

**Keable, Ian. *The Century of Deception: The Birth of the Hoax in Eighteenth-Century England*. London: The Westbourne Press, 2021. 305 pp. 978-1-908-90644-1**

*Andrew C. Rouse*

A much-awaited new volume (with a pre-publication option) by Ian Keable made its way to the physical and online stores last year. Those who have already savoured Keable's book on the life and magic of Charles Dickens (*Charles Dickens Magician: Conjuring in Life, Letters and Literature*, 2014, privately published) will already know him as more than a professional magician, indeed a multiple award-winning inner member of the Magic Circle, but a wordsmith of some considerable talent and a meticulous researcher. His monthly newsletter demonstrates how he can pitch his prose according to the task in hand with literary sleight of hand. This is enjoyable as well as informative reading.

The eighteenth century, Keable claims, was the age when the hoax came into its own in England, although certainly earlier examples do exist—the Donation of Constantine (eighth century) being just one that comes to mind. But certainly, the spread of popular print and the “newspaper” would have been convenient vehicles for spreading at speed “facts” to the gullible. Keable's book, if nothing else, shows the modern reader that “It must be true—I read it in the papers/I heard it from this reliable source” is no modern mantra but has existed for a very long time. However, from examples from an earlier period given by Keable in the Prologue, it can be seen how apt the eighteenth century was for deception. “One of the most authenticated, pre-eighteenth-century hoaxes was conducted by William Perry [. . .] he claimed in 1620 that he was bewitched, as a result of which he began to vomit ‘rags, thred, straw, crooked pinnes’ [. . .]. All of our knowledge related 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” (Keable 8). A century later, the *Daily Courant*, England's first daily newspaper, had already been in circulation for almost two decades, being followed by many other journalistic ventures. Even more evident on the streets was the swathe of broadsheet ballads that had begun to emerge at the end of the sixteenth century but which by now were equally an omnipresent source both of entertainment and what was perceived as fact but which, like today, was as likely to be disinformation or at best fancy.

Gullibility—a necessary prerequisite to a successful hoax—was widespread and democratic. Among those mentioned astounded in one way or another by the eighteenth-century hoax are Henry Fielding, Samuel Johnson and Jonathan Swift—

Johnson was an admirer of the hoaxster George Psalmanazar, who features in the opening chapter, “Lately Arrived from Formosa” (13-32). Fielding’s involvement in the supposed abduction and incarceration of Elizabeth Canning (“This Resolutely-Virtuous Creature,” 132-60) was in his role of magistrate, which makes the fact that he was entirely taken in more notable than had he simply been a writer of fiction. Swift, unsurprisingly, was more perspicacious, and using a pseudonym produced three hoax letters of his own under the name of Bickerstaffin order to attack the astrologer Partridge, predicting the poor man’s death and cruelly plaguing him throughout the remainder of his life.

No less-known than the Bickerstaff episode is the remarkable claim by a woman, Mary Toft, that she had given birth to rabbits (“An Extraordinary Delivery of Rabbits,” 524-80). The credulity of the age is well demonstrated in Keable’s narrative of the affair as he lists one by one the eminent surgeons (note, not physicians). From the initial local Guildford surgeon John Howard, who “delivered the stomach, intestines and three paws of a cat... he stayed around long enough for a rabbit’s head and foot to appear. With enough body parts to assemble some sort of complete creature in place, Howard was a convert” (54). The deliveries of dead rabbits continued. Howard was cautious, however. Keable lists the progression of various medical men of eminence. The visit of the courtier Henry Davenant paved the way for the arrival of Nathaniel St André, surgeon to none other than George I, who had previously treated and remained friends with the poet Alexander Pope. Next in line was Cyriacus Ahlers, another of the king’s surgeons. A week later, “the ultimate authority got involved... Sir Richard Manningham, considered to be the leading man-midwife of his day” (57). Fearing Manningham’s scepticism, St André managed to involve the esteemed anatomist and forceps pioneer James Douglas. However, his strategy backfired as Manningham and Douglas finally exposed the fraud (58).

Meanwhile, the popular press was having a ball, and while learned doctors were entertaining the idea that Toft truly had given birth to rabbits (not to mention cat parts!), the pamphleteers and etchers took full advantage of the opportunity to ridicule the imposture, led by no lesser celebrity than William Hogarth, whose *Cunicularii, or The Wise Men of Godliman in Consultation* (1726) depicts the whole throng of medicos around Mary Toft’s four-poster bed as she gives birth to a swarm of rabbits, many of which are already scampering around on the floor. She appears again, this time stretched out in labour on the floor among in his *Credulity, Superstition, and Fanaticism*. Another portrait of Toft seats her rather more demurely in a chair with a solitary rabbit on her lap. Originally a painting by John Laguerre, the subsequent engraving by T. Maddocks would have been better known, as, unlike the painting, it would have been mass-produced while the topic was hot.

Although Keable does not specifically address the issue of the early modern novelists of the day vis a vis the hoax, familiar men of letters appear dotted about throughout the book. It is worth noting that Daniel Defoe does not appear among them, perhaps the greatest hoaxster of the literary world, as he successfully had readers believe that his works were not fiction but factual reports written by the main protagonist. The use of the first person in prose-writing may now be no more than an artistic decision, a conceit, but at least some of the readers of “works by” Robinson

Crusoe, Captain Singleton and Moll Flanders would have been duped into believing that these figures actually existed, especially as Defoe frequently used a pen name (he used some 200 of them!). Neither was he alone in this; other authors had recourse to the same subterfuge. It is possible that with prose fiction in its infancy, authorship was not seen as respectable; or the less-than-respectable or exotic supposed authors—a felon, an adventurer, and so forth—extracted a vicarious curiosity, thereby anticipating greater sales. Many street ballads of the day had (excruciatingly) long titles that attempted to induce a belief that their contents were factual, at least in the journalistic sense. In this way, the initially incredible claims investigated in this volume by Keable with the trained eye of the professional magician sensitive to deception are not so remote from the general access in our own digital age to semi-truths masquerading as fact, both in print, in politics and in dramatic portrayals. The present long-running series *The Crownis* is a perfect example of how a little truth is interlaced with fiction to produce an alternative reality.

Maybe the most notable conclusion that can be drawn in this punctiliously-researched and nicely-written examination of eighteenth-century hoaxes is the exposure of how easily not only common people but respected figures of the day—an era in which analytical science was increasingly holding sway over superstition and uncritical belief—were indeed drawn into each hoax with such gullibility, even when the hoax in question was so outrageous as giving birth to rabbits. Keable is in a privileged position in that his business is public deception, and that while his audiences cerebrally are aware that they are being duped, in being unable to fathom the trick, they are prone to choosing belief in what their eyes have purportedly witnessed. And he shares his experience in his analysis of how the hoaxes are pulled off, as, for instance, at the commencement of Chapter Nine: “A Chinese Temple Rising Out of The Clouds” (213-32) which begins, “The wider the gap between the anticipation and the outcome, the more likely it is that people will feel they have been hoaxed”(213). The hoaxes in this book differ from such monetary cons as the South Sea Bubble, which ruined a great many people before being ridiculed by Hogarth in his engraving. For the most part, neither the protagonists nor those duped by them come to much harm: indeed, the hoaxster George Psalmanazar not only successfully carried his hoax as being the first Formosan to reach Europe for many years, but became intimate with a number of literary figures, most closely with the lexicographer Samuel Johnson.

In *The Century of Deception*, Ian Keable has discovered an off-beat topic and turned it into a captivating piece of reading that will draw a broad variety of readership, from the casual reader to the scholar of eighteenth-century studies, the avid reader of non-fiction to the journalist, the student of early popular print and the legal eagle. He has spread his net of enquiry further than in his earlier volume on Charles Dickens, and the result is most compelling. A great read.