

HENK DE VRIES, *“La Celestina” por dentro: Una exégesis numerológica de la “Comedia de Calisto y Melibea,”* with a prologue by WILHELM PÖTTERS and an epilogue by DORIS EDEL. (Medievalia Hispanica 30.) Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2020. Pp. 165; black-and-white figures. €19.80. ISBN: 978-8-4919-2130-1.  
doi:10.1086/721945

This short monograph is a posthumous contribution from a Dutch scholar who specialized in the study of medieval Spanish, especially that of the Spanish literary masterpiece *La Celestina* (1499), of which he published a modern Dutch translation. The monograph includes some new ideas he kept honing after he retired, but he died before seeing it published. (However, much of its content was already published in previous articles.) The book is, as its title proclaims, a numerological analysis of the text of *La Celestina*; in other words, of the meanings that the interpretation of the numbers of letters or structures and their patterns in the famous play may convey. It is based on the “gematria,” the traditional practice of assigning numerical, and therefore symbolic, values to letters and indirectly to words, including personal names. This use of numbers is in line with kabbalistic, Pythagorean, and other gnostic beliefs that

*Speculum* 97/4 (October 2022)

considered the harmony of numbers found in many natural phenomena, such as the movement of the planets, had meaning that could be applied to human activities.

The book contains a brief but complete introduction to how gematria works and the use of numerology in literature, which is exemplified with several examples of Spanish medieval literature. Then the remaining chapters study *La Celestina* by applying these methods. The overarching thesis is that *La Celestina* is the work of Fernando de Rojas, traditionally thought to be one of the authors and who was of *converso* Jewish descent, and one or several other people, one of whom knew much of gematria and other theories of the symbolic use of numbers in kabbalistic and other traditions. De Vries even goes further, identifying this mathematician as a Jacobo Coheno of Seville, an otherwise unknown person whose name is encoded in one of the metatexts that accompany some of the old editions. According to de Vries, the book contains a veiled message for those initiated in this arcane knowledge. The existence of such a message is implied in the colophon added by one of the editors, Francisco Delicado, another *converso* author of *La lozana andaluza*, and who was responsible for the corrections of the Venice 1531 edition of *La Celestina*. Some words in the colophon may indicate that the book contains many hidden messages for those who know how to read them. These messages, according to de Vries, are the many numerical patterns that allude to figures and episodes in the Bible. For instance, through their numeric equivalents in one of the traditions of gematria, the names of ten main characters of *La Celestina* correspond with the numbers in the famous Fibonacci progression. Through the parody of Christian figures and authority, the book contains hidden complaints against the persecution of *conversos* and crypto-Jews in contemporary Spain.

The detailed argumentation of de Vries's book is too convoluted even to attempt to summarize it. For instance, parts of the play are to be read as a parodical allegory of the Holy Mary through a complex parallel of numeric coincidences in the numbers of letters, sections, or interventions of a character. To explain these complicated hypotheses, many tables with numbers, numeric progressions, and other harmonies are included, making the reading difficult to follow even if the mathematics used are relatively simple. In some cases, the arguments adduced to understand the text as a criticism of the persecution of the Jews of Spain are not veiled under numeric allegory but in plain view. This is the case of the name of Melibea's father, Pleberio, which resounds of the Latin "plebeian" and alludes, therefore, to the situation of Spanish *conversos*, whose blood was considered impure, making it impossible for them to be part of the nobility even if they had reached powerful positions.

The arguments to support these and other readings are convoluted and show much knowledge and ingenuity on the part of de Vries. His posthumous monograph has to be understood within the established critical subfield of considering *La Celestina* and other Spanish literary pieces as part of the effects of the repression that Spanish Jews underwent at the time. The complex textual history of *La Celestina*, the many unknowns about its author or authors, and the numerous meanings of this rich text that encourage irreverence toward authority are characteristic of early modern literature and favor these cryptic interpretations. However, the same ingenuity that was needed to come up with these arguments as well as to massage the spellings and other formatting issues of this text—which has gone through so many changes since its origin—is not convincing enough for the general reader. One cannot help but wonder whether, if the message was so carefully hidden and difficult to decipher, any of the intended original readers could actually grasp it.

ENRIQUE FERNANDEZ, University of Manitoba