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Number Symbolism in *Pearl*: Lines 720–721

B.S.W. BAROOTES*

Concatenation is one of the hallmarks of the intricately wrought dream vision *Pearl*. However, in the transition from Section XII to XIII (lines 720–721), this structuring device fails. While several scholars have attempted to explain this breakdown of formal integrity, few have considered its numeric resonances. The crux at lines 720–721 can be read as an intensification of the symbolic numbers twelve and five. Drawing on biblical and patristic sources, medieval number theory, and critical discussions of *Pearl*'s structuring principles, I argue that the displacement of the link-word *ryȝt* by the name of *Iesus* is not a mere instance of carelessness on the part of author or scribe but a considered and carefully constructed comment on the distinction between the mundane and celestial planes.

No reader of the Middle English *Pearl* can overlook the poem's formal complexity. It combines the native English alliterative line with Continental end-rhyme; each twelve-line stanza deploys only three rhymes, with the final c-rhyme serving as a concatenating link-word through each of the twenty five-stanza sections. However, as David Carlson (1991) and others have noted, the poem's structural integrity falters – or appears to falter – here and there.¹ One of the oft-noted formal hiccoughs in *Pearl* is the failure of concatenation at lines 720–721, a feature that is maintained in all of the poem's other 100 stanzas.² The first line of Section XIII fails to repeat the link-word of Section XII, *ryȝt*. The name of *Iesus* appears instead:

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¹Carlson identifies three formal imperfections in the poem: the omission of line 472, which reduces *Pearl*'s symbolic 1212 lines to a less-significant 1211; the additional stanza in Section XV, which mars the uniformity of twenty five-stanza sections; and the failure of concatenation at 720–721, discussed below.

²On the patterns of concatenation, see Macrae-Gibson (1968).

There are a couple of instances that consist of what might be called slant-concatenation, such as the echo of *cortaysye* (444) in *court* (445) and, more obliquely, the echo of *innoȝe* (612) in *now* (613). The one other instance where concatenation appears to break down, at lines 996–97, is not, as in the case of lines 720–721, an error by design; this imperfection is likely a scribal error. As Carlson points out, the line resulting from the failure of concatenation here – *As derely deuyez þis ik toun / In Apocalyppeȝ be apostel John. // As þise stonȝ in writ con nemme, / I knew þe name after his tale* (995–98) – does not make good grammatical sense as it stands in the manuscript (1991: 66, n. 11). Like Carlson, all modern editors of *Pearl* read this aberration in the manuscript as a simple case of scribal omission and restore 'John' to the line: 'As John þise stonȝ in writ con nemme'. All citations of the manuscript are taken from the high-definition images available through *The Cotton Nero A.x Project* <<http://gawain.ucalgary.ca>>.

Jesus þenne hem sweetly sayde:
 'Do way, let chylder vnto me tyȝt.
 To suche is heuhenryche arayed':
 Pe innocent is ay saf by ryȝt.

Iesu con calle to hym hys mylde,
 And sayde hys ryche no wyȝt myȝt wynne
 Bot he com byder ryȝt as a chylde,
 Oþer elleȝt neuermore com þerinne. (717–24; emphasis mine)³

Several scholars have attempted to explain this apparent aberration. Gordon suggests that the failure may be a case of textual corruption, noting that *Iesu* is the subject of the previous sentence (lines 717–20), and thus need not have been repeated (1953: 88–89, fn. 1). He posits that *Iesu* at 721 replaces 'He ryȝt'. In their edition, Andrew and Waldron replace MS *Ihc* with *Ryȝt*, arguing that Justice is a personification of Jesus (2008: 87–88). W.A. Davenport insists there is no failure of concatenation at all, but that, while 'the link between the section and the preceding stanza is irregular', it offers a unique 'concentration of ingenious devices' (1978: 47–49). Indeed, he argues, 'the link is more binding than anywhere else in the poem, though not made in the regular form', and goes on to discuss how, at this section transition, the stanzas 'virtually merge into one another', which results in 'a sense of continuity and [a] stress [on] the phrase "ryȝt as a chylde"'. Citing lines 717–24, Davenport shows how the poet gathers together five of the preceding link-words in these eight rich lines and constellates them 'around the poem's central symbol, the pearl of great price', which is reintroduced at line 732.

Carlson believes the imperfection is authorial, arguing that the 'failed link [in] the poem's structure calls attention by formal means to the Pearl-maiden's point, perhaps her most important point, that claims of "ryȝt" are a dead end, and that Christ's mercy makes salvation possible' (1991: 62).⁴ He does not, however, offer an explanation for why this formal breakdown should occur at the break between Sections XII and XIII. Only Marie-Sofie Røstvig has addressed the numerical significance of this site of seeming failure. She argues that the gap here marks a conscious break in the structure and content of the poem. Citing twelve and eight as symbols of circularity and new beginnings, Røstvig divides the poem into two parts, the first of twelve sections (ending at line 720), and the second comprising the final eight sections of the poem. The latter part, she suggests, elevates or 'lifts' the symbolism and referents of part one, thus emphasising the division between the mundane (Sections I to XII) and the celestial (Sections XIII to XX). 'There can be no bridge between this life and the next', writes Røstvig, and so the linking device of concatenation fails (1967: 329).⁵ Given that the *Pearl*-poet does not emphasize the resurrection symbolism of the number eight elsewhere (as he does with the numbers

³Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from Gordon 1953.

⁴Dennis Caslin and V.J. Scattergood discuss instances where a failure in the linking structure is a deliberate choice. Concatenation, they write, 'establishes a normative pattern, which, when broken, has the effect of focussing the attention of the listener or reader on a particular part of the poem'; lines 720–721, they suggest, structurally emphasize the shift in the poem's argument (1974: 80 and 89). See also Bishop 1968: 31–35; and Spearing 1970: 159–60.

⁵On the variation (or elevation) of morphology and semantics as *Pearl* progresses, see Milroy (1971) and Donner (1989).

five, twelve, and 101), I wish to propose some additional explanations for this formal break. In what follows, I will argue that lines 720–721 constitute a numerically appropriate point for Jesus to supplant the concatenating pattern of this theological poem.

The structure of *Pearl* is founded on three important numbers: 101, twelve, and five.⁶ For the purposes of this investigation, I shall leave the significance of 101 aside.⁷ Twelve and five appear most prominently in the arrangement of the poem's stanzas: each stanza has twelve lines and, with one exception, they are grouped together in five-stanza sections. In many medieval texts, five emblematises the carnal world of man, evoking the five extremities of the body, the five fingers and toes on each hand and foot, and the five senses.⁸ E.R. Curtius further identifies five as 'the symbolic number of the world', illustrative of the five zones of the earth and the five species of living creatures (1953: 503–504); it is also a number of creation through the five elements (earth, water, air, and fire, plus aether, quintessence, or the constellations).⁹ In Patristic and exegetical texts, the number five is associated with the Old Law and the Pentateuch (Peck 1980: 43 and 60). John V. Fleming links the number five with humanity through the incarnate suffering of Christ, specifically the five spillings of blood in the Passion and Christ's five wounds at the Crucifixion (1981: 93–94).¹⁰ He does not draw a connection to *Pearl*'s five-stanza sections, but the parallel is pertinent, as shall be demonstrated below.¹¹

⁶Other numbers play lesser and less obvious roles in both the form and content of *Pearl*. For instance, each stanza depends on three rhymes, and, following the alliterative tradition, most lines have four stresses. It is no accident, I think, that these two elements of the stanza's composition are complementary factors of twelve (see below). On the significance of the numbers three and four in *Pearl*, see Chapman 1939. On the metre, see Gordon 1953: 89–91; and Duggan 1997: 232–238. See also Bishop 1968: 29 and 135, n. 5. On the *Pearl*-poet's use of numeric structure elsewhere, see Gilligan 1989. For more general discussions of numerical composition in medieval literature, see Curtius 1953: 501–509; and Hopper 1938: 89–135.

⁷For many critics, the number symbolizes the circularity of the poem as well as the simultaneous continuation and beginning of cycles. John V. Fleming (1981) has convincingly argued that 101 represents for the *Pearl*-poet the centuple reward of divine grace. See also Nolan 1977: 175–176; and Davis 1954: 100.

⁸See, for instance, Fleming 1981: 93–94.

Five is also, of course, the most significant number for *Sir Gawain*. It is closely identified with Gawain through the pentangle he bears on his shield, the discussion and analysis of which stretches for 25 lines and covers five groups of five qualities and emblems. Gawain himself is said to be 'faythal in fyue and sere fyue sypez' (632). See Tolkien & Gordon (1967). A. Kent Hieatt (1970) notes further that the final narrative line of *Gawain* is 2525, a parallel of *Pearl*'s 1212 lines (see below). Moreover, he observes, the bob-and-wheels that conclude each of the poem's 101 stanzas measure five lines. For further analysis of the number five in *Gawain*, see Metcalf (1980).

⁹In the *Moralia*, Plutarch links the number five with quintessence (1936: 389f–90).

¹⁰See, for instance, Augustine, *On John* 24.6.1–14 (PL 34.1999), and the *Glossa Ordinaria* (PL 114.373).

¹¹In his discussion, Fleming draws most heavily on the early fourteenth-century *Arbor vitae crucifixae Jesu* of Umbertino of Casale.

¹²A few scholars have identified other possible instances of the number five in *Pearl*. Barbara Nolan reads the presence of peonies in the *erber* as another way for the poet to highlight the symbolic importance of five in the poem, especially in the proem. Peonies, she observes, do not bloom in England 'in Augoste in a hy3 seysoun'. (Indeed, they stand out as the only herb listed that neither blooms nor produces seed during this time.) Drawing on Isidore's *Etymologiae*, Nolan suggests that the *Pearl*-poet alludes to another name of the peony, *pentaboron*, so called

Whereas five is associated with the mundane world, the lower sphere in which the Mourner finds himself bereft of, and sorrowing over, his pearl, the number twelve is most commonly identified with the celestial world, where his pearl dwells with the Lamb in eternal bliss. Twelve is, for instance, linked with the signs of the zodiac and the fixed stars. In medieval numerology, twelve is also a symbol of abundance: it is what mathematicians, both medieval and modern, call an abundant number; that is, the sum of its aliquot parts equals more than itself ($1+2+3+4+6 = 16 > 12$).¹³ In biblical symbolism, twelve is likewise a number of totality, of fullness, from the twelve tribes to the twelve apostles (cf. Luke 21:30, Matt. 19:28), from the twelve mansions to the twelve stars on the crown of the Church. Augustine explains that the number twelve symbolizes a fullness of faith, the spreading of the Trinity to the four corners of the earth.¹⁴

Twelve is (with, perhaps, the exception of seven) the most prominent number in the Apocalypse. *Pearl*'s depiction of the New Jerusalem (lines 985–1044) contains many of these numerical echoes. There are twelve gates to the heavenly city. (The ostian angels are absent in *Pearl*, but the names of the twelve tribes are there, as are the twelve *parfyte perle[s] bat neuer fatez* over each gate.) Twelve types of gemstone adorn the city walls. The tiers, steps, and foundations on which it is built each number twelve. In *Pearl*, the New Jerusalem's length, breadth, and height all measure 'Twelue forlonge space' (1030), a thousand-fold reduction of Rev. 21:18, one perhaps intended to emphasize the significance of the duodecimo.¹⁵

Duodecimal symbolism is at work in *Pearl*'s form as well as its content.¹⁶ Based on the associations made in biblical and exegetical texts, each of the poem's twelve-line stanzas points to the celestial plane. Its 101 stanzas yield a total of 1212 lines, which, according to some medieval number symbolism, can be read as a duplication or multiplication by repetition; that is, 12×12 , or 144.¹⁷ This number, of course, resonates with the source text of Revelation, including the 144,000 blessed – the 'precious perle \bar{z} unto his pay' (1212; cf. Rev. 7:1–4,

because of the flower's five petals (1977: 172). Edward Condren posits that the *Pearl*-poet knew Richard Rolle's *Form of Living* and builds the mystic's five-step path of religious maturation into the structure of the poem (2002: 69).

¹³For a discussion of abundant numbers, see Butler 1970: 3. Twelve, like ten, is also linked with abundance by virtue of being the first multiple of the number six, which, like five, is a so-called circular number; that is, it reproduces itself when raised to its powers (6, 36, 216, 1296, and so on). Six is also a perfect number, in that its factors add up precisely to itself. Cf. Peck 1980: 24; and Curtius 1953: 506.

¹⁴On *John*, 29; cf. Peck 1980: 62. Hugh of St Victor makes a similar claim in his discussion of how numbers work in symbolic relations: 'Secundum multiplicationem numeri significant, ut duodenarius universitatis signum est, quia ex ternario et quaternario invicem multiplicatis perficitur; quoniam quaternarius corporalium, ternarius spiritualium forma est' [...] where twelve is a sign of universality because it is composed of three and four by multiplication, four being the corporeal, three the spiritual form]. See *De scripturis et scriptoribus sacris prænotatiunculae* 15.6 (PL 175.22); the translation is Russell Peck's (1980: 59).

¹⁵The *Pearl*-dreamer likewise omits the detail that the city walls measure 144 cubits, 'the measure of a man, which is of an angel' (Rev. 21:17).

¹⁶The duodecimo shows up in *Pearl*'s material aspects, too. As Condren points out, each folio includes 36 lines—that is, three twelve-line stanzas (2002: 38).

¹⁷Hugh of St Victor, *De scripturis et scriptoribus* 15.6; Kean 1965: 50; Hieatt 1970: 122; and Hopper 1938: 82. This product can be read as a squaring of the Old Testament and the New, the Twelve Tribes multiplied by the Twelve Apostles. Cf. Pseudo-Aquinas 1879.

14:1–3). The squaring of this celestial number functions as a further perfecting of the divine, a raising of totality to its power, an extension of a temporal ideal across eternity.

In all but one of *Pearl*'s twenty sections,¹⁸ we witness an encounter between eternity and the mundane. The five stanzas of each section form a containing structure for – and further constraint upon – the poetic majesty of each twelve-line stanza. The sixty-line total of a given section thus represents the coming together of the earthly and the divine, just as the Mourner and the Maiden, representatives of those two realms, meet in the space of the dream. Furthermore, as a product of the mundane and the heavenly numbers, 60 is, to be somewhat poetic, a numerically represented incarnation. This important number shows up again at the end of Section XII, for line 720 marks the conclusion of sixtieth stanza.

The turn between lines 720 and 721, which marks a significant beat in the Maiden's discourse on law (*ryȝt*) and grace, brings together several important numerical resonances. First, 720 is the product of the incarnational number 60 – the divine number (12) multiplied by the carnal number (5) – multiplied again by the divine (12), a further elevation of that vital fusion. The concatenating pattern of each section is rooted in the number five, the number of the Pentateuch and the Old Law. As I have suggested just above, the five of concatenation encloses the divine symbol represented by the twelve lines of each stanza. When this incarnational product is combined with the divine twelve once more, concatenation falls away. Line 720 announces Christ's intervention: only under the New Law is 'þe innocent ... saf by *ryȝt*'. Line 721 thus sees Christ appear, importantly in his incarnated identity and hailing those that he has saved by *ryȝt*: 'Iesus con calle to hym hys mylde'.¹⁹ And so *ryȝt* gives way to its source, *Iesus*.

The number 720 can also be parsed as the product of the square of the celestial number multiplied by the carnal number five: $12 \times 12 = 144 \times 5 = 720$. The product of 12×12 , 144 represents an extension (or perfection) of divinity.²⁰ Five is, as noted above, the number of terrestrial embodiment, the flesh, and the Pentateuch, but it is also the number most closely associated with the Passion. Five symbolizes the five instances of blood spilt during the Passion: in Gethsemane, the flagellation at the pillar, the crown of thorns, the Crucifixion itself, and Longinus piercing Christ's side. It also represents the Five Wounds of Christ at the Crucifixion.²¹ This second parsing of 720, one which places five as

¹⁸On the numerical significance of the additional stanza in Section XV, see Carlson 1991: 62–64; and Kean 1965: 50–51. Kean's discussion emphasizes the importance of the number twelve and touches on the importance of six as a circular and a perfect number (see n. 13, above). When six and twelve are multiplied, she notes, the product is 72, and that stanza appears in Section XV. Seventy-two is also half of 144.

¹⁹It is worth noting that 'hys mylde' refers equally to the 'precious perleȝ unto his pay' (1212), the blessed 144,000.

²⁰On the perfection of twelve according to Hugh of St Victor's rules in *Exegetica* 15, see Hopper 1938: 103–104. Hugh's own seventh rule on meaning through squaring states that 'squaring gives extension.' In his *Commentaria* on Lombard's *Sentences* (2014a and 2014b), Bonaventure gives the example of how the nine orders of the angels extend the perfection of the Trinity (II, dist. 9, qu. 8, ad opps. 2).

²¹A considerable devotional cult developed around the Five Wounds in England during the later Middle Ages. Although no *nova festa* proper developed for the devotion, there was a popular votive mass of the Five Wounds, one which, with the promise of a generous indulgence, was intended to be repeated five times. See Pfaff 1970: 84–91.

the final and thus the most influential factor, presents an extended divinity (144) – the coming together of the Old and the New in Christ – further elevated through the event of the Passion (5), the re-enactment of which plays a central role in the climax of the *Pearl*-dreamer's vision.

These two parsings of the numerical significance of the 720–721 turn need not be mutually exclusive. Indeed, when read in the context of the *Pearl*-poet's well-documented use of multivalence, they should be seen as mutually reinforcing. What first appears as a formal aberration, a breakdown of the careful architecture of the poem, is thus revealed as an instance which deepens the poet's meditation on the troubling gulf between the terrestrial and the eternal, between the time-bound Mourner and his celestial pearl. Through its numerical symbolism, the shift from *ryȝt* to *Jesus* between lines 720–721, like the image of the eucharist in the final stanza of the poem, points to the way of overcoming that gap.

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