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Down for the Count: The Limits of Numerology

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“Recuerde el alma dormida”: Medieval and Early Modern Spanish Essays in Honor of Frank A. Domínguez

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Essays in Honor of
Frank A. Domínguez

Edited by
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Repeatedly in *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco's monkish characters fall into rhapsodies about medieval number symbolism. On his first approach to the unnamed abbey where the novel is set, novice Adso picks out the architectural symmetries of the looming library and with worshipful insight pumps them into a coded exegesis of unseen mysteries that human builders reverently project onto their physical templates:

While we toiled up the steep path that wound around the mountain, I saw the abbey. I was amazed, not by the walls... but by the bulk of what I later learned was the Aedificium. This was an octagonal construction that from a distance seemed a tetragon (a perfect form, which expresses the sturdiness and impregnability of the City of God).... Three rows of windows proclaimed the triune rhythm of its elevation, so that what was physically squared on the earth was spiritually triangular in the sky. As we came closer, we realized that the quadrangular form included, at each of its corners, a heptagonal tower, five sides of which were visible from the outside—four of the eight sides, then, of the great octagon producing four minor heptagons, which from the outside appeared as pentagons. And thus anyone can see the admirable concord of so many holy numbers, each revealing a subtle spiritual significance. Eight, the number of perfection for every tetragon; four, the number of the gospels; five, the number of the zones of the world; seven, the number of gifts of the Holy Ghost. (“First Day, Prime,” 15-16)¹

¹ Compare this architectural description to Spenser’s account of the castle of Alma in the *Faerie Queen* 2.9.22, quoted in Barbara M. Fisher (51-52).
The almost Byzantine complexity of such descriptions is, Adso admits elsewhere, to some extent showing off what he perceives as the subtlety of his learning, but it helps Eco set up for the reader the nearly untamable labyrinth of the library that wily William of Baskerville will need to navigate from the inside. But for Adso there is an orderliness that induces respect for the worldly authority that emulates divine proportions the Creator's hand built into the structure of the universe itself.

Eco, of course, uses Adso and his credulity as a persistent foil for the exquisitely rational protagonist called to investigate a series of grisly murders. William tends to brush aside what sees as the naivete of les er mind. When the equally unnamed abbot of the anonymous monastery surveys the same building much later, he trips into the same sort of pointless musings.

"An admirable fortress," he said, "whose proportions sum up the golden rule that governed the construction of the ark. Divided into three stories, because three is the number of the Trinity, three were the angels who visited Abraham, the days Jonah spent in the belly of the great fish, and the days Jesus and Lazarus passed in the sepulcher, three times Christ asked the Father to let the bitter chalice pass from him, and three times he hid himself to pray with the apostles. Three times Peter denied him, and three times Christ appeared to his disciples after the Resurrection. The theological virtues are three, and three are the holy languages, the parts of the soul, the classes of intellectual creatures, angels, men and devils; there are three kinds of sound—vox, flatus, pulsus—and three epochs of human history, before, during, and after the law." ... "Oh, to be sure," said William, "and three plus four is seven, a superlatively mystical number, whereas three multiplied by four makes twelve, like the apostles, and twelve by twelve makes one hundred forty-four, which is the number of the elect." And to this last display of mystical knowledge of the ideal world of numbers, the abbot had nothing further to add. Thus William could come to the point. ("Sixth Day, ones," 539-40)

The clever Englishman, a devoted follower of Aristotle and Roger Bacon, stumbles when he underestimates the power that perceived correspondences of this sort have on the mawkish or malevolent monks
that fill the sacred precincts now soaked in blood. But the point is well taken that the power that numerical sequences held over the imagination of the medieval mind—the illiterate mind to some extent, but above all the literate mind—is routinely undervalued by modern readers who only use numbers to abstract and tally units of possession and commerce.

Alfred W. Crosby in *The Measure of Reality* makes an eloquent case for the exponential increase in literally measured thinking as a deepening *mentalité* that bestowed incalculable dividends on Western Europe from the later Middle Ages and triumphantly in the dominance of Western science and warcraft later on. The Greeks after Euclid may have loved concrete demonstrations of geometry but neither they nor the Romans—who despite their vast bureaucracy and mighty engineering projects made no major contributions to mathematics—came up with the astonishing cipher “zero” as a placeholder. Roman numerals gradually gave way to Hindu-Arabic ones from the thirteenth century onward but old habits die hard: the last mathematical treatise published using the old Roman letter figures I, V, X, C, D, and M appeared in 1514 (Crosby 113-114).

The most persistent habit of the medieval mind was the supposition that the deliberative act of God’s creation made for a world scripted according to the mathematical harmonies of the heavens. Two of the most congruent disciplines of medieval scholarship were music and mathematics, both structured by intervals of rational numbers. Certain quantities were significant for the divine being and his extensions into human time and space, like 1 to express the unity of the godhead; 2 for the dual nature of Christ; 3 for the persons of the Trinity; 4 for the sublunar world of basic elements, winds, points on the compass, seasons, humors, Gospels preached to mankind; seven for the happy confluence of heaven and earth; and so on for 12, 15, 21, 40 and other sums built from them. Once these principles are accepted as echoing through all creation, the momentum becomes inevitable and most of all for those best versed in biblical precedents. “But our minds, which are at least as metaphorical and analogical as logical... have often adapted mathematics for non-mathematical motives.... Even in the hands of an expert—or, especially, in the hands of an expert—in the Middle Ages mathematical inference] was a source of extraquantitative news” (Crosby 121, emphasis...
in original).

Given this celebrated proclivity among virtually all the writers of Antiquity and the Middle Ages, alertness to the implications of numerology has to be among the standard tools of the working medievalist in our own age. We stay sharp for triads, quartets, sevens, twelves and all sorts of multiples of the smaller prime numbers. Fine interpretative essays by James Marchand, Henk de Vries, Pablo Martín Prieto, Regula Rohland de Langbehn, José Luis Martín Rodríguez, Javier González, F. Relano and most recently Sonja Musser Golladay find well-documented and enlightening cases in literary works from the Spanish Middle Ages. Musser Golladay notes in her study of the Alfonsine Libro de los juegos how a study of the ludic and artistic features in this wondrous and not merely playful volume “requires us to look beyond the literal meaning of the visible and temporal work in order to discover the invisible and spiritual meaning hidden within its pairs of metaphysical symbols” (1044).

But given our sometimes capricious will to find numerical symbolism everywhere, there is a guarded attitude within our contemporary scholarly community toward studies of numerology. I have a sharp memory from some years ago of listening to a conference paper on an interpretation of a certain medieval Castilian classic based on questionable counting—including for one argument a word-by-word counting from both ends of the first chapter toward the middle where the

2 One of the clever details of Eco’s Name of the Rose is that is it set in 1327, the historically correct year for the political events he describes but conveniently enough itself a prime number. That means that it is indivisible by any lower prime and cannot therefore participate in the mathematical building blocks of the sacred: it cannot be a multiple of the number of apostles, or days Christ spent in the desert, or the number of the elect. To that extent 1327 is therefore an odd, even unholy year, outside the orderly rhythms pulsing through God’s handiwork. In the flow of the ages it refuses to converge with sacred frequencies and stays stubbornly out of tune with the music of the spheres. So 1327 is a good year for the apocalyptic rhetoric and panic that surge through the unnamed Italian monastery of Eco’s invention. Not all prime numbers are either honored (all of the lower ones are) or neglected (decreasingly the higher ones): see the Index to John MacQueen’s Numerology for examples of uses of the primes 11, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 43, 59—but not 47, 53, 61, 67, 71, 73, 79, 83, 89, 97. Higher primes are documented by MacQueen except for 101 and 359.
middle word, it was claimed, held a secret meaning. I recall the visible discomfort of the audience during this ponencia, and afterward in the hallways the open disdain for what—I had to agree—was a private vision of internal coherence based on a number system only the speaker found persuasive.

This problem is only exacerbated for those in a position to act as gatekeepers for publications in our field, namely journal editors. Faced with periodic submissions on numerology in medieval Hispanic literature and cultural studies—and there are abundant legitimate applications of number theory to music, architectural, astronomy, anatomy, etc.—I had to devise a defensible rationale that would help me evaluate these manuscripts and give helpful guidance to authors. To my mind, any presentation on medieval number symbolism would need to meet the following criteria.

First, the manuscript tradition must be clear enough so that we can feel certain that the surviving form of the text is a true reflection of the author’s intended disposition of elements. Partial and incomplete surviving witnesses compromise any attempt at a numerological critique. This applies in particular to supposed subtle coding such as the number of words a modern reader counts in a given print edition. Word divisions are notoriously unstable in medieval texts, and although syllable count may be a very conscious technique in cuaderna via poetry and cancionero verse, word count often is not, even when we hope to prove certain textual features as evidence of mnemonic techniques.

3 The author of this essay served as Editor in chief of the journal La corónica for some fourteen years, twice the perfect seven years of his predecessor but with perhaps half the skill. Like many fellow editors, I warmly regard Frank Domínguez as an extraordinarily talented editor both of journals and his monograph series. This homage volume is a small tribute in which I am proud to participate.

4 In the remarks which follow I am indebted to David R. Howlett for his private correspondence on medieval number symbolism, especially for Insular British studies. Howlett’s publications on numerology and numerical systems in literary and musical texts are invaluable.

5 Walter J. Ong shows that among the psychodynamics of orality is a natural disregard for keeping tabs on one’s own linguistic production, at least beyond the metrical requirements that speaker and listener can both feel as part of the living, performed speech stream.
Second, the modern critic must prove that the original medieval author participated in an intellectual world, and in a literary world, where his readers, or some like-minded ideal reader, would have understood his numerology. The sources for his numerological theory—from scripture, biblical exegesis, liturgy, astronomy and cosmology, ancient learned authorities, local folk tradition, etc.—must be documented for his community and not merely for the ancient or medieval world in general. There is, one could argue, an unbroken succession of computistic texts from Boethius and Martianus Capella through the seventh century and on to the modern period (Howlett, personal communication) but number symbolism is a somewhat looser search for significance. Also, a learned author coding for learned readers or listeners might well play artfully on multiples of twelve, but a folk singer is less likely to do so. That certainly doesn't mean medieval listeners would not catch references to number symbolism, just that keeping track of such structuring devices becomes more difficult the longer and more complicated the text.

Third, if possible, the numerology seen in one work by a given au-

One of the most telling discoveries of Albert Lord's work [The Singer of Tales, on oral epic composition] has been that, although singers are aware that two different singers never sing that same song exactly alike, nevertheless a singer will protest that he can do his own version of a song line for line and word for word any time, and indeed "just the same twenty years from now" (Lord 1960, p. 27). When, however, their purported verbatim renditions are recorded and compared, they turn out to be never the same, though the songs are recognizable versions of the same story. "Word for word and line for line, as Lord interprets (1960, p. 28), is simply an emphatic way of saying "like." "Line" is obviously a text-based concept, and even the concept of a "word" as a discrete entity apart from a flow of speech seems somewhat text-based. [Jack] Goody [The Domestication of the Savage Mind 1977, p. 115] has pointed out that an entirely oral language which has a term for speech in general, or for a rhythmic unit of song, or for an utterance, or for a theme, may have no ready term for a "word" as an isolated term, a "bit" of speech, as in, 'The last sentence here consists of twenty-six words'. Or does it? Maybe there are twenty-eight. If you cannot write, is "text-based" one word or two? The sense of individual words as significantly discrete items is fostered by writing, which, here as elsewhere, is text-based, diaeretic, separative. (Early manuscripts tend not to separate words clearly from each other, but to run them together.) (Ong 60)
umerology in Medieval Texts / GREENIA

Thor should be buttressed by parallel examples of similar numerical systems practiced by the same writer in his other works, or in work by his contemporaries, in as those of Berceo and Gil de Zamora, for example. Umber symbolism is fairly regular, especially in basic units such as triads, but not completely stable over time. In Insular studies one could examine the extant works of the seventh-century Hiberno-Latin writer Cummianus and the Anglo-Latin writer Aldhelm, and the signed works of the Old English poet Cynewulf, but their systems and the relative importance given certain numbers in relation to others may not be the same as in medieval Iberia.

Fourth, a later copyist may impose such a system on a received text or enhance the instances of numerology already there. If the qualitative rather than merely quantitative numbers belong to a post-authorial time frame such as a later moment within the Middle Ages or a post-medieval one, again we would need to establish what sort of knowledge this later, "secondary author" might have about numerological systems, both from any earlier period and from his or her own historical moment, and how the subsequent redactor and/or author manipulates the text to conform to personalized perceptions of what makes for a compelling numerological construct.

Fifth, the numerological patterns revealed in the modern critical assessment must correspond to documented systems from the period and culture studied. For instance, although there is considerable overlap between Hebrew and Christian numerology in the Middle Ages, a given text must be shown to correspond to one system or another, or perhaps show how it merges the two into a unified or mixed system. And then the question of audience/ideal reader must be addressed with extra care.6

Sixth, there has to be a rationale for how the numerology encod-

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6 Meir Bar-Ilan, in his review of John S. Lucas, Astrology and Numerology in Medieval and Early Modern Catalonia, insists that no comprehensive study of medieval Hebrew number symbolism is yet available for the comparisons we tend to draw with such casual certainty. The large reservoir of Christian numerological interpretations of Hebrew scripture is certainly part of the shared legacy of both communities, such as the importance of the two tablets of the Commandments, of the five books of Moses, the forty days of Noah's flood, and so on. Documentation of prior Talmudic interpretations often confirms and validates the sources for later Christian ones.
ed into the structure of the text adds a unique layer of meaning that complements the work studied, and this in contrast to flat out narrative or descriptive components reporting that certain beasts have, say, seven heads or ten crowns, features which constitute image patterns and not structural ones. The structural enhancements may provide an additional register of theological complexity, a show of technical artistry, or even a reverential gesture toward the material handled. The classic example here is the Book of Revelation or Apocalypse, the last book of the Christian bible. The multiple series of sevens are evident in the design of certain images (the seven seals of the great book) but also make images more wondrous for being nearly unimaginable (ten horns on seven heads). The multiple series of seven narrated events (the text of the letters to the seven churches; the consequences of the seven trumpet blasts and opening of the seals) may be disrupted by other sequenced events (the devastation meted out by the four horsemen, a third of the stars being swept from the sky). Some scripture scholars call this patterning “the law of undulation” and the broken and disrupted series in this visionary account of the end times or eschaton help induce an experience of sacred vertigo as the action described loses its logical coherence. Creation itself breaks down and crumbles as it loses its numerical harmonies.7

Seventh, any claims for the relative hiddenness of the numerological pattern should be justified: why pretend to hide something that the reader (at least some reader) is supposed to notice and appreciate? To avoid censure by a less perceptive authority? To reserve that level of meaning to an inner circle of cognoscenti and keep it from the unworthy or somehow vulnerable masses? To flatter those reader who catch the veiled allusions to mathematical arrangement inside the text? To make a thematic statement about the occult nature of God’s own revelation? To echo the literary and stylistic techniques of another text, such as the Book of Revelation? Concealed meanings and witty double entendres are

7 Howlett suggests that “These structures do not add ‘a unique layer of meaning’. They add multiple layers of meaning. . . . The use of the Hebrew codes ensured that well-known passages of Isaiah and Jeremiah, to name only two prophet-poets, had more than one literal meaning, even before beginning to consider the allegorical, tropological, and anagogical senses” (personal communication, emphasis in the original).
well known in medieval works from ribald passages of the *Libro de buen amor* to slanderous charges in courtly verse, but numbers are usually on the surface of things. Claims that numerological significance lays below our radar need to be carefully established.

Eighth, does the numerological interpretation depend on taking in the literary text as a written document, being able to see and take measure of the numerical component as they are physically arranged in a given (or imagined) manuscript copy? It works differently for, say, a musical manuscript where scribal formatting and performance rhythms manifest numerical intentions more plainly. If the text were really meant for oral delivery, could oral performance alone have communicated to a contemporary audience the sort of numerology that the modern critic sees in the work?

Finally, can the modern critic mount an adequate defense against those who would see his or her reading as a merely personal intuition about the internal elements of a literary work, a reading that overlooks inconveniences such as clear transitions from numbered section to numbered section, ignoring leftover material that stands outside the pattern defended by the modern reader, and by dint of Procrustean methods forces the text into the numerological arrangement now endorsed?

Despite the need for caution, knowing how to recognize and evaluate numerology in medieval texts is a required tool in every medievalist’s repertoire—and not just for us but for many scientists and authors who came after the Middle Ages but who were dazzled by the mystical potential of numbers. Their august company includes Galileo and Kepler and even twentieth-century figures like Husserl (see Jens Ulfø-Møller; Teun Koetsier and Luc Bergmans). Playful, pseudo-psychological publications of our own gullible age aside (Hazel Whitaker), numerical systems still comprise an intuitive part of many forms of narrative, as Barbara M. Fisher demonstrates for the hyper-learned Borges and the elegant Toni Morrison. Medieval numerology may have been fairly pervasive among medieval authors and still not provide more than decorative if reverential gestures. Add it to your tally of techniques, but don’t count on it too much.

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