

INTRODUCTION

Is It Ever Acceptable to Lie?



Punishment awaits those who lie.

Dante had little doubt about this, little doubt that unrepentant liars would suffer an eternity of pain, and he devoted much of his early fourteenth-century masterpiece, the *Inferno*, to describing their torments. As the pilgrim Dante and his guide, the revered Roman poet Virgil, enter the eighth circle of hell, a place called Malebolge, the final, painful residence for the fraudulent and every type of falsifier, they witness flatterers stewing in dung “that might well have been flushed from our latrines” and seducers condemned for eternity to walk naked in endless circles as “horned demons with enormous whips” beat them from behind. Pausing for a moment, Virgil asks his companion to look at one of the figures, a disheveled woman wallowing in excrement, squatting then standing then squatting again, forever scratching herself raw with filth-encrusted fingernails. “It is Thais,” Virgil explains, “the whore who gave this answer to her lover when he asked, ‘Am I very worthy of your thanks?’: ‘Very, nay, incredibly so!’” Disgusted, Virgil urges his companion to hurry on: “I think our eyes have had their fill of this.”¹ Perhaps they have seen more than enough seducers and flatterers, but the variety of deceivers and falsifiers proves limitless. As the two continue farther into the depths of Malebolge, they discover hypocrites struggling under the weight of gold-gilded iron robes, false counselors transformed into heatless flame, a frozen

lake filled with traitors submerged to their bellies, their teeth chattering “notes like storks’ beaks snapping shut.”²

A journey through hell, Dante’s *Inferno* maps a geography of sin. Though all in hell are guilty, all are not equally punished. The gravity of sin increases the deeper Virgil and the pilgrim descend. Sinners guilty of lust and gluttony, avarice and prodigality, wrath and sullenness, give way to the violent, to murderers and suicides. But worst of all are the fraudulent, all those liars, deceivers, and traitors that fill hell’s final two circles. “Since fraud belongs exclusively to man,” Virgil explains, “God hates it more and, therefore, far below, the fraudulent are placed and suffer most.”³ Those guilty of lust allowed their passions to overwhelm them, like the winds that batter them in hell’s upper reaches, catching them in storms of desire that lay waste to reason. Though their crimes were worse, the same is true of the malicious, of murderers condemned to cook in boiling rivers of blood as fitting justice for the burning rage and greed they let go unchecked, clouding all sense of charity as it drove them toward homicide. Traitors are different. Condemned to suffer forevermore in the arctic depths of hell, they composed their deceitful words with cold calculation, sundering every bond of love and friendship, like Judas before Jesus. When asked if he was the one who would betray the Son of Man, Judas calmly replied, “Surely, not I?”⁴

The denizens of hell not only suffer, their suffering poses a challenge to the two travelers. Forever trapped in forms and punishments emblematic of their crimes, the damned are forever doomed to repeat them. Well inside the eighth circle of hell, Virgil and the pilgrim discover that a bridge they had hoped to cross now lies in rubble. When Virgil questions a nearby demon, the creature promises that there are other bridges still standing farther along the path. Although the pilgrim warns his leader to be wary of this information, Virgil accepts it as true, only to discover later that every bridge has collapsed. “Once, in Bologna, I heard discussed the devil’s many vices,” a nearby hypocrite snidely comments. “[O]ne of them is that he tells lies and is the father of all lies.” Virgil stalks off, angry with himself for having been fooled.⁵

If Virgil proves occasionally too trusting, the pilgrim responds differently to hell's challenges. Now in the ninth and final circle of hell, the abode of traitors, Virgil and the pilgrim come across a soul who refuses to name himself, frozen in place, his head bent back with tears turned to pools of ice so that "weeping puts an end to weeping, and the grief that finds no outlet from the eyes turns inward to intensify the anguish." Blinded and believing the pilgrim to be dead and damned just like himself, the frozen figure cries out, "O wicked souls, so wicked that you have been assigned the ultimate post, break off these hard veils covering my eyes and give relief from the pain that swells my heart—at least until the new tears freeze again." The pilgrim, doing nothing to correct the suffering soul's mistake, makes a promise: "If you wish me to help you, tell me who you are, and if I do not extricate you, may I have to go down to the bottom of the ice." These are misleading words at best, no doubt deceitful, perhaps even dishonest. With Virgil as his guide, the pilgrim knows he will soon descend to the bottom of the ice, the very pit and nadir of hell, fulfilling in some sense the strict letter of his promise, if not its spirit, and certainly not the promise as the soul understands it. Deceived, the soul immediately reveals himself to be Alberigo, a man whose treachery is so great his soul already suffers in hell while his body remains on earth inhabited by a shade. His crime? Under the false pretense of a reconciliation with relatives, he invited them to dine at his house, where he gleefully watched hired hands slaughter them as they ate. "But now extend your hand and open my eyes for me," the soul cries out. "I did not open them," the pilgrim reports. "To be mean to him was a generous reward."⁶

If cruelty can become generosity, can lies ever become virtuous?



This is a book about the history of lying from the Garden of Eden to the Enlightenment. With one notable exception, it is not a history of specific lies, of who said what to whom, but a history of responses to a very fundamental, if straightforward, question: *Is it*

ever acceptable to lie? A perennial question, one that remains with us to this day, it no longer means for us what it meant for people who lived during the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Reformation. Contemporary behavioral psychologists and evolutionary biologists tell us that deception is woven into the very fabric of nature. Plants have evolved to look like insects and insects to look like plants. The bolas spider can emit a scent so similar to that of a female moth that it lures males to their death. For their part, different sorts of baboons, gorillas, and chimpanzees engage in what can best be described as intentional acts of deception, purposefully leading their fellows away from banana-laden trees only to scurry back unseen to gorge themselves, alone and in peace.⁷ We humans are little different, and evolution seems to have favored those of us who deceive better than others. If we don't lie constantly, we certainly lie frequently. One study suggests that during every ten minutes of conversation, we lie three times and even more frequently when we use e-mail and text messaging.⁸ Contemporary philosophers may debate whether it is ethical to lie, whether the standards and expectations of human society and conduct allow for or prohibit dishonesty, but these debates simply assume that lying is one of many questionable things we do.⁹

No one living before the eighteenth century would ever have claimed that our penchant for lying was simply natural. Scripture may have famously proclaimed "Every man is a liar," but that was an observation rooted in much more than mere empirical analysis. Near the beginning of his meditative treatise *On Humility and Pride*, Bernard of Clairvaux, perhaps the most famous religious figure of the twelfth century, writes that we can understand what it means to be a liar only if we humble and humiliate ourselves before God's truth and in that humiliation experience how wretched we really are. Reflecting on the book of Psalms, Bernard writes: "The prophet has humbled himself [. . .] as he says in another Psalm, 'And in your truth you have humbled me.' He has been thinking about himself. Now he looks from his own wretchedness to that of others, and so passes to the second step, saying in his ecstasy, 'Every man is a liar.'" But what does it mean to say "Every

man is a liar?” It means, Bernard continues, that “every man is weak, powerless, unable to save himself or others.” It means that anyone “who trusts his own strength deceives himself . . . [for] . . . he cannot hope for salvation from himself, nor can anyone else hope for salvation from him.”¹⁰ To assert that every man is a liar is to say something profound about who we are and how we got to be this way, about our relationship to God and ourselves, to those around us and to the world itself. Every man is a liar because every man is fallen, cast out of paradise, full of pride and utterly at God’s mercy.

While Bernard’s deeply monastic and religiously severe assessment of human depravity and helplessness may have been more extreme than those of his nonreligious peers, Christian writers from the earliest days of the Church to the seventeenth-century writings of Blaise Pascal, John Milton, and beyond would have agreed with him that the problem of the lie, of lying, was the problem of human existence itself. Its roots dug deep into the ground of ontology, metaphysics, and theology, and reached as far back as the very first moments of human history, a history blasphemed into existence beneath a tree in a garden, in the serpent’s lying words to a woman who would soon be named Eve. For this tradition, human history, the history of fallen man, began with the serpent’s lie, and that lie shaped and marked us, deformed and weakened us. It transformed us into sons of the Devil, liars and sinners both, even as it entangled us ever more tightly in the misery of a life lived in exile from the earthly paradise that God had created for us. Given this history, with all it entailed, the question *Is it ever acceptable to lie?* was always more than a question about acceptable or unacceptable behavior. It rephrased in the most trenchant form possible a much broader question: *How should we live in a fallen world?* Should the faithful Christian, when need be, adapt to the ways of a corrupt and deceitful world, lie to the liars, or is such accommodation the very hallmark and sign, root cause and continuing symptom, of our miserable lives as sinners? This account of the human penchant for perversity would begin to unravel, perhaps already in the seventeenth century but certainly in the next, a

development most obvious in the writings of the French *philosophe* Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who would look to society as the entirely this-worldly source of human corruption and deceit.

From the Garden of Eden to the Enlightenment, from the serpent to society, at least one of the questions this book hopes to answer is how lying became a natural phenomenon, how religiously inspired accounts of human mendacity slowly gave way to accounts that had nothing to do with either God or the Devil. Human beings would remain liars forever after, but there would no longer be anything divine or damned in that fact. The Devil's greatest victory, even if it meant his own self-annihilation, was to set in motion the long slow process that would one day make a corrupted world seem like the world God had meant to create all along.



More often than not, when historians tell the history of lying and deception, it is a history of early modern Europe, of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, “the Age of Dissimulation.”¹¹ Both religious controversies and the centralization of power in the various European states during this period lent particular urgency to questions about the morality of lying and deception. Protestants in Catholic lands and Catholics in Protestant lands had to ask themselves if it was acceptable to lie, conceal, or dissimulate their true beliefs in order to avoid jail, torture, and death at the hands of their persecutors, whether they could lie to protect friends and family from similar fates.¹² Members of the aristocracy felt similar pressures as they vied with one another to secure positions in the increasingly centralized and politically absolutist European states. Whether engaged in diplomatic missions or managing life in the competitive, often capricious and conspiratorial world of the court, the courtier needed to manage his self-presentation with utmost care, knowing what to say and what not to say, when to mislead and when to lie. Machiavelli, who not only wrote the most infamous book of political advice of the Renaissance but also served as a diplomat for the Republic of Florence, described the

personal consequences of this predicament in a famous letter he wrote to Francesco Guicciardini: “For a long time I have not said what I believed, nor do I even believe what I say, and if indeed I do happen to tell the truth, I hide it among so many lies that it is hard to find.”¹³ A tad hyperbolic perhaps, but certainly fitting for an era whose most oft-repeated maxim may well have been “A man does not know how to live, who does not know how to dissimulate.”¹⁴

The question of deception was seemingly everywhere during these centuries, in conduct manuals and ethical treatises, in plays and novels, touched on directly or implicitly, at length or in passing. Baldassare Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier*, first published in 1528, was reprinted 108 times by 1616 and translated into most every European language. After Castiglione, Giovanni della Casa’s *Galateo: Or, the Rules of Polite Behavior* appeared in 1558, Torquato Tasso’s dialogue *Malpiglio, or the Court* in 1587. The Spanish Jesuit Baltasar Gracián’s *Art of Worldly Prudence* proved an overnight sensation on publication in 1647. In France, both Pierre Charon’s early seventeenth-century treatise *On Wisdom* and Madeleine de Scudéry’s *On Lying* (part of her popular late-century work *Conversations on Diverse Subjects*) achieved wide readership, while, a century earlier, Philbert de Vienne’s satirical *Philosopher of the Court* hit close enough to home that more than a few readers took it for the real thing. No one missed the point when the renowned playwright Molière parodied both the self-interested religious hypocrite and the insufferably vain truth-teller in two of his greatest comedies, *Tartuffe* and *The Misanthrope*. Meanwhile, in England, Nathaniel Walker translated della Casa’s treatise as *The Refin’d Courtier*, while John Taylor would strike a blow for truth-telling in *A Satyre against, Equivocation, Mentall Reservation and Detestable Simulation*.

All this early modern interest in deception must mean something, and historians have often argued that its significance becomes clear only when contrasted with medieval attitudes about lying, and especially those of the early fifth-century North African bishop Augustine of Hippo, who famously and categorically prohibited all lies. Every lie is a sin, Augustine would argue, and we

must never choose to sin, never mind our reasons, never mind the consequences. Augustine's opinion soon became every theologian's opinion, repeated over the centuries, throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and long after as a truism never to be doubted. "Is every lie a sin?" the Dominican Sylvester Prierias would ask late in the fifteenth century. "I answer that it is not even licit to lie for the sake of saving someone's life, as Augustine, St. Thomas and all the theologians and canon lawyers teach."¹⁵ A difficult standard to live up to and one that almost every subsequent theologian would try to work around, but certainly one that contrasts profoundly with what would soon be common, if never uncontroversial, advice in the sixteenth century. In Dante's *Inferno*, for example, Guido de Montefeltro suffers eternally among the false counselors for having so often played the part "not of a lion, but of a fox," advising acts of cunning and fraud, telling lies and making false promises.¹⁶ When Machiavelli takes up the metaphor in *The Prince* several centuries later, he famously advises his readers that "it is necessary to be a fox in order to recognize the traps and a lion in order to frighten the wolves. Those who play only the part of the lion do not understand matters. A wise ruler, therefore, cannot and should not keep his word when such an observance of faith would be to his disadvantage and when the reasons which made him promise are removed."¹⁷ His stratagems may have been successful, but Guido languishes in hell all the same, while Machiavelli, in *The Prince* at least, seems simply not to care at all about the spiritual consequences of his advice.

While these contrasts are stark, they are a bit misleading. Too often, historians imagine that the difference between medieval and early modern Europe can be captured in the differences between medieval monks, priests, and theologians, on the one hand, and Renaissance humanists and courtiers, on the other. Through a sleight of hand, even if unintentional, "Scholastic" comes to stand in for "medieval," as if the writings of university-trained theologians speak transparently for all medieval men and women.¹⁸ Compared with medieval religious writings, the early modern emphasis on deception looks new indeed, as if people had suddenly

become less concerned about faith and more concerned about the world. Hand in hand with this new worldliness, people similarly seem to turn inward. As any number of historians have argued, the promotion of techniques of concealment and dishonesty among early modern writers allegedly provides evidence for new conceptions of the individual, rooted in clearer (or more complicated or more ambiguous) divisions between the exterior and interior self. While there might be something to these claims, there is not as much as historians think. Is it really all that surprising that Scholastic theologians and theologically inspired poets had different views about lying, about how to live in the world, than did Renaissance humanists and courtiers? Even the attitudes of medieval humanists and courtiers differed from those of their Scholastic peers.¹⁹

This is not another example of the historian's trick of arguing that everything new is old again, of the medievalist's cry that "so-called" Renaissance discoveries are little more than thefts from the closet of the past. Rather, it is to suggest that if we hope to understand what changed as Europe moved from a premodern to an early modern society, we need to be careful about how we put that story together. We must not unduly smooth it over, nor mismatch its narrative parts to create startling, though not entirely accurate, contrasts. There was not one medieval response to the question *Is it ever acceptable to lie?*—there were many. If theologians achieved a fair degree of consensus when specifically addressing the question, they disagreed, often significantly, in the fine points of their analyses. When questions about lying came up in other theological contexts, in biblical passages in which the patriarchs or demons or even God seem to lie, or when mulling the many mysteries of the Eucharist or Christ's incarnation, theological analyses of lying were often stretched near to the breaking point. Outside the rooms and walls of the medieval university, there were entirely different attitudes about lying. In both medieval court manuals and vernacular romances, those ever-popular stories of knightly chivalry and clandestine love, writers understood lying to be an unfortunate, but completely legitimate, response to a fallen and confusing

world. Even Dante's pilgrim in the ninth circle of hell is not above misleading and deceiving, making promises that he knows his interlocutor cannot possibly understand and then confidently justifying his deceptions by claiming his ice-blinded victim deserves whatever mistreatment he receives.

To attempt to do justice to these many historical strands, this book does not offer a single monolithic and chronological account of the history of lying. Rather, it presents the history of lying through five separate narratives, each one beginning in the early days of the Catholic Church or the Middle Ages and ending sometime late in the seventeenth or early in the eighteenth century. The book's organizing question, *Is it ever acceptable to lie?* is well suited to this project of multiple retellings because it begs us to ask an additional question, a question about who it is that can or cannot sometimes justifiably lie. While theologians, at least when specifically addressing the question of lying in their commentaries on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, did not believe specifying the speaker mattered (that is, they believed that the same response applied identically to one and all alike), this was not the case when the question slipped into other sorts of theological discussions or when nontheologians asked the question.²⁰ Is it ever okay *for whom* to lie? makes it possible to explore the different facets of this history.

This is at least one reason why it can be useful to do history, at least this history, in terms of an enduring and perennial question whose answer will differ depending on who does the asking and when. It allows us to perceive the fragmentations, the differences and debates, that exist in any culture at any one time, while simultaneously allowing us to trace how similarly situated people responded to the same question over time.²¹ And people were similarly situated when they pondered this question from the early days of the Christian church until the eighteenth century, not least because they agreed about the origin of human mendacity and its consequences. The narrative of the Fall—of the serpent's lying deception of Eve, Adam's decision to disobey God, and the first couple's exile from Eden—provided something like the bare bones of a tradition within which Christians would ask and answer this ques-

tion until well into the eighteenth century. Seventeenth-century natural scientists may have understood parts of that narrative differently than sixteenth-century reformers, and medieval theologians would understand it in yet other ways, but that tradition, transmitted from one generation to the next—some elements remaining unchanged, others evolving, disappearing, then reappearing, or taking on changed significance—set the stage within which Christians formed their beliefs about lies and lying.²²

If the narrative of the Fall set the stage for over a millennium of reflection on lies, it was a stage whose borders were porous and shifting, first decorated one way, then another. Simply put, even while accepting much the same narrative, different people brought different sets of concerns to it, interpreted it differently, drew varied conclusions from it. This has at least two consequences for how the history of lying will be presented in this book. First, there are elements of this narrative that writers will assert again and again over the centuries, beliefs that fifth-century bishops hold in common with sixteenth-century reformers. To stress these continuities and to elaborate on them more fully, there will be moments when it will be useful, for example, to bring Augustine into dialogue with Martin Luther, to use Luther's writings to make sense of and give added nuance to Augustine's writings, to look to the Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra's monumental fourteenth-century biblical commentaries as a way into the challenges that the seventeenth-century scientist and philosopher René Descartes faced as he worried about the problem of divine deception. Second, precisely because different writers told the story of the Fall differently, stressing different elements, integrating them with other sets of traditions, concerns, and ideas, it will be necessary to return to that story more than once in order to clarify how various writers drew on it, even as they used it to differentiate themselves from their peers and predecessors as they repeatedly asked the question *Is it ever acceptable to lie?*

In order to accomplish these various tasks, the following chapters, divided into two parts, tell the history of lying as a response to this question when posed to five different types of speakers in

the medieval and early modern world. The first part considers how theologians addressed the problem of lying, the second how non-theologians addressed the problem. Since one of the claims this book makes is that theological attitudes about lying were much more varied than often realized, the first half of the book examines how theologians analyzed lying in three different contexts: in their attempts to understand the nature of the Devil's deceitful words in the Garden of Eden, when they asked whether God could lie, and, finally, when they asked if it was ever licit for human beings to lie. Since another claim this book makes is that the opinion of professional theologians did not entirely define medieval attitudes about lying, the second half of the book shifts from the opinions of theologians to the opinions of two very different types of speakers: courtiers, on the one hand, and women, on the other.

The first chapters frame the ontological and metaphysical issues that will shape the rest of the book, but also seek to reveal how diverse the theological discussion of deception really was. To discuss lying and the Devil is to ask what precisely he did in the Garden of Eden, how did his words so quickly convince the Woman and, after her, Adam to sin against God's commandment not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. From very early on, the Church fathers asserted that the serpent's words were lies precisely because they altered and misinterpreted God's sacred Word. Genesis made the danger of misinterpretation obvious, as it spread contagion-like to the Woman, who, responding to the serpent's lying question, proceeded to alter God's command yet again. As a result, the Devil came to stand for the prototypical sophist swaying his audience with self-serving lies, the heretical teacher leading his flock away from the clear and inspired holy words of scripture. To misinterpret scripture was, in a very real sense, to lie about God, and we lie about God whenever we deviate from the truth of his Word. But as fallen creatures, our intellects dimmed, no longer able to see God face to face and easily confused, how do we know if we have deviated? This question took on renewed significance in the aftermath of Martin Luther's break with the Catholic Church as reformed theologians and believers

endlessly divided and subdivided into exegetically cantankerous sects, each claiming to be the sole keepers of God's literal word while accusing everyone else of colluding with the Devil. An impossible situation, and one that could be surmounted, according to the sixteenth-century Italian Protestant convert Jacobus Acontius, only if we turned our attention from the Devil, as the source of lies, to our diminished faculties, as the continuing cause of our inability to reach complete interpretive clarity and agreement. In his treatise *Satans Strategems* Acontius would urge his fellow reformers to treat interpretive disagreement not as a sign of demonic possession but rather as the consequence of our fallen and finite state. Misinterpretation, the cause of our exile from Eden, becomes the possible precondition for our peaceful coexistence with others.

The second chapter turns from the Devil's lie to ask the troubling question *Can God lie?* Considered in his essence, most theologians had no doubt that not only could God not lie, he could not even deceive. Beginning with Augustine (who, in part at least, drew on Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas concerning divinity), theologians understood God to be eternal and unchanging, immutable, just, and wise. It was inconceivable for such a being, incompatible with its very essence, to act so imperfectly as to deceive. Unfortunately, theologians had a rather difficult time squaring this philosophically inspired conception of God with the God described in scripture, a God who speaks, punishes, deceives, lies, and orders others to lie for him. How, for example, were they to explain away the fact that the entire possibility of human salvation depended on an apparent act of deception? A long line of theologians, poets, and artists, from Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century to Martin Luther in the sixteenth, believed that Christ had intentionally concealed his divinity from the Devil, hiding it within human flesh so the Devil would not know the true identity of the man he sought to crucify. The ritual consecration of the Eucharist posed a related problem. After the consecration of the host, the Church taught that the body of Christ was really and truly present, hidden within or behind the appearance of a simple piece of bread. Theologians attempted to justify these apparent deceptions through the lan-

guage and tools of rhetoric. Just as the Devil was the corrupt rhetorician, the evil sophist, God was the morally upright orator, perfectly fitting his words and deeds to the moment, countering evil with goodness, cunning with prudence. Whether this tactic successfully rescued God from charges of lying and deception is not entirely clear, but it highlights just how at odds the biblical and narrative conceptions of God as involved and interacting with the world were with philosophical conceptions of God as omnipotent, unchanging, and transcendent. Throughout the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, the tension between these two conceptions would prove completely incompatible, compelling the French philosopher René Descartes to argue that we can learn next to nothing about God from the Bible. God would be forever freed from charges of lying, but at the cost of no longer playing any active part in the world.

Taken together, the first two chapters describe the changing relations between the supernatural and the natural, between the Devil, God, and the world. In both cases, the history of lying reveals a gradual process of clarification and separation as the lines between the natural and supernatural become more distinct, more difficult to cross, as what once were divinely inspired features of the world become mere features of the world, ever more loosely tied to divine origins. The third chapter concludes the discussion of theological opinions about lying. Writing early in the fifth century, Augustine rooted his prohibition against lies in the nature of the Trinity and in the incarnation of Christ as the Word made flesh. When we lie, we undo our image and likeness to God. Every lie is a sin because with every lie we turn away from God. Scholastic theologians accepted Augustine's prohibition as authoritative but grounded it, not in God, but in conceptions of justice, that is, in terms of our obligations to ourselves and others. A crucial reorientation, this move offered a basis for considering the possible benefits of our lies while simultaneously asserting that no lie can ever be justified in terms of its outcomes. From this point forward, the history of theological debate about the legitimacy of lying becomes the history of unending efforts to expand the range of misleading,

but nonmendacious, speech, an effort culminating in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writings of Dominican and Jesuit casuists with their advocacy of such practices as equivocation and mental reservation. Blaise Pascal would lampoon these practices in his *Provincial Letters*, accusing the casuists of the most base and despicable sort of accommodation to the world. In response, he called for the good Christian to stand apart from worldly values, but even his writings evince some of the very adaptation he condemns.

The fourth and fifth chapters take up the problem of lying as it appeared to people whose relationship to the world made the problem of lying appear distinctly different than it did to theologians. The fourth chapter considers attitudes about lying among the members of Europe's ecclesiastical and secular courts. A long tradition, dating back to Rome, consistently depicted the court as a place of deception and mendacity gone wild as status-seeking courtiers did everything in their power to win the notice of their superiors, mislead their equals, and quash their inferiors. In the Middle Ages, especially in the writings of John of Salisbury, the court came to represent most clearly the conditions of life in a fallen world. The response of courtiers to this situation, in the Middle Ages and throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, remained much the same: we must be skeptical, we must employ the tools of rhetoric and the faculty of prudence to determine how we should act and what we should say and, when necessary, when we must lie. We have no choice but to adapt to the ways of a fallen and deceitful world, to lie to the liars. Medieval, no less than early modern, works stress the difference between our inner thoughts and our outward appearance, and the need to regulate our self-presentation to fool and please and deceive those around us. Simply put, the alleged differences between medieval and early modern conceptions of the self are overstated and, when it comes to the history of lying, a distraction from a much more significant development. John of Salisbury in the twelfth century, Christine de Pizan at the beginning of the fifteenth, and Castiglione in the sixteenth century all stress that we must lie to counteract the lies of

others. Lies are the regrettable tools we must employ in our own self-defense and for the good of the community. Over the course of the sixteenth century, but especially in the seventeenth, writers such as Giovanni della Casa, François La Rochefoucauld, and Pierre Nicole will contend that lies are not simply weapons deployed in our self-defense. Rather, lies constitute the very foundation of society itself. Without all forms of deception and flattery, society would rend itself irrevocably as our most base and inescapable passions would be revealed for one and all to see. Early in the eighteenth century, Bernard Mandeville would push this line of thought one step further, arguing that lies do more than help us endure one another's narcissistic pride: they are necessary if society is to progress and flourish.

The problem and fact of lying affected women differently than men. While we all might be liars, only women were thought to be inveterate liars. Greek medical ideas propounding the inferiority of women merged easily with a tradition of biblically based misogyny rooted in the story of the Fall, together forming the notion that all women were feeble-minded and inconstant, lacking in both prudence and judgment, and always under the sway of their desires with no qualms about lying to satisfy them. Women were to men, so the analogy went, as the body was to the soul. In other words, women were associated with deceptive coverings, false surfaces, and seductive adornment. Endlessly repeated, these ideas passed down from the third-century writings of Tertullian and other Church fathers to the Middle Ages, and from there to succeeding generations. The challenge women faced was not simply whether or not it was licit to lie, but how to respond to a situation in which they were thought to be—indeed, taught that they were—the very embodiment of dishonesty. Confronted with this oppressive and institutionalized ideology, women writers responded with a two-pronged critique. On the one hand, they revealed the misogynist tradition for the fabric of lies it was. On the other, they rehabilitated the function of adornment, decoration, and deception. Christine de Pizan, writing at the beginning of the fifteenth century, took up the first task, correcting slanderous accounts of famous women

and pointing out the implausibility of biologically based misogyny. Some two centuries later, two Venetian women, Lucrezia Marinella and Moderata Fonte, would argue that men, no less than women, depend on style and adornment to make themselves known, while contending that the lies of men are infinitely more harmful than any lie a woman could tell. Madeleine de Scudéry, the most popular author of the seventeenth century, would bring this line of thought to its conclusion. For Scudéry, style and adornment become the very mark and basis of the ideal society. If our self-interested passions and desires pose the greatest threat to social harmony, then we must conceal, even repress, them behind false and insincere adornments of speech, little lies and social niceties. Societal relations may well become utterly superficial, with people more interested in amicability than truth, but at least in such a society women, finally, can coexist in peace with men.

Decomposing the history of lying into five separate narratives raises questions, not only about the interrelations between and among those narratives, but also about the movement from medieval to early modern conceptions of lying. While each chapter can be read on its own, independently of the others, taken together they do tell a larger story about the domestication and naturalization of mendacity as it moves from being a devastating demonic disruption of the orderly world of paradise to being the source of worldly order itself. These movements seem gradual rather than sudden, beginning sometime in the High Middle Ages and generally reaching their conclusion sometime in the mid-seventeenth or even eighteenth century. At least when it comes to the history of lying, sharp divisions between the medieval and the early modern seem to be more hindrance than aid to understanding these developments, rendering differences sharper and more radical than they really are. If there is a moment that seems to divide the past from the present, these narrative histories suggest it can be found sometime in the eighteenth century, when it became possible to ask the question *Is it ever acceptable to lie?* outside the tradition of the Fall.

No doubt some readers will be surprised that certain topics or writers are barely discussed or not discussed at all. There is noth-

ing on politics and lying, on Renaissance debates about “the reason of state,” nor anything about the truth status of fiction and history. In response, I can only point out that the history of lying is immense, and no book could provide anything approaching a comprehensive account of it. Hopefully the book itself, its aims and logic, will justify what is included and what has been quietly passed over. This is a book about the problem of lying as it appeared to people from the fourth until the eighteenth century, that is, as a problem deeply connected to the tragic events in the Garden of Eden and how, finally, it became possible to imagine it as a problem having nothing to do with those events. In other words, it is a book about how the problem of lying became our problem, the problem as we know it today. At the same time, it is a book that hopes to upset a popular narrative that contrasts the medieval and the early modern in terms of diametrically opposed attitudes about lying and the easy contrasts that flow from that opposition. In order to accomplish these joint goals, this book examines the historical response to one question from a variety of perspectives, the theological and the secular, the uncreated and the created, the masculine and the feminine, revealing, if not the total diversity of opinions, a much greater diversity than historians have previously recognized. No doubt other perspectives could have been included, but it is difficult to imagine this history without these five perspectives, and certainly these five seem adequate to fulfill this book’s goals. Augustine may have had some sympathy for the predicament of having more to say than one should or has the time to say. “Hence it is not a lie when truth is passed over in silence,” he writes in his early fifth-century treatise *Against Lying*, “but when falsehood is brought forth in speech.”²³ And hopefully, if it is not a lie to pass over the truth in silence, neither will it be misleading, at least in what follows.