

Gematria in *Piers Plowman* (A Response to Arthur Versluis)

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Students of *Piers Plowman* should be grateful to Arthur Versluis for linking medieval gematria—symbolic alphanumeric patterns—to the prophecies. His fruitful reading of the apocalyptic first prophecy, where the three F's in III.325 are probable gematria for 666 and the last days, epitomizes the virtues of his pioneering approach. Although the “cyclical” view of history attributed to Langland, the “Greeks, Hindus, and Buddhists” deserves further study, Versluis's reading helps decode the difficult sign of the “six sonnes, and a ship, and half a shef of arwes” (III.326). He follows previous editors in connecting the six suns with the present age, the ship with the Church, and the half-sheaf of arrows with the twelve zodiacal signs—in other words, the time of tribulation, the passage through that time, and “the wholeness which is the aim of that passage, twelve being the predominant number of the City of New Jerusalem” (120).¹ This is plausible, and the link with gematria persuasive.

With engaging modesty, Versluis calls his groundbreaking study “a preliminary investigation” (104), a wise decision given the open-ended claim that alliterative gematria in *Piers Plowman* have “esoteric implications for the poem as a whole” (105). This modesty bequeaths him considerable advantages. For by conceding the tentative character of his conclusions, he can elide certain evidential responsibilities in developing his argument. However compelling in outline, Versluis's argument is occasionally vulnerable to a second-generation critique of the sort A. Kent Hieatt has recommended:

One of the directions that those interested in [medieval numerical criticism] should follow, I believe, is that of second-generation studies—studies that need not always and exclusively be critiques of what has already been done, but that proceed more temperately in the light of what can now be seen as the mistakes of the past.²

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <http://www.connotations.de/debate/piers-plowman>.

Hieatt, a distinguished numerical critic himself, noted three aspects of "fantasticity" in the field that deserved scrutiny: "a neglect of adverse evidence," "a hydroptic desire for achieved patterns," and "results conditioned not so much by the object of the researcher's study as by his own angle of approach." Prophetic themselves, these three fantasticalities recur in Versluis's study.

First, neglect of adverse evidence. The validity of Versluis's argumentation depends crucially on the lineation of the A. V. C. Schmidt edition of *Piers*. If Book III's lineation has been unproblematic for editors of the poem, this is not true of Book VI: the second prophecy, according to Versluis, "ends at line 330—the number of Christ multiplied by ten—with an alliteration of triple G's, which is to say, 777" (121). But Schmidt's line 330 is line 331 in Kane and Donaldson, line 332 in Skeat. If Versluis's results require this modern edition, that fact should be mentioned. Perhaps Schmidt's lineation is the correct one; but, until such an argument is advanced, readers can justly withhold assent.

Second, hydroptic desire for achieved patterns. Throughout Versluis's study, the method of calculating letter or number significance varies according to local interpretive needs. Just after the reading of the three F's in the first prophecy, the five M's of III.330 are taken as significant. Since these are not initial letters, the notion of alliterative gematria does not come into play: Versluis counts all instances of the given letter in the line, an arbitrary method in the service of a desire for meaningful patterning. The original notion of alliterative gematria then reappears as Versluis argues that the three (initial) W's and four (initial) H's beginning the second prophecy are significant: "H is the eighth letter, W the twenty-third, eight being traditionally affiliated with the sphere of the moon beyond the other seven spheres; twenty-three being one beyond twenty-two, a profoundly sacred number in Qabalism, a meaning taken over into Christianity by St. Augustine and others" (121). Here, however, not the number, but n minus one grounds Versluis's interpretive claims. Elsewhere, n to the second power figures, as in the contention that "the sixteenth line of the Prologue contains four D's, the value of which is sixteen, and P is the sixteenth letter" (note 59). Sometimes it is not letters, but sounds, that are calculated, as when significance is found in the three C-

sounds of VII.134, one of which is represented by the letter K. And sometimes the patterning sought is not calculative, but ideational: the S's in VII.138 are "linked with the serpentine waxing and waning patterns of the Moon, and with the Serpent" (106). A footnote offers support for this claim from Cirlot's *Dictionary of Symbols*; still, no lunar or serpentine imagery occurs in the line.

Third, results conditioned not so much by the object of the researcher's study as by his own angle of approach. Since the number is symbolically important, Versluis finds it "appropriate" that "the [third] prophecy begin[s] on line 153" (128). But since it actually begins on line 151, this piece of evidence seems dictated by the interpretive frame. A similar conditioning occurs in the discussion of VII.133-34, where Piers explains how he learned to read:

"Abstynence the Abbesse," quod Piers, "myn a.b.c. me taughte,
And Conscience cam afterward and kened me muche moore."

Versluis argues that 33 is affiliated with Christ, that three alliterative A's are followed by three alliterative C's, and that "there are no alliterative B's because the essential mystery here is that of the Three in One, the Unicity of the Trinity" (106). But if the alphanumeric data (line 133, 3 A-letters, 3 C-sounds) suggest the Trinity to Versluis, no Trinitarian mystery at all can be detected in the lines themselves. Readers are told that the Trinitarian mystery is "here," a site that can only be the interpretative grid, especially given the fact that these are lines VII.138-39 in the Kane and Donaldson edition of the B-text.

Despite such limitations, enough promising work is found (e.g., the R/M correlation by which *resurreccio mortuorum* is linked with rightwisnesse and mercy in XVIII.397-98) to suggest that further research on gematria in Langland should be conducted. In particular, the *De semine scripturarum* should be investigated:

quite popular in England . . . it was cited by writers like Roger Bacon and John Wyclif, and found its way into a handful of English chronicles and medieval library catalogues. It is based on the unlikely notion that clues to the meaning of history may be found in the letters of the three alphabets of the three languages used on the Cross, Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Each letter is allotted one century and any century can be understood by examining the characteristics of each letter.³

Versluis has made this "unlikely" notion more likely for students of *Piers Plowman*. They should follow the path he has cleared by exploring this strain of prophetic gematria, which was quite influential in the fourteenth century.

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NOTES

¹See notes and commentary in editions of the poem by A. V. C. Schmidt, J. A. W. Bennett, and Walter W. Skeat.

²"Numerical Structures in Verse: Second-Generation Studies Needed (Exemplified in *Sir Gawain and the Chanson de Roland*)," *Essays in the Numerical Criticism of Medieval Literature*, ed. Caroline D. Eckhardt (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1980) 66. The following quotations are found on the same page.

³Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Reformist Apocalypticism and Piers Plowman* (Cambridge: CUP 1990) 183. Unfortunately, no printed edition of the *De semine* exists. Kerby-Fulton goes on to say that "Most of the prophecy is concerned with H to Z (or the Incarnation to the End of the World) of the Latin alphabet. Here the author surveys the history of the Church and the Roman Empire and the development of the Church is conceived, not surprisingly, as a succession of chastisements and renewals. During K to L, Christ liberated the Church from persecutions and during M from heresy. In the time of Q, simony had begun to penetrate the Church and by the time of X (that is, the century from 1215 to 1315) the author declares the Church to be thoroughly corrupt. At this time Christ will drive out the unchaste and mercenary clergy, as he did the money-changers from the temple. The reformed Church will attract the "Gentiles" into it and all the peoples of the world will be received into the Church in the time of Y, the three arms of Y symbolizing Europe, Africa and Asia. Also under X, the Holy Land, which had been lost to the Saracens during V, is returned to Christian hands, but there will be more suffering, particularly among the clergy, from the effects of war, plundering and general turbulence during the X period. In view of the fact that the writer is (on the basis of internal evidence) probably writing in about the year 1205, it is not surprising that he details his starkest prophecies, no doubt as warning to clerics, for the X (1215-1315) and Y (1315-1415) periods. During the last period, Z, the author expects Antichrist to come—that is, some time after 1415."