

Seminal Parables of Parasemiology: The Turn of the Shrew

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Parasemiology is the esoteric twin of numerology, *para* meaning “in two positions,” semiology being the study of signs *and* symbols *and* their use *and* interpretation. The casual reader will immediately have noted that these brief (and admittedly imprecise) definitions contain the number *two*, and the word *and* (often used as a synonym for addition). Even more telling is semiology’s focus on *signs*, those disagreeable pluses and minuses attached to the “integers” of modern mathematics, as ably discussed by Porch Lagersthwaite in the abominable *The New Math* (abominable here used in the sense of “causing moral revulsion,” the perhaps predictable reaction of the Old Guard when our new and more effective mathematica were introduced). We seek, therefore, pleasing numerical symmetries, as of two small children in a family portrait, both adorned in ribbons; though the ribbons be of different colors, they nonetheless call one to the other in what has been called an “echo,” or a paradigmatic “parasign,” the ribbon a sign “in two positions”; such symmetries produce in the reader a jolt of pleasure which can be felt in the tripes and trillibubs (the body, and not the mind, being the primary research tool of a Parasemiologist). Such was this author’s response when beginning to read, using the Ottorino method of disassembling both books and reassembling by alternating pages of each text, beginning with the text published first (*viz.*, *Shrew*), while inserting tarot cards and astrological charts at precisely calculated intervals (for a fulsome description of the method please consult Appendix C of Ottorino, 2017), Shakespeare’s indolent *The Taming of the Shrew* alongside James’s inscrutable *The Turn of the Screw*.

Consider, first, that each of the texts’ titles are precisely five words long, and then observe that the fifth (and last) word in each of the titles contains precisely five letters. In fact, these two “last words,” *screw* and *shrew*, differ only in the second position (where *screw* contains a ‘c,’ *shrew* contains an ‘h’) which directs our attention also to the second words in each title: *taming* and *turn*, where we note that these two words do not contain the same number of letters (six letters as opposed to four), but the key number five is “between” the four and six. As reported in the venerable website [NUMEROLOGY - The vibration and meaning of NUMBERS](#), the number five is “said to be the prevailing number in nature and art,” and symbolizes, among other things, “the ‘stigmata,’” but our two texts play a gleeful game of hide and seek with this most sacred symbol: the word “stigmata” appears nowhere in either text. And yet, to the experienced numerological parasemiologist, the core of both texts is laid bare by the title alone: each must be a retelling of that most famous ghost story, the Christian Bible.

In place of “stigmata,” both texts use its numerological equivalent. The word five is used by Biondello to describe Petruccio, the parading parakeet of the *Shrew*, in this passage:

Why, Petruccio is coming in a new hat and an old jerkin; a pair of old breeches thrice turn’d; a pair of boots that have been candlecases, one buckled, another lac’d; an old rusty sword ta’en out of the town armory, with a broken hilt, and chapeless; with two broken points; his horse hipp’d, with an old moldy saddle and stirrups of no kindred; besides, possess’d with the glanders and like to mose in the chine, troubled with lampass, infected with the fashions, full of windgalls, sped with spavins, ray’d with the yellows, past cure of the fives, stark spoil’d with the staggers, begnawn with the bots, sway’d in the back, and shoulder-shotten, near-legg’d before, and with a half-cheek’d bit and a head-stall of sheep’s leather, which being restrain’d to keep him from stumbling, hath been often burst, and now repair’d with knots; one girth six times piec’d, and a woman’s crupper of velure, which hath two letters for her name fairly set down in studs, and here and there piec’d with packthread. (Act 3, Scene 2).

The sum of three and two is five, and it is no coincidence that this passage appears in Act 3, Scene 2, and that the number three makes an oblique reference to *The Turn of the Screw* (“old breeches thrice *turn’d*” (emphasis mine)), which would not be published for upwards of *three* hundred and *three*

years. We must add the number three into the numerological mix, so to speak. Of course, Shakespeare also includes the words “pair” and “two,” four times, and the word “six” once. The number between four and six, as previously discussed, is the stigmatised “five”: Shakespeare tells us that Petruchio’s horse has fallen ill with “the fives,” a form of *distemper*, which echoes the famed *ill temper* of the titular shrew. Thus, a woman is a shrew is a horse is a ghost is Christ himself; all words containing precisely five letters.

In *Screw*, the word “five” is used but twice (once again, a two appears!), in both instances as a descriptor for *time* (“five minutes”). As every child knows, “five minutes” seldom means “five minutes,” and we must therefore look *under* and *through* the sign to find a mare’s nest of parasemiological meanings. Five is, of course, a particularly important number in chrono-parasemiology. In the Major Arcana of the tarot, five is the Hierophant, representing convention, tradition, and rules, and thus echoes the measurement of time, be it in parsecs or aeons, the convention *par excellence* of humanity, who once again attempt to lead a horse by way of bit and bridle, never minding that the horse in question is made entirely of wind and wishfulness.

That two and three makes five is amplified by James in the opening paragraphs of his text, at the first mention of the turning of the screw:

"If the child gives the effect another turn of the screw, what do you say to two children—?"

"We say, of course," somebody exclaimed, "that they give two turns! Also that we want to hear about them."

One wonders therefore why the obvious consequent is absent: "And what do you say to three children?" "They give three turns!" Continuing, one should eventually arrive at five turns of the screw. But one does not. Here we find the inscrutability of James, the reason the parasemiological significance of his text has eluded, until now, even the most perspicacious examiners: as the aphorism goes, “the soup cannot count the parsnips.” James no doubt believed that his five letter title, the five letter word in fifth position, and the obvious analogy of screws to nails would lead the reader inevitably to stigmata and the unraveling of his Christ story’s entire inner meaning. Rather than “give away the ending” from his story’s first words, James chose to bury the metaphorical parsnips in the literary soup. James’ Sisyphean efforts to keep *Screw’s* numerological code an indecipherable mystery might have been a success, were it not for the incisive exegesis of parasemiotics.