with geometric shapes in the framing of the first and last beatitudes and dames, giving a hint to the physical circular shapes that seem to appear for Jonah in his hiding places, which are ultimately spaces within spaces, connecting to the empty space to be found within a circle, an area that can contain nothing or anything. The three circular spaces Jonah finds himself in are a ship, where he hides from God which incurs His wrath and results in a storm which threatens the ship; the whale which swallows him; and the bower outside of Nineveh, where God has instructed him to go to prophesize. These three hiding places bring to mind the tripartite structure to be found in "*Pearl*" as well as "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." It also connects to the reoccurring three in one image of the Trinity, demonstrating the extreme importance that this concept had to a medieval audience. The geometrically circular construction of the physical within this work, the hiding spaces, as well as the linking together of the dames of the beatitudes, connects the work to the circular construction of the pearl in "*Pearl*." The theme of things hidden within other things, the building not only of literally hiding spaces to find meaning but also allegorically ties this works together. Beyond the connection to the Trinity that is to be found in the three hiding spaces, the work also tells of Jonah's stay in the belly of the whale as having lasted three days and three nights. These threes connect to many biblical instances of the use of three, both within the Bible itself and in accepted Christian history. The

numerical product of the time Jonah spent in the whale adds up to six; the number of days that God spent creating the world, duplicating the number creates the alleged age of Christ at his crucifixion, thirty-three. The connection numerically of Jonah to Jesus also holds allegorically. Jonah becomes a Christ figure in the work, with the mast of the ship that he takes refuge on representing the cross which Christ is crucified on. The ship itself becomes the church. And traditional representations of hell in the medieval world show the entrance as a whale's mouth. Jonah's trip into the belly of the whale becomes an allegory for Christ's trip to hell after crucifixion.

The poem's 531 lines are divided into five sections. The numbers which create the structure of this poem demonstrate their connection to the ideas demonstrated within the work. The use of five, an earthly marriage number, relates this work to "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." Five, an imperfect marriage number between two and three, is directly related to human failings and concepts. In this work, the image of God is shown to be focused upon the act of patience for the actions of Jonah, a concept traditionally associated with the weakness of man. God is humanized within this work and brought closer to the concept of man. It is his extreme patience for Jonah which readers would look to as guidance for their own further development of this earthly quality. The line total of 531, when added together, $5+3+1$ equals 9, a tripling of threes. This three in three correlates to the three hiding space, as well as again bringing forward the Trinity imagery. The five sections of the work relate "to the five-letter Hebrew name of Jesus, YHSVH" which developed from "the four letter sign for Jaweh, YHVH" (Condren 105). The focus of the poem upon the patience of God, and the relation of threes to the age of Christ demonstrate a deep connection to the focus upon the heavenly. This movement from four to five is also represented within the structure of the poem. As Condren notes, "*Patience* seems to grow

from a four-based system into a five-based system. It has a four-line metrical form, but arranges this form into a basic 500 lines with a signature of 31, the 10th prime number in the Middle Ages” (107). The upward movement of the four-to-five pattern parallels the vertical movements to be found within the work itself. As Jonah is told to go east to Nineveh, he travels west to escape God, who is already traveling east to meet Jonah upon the shore. Up and down movements fill the work, with Jonah traveling down into the belly of the whale, allegorically descending into hell, to rise up upon the shore of Nineveh.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

“Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” the last work of the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript, is a medieval romance written in Middle English alliterative long line focused upon characters well established from Arthurian legend. Beyond the story it tells, the author sets up a complex system of numerology surrounding the characters and physical locations. The layering of numbers in this work creates an intricate system of symbolism that produces a circular feel to the text. On a surface level, the work revolves around the number five, as the physical layout of the poem relies on this number and its multiplied product, 25. The Gawain-poet creates a “poetic framework, [which] is fundamentally a matter of 5s and 25s” (Metcalf 143). A deeper reading shows the work to be an interlacing of twos and threes. The poem consists of 2,525 lines, with a remainder of a five line bob-and-wheel: “To be sure, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* does not come to a complete end in line 2,525; only its long lines do. One small group of lines is left over, the final bob and wheel. But this, too, suggests a number-symbolic structure: it is a single group of exactly 5 lines” (Metcalf 144). Five becomes the ruling number of Gawain through his use of the pentangle shield. A. Kent Hieatt attests to the intricateness of the number five and the circular nature of the lines in his article, “Numerical Structures in Verse,” in which he compares the number of lines in “Pearl” to those found in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” and their meaning to the work as a whole:

Although the total of 1,212 lines in *Pearl* follows necessarily from its 101 stanzas, each of 12 lines, no such necessity attends a total in *Sir Gawain's* corresponding sum of 101 stanzas... Yet the line in the last stanza echoes the first line of the poem is number 2,525, and 25 is surely a most important symbolic number in the poem,

for Gawain with his pentangle has, we are told, 5 x 5 excellences, all dully listed and responsible for his apparent physical and moral invulnerability. (67)

In relation to the fives discussed by many critics of the Gawain-poet in relation to this poem, the image of the pentangle demonstrates the most thorough analysis of the early union of two and three, and becomes the central focus of the poem.

The most significant image in this work by the Gawain-poet is the pentangle on Gawain's shield. This image is of a five pointed star, made of continuous lines that intersect each other without a starting or stopping point. Ross Arthur exemplifies this explanation of the pentangle found on Gawain's shield:

It is called an "endless knot" because it is a unified infinite figure, despite its composite nature. Even when considering it as a combination of elements, the reader is moved toward the idea of unified endlessness by the choice of the number. This a so-called circular number, for its square, cube and so on always end with the digit 5. The pentangle itself is also endless in a geometrical sense, for new, smaller pentangles may be inscribed in the center pentagon of every pentangle, and the ratios of the line segments of the pentangle produce the ration of the length and breadth of the self-replicating golden rectangle. (222)

The pentangle is a symbol with much weight within this work, with meaning which transverses the pure image itself. Much is made of the five points of the pentangle, with each point of the star symbolically representing five different things and concepts at once:

Fyrstt he watz funden fautlez in his fyue wyttez.

And efte fayled neuer Þe freke in his fyue fyngres.

And alle his afyaunce vpon folde watz in Þe fyue woundez

Þat Cryst kast on Þe croys, as Þe Crede tellez...

Þe fyft fyue Þat I finde Þat Þe frek vsed

Watz fraunchyse and felazschyp forbe al Þyng,

His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer,

And pité, Þat passez alle poyntez – Þyse pure fyue

Were harder happed on Þat haþel Þen on any oþer. (640-655)¹

The points, as a whole, represent five specific things, with two groupings worldly and related to battle, two groupings heavenly, and one grouping related to the notions of knighthood. The sensory groupings are the five senses and the five fingers, both of which are necessary for battle, with the most skilled warrior having the most heightened senses. Gawain, in possessing the shield, establishes himself as the best, in possession of these senses. The heavenly grouping contains the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of Mary. The last grouping contains the essential virtues of knighthood: generosity, fellowship, cleanness, courtesy, and pity – with pity reigning above the others, and all of these aspects combining to influence the concept of *trawþe*. The five points of the pentangle connect the poem to the earthly world as well as the spiritual world, as it moves beyond the ideals of chivalry to the joys of Mary and the wounds of Christ. The geometric shape of the pentangle ties into the spherical nature of the work itself, as the poem begins and ends in Arthur's court. As the pentangle has no beginning or end and continues in an endless knot, so does a circle. The knot of the pentangle connects to other knots within the poem,

such as the green girdle which is given to Gawain and is the cause of his breaking of the pentangle. The girdle is knotted around Gawain and enacts a physical representation of the knot on his shield; both exist to offer the knight protection.

Moving beyond a surface discussion of the numerical significance to be found in this work, Allan Metcalf discusses the relation of numbers within the work and their connection to Gawain: “The numbers that knit the structure of the poem do not seem to be 5s and 25s, as the pentangle passage would lead us to expect, but 2s and 3s” (143). The poem contains three main settings: Arthur's castle, Bertilak's castle, and the Green Chapel and three main characters: Gawain, the Green Knight, and Bertilak. The female characters are set into three pairs of dichotomous relationships, with Bertilak's wife paired with an old woman within the work, Guinevere set against Bertilak's wife, and Morgan le Fay pitted against the image of Mary on the back of Gawain's shield. Yet there are only two actual female characters, as Morgan le Fay is Bertilak's wife. There are also three parts to the trading game that Gawain plays with Bertilak, and two swings of the axe at the Green Knight's chapel in the instance of Gawain's beheading and breaking of the ideals represented by the pentangle. The physical setup of the poem is in fives and twenty-fives, while the interactions between character and location become a matter of twos and threes. Five itself is simply a sum of two and three.

The recurring usage of twos and threes throughout this work connects to Peck's concept of marriage numbers through their construction of the number five, a number both structurally important to the poem as well as symbolically important in the image of the pentangle. By relating the number five to Gawain, he is shown to be imperfect and worldly. This comes through in his inability to keep to the standards that the symbolism of the pentangle represents.

Through his actions at Bertilak's castle, when he keeps the girdle and lies to Bertilak, a weakness is shown:

He metez me Þis godmon inmyddez Þe flore
And al with gomen he hym gret and goudly he sayde,
'I schal fylle vpon fyrst oure forwardez nouþe,
Þat we spedly han spoken, Þer spared watz no drynk.'
Þen acoles he Þe knyzt and kysses hym Þryes
As sauerly and sadly as he hem sette couþe.
'Bi Kryst,' quoþ Þat oþer knyzt, '3e cach much sele
In cheuisaunce of Þis chaffer, 3if 3e hade goud chepez.'
'3e, of Þe chepe no charg,' quoþ chedly Þat oþer,
'As is pertly payed Þe porchas Þat I aste.'
'Mary,' quoþ Þat o þer mon, 'myn is bihynde,
For I haf hunted al Þis day and no3 haf I geten
Bot Þis foule fox felle – Þe Fende haf Þe godez! -
And Þat is ful pore for to pay for suche prys Þinges
As 3e haf Þryzt me here Þro, suche Þre cosses

So gode.' (1932-1947)²

Gawain's failure to honestly participate in the trading game which has been agreed upon with Bertilak demonstrates his weakness of character and inability to hold up to the knightly standards

of the pentangle and trawþe. Also, through his actions at the Green Chapel, flinching at the Green Knight's blade, Gawain shows himself to exhibit an imperfect form of chivalry, unable to fully encompass the principles of the pentangle and knighthood:

Bot Gawayn on þat giserne glyfte hym bysyde,
As hit com gyldande adoun on glode hym to schende,
And schranke a lytel with þe schulderes for þe scharp yrne.
þat oþer schalk wyth a schunt þe schene wythhaldez
And þenne repreued he þe prynce with mony prowde wordez:
'þou art not Gawayn,' quoþ þe gome, 'þat is so goud halden,
þat neuer arzed for no here by hylle ne be vale,
And now þou fles for ferde er þou fele harmez!
Such cowardise of þat knyzt cowþe I neuer here. (2265-2273)³

The pentangle becomes the representation of the ideal knight, which Gawain does not fulfill. Gawain is thus the imperfect unity of trawþe and the quintessential heavenly. Metcalf explicates the concept of the number five in association to Gawain: "To be sure, the pentangle passage is unquestionably useful in illuminating Gawain's character and in stating the social, moral, and religious ideals whose embodiment in Gawain will soon come to the test" (142). This is a test which Gawain fails through his actions. Though Gawain is destined to fail, having the imperfect union of two and three as his ruling number, a number which is unable to reach heavenly perfection and is intrinsically linked to the worldly, shows that Gawain will be unable to achieve the perfection that is required of him. The connection of this number shows that Gawain would always end up returning to Arthur's castle in shame, even if that shame is not understood by the

members of the court, and the symbol of that shame becomes a show of fashion and unity as the court takes up the girdle as a way to unite with Gawain and celebrate his return home alive.

Conclusion

The work as a whole demonstrates an intricate construction of number planning. The ratio of the total line numbers of each work, as they appear in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript, reflects the divine proportion: “Pearl,” with its 101 stanzas, begins the work with 1212 lines, “Cleanness” follows it up with 1812 lines, “Patience” continues with 531 lines, “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” which also has 101 stanzas, ends the manuscript with 2531 lines (Condren 15). Even a basic look at the numbers which appear in the manuscript show a connection and pattern. The work begins and ends with 101 stanza works. The last numbers of the first two and the last two works repeat. This creates a circular notion to the work; the poems are not just haphazardly placed but are shown to have a specific organization. The first work in the manuscript, “Pearl,” represents a dream vision which touches upon the biblical concepts to be discussed in the next two works, “Cleanness” and “Patience.” “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” ends the work by bringing the dream vision and biblical concepts of the beginning poems to an earthly plane. The poems come full circle in the realization of the concepts that are expressed in a lofty way in their earthly representation. A movement towards man can also be seen, as “Pearl” dwells in a realm that has no connection to the earthly concept of man but the elevated, heavenly aspect of man. The physical has little place in the dreamscape of this work. “Cleanness” looks to the deeds of man and God, elevating human aspects as allegory for divine salvation. Man is present only as a demonstration concerning how one should behave to ensure entrance to Heaven, a major goal in most medieval people’s lives. The work centers around biblical stories of extremes, moments in which God, the divine creator, takes control of the fate of man and His creations. “Patience” demonstrates the connection of human concepts to God, as it looks at God's patience for Jonah. The work focuses on the state of God, not man, through the

story of man (Wallis 182). Finally, man is fully realized in the last work of the poem, bringing together the concepts of patience, purity, and heavenly aspirations through the pentangle and Gawain's struggles. As a purely earthly being, Gawain is seen to falter, unable to reach the divine.

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Appendices

Pearl

1. As John the apostle saw it of old / I saw the city beyond the stream, / Jerusalem the new and fair to behold, / Sent down from heaven by power supreme. / The streets were paved with precious gold, / As flawless pure as glass a gleam, / Based on bright gems of worth untold, / Foundation-stones twelvefold in team; / And set in series without a seam, / Each level was a single stone, / As he beheld it in sacred dream / In Apocalypse, the apostle John. (Borroff 985-996)
2. Pearl, that a prince is well content (Borroff 1)
3. As precious pearls to his content (Borroff 1212)

Cleanness

1. first felony
2. The medieval concept of *trawþe*, most important to “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” within the works of the Gawain-poet, encompasses much more than its translation of “truth.” This word, which appears in almost all of the works in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript, is directly related to the image of the Medieval knight, and is upheld as one of the highest qualities a Christian knight could maintain. To commit “*untrawþe*” would be the worst sin to commit for a Medieval knight, as it demonstrates an inability to uphold the virtues held most important to this selective organization and could be seen as an affront on God.
3. failed in truth

4. Thick thousands through thrown throughout, / Fallen from the firmament fiends full
black / “whirled at the first blow as thick as snow” (121) / Hurlled into hell as the bees
swarm. / “The fiendish folk clung together for the duration of forty days” (121) / Of that
strange storm stayed of might; / but as sieved meal smokes very thickly under a fine
sieve, / so that vile shower stretched from heaven to hell” (Andrew 121) / On each side of
the world anywhere seen.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

1. And first, he was faultless in his five senses, / Nor found ever to fail in his five fingers, /
And all of his fealty was fixed upon the five wounds / That Christ got on the cross, as the
creed tells ... The fifth of the five fives follower by this knight / Were beneficence
boundless and brotherly love / And pure mind and manners, that none might impeach /
And compassion most previous – these peerless five / Were forged and made fast in him,
foremost of men. (Borroff 640-655)
2. He come to meet the man amid all the folk, / And greets him good-humoredly, and gaily
he says, / “I shall follow forthwith the form of our pledge / That we framed to good effect
amid fresh-filled cups.” / He clasps him accordingly and kisses him thrice, / As amiably
and as earnestly as ever he could. / “By heaven,” said the host, “you have had some luck /
Since you took up this trade, if the terms were good.” / “Never trouble about the terms,”
he returned at once, / “Since all that I owe here is openly paid.” / “Marry!” said the other
man, “mine is much less, / For I have hunted all day, and naught have I got / But this foul
fox pelt, the fiend take the goods! / Which but poorly repays those precious things / That
you have cordially conferred, those kisses three / so good.” (Borroff 1932-1947)

3. But Gawain at the great ax glanced up aside / As down it descended with death-dealing force, / And his shoulders shrank a little from the sharp iron. / Abruptly the brawny man breaks off the stroke, / And then reproved with proud words that prince among knights. / “You are not Gawain the glorious,” the green man said, / “That never fell back on field in the face of the foe, / And now you flee for fear, and have felt no harm: / Such news of that knight I never heard yet! (Borroff 2265-2273)

Vita

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