

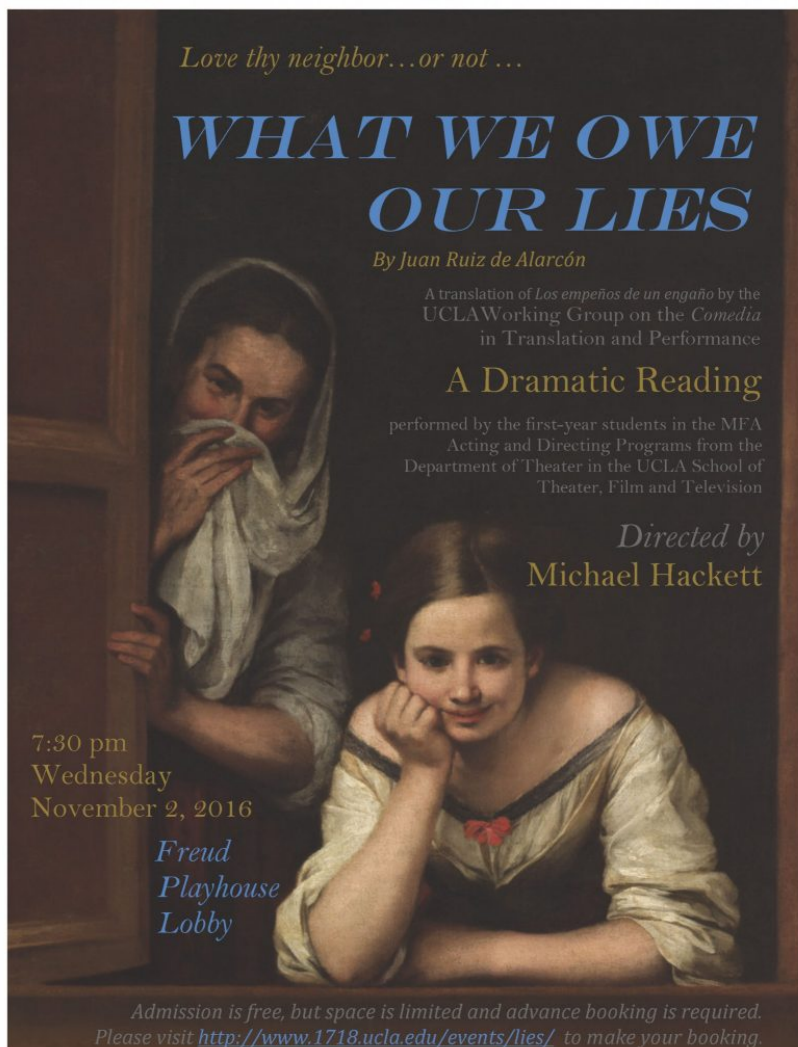
DIVERSIFYING THE CLASSICS

What We Owe Our Lies
Dramaturgy Packet

What We Owe Our Lies
by Juan Ruiz de Alarcón

Dramaturgy packet compiled by Cheché Silveyra

Based on the translation by
The UCLA Working Group on the *Comedia* in Translation and Performance
with an introduction by Paul Cella and Javier Patiño



What We Owe Our Lies

A play by Juan Ruiz de
Alarcón

What We Owe Our Lies (1634) depicts the efforts of two women, Leonor and Teodora, to pursue their love interests against the dictates of their brothers, who are trying to arrange reciprocal marriages for them. Occupying different floors of the same building, the two women are not enthusiastic about the prospect of marrying the other's brother. They contend instead for the love of Diego de Luna, a stranger in town who roams up and down their street, attracting the attention of everyone in the neighborhood.

Juan Ruiz de Alarcón y Mendoza (1581-1639)

It is almost certain that Juan Ruiz de Alarcón y Mendoza was born in Mexico City, the capital of New Spain, in 1581. From 1600 to 1609 he lived in Spain, studying law at the University of Salamanca and spending time in Seville, where he took part in a vibrant literary culture. On returning to Mexico, Alarcón obtained his law license and occupied various public posts.

In 1613 he again left for Spain, and settled in its bustling capital, Madrid, where he would remain until his death in 1639. It was there that he began to write for the stage. In just twelve years, before obtaining a prestigious position in the Council of the Indies, he composed over twenty dramatic works, most notably *The Truth Can't Be Trusted*, or *The Liar*, which granted him a spot among Spain's foremost playwrights. Because of its influence on Corneille and Moliere, *The Liar* is a foundational text of French classical theater.

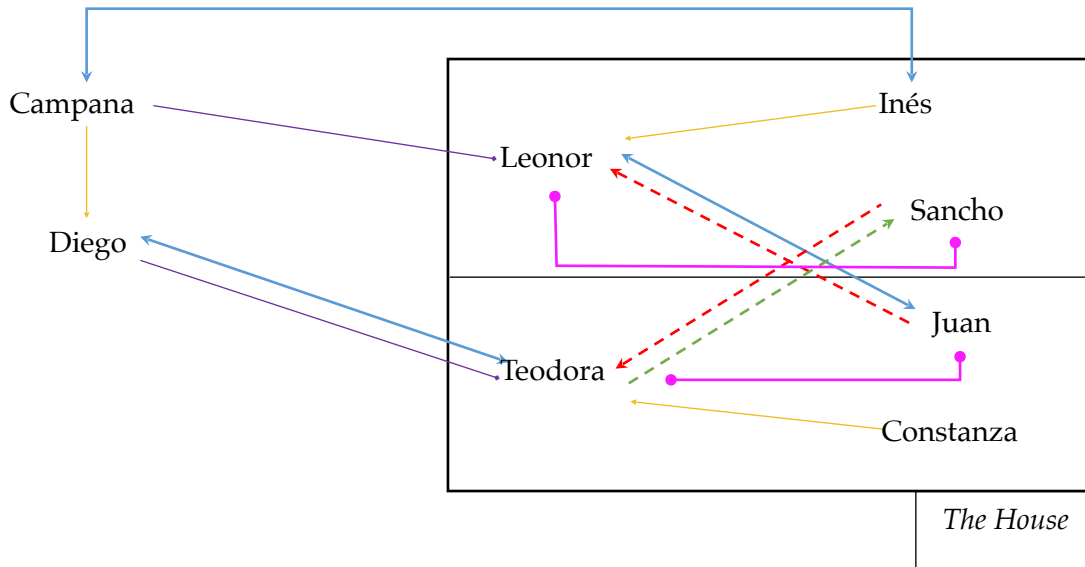
During Alarcón's life in Mexico (ca. 1581-1613), the ecology surrounding the viceregal capital was the same that Hernán Cortés witnessed at his arrival in Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, more than sixty years before.

The Valley of Tenochtitlan as Seen by Cortez. George F. Cram, 1869.



Characters

Map of Character Relations



Key:
Love / Marriage
Arranged marriage
Broken engagement
Siblings
Serves
Deceit

DIEGO

An impoverished nobleman foreign to Madrid, in love with Teodora. He is torn between abiding by noble standards of behavior, such as keeping his word and avoiding ingratitude, and the constraints that a lie has placed on him. Brave and bold, though not too bright, he is the male lead.

JUAN

Brother of Teodora, has made arrangements to marry his sister to Sancho, his upstairs neighbor, in exchange for the hand of the latter's sister, Leonor.

TEODORA

Although her brother has arranged for her to marry Sancho, she loves Diego. Friend to Leonor.

LEONOR

Falls in love with Diego, encouraged by Campana's lies, even though her brother has arranged for her to marry Juan, and though she suspects Diego loves Teodora. Vain and selfish. Friend to Teodora. She marries Juan in the end.

SANCHO

brother of Leonor, has made arrangements to marry his sister to Juan, the downstairs neighbor, in exchange for the hand of the latter's sister, Teodora.

FADRIQUE

A wealthy, powerful grandee, friend to Diego, in love with Leonor.

CAMPANA

Servant to Diego. His lie to Leonor about Diego being in love with her instead of Teodora sets the plots in motion. He marries Inés in the end. In Spanish, his name means "Bell."

CONSTANZA

Servant to Teodora.

INÉS

Servant to Leonor, marries Campana in the end.

When in public, Spanish women often wore veils, both to preserve their modesty and also, potentially, to go undetected. *Lies* challenges conventional notions of the domestic space as one of female voicelessness and solitude.

Habiti antichi. Cesare Vecellio, 1664



Contexts

The Comedia Form

The *comedia* developed in Spain in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Though influenced by Italian *commedia dell'arte*, the Spanish *comedia* includes not only comic plays, but also histories, tragedies, and tragicomedies. Roughly three thousand lines, they are usually divided into three *jornadas*, or acts. Plots move quickly across time and space, without much regard for the Aristotelian unities of action, time, and place. The plays are written in verse, and employ different forms for different characters and situations. Hugely popular in their time, over ten thousand plays survive today.

Original Performance Conditions

The *comedia* was performed in rectangular courtyard spaces known as *corrales* (see image on page 15). Built between houses of two or three stories, the *corral* offered seating based on social position. A performance would have included the play as well as songs, dances, and *entremeses*, or short comic interludes, before, after, and between the acts.

Corral de comedias in the city of Almagro. Built in 1628, it is the only open-air Baroque theater that remains active.



Gender and Female Agency

The *comedia* often examines on stage the patriarchal structure of seventeenth-century Spanish society. Just as the king was the head of the republic, the father was in charge of the household, and both relatives and servants were under his command. The patriarchal structure was resilient: in the absence of the father, another male swiftly occupied his place, usually a brother or a son, to whom obedience was paramount. Daughters were prized possessions because they could be married off to powerful men, thus integrating the family into social networks that allowed them to advance politically, socially and economically. Young noblewomen were particularly valuable tokens of exchange, and as such they led guarded lives: they often covered their faces with a veil before going out in public, and their outings were regulated by the father-figure and watched over by older women and servants. But the *comedia* also gives voice to a counter-discourse wherein the female characters openly express their disagreement with the unfairness of this social model, even in the presence of powerful patriarchal figures. Moreover, the plots are frequently driven by the ladies' secret plans to hinder the marriage arrangements made for them by the father-figure, and in the end they often marry the men they choose, as is the case in *Lies*.

Homosocial Relations

Nobles and commoners alike sought to cultivate relations with those further up the social scale, exchanging goods and services for favors from the more powerful. In our *comedia*, Juan and Sancho plan to exchange their sisters in reciprocal matrimony. Homosociality also explains Diego's anxiety not to strain his friendship with the powerful Marqués, a point of access to the upper echelons of the nobility. Leonor and Teodora consider each other's feelings and integrity when making important decisions, so that their relationship is presented as less instrumental and more solidary than the male character's.

The Outsider

Spaniards born in the New World colonies to Spaniard parents, known as *criollos* (Creoles), were regarded with suspicion by those born in the Iberian Peninsula. Theories of climatic determination colored perceptions: if America was imagined to be a degenerate world, American-born Spaniards must be inclined to vice, unreason and deception. The idea that the “evil tendencies” of American Indians were inevitably acquired by Spaniards born in America, began to circulate soon after conquest. Alarcón, a Creole himself, regularly represents outsiders who, even though they are not subversively unorthodox or even *criollos* themselves, still find it difficult to acculturate into Spanish culture. In our *comedia*, Leonor is suspicious about the true intentions of Diego, a foreigner to Madrid, and threatens him with violence if he does not reveal “what he is about” (145). While Diego does his best to mimic the supposedly virtuous conduct of Spanish nobility, the lies he upholds challenge his honesty and, thus, his Spanish identity.

The social lives of young European noblewomen were mostly restricted to the domestic space.

Curiosity, Gerard ter Borch, ca. 1660.



Themes

Men and Women

As is often the case in the *comedia*, the characters in *What We Owe Our Lies* do not fit neatly into the conventional gender roles. Leonor and Teodora are strong, resourceful, and capable of asserting their wills despite opposition from men. The play turns conventional expectations on their head by presenting the control of women's actions as an ongoing struggle in which they can successfully resist, as opposed to a *fait accompli* of patriarchal domination. The women define themselves as complex characters capable of the sort of nuanced observations denied to the men, and show us the underbelly of the conventional mores the men champion with relative naiveté.

Compared to Leonor and Teodora, Juan and Sancho threaten to become caricatures of stereotypical masculinity who ineffectively exercise the power that is theirs according to convention. The plot focuses on a single generation—the young lovers—without a patriarchal figure who might intervene to shore up the male domination represented by Juan and Sancho. The absence of a father, and the fact that the play's conflicts must be resolved intra (not inter) generationally mean that the men cannot appeal as readily or effectively to tradition to justify themselves, but must come to a resolution with their peers. A case in point is when Teodora pushes forward her plan to punish Diego's apparent infidelity by shrewdly persuading Juan not to abandon his engagement to Leonor just because Diego has been staying in Leonor's house as her husband. Juan presents us with the trappings of the stereotypical, strong-willed man, but he is really a more impressionable figure, easily convinced to play the role Teodora wants him to play.

We get the impression that Juan is merely aping a sort of *pater familias* in training, while Teodora emerges as an individual,

with particular motivations that challenge social norms. Leonor, for her part, makes more complex our understanding of the marriage scheme that the men have designed. Juan's matter-of-fact reference to arranged marriage and women's role therein as the object of exchange sounds hopelessly anachronistic with the echo of Leonor's contempt for her husband-to-be ringing in our ears: "I shall not be sorry to lose/ what I do not wish to have" (41–42).

Deceit

This *comedia* examines the impact of deceit on the lives of those who stumble onto the path of untruth. Despite the feeling of slapstick in the episode when Diego gets hurt jumping from a balcony, his succession of mishaps stem not from a series of errors of his own, but rather from the clash between his only fault—going along with Campana's lie—and his scrupulous observance of his code of behavior. The lie places him in situations from which he cannot escape without harming his reputation for courage and worthiness—the two meanings that coalesce in the term *valor*, which he repeatedly uses to describe his social and personal status.

Campana's lie activates two significant concepts of the period, simulation and dissimulation. Campana's reminder that the conventional wisdom at court is to "rob Peter to pay Paul" (418) echoes the widespread notion that revealing naked truths was not only naive but dangerous. The constraints placed upon seduction in seventeenth-century Spain taught lovers various forms of dissimulation. Concealing one's object of interest and intentions (both covered by the term *intento*) was considered mandatory for women and expeditious for men. Diego tries to pass unnoticed as he roams around in front of Teodora's apartment. Campana finds this insufficient. Should Leonor learn about the love between Diego and Teodora, Campana claims, she would immediately notify her brother, Sancho, who expects to marry Teodora, and he

would tell Juan, Teodora's brother. Alarcón's play illustrates something of which many contemporaries were fully aware: it is often necessary to simulate one thing (to make up something that does not exist) in order to dissimulate another. According to Campana, lies bedazzle the interlocutors by drawing their attention elsewhere, so that they fail to see what really matters. A well-designed lie mobilizes self-love, and so persuades easily, as when Leonor puts aside her suspicions that Diego might love Teodora instead of herself.

Campana and Diego may be amateurs in the art of lying, but they allow Alarcón to make a statement about deceit as the trigger of a plot—a mechanism that, by creating a gap between what some characters know and others do not, creates dramatic irony and gives the audience the satisfaction of watching it all work out.

Honor and Knowledge

In Alarcón's play the defenders of convention are presented in a negative light. Specifically, their attachment to honor restricts their access to knowledge and information. They are, in other words, blinded by convention and so unable to appreciate non-conventional, natural truth, which is presented positively as a means to liberation and the enrichment of lived experience. Male characters are the proponents of social convention. For Juan, Teodora's duty is to "[give] in" and "be Don Sancho's wife" (444–445). The inadequacy of Juan's understanding of things becomes apparent immediately, when Teodora, in conversation with her servant, Constanza, describes herself not as a sister, but as Diego's lover, and so expands our perspective beyond her brother's relatively narrow vision. Teodora's complexity is contrasted with the stringent demands of honor, which make her brother unable to conceive of nuance or resistance. Conversely, for Teodora, one's character is conditioned by one's feelings, not social expectations.

The demands of their own code of honor also blind the male characters to the real world beyond it. Juan, when faced with the option of marrying Leonor, who has already promised her heart to Diego, responds conventionally. Despite acknowledging that “a happier man/ may count transgression as a virtue” (1456–1457), his own moral “scruples” (1455) demand his conclusion: “Am I to be husband of one / who’s called another by that name [. . .]?” (1432–1433). Teodora’s response points to Juan’s narrow mind: “If favors from eyes and lips, Don Juan,/ were now considered trespasses,” she asks, “what honest woman would not be/ guilty of such a sin [. . .]? [. . .] what man would go/ blameless to his wedding bed?” (1461–1466). Juan touts an ideal of premarital chastity prescribed by society, while Teodora counsels the abandonment of social dogma and unprejudiced observation of the real world. The same conflict is evident when Sancho, having burst in on Teodora and Diego, is ignored amidst a cacophonous series of asides, in reaction to which he bellows: “And what about my jealousy?” (771). Sancho’s demands for attention are symbolically drowned out by real-world events he cannot control.

The two female characters deepen the play’s examination of the moral frameworks that condition action and access to knowledge. Both women want to flee from the house and its limiting code of honor. However, by the end their paths diverge in important ways. The final revelation of the truth of Diego’s love for Teodora leads her to act according to what her instinct had told her all along, that is, to separate herself from the house’s moral system and go off with Diego. Logically, then, a connection is made between ignorance and the house, on the one hand, and knowledge and the exterior, on the other. The two women thus dramatize two distinct ways of understanding the interaction of morality and knowledge. Teodora desires vengeance only while she ignores the truth—her appeals to honor are born of error.

Leonor's love, however, is possible only when shrouded in lies, and when the truth is discovered, she reassumes her assigned social role.

The House

The house is as much a character in the play as the people living in it. Leonor's apartment is located on the second floor, right above Teodora's. The servant Inés flatters Leonor by comparing her with the sun, which rules way above the moon, to which Teodora is compared. The house becomes a kind of Ptolemaic universe, with Diego gravitating to one or another of the women to set the plot in motion.

Windows and balconies open up to a street that everyone sees from inside. Down below, on the figurative earth under the apartment's heaven, Diego tries to pass unnoticed; at other times, we find Juan and Sancho on the street, about to go upstairs and find out, much to their dismay, that another man has intruded in the domestic space they claim to control. In the inner space of the apartment, desire, danger and voyeurism are all at work. Divided into three areas, it allows for the meeting of Diego and Teodora in a main chamber flanked by two rooms. Leonor spies on their encounter from one room, while the entrance hall allows Sancho to catch them as he enters from the opposite side. As the plot becomes more complicated, access becomes more restricted, and the traffic in and out of the house is progressively closed.

The victim of this closure is Diego, for whom the house functions as a site of both desire and fear: Teodora's apartment is his goal, yet the lie of which he and Campana are guilty condemns him to end up in the wrong apartment. Under Leonor's lock and key, he realizes only too late that there are true barriers keeping him from the world outside. The doors are locked and the exit is under surveillance. The physicality of the space becomes the focus of

attention, while windows and balconies become now the only (though hardly safe) path to the street. As he rushes to duel with the Marqués, Diego finds himself trapped between a locked door and a balcony, and chooses the latter, even though it costs him some broken bones.

Staging Opportunities & Challenges

Alarcón's 1634 play does not offer much in the way of stage directions. This is fairly typical for the period: limited explanations of the dramatic space allowed the producer of the play to construct the scenography in accordance with the needs of the text, the conditions of the stage or the company's budget. In Juan Eugenio Hartzenbusch's 19th-century edition, textual references to the dramatic space have been interpreted and fleshed out in stage directions. Most modern editions, ours included, follow this latter model, yet modern readers interested in producing this play should know that they have at least two options.

The house in this play is a character in its own right, yet building a two-story house on stage can be a daunting prospect. The façade requires one balcony per story, and the text refers to a view of the street below. Several scenes take place inside the house, some of them in individual rooms, while others occur in a space comprised of three adjacent rooms, and are vital to the plot: "A hall in Teodora's house on one side, a sitting room in the middle, and a bedroom on the other, with doors between the three rooms" (p. 44). Yet when a character needs to move to an adjacent room, Alarcón merely indicates that the actor pretends to leave the stage, but remains visibly hidden behind a curtain.

A modern production can follow the playwright and use wings and curtains as walls and separations between rooms. It might also use lighting to color-code and demarcate different zones of the house. Projected images may also be used to indicate different spaces. Wooden platforms can recreate the verticality of a two-story house above the street.

Performance History

Germán Castillo Macías directed the play in 1979 at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), and won a prize at the 1980 edition of the Siglo de Oro Drama Festival in El Paso, Texas. The production, which was received with mixed reviews, framed the urban plot of the play with excerpts from works of Spanish missionaries and the Mayan books of Chilam Balam. The juxtaposition attempted to underscore the violence at the origin of the colonial society of which the author was a product, and was perceived by critics as an attempt to address the often debated question of Alarcón's Mexicanness, and the alleged neglect of colonial settings and topics within his dramaturgy.

Pronunciation Guide

Each vowel in Spanish has just one sound. They are pronounced as follows:

a - AH e - EH i - EE o - OH u - OO

The underlined syllable in each word is the accented one.

Don Diego (de Luna): DOHN DEE-EH-GOH
(DEH LOO-NAH)

Don Juan: DOHN HOO-AHN

Teodora: TEH-OH-DOH-RAH

Leonor (Girón): LEH-OH-NOHR (HEE-ROHN)

Don Sancho: DOHN SAHN-CHOH

Betis: BEH-TEES

Manzanares: MAHN-SAH-NAH-REHS

Campana: CAHM-PAH-NAH

Constanza: COHNS-THAN-ZAH

Inés: EE-NEHS

Marqués (Don Fadrique): MAHR-KEHS (DOHN
FAH-DREE-KEH)

Madrid: MAH-DRIHD

San Jerónimo: SAHN HEH-ROH-NEE-MOH

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