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THE WIFE OF BATH'S FIVE

by R. F. Fleissner

*Unde pulcrum in debita proportione
consistit*—Thomas Aquinas, *Summa
Theologica*, i quaest. 5, art. 4

Was there a reason for the Wife of Bath's having had *five* husbands?
It is far too easy to assume that Chaucer just needed a rhyme for
lyve when he wrote

She was a worthy womman al hir lyve:
Housbondes at chirche-dore she hadde fyve. . . .
(A 459-60)¹

There is evidence that he was acquainted with *five* as *le nombre prestigieux* in mediaeval and Renaissance Pythagoreanism. D. W. Robertson, Jr., for example, reveals the import of number theory to Augustinian influences upon Chaucer's world, viz.: "The spirit is therefore most powerful and the body most healthful when the spirit perceives and loves the 'numbers' or constituents of beauty which are transmitted to it from God, and which it finds, through a rational motion, in itself."² Ernst Cassirer observes that "besides space and time, the third great formal motif dominating the structure of the mythical world is number," that "number thus fulfills the function which the Pythagoreans impute to harmony," being "a Unity of many mixed elements and an agreement between disagreeing elements" that "acts as the magic tie which not so much links things together as brings them into harmony within the soul."³ Cassirer, however, is skeptical about the import of individual numbers ("there remains in the end hardly any numerical term which cannot be drawn into this sphere of intuition and this process of sanctification"⁴), and so we should do well to examine the plausibility of Chaucer's debt to the Golden Number.

Two points are worth mentioning at the start: Chaucer was significantly indebted to mediaeval writers who stressed the meaning of Pythagorean numbers, and *five* in particular, namely Dante and Macrobius; and there was a good deal of number influence upon other Middle English writers, notably the Pearl Poet.⁵ That number theory had considerable influence upon poets of the English Renaissance, Spenser particularly, has been emphasized by two leading numerologists, Alastair Fowler and A. Kent Hieatt. Fowler's work⁶ is

especially helpful but need not be summarized here: he reveals the many influences upon Spenser that also could have influenced Chaucer (e.g., Nicomachus, Iamblichus, Bonaventura, Aquinas, Pythagoras, Hermes Trismegistus, Gnosticism).

With regard to the Wife of Bath, the debt to Dante, and Dantean numerology, is probably most noticeable. The discussion of nobility in her tale is borrowed, as Paul G. Ruggiers notes, from the *Convivio*.⁷ What may not be so well-known is the import of *five*,⁸ the number of figures forming the eyelid of the Eagle in the *Purgatorio*. That Chaucer was cognizant of this symbolism in the *House of Fame* has been pointed out by B. G. Koonce.⁹ Moreover, the concept that *five* was important as "the type of nature, embracing all things"¹⁰ was known to Macrobius, to whom Chaucer alludes in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the *Parliament of Birds*.

In the Prologue to the *Wife of Baths Tale*, the Wife says,

Yet herde I nevere tellen in myn age
Upon this nombre diffinicioun.
Men may devyne and glosen, up and down. . . .
(D 24-26)

Not only does this suggest that the poet might have known what the Wife seems not to know, but it implies a reason for professing ignorance of the mystery number five. For the import assigned to the pentad tended to be more magical than mystical, having been derived from Persian culture. Yet, though Hopper points out that "Capella designates [five] as the number of this world,"¹¹ he adds: "Irenaeus, in his refutation of the Gnostics, argues that their theology is fallacious not because it is based on number, but because the numerical scheme is incorrect. For do they not completely ignore the number 5, which is everywhere manifest in the True Faith?"¹² Nonetheless, since *five* came to be a symbol of the flesh, the gradual Christianization of numbers limited the pentad's religious significance ("it is fitting, therefore, that the Old Law, which lacked final perfection, should be contained in the Pentateuch"¹³), though it was still held to be a "worthy" number. Not only is the ambivalence of the number from the Christian point of view appropriate for the Wife of Bath's interpretation of Scripture, then, but its association with the flesh is fitting for "a worthy womman."

The reason why the Wife of Bath had five husbands may well be then that Chaucer recognized in the Pythagorean endorsement of *five* (also strongly promoted by Ficino, following Plato, in his *Commentary on the Timaeus*¹⁴) the symbol, not just of the flesh or earthly love, but of marriage,¹⁵ a point established by Plutarch¹⁶ and

derivative from the notion that *five* was the sum of the first female digit, *two*, and the first male digit, *three*. Though the Wife may give the initial impression of being loose and unfaithful, her arguments are in accord with Scripture, albeit with a primitive reading of it at times, and so the reference to five husbands reflects back on the interrelationship of heavenly and earthly love as revealed in the pentad and pentagonal symmetry. The classic formulation of this was Fra Luca Pacioli's *De Divina Proportione* (1509). The same formulation is evident symbolically in the motto of the Prioress, *Amor vincit omnia*. As with the Prioress, the Wife of Bath's love symbolism probably also has some ironic purport.

Lastly, it might be mentioned that Chaucer was involved in numerology through his interests in alchemy (the association with Hermes Trismegistus again) and especially astrology. Number lore from Babylonian times on was related to astrology, and Chaucer's concern with that subject not only in the Astrolabe treatise but in the *Knight's Tale* has some bearing on the Wife's cry,

Myn ascendent was Taur, and Mars therinne.

Allas! allas! that evere love was synne!

(D 613-14)¹⁷

It is notable, moreover, that Chaucer indirectly alludes to the Golden Proportion, from which pentagonal symmetry and pentad lore in general derives, in the *Knight's Tale*.¹⁸

When the Wife stated that she had never heard "Upon this nombre diffinicioun," she was most likely acknowledging directly or indirectly the mystique associated with the Golden Number Five and thereby anticipating what John Donne was to refer to in "The Primrose"¹⁹ as the "mysterious number" *five*.

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1. All quotations are from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957).

2. A *Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, 1963), p. 68. The following studies have treated the subject of Chaucer and numerology: Bruce L. Grenberg, "The Canon's Yeoman's Tale: Boethian Wisdom and the Alchemists," *Chaucer Review*, 1 (Summer 1966), 37-54 (especially pp. 54-55); Russell A. Peck, "Number Symbolism in the Prologue to Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*," *English Studies*, 48 (1967), 205-15; and "Theme and Number in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*," in *Silent Poetry: Essays in Numerological Analysis* (New York, 1970), pp. 73-115; Douglas Brooks and Alastair Fowler, "The Meaning of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*," *Medium Aevum*, 39 (1970), 123-146. My own studies on the relationship of numerology to literature include "A Note on the Golden Section," *Nexus*, 2 (1957), 39-42; "The Mystical Meaning of Five," *English Studies*, 46

(1965), 45; "Homage to the Pentad: Williams's 'The Great Figure,'" *Notes on Contemporary Literature* (West Georgia College), 1 (September, 1971), 2-5, which provides a summary of pentad lore as well as a structural analysis.

3. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, tr. Ralph Manheim, 2 Vols. (New Haven, 1955), II, 140, 151. Cf. E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask (London, 1953), especially the XVth *Excursus* on "Numerical Composition."

4. Cassirer, II, 146.

5. See J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"* (London, 1965), pp. 41ff. Also cf. P. M. Kean, *The Pearl: An Interpretation* (New York, 1967), pp. 14 and 138. On the import of *five* in particular, see A. Kent Hiatt, "Sir Gawain: Pentangle, Luf-lace, Numerical Structure," *PLL*, 4 (Fall, 1968), 354n. et passim (reprinted in *Silent Poetry*, ed. Alastair Fowler).

6. *Spenser and the Numbers of Time* (New York, 1964); also, more importantly, his recent *Triumphal Forms: Structural Patterns in Elizabethan Poetry* (Cambridge, 1970), particularly his chapter on "Pentads and Ogdoads" (pp. 148-73).

7. "The Italian Influence on Chaucer," in *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London, 1968), p. 145. On Macrobius' influence upon Chaucer, see Richard L. Hoffman, "The Influence of the Classics on Chaucer," *ibid.*, p. 163.

8. Vincent Foster Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism: Its Sources, Meaning, and Influence on Thought and Expression* (New York, 1938), pp. 197-98. The basic treatise on medieval and Renaissance numerology written in those times is Pietro Bongo's *Numerorum Mysteria* (Bergamo, 1591). See also Alastair Fowler, above.

9. *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame: Symbolism in "The House of Fame"* (Princeton, 1966), p. 81. Also Ruggiers, pp. 146-47.

10. Cited by Hopper, p. 43. See Macrobius' *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, tr. and ed. William Harris Stahl (New York, 1952), p. 103.

11. Hopper, loc. cit.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 74. A biblical basis for numerology, which may have at least indirect bearing upon what Alisoun says, is to be found in Isaiah 11:26 and Matthew 10:30. Inasmuch as she likes to cite St. Paul, the following reference to the pentad in Pauline doctrine by Sir Thomas Browne is worthy of mention: "Saint Paul had rather speak five words in a known than ten thousand in an unknown tongue: that is as little as could well be spoken. A simple proposition consisting of three words and a complexed one not ordinarily short of five" (quoted by Fowler in *Triumphal Forms*, p. 21). Cf. five as the "span of perception" (the longest cluster of units that the eyes can report to the mind as a single entity) in modern psychology and aesthetics; its most prominent illustration (in metrics) is iambic pentameter.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 86. The argument may seem tenuous. Cf. the sacred use of *five* words in the Consecration of the Bread during the Mass ("Hic est enim Corpus Meum"), alluded to in *Everyman*, where emphasis is also placed on the "Five Wits" (senses).

14. See *Spenser and the Numbers of Time*, p. 34, n. 1.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 35 ("Another epithet of the pentad is Marriage"). Fowler places more stress on its symbolizing Justice because he wishes to relate it to Book V of the *Faerie Queene*. This further symbolism is indeed interesting (it is considered by Browne in his *Garden of Cyrus*) but scarcely relevant to Chaucer except insofar as he stresses Jupiter, as "fifth among the deities of the planetary week" (p. 206), in his *House of Fame*.

16. In "De E apud Delphum" in the *Moralia*. This is a basic classical source for the significance of the pentad (the letter *E* being the fifth letter in the alphabet).

17. Chauncey Wood, "Chaucer and Astrology," in *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, p. 184, has called this "perhaps the most famous horoscope in English literature."
18. I [A] 2450-69. Cf. Matila Ghyka, *The Geometry of Art and Life* (New York, 1946), pp. 90-91. Ghyka is the leading modern authority on the relationship of the Golden Proportion and pentagonal symmetry to nature and the Fine Arts.
19. See also *Spenser and the Numbers of Time*, p. 250. For further study, consult Russell A. Peck's "Number Symbolism and the Idea of Order in the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer," unpub. dissertation (University of Indiana, 1962).