Comedy Studies

Bunga-Bunga on the Dreadnought: Hoax, Race, and Messages

--Manuscript Draft--

Full Title:	Bunga-Bunga on the Dreadnought: Hoax, Race, and Messages
Manuscript Number:	
Article Type:	Article
Keywords:	practical joke; hoax; Virginia Woolf; race; humor
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Bunga-Bunga on the Dreadnought: Hoax, Race, and Messages

Moira Marsh

Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana USA

molsmith@indiana.edu

Moira Marsh is a folklorist and humor scholar, with a focus on vernacular humor, practical jokes, and humor theory. She is the author of *Practically Joking* (2015).

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The 1910 Dreadnought hoax was famous in its day and continues to be well-known today, in large part because it involved both the young Virginia Woolf and the celebrated prankster Horace DeVere Cole. Currently, we see the affair as a ludic blow against authority, or as an anti-imperialist, anti-patriarchy stunt. In 1910, however, the joke was as much about race as it was about authority. Far from being anti-colonialist, the hoax was originally read as reasserting contemporary attitudes about race and empire. Keywords: practical joke; hoax; Virginia Woolf; race

In 1907 HMS *Dreadnought* was the newest, biggest and most powerful man o' war in the Royal Navy, the flagship of the Home Fleet, the prototype of a new class of warship that made every competitor obsolete. In those years of a naval arms race between Britain and Germany that soon erupted into the Great War, this warship was viewed by the nation as an icon, the symbol of the superiority of the British Navy. It was, in brief, 'the most formidable, the most modern and the most secret man o' war then afloat' (Bell 1972, vol. 1, 157).

On the afternoon of Thursday the seventh of February 1910, the Admiral received a telegram from the Foreign Office announcing the imminent arrival of 'Prince Makalen of Abbysinia' [sic] and his suite, requesting a tour of the ship and regretting the short notice. Thirty-five minutes later, the Royal party arrived by train: four bejewelled princes in turbans and flowing robes, accompanied by an interpreter and an official from the Foreign Office. They were received with full honours: flags flying, officers in their gold braided finery, marines drawn up at attention, and the ship's band playing. The band did not have a copy of the national anthem of Abyssinia so they

played the anthem of Zanzibar instead. The princes were given a full tour of the ship, exclaiming in appreciation at every new wonder. They politely declined a 21-gun salute and they also said no to the offer of dinner, explaining that they could only eat specially prepared food. Finally, they were ferried back on shore in the Admiral's launch to catch the train back to London.

What neither the Admiral nor any of his officers realized was that the Abyssinian royals were English hoaxers in blackface, wearing elaborate Orientalist costumes and speaking an impromptu language consisting of a few words of Swahili mixed with remembered passages of Virgil and Homer. They declined dinner not on religious grounds, but for fear of the damage to their false whiskers. In fact, one of the 'princes' was a woman. The officers of the Dreadnought had fallen for an elaborate hoax.

Horace De Vere Cole, a renowned and compulsive practical joker, was the ringleader of the group. His friend Adrian Stephen, who wrote a detailed account of the hoax many years later, played the part of the German interpreter. The other players included their two friends Hugh Duncan and Anthony Buxton. When another of the original hoaxers got cold feet and withdrew at the eleventh hour, Adrian's sister Virginia joined the troupe in cross-cultural cross-dress attire. She was Virginia Stephen then but we now know her as Virginia Woolf.

The Dreadnought affair has become known as 'the greatest hoax that has ever been perpetrated in Great Britain' (Greenwall 1936, 36f), 'one of the century's greatest practical jokes' (Boston 1982, 35), or even the greatest hoax in history (Johnston 2009, 9). It certainly was a success in 1910, winning headlines for months all over the United Kingdom and eventually throughout the English-speaking world.[1] Following Cole's death in 1936, the story was revived in memoirs by his friend Adrian and by the

costumier Willy Clarkson (Stephen 1983; Greenwall 1936, 36-8); Virginia wrote a hilarious speech about the hoax and her part in it which she delivered in 1940 (Johnston 2009).[2] The hoaxing of the Dreadnought continues to be recounted to this day, often in extensive detail, in websites, comic book versions, and histories of practical joking. These versions link the story to Horace Cole's place in histories of hoaxing and practical jokes, usually as a light-hearted story about joking audacity and the pricking of official pomposity (Hone 1940; Smith 1953, 101-7; 'Obituary: Major A. Buxton, Emperor in Abyssinian hoax' 1970; Owen and Cole 1974; Reeve 1977, 19-33; Boston 1982, 35-44; Davenport-Hines 2004; Davis 2006; Downer 2010). In another strand of dreadnoughts, Woolf biographers and analysts have repeated the story in gorgeous detail, often with extensive analysis (Bell 1972; Stansky 1996; Kennard 1996; Lee 1997; Reid 1998, 1999; Barkway 2006; Gerzina 2006; Ito 2007; Woolf and Rosenbaum 2007; Johnston 2009; Delap 2011; Alberge 2012; Jones 2013).

In the following pages I shall explore the reasons for the extraordinarily successful reception of the Dreadnought hoax from Edwardian England to the present. Most practical joke stories remain closely tied to their contexts of origin and quickly lose any appeal they may have had as the original participants are forgotten. The story of the Dreadnought hoax has persisted for over a century, but as it has done so, it has taken on new meanings that might not have occurred to the originators. Beginning with Adrian Stephen's 1936 memoir and continuing in most versions of the story to the present, the hoax is understood as an anti-authoritarian joke. More recently, Virginia Woolf scholars have argued that for her, whether in 1910 or in later life, the hoax was a symbolic act against patriarchy and against imperialism and colonialism. Both interpretations miss what was the most salient message of the joke to Edwardian Britons, for whom its racial and colonialist scripts were the most compelling.

1. Pure Fun

Today, the hoaxing of the Dreadnought belongs to a popular canon of outstanding practical jokes that are recounted, with approval, in a variety of popular books, features, and websites. As these celebratory treatments put it, the Dreadnought hoax was no run-of-the-mill trickery, and the mastermind behind it was no ordinary practical joker. Horace Cole is variously called 'the king of jokers,' 'master prankster,' and 'jester in chief' or the likely patron saint of April Fool's Day (Hone 1940; Smith 1953, 101; Davis 2006). Cole (1881-1936) was an Anglo-Irish eccentric and poet who planned and executed many practical jokes. Prevented by physical infirmity from pursuing a longed-for military career, but having inherited a substantial fortune, he carved out a unique if short-lived career as a poet-prankster. He is one of a small number of men (and they are usually men) for whom practical joking is a significant part of their self-identity. He boasted that 'I have played and got away with more jokes than any man ever has' (Owen and Cole 1974, 39). Towards the end of his life, he began work on an autobiography, tentatively titled 'The Joker' or 'Unpractical Journey,' in which he intended to chronicle the one hundred practical jokes that he claimed as his. The work was never completed and is now lost.

The chroniclers of practical jokes treat Cole as a comic genius, a born jester. As a lifelong trickster, the stories suggest that his motive for planning and executing the hoax of the century was nothing more than an unusually well-developed sense of fun. The sheer scale of the hoax and the apparent lack of a personal relationship between the prankster and his target mark it is an extraordinary example of the art. Most practical joking is deeply socially embedded, arising from, reflecting, and solidifying social relationships. April Fool's Day lends traditional permission to play jokes on strangers,

but most other practical jokes played by individuals are aimed at people they know—friends, family, or co-workers. Individuals like Horace Cole depart from the usual pattern in that they play jokes seemingly at random on strangers. Such joking is more daring and risky than the usual kind, as it lacks either the social or traditional context that would otherwise lend a veneer of license. Accordingly, such untethered practical jokes appear more bold, elaborate, and spectacular than the usual kind simply because they seem to be operating without a safety net. Cole is remembered not simply for the number of jokes he played, but for their daring and outrageousness.

In point of fact the Dreadnought hoax was not as context-free as it is sometimes depicted. Both Adrian Stephen and his sister Virginia wrote that Cole was approached by a junior naval officer asking for help to pull the leg of another officer from a rival ship. In Virginia's account, the officer's motivation was the rivalry and ongoing exchange of practical jokes between his ship and the *Dreadnought* (Johnston 2009, 12). There was also a direct personal connection in Adrian's lifelong jealousy of his cousin William Fisher, who was then flag commander on the ship (Stephen 1983, 29-31; Reid 1999, 341; Reid 1998). These backstories pull the hoax into the social dynamic common to most practical joking. It was not random, but arose from either an ongoing joking relationship, albeit between two closely related groups rather than two individuals, or an ongoing family rivalry. Cole entered these relationships by proxy, serving almost as a joker for hire (although there is no indication that he was paid to do it). By skimming over these contextual details, the practical joke chronicles throw Cole's nature as a trickster into sharper relief.

The practical joke chronicles depict Cole and his hoaxes in sunny, light-hearted tones, but two recent biographies by Martin Downer and Roderic Owen paint a darker and more complex portrait of the man. Because of his penchant for playing sometimes

aggressive practical jokes, he was described by Winston Churchill as ‘a very dangerous man to his friends’ (Owen and Cole 1974, 49). This quip suggests the ambivalence with which he was regarded by his contemporaries, but it also points to Cole’s divided self and the mixed motives behind his jokes. In her speech about the hoax, delivered four years after Cole’s death, Virginia Woolf also called him ‘rather a dangerous friend for a young man to have’:

> He was an Irishman: with beautiful blue eyes and a little moustache and a perfect figure. He was as it happened the brother of Mrs. Neville Chamberlain. In those days she was called Annie Cole, and she was very proud of her brother. I don't think though that she was proud of him when she became the wife of a Prime Minister. For in truth Horace Cole was a wild young man. He was a bit of a scapegrace.[3] When he was boy [sic] he ran away from school, joined the army, and went out to the South African war. And there he was shot through the head, but he recovered, except for this— he was deaf. . . . And that perhaps was why he took up practical joking, he couldn't take up any profession. And fortunately for himself he had a good deal of money. And so instead of going to the bar or becoming a man of business he made it his business simply to make people laugh’ (Johnston 2009, 9).

In point of fact Cole lost almost all of his hearing after a serious bout of diphtheria when he was a child. According to his biographer Martyn Downer, this deafness contributed to a pervasive social awkwardness and great sensitivity to personal criticism (Downer 2010, 22). When Cole was about eleven years old his father, whom he idolized, died of cholera in India. Horace felt deeply rejected when his mother remarried barely two years later, sending Horace off to school at Eton almost immediately after the wedding, After Eton, he joined the army and served briefly in the Boer War before a serious

injury left him almost dead. He survived, but with a life-long infirmity that closed off his hopes for an army career. Downer speculates that this final loss set the tone of his personality during adulthood: 'A mischievous, even malicious, streak had been evident in him before the war, but Horace emerged from it with the motivation for revenge against a world which had left him fatherless, deaf and crippled by injury' (Downer 2010, 37). Downer surmises that Cole's outrageous and eccentric behavior, of which his practical joking was just one part, was driven by a deep-seated longing for the love and attention he felt he had lost when his father died (14), and by pervasive but undirected feelings of hostility and aggression toward a world that had denied him his dreams and a society in which he never felt he fully belonged (22).

Besides practical jokes, as a young man Cole was known for sudden bouts of violence and extreme recklessness as well as spells of melancholia (Downer, 68 conjectures that he may have been bipolar). These two strands— longing and anger— motivated his unusually strong penchant for playing practical jokes. There is a strong parallelism between the ambivalent feelings of the joker and the ambivalence expressed in the practical joke, a genre that combines play and aggression (Marsh 2015, 173). It is thus not surprising that while time and distance permits the chroniclers of the practical joke to admire him and laugh with him, Cole's contemporaries had more mixed feelings toward him. 'It is difficult for us now to imagine how famous he was,' writes Roderic Owen; 'how deeply some loathed him, how persistently others idolised him' (Owen and Cole 1974, 34).

2. Anti-Authoritarian

In addition to looking to the personality of the trickster to explain the Dreadnought hoax, a number of chroniclers see it as an exercise in anti-authoritarianism. 'It had seemed to me since I was very young,' wrote Adrian Stephen, 'just as I imagine it had seemed to Cole, that anyone who took up an attitude of authority over anyone else was necessarily also someone who offered everyone else a leg to pull' (1983, 22). Stephen implies that the caper arose out of almost nothing, simply because the ship was there, or because the Royal Navy and the Admiralty were full of stuffed shirts that cried out for ritual debasement. Many others have similarly evaluated the hoax as a ludic assault on authority. The power of the Admiralty, the esteem of the royal navy, and the formality of official protocol all stand in contrast to the informality and irreverence of the tricksters, a contrast that would seem to make an anti-authoritarian narrative obvious. The serious reactions of some officials lends further weight to this interpretation. The Admiral was embarrassed and anxious to find out whether the tricksters could be prosecuted, and for some weeks officials in the Foreign Office and the Admiralty investigated the question before deciding that circumspection was the better part of valour. Adrian Stephen wrote that many people, especially his relatives, were 'profoundly shocked at the idea of hoaxing the Navy. I had an elderly relation, for instance, who…. felt bound to state his opinion that 'His Majesty's ships are not suitable objects for practical jokes.'' (1983, 57). In the words of Woolf biography Hermione Lee, such reactions only served 'to turn the incident into the epitome of establishment pomposity versus anti-establishment satire' (1997, 280).

The anti-authoritarian narrative may be over blown, however. The flag commander on the Dreadnought that day was none other than Willy Fisher, who was Adrian and Virginia's cousin (fortunately, he did not recognize either of them in their disguises), suggesting that the social gap between the tricksters and the naval officers

was not so great. In other settings, research suggests that practical joking is much more common between parties who statuses are different but not widely so (Santino 1986). In Edwardian England, upper-class pranksters were allowed, even expected, to indulge in licentious play that would have been labelled hooliganism if the perpetrators were from the lower classes (Saltzman 2012, 53). Thus any interpretation of the hoax in terms of an assault on authority must be tempered. A generational relationship may be more salient: 'It was a family affair above all--'it was the younger generation of Stephens thumbing their nose at their aunts' and uncles' book of tradition (Lee 1997, 280).

2. Gender Blurring and Political Activism

By her own account as well as that of her brother Adrian, Virginia joined the conspirators to take the place of an original member who dropped at out at the last minute. This substitution made her the only woman in the party, which lent an extra thrill to the story when it first became public. Many of the stories in the press betrayed a particular fascination with the fact that one of the perpetrators was a cross-dressing woman. 'Girl Hoaxes British Navy' was the *Washington Post* headline. *The Dorchester Mail* punned that Virginia, the only woman among the bogus princes, 'had stepped into the breach and the breeches' (Stansky 1996, 34).

Cross-culturally, women are less likely than men to be encouraged or even permitted to be clowns or practical jokers, and this expectation was particularly true in Edwardian England. The upper classes enjoyed more license to joke and play than other social strata, but even within that privileged group young men had more freedom than young women, especially young unmarried women (Saltzman 2012, 44, 9-5). Women's joking activities are under stricter social control than men's, although the restrictions on

women's humor often relax as they advance in years (Apte 1985, 67-81). Women face more socially constructed injunctions against joking, especially in public or when the jokes are aggressive or transgressive (Kotthoff 2006, 13-4). Rather than performing jokes, they are more often expected to play a supportive role, encouraging and assisting their men's jokes (Marsh 2015, 167), which is what Virginia Woolf claimed to be doing in the Dreadnought hoax— she stepped in at the last moment when the plan was about to unravel with the departure of some of the original players.

Normative prohibitions against female joking derive from the cultural belief that joke pulling and joke telling are transgressive and aggressive matters which are only appropriate for men. Thus a woman who jokes, especially in an aggressive way, is seen as acting as a man. The very fact of her joking is a transgression against norms, which only intensifies any transgression already contained in her jokes. Lucy Delap states that 'it was...the penetration of the *Dreadnought* by a woman that caught the world's headlines' (2011, 102), which perfectly captures the aggressiveness of the hoax. Because there was a young unmarried woman involved, the fooling of the naval officers acquired a strong flavour of sexual conquest.

As numerous scholars have observed, the gender politics of Virginia's role in the hoaxing of the royal navy prefigures the theme of gender blurring, cross-dressing, and sexual ambiguity in her later literary oeuvre (Kennard 1996; Lee 1997, 282-3). The hoax and its aftermath may have helped to crystallize some of her feminist principles, as Quentin Bell suggests: 'the theme of masculine honour, of masculine violence and stupidity, of gold-laced masculine pomposity--remained with her for the rest of her life' (Bell 1972, 160-1).

In addition to cross-dressing, Virginia—and the other hoaxers—were also impersonating Africans, lending a racial politics script to the hoax that Woolf scholars

have seen as prefiguring the critique of empire and colonialism in her literary output. S.P. Rosenbaum sums up the stunts as ‘very much an anti-establishment class joke and finally an anti-imperialist one in which upper-middle-class costumed, black-faced gentlemen and a lady speaking gibberish could uncover the preposterous ignorance of the officers and sailors of the home fleet's flagship, with their unique codes of martial honour’ (Woolf and Rosenbaum 2007, 145-6). A few scholars go further, arguing that even in 1910, Virginia intended the joke to be a form of anti-imperialist political theatre in which she identified with the oppressed, colonized Africans (Phillips 1994, 248). Panthea Reid takes this claim a step further, in a subtle argument that Virginia was more than a bit player in the hoax and that the choice of impersonating Abyssinians was her idea. ‘Enabling Abyssinian royalty to humiliate the most visible sign of English colonial power was the choice of a more subtle mind’ than that possessed by either her brother or his friend Horace (1999, 347).

Whether Virginia Stephen or indeed any of the Dreadnought hoaxers saw their joke as more than a joke can only be conjecture, for no suggestion of an anti-imperialist or feminist message appear in their first-hand accounts. Virginia treated the hoax as a lark and a thrill, while Adrian interpreted it as a tweaking of authority. But in the public response to the hoax, race and Empire were clearly dominant themes.

3. Bunga-bunga: the joke in the political situation

Someone, possibly Horace Cole himself, leaked the story of the hoax to the London tabloids, resulting in front-page headlines. The story did the 1910 equivalent of going viral, being repeated in the English-language newspapers throughout the United

Kington but also in the United States, India, Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore (see Appendix 1). The bulk of this coverage was amused and favourable, praising the audacity of the hoaxers, and the good-natured response of the majority of naval officers, and joining in the fun with journalistic puns and jokes of their own. As already mentioned, some of these jokes and headlines fastened in on the fact that one of the hoaxers was female. However, it was race rather than gender that received the most attention. The papers made jokes and printed reports betraying racist and orientalist attitudes that would be swiftly condemned had they been published today.

There were numerous journalistic puns on the theme of color. The *New York Times* reported, tongue in cheek, that 'the Admiralty is being inundated with letters from all parts of England suggesting that the name of the battleship be changed to 'Black Prince' (*New York Times* 02/27 1910: 1). Similarly, the *Daily Mirror* suggested the following possible new names for the ship: the Abyssinai, the Ethiopia, and the Dark Horse (Stansky 1996, 33). One month after the fact, *Punch* was still getting comic mileage out of the affair—this time over a question put to the first Lord of the Admiralty in the House of Commons, inquiring whether it was true that government funds had been expended to purchase special gloves with which to serve the visitors: 'With reference to the *Dreadnought* hoax, Mr. McKenna refused to answer Captain Faber's enquiry as to whether the officers bought white kid gloves for the occasion. The question of colour may be in doubt, but the officers were unquestionably kidded' (quoted in Barkway, 23, n. 13). These jokes were ways of showing support and approval of the joke, in effect 'playing along' with the jokers or 'laughing' with them through mode adoption (Hay 2001), but they also suggest that to the Edwardian public, race, as evidenced by skin colour, was one of the most salient elements in the story.

Another aspect of the racist script in the public reception of the hoax are the numerous sensationalized, outlandish descriptions of the hoaxers' costumes and make-up. 'The make-up was certainly of a most striking character,' wrote the *Pembrokeshire Herald*:

> All had their hair cut short, and were fitted with black woolly mats which completely covered their skulls. They were provided with short, crisp, curly black beards and the most complete sets of nigger lips. Their faces, arms, and hands were dyed to the proper hue. They wore turbans and flowing robes. Unable to resist a touch of humour, the princes completed their disguise with very long, pointed, elastic- sided, patent leather boots.[4]

None of these costume details was an accurate simulacrum of aristocratic Ethiopian dress, but their inclusion served 'to satisfy an Edwardian racial stereotype' (Downer 2010, 123). The costumes conformed more to contemporary Orientalist notions than to Ethiopian royal attire—the turbans and pointed shoes being particularly anachronistic.

[FIGURE 1: The Princes of Abyssinia Suite ABOUT HERE]

[FIGURE 2: Ras Makonnen ABOUT HERE]

Scholars today suggest that the hoax employed 'The shoddiest and most obvious of disguises' (Gerzina 2006, 52), yet it worked. In his initial report on what happened, Admiral May explained that 'the Abyssinians were in native dress & appeared to be genuine' (Stansky 1996, 28). Although it was not accurate, the disguise worked because it conformed to stereotype, drawing upon familiar tropes and methods of blackface minstrelsy, which was very popular in England at the time (Gerzina 2006).

The Edwardians' Orientalist worldview of also led them to assume that Abyssinians must be Muslims, a misapprehension that gave rise to further jokes. 'The cream of the jest is that 'sunset' was delayed over an hour on the battleship, as the flagship's commander feared that the 'Abyssinians' might fall to their prayers at the sound of the evening gun,' according to the *Cardiff Evening Express*. In point of fact, the Ethiopian Empire has been Christian Orthodox since the fourth century if not earlier.

However, it was the supposed language of the hoaxers that provided the culminating joke. By their own admission, the hoaxers knew not a word of Amharic and relied instead on an ad-hoc assemblage of Swahili, Latin, and gibberish which served well since none of their targets know the language either. The papers quickly filled in this gap in knowledge with their own inventions. The *Pembrokeshire Herald*'s version is typical: 'The princes were shown everything: the wireless, the guns, and the torpedoes, and at every fresh sight they murmured in chorus, 'Bunga, bunga,' which, being interpreted, means 'Isn't it lovely?' Although according to Stephen none of the party ever uttered the words bunga bunga, the phrase became a byword for the whole affair. Children taunted the Dreadnought officers by shouting the words at them in the street, and a music-hall song was written about it:

> When I went on board a Dreadnought ship
> Though I looked just like a costermonger;
> They said I was an Abyssinian prince
> Because I shouted 'Bunga-Bunga'
> (Stansky 1996, 34-5).

(see also Owen, 36; Hone, 675; Stansky, 33)

‘Bunga-bunga’ echoes ‘bungle’ and ‘bugger,’ which would have contributed to the popularity of the phrase as a tool of mockery (Woolf and Rosenbaum 2007, 144). Like the other errors in the accounts of the hoax and in the impersonation itself, these words betray complete ignorance of the language being parodied along with a contemptuous assumption that Abyssinian speech must be primitive. Yet the implied mockery of Abyssinia was only a technique in ridiculing the navy, brought low by mere Abyssinians, their cultural inferiors according to the colonialist and cultural evolutionist thinking of the time, whose relative cultural underdevelopment was displayed by their supposedly primitive language. Worse still, the agents of the navy’s undoing were not even genuine savages, but fabricated ones in not very convincing disguise, looking like a costermonger, someone who sells goods from a barrow on the street.

4. Once Bitten

All of the interpretations of the Dreadnought hoax considered so far involve just two significant parties: the young tricksters pitted against the older, more powerful authority of the Navy/Admiralty. Whether the hoax is seen as pure fun, an attention-seeking stunt, an anti-authoritarian joke, or a political critic of Empire and gender relations, the supposed national origin of the bogus princes is incidental. However, the choice of Abyssinia was no accident. The pubic responses to the hoax in 1910 reveal another layer of meaning that featured a third significant party: the absent, impersonated Abyssinians.

On February 17 the *Daily Mirror* printed a cartoon response to the hoax, showing the artist’s rendition of ‘What will happen next time some genuine eastern princes visit a British man o’-war.’

[FIGURE 3 ‘Once Bitten’ ABOUT HERE]

The first panel depicts the hoax, with uniformed naval officers bowing to five ‘Abyssinian princes’ who wink knowingly to each other. The second panel depicts five individuals with black skin wearing robes and turbans are assaulted by the same officers: they pull on one man’s beard, bonk another on the head as he flees, throw one to the deck, throw another overboard, and grab a fourth by the waist. The fakery in the first scene is suggested by the shoes and trousers showing beneath the ‘Abyssinian’ robes, while the genuine princes are shown barefoot. The accompanying text explains ‘that the next time Oriental personages, however genuine, visit a man-o'-war, their reception will be rather warm, and something of the sort shown here.’

On the surface, this cartoon is simply one more joke in support of the hoaxers and at the expense of the navy. The cartoonist’s sympathies seem to lie with the sham princes rather than the real ones shown being manhandled by the ship’s officers. The hoaxers got the better of the officers, but in the cartoon the officers get the better of the Abyssinians, with facial expressions that I can only describe as malicious glee. Rather than punishing the hoaxers, they are shown ‘accidentally’ punishing the Abyssinians—but for what were they being punished?

Abyssinia, or the Ethiopian Empire, was one of only two African nations that successfully resisted European colonization. Led by Emperor Menelik II, they decisively beat the Italian army in the battle of Adwa in 1896, forcing Britain along with other western powers to recognize Abyssinia as a sovereign nation. If any of the Abyssinian royal family visited the United Kingdom, protocol demanded that they be accorded the full honours due to any royalty. This situation would have felt nothing if

not incongruous to Edwardian Britons, for whom ‘African nobility was an oxymoron, an apt subject for comedy’ (Reid 1998, 337).

‘Few events in the modern period have brought Ethiopia to the attention of the world as has the victory at Adwa’ (Zewde 2001, 81). The Abyssinian victory shocked the world, causing colonial powers to take seriously the threat of African military power or revolt. ‘The racial dimension was what lent Adwa particular significance. It was a victory of blacks over whites. . . . The symbolic weight of the victory of Adwa was greater in areas where white domination of blacks was most extreme and marked by overt racism’ -- i.e. South Africa and the U.S (Zewde 2001, 81).

The Dreadnought hoaxers would have been children when Ethiopia humiliated Europe in 1896, and it may be that this was not explicitly on their mind fourteen years later. Nevertheless, despite their boasted ignorance of all things Abyssinian, the names that they gave to their alter egos betray more knowledge than we would otherwise expect. A contemporary portrait of ‘The Princes of Abyssinia Suite’ (Figure 1) lists these names as Ras el Mikael Golen; Ras el Makalen (cousin to Menelik); Ras el Sanganyas; and Ras el Mendax. ‘Ras’ is an Ethiopian aristocratic title, and Menelik II was the Emperor on the throne at the time—a fairly well-known international figure. ‘Makalen’ and ‘Mikael Golen’ are rough approximations of the real names Haile Mikael, the Emperor’s uncle, and Ras Mekonen, a regional governor. (‘Ras el Mendax’ is, of course, the clue to the fact of the hoax, being based on the Latin for liar’.) As Panthea Reid (Reid 1999) painstakingly demonstrates, Virginia Stephen and her brother had more acquaintance with Abyssinia than we might expect. Horace Cole himself had travelled through North Africa disguised as a deaf mute Arab (Downer 2010, 78), which cannot have left him without at least a superficial acquaintance with Ethiopian culture and language.

Regardless of how much detailed knowledge they or their contemporaries retained, the public response to the hoax reflects a deep if unconscious feeling about the African empire. As the Edwardians saw it, Abyssinian sovereignty was an incongruity, or what Mary Douglas called a 'joke in the social structure' (Douglas 1975, 100); the hoax, and the jokes that followed it, mirrored this socio-political incongruity in the expressive realm. It is this congruence of contemporary world order and the joking expression that caught the imagination of the English-speaking world in 1910 and made the Dreadnought stunt Horace Cole's most famous hoax.

From a distance of more than a century it is difficult to appreciate the feelings of Edwardians at the unexpected military and political reversal that the Battle of Adwa represented, even fourteen years later (Stansky 1996, 18); Reid suggests that this continuing feeling of shame, of affronted racist pride, lay behind Mussolini's Ethiopian offensive (Reid 1999, 351 n.4). The events of 1896 may have helped fuel the British mania for blackface and Orientalist fancy dress (Ito 2007). The literature of the day was full of examples in which white men successfully masqueraded as Africans or Arabs. 'The complacent English reader assumed that the white man could successfully pass as native, whereas the native's attempts to cross the racial barrier were always doomed to fail.' (McLaren 2007, 597). Finally, society women wrote to the hoaxers with invitations, as Virginia recalled: 'Great ladies implored us to come to their parties—and please they added, do come dressed as Abyssinians' (Johnston 2009, 30). These invitations expressed the desire to continue and repeat the feelings of vicarious satisfaction engendered by the spectacle on the Dreadnought.

'Once Bitten' expressed the secret frustrations of Edwardian Britons at having to treat 'inferiors' as royalty and that the bottom panel depicts their unconscious wishes in a joking guise. The hoax was a carnival mirror in which Britons could see themselves

bowing to those they felt were racial inferiors; it was a metaphor for the unique relationship between European powers and the Ethiopian Empire. But it was more than a mirror; it was a fantasy in which the upstart Africans were tamed, symbolically stuffed into stereotype boxes controlled by whites. The parody of Abyssinian 'princes' was shown to be as effective as the genuine article—in fact, in the imagination of the cartoonist, the Englishmen were better princes better than the Africans. To the British colonialist mind, African royals could never be more than bogus 'princes.'

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Figure 1. The Princes of Abyssinia Suite. © National Portrait Gallery, London

James Lafayette [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 2. An example of Ethiopian aristocratic dress: Ras Makonnen ca. August 1902. Photographer: Lafayette Ltd., 179 New Bond Street, London. Public domain.

Figure 3. Haselden, William. 1910. "Once bitten, twice shy." *Daily Mirror*, 17 February 1910.

Appendix: Contemporary Newspaper Reports of the Dreadnought Hoax

Listed in chronological order. Unless otherwise indicated, all papers were published in London.

1. “Amazing Naval Hoax: Sham Abyssinian Princes Visit the *Dreadnought*: Bogus Order.” *Daily Express* 02/12/1910.
2. “Bogus ‘Princes’ on the Dreadnought.” *The Globe* 02/12/1910.
3. "British Warship Is Hoaxed: Bogus Princes of Abyssinia and Suite Fool Officers. Jokers Are Well Known. Five Men and a Girl Make up Like Real Africans." *Chicago Daily Tribune* 02/13/1910: 1.
4. "Girl Hoaxes British Navy: 'Prince and Suite' Entertained by Dreadnought's Officers; Young Men and Woman of High Family, Made up as Visitors from Abyssinia, Are Received with Honors." *Washington Post* 02/13/1910: 15.
5. "*Dreadnought* Officers Hoaxed: Sham Abyssinian Princes Welcomed in State on Flagship." *Daily Mirror* 02/14/1910.
6. “Bunga Bungle.” *Western Daily Mercury* 02/15/1910.
7. "Dreadnought amused at hoax. Captain of ship and sham attache [sic] meet in street. Lady Prince's story" *Daily Mirror* 02/15/1910.
8. "How the officers of H. M. S. *Dreadnought* were hoaxed." *Daily Mirror* 02/16/1910.
9. "The Dreadnought Hoax." *Evening Express* [Cardiff] 02/16 1910: 4.
10. “Once Bitten, Twice Shy” (Cartoon) *Daily Mirror*, 02/17/1910.
11. "Amazing Hoax. Sham Princes Visit a British Warship." *Pembrokeshire Herald and General Advertiser* [Wales] 02/18/1910: 4.

12. ----. *Dorchester Mail*, 02/18/1910.
13. "February Fools in the Navy: The Great 'Dreadnought' Hoax and Some Other Recent Examples of Practical Joking." *Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times* 02/19/1910: 234.
14. "Dreadnought Hoax."[Cardiff] *Evening Express and Evening Mail* 02/24/1910: 2.
15. "Parliament: Abyssinians." *The Times* (London, England), Friday, Feb 25, 1910; pg. 6; Issue 39205.
16. "Sham Abyssinians Hoax Admiral May; Jokers Made up as Princes and Party Receive Royal Honors on Flagship Dreadnought. Met by Official Barge Guard of Honor Turned out and Band Plays Anthem— One of the Masqueraders a Woman." *New York Times* 02/27/1910: 1.
17. "Meyer Warned of Hoax." *Washington Post* 03/01/1910: 5.
18. Marquise De, Fontenoy. "Bogus Baronets Plagues British." *Washington Post* 03/02/1910: 6.
19. "Parliament: House of Commons: "Abyssinians"." *The Times* 03/03/1910: 8. (Excerpt from Hansard showing questions asked of the First Lord of the Admiralty in the House of Commons.)
20. *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 03/09/1910, p. 163.
21. "Naval Hoax: 'Foreign Princes' Escapade." *The Times of India* 03/14/1910: 14.
22. "The Dreadnought Hoax." *Daily Mail* 03/24 1910: 5.
23. "A Dreadnought Hoax: 'Prince Makalin of Abyssinia'." [Tasmania, Australia] *Hobart Mercury* 03/24/1910.
24. "Officers Even up Dreadnought Joke: Get Last Laugh for Entertaining 'Princes'." *Washington Herald* 04/14/1910: 1.

25. "Officers Cane Hoaxers: British Dreadnought's Commanders Re- Pay "Joke" with Thrashing." *Washington Post* 04/15/1910: 5.
26. "Naval Hoax: Bogus Princes: The Hoaxers Identified: Punishment Inflicted." [New Zealand] *Evening Post* 04/15/1910: 7.
27. "Dreadnought Hoax: The Culprits Caned." [Singapore] *Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* 05/12/ 1910: 2.

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[1] For a partial listing of contemporary newspaper stories about the hoax, see Appendix 1.

[2] Georgia Johnston (2009) published an uncorrected transcript of the typescript of Virginia Wool's talk on the Dreadnought hoax which she delivered to the Women's Institute at Rodmell in 1940. Prior to this publication only three pages of the speech were extant (Bell 1972, 214-216). In this paper I have corrected the typographical errors in the unedited transcript given by Johnston.

[3] A 'scapegrace' is a rascal.

[4] The *Times of India* gives the same description almost verbatim but attributes it to a statement made to the *Globe* by a manager of the costumer.

Author Bio

Moira Marsh is a folklorist and humor scholar, with a focus on vernacular humor, practical jokes, and humor theory. She is the author of *Practically Joking* (2015) and former member of the International Society for Humor Studies Executive Board. .