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The Rhetoric of Illusion: Persuasion and Response in Forgery, the Arts and Other Deceptions (1600-1750)

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Summary

In his drawing 'The Children of Mercury' (1596), Hendrick Goltzius follows the tradition of the *Planetenkinder* by surrounding Mercury with his offspring, the professions associated with him. He does however break with the genre's convention of presenting Mercury in the context of trade: by placing two rhetoricians at the god's feet, Goltzius emphasizes that he is depicting him in his role as the protector of rhetoric, the art of persuasion. Behind Mercury we see his other children: the painter, the sculptor, the actors on stage and, right in the centre of the image, the mountebank, the profession associated with so many different forms of deception, from textual forgery to imposture, that it had become a by-word for deceit in late 16th-century Europe. What unites all of these professions is that they weave a fabric of lies, a notion that Goltzius underlines by prominently placing a weaving shuttle between the quack and the painter. The shuttle refers to the early modern Dutch word 'webbe', which referred to a woven tissue but was also used in the phrase 'een webbe van leughens', which literally translates as 'a tissue of lies'.

The lies spun by forgers, imposters, painters, playwrights, poets and other kinds of deceivers form the main theme of this dissertation, which in many respects is marked by variety and difference. The dissertation is a collection of five articles about five very different deceptions. The first of these is *The Originall of Idolatries* (1624), a religious treatise that was deliberately misrepresented by its translator, Abraham Darcie, as a work by the renowned philologist Isaac Casaubon. The second is a medical handbill, which advertises the arrival of an Italian mountebank in London but was really written by John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, in 1676. The third case is that of George Psalmanazar, a Frenchman whose claim that he was a native of Formosa, today's Taiwan, made him a celebrity when he first arrived in London in 1703 and would be elaborated on in his *An Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa* (1704), an almost completely fabricated treatise on the island. The fourth is the extraordinary history of Mary Toft, a young woman who pretended, in front of some of her period's most eminent physicians, to give birth to rabbits in 1726. The Great Bottle Hoax, the last of my cases, took place on 16 January 1749, after an advertisement had promised that a man would jump into a small bottle on the

stage of the New Theatre in London. When neither man nor bottle appeared on the night, the audience realized it had been fooled and wrecked the theatre.

What these deceptions have in common is that they were all presented and exposed in London in the period between 1620 and 1750 and that they can all be defined as creative forgeries, a term I use for forgeries, impostures and hoaxes that are original and unique creations rather than copies that are created to be passed off as their prototype. This absence of a prototype has major implications for how a particular forgery is created, presented and evaluated, and the kind of impact it will have on the world. Creative forgery is an emphatically rhetorical genre: it is created to convince audiences of its authenticity and to be woven into the fabric of reality. This is a highly complex process and all five articles focus on the strategies of this persuasion as well as the dynamics of the various kinds of response to them, from the games of cat-and-mouse played between forgers and their critics to prints and pamphlets published in the aftermath of the forgery's exposure.

The five articles are also connected by three themes, the most important of which is the relationship between the respective dynamics of forgery and artistic deception in the early modern period. The first question within this theme is why some artists, like Goltzius, and playwrights identified with forgers in the early modern period and what role the notions of persuasion and response played in this identification. This question is first addressed in 'The Artist and the Mountebank: Rochester's Alexander Bendo and the Dynamics of Forgery and Illusion in 17th-Century Art', the second article in the dissertation. My discussion places Rochester's handbill in the tradition in which artists and playwrights compared the mountebank's deceptions with their own work's ability to make their audiences experience their work, however fleetingly, as what they represented rather than a mere representation.

The theory and practice of artistic illusionism is also the subject of the final article, 'The Pleasure of Being Deceived: Spectatorship in the Arts and Other Deceptions in 18th-Century England', which discusses three of the commentaries on the case of Mary Toft and the Great Bottle Hoax, including William Hogarth's *Cunicularii or The Wise men of Godliman in Consultation* (1726) and George Bickham the Younger's *The Bottle Conjurer, from Head to Foot, without Equivocation* (1749). These prints include, implicitly as well as explicitly, discussions of the dynamics of illusion in painting and the theatre and how these compared to those found in actual deception. And perhaps more importantly, both reflect on a crucial question: what set forgery and artistic illusion apart?

The second theme concerns the relationship between forgery and scholarship in early modern England, which is explored in three different ways. The first of these concerns the attitude of early modern philologists, such as Joseph Scaliger, Isaac Casaubon and Joseph Bentley, towards forgery. As Anthony Grafton observes in *Forgers and Critics. Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (1990), Joseph Scaliger ‘saw the identification of spurious passages and whole works as the most profound and original task the critic had to perform’ and this perception was to have a profound impact on the relationship between philology and forgery in the early modern period.¹ The first article, ‘The Forgery of Isaac Casaubon’s Name: Authority and *The Originall of Idolatries*’, discusses this relationship in an analysis of *The Vindication or Defence of Isaac Casaubon* (1624), in which Meric Casaubon not only explicitly addresses the connections between forgery and scholarship but also uses his father’s philological tools to prove that his father did not write *The Originall of Idolatries* (1624).

The third article, ‘Between Fact and Fiction: Transforming the Past in George Psalmanazar’s Forged Histories of the Orient’, combines the themes of the relationship between forgery and scholarship and that between forgery and art, in the sense that it demonstrates how Psalmanazar’s fake treaty on Formosa uses the generic conventions of historical scholarship to disguise its fictional nature and persuade its readers of the truthfulness of its often outrageous accounts. ‘The New Phalaris: George Psalmanazar between the Moderns and the Ancients’, the fourth article, argues that the philological attitude towards forgery would eventually collide with the discourse of artistic illusionism in the Battle of the Books at the turn of the 18th century and places the reception of the imposture of George Psalmanazar in the light of this clash.

The third theme is the notion of forgery as a locus for negotiation of change, definition and redefinition. All the texts and images I discuss include definitions and redefinitions of the concept and practice of forgery in early modern England as well as intimately related concepts, such as truth, authenticity, and reality. Grafton’s *Forgers and Critics* led the way to a new critical approach to forgery in which it is not simply dismissed for its dubious ethics or treated as a mere literary curiosity. Instead, the various stages of the lifecycle of a forgery, from its creation to the aftermath of its exposure, are explored in terms of how they reflect certain wider developments as well as their lasting impact on a broad range of discourses and practices. The five articles in this dissertation all share this approach and together shed light on how the

1 Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, 74.

creation and exposure of forgery in early modern Britain contributed to the definition and redefinition of the nature and dynamics of the arts and their reception and the perceived relationship between scholarship, truth and truthfulness.

These three themes are not static and the articles in the dissertation have been arranged according to the chronology of the forgery cases to reflect this and to facilitate a short final discussion, in the coda. The articles also build on each other in terms of their content: the discussions of the respective attitudes to deception in scholarship and the arts in the first two articles prepare the ground, as it were, for my discussions on how the two relate to each other in George Psalmanazar's deceptions.

1. The Forgery of Isaac Casaubon's Name: Authority and *The Originall of Idolatries*

The first article focuses on *The Originall of Idolatries* (1624), a long-forgotten and vehemently anti-Catholic treatise that appeared posthumously under the name of the great philologist Isaac Casaubon. Meric Casaubon immediately disputed his father's authorship and, at the request of Casaubon's former patron, King James I, published *The Vindication or Defence of Isaac Casaubon*, in which he used his father's philological tools and methods to prove that his father could not have written *The Originall*. He was right: the work was in fact a translation of an anonymous 16th-century French pamphlet, which had been craftily attributed to Casaubon by its translator, Abraham Darcie. The fact that Darcie used the name of one of the greatest forgery hunters of the early modern period for his deception makes this case particularly relevant in the context of the relationship between forgery and authority. The various concepts, practices and traditions of authority associated with Casaubon were in many ways crucial to the goals and set-up of Darcie's deceit and the intended impact of the deception.

Forgeries engage with specific social and political circumstances as well as a wide network of texts and they involve many different practices – on the forger's side as well as that of the reader. Tracing the history of *The Originall* from the foundations laid by Darcie's earlier works to the affair's aftermath shows how a number of texts – by Casaubon and others – and practices, including dedication, plagiarism and critical reading, all played a crucial part in the case and were all, in their own way, closely related to authority - Casaubon's *auctoritas* as well as the authority of James I, Meric Casaubon and Abraham Darcie.

2. The Artist and the Mountebank: Rochester's Alexander Bendo and the Dynamics of Forgery and Illusion in 17th-Century Art

In 1676, a medical handbill was published to advertise the recent arrival of the Italian mountebank Alexander Bendo in London. The handbill however addressed the subject that authentic mountebanks, given their reputation for mendacity, tended to avoid: deception. 'if I appear to any one like a counterfeit', Bendo states, it could only be because as an honest man, he is 'the counterfeit's example, his original [...] Is it therefore my fault if the cheat by his wits and endeavours makes himself so like me, that consequently I cannot avoid resembling of him?'¹ Alexander Bendo actually was a cheat, in the sense that his persona and his handbill had been fabricated by the Earl of Rochester, as a sustained experiment with the boundaries of fiction and deceit.

Instead of following the common perception that the handbill was part of the imposture Rochester allegedly carried off in 1676, I place the text in the context of the tradition in which painters and playwrights identified with the figure of the mountebank and discuss it with reference to Goltzius' drawing 'The Children of Mercury', the mountebank scene from Ben Jonson's play *Volpone* (1606) and Gerrit Dou's painting *The Quack* (1652), all of which use the mountebank as a vehicle to explore the illusionary nature and dynamics of their own *métier*. Rochester's Alexander Bendo handbill, I argue, is a continuation of this particular tradition but takes the identification between the mountebank and artist a significant step further in an experiment with representational boundaries, in which the text bounces back and forth between poetic virtuosity and actual deception.

3. Between Fact and Fiction: Transforming the Past in George Psalmanazar's Forged Histories of the Orient

In this article, I turn to Psalmanazar's main forgery, *An Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa* (1704), and the relationship between forgery and the past. Fiction and history both engage in a constant process of reinventing the past, but the same can be said for most types of forgery. Psalmanazar's *Historical and Geographical Description* is no exception to this rule and offers several different kinds of invented pasts. In his representation of these pasts, Psalmanazar plays a complex game with

1 Rochester, *To all gentlemen, ladies, and others*, 2-3.

the dynamics of truth and fiction as well as his readers' knowledge of the generic conventions of literary fiction and history. As such, the work reflects the perceived differences between the *ars poetica* and the *ars historica*, which I elaborate on with reference to the work of the French Jesuit poet and historian Pierre Le Moyne, as well as developments in historical genres, most notably that of the biography, in early 18th-century England. As such, Psalmanazar's invented pasts are highly relevant to the understanding of the early modern perception of the ways in which history and fiction transformed the past as well as the borders that separated truth and fiction in the early 18th century.

4. The New Phalaris: George Psalmanazar between the Moderns and the Ancients

Over the past decades, George Psalmanazar has become one of the darlings of forgery studies and is regularly included, alongside Thomas Chatterton, James Macpherson and William Henry Ireland, in the canon of Britain's 18th-century master forgers. This article takes a new approach and considers Psalmanazar's imposture in the context of a controversy that started in the 1690s, the Battle of the Books. The article first analyses the debate about the *Epistles of Phalaris*, the forgery at the heart of the battle, in the light of the two discourses set out in the first two articles, the philological approach and the illusionist perception. Richard Bentley's approach to the letters and the methodology he used to expose them were in line with the philological approach to forgery established by Joseph Scaliger and Isaac Casaubon, whereas the Ancient camp referred to aspects of artistic illusionism, most notably the notion of living presence, to shrug off Bentley's conclusions.

The debate about George Psalmanazar's identity came hot on the heels of the Phalaris controversy and my article argues that placing his imposture in the light of the Battle of the Books helps to elucidate the Royal Society's preoccupation with Psalmanazar as well as the role of the concept of living presence in the reception of his imposture. The article elaborates on this notion in discussions of Psalmanazar's appearances in a spoof advertisement by Sir Richard Steele that appeared in *The Spectator* in 1711 and the text that would preserve the persona of the Native of Formosa in literary history, Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729).

5. The Pleasure of Being Deceived: Spectatorship in the Arts and Other Deceptions in 18th-Century England

The final article focuses on the aftermath of two 18th-century deceptions: the case of Mary Toft, a young woman who pretended to give birth to rabbits in 1726, and the much less familiar Great Bottle Hoax (1749). As was usual in 18th-century England, the aftermath of these cases was accompanied by an abundance of pamphlets and prints. I will discuss three of these and argue that they include subtexts that reflect on the relationship between illusion in the arts and actual deception. In the case of Mary Toft, my main focus will be on William Hogarth's print *Cunicularii or The Wise Men of Godliman in Consultation* (1726), which depicts Toft mid-birth, surrounded by the eminent physicians who, against all scientific evidence, believed her. At first sight, the print may seem a simple case of *Schadenfreude*, but on closer inspection it contains a number of visual references that place the image in the context of the 17th-century discourse on the illusionary nature of the arts as well as 18th-century developments in the approach to artistic illusion.

In the second part of the article, I turn to the aftermath of the Great Bottle Hoax. My discussion focuses on two particular commentaries published in the weeks after the New Theatre was destroyed by its outraged audience, the first of which is *A Letter to the Town Concerning the Man and the Bottle* (1749). This anonymous pamphlet touches on two important notions of theatrical illusion, the theatre's duty towards the audience to hide its artificial status and different approaches to audience response, and I discuss these with reference to a number of 18th-century theoretical texts on the theatre. George Bickham's print *The Bottle Conjurer, from Head to Foot, without Equivocation* (1749) juxtaposes two kinds of deceivers: Philip Stanhope, the Earl of Chesterfield, whom Bickham clearly believed was responsible for the hoax, and Samuel Foote, who was a playwright and actor as well as the manager of the unfortunate New Theatre. Like Hogarth's *Cunicularii*, Bickham's print elaborates on 17th-century visual comparisons between artists and actual deceivers but unlike Goltzius and Dou, Bickham presents moral objections to actual deception and is unequivocal about its methods as well as its negative impact on the world.

