

“LA VERDAD SOSPECHOSA”: LYING AND DRAMATIC STRUCTURE ONCE MORE

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ONE QUESTION HAS CONSISTENTLY DOGGED STUDIES of *La verdad sospechosa*: whether or not García is to be viewed in a more or less favorable light or not. Should his lying be seen as morally reprehensible or easily excusable? Is his lying to be construed as a delightful exercise of the imagination or the ostentatious egotism of a flawed individual? This in turn raises the question of whether the very disconcerting ending is acceptable or unsatisfactory. To take it a stage further, what are its wider repercussions, for society or even for literature? Is the play a satire on seventeenth-century society through his fabrications or, alternatively, is society in some way complicit in his mode of life? In considering this subject –reconsidering it after many years in my case (Ribbans, 1973)– I would suggest that many clues to elucidating these questions are to be found within the organic structure of the play in action rather than in attempts at establishing an a priori characterization, rigid and unchanging, of the protagonist. The sequence of events and disclosures, and particularly the Aristotelian devices of reversal of fortune (peripeteia or peripety) and discovery (anagnorisis) have a special relevance in a work containing so many deliberate fabrications.¹ The visual and dynamic effects of the staging (costume, exits and entrances, gestures, position on the stage, audience expectation, etc.), have a vital part, whether the play is presented before an audience or experienced by a reader.²

Thanks to various erudite studies, the underlying sources of García's lying, imbued with classical, scholastic and Renaissance theoretical ideas, have been adequately determined. Jules Whicker, in an excellent comprehensive study, effectively brings out the significance of ancient moral disquisitions for the elucidation of García's conduct. He notes that García resembles Aristotle's boastful man, who claims more merits than he has. García also fits in very well with Augustine's fourth category of lying: his lies "are told 'ex mentiendi libidine' (out of sheer delight in lying). According to Aquinas, lies of this sort proceed from a habit ('quod procedit ex habitu') and are caused

by vanity ('ex quadam vanitate aliquis ad jactantiam procedat')" (Whicker 67). Finally, this scholar comes to a firm conclusion:

If we consider García's lies according [to] the distinction drawn by Aquinas between cause, intent, and effect, we find: firstly, that they are motivated by arrogance and vanity; secondly, that they are intended to deceive; and thirdly, that they cause injury (albeit in the relatively mild form of shame) not only to others (don Beltrán, don Juan, Tristán) but also to García himself. (67)

Edward Riley had earlier indicated, in a fundamental article, the relevance of Renaissance moralists such as Huarte de San Juan and López Pinciano. Even though for them lying was relatively innocuous –if contemptible–, the potential harmful effect is emphasized if it is allowed to become a habit.³ It is in this context that Riley raises an important distinction between youthful exuberance and an ingrained condition: "how far is D. García, as a case of 'arrested development' rather than grave depravity, responsible?" (290). Is it "a natural disposition (*inclinación*) to mendacity or simply a bad habit (*costumbre*)"? (291). Such a distinction must be borne in mind in assessing García's culpability.

Near-contemporary definitions of lying are also revealing. Covarrubias has a fairly orthodox censorious definition: *Mentir*: "Es no dezir verdad maliciosamente" (800), while the *Diccionario de autoridades* is more bland, since no reference is made to a deceitful motive: *Mentir*: "Decir lo contrario de lo que se entiende". The entry under *Mentira* is even wider and would encompass many words or actions by several characters in the play: "Expresion externa hecha por palabras o acciones, contraria a lo que interiormente se siente" (2, 545). Under *mentira jocosá*, a non-deceitful definition is admitted: "por diversión, entre personas que se sabe o conoce que no tendrán por verdad el dicho, intentando solamente causar risa" (2, 545).⁴ Jacinta no doubt has such a definition in mind when she speaks of lying as "donaire": "Pasar por donaire puede,/ cuando no daña, el mentir..." (2546-47).⁵

The early scenes of the play, before the actual falsehoods begin, plunge us into this ambiguity about the nature of lying. In the excellent discussion between don Beltrán and the Letrado, the latter passes from listing his pupil's good qualities –note that these include being "si repentino, impaciente" (144)– to hesitantly admitting a vice, meekly described as "No decir siempre verdad" (156). While distinguishing between "condición" and "mala costumbre" (159, 160), the Letrado nonetheless attributes his pupil's persistent mendacity to juvenile exuberance susceptible to reform. Don Beltrán, preoccupied about his social standing, reacts strongly. Not only does he fear that the vice is ingrained but declares emphatically that his fabrications will be

both surpassed and ridiculed in the deceitful environment of the *corte*. It is an early example of a critical view of society as a whole. Whatever the root cause of García's lying is, however, reform is not impossible.

It is also noteworthy that in a play about a liar Alarcón foregoes the obvious start of surprise available to him of concealing his protagonist's defect from the audience until he embarks on his first lie. Corneille, in *Le menteur*, does not follow him in this respect. He skips the arrival scene in the capital, with its disclosure of his failing by his tutor, and starts with an abbreviated discussion of fashion and women between Dorante (García) and Cliton (Tristán). Dorante's situation is in fact very different. He is not the unexpected heir to his family fortunes called back from his potential career as a scholar, but decided on his own initiative to abandon law and go to Paris. As we shall see, the changes Corneille made are revealing; more interested in maintaining the classical unities and in unadulterated comedy than in moral judgment, he tends to remove or blur some of the most original of Alarcón's practices.⁶

The fact that García's mendacity is previously announced converts the members of the audience (or the readers) into accomplices of the playwright, not of the deceived characters. Spectators and readers will be on the alert for his lies from the start, even though they are kept in suspense for a considerable time before their expectation is gratified. Costume, too, has a part to play. The contrast in dress from the typical student garb—"toga" and "ferreuelo" (Oleza/Ferrer, 218)—García wore in Salamanca and on the journey and the ornate fashionable clothes of a "galán" discussed in scene 3 marks the contrast in manners and environment between university life and *la corte*; it is emphasized by don Juan's failure at first to recognize him: "Veros en Madrid lo hacía, / y el nuevo traje ... / Más galán sois de seglar / que de estudiante lo fuistes" (595, 599-600). The abrupt change of circumstances accounts for García's eager concern with fine clothes and the latest fashion. The audience is brought to consider visually as well as verbally how influential his very different youthful experiences in Salamanca may be in his propensity for lying.

Scene 2 also places a great deal of emphasis on his father and his reaction. The revelation induces such alarm in don Beltrán that he rushes into a deceit of his own, precipitating one of the crucial developments of the action: his proposal, without consultation, to marry his son off to Jacinta. It also inaugurates the important motif of how a gentleman of high social status who obviously commands great authority, seasoned in dispensing favors and having an apparently wordly-wise sagacity about human failings, turns into a dupe who has to acquiesce in events over which he no longer has any control. In *Le menteur*, the plot construction is much looser. Géronte (don Bel-

trán), first introduced at the beginning of Act II, does not have the same motivation for proposing the marriage; it is simply an arbitrary decision by an authoritarian parent. As he has not yet learnt about Dorante's compulsive lying, Géronte has no cause to rebuke his son before he is deceived by the marriage lie; and he discovers the deception through a friend, not through Alcippe (don Juan).

A small but telling dramatic detail is that the crucial information about García's lying is withheld from Tristán, since he leaves the stage with García before the Letrado's disclosure. Tristán, who is well educated and experienced in the ways of the world, demonstrates these qualities in his comments on fashion and his racy advice on women before he is aware of his master's defect. They are thus of general application for society as a whole, as well as for the young heir just arrived in Madrid. The apparently casual anecdote about the gentleman who covers his scars (presumably from smallpox) with the wide brimmed collar so much the current fashion is significant for the whole play:

Con un cuello apanalado,
 ¿qué fealdad no se enmendó?
 Yo sé una dama a quien dio
 cierto amigo gran cuidado
 mientras con cuello le vía,
 y una vez que llegó a verle
 sin él, la obligó a perderle
 cuanta afición le tenía,
 porque ciertos costurones
 en la garganta cetrina
 publicaban la ruina
 de pasados lamparones. (241-52)

García's defect is not physical but no less real. On the vexed question of *inclinación* versus *costumbre*, it tilts the balance slightly, by referring to a permanent condition, in favor of *inclinación*. Lying, like disfiguring scars, could easily put off potential spouses, as occurs with the lady in Tristán's account, or their guardians, as don Beltrán feared; and the whole story neatly pinpoints, not only the type of deception that contemporary society perpetrates automatically to shun awkward problems, but more specifically what don Beltrán will attempt to do about his son's lying: cover it up until he is safely married off. García, incidentally, disapproves of the extravagant fashion but, as Tristán observes, such criticism does not prevent *galanes*, the recently joined García among them, from following the tide, thus, by implication,

concealing their shortcomings. It is an adroit use for dramatic purposes of a contemporary controversy that demonstrates the play's capacity to refer to García's specific situation and Madrid aristocratic society in the same breath.

Tristán's extended, amusing and cynical astrological satire is unequivocally a splendid set piece of social satire, conveying a generalized message that appearances deceive and that money buys sexual favors from ladies throughout society, outwardly virtuous or not. It applies only marginally to García's situation, for though "tierno" (290), his attention is directed entirely to respectable unmarried ladies. Only in the specific advice that money is what counts does it impinge on his conduct. Nor can Tristán's satire be applied to Jacinta and Lucrecia, whom the audience has not yet encountered and who are the only ladies of rank in the play. They can hardly be included among the carefully graded ranks of mostly married women of dubious morality; one would expect to find them, if at all, among "Las señoras... que son ángeles a quien / no se atreve el pensamiento" (301, 303-04). There is however possibly an anticipation of the fact that Jacinta will not seem adverse to receiving gifts from García so long as don Juan does not witness it.

Alan Paterson rightly attaches great importance to this solo performance as a medium for satirizing society and goes on to claim the same qualities for García's lies as autonomous solo performances. He argues powerfully and convincingly that each of the lies has a specific social reference. It is indeed significant that the lies apply to relevant issues of the time: the influx of riches from America – "the *indiano*, epitome of upstart wealth" – (363); the elaborate banquet on the river is satirized, Paterson plausibly suggests, as reflecting the increasing official hostility to luxurious entertaining (364); the close connection of marriage with nobility, of which García's lie is a "wicked mockery" (1984: 364); and the duel, which he sees as "one of the traditional rituals enacted in the name of worth" (365). By treating the lies as "autonomous," however, Paterson fails to relate them to the story of García himself.

Obviously, great importance attaches to the virtuosity of the lies themselves. The same scholar, rightly conscious of the scenic quality of the play, gives a good description of the fabrications "as acts of high theatricality, whose relationship with the spontaneous brilliance of improvisation is suggested by the adverbial 'de repente' that is used on at least three occasions to convey admiration at García's skill" (Paterson 362-63).⁷ García's lies have a twin effect throughout; they have a verve and an imaginative power that goes beyond mere verisimilitude (Whicker 54-55). They belie the assumption that the ex-student cannot hold his own in deception in Madrid, though a skeptical don Félix puts this in doubt, but at the same time the stories can easily be disproved; this combination is clearly one of the endearing features for the

audience, which enjoys the fabrications, knowing them to be such, and awaits expectantly their refutation.

The imaginative quality of García's fictions is not however the only factor. Much of the humor depends on something that is often underrated: how the characters who are deceived react and what is the effect on the hero of the subsequent, and inevitable, moment of truth, or *escarmiento*. His actions cause significant anxieties to each of the principal characters that call for a reasoned response; and these responses, by don Beltrán, don Juan, Jacinta, Lucrecia, even Tristán, are essential to the impact of the play as a whole.

As his master approaches Jacinta, Tristán spells out his cynical advice twice more ("es el polo el dinero"[416], "Que a la mujer rogando/ y con el dinero dando" [430-31]). García puts his suggestions into practice, but in his own way, and with the utmost recklessness. Tristán's unawareness as yet of García's vice makes for good stage action, as the audience, knowing more than he does, witnesses his utter astonishment at García's outburst of fabrications. Moreover, his warning, "Mucho te arrojas..." (527), is addressed directly to his master's rashness in making extravagant promises: lying is not the only problem. García's own consternation, evident on the stage in the exchange of asides, is both a mark of inexperience (associated with his being "bisoño") and a sign of imprudence. The notion of "arrojarse", which Whicker acutely associates with Aquinas' concept of *praecipitatio* (71, n. 55), is reiterated throughout the play. It is the negative counterpart to a quality that is of cardinal importance: Prudence. Whicker shows clearly that García lacks the essential components of Prudence, as defined by Aquinas:

he lacks both *memoria* and *entendimiento* [*intellectus*] and [...] he habitually subordinates reason (*razón*) to appetite (*gusto*). That he also lacks foresight [*providentia*], circumspection [*circumspectio*] and caution [*cautio*], is evident in his propensity to lie without thought to the consequences of his lies, and his tendency to lay himself open to discovery at every turn. (70)

The first meeting with Jacinta (1, 4) is well contrived. The conventional theatrical device of her stumbling enables García to offer her, literally, his hand, with all that this implies as a forecast of a definite commitment. Symbolically, García has obtained what he wants without effort; his subsequent actions are what cause the frustration of his aims. The conversation that follows, with its specific references to "alcanzar" y "merecer," also raises in anticipation an important subject: the relation between ends and means. His insistence on requiring to deserve this success as well as to achieve it is in ironic contrast with his statement shortly afterwards that any means will do

so long as one achieves one's goals. He –or is it his reckless generosity?– leaves an excellent impression on Jacinta.

The story about the banquet (1, 7) is not far from fitting the more harmless mode of lying, such as the *mentira jocosa*. Indeed, it might have been permissible as a *tour de force* had García immediately confessed his storytelling at the end; instead, even when he later reassures don Juan (2, 11) that the banquet was not devoted to Jacinta, he maintained his deceit. No less striking visually, at the end of the scene, is the incipient tension between the two *galanes*, which reveals García's insensitivity to don Juan's increasing disquiet. This is vividly demonstrated by the curt farewell and ultra-abrupt departure of them both. It is one example of the meticulous stage-positioning characteristic of the play.

After these preliminary actions comes the explanation that García provides to the astonished Tristán of his propensity for lying, an intellectualized justification of his conduct that should be taken seriously. First, García declares that he is not prepared to brook anything that arouses his envy or his "admiración," a term that embraces wonder as well as admiration:⁸

Fingilo porque me pesa
que piense nadie que hay cosa
que mover mi pecho pueda
a invidia, o admiración,
pasiones que al hombre afrentan:
que admirarse es ignorancia,
como invidiar es bajeza. (838-44)

The fallacy of the argument is clear. Envy is one of the seven deadly sins and is the result of a moral inadequacy: desiring an object or a quality others have that one does not possess oneself; it gives offense ("afrenta") and can be equated with "bajeza" only when one yields to it. Similarly, the sense of wonder, the primary meaning of "admiración," would seem to proceed from a lack of experience that lays bare the ignorance of which he is ashamed. It is a sign, as Louise Fothergill-Payne indicates, of what in modern times will be called an inferiority complex (591). His fabrication about the banquet exemplifies exactly both his envy and his desire for admiration, as well as fitting the boastful model seen in Aristotle and Augustine. He is beginning to confirm Whicker's assessment of his character, according to Aquinas' criteria. Arrogant egoism combined with recklessness is apparent, but whether or not it is the temporary aberration of youth or a more permanent condition is not settled.

Then García takes his argument further, in the much-quoted lines:

Quien vive sin ser sentido,
 quien sólo el número aumenta
 y hace lo que todos hacen,
 ¿en qué difiere de bestia?
 Ser famosos es gran cosa,
 el medio cual fuere sea;
 nómbrenme a mí en todas partes
 y murmúrenme siquiera:
 pues uno, por ganar nombre,
 abrasó el templo de Efesia. (857-66)

This important passage brings up the typical Renaissance subject of fame.⁹ A significant component is the constant debate about whether it is morally preferable to live for fame or in unobtrusive modesty, reflected of course in the Don Quixote/ Alonso Quijano dichotomy.¹⁰ Again, García's reasoning is fallacious: modest living out of the public eye, recommended incidentally by don Beltrán (2, 4), has a long and positive ancestry as *aurea mediocritas*; it certainly has little to do with resembling an animal devoid of reason. What he is declaring is that he seeks an end-result, reputation, reduced to nothing more than being talked about, from any sort of action, even of such a questionable quality as to make him the object of slander ("murmúrenme siquiera"), a vice Alarcón was very conscious of, as *Las paredes oyen* attests. Moreover, in asserting that the means of attaining renown are unimportant, he identifies himself, without naming him, with Herostratus, the paradigm of infamy.¹¹ Herostratus stands for iniquitous destruction, the senseless burning of one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the temple of Artemis at Ephesus, for the sake of self-aggrandizement; it is the extreme application of envious pride. García is not of course in this class of iniquity, but for him to quote Herostratus as an example, however illusively, is to risk putting himself into the worst category of liars, beyond the pale of acceptable honorable conduct. If the end is despicable –fame or infamy at all costs–, the means take on a hardly less pernicious caste, through the uncontrollable mendacity used to achieve it, as well as entailing, in the real world of pragmatic values, the danger of losing credit or trust among one's peers. By this point in Act 1, then, we are led, without full certainty however, towards accepting the more serious response regarding his motivation: that it is the result of ingrained arrogance rather than youthful exuberance.

Finally, García offers a less intellectual argument: his "gusto," which is similarly equivocal. This justification, reiterated many times in the course of the play, may be a temporary symptom of the self-indulgence of his carefree

student ways, but it also corresponds to Aquinas's "appetite," as Whicker has shown (71).

The rest of Act 1 deals with the consequences of his lies on other characters: Beltrán's neatly handled surprise visit to Jacinta's home to make his proposal; Jacinta's great caution, in part through her attachment to don Juan, in not accepting don Beltrán's attractive offer of his son's hand without investigating further; when she does so in Act 2, scene 8, she will discover (another dramatic jolt of surprise, another anagnorisis) that he is the feigned *indiano* she found attractive. Though she concludes that it is practically a settled matter, she keeps her options open. When confronted by the furious don Juan, she tries to conciliate him, but will not compromise herself by giving him her hand (once more, a symbol of commitment); instead she concocts a strategic falsehood by declaring, in a well-staged conclusion to the act, that her uncle is coming, reversing what she had just said.

In Act 2, when a reluctant Tristán reveals García's batch of lies to don Beltrán, the two explanations: "caprichos juveniles/ con arrogancia imprudente" (1239-40), are fused without being resolved. The basis of Beltrán's recriminations to García is, as is to be expected, earnest and conventional: nobility depends on noble actions and can be lost by ignoble ones. This, his second attempt at understanding the temptations of vice, is in itself entertaining enough, as he goes through systematically, as if well acquainted with them, the attractions of most of the seven deadly sins, plus gaming and theft. The only sin missing is envy, precisely the one that lacks the desirable qualities of "gusto" and "provecho" in Beltrán's catalogue of priorities. Implicitly, therefore, it is envy that gives lying its distinctive vileness.¹² García, for his part, answers with a straight denial—another falsehood—followed by a puzzled truculence; with his usual lack of forward planning, he is unaware that his reputation has followed him from Salamanca. The reprimand has no impact on him and he has no compunction in following the rebuke with the longest and most elaborate of his lies, though he does have to hone his skills on this occasion.

The deception is much more serious than any of the others. Provoked by the desire to get out of an apparently awkward situation,¹³ it is, in Aquinas' terms, not only calculated to deceive on an important matter but potentially injurious. At the same time it is amusing, graphic in detail, and well structured to be enacted with verve on the stage, with such spectacular devices as the clock that strikes the hour, the pistol that goes off and the siege of the bedroom. And there is a comic irony here, for the scenario is hardly designed to meet with don Beltrán's approval: a blatant seduction, an imagined family that, although allegedly noble, is poor—in this society so preoccupied with money¹⁴—has little attraction, though the story may engage the imagination

of one as susceptible as Beltrán is to the attractions of vice. Moreover, the invention is inherently implausible and will inevitably be uncovered. Its willing acceptance by Beltrán corresponds to an understandable mindset that cannot conceive that his son would have the arrant audacity to deceive him after his reprimand. Yet the fact that he swallows it whole betrays Beltrán's naivety, despite his professed worldliness, and continues the undermining of his authority. As for García, to the imprudence and the impudence of the lie itself is added his evident disdain for "el viejo," which goes beyond any normal disrespect of the older generation by the young, as he gloats about a story that has in his eyes both "gusto y provecho".

The duel scene with don Juan brings in another example of impetuosity ("arrojarse" again) in a character whom Whicker (71-72) sees as the counterfigure to García. Don Juan overcomes his rash behavior, while García, ironically, does not hesitate to criticize him for it. Moreover, he matches his opponent's arrogant valor by insisting on carrying on the duel once his opponent is satisfied, benefiting the spectators with a bit of stage-fighting. At the same time he adds to his reputation as a liar with a supplementary falsehood, that the banquet's recipient was a married woman (a reminiscence of Tristán's satire). The whole fabrication is speedily demolished by don Félix, who also undermines his plausibility as a liar. We are faced with a *galán* with the contrasting characteristics of bravery (denoting nobility) and lying (a debasing habit). Still unresolved is the question of whether the latter is a *costumbre* or a character trait, but a new derogatory term is now attached to him: "embustero," denoting a more serious form of lying, in which calculated deceit is an essential part.¹⁵

The same taint of "embustero" sullies his relations with Jacinta and Lucrecia. In the interview called by Lucrecia, García makes a sustained effort and does not lie, but he cannot break through the confusion produced by the mistake of names. By the end of the act the sense of bewilderment among the characters has reached its peak. Lucrecia is confused, Jacinta indignant, García frustrated at not being believed when he is telling the truth. He has suffered the humiliation at Jacinta's hands of being "mal acreditado" and punished by having his whole repertoire of lies rehearsed one by one before him (2, 16). It might be thought that this *escarmiento* would be sufficient to produce a change of conduct. In the last words of the act, Tristán draws the moral all too clearly: "quien en las burlas miente,/ pierde crédito en las veras" (2150-51), but it is not clear whether García is listening. The unsolved question at this stage, it seems to me, is whether García is going to stop lying, from repentance or calculation, and so justify morally a happy ending. This in turn depends on how ingrained his failing is. If the *costumbre*

juvenil hypothesis prevails, the audience or reader may well expect a harmonious and conventional solution to emerge in the final act. This solution is exactly what is supplied in *Le menteur*, where Corneille, considering the conclusion "un peu dure" and little to the taste of his public ("Examen du Menteur", 294), opts for an ending that is at once more implausible and more orthodox: an abrupt and insufficiently justified change in Dorante's affections from Clarice (Jacinta) to Lucrece (Lucrecia).

It is therefore of special interest to explore the extent to which García has evolved in the course of the action. Riley inclines to the opinion that García is on the mend: "the signs are hopeful ... There is enough *discreción* in his character to suggest the likelihood of reform" (296), but, troubled by a lack of clear indications, he concludes that "[t]he play is clumsily contrived in several respects" (296). I do not share this view, which does not fully appreciate that the deliberate uncertainty created about how tenacious García's lying propensity is conditions the audience's (or the reader's) response in a way that resonates constantly throughout the play. It has a profound dramatic purpose, for it keeps the audience in suspense between enjoyment of the imaginative flair of the lies and the moral implications of his conduct. The two interlinked questions that automatically arise are: Will he get away with it? Will he reform?

In Act 3 the focus turns to Lucrecia, the recipient of García's attentions in Jacinta's name. Speculating on García's possible love for her, she indulges in some deception of her own, through Camino and Tristán, with her false message about how she reacted to García's letter. Expressing her hopes of redeeming him, she too keeps her options open. To Jacinta, she admits to being between "enamorada" and "curiosa." In the continued confusion of the well articulated Magdalena scene (3, 5-6), in which García and Tristán see Jacinta reading the letter in which García committed himself to Lucrecia as "tu esposo, Don García" (2459), the two ladies become suspicious of each other. Even truth by the "embustero" breeds distrust.

The further falsehoods García indulges in (about his imaginary wife's pregnancy and the mistake he makes about the name of his false father-in-law), are dependent on the marriage lie and do not add to the deceit. Various indications are given that his love is genuine and passionate: Camino sees him prowling round Lucrecia's house (3, 1), and with a new fastidiousness he rebukes Tristán's no-nonsense materialism in advising him, once more, to give his lady presents. Even from him, the strength of his amorous bewilderment ("ni conozco el que soy, / ni me acuerdo del que fui" [2514-15]) seems convincing.

Then comes the Tristán lie, which is of a different order from the others. It is completely gratuitous; it brings him no practical benefit, its only object

is to show off to his retainer in yet another direction, that of heroic bravado. Paterson brings out its theatrical force as "a real show-stopper" (365) in the swashbuckling mode, but critics have paid little attention to its place in the play's structure, no doubt because it lies outside the main action-line. In my estimation this is precisely the point. The fabrication occurs at a moment when García has suffered the confusion, shame and humiliation caused by his previous lies, and has demonstrated the degree of his commitment. It is addressed to the person he should have been most honest with: his trusted servant, the "secretario de su alma," and it takes him in: a mortification for the rather know-all Tristán. The lie completes the graduated pattern of those deceived—a lady unknown to him; a not very close friend; his father and now Tristán. As Lola Josa comments: "Mentirle hasta a su propio criado es el colmo de García" (183). This is the moment of truth that indicates clearly that García is incorrigible, at least within the timescale of the play.¹⁶ It proves to the audience that he has not renounced lying, that it is more than a juvenile aberration but a serious character flaw, and that he does not deserve to get off the hook. Willard King is right in declaring that "Don García es condenado... por haberse empedernido en el vicio" (192).

We should now return to the question posed by the dichotomy between García's lies and the mistake of identity. Evidently there is a disconnect between the two, for, as critics from Antonio Castro Leal (136) onward have made clear, it is the mistake of identity, not García's lying, that brings about the denouement. Mary Gaylord points out, quite rightly, that lying, as deliberate deception, and simple error are different categories, the first operating in temporal sequence and the second in causal sequence (226). Thus the problem of whether García should be held responsible and punished at the end of the play causes unease and the ending is seen to be unjust or harsh, in Gaylord's words, "the forceful, almost violent imposition of restraint" (224).

This is where the concept of "poetic justice," in an attenuated form, comes in. According to most definitions,¹⁷ poetic justice does not mean an automatic retribution for specific actions, in a mechanical working-out of cause and effect. It is rather that a given course of behavior will in the long run and in an oblique way bring its own consequence: the individual concerned will be, in Shakespeare's phrase, "hoist with his own petard" (*Hamlet*, 3, 4). Without García's continued mendacity it would indeed have resulted severe and unjust if events had been allowed to take their course, but penalizing an unreformed character for continuous errors has a moral appropriateness and a respectable pedigree. The "final lie takes away the "arbitrariness" of an "ending [that] seems perplexingly untidy" (Gaylord 224, 236) and

endows it with a certain inexorable sense of justice, clearly reinforced by the effective stage action.

The course of the lie to Tristán is ended by yet another dramatic anagnorisis, when the man who is reputed to have been mortally wounded suddenly appears. The lying continues now in a preposterous fashion with the pathetic story of the healing ointment, the Hebrew formula and García's proficiency in languages. For the first time his lying is not believed by its recipient; the patent falsehoods are not just dismissed but mocked at by Tristán. The characters are now at one with the audience. The accumulated falsehoods can only be seen as bringing into contempt, in a quite demeaning conclusion, his exuberant career of invention. García is revealed on the stage, in the presence of his servant, as a foolish and arrogant braggart.

In the diatribe that follows from the ill-used don Beltrán, converted ignominiously into the "pregonero de tu infamia" (2908), García is publicly humiliated before his servant, though he is as impervious to his shame as Tristán is fearful of the consequences. Even now, in his less than respectful explanation to his father, García offers no excuse for lying except its necessity through love. Rather than accept any culpability or blame, he confesses only to a mistake and ignorance:

Error fue, no fue delito;
no fue culpa, fue ignorancia. (2928-29)

He puts the onus on Beltrán to put it right, and only by calling his trusted retainer as a witness does he persuade the old man to seek Lucrecia's hand on his behalf. Through don Juan, Beltrán learns that the Salamanca marriage was an invention. He at once dispenses another favor –the *hábito* de Calatrava– that, with a final irony, enables Don Juan to marry Jacinta. García, by no means penitent or contrite is, to Tristán's amazement, not unhappy with the encounter: "Bien se ha hecho" (2972) is his self-satisfied comment. In neither the exchange between characters nor the action as viewed on the stage does García reveal that he deserves anything but a clear and unequivocal *escarmiento*.

A gradual leisurely pace leads towards the *desenlace* as a sedate, long-winded conversation takes place between the two old men, don Juan de Luna and don Sancho, in the garden of the former's house. Whicker views it as a moment suggesting a new atmosphere of "friendship and concord" (75), but it portends a coming storm. The tranquility is abruptly interrupted by don Juan de Sosa seeking Jacinta's hand, followed by the appearance of García and don Beltrán. García is full of self-assurance, displayed in three utterances. First, he disclaims any envy –the vice he had wrongly claimed to

spurn— in congratulating don Juan on one “victoria” —his *hábito*— that has enabled him to claim another, Jacinta, under his rival’s nose; second, in proclaiming triumphantly that “Yerros [not “engaños”] causados de amor,/ quien es cuerdo los perdona” (3061-62); and, third, in asserting blithely, discounting his “mentiras,” that “Agora de mis verdades/ darán probanza las obras” (3073-74).

All is thus prepared for the masterly final discomfiture, a very late anagnorisis that is at the same time a final reversal, a peripety, enacted on the stage, against the unrepentant hero. The traditional lineup of happy lovers goes terribly wrong, as there takes place the dramatic positioning on scene of seven characters, who each make incisive physical and verbal interventions. García’s move towards Jacinta is countered by don Juan de Sosa and don Beltrán; then Lucrecia intervenes, waving the decisive letter she has received; next comes a further agonized exclamation from don Beltrán before don Juan de Sosa’s disdainfully dismissive lines:

Dadme, Jacinta, la mano,
y daréis fin a estas cosas. (3087-88)

Commanded by her guardian, don Sancho, Jacinta happily gives her hand to don Juan. Then they turn on García. First, his father, then don Juan de Luna, demand menacingly that he accept Lucrecia, and once Tristán has rubbed in the moral of García’s culpability and the inevitability of the outcome, Garcia is obliged to cross the stage to give his hand to Lucrecia, with a grudging “La mano doy, pues es fuerza” (3107). The whole process is accomplished with impeccable precision.

Finally, the question of the relation between García’s lying and society. Paterson is perceptive in detecting the considerable background of social content throughout the play: references to the *mayorazgo*, the *hábito* don Juan aspires to and so on;¹⁸ and, as we have seen, he indicates acutely the social references in the lies themselves. Tristán’s satirical account of sexual behavior and his strictures on society’s propensity for concealment precede García’s lying and are not dependent on them. Quite a number of references to society occur in apparently casual remarks by the characters. Don Beltrán denounces the mendacity of society, *galanes* follow fashion rather than reason or law, the two ladies conduct much intrigue through their servants Isabel and Camino. The operations of worldly prudence produce a considerable amount of manipulation. García’s lying brings such behavior out in the open and puts it under stress, but it is hardly admirable in itself. In fact, no one in

the play, except García himself at times, can be said to be likeable; even Tristán is smug and materialistic.

The individual story of a vain youth precipitately launched into the *corte y villa* is not at odds with what is happening in the society of the time. In the dramatic portrayal of an aristocratic society its members meticulously protect their individual interests by prudent behavior from which calculated deceit is not excluded. Whicker perceptively sees deception in one form or another as the essential element of the play, and distinguishes between "two different forms of deception, one associated with imagination and desire and represented by García's extravagant lies, and the other associated with understanding and reason and represented by the prudent stratagems of Jacinta" (53). The point is well taken, but in speaking of the latter as "honest deception" (11) he is over-generous in my view to this prudently self-interested society. Alarcón is evidently greatly preoccupied with this social world, and finds it a worthy subject of satire and a continued source of irony. Whether his criticism is positively reformist is not altogether clear; it is after all not his job as a playwright to offer forthright solutions. My suspicion is that he has no false illusions about the society he depicts, but no desire to confront this good material for dramatic action with more than his sardonic wit.

García's lies lend an exuberant imaginative flavor that gives the play its liveliness; they also lay bear the disruptive (and entertaining) consequences these fabrications have both for those he deceives and for García himself. For all its humor there is an underlying moral problem that despite warnings, rebuffs and frustrations García does not face. His punishment is evidently severe but not crippling.¹⁹ Whether his recalcitrant mendacity will ever be curbed in marriage to Lucrecia, who, as well as being "una buena moza" (3106), knew what she was letting herself in for (or for that matter, what the result would have been had he married Jacinta), we shall never know for sure. The conclusion is an unexpected one, but it is meant to be, and it is consequential. Unlike fine scholars like Riley and Gaylord, I do not find it faulty. What is certain is that Alarcón succeeded in writing a comic masterpiece that at the same time as it posed serious moral issues at both the individual and collective level exploited the qualities of the theatre to maintain a forceful dramatic tension to the very end.

NOTES

1. Alan Paterson in particular makes good use of the reversal criterion in his stimulating study.

2. The disregard of stage techniques shown by purely literary readers in determining the impact and hence the dramatic significance of plays is notorious.
3. See, for instance, Dámaso de Frías y Bilbo's *Diálogo de la discreción* (1579) (Whicker 57, n. 14).
4. There is also a *mentira oficiosa* that is entirely blameless: "Lo que se dice para conseguir algun fin que no perjudica a otro, ni él en sí es malo, como quando para que un niño no vaya hácia algun paráge peligroso..." (2, 546).
5. All quotations, with line references, are given to the edition of *Las paredes oyen; La verdad sospechosa* by Juan Oleza and Teresa Ferrer.
6. For stimulating observations on the differences between the two plays, see the Introduction to the edition of Oleza and Ferrer (LXVI-LXX).
7. The fact that such imaginative falsehoods are equated with poetry by such theorists as Huarte de San Juan and López Pinciano raises a fascinating subject that I cannot pursue here: the degree to which García's lies are related to literature, to the point of becoming a metatheatre. John London is a representative example of this approach: "el mundo ficticio de don García compite con el mundo teatral de Alarcón y amenaza su supremacía" (90).
8. Covarrubias gives only the first sense: "es pasmarse y espantarse de algun efeto que vee extraordinario, cuya causa inora" (43). The later *Diccionario de autoridades* gives the two definitions of *admiración*, the connotation of "wonder" coming first: "El acto de vér, y atender una cosa no conocida, y de causa ignorada con espanto, ó particular observación. Se dice también lo que en sí mismo por su perfección o hermosura es digno de ser admirado..." (1, 88).
9. Within the cult of fame "we see with frightful evidence a boundless ambition and thirst after greatness, independent of all means and consequences" (Burckhardt 162).
10. Frederick de Armas has drawn attention to the parallel with Cervantes. See also Ribbans 2000 (192-94).
11. It is a grave case of sacrilege, according to the legend's main propagator, Valerius Maximus: "illa vero gloriae cupiditas sacrilega." Leo Braudy calls him the "patron saint of notoriety" (559) and equates him with Caligula and Nero. It is curious to note that the authorities in Ephesus required, unsuccessfully, that Herostratus be not named on pain of death.
12. Very like don Beltrán, Cervantes has Don Quixote say much the same about envy: "¡Oh envidia, raíz de infinitos males y carcoma de las virtudes! Todos los vicios, Sancho, traen un no sé qué de deleite consigo, pero el de la envidia no trae sino disgustos, rencores y rabias" (603).
13. A more prudent man might have followed the example of Jacinta or his own imaginary doña Sancha in temporizing about a potential marriage.
14. The income Lucrecia will inherit ("dos mil ducados") is carefully indicated by Camino (2, 1, 1133). Oleza and Ferrer point out that this makes her considerably less wealthy than García, through don Beltrán, and possibly than Jacinta (220, 237).
15. The *Diccionario de Autoridades* defines "embuste" as "Mentira disfrazada con artificio, para engañar y enredar" and "embustero" as "La persona que engaña y procura engañar, fingiendo embustes y mentiras" (2, 396). The term "embarrador" (1974) is even stronger: "el uso desta voz es regularmente metaphórico, llamando Embarrador

- ál que no procede con lisura en los negocios, y los maneja con dobléz y trato engañoso..." (2, 383).
16. Significantly, Corneille does not aim at this effect by placing this lie earlier, in Act 4, 1, before the denouement is imminent.
 17. For example, "In literature, an outcome in which vice is punished and virtue rewarded, *usually in a manner peculiarly or ironically appropriate*" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, my emphasis). In the not uncontroversial application of poetic justice to the Spanish Golden Age theatre, the outstanding figure is A. A. Parker. I remain convinced that in their essentials Parker's arguments are applicable to *La verdad sospechosa*. See Ribbans, "Lying" (1973: 212-13).
 18. He is surely mistaken, however, in attributing the post of *corregidor* to García rather than to el Letrado (362, 367n).
 19. One critic, by exalting unduly Lucrecia's merits, claims that García "escapa con una 'admonestación' que resultará en un enlace feliz" (Fothergill-Payne 595).

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