THE USE OF DECEIT IN VALERA'S *JUANITA LA LARGA*

IT is rare to find in the last works of old age the spirit of youthful glee, of sly merriment; and yet this is precisely the case with one of Juan Valera's last novels, *Juanita la Larga* (1896). Its bucolic setting, gay Andalusian *costumbrismo,* and happy resolution of two favorite motifs of Valera, those of illegitimacy and the *viejo–niña,* prompted José Montesinos to label the novel "el último idilio clásico de la literatura española."[1] Generally, readers of Valera's work have agreed with the eminent Hispanist, with the unfortunate result that less serious critical attention has been paid to *Juanita la Larga* than to *Pepita Jiménez* and the Andalusian writer's *opus* as a whole.[2] It is tempting to interpret the book as the fond remembrances and idealizations of a blind, old man, as, in a word, a mere bagatelle. But is this so? I should emphasize here that Montesinos, whose insight into Hispanic texts is unquestionable, does not actually misread but, rather, underread this delightful novel of Valera's final years.

[1] José F. Montesinos, *Valera o la ficción libre* (Madrid, 1969), p. 149. For a discussion of the themes of illegitimacy and the *viejo–niña,* see Paul Smith, "Juan Valera and the Illegitimacy Motif," *Hispania,* 51 (1968), 803–11; and Mario Maurin, "Valera y la ficción encadenada," *Mundo Nuevo,* No. 14 (1967), pp. 35–44; No. 15 (1967), pp. 37–44.

[2] Some studies on *Juanita la Larga* include: Joaquín de Entrambasaguas, "Juan Valera (1824–1905)," in *Las mejores novelas contemporáneas,* I (1895–1899) (Barcelona, 1957), 514–24; Matías Montes Huidobro, "Sobre Valera. El estilo," *RO*, 2a época, 35, No. 104 (1971), 168–91; Germán Gullón, *El narrador en la novela del siglo XIX* (Madrid, 1976), pp. 150–55; Roxanne B. Marcus, "An Application of Jungian Theory to the Interpretation of Doña Inés in Valera's *Juanita la Larga,*" *RCEH*, 3 (1979), 259–74.

To understand *Juanita la Larga* only as a rustic interlude is to ignore the extraordinary and subversive role played by one of the novel's dominating motifs, namely, that of deceit. What I propose to study in *Juanita la Larga* is the structural and thematic trajectory from deceit and illusion to authenticity and reality, that is, the way in which Valera arrives at what at least seems like *lo verdadero mediante lo engañoso.* In analogous fashion, the Andalusian novelist also develops two other thematic motifs which undergo a similar metamorphosis, or conversion from one meaning to its opposite: the passage from impurity to cleanness and that of illegitimacy to legitimacy. Both of these last-named themes may, in fact, be perceived as subordinate to the controlling element of deceit, since *lo engañoso* implies a negative, inauthentic condition, stressing what is false and improper.

What is it specifically in *Juanita la Larga* which manifests such convertible dichotomies? What aesthetic devices does Valera exploit in order to develop, with characteristic Jesuitic duplicity, his topsy-turvy trajectory of reality? And, finally, what, if anything, can we deduce from *Juanita la Larga's* novelistic universe about Valera's notions of Spanish society and the role of the individual within it?

Juanita la Larga offers us yet one more version of one of Valera's lifelong obsessions: the May-December romance. In the present thematic variant, Don Paco, a fifty-three-year-old, well-to-do widower, becomes enamored of the seventeen-year-old local beauty and self-styled free spirit, Juanita la Larga, illegitimate daughter of the town's best seamstress, cook, and pastrymaker, Juana la Larga. As in a contrapuntal dance, reminiscent of the Golden-Age *comedia,* Don Paco woos and is wooed, only to be regretfully though firmly rejected by Juanita la Larga, who, in turn, with the connivance of her astute mother, will artfully manipulate Don Paco, his conformist and hypocritical daughter Doña Inés, another suitor Don Andrés Rubio (the local *cacique*), indeed, the entire town of Villalegre, in order to enter into holy matrimony with one of the town's most respected citizens, Don Francisco (alias Paco) López. Juanita, strongly condemned at first by the smug complacency of the townspeople for having attempted to rise above her social station, in the end convinces everyone of the rightness of her hymeneal union with Don Paco and, in the process, discovers her own true and deeply felt affection for the middle-aged widower.

How does Juanita triumph in Valera's novel? Through dissemblance and trickery. The use of deceit to gain honorable ends strikes one, of course, as supremely Machiavellian, of discreditable value, but Valera cleverly manages to make Juanita's deception amusing and even acceptable to his readers by initially presenting his heroine in the most pleasing of terms. First, Juanita's mother makes no attempt to hide her daughter's birth or the stain of illegitimacy. And then, Juanita herself is described as "la moza más alta y más esbelta que había en el lugar. Algo de la sangre belicosa del oficial de Caballería se había infundido en ella, y la crianza libre y hombruna que había recibido, había desarrollado su agilidad y sus bríos."[3] Juanita is, in a word, an uncorseted creature, something of an anomaly in nineteenth-century Spain. Thus, on the level of characterization, Valera will suggest a playful juxtaposition of naturalness (apparently Juanita's authentic personality, according to the initial description) and artifice (the protagonist's subsequent deceptive actions).

It is significant that both Juanas are in a dual sense confectioners. Juana la Larga is, literally, a *repostera,* a confectioner of the most delicious pastries in the province; and her daughter is an expert at confecting garments. *Confeccionar* can, of course, be extended metaphorically to signify the talent both women possess for manipulating and creating circumstances which most suit their purposes. And as confectioners of reality, Juana and Juanita quite naturally become artful dissimulators (the key word, *disimular,* is, in addition, frequently reiterated in the text).

It is also through contrivance that the Andalusian novelist furthers the plot line of *Juanita la Larga.* When Don Paco and Juanita literally run into each other at the fountain setting, they engage in verbal gamesmanship, a sly linguistic trick which has been pointed out in a fine stylistics study of the novel by Montes Huidobro.[4] It is after that meeting when Don Paco decides to

[3] Juan Valera, *Juanita la Larga, Obras completas* (Madrid, 1968), I, 536. All other page references are cited within the text.

[4] Montes Huidobro, "Sobre Valera . . . " pp. 175–77. The passage which Montes Huidobro analyzes begins: "¡Perdón, hija mía! ¿Te he hecho daño?" with Juanita's response, "¿Qué daño me ha de haber hecho usted? Pues qué, ¿soy yo acaso de alfeñique?" (p. 540). As the critic observes, "la técnica se puede reducir a la fórmula A *versus* B; es decir, si un personaje dice blanco el otro dice negro" (p. 176).

court Juanita. How? "Con la mayor cautela y ser lo más ladino que pudiese, aunque en estos negocios no le sucedía como en los negocios del Municipio, y el ser ladino no era su fuerte" (p. 542). His first subterfuge consists in bringing to Juana la Larga's house an order for a half-dozen new shirts and at the same time a covered basket of rare strawberries, as well as a gift of chocolate. Both Juanas catch the meaning very quickly and invite Don Paco to a game of cards. All three characters play the game of love and courtship precisely as though these were not the actual objectives of their actions, but Juana, her daughter, and Don Paco have not reckoned with the stifling influence of public opinion. When society, scandalized by what it regards as Juanita's unjustified and forbidden social climbing, balks at the projected union, Valera's heroine resorts to the only weapon left to her, deception: "He de disimular más y he de ser más hipocritona que esa indina [Doña Inés]. Mala intención es lo que no tengo: mi intención siempre será buena" (p. 561).[5] A female Machiavellian, Juanita, in seeking revenge against the treachery of Doña Inés, who has provoked the anti-Juanita campaign of the townspeople, feigns the modesty and piety of a *beata* and indifference toward Inés's father, Don Paco. Small wonder that the perplexed widower is confused over Juanita's motives: "¿sería esto por cálculo o ladino instinto de mujer para cautivarle mejor o para entretenerle con esperanzas vagas? También recordaba don Paco los cuchicheos de Juanita con Antoñuelo [nephew of Don Andrés], y se ponía celoso" (p. 563).

There follows a series of further ruses and reactions to the ruses: Juanita's teasing relationship with the *cacique,* Don Andrés; Don Paco's misinterpretation of her true motives and his subsequent quixotic, burlesque flight to the countryside in order to kill himself over a soured love affair; and Juanita's final grand trick in Chapter xliv, in which she lures an obtuse Don Andrés into an apparent lover's rendezvous only to best him in hand-to-hand combat. In effect, Valera's novel turns on an entire linked series of subterfuges and subsequent misunderstandings on the part of those not aware that others are playing a game and are

[5] For a serious misinterpretation of Juanita la Larga as a mere plaything of circumstances, society, and the times, see Teresa Barbero, "Juanita la Larga," *La Estafeta Literaria,* No. 550 (1974), pp. 23–24.

withholding the rules of that game.[6] Thus, plot, as well as characterization, depend on the illusoriness of deception, a curious state of affairs in which reality and authenticity become the slippery playthings of Machiavellian operators—Juanita, her mother and, to a lesser degree, Don Paco, his daughter Inés, and Don Andrés—throughout most of the novel's events and scenes.

This ludic quality of the art of deception pervades more than just the shape of events and the gestures of characters: it is fundamental in the creation of setting and scene and, indeed, embedded within the very language of the novel. The rustic *locus amoenus* of *Juanita la Larga* carries at the very heart of it, at "la milagrosa fuente del ejido," both the elements of joyful playfulness and deceit. The fountain, which is described in Chapter iv and which plays a significant role in the Juanita–Don Paco relationship in Chapters v through vii, functions as an analogue, a form of objective correlative to the basic play of opposites inherent in Valera's novel. Like Juanita, the fountain possesses wonderful, natural qualities; just as he describes his heroine as the product of "la crianza libre y hombruna," Valera compares the strong, heavy flow of the fountain's waters to the "brazo de un hombre robusto, siendo tal la abundancia de agua, que con ella se regaban muchísimas huertas y se hacían frondosos, amenos y deleitables los alrededores de Villalegre, contribuyendo no poco a que la villa mereciese este nombre" (p. 537). The fountain is also notable for other qualities: its transparency and purity (p. 537). There is no doubt that Juanita, despite her rather unconventional background, is also essentially innocent and untouched. It is representative of Juanita's character, for example, that she uses on her hair "agua sola con alguna infusión de hierbas olorosas para lavarlo mejor" (p. 538).

There are, moreover, other points of contact between the protagonist and the fountain. Juanita spends a good deal of her time at the fountain, first, for practical reasons, and, second, for the sake of conviviality. Valera's idyllic setting provides an agreeable spot for the townspeople's daily *tertulias,* pleasant interludes

[6] There is, in fact, a literal moment of game-playing in the last chapter (xlv), when all the major characters join hands, Juanita sings a gay song, and, in a sportive gesture akin to our "one potato, two potato," touches each man on the shoulder, saying "ni con éste, ni con éste," until she reaches her intended, Don Paco. Then, she says: "sino con éste" and embraces him warmly (p. 627).

bubbling with laughter, wit, and merriment. It is significant, I believe, that Juanita, ignorant of love and marriage, and against her mother's wishes, insists on going to the fountain as night falls. The asexual joy and freedom that the protagonist associates with the fountain are not fortuitous components of a setting which later Juanita will be forbidden to visit when it assumes a definite sexual cast in her mind. In effect, Valera's heroine and Don Paco rudely bump into each other in the gathering darkness at the fountain, and it is after this accidental meeting that the widower begins to seek Juanita's favor.

In clearly pre-Christian terms, the fountain, with its marvellous waters and gift of fertility, seems a particularly appropriate setting for lovemaking to occur. Yet the widower and the seventeen-year-old engage only in verbal sparring. What has happened here? Some other element, of a more dubious nature, has crept into the scene: game-playing, this time, within the confines of a dialogue replete with delightful jousting. The exchange between Juanita and Don Paco points to one more characteristic which is indisputably associated with the fountain: trickery. Good *costumbrista* that he can be when the occasion merits it, Valera also inserts in Chapter iv two examples of local exploitation of the fountain's waters. First, he observes that the muleteer, who buys his vinegar in Villalegre, dilutes it with the pure waters of the fountain, thus sweetening the vinegar's flavor, but also profiting considerably more from the watered-down product. The second example given consists in using the water to dampen the wheat and then to allow it to dry in the sun, just before it is to be sold. This operation, to be done in strict secrecy, cautions Valera, improves the wheat's flavor, for while the outer part is dry, inside, liquid is trapped, resulting in added weight and volume.

The Andalusian novelist thus establishes a number of parallels between Juanita and the fountain setting, for not only do they both participate in similar characteristics, but, in addition, Juanita's awakening to love initially takes place at Valera's propitious setting. One suspects a sly implication that the fountain in some pagan, magical way has acted as mediator between Don Paco and Juanita la Larga.[7] Indeed later, Juanita admits that she ought not to have gone to the fountain, since she is a "mocita

[7] The fountain setting as a love scene also figures in the last chapter of Valera's early story of enchantment, "El pájaro verde" (1860).

casadera, y, si no ocupando cierta posición aspirando a ocuparla, debí dejar de ir por agua . . . Debí darme más tono" (p. 571).[8] Social considerations aside, the fountain obviously exerts an influence which, in the long run, will have less to do with differences in social standing, than with the enchantments of love and the promise of marriage.

I emphasize this last-mentioned point not because I would diminish the importance of the social theme in *Juanita la Larga,* but because that element of enchantment, which Montesinos perceived as idyllic, strikes me as fundamental to the structure and meaning of Valera's novel. Yet I hasten to qualify the term "enchantment" by juxtaposing to it the adjectives, ironic and burlesque. *Juanita la Larga* is less an idyll, than a gently ironic, burlesque version of that universal genre, the fairy tale.[9] The basic motif of trickery, which permeates the action, characterization, and imagery of the novel, in no way contradicts its fairy tale atmosphere; indeed, it serves not only to bolster but also to explicate the persistence of the *cuento de hadas* in Valera's novel. First, the theme of trickery is a common one in many fairy tales. And, second, it is through deception that the element of enchantment is realized and that we the readers subsequently become aware of it.

A characteristic arrangement of fairy tales is the pairing of baseborn and noble, of inferior and superior. Quite often, of course, the lowborn character, in the end, turns out to be highborn (sometimes, the reverse is true). Or the socially inferior character manages through trickery to win the hand of the aristocrat: the use of deceit thus becomes legitimized since *el engaño* serves to demonstrate the lowborn protagonist's cleverness, that is, his ultimate superiority. Something of both patterns is evident in *Juanita la Larga.* Valera's heroine will emerge tri-

[8] In a sensible moment, Don Paco also advises Juanita not to go anymore to the fountain: "estando ya muy remotos los siglos de oro, no era posible imitar a la princesa Nausicaa sin rebajarse o avillanarse demasiado; y así, aconsejó y amonestó tantas veces y con tan discretas razones a Juanita para que no fuese a la fuente" (p. 545).

[9] Valera's interest in fairy tales was authentic. See, for example, his stories, "El pájaro verde" (1860), "Dos cuentos japoneses" (1887), and "El hechicero" (1894), in *Obras completas,* I. (Madrid, 1968) Sherman Eoff observes that "throughout his life Valera manifested a liking for the legendary, the historical, and the fantastic" ("Juan Valera's Interest in the Orient," *HR*, 6 [1938], 195).

umphant in the end because she will prove herself superior in intelligence, virtue, and even physical strength, to everyone else in Villalegre. In employing trickery and her innate astuteness, Juanita finally gains not only Don Paco's hand in marriage (an upside down situation, to be sure), but also the respect of the entire town.

There is, however, one other way in which Valera emphasizes Juanita's inherent nobility: he consistently applies to her character the terminology and assets of royalty. Although at first Juanita calls Doña Inés a princess and herself a mere "pobrecita trabajadora" (p. 541), at the very end of her playful conversation with Don Paco, she leaves her future suitor, with "un gesto imperativo, marcándole la calle por donde debía irse" (p. 541). A few pages later, Valera describes her as "más airosa y gallarda que una ninfa del verde bosque y más majestuosa que la propia princesa Nausicaa, que también lavaba la ropa, cuando, sin desconcharse ni echar las ínfulas por el suelo, solían hacerlo las princesas allá en los siglos de oro" (p. 545). Or again: "Parecía la señora principal, la reina de aquella función [Mass in honor of St. Domingo de Guzmán], y apenas podían comprender sus compatricios que fuese ella la misma moza que hacía poco iba con un cántaro por agua a la fuente. Era marcial y decidido su paso, pero al mismo tiempo majestuoso y modesto" (p. 558). Royal characteristics attributed to Juanita by the auctorial voice, Don Paco, and later Don Andrés, persist to the very end of the novel. Doña Inés, however, who is also compared to an aristocrat but who proves to be the very opposite in character, sees only the plebeian side of Juanita. Ironically, it takes all of Juanita's art of subterfuge to convince Doña Inés of the protagonist's true, inner nobility.

In the epilogue, Valera tells us that his heroine "parece una princesa encantada, pues no pasan días por ella" (p. 628). One could also interpret the expression "enchanted princess" as a reference to Juanita's status throughout the work. Implicit in the word "enchanted" is an element of concealment. If Juanita appears to be a mere "moza de cántaro," it is because her true identity remains hidden. In effect, after Doña Inés and the townspeople have condemned her social presumptuousness, the protagonist deliberately sets up a screen between herself and the outer world: she will not only dissimulate by repressing her wild ways and open character, but also by dressing the part of a "beata

pobre." Or as she remarks to herself: "En lo exterior he de parecer como una beata pobre; mas ¿por qué he de privarme del placer de cuidar, de asear y de pulir con el mayor esmero este cuerpecito que Dios me ha dado? Sin que nadie lo sospeche, he de cuidarlo y he de lavarlo como si fuera el de una infanta de España" (p. 572). And a few lines later: "Además, quiero ser cuidadosa y muy regalada en mi ropa blanca interior" (p. 572). Here, Valera stresses the quality of cleanliness in Juanita's nature (as well as her vanity): the notion of an implied contrast with impurity, particularly in the guise of illegitimacy, inevitably suggests itself.

It is clear that Juanita herself understands her present social position as indisputably inferior to that of Doña Inés and Don Paco. Valera's heroine is quite frank with herself. Still, her use of deceit is clearly justified in her eyes. Why? In part, because she, like her creator Valera, views reality as Machiavellian, because ultimately she wants "posición, autoridad y título verdadero, suficiente y legítimo" (p. 572). Her goals, she firmly believes, are good: to legitimize—in this sense, to make clean—her dubious social status. At the same time, Juanita la Larga never actually accepts that majority opinion, represented by the hypocritical Doña Inés, which sees her as something unclean, illegitimate, and, finally, unworthy of Don Paco. It is for this reason that I believe Valera persists in calling Juanita a princess, a queen, and a goddess throughout the novel. Has then Juanita la Larga always been a princess?

In that case, can we really speak of a trajectory, both thematic and structural, which passes from *lo engañoso* to *lo verdadero,* from *lo sucio* to *lo limpio,* from *lo ilegítimo* to *lo legítimo?* In one sense, perhaps not. Juanita la Larga's character does not, for example, appear to alter radically. Yet, on the other hand, it is possible to conceive of the novel as a movement from one form of reality to another. In effect, Valera is once again slyly manipulating that age-old, Cervantine duality of appearance versus reality. If Juanita la Larga really is a princess, as we gather from Don Paco, the auctorial voice, and Juanita herself, she does not appear so to anyone else. In fact, she is illegitimate. She is lowborn. She is even deceitful. What is happening here? Valera's game of juxtaposing antithetical concepts throughout *Juanita la Larga* is really *un juego dentro de otro juego,* because what he is really

doing is playing games with us, the readers of *Juanita la Larga*. That is why Valera's novel is more than just the last Hispanic idyll: it is a gentle burlesque of all such idealized fictions, call them idylls or fairy tales.

One may also draw another conclusion. If truth can come from deceit, if confectioners can create and manipulate their own reality, who can be certain of any reality? Valera's deliberately ambiguous use of irony has, of course, been remarked upon, most recently by Frank Durand;[10] but the Andalusian novelist's handling of reality as fiction and fiction as reality goes beyond the evident ironic stance. The constant gamesplaying within the novelistic world of *Juanita la Larga* points to a far more radical perception of reality and the instrument by which Valera expresses that reality: like everything else in *Juanita la Larga,* its creator, language, becomes an act of deception. The images of confection and dissimulation, the plays with words between Don Paco and Juanita, for example, the verbal and nonverbal trickery and games enacted among the characters, all these components of Valera's novel reveal a world in which language becomes a weapon of subversion. That Juanita herself conceives of language in these terms is evident when she declares at one point in the novel: "he de castigarla [Doña Inés], valiéndome de la lengua, que ha de lanzar contra ella palabras que le abrasen el pecho. Ha de lanzar mi lengua más rayos de fuego que la uña del boticario" (p. 589). Here, of course, language is regarded as truth-bearing, but an emphatic statement of this nature stands out in *Juanita la Larga* precisely because words in the rest of the work have played such a tricky game.

Because language, gestures, characters, setting, and plot are so permeated with the spirit of *el engaño,* it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain Valera's ultimate intent in writing *Juanita la Larga*. It is usual for the Andalusian writer to claim no moral or philosophical message inherent in his fiction, or as he writes in the prologue: "*Juanita la Larga* no propende a demostrar ni demuestra cosa alguna" (p. 529). His declaration may be truer than we realize. What indeed is Valera telling us about reality and, more specifically, Spanish society in the novelistic world of *Juanita la Larga*? How significant are social differ-

[10] Frank Durand, "Valera: Narrador irónico," *Ínsula,* No. 360 (1976), p. 3.

ences? The playful treatment of Juanita la Larga's background is representative of Valera's extraordinarily subversive view of social stratification: in the long run, as in the case of Juanita la Larga herself, princess or commoner, baseborn or noble, it doesn't really matter. In fact, it is as valid to call Juanita la Larga a princess as it is Doña Inés, because no one in *Juanita la Larga,* in truth, is of noble origin. Public opinion and appearances, only, dictate social differentiation. And appearance in Valera's novel is fundamentally deceptive.

It is significant that the novel's epilogue ends by recounting an episode in the life of Antoñuelo, a secondary character who was a thief in Villalegre and, in the final pages, has become a confidence man in the New World. Antoñuelo, like Juanita, is a trickster; and it is obvious that Valera takes great pleasure in detailing some of Antoñuelo's latest chicanery.[11] *Juanita la Larga* ends as it began, *burla burlando,* on a cheery note of deceit, thus putting the final, ironic touch on what can be seen as a comic view of the fraudulence of nineteenth-century Spanish society.

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[11] This is not the only instance of deceit presented in the epilogue. After noting that Doña Inés' husband, Don Álvaro Roldán, has become a paralytic (p. 628), Valera goes on to say—several paragraphs later—that that august matron "conserva todas sus virtudes, incluso la prolífica, y en estos últimos años ha conseguido que los vástagos de su ilustre casa lleguen a la docena" (p. 629).