

THE WHOLE TRUTH ABOUT *THE LIAR*

When my agent called and asked if I'd be interested in translating Corneille's *The Liar* for the Shakespeare Theatre of Washington, I had never heard of the play. Nor had my agent or anyone else I asked. Not that I was all that *up* on French theatre, though I had recently found myself wading into the tricky waters of translation. Using the remains of my college French and memories of a romantic month in Paris, I had somehow managed a translation of Feydeau's *A Flea In Her Ear* and Yasmina Reza's *A Spanish Play*, both produced to good success.

My agent sent the play over and several hours later, with the help of a fat French dictionary, I found myself astonished. Exhilarated. Giddy. For, lying on the desk before me, was one of the world's great comedies. I felt as if some lost Shakespeare festival comedy on the order of *Twelfth Night* or *Much Ado* had been found.

Everything about it spoke to me. The rippling language. The rich simplicity of the premise alongside the intricate rigor of the plotting. The gorgeousness of the set pieces. The way the play's wide understanding and humanity was seasoned with several pinches of social satire. The prospect of englishing it made me feel like Ronald Colman sighting Shangri-La.

Corneille (that's pronounced Cor-nay, by the way) wrote *Le Menteur* in the middle of his career as a return to comedy, and it shows. The play has all the ease of a playwright in complete control of his powers. He seems to be improvising this *divertissement* before our eyes, riffing on the Spanish play he stole the basic plot from (and which he vastly improved). Having been bowled over by the play, I had to consider how to render it into English. There was one thing that I knew right away: it had to be in verse, just as it is in Corneille. *The Liar* is a portrait of a

brilliant performer and it needs language to match. Prose would have turned this into a “Seinfeld” episode and made it banal.

Next question: translate the whole play, as is? Or make another play “based on” Corneille, like Tony Kushner’s version of Corneille’s *The Illusion*? Frankly there were elements of the plot that did not satisfy me. Lucrece was a cipher, virtually a non-speaking role for most of the action; Cliton’s relationship to Dorante wasn’t clear; the two maids were thankless parts; and the wrap-up was too abrupt: Dorante realizes he’s gotten his lady love’s name wrong and changes his mind, plopping for Lucrece and professing his love. Sorry. Not good enough.

Samuel Johnson once said: “We must try its effect as an English poem; that is the way to judge the merit of a translation.” I submit that the same principle applies to plays, especially old ones. In fact, for my money only playwrights should translate plays because the point is not to carry over sentences from one language to another, but to produce a credible, speakable, playable, produceable play for today *no matter what’s in the original*. In translating a play, I contend, one must think as a playwright, not as a translator. One must ask: what is the action *underneath* the words, who are these characters and what drives them, and finally what is this play actually all about? What was on Corneille’s chest and how can I use what’s on mine to create something with dramatic and comedic integrity? “But that’s what Corneille wrote in 1643,” is no defense. If actors can’t play every line, if every moment isn’t comedic or dramatic or both – fuhgeddaboutit.

In the end I did to *The Liar* what Corneille had done to his Spanish source: I reworked it to my own ends, creating what I call a translaptation, i.e., a translation with a heavy dose of adaptation. I trimmed some very long speeches (the French *love them*) and broke up others. I parcelled out the action between interiors and exteriors rather than setting most of the action – as

“classical” writers implausibly do – in a street. I let Cliton meet Dorante in scene one and gave him a problem with the truth that would complement his boss’s. I beefed up Lucrece. I cut a useless manservant and doubled the maids’ parts, making them twins. I added the Queen, offstage, and cut some unimportant remarks that might ring politically unacceptable today. Loving duels (who doesn’t?), I put the duel onstage which in the original happens offstage. I inserted a lying lesson – the equivalent of the specialty number at the top of virtually every musical’s second act – and rejiggered the ending. I gave Philiste a love interest, tying him into the plot more than he was, and along the way I fell in love with Lucrece. (Who wouldn’t?)

Of the three great 17th-century French playwrights – Corneille, Racine, Molière – I’m fondest of Corneille. He loves the world in a way those two don’t, and this gives him, for me, a Shakespearean understanding and comprehensiveness and brio.

So here it is. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, as refracted in a theatrical fun-house mirror. Welcome to *The Liar*.

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