

Narcissus Redivivus: The Psychology of Corneille's Comic Liar and His Divergence from Alarcón

L'éclat, c'est une obscurité niée; ne plus se montrer admirable, c'est ne plus être, c'est retourner à la nuit froide, à l'existence sans nom.
Jean Starobinski, "Sur Corneille"¹

Why does Corneille's liar lie? The critics have disagreed. According to André Rousseaux ("Corneille, ou le mensonge héroïque"), Dorante, the hero of *Le Menteur*, has an affinity with Don Quixote. His lies are heroic fictions, transfiguring reality to make life freshly livable.² This is a romantic reading of Corneille. There are anti-romantic readings as well. André Stegmann (*L'Héroïsme corneilien*) calls Dorante a self-interested scoundrel: "un fourbe intéressé," "un flétté menteur par intérêt."³ Octave Nadal (*Le Sentiment de l'amour dans l'oeuvre de Pierre Corneille*) voices both of these views without reconciling them: for the most part Dorante is noble when he lies, but suddenly, at the dénouement, he steps out of character and behaves like a blackguard, denying that he loves the woman he has pursued since the curtain's rise.⁴ *Est-il bon ou est-il méchant?* Or is Dorante simply incoherent

and Corneille interested only in entertaining his audience and not in exploring character? "Quelles révélations sur le mensonge pourrions-nous en attendre? ... La pièce de Corneille est un jeu très amusant, et n'a d'autre objet que de nous divertir," writes Antoine Adam.⁵

All of these readings simplify the existence of the liar in the play. They also fail to measure Dorante against his theatrical model. *Le Menteur* is not an original work but a rather close adaptation of *La Verdad sospechosa* by Juan Ruiz de Alarcón; Dorante is a French avatar of the Spaniard's García. To compare the two plays in order to see how Corneille creates his liar from Alarcón's, observing what he retains, what he rejects, and what he invents is to enjoy a rare opportunity for viewing the choices Corneille makes as a dramatic psychologist. It also provides a coherent answer to the question of why his liar lies.

Alarcón, born in Mexico, is unique among the Spanish dramatists of his time in the social or moral seriousness of his plays, such as *Las Paredas oyen*, concerned with malicious gossip and *La Verdad sospechosa*, exploring the consequences of deceit and based on the lie as a dramatic motif. Corneille may well have been drawn to his model by Alarcón's notes of gravity, but his audience was accustomed to permissiveness or even escapism in moral matters on the comic stage. *La Verdad sospechosa*, in its full richness, best studied in this respect by Louise Fothergill-Payne, Alba V. Ebersole, and Jesús Antonio Ara, was nonetheless Corneille's starting point for the creation of his comic liar.⁶

Like Alarcón, Corneille places his hero at the centre of a plot that turns upon a discrepancy between the lies the hero tells about himself and the truth the audience knows. An inexperienced young nobleman freshly arrived in the capital from a provincial university, he dazzles the other characters by telling fanciful tales of an imaginary career. As I read these plays, the liar in *Le Menteur* is what we would now call a narcissist (a more complex term than the traditional egoist with which it is sometimes confused). Narcissism refers to a deviation of affect in which the subject takes himself — or more

1 *L'Oeil vivant* (Paris: Gallimard 1961) 59. I owe much to this study and to that of Charles Mauron, "Le Menteur et le héros dans le théâtre de Corneille," *Des Métaphores obéissantes au mythe personnel* (Paris: Corti 1963).

2 *Revue de Paris* (juillet 1937): 50-73. "Le Menteur ment par optimisme, par magnificence, reverons à ce mot, afin de donner à l'humanité, serait-ce en fausse monnaie, assez de surhumain pour l'embellir" (65).

3 Paris: Armand Colin 1968, Vol. II. The first quotation is from a note on p. 463 and the second from p. 593.

4 "Le mensonge pour Dorante est cette respiration pleine; féerie spacieuse où se satisfait un besoin du coeur ... Jeu sans bassesse. C'est la générosité, le feu du coeur qui font de Dorante un personnage trop grand pour lui." "Le dénouement du *Menteur* ne paraît pas répondre à la 'comédie du noble jeu' menée jusque-là sans défaillance. Il reste étranger au caractère de Dorante et à la nature même de son mensonge" (Paris: Gallimard 1948) 223-224.

5 *Histoire de la littérature française au XVII^e siècle*, (Paris: Domat 1957) II, 391-92. Georges Couton in *Corneille* expresses the same opinion. "Le comique de caractère manque: les mensonges s'enchaînent les uns aux autres sans que jamais l'auteur cherche à quoi tient ce besoin de travestir la réalité." (Paris: Hatier 1958) 109.

6 For studies of *La Verdad sospechosa* on its own terms, see: Louise Fothergill-Payne, "La justicia poética de *La Verdad sospechosa*," *Románische Forschungen* 83, (1971): 588-595; Alba V. Ebersole's edition of *La Verdad sospechosa* (Madrid: Ediciones Católica 1976); and Jesús Antonio Ara, "El engaño desenlace de *La Verdad sospechosa*," *Revista de estudios hispánicos* 13 (1979): 91-98.

precisely, an idealized image of himself — as his principal love object. In the original version of the myth of Narcissus as told by Ovid, the young Narcissus gazes into the surface of a pool and falls in love with his beautiful image. At first he does not recognize this image as his own. Only after he has fallen in love does he come to understand that the vision he reveres is his own reflection. Thus the myth suggests a link between self-adoration and self-estrangement. In other words, the narcissist, troubled in his sense of who he is, cleaves to a satisfying self-image and looks inordinately outward, rather than to his own consciousness, for confirmation of his reality and his worth. In this sense, Alarcón resurrects Narcissus in his liar and Corneille, loyal in much of his adaptation, adds rigor and comic verve to the portrayal.

Le Menteur is not the first play in which Corneille chooses to depict narcissism. Elsewhere I have shown that his early comic heroes, such as those in *Mélite* and *La Place Royale*, are narcissists.⁷ These plays centre on young lovers joining or separating against a background of seventeenth-century Paris, but the hero's insecurity, his self-involvement and fantasies of grandeur, his failure to perceive the heroine other than as an object of possession or as a fragment of himself add psychological realism to familiar love plots. In selecting *La Verdad sospechosa* for adaptation, Corneille chooses a play that coincides with his own interest in combining courtship comedy with the exploration of male psychology.⁸

His respect for his model is evident in his fidelity to much of the spirit of Alarcón's text, but he makes important formal changes to recast a Spanish *comedia* for a French audience. In accordance with French classical conventions, he reduces the time of the action from three days to thirty-six hours, limits the scenery changes to two and simplifies the plot. He also gallicizes the plays as Madrid becomes Paris; the Manzanares, the Seine; the University of Salamanca, the law faculty at Poitiers; a young woman's balcony, her French window. Most of the Spanish names become the

conventional labels fashionable at the time in French comedy. Guittars disappear from a concert; mantillas from among the costumes. More important, Corneille renders the action uniformly comic eliminating Alarcón's didacticism and his moral message. Nevertheless he retains most of the original lies and the main outlines of Alarcón's comedy-of-errors plot at the centre of which stands a narcissistic liar.⁹

The action of *La Verdad sospechosa* flows from a single instance of confusion when the hero, García, begins to court a young woman, Jacinta, but mistakes her name for that of her friend, Lucrecia. García's lies serve two aims: avoiding marriage to anyone other than Jacinta and satisfying his need to bedazzle his on-stage audience with fabulous stories about himself. His self-puffery gives rise to richly humorous effects. García is an extraordinarily talented, but at the same time a whimsical, liar. Laughter springs from the enormity of his fabrications, the gratuitous details he insists upon, the gullibility of his listeners and the asides of his valet, and ever-present witness of the young man's flights of fancy. García boasts, for example, of an imaginary river-party he has arranged for an equally imaginary sweetheart: four orchestras entertain the guests; twenty-four torches illumine the darkness; a banquet of thirty-two courses, without counting the entrées and desserts, appears on silver and gold plates. Even the toothpicks are golden. In another of his yarns he engages in a fictitious duel: his courage whole, though two-thirds of his blade is lost, he decimates his opponent. To avoid an unwanted marriage García tells his father an elaborate tale of a shot-gun wedding. Even this story of a forced capitulation echoes with narcissistic self-aggrandizement: caught in *flagrante delicto* in a beautiful girl's bedroom, outnumbered and hard-pressed by her mortified family, foreseeing the inevitable outcome of his amorous success, García succumbs to love.

Corneille translates and edits this phantasmagoria so that it conforms to French rather than Spanish fantasies of male grandeur. If García, for example, expatiates on the material abundance of his imaginary banquet, Dorante too flaunts an air of aristocratic insouciance about money, but his version of the same lie honours him most for taste and connoisseurship.

7 H.R. Allentuch, "Corneille, *Mélite*, and the Comedy of Narcissism," *Corneille Comique: Nine Studies of Pierre Corneille's Comedy*, ed. Milorad Margitić (Tübingen 1982) and "Alidor Narcissus," *Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature*, Actes de Fordham (1983). See also, "Reading *L'illusion comique* Psychologically," *Romantic Review* LXXVIII (Jan. 1987): 43-56.

8 *Le Menteur* was first performed in 1643, after Corneille's four most popular tragedies. He happened upon *La Verdad sospechosa* in a collection of *comedias* and at first attributed it to Lope de Vega. See "Épître" and "Au lecteur" in *Oeuvres de Pierre Corneille*, ed. Charles Marry-Laveaux (Paris: Hachette 1862) IV, 130-134. In his "Examen," he describes *Le Menteur* as "en partie traduite, en partie imitée de l'espagnol" (ed. cit. 137) and remarks that he would gladly sacrifice his two best works to be the original author of *La Verdad sospechosa*.

9 For more on Corneille's formal reworking of the Spanish text see the "Appendice" by Viguer in *Marry-Laveaux* IV, 241-73; the P. Volz edition of *Le Menteur* (Paris: Bordas 1964); Susan Staves, "Lies and Lying in Alarcón, Corneille, and Steele," *Revue de littérature comparée* 46, (1972): 514-27; and G.J. Mallinson, *The Comedies of Corneille* (Manchester: Manchester UP 1984). Mallinson focuses on how Corneille reworked his model to make it truly comic but fails to attend to the comic aspects of the Spanish original.

French precision replaces Spanish abandon in Dorante's stories about his career. He specifies the names of the battles he has won, the number of months that his make-believe wife, acquired in the forced-marriage story, has been pregnant and the date of their fateful rendez-vous in her bedroom. All of this is testimony to Corneille's skill for naturalizing ego fantasies. In fact his sympathy with his model is so unerring that his liar delights in (and his comedy lives by) a verve and vitality of language that seems to flow from an entirely native source.

I think it is because this verve proves so arresting that many critics, overlooking the narcissism in the play, have viewed Dorante as a metaphor for the poet-playwright who transforms reality with beautiful lies.¹⁰ It is true that Dorante — and García as well — are persuasive fiction-makers and in this sense avatars of the poet. But their fiction-making is of a special sort. What they beauty is not the reality of the world nor of those around them, but a fantasy of their own image. For the most part, their stories are glamorized self-histories, at times enhancing, at other times protecting or repairing the ego of the story-teller.

A more compelling comparison has been drawn between this type of liar and the actor.¹¹ García and Dorante do not just create fictions, they perform them. They are by turns the liberal or irresistible lover, the valiant duellist, the constant or inconstant swain. And they transform their friends, sweethearts, servants and fathers into an on-stage audience whose applause (in the form of belief, admiration, or envy) proves deeply gratifying. Rather than form a coherent self-portrait, the liar's scripts vary, reflecting the repertoire of self-idealizations he commands and the public he is seeking to impress. Many of his performances recall conventional fiction or the shared fantasies of his sex and class. Depending upon whom they meet and the demands of the moment, García and Dorante change masks. Promoted to wealth, hardened in combat, harried into marriage, they disappear into a variety of roles that aggrandize their image or command attention. Their identity is not a matter of a single scenario; it is tied to the identity of their audience.

Cornelle goes further than Alarcón in making the showman quality of his liar's narcissism explicit and highlighting his talent for adapting to his public. At the midpoint of *Le Menteur*, after Dorante has paraded as a war

hero, a soubrette discusses him with her mistress. With a witty pun she draws attention to his involvement with physical appearance ("une plume au chapeau") and to the way he fashions his lies, both upon his own fantasies of grandeur ("ce qu'il veut être") and upon what he understands to be the fantasies of his female audience.

Il aura cru sans doute, ou je suis fort trompée,
Que les filles de coeur aiment les gens d'épée;
Et vous prenant pour telle, il a jugé soudain
Qu'une plume au chapeau vous plaît mieux qu'à la main.
Ainsi donc, pour vous plaire, il a voulu paraître,
Non pas pour ce qu'il est, mais pour ce qu'il veut être. (III.iii.869-874)¹²

Corneille also shows Dorante thinking like an actor about the proper tonal emphases and facial expressions required by his role, and taking pleasure in his bag of tricks for projecting the personality of a man of destiny before an audience of credulous young women:

Tout le secret ne gît qu'en un peu de grimace,
A mentir à propos, jurer de bonne grâce,
Étaler force mots qu'elles n'entendent pas,
Faire sonner Lamboy, Jean de Vert et Galas.
.....
Sans ordre et sans raison, n'importe, on les étonne,
On leur fait admirer les bayes qu'on leur donne,
Et tel, à la faveur d'un semblable débit,
Passe pour homme illustre, et se met en crédit. (I.vi.333-344)

None of this is in the Spanish original. García, it is true, is like an actor when he relishes his delivery of the forced-marriage story to his father. ("Dichosamente se ha hecho: persuadido el viejo va." [II. 1731-33].) (I acquitted myself wonderfully. The old boy is convinced) [II, 10].)¹³ But significantly Corneille lengthens what is only a moment of thespian pride in the Spanish text. Moreover, García savours his performance alone in a monologue, whereas Dorante savours his in a dialogue with his valet, Cliton, from whom he demands applause (II, vi).

10 See for example: Auguste Dorchain, *Pierre Corneille* (Paris: Garnier 1918), Robert J. Nelson, *Cornelle, His Heroes and Their Worlds* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1963) and Marie-Odile Sweetser, *La Dramaturgie de Corneille* (Genève: Droz 1977).

11 See for example Nelson, *Slaves and Mallinson*.

12 All my quotations of *Le Menteur* are from Georges Couton's Pléiade edition of *Corneille, Oeuvres complètes* II (Paris: Gallimard 1984).

13 All my quotations of *La Verdad sospechosa* are from the edition of A. V. Ebersole; English translations are from *The Truth Suspected*, trans. by Julio del Toro and Robert V. Finney *Poet Lore* XXXVIII (Jan.-Dec. 1927): 475-530.

If Cornelle makes his liar more outwardly a showman than does Alarcón, the Spaniard renders the liar's narcissistic motives more manifest.¹⁴ Because García depends for his sense of self-worth upon his success in the eyes of others, he can never afford to be outdone. Thus, for example, as he explains to his valet, he contrived the tale of the river-party to silence someone else. García must appear immune to admiration, alone worthy of attention.

Finglo, porque me pesa
que piense nadie que hay cosa,
que mover mi pecho pueda
a invidia, o admiración,
pasiones que al hombre afientan:
que admirarse es ignorancia
como invidiar es bajaça.
Tú no sabes a qué sabe,
cuando llega un porta nuevas
muy orgulloso a contar
una hazaña, o una fiesta,
taparte la boca yo
con otra tal, que se vuelva
con sus nuevas en el cuerpo,
y que reviente con ellas.
(II. 838-52)

I invented it because it
grieves me to have anyone
think that there is anything
which could move my heart
to envy or to admiration,
passions unworthy of a man.
Because to admire is ignorance,
to envy baseness. You do not
know how it makes me feel,
when a newbearer arrives swollen
with pride, to tell me of some
prodigy or great festivity, to
silence him by capping his
story and making him swallow
his yarn if he should burst with it. (I,
8)

When he reworks this speech Cornelle has Dorante express similar feelings, but in French the effect is mainly comic: Cornelle expands on Alarcón's use of the language of physical combat ("braver," "force," "je le sers," "faire rentrer au corps" adorn the French text) in a speech about posturing and lying. There is also a play on the verb "étonner" ("m'étonner..qui l'étonne") that seamlessly shifts the hero's role from uneasy spectator to riveting spectacle.

J'aime à braver ainsi les conteurs de Nouvelles;
Et s'ilôt que j'en vois quelqu'un s'imaginer
Que ce qu'il veut m'apprendre a de quoi m'étonner,

¹⁴ In *La Place Royale* Alidor has several soliloquies, and Cornelle suggests his protagonist's narcissism to the audience by this means. In *Le Menteur* he eschews soliloquies and works out the revelation of his hero's psychology mainly through the unfolding action and a few exchanges between master and valet. Cornelle moved away from showing inwardness in the hero at this time on the tragic stage as well. César, the hero of *La Mort de Pompée*, which appeared in the same year as *Le Menteur*, is noticeably less introspective than Cornelle's previous tragic heroes.

Je le sers aussitôt d'un conte imaginaire
Qui l'étonne lui-même, et le force à se taire.
Si tu pouvais savoir quel plaisir on a lors
De leur faire rentrer leurs Nouvelles au corps ... (I.vi.362-68)

Alarcón's preference for laying motives bare and Cornelle's for showing them in action and leavening their expression with wit is an important difference between these texts. This becomes even more apparent later in the same first-act scene (I, 8 in *La Verdad sospechosa*; I, 6 in *Le Menteur*) where García continues to bare his soul to his valet and Dorante cuts short his confidences to rush into action. The Spanish liar, pressed by his valet to explain why he lies when he may very well be found out, makes his ego needs plain. He cannot endure the thought of obscurity and, citing the ancient Greek who burned down the Temple of Ephesus rather than remain unnoticed, insists he prefers infamy to oblivion. What makes a man a man is the vividness of his existence in another man's consciousness.

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 muerenme siquier;
pues uno, por ganar nombre
abrazó el templo de Efesia. (II. 857-866)

He who lives without making
himself felt, who is only
one more head to count and
who does what they all do,
wherein does he differ from
an animal? To be famous is a
fine thing, whatever the
means employed. Let them
speak of me everywhere even
if they criticise me. It is
thus that in order to become
famous, a man burned the
temple at Ephesus. (I, 8)

These sentiments in a nobleman represent a rejection of traditional values and a revolt, in particular, against the father who is their guarantor. In the Spanish play, Beltrán, García's father, is an impassioned spokesman for the aristocratic code of honour and the chivalric ethos of "ganar nombre" through noble exploits. The gulf between father and son is prominent in both the Spanish and the French text. But *La Verdad sospechosa* is a *comedia*, a play of a mixed genre, suffused with bitterness and pathos as well as laughter, not a *comédie*, and the father-son conflict is played out as a moral drama. Cornelle reworks the conflict in a lighter vein but does not change the fact of father-son estrangement. Thus in both plays the father is his son's principal dupe. (Beltrán is repeatedly hoodwinked even though he has been forewarned of García's 'habit'; Géronie complains of being the

'second author' of Dorante's deceptions because he not only believes them, he repeats them.) Implicitly the son's lies represent an aggression against his father who calls truthfulness the highest virtue and considers his own honour stained by his son's falsehoods. Alarcón provides a serious background for the son's aggression which Corneille again does not repeat. García is a second child, adopted as his father's heir after the death of an elder brother. He is expected to fill the place of a son better loved than he. From the beginning of the play García is a disappointment, and his lies serve as a reminder to Beltrán of the child he has lost. In the end Beltrán's rage is murderous. A son's 'narcissistic wounds' seem to be the unconscious of the Spanish text; they help explain his passion to annihilate the greatness of other men.

Although Corneille does not follow Alarcón here but keeps the father-son dispute within conventional comic bounds and resists exploring its darker side, he surpasses his model in psychological consistency and makes important changes to render his liar's portrayal not only more comic but more rigorous. Where, for example, Alarcón develops a love interest alongside his portrayal of narcissism, Corneille shows self-love triumphing over romance. He also manages to graft Alarcón's comedy-of-errors plot onto the psychology of the liar. To make these changes he alters the Spanish text at three crucial moments in the action; the opening scene, the liar's first lie, and the dénouement — which in *Le Menteur* are largely the work of Corneille's imagination.

When the curtain rises on *La Verdad sospechosa*, García has just been summoned away from his studies by his father to a new life in Madrid; then a tutor informs the Spanish grandee that his son is an inveterate liar. Beltrán cries out that he would be less pained to learn that his son has died than that he lies. Where Alarcón put his initial emphasis on lying and on the father-son conflict, Corneille places his on narcissism. No one has summoned Dorante to Paris; he appears on stage at the curtain's rise restless for a new image, having thrown off his law student's robe for a sword. "À la fin j'ai quitté la robe pour l'épée" is the first line of the play. In a show of physical narcissism Dorante calls attention to his changed appearance and asks his valet if he finds him dashing as a cavalier: "Dis-moi, me trouves-tu bien fait en Cavalier? Ne vois-tu rien en moi qui sente l'écolier?" (vv. 7-8). Both here and in the final scene of Act I, Dorante belittles the legal profession as tiresome and unfashionable. "J'ai fait banqueroute à ce fatras de Lois" (v. 4). "Il est malaisé qu'aux Royaumes du Code/ On apprenne à se faire un visage à la mode" (vv. 9-10). As a provincial and a scholar ("un cœur nouveau venu des universités," v. 324), "un homme à paragraphe" [v. 331]), he reveals his anxiety about making his

mark in Parisian society. "Fausses clartés" (v. 68) are enough in Poitiers; Paris is another world. Moreover Dorante craves immediate success with women. "Dis-moi comme en ce lieu l'on gouverne les Dames," (v. 21) he asks his valet. Dorante's impatience to change his social identity, his preoccupation with his appearance and fears about not being noticed in an environment that dazzles him are all of Corneille's invention. He allows us to see into Dorante before we see him lie and glimpse the vulnerable ego that inspires his tall tales. In García's comparable scene with his valet (which occurs after the audience learns that García is a habitual liar), the young man speaks in passing about his new clothes; then the conversation turns to the impersonal subject of fluted collars in the contemporary Dutch style and next (as in *Le Menteur*) to the subject of women. There are no allusions to García's former life or to his need to impose himself upon the capital. Corneille's first scene, in accord with his usual dramatic practice, provides a suggestive key to the rest of the play: we are invited to see Dorante's behaviour flow from these revelations.

Dorante's first lie follows his encounter with two young Parisiennes. In speeches rich in Cornelian self-satire this 'homme à paragraphe' adopts the rhetoric of glory to parade as a veteran of the thirty-years war. He has been fighting in Germany for four years, he tells the young women, and there has never been a combat, siege, or victory in which he has not played a leading role. He is, in fact (shades of Matamore) "feared like the thunder." García, by contrast, impersonates a Peruvian blessed with silver mines (his valet having informed him that money quickens the passions of the women of Madrid). A *coup de foude* strikes the Spaniard when he looks at one of the women (Jacinta) and he conveys his sudden, surprising ardor to the audience. ("¿La primer dama que vi en la Corte, me agradó? ... es divina esta mujer" [ll. 389-394]). ("The first woman I have seen in Madrid has won my heart ... She is divine, this woman" (l. 3)). This is not repeated in French. Corneille suggests a more perfect narcissism. Dorante begins to court one of the young women but spends more time on his own image than on hers. He invents a flourishing military career that enthralis his listeners. Where García inflates his wealth to seduce his new-found love and offers her gifts, Dorante assumes "un visage à la mode" and fills out his new clothes.

By emphasizing the hero's fascination with himself as against his fascination with the heroine, Corneille supplies what is wanting in the Spanish text — the logic for his hero's crucial mistake. Of the two young women that the liar meets, one responds to his overtures, the other remains silent. When Dorante learns through a coachman that the more beautiful of the two is named Lucrece (Lucrecia in the Spanish original), he assumes, as any good narcissist would, that she must be the one who responded to him.

For the rest of the play he labours under this delusion and never inquires further. This lack of curiosity about his beloved gives rise to delicious imbrolios, especially when the two young women compound the confusion by themselves exchanging names to test their lover. The liar's failure to investigate his lady love's identity, despite the tenuous nature of his information, makes excellent sense in Corneille's text. Narcissists tend to have blurred appreciation for the otherness of other people: the role of the other is to provide an audience. That Dorante shows so little ambition to discern his beloved's identity accords with Corneille's presentation of his character. But the audience is supposed to believe in the reality of García's love. How to reconcile his narcissism with his passion for Jacinta or his passion for her with his lack of effort to find out who she is are matters that Alarcón never resolves.

Corneille's dénouement departs even more radically from that of *La Verdad sospechosa* than his first act. Alarcón punishes his liar, and the *comedia*, at its conclusion, takes on the air of a morality play. Since García had lied repeatedly, nothing saves him from an erosion of trust. Like the folktales shepherd who cries wolf once too often, when García speaks the truth, no one believes him; he has made even the truth suspect. (Hence the play's title.) Thus as the curtain falls on a crescendo of paternal rage, García is disregarded when he identifies the woman he truly loves and is forced, under threat of death, to marry a woman for whom he feels nothing. Yet his confusion has been only a confusion of names; he never wavers in his pursuit of Jacinta. In his commentary, Corneille calls Alarcón's treatment of his liar too harsh for the French stage.¹⁵ But in exchanging this ending for the conventional happy ending of comedy, Corneille does not weaken his portrayal of narcissism, he deepens it. Thus in the middle of the last act he shows Dorante suddenly attracted to the real Lucrèce — or rather, wavering between the two young women and uncertain which one he 'loves.'

J'ai tantôt vu passer cet objet si charmant,
Sa compagne, ou je meure, a beaucoup d'agrément.
Aujourd'hui que mes yeux l'ont mieux examinée,
De mon premier amour j'ai l'âme un peu gênée,
Mon cœur entre les deux est presque partagé. (V.iv.1619-1623)

In other words, Dorante's 'love' for someone other than himself is not to be taken too seriously. His heart fails to distinguish sharply between the two

young women because for him their identities are as interchangeable as their names in the convolutions of the comic plot. Either wife will do for Dorante, as long as his pride is saved.

This is exactly the ending Corneille devises for his narcissist. After Dorante's father insists that he must marry the woman whose name he has trumpeted throughout the play, the young man overhears Lucrèce and Clarice (the Spanish Jacinta) address each other and so discovers both his own error and their game of exchanging identities to test him. This leads to the invention of his final lie: he has loved Lucrèce all along. "Elle avait mes discours, mais vous aviez mon cœur," (V.vi.1768) he tells her. Dorante's purpose is clear: he not only avoids his father's wrath, he saves face. For if he loses Clarice, in embracing the equally 'loved' Lucrèce and persuading the women that he always knew who was who, he wears the look of a winner. It is the women, he insists, not himself, who have played the role of dupe in this comedy.

Je vous donnai plus que vous ne m'en donniez
Je vous embarrassai, n'en faites point la fine,
Choisissez un peu mieux vos dupes à la mine;
Vous pensiez me jouer, et moi je vous jouais. (V.vi.1744-47)

Alarcón punishes the man; Corneille the women.¹⁶ In the same move he saves both male pride and comedy, making the curtain descend on a scene of joyous matchmaking: even Clarice has a husband. Dorante exults in his marriage to the real Lucrèce. Just as the insecure law student of Act I changes his clothes and gathers assurance from his lies, the Dorante of Act V changes wives and with his final lie protects his manhood. For a narcissist, anything is preferable to appearing weak, helpless or defeated. "Ne plus se montrer admirable, c'est ne plus être, c'est retourner à la nuit froide, à l'ineexistence sans nom."

Many critics, failing to see the unity of conception here, find Corneille's dénouement arbitrary or confusing.¹⁷ After pursuing Clarice for five acts, Dorante humiliates her publicly, treating her as a means to an end, nothing

16 On the theme of the punishment of women in Corneille's theatre see Maunon and Han Verhooff, *Les Comédies de Corneille: une psychocritique* (Paris: Klincksieck 1979).

17 "Le dénouement du *Menteur* ... reste étranger au caractère de Dorante. ... C'est la première ventrerie, la première lardure. Le cœur lui-même ment, l'amour se nie. À la vérité, on ne comprend plus." (Nadal, 224). "Ce nouveau genre de mensonge n'a rien de l'inspiration comique des précédents ... Tout se termine, nous sommes forcés de le dire, dans une indifférence générale du spectateur pour les personnages, surtout pour le principal." (Viguer, 269).

15 "Pour moi, j'ai trouvé cette manière de finir un peu dure, et cru qu'un mariage moins violenté seroit plus au goût de notre auditoire." "Examen," 138.

in herself. (He also hands her to her new husband: "Et vous, belle Clarice, aimez toujours Alcippe" [Vv.1782].) Despite this, the tone of the comedy remains lighthearted; with his new ending Cornelle transforms Alarcón's amalgam of laughter, pathos, bitterness, and moralizing into a creation that is, on the surface, all effervescent gaiety. But he does not prettify psychological truth, something his critics do not always recognize. At the dénouement he shows his hero, still a sympathetic figure, sacrificing the woman he 'loves' to his ego, preferring her humiliation to his own. Rigorous portrayal, what Cornelle calls "la naïve [i.e. sincère] peinture des vices et vertus,"¹⁸ rather than didacticism or moralizing is his hallmark. In this he never yields to his model. In the sequel to *Le Menteur* we learn that Dorante abandons Lucrece as well, leaving his father to marry her.

While *Le Menteur* is an adaptation of another man's play, it is profoundly Cornelian in language, theme and dramatic imagination. Cornelle anchors the text to his own theatrical universe by parodic allusions. (Dorante's style is that of a *faux* Rodrigue; Géronte's of a *faux* Don Diègue; Dorante's 'war experiences' are a tamer version of the campaigns of Matamore.) There are other resemblances. Like Tirsis, Cornelle's first hero, Dorante dazzles people with his poetic talents; like Alidor in *La Place Royale*, he is an actor who abandons the woman he says he loves in order to strike a pose of invulnerability. The same imagination is in evidence throughout these plays and the same compulsive interest in the vainglorious ego and its narcissistic defenses. Alarcón's whimsy and ingenious imbroglia clearly appealed to Cornelle, but their common insight into the psychology of the self, their fraternity of spirit explains, I think, why *Le Menteur* remains such a close adaptation of another man's work.

In making Alarcón's plot his own, Cornelle continues an exploration that characterizes his entire creative life. His theatre resounds with ontological questions and affirmations:

"Sais-tu bien qui je suis?" *Le Cid*, I.2.

"Je suis toujours moi-même, et mon cœur n'est point autre" *Cinna*, III.4.

18 In his "Épître à la suite du menteur" 279-84, Cornelle defends himself against the charge that *Le Menteur* is immoral because the liar triumphs in the end. "Vous me demanderez en quoi donc consiste cette utilité de la poésie ... J'en trouve deux à mon sens: l'une empruntée de la morale, l'autre qui lui est particulière: celle-là se rencontre aux sentences et réflexions que l'on peut adroitement semer presque partout; celle-ci en la naïve peinture des vices et des vertus" (p. 283). He takes this position customarily. See *Pierre Cornelle: Writings on the Theatre*, ed. H.T. Barnwell (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1965).

"Je suis maître de moi comme de l'univers;
Je le suis, je veux l'être." *Cinna*, V.3.

"Allons, cher Polyucte, allons aux yeux des hommes
Braver l'idolâtrie, et montrer qui nous sommes" *Polyucte*, II.6.

"Souviens-toi seulement que je suis Cornélie" *La Mort de Pompée*, III.4.

"Je sais ce que je suis, et ce que je me dois" *Don Sanche D'Aragon*, I.1.

"Voilà quelle je suis et quelle je veux être" *Théodore*, II.2; *Pulchérie*, I.2; *Pertharite*, I.1; *Sophonisbe*, II.4.

In Cornelle's tragedies, history and power politics are the arena in which his protagonist struggles to prove that they are in fact the self they claim to be; in his comedies, *galanterie* and the relations between the sexes are the domain of action, and the hero is even more dependent upon the eye of the other to confirm his worth. Cornelle has often been called the dramatist of awe and admiration. The other side of the desire to astound is the fear of humiliation or oblivion. Cornelle's comic liars lie to annul this fear.

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