

**NUMBER SYMBOLISM
IN ST. THOMAS MORE'S « PAGEANT VERSES ».**

A lively conflation of iconographic and literary motifs from various traditions, notably the Ages of Man and the Petrarchan *Trionfi*,¹ More's early « Pageant Verses » consists of nine stanzas corresponding to nine pageants on a « goodly hangyng of fyne paynted clothe » : Chyldhod, Manhod, Venus and Cupyde, Age, Deth, Fame, Tyme, Eternitee, and the Poet.² The first seven stanzas are in More's favorite English stanzaic form : rime royal ; the Poet's entrance into his own creation is appropriately set off by Latin verses. But the eighth stanza is an anomaly. Although it begins like rime royal, it is eight lines long, in contrast to the preceding seven seven-lined stanzas, and its rhyme scheme changes from ababbcc to ababaacc. Are these changes poetically significant or not ? We could argue, as Sister Mary Edith Willow has, that « More was not bound by prosodic convention but placed more emphasis on thought content rather than on structure and form. »³ On the other hand, the alteration of the stanzaic pattern occurs at a crucial point in the poem, just as the perspective shifts from time to eternity. We could, then, view these changes as evidence of the young More's interest in fusing thought, structure, and form, effected in this case by a simple extension of sacred number symbolism.

Throughout the middle ages and the Renaissance the number seven was often viewed as representing the world of time, while eight was the number of eternity and with it renewal and regeneration : hence the familiar rhythm of the liturgical octave. St. Augustine frequently uses the relationship between seven and eight in this symbolic way. At the end of the *City of God*, on which More was lecturing in the early 1500's, for example, the seventh day, associated with the Sabbath rest (the work of creation completed), prefigures the eighth « eternall Day » and our life in the kingdom of God.⁴ But Hugh of St. Victor's drier formulation is more immediately à propos ; he points out that if we view number relationships in the Bible « secundum modum porrectionis, » that is, according to the method of extension, « Octonarius ultra septenarium, aeternitatem post mutabilitatem [significat] » : eight after seven signifies eternity after

mutability.⁵ There is an intriguing parallel with the ordering and scheme of More's sequence, where an eight-lined eighth stanza on Eternitee, who undercuts Tyme's proud boast to « distroy the world and all » (94), placing him as « mortall Tyme » (104) and « nothyng els but the mobilite/Of sonne and mone chaungyng in every degre » (105-06), follows seven seven-lined stanzas which are devoted to the world of time and mutability. Equally important, More follows his eighth stanza, with its personified but otherwise abstract image of Lady Eternitee, by a passionate invocation of the love of God and His gift of eternal life. Pleasures, praise, honor, all things give way with swift foot, and nothing lasts except the love of God « qui manet ... semper » (120).

I do not want to claim too much for such number symbolism.⁶ But the symbolic relationship between seven and eight is a medieval and Renaissance commonplace which was part of the daily fabric of early Tudor life through the Bible and the liturgy of the Church. And it not only reflects the thought and order of More's eighth stanza, but clarifies the larger structure of the poem. In writing his pageant verses, with its sequence of ironic undercuttings resolved by the Poet's spiritual understanding of eternity, More wove together traditions with quite different movements. The Ages of Man or wheel of life moves in a circle from womb to tomb, thereby rising to fall and tracing the progress of the body, so to speak. But the Petrarchan triumphs move in ascending stages which the sixteenth century understood as mirroring the progress of the soul.⁷ The shift from seven lines to eight in the eighth stanza of the poem, with its rebalancing of the dynamics and weight of the stanza, underscores major shifts in feeling and perspective from the temporal world to the eternal one, and prepares the way for the Poet's meditative intervention.

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NOTES

1. There is a significant body of criticism for a poem sometimes viewed as an apprentice piece. Sister Mary Edith Willow's *An Analysis of the English Poems of St. Thomas More* (Nieuwkoop : De Graaf, 1974), pp. 73-138, and Robert A. Duffy's « Thomas More's 'Nine Pageants,' » *Moreana*, 13, No. 50 (June, 1976), 15-32, discuss sources and analogues in some detail. See too Robert Coogan, C.F.C., « Petrarch and Thomas More, » *Moreana*, No. 21 (Feb. 1969), pp. 27-29 ; Robert Coogan, « Petrarch's *Trionfi* and the

English Renaissance, » *SP*, 67 (1970), 306-27, especially pp. 310-12 ; D.D. Carnicelli, ed., *Lord Morley's « Tryumphes of Fraunces Petrarke » : The First English Translation of the « Trionfi »* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 47-49 -- excellent on iconographic influence ; and Samuel C. Chew, *The Pilgrimage of Life : An Exploration into the Renaissance Mind* (New Haven and London : Yale Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 157-59, on More's poem as a « unique » intertwining of the Four Ages with the *Trionfi*. See too Richard S. Sylvester, « *A Part of His Own* : Thomas More's Literary Personality in his Early Works, » *Moreana*, No. 15-16 (Nov. 1967), pp. 29-42, incisively connecting More's sense of literary form with the dramatic sense of form More brought to life.

2. My text is from *The History of King Richard III and Selections from the English and Latin Poems*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester, Selected Works of St. Thomas More (New Haven and London : Yale Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 114-118. The lines are counted as in that edition. See too *The Workes of Sir Thomas More*, 1557, rpt. with introduction by K.J. Wilson (London, Scholar Press, 1978), I, sig Cii^v - Ciii.

3. *An Analysis*, p. 132.

4. From Vives' edition as Englished by J. Healey, 2nd ed. (London, 1620), p. 859. Jean Daniélou, S.J., *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame : Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1956), chapters 14-16, extensively discusses symbolic time in Augustine and other Church Fathers. See too Vincent Foster Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism* (1938 ; rpt. New York : Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1969), and Maren-Sofie Røstvig, « Structure as Prophecy : the Influence of Biblical Exegesis upon Theories of Literary Structure, » in *Silent Poetry : Essays in Numerological Analysis*, ed. Alastair Fowler (New York : Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1970), p. 43.

5. From *Exegetica, Patrologia Latina*, ed. Migne, vol. clxxv, col. 22 ; I owe this reference to Christopher Butler, « Numerological Thought, » in *Silent Poetry*, ed. Fowler, p. 20 ; cf. Hopper, pp. 100-103.

6. In this connection More's (sometimes « at least half-humorous ») use of the number 7 is assessed in G. Marc'hadour's brief response to Maren-Sofie Røstvig's *The Hidden Sense*, in *Moreana*, No. 21 (Feb. 1969), pp. 109-10.

7. Carnicelli, pp. 28-35.

I hope I caught all
the types
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