Dramatic Resolution in "La verdad sospechosa"

James F. Burke

As Arnold Reichenberger has noted, the pattern of the Spanish comedia of the Golden Age is one which moves from order disturbed to order restored.¹ Whether the reader considers the political imbalances which eventually come to resolution in Fuenteovejuna² or the new moral awareness which Segismundo finds in La vida es sueño,³ the outline of this movement is apparent again and again in the plays of the era. Ruiz de Alarcón's masterpiece La verdad sospechosa presents a puzzling contrast to this scheme in that while the drama's main character, Don García, is affected by a serious moral vice, lying, he never appears to abandon his evil inclination. At the end of the play he is exposed as a liar and receives a kind of poetic justice when he is forced to marry a woman not of his choosing. Alarcón, however, does not present the kind of moral anagnorisis which is so common in the theatre of the period and leaves his public to wonder whether García has really learned anything at all. Threatened with death by his own father if he does not marry Lucrecia, García accedes with an enigmatic statement which seems to imply that he has garnered no new self-knowledge from his experience and that he may continue to lie if given the opportunity. "La mano doy, pues es fuerça" (line 3107).⁴ Critics have naturally concerned themselves with this lack of moral resolution in La verdad sospechosa and one, E.C. Riley, even feels that the play is somewhat defective because of the lack of a clear indication of García's final psychological pose. "If . . . he [Alarcón] intended to leave the mentiroso's condition in real doubt, a clearer definition of the uncertainty than he has provided was necessary".⁵ Ellen Claydon views the work as a product of the typically Baroque vision of reality in which the dramatist has contrasted García's efforts, his industria, with the natural workings of the universe, la suerte, in order to throw light upon the main theme, lying, and its corollary idea, the deceiver who is the most deceived.⁶ For her the important point is that García is put to the test so that his moral weakness may be revealed. She sees change and development as aspects of modern dramatic criticism which were not expected in the Siglo de oro (p. 169).

More recently Louise Fothergill-Payne has suggested that the statement which immediately precedes the play's denouement "el Cielo ayuda / la verdad más oculta, y premiada / dilación pudo aver, pero no duda" (3008) implies an eventual happy outcome to the forced marriage between García and Lucrecia. "¿Se podría aplicar la sentencia al caso de García, es decir que su simplicidad, como rara virtud en la Corte, merecerá su premio, dilatado sí, pero no por eso menos seguro?"⁷ While I would agree, as I shall indicate later, that these lines are of basic importance for understanding this play, this solution would still leave Alarcón subject to the criticism inherent in the statement of E.C. Riley: a playwright should give, within the context of his play, a clear indication of what the dramatic trajectory of his piece has achieved.

This seeming confusion at the end of La verdad sospechosa is even more puzzling if one takes into account the fact that the work reflects a number of themes and motifs, common to the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, which imply a movement toward moral awareness and resolution. García has been blinded by his passion for Jacinta (who he believes to be Lucrecia) and it is this blindness which causes the unfortunate confusion of the two women: "la que me cegó, vencía" (564).⁸ His error is one of point-of-view and
perspective. The coachman identifies “la más hermosa” as Lucrecia and García, forgetting that other people necessarily have different opinions, immediately concludes that this is the woman who so attracts him. Claudio Guillén, in his magnificent essay on the confusion resulting from the representational aspects of optical phenomena in the literature of the Renaissance, has shown that writers of the era were increasingly concerned with showing the “inner man” in contrast with the “outer man”. The hero of Lazarillo de Tormes learns from his blind master to see with his “inner eyes” so that he may grasp the essence of the soul of those he meets without recourse to deceptive vision (p. 307).

Guillén mentions the study of Lionel Friedman who has explained that the radical division which the Middle Ages made between homo exterior and homo interior was balanced by certain correspondences between the two. The secret life of the soul and heart (oculta cordis) could be perceived because a number of signs, principally facial expressions, mirrored the interior reality. That Alarcón was aware of this tradition is implied at the beginning of Act III where Lucrecia is discussing García’s apparent lack of constancy with the go-between Camino:

Camino: Yo, al menos, si en las señales
se conoce el corazón,
ciertos juraré que son,
por las que he visto, sus males.

(2168-2171)

The dramatist then proceeds to parody the tradition by suggesting that the surest indication of the heart’s intent is its willingness to part with money.

...me da dineros—que es oy
la señal más verdadera—,

(2182-2183)

Connected with this theme of visual perspective is the idea, accepted throughout the medieval period, that in this sublunary world objects are often covered by a false “colour” which hides their true identity. In La verdad sospechosa as Alan Soons has noticed, Alarcón presents this kind of veiled reality, in terms of an exuberant recourse to verbal eloquence and exaggerated rhetoric. His description of the riverside fiesta, which he of course had neither staged nor attended, is so powerful that the very magic of his words appears to be greater than reality.

Don Juan: ¡Por Dios, que la avéys pintado
de colores tan perfetas,
que no trocara el oyrla
por averme hallado en ella!

Tristán: (ap.) ¡Válgate el diablo por hombre!
¡Que tan de repente pueda
pintar un combite tal
que a la verdad misma vença! —

(749-756)

The symbolic reflection of such false colouring in terms of society was costume. Clothes could hide the unattractiveness of man’s body and even enhance its appeal. Maurice
Charney has pointed out that in Shakespeare, and especially *King Lear*, clothing represents the values of society, the external façade of socially acceptable morality and truth. Throughout *King Lear* there are constant allusions to the stripping away of surface ve neers which culminate when the suffering King begins to rip off his clothes, the former emblems of royal power, in the famous unbuttoning scene (III, 4; 103-112). Shakespeare means to suggest nakedness as the traditional image of unadorned truth and also as the way to the finding and assumption of a new and transformed identity.

In *La verdad sospechosa* Alarcón has also employed symbols of clothing to complement and illuminate the themes of lying and deceit which underlie the play’s structure. As García is dressing toward the beginning of Act I, he and Tristán engage in a long discussion which focuses on the plaited Dutch collars which were worn in the period. The *cuello apanalado* is an emblem for all the false colourings, the cosmetic, which may be utilized to hide the truth.

Con un cuello apanalado  
¿qué fealdad no se enmendó?  

(241-242)

Que, después de esos engaños,  
con su olanda el estranego  
saca de España el dinero. . .

(265-267)

Clothing as an aid to confusion is presented also in the form most common for the Golden Age *capa y espada* play when Lucrecia and Jacinta, both covered *con mantos*, meet García in the Convent of the Magdalena. Again, his vision impeded by the enveloping garment, he does not realize that the woman he loves is not Lucrecia and he continues mistaken toward the ending of the play. But, as in the case of the facial signs, Alarcón seems to be again parodying a traditional meaning. He has presented the *cuello*, and by extension all clothing, as emblems of the false covering of nature which hide reality. Yet, we learn from Jacinta that it is the lack of symbolic garb, the *bábito* of the military order which her lover Don Juan is seeking, which prevents them from being married (966-970). In the final scenes of the play when everyone is learning the truth of García’s deception, Don Juan appears at the house of Jacinta’s father to claim her as his bride. Finally he has received what he has been awaiting. “Ya el ábito salió” (3000). He will now be symbolically robed in the traditional vestment of a semi-religious institution and it is clear that Alarcón means to imply a positive connotation to the garment. Don Juan cannot see his beloved immediately because she, however, in keeping with the revelations about to take place is *desnuda* (3007). Soon she and Don Juan as well as García and Lucrecia will be finally covered by another traditional symbol, the marriage veil used throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and Golden Age as a sign of the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. In *La verdad sospechosa* the glamorous costumes of the court, as emblems of deceit and probably man’s fallen state, stand in contrast with those of the Church which reflect the truths of moral redemption.

Alarcón even utilizes the weather to signal the moral and spiritual imperatives of his play. At the beginning of the drama García, in a statement which must prefigure the “ardiente amor” (2577) which he will later suffer, complains of the harsh heat and dryness of the summer:
At the end of the play in consonance with refreshing truth which is about to be discovered the weather has also improved.

Don Juan, viejo  Parece que la noche ha refrescado.

Once again, however, Alarcón is unwilling to present a simple paradigm of complication to be eventually followed by resolution. The coolness of the evening must be tempered so that its extremes will not be harmful to the health of the two old men:

Don Sancho:  Señor don Juan de Luna, para el río, éste es fresco, en mi edad, demasiado.

Don Juan:  Mejor será que en ese jardín mío se nos ponga la mesa, y que gozemos la cena con sazón, templado el frío.

Don Sancho:  Discreto parecer. Noche tendremos que dar a Manchanares más templada que ofenden la salud estos estremos.

Just before the garden scene, Don Beltrán, García’s father, complains that his son’s latest explanation, which happens to be true at least as far as García knows, may in reality be further deception.

Ya, si dizes que ésta es luz, he de pensar que me engañas.

Immediately afterward the play’s characters will receive this metaphorical luz in terms of the final truth of the situation. But ironically it will come in the darkness of the garden and not in the clear light of day.

The oscillating vision of reality which so often characterizes works of the Baroque period appears in La verdad sospechosa in the treatment of these traditional themes which normally would orient the play toward an absolute solution, a final point-of-view. We search in vain for a “temperance”, a “harmony”, a “resolution” in the lines of action of the play which would parallel the “frío templado” of the night which is necessary to the health of the two old gentlemen.¹⁵

Don Juan viejo, in the phrase noted as central to the play by Louise Fothergill-Payne, predicts that García’s deceptions are about to be revealed. His words recall a Renaissance commonplace having to do with truth and lies:

Por cierta cosa
  tuve siempre el vencer, que el cielo ayuda
  la verdad más oculta, y premiada
dilación pudo aver, pero no duda.
Fritz Saxl has discussed the proverb “Veritas Filia Temporis” and its wide diffusion in literature and art during the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe. The verse Veritas de terra orta est (Ps. 85, 12) gave birth to an iconographic tradition which portrayed Truth as a woman being led out of an underground cave or passage by some figure representing Time. This idea metamorphosed in the minds of many artists and eventually comes forth in such works as Bernini’s Truth unveiled where Time, winged and bearing in his left hand his scythe, flies to the aid of Truth writhing within the confines of her veil (p. 216).

Heaven, which Alarcón substitutes for the pagan concept of Time, has aided the young Don Juan in his efforts to gain the bábito of the religious order and it will now proceed to demonstrate the truth in regard to García’s lying and his love for Jacinta-Lucrecia. It is not clear, however, that heaven will bring the mentiroso to an understanding of his error and force him to repent. Such a position appears to be consummately paradoxical and it is difficult to believe that the dramatist was not aware of the dilemma which he was suggesting. Is there a way in which this paradox may be explained?

The concept of Veritas Filia Temporis, truth being progressively revealed by the passage of time or in the case of this drama by heaven’s intervention, is obviously related to the neo-platonic idea of “becoming” which many critics have seen as important in the comedia of the Siglo de oro. As William McCrary put it, “The Platonic cosmology, with its focal center in the doctrine of World Harmony, assumes a perfect adjustment of all parts, a chain of exact alignments”. The theory of “becoming” held that the eternal light emanating from the true center was constantly adjusting and harmonizing those elements in this fallen world which were not in consonance with the universal absolutes. Whereas Lope de Vega in Fuenteovejuna presents “becoming” in terms of physical movement, Alarcón uses the rather strange word dilación which in the Spanish of the period means “delay” as well as “distension” and “dilation”. In the lines immediately preceding the revelation passage, he has employed forms of the infinitive dilatay twice and one wonders if the resulting nominatio dilatata, dilatado, dilación was meant to suggest something or to catch the attention:

.... que no quiso el amor que dilatara
la nueva un punto....

(2997-2998)

Mi fe, señor don Juan, avéys premiado
con no aver esta nueva tan dichosa
por un momento dilatado.

(3003-3005)

The final use, that of the word dilación, occurs in the passage previously quoted which signals the revelation of truth.

There was another neo-platonic conception of change parallel to “becoming” which had a long history and which enjoyed wide currency during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. This idea, which derived from Plotinus and was modified and utilized by Boethius, held that things do not really change from their first estate but are transformed by a fateful dilation of their “being” which finally results in a return to the original state or results in some variety of self-fulfilment. As a philosophical notion, “dilation” is rather difficult to understand. In one way, however, it could be practically applied to certain
objective problems which were of great concern to writers and thinkers of the Renais-
sance and Baroque periods.

The threat issued by Don Juan viejo, which in part convinces García that he must
marry Lucrecia and thereby evinces his enigmatic replay of acceptance, is couched in
terms of his inconstancy:

La mano os he dado agora
por Lucrecia, y me la distes;
si vuestra inconstancia loca
os ha mudado tan presto,
yo lavaré mi deshonra
con sangre de vuestras venas.

(3094-3099)

The question of mutability was one which was treated and discussed again and again in
the literature of the period. It is clear that the central theme of La verdad sospechosa,
lying, is one closely related to this problem in that the liar, in effect, simply imitates ima-
ginatively the natural course of creation. Nothing in this fallen world is sure; everything is
merely a dream, an illusion. Why should the liar not conform to this reality by extending
it and playing with it verbally in terms of his own existence?

A number of critics have noticed that Edmund Spenser has utilized the idea of “dila-
tion” as a means of elucidating the matter of change as it occurs in The Faerie Queene. If
constant mutation is the rule in this world as a result of Adam’s Fall, how is it possible to
maintain that a neo-platonic “becoming” is constantly moving things toward perfection? Rosalie Colic answers this question by relating the tradition of Veritas Filia Temporis to
the concept of “dilation”. “God himself cannot be looked on, cannot be described, can-
not be defined; in the same way truth, time’s daughter, can only be progressively, never
wholly, revealed to mortal man”.20 William Nelson generalizes the problem to a greater
degree by implying that Spenser’s masterpiece simply reflects the abject truth and reality
of man’s fate. “For none of the books of The Faerie Queen, therefore, is a true conclu-
sion possible. The powers of darkness may for a time be held prisoner, seen in their true
horror and rendered impotent, but since they are of earth’s essence they will again break
free and threaten destruction, night, and chaos”.21 This, I suspect, is also the view of the
bomo deformis et pravus Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, who, far better than most men, would
have been aware of the depravity of man. It might seem that Truth, the Daughter of Time,
could be revealed and that light would triumph over the darkness of lies. Justice could be
done to Lucrecia, Jacinta, and Don Juan while García would have to suffer his poetic jus-
tice. But according to the medieval understanding of personality, which as Ellen Claydon
has observed, really did not change much in the Renaissance and Golden Age,23 men
were a compound of certain virtues and vices which predicted their fate and final end.
García, in his essence, was a liar. As truth “dilates”, moves progressively toward final re-
velation only to return upon itself, it might appear that his condition could be finally and
absolutely altered. But Alarcón, of course, knew that this was not possible and he gave
the only solution to the problem really in keeping with the traditions of his era. García
would adjust for the moment; he would place himself in accord with the rising wave of
truth which momentarily was bringing harmony upon the play and its characters. But in
keeping with the tenets of Baroque philosophy and the neo-platonic concept of “dilation”
which accorded so well with it, this upsurge would eventually begin to recede and the artificial world of the drama as well as the real one would return to the pattern of oscillation, light and darkness, truth and untruth which, according to Christian teaching, is the heritage of man.

University of Toronto

Notes

6 Juan Ruiz de Alarcón Baroque Dramatist (Estudios de Hispanofilia 12, Chapel Hill 1970), 120.
7 "La Justicia poética de La Verdad Sospechosa", Romanische Forschungen, 83 (1971), 595.
8 Edward Engelberg, "Tragic Blindness in The Changeling and Women Beware Women", Modern Language Quarterly, 23 (1962) 20-28 points out that the theme of tragic blindness pervades Western Literature and that generally a writer traces the course of his character's tragic struggle to gain in-sight.
11 See Edgar de Bryne, Estudios de estética medieval, trans. Fr. Armando Suárez, 3 vols. (Madrid 1959) especially III, 57-59 who mentions again and again the importance of the false grace and colours of nature.
12 "La verdad sospechosa in its Epoch", in Critical Essays on the Life and Work of Ruiz de Alarcón, 239-245, originally in Romanische Forschungen.
14 Covarrubias explains velo in the following way: "El que lleva la novia quando se casa, de donde se llamó aquel acto velambre, y ella y él velado y velada". Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española, ed. Martín de Riquer (Barcelona 1943), 996.
15 Spitzer demonstrates that the verb temperare with its tones of health, harmony, and balance is often related to the weather and climate. "Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony" (part II), Traditio, III, 319.
18 McCravy, Ibid. n. 4, pp. 179-180 discusses how the political resolution which will come about in the drama is presented in terms of the appearance of the reyes católicos: "Ya los Católicos Reyes, / que este nombre les dan ya, / presto España les dará / la obediencia de sus leyes, / Ya sobre Ciudad Real, etc.' (1327-32). . . . The deliberate repetition of the adverb infuses a dynamic atmosphere of development".

58
19 See Brent Stirling, "The Concluding Stanzas of Mutabilitie", *Studies in Philology*, XXX (1933), 193-204. M. Menéndez y Pelayo points out that a knowledge of Plotinus is absolutely necessary for understanding all of the Renaissance theorists of love as well as the Spanish Mystics. *Historia de las ideas estéticas en España* (Santander 1946), I, 83-84. Otis Green notes the influence of Plotinus on Miguel Servet. *Spain and the Western Tradition* (Madison and Milwaukee 1965), III, 307. I have found no mention of the theory of "dilation" in Spanish letters of the Golden Age, but because of its use in Boethius and its wide diffusion among the *literati* of the Renaissance, it is difficult to believe that the concept would not have been known in Spain.


22 See Otis Green, "Juan Ruiz de Alarcón and the *Topos Homo deformis et pravus*", in *Critical Essays on the Life and Work of Ruiz de Alarcón*, 63-69, originally in *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*.

23 169. See the excellent study of William J. Brandt, *The Shape of Medieval History: Studies in Modes of Perception* (New Haven and London 1966) who discusses at length the medieval tendency to view man as nothing more than a "bundle of qualities" (p. 169).