

What is a Hoax?: Redefining Poe's *Jeu d'Esprit* and His Relationship to His Readership

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Note—Strictly speaking, there is but little similarity between the above sketchy trifle and the celebrated “Moon-Story” of Mr. Locke; but as both have the character of hoaxes (although the one is in a tone of banter, the other of downright earnest) and as both hoaxes are on the same subject, the moon—moreover, as both attempt to give plausibility by scientific detail—the author of “Hans Phaall” thinks it necessary to say, in self-defense, that his own jeu d’esprit was published, in the Southern Literary Messenger, about three weeks before the commencement of Mr. L.’s in The New York Sun.

—“Note to Hans Phaall”

“Hans Phaall—A Tale” was Edgar Allan Poe’s first *jeu d’esprit*, his first media hoax. As noted by Poe above, it appeared in the Richmond news and literature monthly, the *Southern Literary Messenger*, in June of 1835. “Hans Phaall” purported to recount a balloon journey to the moon by a Dutch burgher frantic to escape his creditors, and the

Previous studies of Poe’s hoaxing have tended toward one of two extremes: either all of his fiction works are called “hoaxes,” or his four actual media hoaxes are mislabeled as parodies, burlesques, and satires, sometimes all within a single analysis. A careful redefinition of Poe’s hoaxes as rhetorical exchanges with readers, rather than simply as texts, reveals Poe to be engaged in a very specific social project with his hoaxing—constructing a community of kindred spirits who reject the “plodding” of Baconian scientific methodology in favor of an imaginative epistemology like the one Poe outlined in Eureka.

bulk of the story is composed of minute scientific detail concerning the construction of the balloon and the properties of the earth's atmosphere. Two months later, Richard Adams Locke came out with another hoax about the moon in *The New York Sun*. This hoax attracted far more attention than Poe's story and forced him to abandon all future installments of Phaall's adventures. The off-hand tone of the "Note" above belies the fact that Poe raged publicly against Locke's supposed plagiarism of his moon-story concept for several years, without satisfaction. The "Note" also suggests that Poe felt there were reasons his *jeu d'esprit* had failed where Locke's had triumphed—its "tone of banter" being the primary obstacle to readers' acceptance of "Hans Phaall" as a real news item.

Poe tinkered with the rhetoric of the hoax throughout the remainder of his writing career: the "Balloon Hoax" was published in 1844 in *The Sun*; "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" appeared in 1845 in the *American Review*; and finally, "Von Kempelen and His Discovery," was published in 1849, the year of Poe's death, in the *Flag of Our Union*. All of these hoaxes were on topics of science and/or technology, and some of them fooled many readers. During Poe's lifetime, they were viewed as the pranks of an eccentric but redoubtable intellectual who had contributed an impressive body of incisive criticism, *avant-garde* poetry, and short fiction to Antebellum American literature.

However, in the last forty years, literary critics have come to recognize Poe's *jeux d'esprit* as serious business. In the early 1960s, when Poe's media hoaxes first came under critical scrutiny, it became fashionable to re-define most of his other tales as hoaxes. In the vanguard of this trend was Richard Benton's "Is Poe's 'The Assignment' a Hoax?" followed by G.R. Thompson's "Is Poe's 'A Tale of the Ragged Mountains' a Hoax?" and a slew of other analyses claiming hoax status for many of his works such as: "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," "The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether," "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Premature Burial," and *Eureka*.

In most of these analyses, however, the same text is simultaneously labeled as several related genres. For example, G.R. Thompson refers to tales like "The Assignment" as "hoaxlike parodies" (Thompson 1969:454), and Benjamin Franklin Fisher variously categorizes the rhetoric of "Tarr and Fether" as "hoaxing," "self-parody," "satiric," and "burlesque" all in a single page (Fisher 1983:136). This con-

fusion of the term “hoax”—caused by simultaneous overapplication and underspecification—is a result of a strictly text-based approach to generic classification, and it obscures an aspect of Poe’s rhetorical practice of which he proved himself aware in the “Note” selected for the epigraph. In “Hans Phaall,” as with the other scientific news hoaxes, Poe was playing a game with his readership that had very specific rules and was different from the games he played in his detective fiction, grotesque tales, and science fiction.

A hoax purports to describe something that actually occurred or existed in the world. Poe implies in the “Note” and elsewhere that a tenor of “downright earnest” serves a hoax’s purpose better than a tone of “banter,” since Locke’s “Moon Hoax” succeeded where “Hans Phaall” failed. Also, Poe claims a hoax must contain a certain critical mass of “scientific detail” to ensure its “plausibility.” Consistent with Poe’s criteria, I will argue that his hoaxes are machine-age rhetorical interactions with a readership. Because some readers “catch on” to a hoax early and on their own, while others take it at face value until someone exposes it for them, hoaxes invoke at least two audiences. This function of splitting audiences will be missed by any strictly textual approach to hoaxing, and yet it is the key to understanding Poe’s choice of the hoax as a rhetorical strategy.

This splitting of the audience is old news. Poe himself claimed to be doing it with his gothic burlesques. Benjamin Franklin Fisher says of Poe’s *Blackwood* pieces that critics concur Poe “operated frequently upon the principle that two audiences would read his fiction: a large number who would understand everything in the Gothic vein as ‘straight’ terror stories; and a small, elite group who would perceive a master hand moving firmly behind the scenes of apparent seriousness in a burlesque or hoaxing manner” (Fisher 1983:136). But what Poe was doing with his dual audience in the news hoaxes was indeed serious business and runs contrary to the easy dichotomy both Poe and critics have made of his readership and of his public ethos. True, Poe wished with his hoaxing to build a public memorial to himself as a genius towering over the masses. But he was also seeking community with like-spirited individuals who would recognize his hoaxes for what they were and would validate his commitment to imagination first, above reason, above “minute facts” (Poe 1848:11). To see how the hoax served as a rhetorical strategy toward these ends for Poe, we must first attempt to be clear about what kind of activity hoaxing is, and what sorts

of relationships between author, reader, and media hoaxing both required and fostered during the decades before the Civil War.

Previous Work on Hoaxes

All of Poe's news hoaxes are about scientific and technological innovations, an observation that is not surprising given Poe's predilection for mathematics, science and cryptography, coupled with the constant hum of scientific activity surrounding him in Jacksonian America. Rapid growth in science and technology manifested itself in the industrialization of the countryside and the railroad, as well as the addition of new departments devoted specifically to scientific research at universities throughout the East Coast and Midwest. All of these endeavors earned science and scientists a permanent place in the public eye (Miller 1972:99). However, as scientific knowledge became increasingly specialized, a lacuna developed in public discourse concerning its advances (Miller 1972:101-102). Into this gap stepped the popular science report. There were whole journals dedicated to digesting the latest scientific and technological discoveries for the public: most widely read were the *American Journal of Science*, or "Silliman's Journal," founded in 1818 and *Scientific American*, begun in 1845 (Mott 1968:303-304). But even a penny daily like *The New York Sun* had a staff science reporter, Richard Adams Locke (grandson of John Locke and author of the famous Moon Hoax which would compete with Poe's "Hans Phaall" in 1835). These journals and magazines reported advances in mesmerism alongside discoveries in geology; there was still a large space for play between what we would now anachronistically term the hard sciences and pseudosciences. At the time, mesmerism and phrenology were budding social sciences, aiming to explain human behavior by the same principles natural scientists used to explain geology or botany (Stoehr 1978:27).

Many literary writers took advantage of this *kairos* or rhetorical opening in the confused borders between science and the imagination. According to Alexander Boese, a Ph.D. student at University of California San Diego who studies hoaxing, the vast majority of hoaxes play on scientific, medical, and anthropological themes¹ (Boese 2000). It seems almost inevitable that Poe would step into this *kairos* to hoax a public all agog at any new discovery bearing the vaguest imprimatur of science. In fact, Poe's hoaxes deal specifically with the nexus of the

scientific and the imaginative; treatments include: a flight to the moon, a balloon flight over the Atlantic, suspended animation, and alchemy. Poe's commitment to the imagination does not need to be rehearsed here, but it is not an overstatement to argue, as Terence Martin has, that Poe believed his imagination provided him with a living environment more "real" or true than reality (Martin 1983:37). For Poe, then, these scientific hoaxes were games in constructing bits of reality for his readership, and through these games, a special relationship with his readers.

There has been no specific study on the rhetoric of written scientific hoaxes like Poe's. Frank Fedler catalogues the written hoaxes of Poe and others in Antebellum America in *Media Hoaxes*, but he offers no generic analysis of them. Studies of Poe's hoaxing practices in particular tend to run into the obstacle of criteria confusion, as mentioned above. Marie-Louise Nickerson Matthew, in her 1974 dissertation on Poe's hoaxing practices, labels all of his tales as hoaxes, breaking these into two types: an external hoax designed to dupe a foolish readership, and an internal hoax designed to provide Poe himself with a sort of flimsy epistemological wall to keep his private demons at bay. To make this argument, Matthew relies heavily on Poe's dichotomization of his audience into dupes and geniuses, among the latter of which, of course, Poe counts himself (Matthew 1975:5, 23). What Matthew's analysis overlooks, however, are the elements Poe built into his hoaxes to expose their artifice to the perceptive reader: Hans Phaall's adventure begins on April Fools' Day; the "Balloon-Hoax" blatantly plagiarizes two popular, contemporary science-adventure texts with which many of Poe's readers were likely to have been familiar (Franklin 1978:94); and Poe links the alchemist Von Kempelen both to Maelzel—who built a chess-playing automaton hoax that Poe debunked—and to Locke, the author of "Moon Hoax" (Franklin 1978:95). These self-revealing elements of Poe's hoaxes undermine even the provisional stability that Matthew claims the internal hoax provides. Additionally, they complicate the wholesale duping of a readership that Matthew claims is the function of the external hoax. Further, if Matthew wishes to argue that Poe's other tales like "Fall of the House of Usher" are internal hoaxes because of their tangled nests of secrets, what is to stop her from arguing that all literature is a hoax simply because the reader can continually re-discover hidden meanings and subtexts? This overgeneralization is the suspect move made by Thompson, Benton,

Fusco, and other early critics who find hoaxes in all of Poe's tales. A hidden subtext, code, or parodic intent abruptly becomes a hoax on the reader. This sort of definition overgenerates until it threatens to strip the hoax of any use as a generic descriptor.

Some Poe criticism has employed more complex definitions of hoaxing. John Bryant counts hoax as a type of satire in his study "Poe's Ape of UnReason: Humor, Ritual, and Culture," as do most of the essays in *The Naiad Voice: Essays in Poe's Satiric Hoaxing*, edited by Dennis Eddings. Bryant enlists Johan Huizinga and Clifford Geertz in defining Poe's hoaxing practice as a "satiric antiritual" which antagonistically denies its readers the comic closure of being able to laugh at themselves (Bryant 1996:28). He focuses on "Murders in the Rue Morgue," claiming it is a hoax because Poe hides the clues to the L'Esplanayes' deaths so well that the reader cannot figure them out and must wait for Dupin to reveal the clump of orangutan hair that clinches everything. While Bryant's analysis is better theorized than Matthew's, its fixation on the text misses the differential effects upon the reader of a hoax and the reader of a tale like "Murders in the Rue Morgue." Poe was keenly aware that in his detective fiction, he had "woven" a mystery that he then set about "unraveling" for the reader (Poe 1938:328); it became such a standard rhetorical procedure for Poe that he grew weary of it and burlesqued himself doing it in "Thou Art the Man!". Thus, when Poe specifies the kind of game he plays with his readers in his Dupin tales—this "mystery-making"—it seems superfluous to re-label this game as hoaxing. Further, weaving and then explicitly unraveling a mystery for readers is very different from adopting a tone of "downright earnest" to fool at least some readers. Evaluating the effect of Poe's rhetoric on the reader helps us to distinguish detective tales like "Murders in the Rue Morgue" from hoaxes like the "Balloon-Hoax."

Yet specifying what exactly a hoax is if it is not satire or any of these related genres is difficult—in fact impossible, I will argue, if we continue to try to define a hoax textually, in terms of what it says. This impossibility arises from the simple fact that so much of the construction of a hoax is *extratextual*. First, a hoax frequently reveals itself outside both the text and the actual reading experience—for example, a drunk Poe announcing on the front steps of *The New York Sun* that his story about the balloon *Victoria* crossing the Atlantic was a fake. A second extratextual problem is the author's intentions, which are a seem-

ingly essential part of hoaxing; i.e., if Poe really believed the *Victoria* had made the crossing, would he still be hoaxing his readers? A third move that a hoax makes outside the text is a move to the medium. A hoax is only a hoax as long as it is carried by a news medium, a medium expected to carry truth. Anywhere else, that “hoax” is merely read as speculative or sensational fiction. A final and crucial extratextual element of hoaxing is in its reception, for even if an author designs a story to embarrass readers, if the readers *do* not “fall for it,” the story is not a successful hoax.

Given the heavy extratextuality of hoaxes, it may be productive to define them in terms of what they do in their communities instead of what they say. To elucidate how a rhetorical rather than a strictly textual account of hoaxing will address these difficulties, it will first be helpful to determine what hoaxes are *not* by comparing their reception with that of genres with which they are often confused. This comparison will tease out certain essential criteria for a redefinition of the hoax on rhetorical grounds. Poe’s “Hans Phaall” will be the primary locus of discussion for each of these comparisons, but his other three news hoaxes will figure as well.

Why a Hoax is not a Parody or a Burlesque

The status of the hoax as a rhetorical exchange rather than a textual genre is clarified first through comparison with two genres it is commonly mistaken for: parody and burlesque. The hoax is an exercise in creating realities and invoking audiences; these characteristics are what made the hoax so strongly appealing to Poe, with his unbending commitment to the imagination (Martin 1983:37). Anything in the style of a hoax that calls attention to its textuality, is then at least an initial hindrance to its rhetorical purpose as a reality-builder. Artificiality and textuality, however, are precisely the hallmarks of parody and burlesque. For these genres to be effective, the audience needs to recognize them as texts mimicking other textualities—either a whole genre of texts or a particular author’s style. Poe’s burlesques, like “How to Write a Blackwood Article,” “A Predicament,” or “Loss of Breath” are written in an entirely different style than his hoaxes, apparent even from the way they are introduced:

It was a quiet and still afternoon when I strolled forth in the goodly city of Edina. The confusion and bustle in the streets were terrible. Men were talking. Women were screaming. Children were choking. Pigs were whistling. Carts they rattled. Bulls they bellowed. Cows they lowed. Horses they neighed. Cats they caterwauled. Dogs they danced. Danced! Could it then be possible? *Danced!* Alas, thought I, *my* dancing days are over! Thus it is in the mind of genius and imaginative contemplation, especially of a genius doomed to the everlasting, an eternal, and continual, and, as one might say, the—*continued*—yes, the *continued and continuous*, bitter, harassing, disturbing, and if I may be allowed the expression, the *very* disturbing influence of the serene, and god-like, and heavenly, and exalting, and elevated, and purifying effect of what may be rightly termed the most enviable, the most *truly* enviable—nay! the most benignly beautiful, the most deliciously ethereal, and as it were, the most *pretty* (if I may use so bold an expression) *thing* (pardon me, gentle reader!) in the world—but I am always led away by my feelings. (in “A Predicament,” Poe 1938:328)

Compare this hyperbolic catalogue of tropes typical of the sensational fiction Poe wrote for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Review* to the opening of Poe's hoax “Hans Phaall”:

By late accounts from Rotterdam, that city seems to be in a high state of philosophical excitement. Indeed, phenomena have there occurred of a nature so completely unexpected—so entirely novel—so utterly at variance with preconceived opinions—as to leave no doubt on my mind that long ere this all Europe is in an uproar, all physics in a ferment, all reason and astronomy together by the ears. (in “Hans Phaall,” Poe 1938:512-518)

Certainly both the burlesque and the hoax open with an excited and exaggerated tone. But the burlesque draws attention to its artifice immediately with its ludicrously repetitive hyperbole. “Hans Phaall,” on the other hand—although stylistically the coyest of Poe's hoaxes—salvages its guise as a news story with impersonal third person narration, jargon like “by late accounts” and “phenomena,” and an implicit argument that the story is true, as it will soon have “all Europe...in an uproar.”

It is this argument for the verity of the material presented that marks a primary difference between hoaxes on the one hand and parodies or burlesques on the other. The focus on textuality and/or style in burlesque and parody serves to shift the reader's attention away from the truth-status of the events reported in the story; for example, believing there actually was a drowning baby, a heroic diver, or a tortuous affair is irrelevant to appreciating Poe's "The Assignment." The story is parodying the Byronic pose and Byron himself (Benton 1963:193). By contrast, what is at stake in a hoax like "Hans Phaall," what is salient to the audience, and what they must decide upon, is not primarily who is being pilloried in the story, but whether the events of the story—the moon journey, in this case—really happened or not. In fact, while "Hans Phaall" borrows the authority of sensational news items of the period by mimicking their style, his hoax does not mimic a particular text or author.² This generality actually helps to deflect the reader's attention away from the language of the piece and toward the truth-value of the astonishing events of the moon flight. So a comparison of the effects of parody and burlesque on the reader with the effect of a hoax on the reader reveals that a hoax resists identification by effacing (at least initially) its own textuality and authorship.

Why a Hoax is not a Satire

Distinguishing a hoax from a satire is not as easy a task and must depend again on the hoax's status as a rhetorical event and not a textual genre. According to Dustin Griffin's re-characterization in *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*, the hoax shares many characteristics with satire at the textual level. Satires, Griffin claims, have at least four textual hallmarks: polemical topics, resistance of closure, parasitism on other genres, and display of the author's genius. Both hoaxes and satires call attention to conflicting values in society (Griffin 1994:37-38): conservatism vs. liberalism, elite vs. middle class, or in the case of Poe's hoaxes, scientific method vs. the imagination. Contrary to traditional estimations, satires are inquiries that resist closure (95); so are hoaxes. For those readers who "fall for it," the last stroke of a hoax like "Hans Phaall" is to embarrass them by revealing itself to be a fake. Once the hoax has thus disquieted its readers, it is complete. It offers no closure, no antidote or resolution to their discomfort. Next, Griffin claims a satire has a parasitic relationship with the genres it imitates

(3). The same is certainly true of Poe's hoaxes and the news articles they mimic. Finally, satire displays the intelligence of the satirist (71). So does the hoax, once it has been revealed, which is why Poe adopted it as a rhetorical strategy to build a public reputation as a "[man] of genius" (in "William Cullen Bryant," Poe 1984:444) along with his other strategies: exposing others' hoaxes, like "Maelzel's Chess-Player," and publishing cryptograms. Poe's motivation to "lionize" himself will be discussed in more depth below.

In spite of all these textual similarities, a hoax is distinct from a satire in several vital functions as a time-and-medium-bound exchange with its public(s). Most importantly, a hoax is not a satire because it is the reader—not Byron nor women writers of sensational fiction nor Jacksonian isolationist policies—who are the butt of the author's jabs. The whole point of a hoax is to jostle the reader into admitting the inconsistency or poor foundation of her beliefs; much like the crux of instructive embarrassment or *elenchus* was the goal of Socrates' dialectic method.³ If the reader is not embarrassed, it is not a hoax.

Further unlike satire, a hoax is not principally an evaluative argument, designed to call into discussion the goodness or badness of a person, style, genre, or policy. Rather, it is an argument against the *stasis* of existence, playing on the question of whether some happening, or perhaps the true witness of that happening, holds true in the world of the readers, as discussed above with respect to parody and burlesque. Certainly, after the reader is ashamed for having believed Hans Phaall really took a balloon to the moon, an evaluation can be inferred: "believing something just because it claims to be science is stupid." But that is an indirect rhetorical move of the hoax; the direct move is to call reality and its construction into question. On the other hand, "satire proper," according to Griffin, "rarely offers itself as 'objective' or documentary...Alerted by its generic signals, we are not likely to mistake a satire for fact, not likely to overlook its avowedly 'rhetorical' nature"(1994:132). A hoax like "Hans Phaall" crucially counts on at least as large a percentage of its readership "overlook[ing] its avowedly 'rhetorical' nature" and taking it as the true report of a balloon voyage to the moon. As seen above, Poe begins with a proemium claiming that it is the latest news from Rotterdam. All of Poe's news hoaxes begin with arguments for their public factuality and, in some cases, "evidence" of how they were acquired:

Of course I shall not pretend to consider it any matter for wonder, that the extraordinary case of M. Valdemar has excited discussion...It is now rendered necessary that I give the facts—as far as I comprehend them myself. They are, succinctly, these...(in “M. Valdemar,” Poe 1938:276)

[Astounding News by Express, via Norfolk!—The Atlantic Crossed in Three Days! Signal Triumph of Mr. Monck Mason’s Flying Machine!—Arrival at Sullivan’s Island, near Charleston, S.C., of Mr. Mason, Mr. Robert Holland, Mr. Henson, Mr. Harrison Ainsworth, and four others, in the Steering Balloon, “Victoria,” after a Passage of Seventy-five Hours from Land to Land! Full Particulars of the Voyage!] (in “The Balloon-Hoax,” Poe 1938:496)

After the very minute and elaborate paper by Arago, to say nothing of the summary in *Silliman’s Journal*, with the detailed statement just published by Lieutenant Maury, it will not be supposed, of course, that in offering a few hurried remarks in reference to Von Kempelen’s discovery, I have any design to look at the subject from a scientific point of view. (in “Von Kempelen and His Discovery,” Poe 1938:606)

If instead of hoaxes these tales had been meant for satires of social norms—like the humorous “Lionizing,” “Diddling,” and “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade”—Poe would not have bothered protesting their verity because it would simply not have been at issue. Thus, an examination of satires against hoaxes clarifies another way in which a strictly textual definition of the hoax is inadequate. By textual standards, a hoax looks remarkably like a satire. But, the locus of the effect of a hoax is in the *reader*, not in the text. The reader is embarrassed by her misapprehension of the world.

Why Poe’s Hoaxes are not Science Fiction

Equally challenging in defining Poe’s hoaxes is distinguishing them from science fiction. Medium is almost the only distinction between one of Poe’s hoaxes and a science fiction story. An item in a newspaper is perceived as reporting truth; that same text in a literary magazine will be read as fiction. In fact, taken out of their news contexts, “M. Valdemar” and “Von Kempelen” have been reclassified by

later Poe critics as science fiction (Franklin 1978:93-94).

An interesting point of comparison in this category is the fiction of literary critic Fitz-James O'Brien. O'Brien came to New York in 1852, a few years after Poe's death, and published science fiction stories in literary magazines like *Harper's New Monthly* and *Atlantic Monthly* until he died fighting for the Union in 1862. His stories were on topics remarkably similar to Poe's hoaxes: "How I Overcame My Own Gravity" recounted a flight into the atmosphere with the aid of a gyroscope, reminiscent of Poe's "Hans Phaall" and "The Bohemian" concerned the gold rush and mesmerism, as did Poe's hoaxes "Von Kempelen" and "M. Valdemar," respectively (Franklin 1978:319-320).

O'Brien's stories, however, have never been confused with hoaxes, and the principle reason for this has to be that they were never framed in a news context, as Poe's were. Considering this effect of medium, we may be able to understand the limited impact of "Hans Phaall" in June of 1835 compared to the runaway success of Richard Adams Locke's "Moon-Hoax" a few months later. "Hans Phaall" appeared in a literary monthly, the *Southern Literary Messenger*, which certainly carried news items but printed them alongside works of fiction. On the other hand, Locke's hoax garnered a one-day subscription of over 19,000 for its appearance in the "news-only" penny daily, *The New York Sun*. The news medium is crucial to the effect of a hoax, and this is another reason a hoax cannot be classified as purely a textual genre, as much of its interpretation hinges on the medium of its transmission.

What Is a Hoax?

As discussed previously, defining a hoax as a textual genre is descriptively inadequate due to the hoax's shiftiness as a text in different media and the problem of reception. Furthermore, there is the issue of the intentions of the author. Authorial intentions are irretrievable, yet they are crucial to the definition of a hoax. If an author truly believed a balloon flew to the moon, was he hoaxing his readers? The tendency is to say "no," at least *ex post facto* when the author's insanity becomes public. But if a reader still comes to that crux of embarrassment after having believed the hoax along with the author, should we say that both are hoaxed? There is no easy answer to this question, but Poe, for one, does not fall in this liminal category; by his own

admission, he planned to hoodwink at least a portion of his audience with his hoaxes. In his note on Richard Adams Locke in which he describes the competition of “Hans Phaall” against Locke’s “Moon Hoax,” Poe claims to have been scheming for several months how to include enough plausible science to earn “credence in some measure” with a “readily gullible” readership (Poe 1938: 1215).

What might Poe have been trying to accomplish with his scientific hoaxing? This question requires a hermeneutics of hoaxing capable of engaging a hoax with the cultural context of its readership, a process to which, as seen above, a purely textual definition cannot aspire. A feasible alternative is to view Poe’s hoaxes as rhetorical transactions on issues of science and/or technology between Poe and his audience(s) through a news medium. When we view the hoax as not a text but an event—a public exchange in the information marketplace—the extratextuality, medium-dependence, intentionality, and reception of the hoax become not problems for a generic classification, but essential components.

One immediate consequence of this redefinition of the hoax is that it forces us to be conscious of a hoax’s production. The hoax must be recognized as a machine-age offshoot of satire. According to Miles Orvell in *The Real Thing*, hoaxes had to wait until the Industrial Revolution, when two primary conditions made fakery possible on a wide scale:⁴ first, machines produced thousands of near-perfect copies of goods, astounding the public and driving down prices for common household items, thus riveting the benefits of mechanism and machine-perfect facsimile deeply in the public consciousness. Secondly, a booming industrial economy replaced transactions with an individual shopkeeper or farmer with repeated transactions with strangers, thus shifting public trust from personal *ethos* to general templates or schemata for these transactions—a focus on form rather than content. These conditions made hoaxes possible—and perhaps inevitable (Orvell 1989:xvii). For example, the penny press’s news articles were generally anonymous before copyright became a more widespread practice in the 1850s, and Poe surely took advantage of this public reliance on the form of a news article rather than on its authorship when he wrote “The Balloon-Hoax” for *The New York Sun* in 1844.

The hoax is a machine-age transaction, but is the hoax’s similarity to the machine any closer than merely the shared functions of facsimile, prolific reproduction, and anonymity? Two of Poe’s hoaxes

focus on machines, specifically balloons, thus, the relationship between machine and hoax is worthy of analysis. Cecilia Tichi in *Shifting Gears* writes that the hoax can be viewed as a rhetorical machine along the lines of the energy-transforming, gears-and-girders technology that characterized mid-19th century industry (Tichi 1987:xii). Gears-and-girders technology visibly transforms energy (coal to steam) and makes the viewer of the machine a sort of co-engineer by laying its structure and workings bare. At least some Antebellum readers shared Tichi's interpretation of the steam-engine. Emerson said by just looking at the workings of a steam-engine, one could legibly read the industrial progress the machine was engaged to produce; through its gears and pistons, it both announced and interpreted itself as a messenger of progress for the viewer (Marx 1964:236). The text of a hoaxing exchange could be said to operate in a similar energy-transforming fashion: it transforms readers' assumptions about science into an awkward awareness of the instability of those assumptions, and it does this by laying bare its machinations, its "gears," so to speak. In so doing, it makes the reader a co-engineer; it implicates her in constructing the problem that drives the hoax (science taking over society, in the case of Poe's hoaxes).

This energy-transforming model of the hoax rhetoric may not be appropriate for all written hoaxes during the American industrial era, but it provides a new perspective on Poe's techniques. As mentioned above, two of Poe's four hoaxes are specifically about machines, and Poe is generally preoccupied with the verbal assembly/disassembly of mechanisms. In the balloon hoaxes, he meticulously details the balloon's architecture to create the "factual ballast" that keeps the hoaxes from sailing away into the ionosphere of implausibility (Ketterer 1983:89). "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is centrally concerned with exposing the fine mechanics of murder-by-orangutan, and "Maelzel's Chess-Player" literally lays-bare the workings of a mechanical hoax. Within these texts Poe reveals a consciousness of the machine as a text and of its usefulness in creating illusions for a public. He also shows he is aware, especially in "Maelzel's Chess-Player," that using words to expose the machine illusion convicts the reader of helping to build the illusion simply by believing in it (Poe 1938b).

The necessity of a reader, an observer, and an audience for the hoax's workings to be complete emphasizes its function as a public exchange about what constitutes reality that questions what counts as

truth and falsehood in a culture (Boese 2000). Hugh Kenner in *The Counterfeiters* agrees that the primary function of a fake is to direct the reader back to what counts as real (Kenner 1985:30). Poe was aware of this orienting function, as his scientific/technological hoaxes revealed their mechanism to readers and thus rattled them for adhering to the “crawling system” of modern science instead of the “intuitive leaps” of the “true science” that Poe outlines in *Eureka* (Franklin 1978:95; Poe 1848:30). Was this all Poe was trying to accomplish with his hoaxes, the shaming of his public? Certainly, his condescension helped construct the public reputation that Poe critics like Matthew have traditionally assumed he was after: the “[man] of genius,” the superior intellect floating above the masses. Indeed, Poe’s own writings support this easy dichotomy of “hoaxers” and “hoaxees.” In addition to his low opinion of the “readily gullible” public expressed in his *Literati* note on Richard Adams Locke, Poe elsewhere mocks the public as “*believers in every thing Odd*,” whose “Credulity:—let us call it Insanity at once” marks them as “ignorant people” (in “Fifty Suggestions,” Poe 1984:1303). To this audience he contrasts “a few gifted individuals, who kneel around the summit, beholding, face to face, the master spirit who stands upon the pinnacle” (in “Letter to B____,” Poe 1984:5).

However, taking this simple binary as the answer to the question of what Poe was after with his hoaxing overlooks a crucial component of his practice, one which only becomes visible when the hoax is viewed as a rhetorical exchange: the double readership materialized by a hoax. As mentioned previously, each of Poe’s hoaxes contains clues in the text that divide its audience according to right apprehension of truth: those who do not recognize the hoax until it is revealed, and those who immediately “catch on” to Poe’s clues and read from the creator’s vantage point instead of the vantage point of the victim. This second audience is often overlooked in assessments of Poe’s work, an audience Poe invoked with the clues he left. Contrary to received wisdom about Poe, his hoaxes reveal him to be a community-builder, not a solipsist. For Poe, reality was imagination, and by constructing bits of public reality, his *jeux d’esprit*, he hoped to tease out those few who would read through the surface and join him in a realm of “dreams,” where those who dared to live as their imaginations dictated become god-like creators of reality for the rest of the public. Like the suffocating but strangely compelling communion between the narrator and Dupin in “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” like the dedication of *Eureka*

“to the few who love me and whom I love, to those who feel rather than to those who think, to the dreamers and those who put faith in dreams as in the only realities,” (Poe 1848:6) the hoaxes, when defined as carefully engineered rhetorical transactions with a double audience, reveal Poe not only yearning for community, but actually designing and building it. This suggestion should provoke re-readings of even Poe’s most traditionally esoteric and asocial texts, like *Eureka* or *The Poetic Principle*, not as uneven attempts at creating theory, but as complex exercises in creating publics and seeking communion.

NOTES

1. See Alexander Boese’s website which lists many well-known hoaxes of this time period: www.museumofhoaxes.com.

2. Hoaxes can have educative results, but their refusal to offer their readers closure by telling them what they can do to alleviate their embarrassment limits further comparison with Socrates’ method.

3. In fact, one could argue that the Antebellum news hoax takes advantage of the anonymity of most news articles at that time to make its claims more difficult to debunk and to protect itself from infection by any one particular author’s reputation.

4. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, second edition, the earliest the word “hoax” as a noun or a verb appears in print is 1796 in Grose’s Dictionary; most other usages are mid–19th century. As an aside, the OED defines a hoax as “an act of hoaxing; a humorous or mischievous deception, usually taking the form of a fabrication of something fictitious or erroneous, told in such a manner as to impose upon the credulity of the victim.” Note its definition of a hoax as an action, a fabrication, a telling, not as an object; the event status of the hoax seems crucial.

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