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THE CENTURY OF DECEPTION

*The Birth of the Hoax
in Eighteenth-Century England*

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PROLOGUE

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I

A professional magician is always looking for the perfect publicity stunt. In 2017 I needed one badly. After successfully performing my one-man comedy magic show at art centres and small theatres, I had ambitiously booked an evening of entertainment at the Theatre Royal Haymarket in London. Featuring a solo appearance at a West End venue on my website would impress future clients. It was going to be a tough sell, given that the theatre's capacity was 893, over ten times the size of my usual audience. But if I got in touch with all my existing contacts, including friends who had previously used my services, I thought I could make up the numbers. It turned out I had miscalculated.

One person after another gave an excuse as to why they were unable to buy a ticket. The potential downside of the venture was eye-watering. Initially I hoped the theatre would agree a box-office split, with proceeds divided between venue and performer. The management pointed out they would only consider such a deal with a show guaranteed to be a success – and mine did not remotely fall into that category. My only option was a buy-out for the evening. This meant that, although I kept all of the ticket sales, I had to pay £25,000 upfront. I decided to risk it. If I sold all the seats at £30 a head and made some additional money on selling programmes and other merchandise, I could come away with a small profit. But with the prospect of no audience I was facing a huge loss.

In turning this around, I had to overcome a seemingly

insurmountable problem: no one had heard of me. If I were well known, like the mind-reader Derren Brown, I could have obtained publicity with a slot on a television programme such as *The One Show* or *Good Morning Britain*. I did try telephoning several production companies but got no further than the receptionist. Emails and text messages were ignored. I sent out a press release to all the major newspapers, both national and local. The *Islington Tribune* was the only one that published it, accompanied with a sarcastic comment about the hubris of one of its borough residents.

With one month to go I had sold ten tickets. In desperation I contacted a few close friends to brainstorm my options. We met at the headquarters of The Magic Circle, which is located just behind Euston Station. Many drinks went down, and I am uncertain who it was that first came up with the ingenious solution. I like to think it was me, but I am probably flattering myself. Neal Austin later said it was him, so it's only fair I give him a name check. Of course, many of you reading this will already know what I'm about to tell you. Because for a brief period in January 2017 I, or at least my pseudonym, was seriously trending.

It all started with an advertisement that appeared on Facebook. The demographic spread of those who received it was potential London theatre-goers in the higher-income bracket, aged between twenty-five and forty. The notice stated that, on Monday 16 January 2017, an unknown performer was going to climb inside a bottle of Prosecco on the stage of the Theatre Royal Haymarket. It stressed it was an ordinary-sized bottle and, in case anyone suspected any subterfuge, it could be examined in advance. Once the entertainer was inside the bottle, he would sing a medley of songs. Furthermore, the bottle could be passed around the audience to check all was fair.

Readers were also informed that this same person would borrow a walking stick and play a tune on it as if it was a musical instrument, and he would reveal the names of audience members, even if they were masked. It was pointed out that he had performed in Europe, Asia and Africa at exclusive private functions. The implication was

that this would be the last occasion on which he would make a public appearance. To reassure everybody they would get their money's worth it was noted the show would last at least two-and-a-half hours. The cost of the tickets, which could only be bought on the night, was at the top end of West End prices, the same as you would pay to see *The Lion King* or *The Book of Mormon*. My thinking was that all this gave the show an air of exclusivity and the semblance of respectability. What's more, it was happening at one of London's most prestigious theatres. Surely such a venerable institution would not be party to some sort of deliberate fraud?

The advertisement appeared only five days before the actual performance. Delaying any publicity until the last moment was a deliberate ploy on my part. It created enough time to provoke interest and intrigue, in particular fuelling curiosity as to the performer's possible identity – but insufficient for anybody to address rationally the absurdity of what the person was claiming he could do. In any event, I surmised, was climbing inside a wine bottle any more impossible than walking on the Thames, living in a Perspex box for forty-four days without food, or making the Statute of Liberty disappear? These had all been done respectively by the magicians Dynamo, David Blaine and David Copperfield.

I knew I was on to something when an anonymous genius came up with the hashtag 'Bottle Conjurer'. It was posted on my Twitter feed, linked to the advertisement. As a result, whether it was on this social network or others, everybody seemed to be talking about the magician entering the bottle. His other proposed feats were ignored. I was a little concerned when somebody wrote a spoof notice stating that a man jumping down his own throat would be on the same bill. But it just got the Bottle Conjurer talked about even more. Given the success of the advertisement I decided to leave it unaltered, thus not publicly acknowledging the buzz surrounding it. My only amendment came, on 13 January; I added a note that there would be security present at the theatre. This hinted that there might be problems on the night, given the demand for tickets. When

I discovered the cost of hiring bouncers, I abandoned the idea. But I disingenuously retained the wording, because the feedback I was seeing online suggested it was giving extra confidence to those contemplating attending.

It was all coming together better than I could have expected. But on 16 January it began to unravel. So caught up was I with the publicity and the promotion that I hadn't got around to thinking how I could even begin to meet the audience's expectations. I did speak with my friend Paul Kieve, who has devised many brilliant theatrical illusions for shows such as *Ghost the Musical*, *Matilda* and *The Invisible Man*. He couldn't think of any magic principle that would genuinely convince spectators that a fully-grown man was inside a litre bottle.

My intended solution was that I would go on stage and treat it as a joke. The Bottle Conjurer hadn't made it as he had been persuaded earlier in the evening to give a private performance. Someone had corked him inside a bottle, and he couldn't escape. After the laughter had subsided, I would then do my normal show. But I could tell, when eavesdropping on the queuing audience, that this was not going to work. I heard one couple agreeing with another that all they wanted to see was a person entering a bottle. A man was proclaiming that, while he knew it was not physically possible, he was expecting to see a credible representation of the stunt: he had seen similar on YouTube, so why not in real life? I confess I lost my nerve. Props in hand, I slipped out of the stage door. I left the theatre staff to deal with the consequences.

The unfortunate circumstances of that night were widely reported in the media. I really hadn't anticipated such anger from those attending. My faint hope was they would still accept the non-appearance of the Bottle Conjurer as an amusing jest. The rioting was set off by a heckle. When a nervous member of staff told the audience that they would get their money back if the show didn't go ahead, someone yelled out, 'For double the price he'll climb inside a medicine bottle!' Scuffles immediately broke out in the theatre

and continued outside as the disgruntled ticket holders exited onto the street. The fracas was not helped by a mocking crowd who were waiting there to hear how the performance had gone.

All the newspapers had a field day, with headlines such as the 'Bubble Bursts leaving the Audience Flat' and 'The Miracle of the Invisible Performer'. Even I had to smile at a cartoon in the *Daily Mail* with the caption 'Ye're all Bottled'. There were rumours Prince Harry had attended the show. Although his name was never specifically mentioned in the press, there were vague references to a 'distinguished member of the royal family' being present. Fearful of getting sued by aggrieved attendees, and the Theatre Royal's claim for damages caused by the brawls, I lay low and kept quiet. I had had the foresight to secure the booking of the theatre through an overseas associate (it was a tax dodge). The Facebook advertisement was posted from an untraceable email account. It meant there was no paper trail back to me. There was speculation that either the theatre's management, or the producer of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, which was showing there for the rest of the week, had dreamt up the Bottle Conjurer as a promotional gimmick. Both issued press statements denying culpability.

This is the first time I have confessed my role in the affair. I refute the allegation made by some that I have chosen this moment to go public in order to promote *The Century of Deception*.

II

As befits a book about hoaxes, what you have read so far is fiction. But only to the extent that I have updated events of 1749 to the present day. You will discover in a later chapter that in all the essential elements, including the attempt by one enterprising author to pretend to be the Bottle Conjurer, the above scenario is identical to what happened over 270 years ago. However one aspect of my imaginary stunt is true: I am a professional magician who specialises in comedy

magic. And part of my fascination with hoaxes is that the best of them comprise both aspects of my chosen form of entertainment: they are fooling and amusing.

A hoax is a different animal from a con or a financial swindle, of which there were plenty in the eighteenth century. The most common was obtaining goods or monies under false pretences, either by claiming to represent another party – the so-called ‘false servant’ – or by passing yourself off as someone to whom credit could be extended. An example, unique to this period, was obtaining naval prize money. This was due to those who had participated in the seizure of a ship. Sailors were allowed part of the proceeds of selling off its cargo and the vessel itself, together with any ransom money received for returning enemy captors to their homeland. The fraud was achieved by pretending to be an entitled crew member or related to a deceased mariner.

Another potential means of illicitly obtaining money was through the lottery. State lotteries had been introduced by a Parliament Act in 1694 and continued through to 1826. The money raised was used to reduce the capital and interest on national debt, as well as pay for specific projects. One deception was the presentation of a forged lottery ticket. A more ambitious scheme was launched in 1722 when the directors of the Harburg Company attempted to sell off lottery tickets to the value of £1,500,000, with the aim of distributing prize money of one million pounds and keeping the remainder. The House of Commons called it ‘an infamous and fraudulent undertaking’ and Lord Barrington, a member who had been instrumental in promoting the project, was expelled. As so often happens, perpetrators of massive fraud fare rather better than those stealing relatively small amounts. William Dodd, an Anglican clergyman, was arrested in 1777 for discounting a bill of exchange allegedly drawn by the Earl of Chesterfield. Despite Samuel Johnson, among many others, interceding on his behalf, he was hanged.

Instigating a hoax in order to financially benefit is rare. In only one of the cases that I consider was money the main incentive for the

deception. Even then it is hard to know how it could have succeeded. A couple of the others did generate income for the perpetrator but that was through chance rather than any foresight. That is not to say that the remaining hoaxes were benign; far from it. Possibly three were done in order to get the upper hand over, or exact revenge on, someone else (as we will discover, the exact motive behind a hoax is often hard to unravel). Another three were carried out for personal ambition. Two had loftier aims to expose wrongs in society. Only one hoax therefore fits tidily into my definition, akin to a good illusion, of amicably spoofing people for the sheer joy of it.

You would have thought that one difference between a magic trick and a hoax is that with the latter it is obvious how it is done. However, many of the best hoaxes are far more intricate and sophisticated than they first appear. This is reflected in that some continue to be believed even after they have been exposed. With others there are details, which contributed to the schemes' success, that require almost a forensic investigation to properly understand them. Confessions, whether through admittance, interrogation, court trial or writing books, therefore play a large part in getting to the bottom of many of the hoaxes. In one instance the alleged culprit went to her grave denying any involvement, which means there are still many unanswered questions relating to it – even to the extent of being unclear whether it was a hoax at all.

In that one, as indeed in all the hoaxes I look at, you cannot blame a lack of available evidence for any failure to comprehend the entirety of the story. The sheer volume of contemporary data can seem, at times, almost overwhelming. Before 1700 this was not the case, with facts about supposed hoaxes being sparse and often questionable. For instance, it is still not known whether the Cerne Abbas Giant – a chalk figure of an enormous naked man with an erect phallus carved into the side of a hill in Dorset – was drawn in the seventeenth century or earlier. Similarly, it is uncertain whether the seer responsible for *The Prophecie of Mother Shipton* published in 1641, eighty years after she was said to have died, even existed.

One of the most authenticated, pre-eighteenth-century hoaxes was conducted by William Perry. Otherwise known as the Boy of Bilson, he claimed in 1620 that he was bewitched, as a result of which he began to vomit 'rags, thred, straw, crooked pinnes'. Jone Cocke was accused of casting a spell on him and was sentenced to death. But a Bishop intervened and persuaded the thirteen-year-old to admit he had faked his symptoms. All of our knowledge relating to the case is limited to, and wholly dependent on, two pamphlets: there are no newspapers, trial transcripts, theatrical reconstructions or satirical cartoons to provide any supporting testimony.

Another 100 years after Perry's bizarre behaviour, there is an abundant paper trail available on all major hoaxes. From 1678, trials at the Old Bailey were regularly published. The first daily newspaper, *The Daily Courant*, appeared in 1702. An exponential growth in other papers, and then journals, followed thereafter. These brought about in their turn, through advertising, an escalation in the production of pamphlets. Drama, too, was more easily promoted. From 1714 onwards there were at least two London theatres competing during the winter months. The evening's entertainment was extended, so that there was both a full-length play and an afterpiece. These short farces or pantomimes incorporated contemporary news items, including hoaxes. Satirical prints, the equivalent of today's topical cartoons, came into their own from 1720, the year William Hogarth's career began. Only a couple of the hoaxes that I feature failed to be depicted in an engraving, with both Hogarth and his great successor, James Gillray, each illustrating three of them.

Alongside the increase in reliable information about hoaxes came an equivalent preoccupation in the subject matter generally. As each new hoax unfolded, it seemed to many to further prove the inherent gullibility of the populace – they were 'perpetual testimonies of English credulity'. The phrase 'English credulity' originated in 1749 and was constantly reprised through to the end of the century. When a number of gentlemen were duped into parting with money for an alchemist-type scheme to make gold, it was labelled as a 'modern

instance of English Credulity'. Readers were informed that a man had taken 'Advantage of English Credulity' by pretending he had slept for four months without food or water. A surgeon announced a successful operation enabling a cripple to walk, raising the question of whether this had been dreamt up in order to ridicule 'English Credulity'. A 'pretty strong instance of English credulity' was demonstrated when a crowd had gone to see 'a wonderful creature' found in a sewer, which turned out to be a hedgehog.

Overseas visitors were said to be taking advantage of this perceived ailment. A German who was tried for fraud had 'for some time past lived upon English Credulity'. French adventurers with fake 'titles of Marquis, Comte, Vicomte and Chevalier' entered this country 'to prey on English credulity'. The Dutch, Italians, Swedes and Hungarians were encouraged to come over with their 'whims' as the English were 'one great pack of fools'. 'Foreigners have repeatedly laughed at the English for their credulity,' reported one paper. Occasionally certain sectors of the populace were highlighted as being especially susceptible. 'The lower class of people' were more ready to 'believe the grossest absurdities'. 'Particularly the Londoners' possessed 'a much greater share of gross credulity'. But usually it was generalised. 'Credulity is a part of the English character,' claimed an author. A correspondent thought that 'no people are more credulous than the English in swallowing [hoaxes]'. In summary, there was a 'hold which credulity retained on the national character'.

Given this self-flagellation, tinged with more than a hint of xenophobia, intellectuals and thinkers were keen to develop the tools to convincingly expose a hoax. It was important that any related incident was 'authentic', which came increasingly to be a buzzword of the eighteenth century. Relying on 'taste' – in other words an instinctive reaction as to whether a story was true or not – was insufficient. English law, in order to convict someone of a crime, no longer insisted on there being an actual eyewitness. Circumstantial evidence was now accepted, which changed the system of proof from 'demonstration' to 'beyond reasonable doubt'. Evidence had to be

collected and weighed up. Once in play it then had to be scrutinised to check it was consistent both with itself and with external facts and observations.

One area of significance was the reliability of witnesses. Did they have a reason to lie? For instance, so as not to implicate themselves, or because they were bribed? Did they have an accurate recall of what happened? The concept of false memories, or the dangers of forgetting due to lapse of time, was known about. Were they giving sufficient detail in relating their side of events? The lack of it could be an indication of falsehood. Nevertheless, in spite of the increasing knowledge in such matters – and in figuring out one or two of the hoaxes there was an element of applying these ‘modern’ principles – the majority were only really solved to everybody’s satisfaction through a confession from the perpetrator.

First-time reliable reporting, contemporary fascination with the subject matter, and the development of methods to expose them might all seem reasons to support the thesis that the birth of hoaxes happened in the eighteenth century. But I would not have wanted to write this book unless I considered the hoaxes themselves to be intriguing in their own right. And in this respect the era does not let me down. In 1899 a query was raised as to whether there were any hoaxes that had occurred in the past 100 years that bore comparison with those of the previous century. A correspondent came back with four suggestions: John Payne Collier, Sir William Courtenay, the *Bathybius haeckelii* and Sir Roger Tichborne. The first was a Shakespearian forger, a mere amateur in contrast to his counterpart discussed in the final chapter. Sir William Courtenay maintained that smugglers accused of stealing the contraband from one of Her Majesty’s ships were innocent. Not so much a hoax as a direct lie. He was imprisoned for perjury. *Bathybius haeckelii* was a substance discovered by the British biologist Thomas Huxley that he genuinely thought was the source of all organic life. So, an error of judgement with no intention of deliberate deceit. The Tichborne affair, concerning a man called Arthur Orton who claimed he was

the missing heir to the Tichborne baronetcy, captivated Victorian society for nearly a decade. But, basically, it was an attempt at impersonation in order to obtain money and a title.

So, stand by not just to be educated but, more importantly, to be entertained by far more enterprisingly duplicitous stunts than these. In the process you will learn plenty about the society of the 1700s; the involvement of historical names such as Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, the Duke of Cumberland, Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Johnson; how hoaxes impacted on the religion, politics, wars and monarchy of the times; the myriad ways and reasons why some people were credulous and others were sceptical; and the sheer inventiveness of our predecessors to come up with imaginatively deceptive schemes. Welcome to a rollicking ride, accompanied by gasps and laughs, through eighteenth-century hoaxes.

‘LATELY ARRIVED
FROM FORMOSA’

* * *

I

Hoaxes tend to be short-lived, overturned by an inevitable revelation, newly acquired information or a forced confession. It takes a special person to sustain a singular pretence over a lifetime, even though most people have forgotten about it and the potential for exploiting any gain is long gone. In this respect George Psalmanazar stands out as exceptional, surely one of the greatest liars of the eighteenth, or indeed any other century – a man who was able to convince London society that, despite an appearance that contradicted his assertion and without any evidence to support his claims, he came from a far eastern island that upheld barbaric religious customs. And yet he was also somebody seemingly without malice or a desire to cause harm to others. Praise does not come much higher or from a more respected source than Samuel Johnson. Psalmanazar was ‘the *best* man he had ever known’ and the one person he would seek out to ‘sit with him at an alehouse’.

George Psalmanazar [Fig. 1] (as he called himself – his real name has never been discovered) was born in 1679 and brought up in Southern France as a Catholic. His father deserted the household before his son had reached the age of five, moving more than



Fig. 1: Portrait of George Psalmanazar, taken from his posthumously published *Memoirs*.

500 miles away. A combination of an excellent education and an 'uncommon genius for languages' resulted in fluency in Latin and Greek. He left school at the age of sixteen, seeking employment in Avignon as a tutor, his early choice of career. This did not work out well, with a relative of one of his pupils making sexual overtures to him. He was eventually dismissed and found himself desolate, unable to obtain another position. He had no alternative but to return to his mother. However, he was faced with the problem of how to pay for his food and lodgings on the journey back.

In his *Memoirs*, published posthumously, Psalmanazar says that from an early age he learnt to gain sympathy by pretending that he had too great an attachment to the Church, blaming his absent father

for this. He was convincing, with friars in particular showing him 'pity and admiration'. He decided for his homebound trip to exploit this acquired skill of exaggerating his religious devotion. He took on the character of a Roman Catholic on a pilgrimage from Ireland to Rome. A forged certificate, showing he was a student of theology, established his credentials. He also carried a stolen cloak and staff, and spoke in Latin. In this guise he requested alms from clergymen and other sympathisers. He led such a good life on his travels that he seriously thought about continuing to the Vatican. Psalmanazar's life of reinventing himself had begun.

Arriving back home, he did not remain there long. His mother persuaded him to go and visit his father. He suspected it was a plan to get him out of the way while she was wooed by his cousin. She reassured him that she only wanted to find out if her husband was all right and that he was 'by no means to stay longer than a year from her', he writes, 'unless I could convince her that it was very much to my advantage'. Once again masquerading as an Irish pilgrim, Psalmanazar made his way to Germany and was reunited with his father. However, this parent, too, didn't seem keen on his son staying with him for any length of time. Psalmanazar acquiesced, knowing that his ignorance of German and his foreign pronunciation of Latin and Greek did not augur well for obtaining any work as a tutor. He was encouraged to go to the Low Countries, where he would have a better chance of getting a job. Never again would Psalmanazar see his family.

Psalmanazar's intended destination was Cologne. But he was wary about continuing to play the part of an Irishman. He was concerned he might meet another person from that country who would expose him as a fraud. He opted instead to be a native from the Far East. This time there was no obvious financial incentive in his choice of role, and Psalmanazar fails to address why he adopted it. The most likely assumption is that he genuinely got a kick out of recreating himself, realising that people were more liable to take notice of him if he was someone other than an unremarkable Frenchman with no money and little prospect of bettering himself.