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978-0-521-12896-4 - Triumphal Forms: Structural Patterns in Elizabethan Poetry

Alastair Fowler

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# *Triumphal forms*

*Structural patterns in Elizabethan poetry*

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By ALASTAIR FOWLER

*Fellow of Brasenose College, Oxford*

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *Contents*

---

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	<i>page</i> vii
PREFACE	ix
1 Evidence	i
2 Triumphs	23
3 Fictional triumphs	34
4 Numerology of the centre	62
5 Styles of symmetry	89
6 The unity of time	125
7 Temporal numbers	133
8 Epithalamia	148
9 Sonnet sequences	174
EPILOGUE Numerology and the literary artifact	198
APPENDIX I 'A Special and Particular Resemblance of Her Majesty to the Roundel'	206
2 'The Amorous Zodiac'	208
BIBLIOGRAPHY	215
INDEX	219

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Alastair Fowler

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *Illustrations*

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*between pages 64 and 65*

- 1 Argo navis. Albrecht Dürer. The Southern Hemisphere of the Celestial Globe, B. 152 (detail). Woodcut, c. 1515. (Warburg Institute, University of London)
- 2 Five in a rank. Hans Burgkmair, *Triumph of Maximilian I* (1519). Woodcuts. Plate 2 (a), Section 50, *Bundrennen*, joustors with shields that fly over the head when struck. Plate 2 (b), Section 39, *Gefecht*, combatants with Hungarian shields and maces. Plate 2 (c), Section 49, Italian joustors. Plate 2 (d), Section 40, *Gefecht*, combatants with scabbarded swords. (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)
- 3 Sonnet zodiac: Gemini-Cancer. Barnabe Barnes, *Parthenophil and Parthenophe* (1593). (Trustees of the British Museum)
- 4 'Waste blanks'. Shakespeare, *Sonnets* (1609). (Trustees of the British Museum)
- 5 The Sun King as cosmic ruler: sun at apogee in Gemini-Cancer. Antoine Benoist, *The Ages of Louis*. Plaque, Bibl. Nat. (detail). (Mansell Collection)
- 6 Arcade of honour, Brussels 1594. Majesty enthroned at the central place of sovereignty, with angels of Good Fame; on his right hand Piety, Prudence, Fortitude and Clemency, on

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12896-4 - Triumphal Forms: Structural Patterns in Elizabethan Poetry

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

- his left Justice, Obedience, Envy bound, Flattery and Profitable Office. Engraving in *Descriptio et explicatio pegratum, arcuum et spectaculorum quae Bruxellae Brabant...exhibita fuere, sub ingressum...Ernesti...Archiducis Austriae* (Brussels 1594). (The Curators of the Bodleian Library, Oxford)
- 7 Mantegna, *The Triumph of Caesar* (detail). Hampton Court Palace. Plate 7 (a), Section 1, Standard-bearers. Plate 7 (b), Section 5, Elephants. (Reproduced by gracious permission of Her Majesty the Queen)
  - 8 Renold Elstrack (?), Queen Elizabeth in parliament. Engraving in Robert Glover, *Nobilitas politica vel civilis* (1608). (The Curators of the Bodleian Library, Oxford)
  - 9 The device called *Nova foelix Arabia*. Stephen Harrison, *Arches of Triumph* (1604). Engraving by William Kip. (The Curators of the Bodleian Library, Oxford)
  - 10 Antonio da San Gallo, façade of the Palazzo Farnese at Rome (1530). (Mansell Collection)
  - 11 Raphael, façade of the Palazzo Branconio dell' Aquila at Rome. Engraving from Pietro Ferrerio, *Palazzi di Roma* (Rome n.d.). (The Curators of the Bodleian Library, Oxford)
  - 12 Façade of the Palazzo Spada at Rome (c. 1555). (Mansell Collection)

## *Preface*

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This book is about numerical organization in works of literature, especially English poetry of the Elizabethan period. It studies the composition of substantive and formal elements into spatial patterns, in an age when all art was thought of spatially. Some now regard numerology as an occasional device, comparable with acrostics. Yet it was widely used by ancient Latin authors, common to the best medieval and renaissance poets and almost universal in the period 1580–1680, when it reached its greatest height of sophistication. The best poems of that time are generally interesting from a numerological point of view; though of course the converse need not obtain. My subject, then, is the largely unstudied level of organization of poetic form, intermediate between prosody and structure; merging with the former in complex stanza forms (sestina, canzone), with the latter in patterns of substantive elements (episodes, catalogues, processions). Numerology has as great interest, potentially, as either of its neighbours; yet it is practically a virgin province of the critical continent.

For its neglect there are good historical reasons. Most obviously and fundamentally, we have come to despise the notion that literature is spatial in character. No longer *ut pictura poesis*. And with its structural and symbolic functions, stanzaic organization lost most of its interest in the eighteenth century, until at last it was relegated to a humble place under the heading of prosody. When Wordsworth (as

De Vere reports) said he was puzzled by ‘a subtle metrical sweetness’ in *Epithalamion* ‘the secret of which he could never wholly discover’, he was in all probability quite oblivious of the secret pattern Professor Hieatt has recently demonstrated in the poem’s large-scale metrical organization. Nineteenth-century attempts to find an expressive *raison d’être* for the stanza failed, and made way for *vers libre*. For when the link with internal structure broke, all metrical organization beyond the phrase seemed external decoration. To this we must add that the whole system of symbolism that numerology depends on is a dead language. Who now has enough knowledge of Scripture to remember how many generations intervened between Abraham and Christ? Or enough interest in Pythagoreanism to be moved by recognition of the *tetractys*?—let alone enough faith in the significance of numbers to manipulate them into their symbolic parts. Less obviously, interest in numerology may have declined because fewer practised the poetic art than in Elizabethan times, when readers of court poetry had first-hand knowledge of composition and structural methods. Some numerology has perhaps always been hidden, however. Singleton may be right to compare Dante’s numerical patterns to inaccessible carvings in medieval cathedrals, visible to God and the angels but not to men. The mathematical harmonies governing renaissance architecture, and rediscovered for our own age by Professor Wittkower, are equally independent of subjective perception.

For some the current attempt to recover appreciation of literary numerology displays all the follies of which autonomous speculative criticism is capable: for others, it vindicates descriptive analysis as a heuristic instrument. As may be imagined, I take the second view. But I have to admit the prematurity, at least, of this study. What makes it premature is not merely the paucity of individual numerical analyses of high quality. A still more rudimentary difficulty exists: the absence of reliable information about the external facts of poetic form. Contrary to what one might suppose, for example, the development of the stanza has never been fully charted. For that matter, there has been no comprehensive history of prosody at all since Saintsbury’s impressionistic sketch (1906–10). Even simple statistics are lacking, such as would enable a numerologist to determine, say, what percentage of elegies were composed in seven-line



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[More information](#)

stanzas, or with line totals of 120, during particular historical periods. Being *ante tempus*, the present book indefinitely aims simply to arouse interest and to suggest future lines of exploration.

The interest of numerological criticism is twofold. First, it makes possible a more fully intelligible descriptive analysis. By bridging the gap between form and content it not only shows what internal considerations led to the external proportions but can even sometimes stimulate fresh appreciation of the meaning. Self-referring passages relating to the work's own structural patterns must remain obscure without it. Nor can we adequately account for the Elizabethan poet's characteristic sureness of direction, without referring to the numerological maps by which he could always tell where he was going and what came next. Secondly, numerological criticism holds out the hope of a better understanding of poetry's relations with the sister arts music and architecture. For, if the doctrines *ut pictura poesis* and *ut architectura poesis* ever had validity, this should be plainest where poetry is most visual: in structural patterns of lines and stanzas. These doctrines, in reality far from vague, implied a completely spatial conception of literature, of which figure poems were only one manifestation, noticeable because bizarre. Literary and architectural theorists shared many ideas, especially that of creation by number and proportion: when he spoke in his *Poetice* (1561) of the poet as an *alter deus*, Scaliger was repeating Alberti's claim (1435) that the painter 'will feel himself another God'. We should never, of course, allow ourselves to forget that comparisons between the arts are only more or less remote analogies. Elizabethan poets were no more trying to write architecture than Palladian architects with their octave proportions were composing music in stone. Nevertheless, if we are to have such analogies at all, numerological criticism may help to make them less impressionistic.

A subject as large as numerical organization, necessarily involving much detail, could hardly be treated in a single volume. Consequently I have selected two sorts of pattern from among many: other books could be written about other sorts. The chosen two, however, triumphal patterns and temporal patterns, are the commonest, and often occur in conjunction. They are also among the most significant; for the triumph embodied some of the profoundest aspirations of the renaissance, while meditations on time and the structure of history

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

many of the finest poems of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Chapter 1, on evidence for the existence of numerical composition, may be passed over by those to whom such evidence seems superfluous or irrelevant. Chapters 2–5 deal with triumphal patterns involving symmetry or significant central points. Similar iconology is traced in extra-literary forms (2), in the substantive structure of poetry (3), in poetic form considered synchronically (4) and in poetic form considered diachronically with respect to historical art styles (5). Chapters 6–8 study the use of temporal numbers: first in renaissance critical theory and in the measure of the action, then in numerology at large, and finally in the numerology of the epithalamic genre. In sonnet sequences (9) temporal and triumphal forms are sometimes closely interwoven.

For the time in which much of this book was written I have to thank the Principal and Fellows of Brasenose College, Oxford, and the Board of the Faculty of English, for sabbatical leave. An invitation to the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, made it possible for me to work in almost ideal circumstances of quiet and scholarly companionship. My debt to generations of indulgent undergraduates is incalculable. Pupils and friends whom I have to thank for individual contributions include Maren-Sofie Røstvig, Douglas Brooks, Robert B. Cummings, Howard Erskine-Hill, John Peacock and Michael Wilding. Where my ignorance was particularly complete, I asked help of David R. Coffin, Ralph Giesey, Colin G. Hardie, Lewis H. Lockwood and John North, meeting with generous assistance to be remembered with pleasure.

In accordance with editorial principles I have set out elsewhere, spelling of post-medieval texts has been modernized throughout (except for proper names), but original punctuation has been retained. In the notes, omission of a place of publication implies London. Unless a specific English version is cited, I may be held responsible for translations myself. Acknowledgements are due to Penguin Books for quotations from Dorothy Sayers's translation of the *Divina commedia*, and to the University of Chicago for quotations from E. H. Wilkins's *The Triumphs of Petrarch*.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The analytical study of works of music reached the point where musical themes were transformed into physico-mathematical formulas. Not long after this philologists began to work on the same lines, and to measure word pictures in the same way as the physicists measured the manifestations of nature: this brought the analysis of pictorial art into line with the long standing relationship between architecture and mathematics. Abstract formulas, relationships, analogies and correspondences were now discovered among those which had already been gained by following these paths.

Hermann Hesse, *Das Glasperlenspiel*, tr. Mervyn Savill as *Magister Ludi* (New York 1949) 33