

Common Core Alignment
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1-6, 8-9
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1-9

THE BOTTLE CONJUROR

BY DANA ROVANG

QUESTIONS:

1) Using the primary and secondary sources, evaluate the article's narrative. What information was included, and what wasn't? Why do you think the author prioritized some information and didn't include other facts?

2) The secondary sources used here are about 150 years old. Why are they considered secondary sources, given their age? Do you think this makes them more or less reliable?

3) Using videos and other sources about the Bottle Conjurer and the Enlightenment, how is this information used to convey different ideas about this period in history?

STORY SPECIFIC QUESTIONS:

4) Why did the audience riot?

5) Do you think the audience was indeed gullible? Do you think they really thought someone could stuff himself into a bottle? Do you think someone could stuff himself into a bottle?

6) What were the ramifications of this hoax? Do you think it was intended to make people think? Or simply to play a joke? What are some examples of hoaxes today?

In 1749, notices appeared for a new magical act in London. This performer was promised to accomplish a variety of near-impossible feats.

First, he takes a common walking-cane from any of the spectators, and thereon plays the music of every instrument now in use, and likewise sings to surprising perfections. Secondly, he presents you with a common wine bottle, which any of the spectators may first examine; this bottle is placed on a table in the middle of the stage, and he (without any equivocation) goes into it in sight of all the spectators, and sings in it; during his stay in the bottle any person may handle it, and see plainly that it does not exceed a common tavern bottle.

The claim that he could "go into" a "common wine bottle" was a major draw in a town renowned for its love of spectacular entertainment.

Therefore, there was little surprise when a large audience packed the Haymarket Theater on the evening of the 16th January 1749. They waited, and continued to wait for hours, all the while growing tired and restless. The theater manager, Samuel Foote, came out front and tried to calm the crowd. They were resistant, and began to demand their money back. There is some confusion as to what happened next. It is said that someone yelled that they would pay double if the conjuror would stuff himself into a pint bottle instead of the wine bottle as originally claimed.

This seemed to have tipped the crowd's good humor, and they rioted.

According to accounts at the time, the theater was utterly destroyed. While most of the audience made a hasty exit,

One party, however, staid in the house, in order to demolish the inside, when the mob breaking in, they tore up the benches, broke to pieces the scenes, pulled down the boxes; in short, dismantled the Theatre entirely, carrying away the particulars above mentioned into the street, where they made a mighty bonfire; the curtain being housed on a pole by way of a flag.

While the original advertisement said that ample guards would be on hand, this did not seem to be the case, as:

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A large party of guards were sent for, but come time enough only to warm themselves round the fire. We hear of no other disaster than a young nobleman's chin being hurt, occasioned by his fall into the pit with part of one of the boxes, which he had forced out with his foot.

It did not seem as if any one class could be pointed to as either the instigators or those who carried out the destruction. Although the audience was comprised from all levels of society, including royalty. The brother of the King, the Duke of Cumberland, was in attendance, but he made a exit and lost his jeweled sword in the commotion.

The perpetrators of the hoax were never uncovered, but it is commonly thought the 2nd Duke of Montagu - a known practical joker - was behind it. The "Bottle Conjurer" became a symbol for the gullibility and credulity of the London populace, which was seen as a powerful criticism in the Age of Enlightenment. Performers in London continued to be compared to The Bottle Conjurer for decades to come.

Primary Sources

General Advertiser (London), Saturday, January 14, 1749;
The same advertisement appeared on the 11th, 13th, and 16th, as well.

"George Bickham the Younger, The Bottle Conjurer, from Head to Foot, without Equivocation," (London), 24 January 1749.

Secondary Sources

Richard Ryan, *Dramatic Table Talk: Or, Scenes, Situations, & Adventures, Serious & Comic, in Theatrical History & Biography*, Vol. 3 (London: John Knight & Henry Lacky, 1830), 69-74.

John Timbs, *Romance of London: Strange Stories, Scenes and Remarkable Persons of the Great Town*, Vol. 3 (London: Richard Bentley, 1856), 55-57.