Part Three

Representation

Six

Imitating the Dead

As long as ghost-beliefs have been recorded, there have been instances of those who have attempted to simulate hauntings. The next chapter will examine the history of projection as a means of reproducing ghosts, but now I want to consider the ways in which and reasons why, over the centuries, people have dressed up as ghosts or mimicked the stereotypical activities of malevolent spirits. Even the most devout believers in ghosts over the centuries recognised that many hauntings were frauds. Puzzled by the uniformity of the manifestations adopted by several famous hoaxers, such as the Cock Lane culprits, Andrew Lang pondered, 'Do impostors and credulous persons deliberately "get up" the subject in rare old books? Is there a method of imposture handed down by one generation of bad little girls to another?'[1] It is a provoking question, but also an easy one to answer. The manifestation and activities of ghosts were so integral to the oral and literary culture of the last 500 years that there was no need to research and revise how ghosts appeared and what they did. It was their familiarity that made hoaxes successful. Ghost hoaxers, whether running about the streets, hovering over graveyards or disturbing bedrooms, were performing for an audience. That was the whole point. So, as we shall see in a later chapter, it was necessary to perform according to the audiences' expectations, perceptions and understanding of ghosts. Otherwise a hoax, just like a play, would fail.

REFORMATION PROPAGANDA

In the Reformation propaganda war no opportunity was spared to heap humiliation and calumnies on the Catholic clergy. Anti-Catholic popular literature was full of images of monks defecating demons, indulging in gluttony and sexual depravity. If the propagandists were to be believed, then after wallowing in vice, monks and priests liked nothing better for recreation and personal enrichment than mimicking the spirits of the dead. They were

portrayed as masters of ghost deception, following in the footsteps of the duplicitous pagan priests of the ancient world. The evangelical Protestant John Bale (1495–1563), a former Carmelite friar, denounced his erstwhile brethren for their tricks and necromancy in making the dead supposedly speak. Reginald Scot, in demolishing the reality of the raising of Samuel, said he 'could cite a hundred papistical and cozening practises, as difficult as this and as cleanly handled'. Samuel Harsnett, a future Archbishop of York, in a searing attack on 'Popish Impostures', execrated the Catholic priesthood who 'worke their wonders, making Images to speake, vaults to sound, trunks to carry tales, Churchyards to swarme, houses to rush, rumble, and clatter with chaynes, high-waies, old graves, pittes, and woods ends to be haunted'. As to the exact nature of these supposed deceits, Sir John Melton described how 'Scab-shin Fryers' placed accomplices in specially made vaults under the tombs of rich men so that when members of the family came to pray for the souls of the deceased, 'they should heare a dreadfull voice under the Sepulchre'. The ventriloquial voices of the dead would tell mourning families that they should give over their property to the local monastery to ease the passage of their souls to heaven. If an incident recounted by the humanist Catholic theologian Erasmus, and later printed by Lavater, is to be believed, the priesthood indeed possessed a genius for such deceptions He described how on Easter eve a priest placed candles on the backs of some crabs and let them scrabble around the graves in a churchyard to simulate the souls of those in purgatory hovering above their corpses.[2]

The clergyman John Gee (1595/96–1639) provided a lengthy account of the papist deception apparently perpetrated on one Mary Boucher of London around 1621. Mary was in the service of a recusant lady, who together with three Jesuits, planned to convert her to Catholicism and have her 'Nunnified'. One of the strategies they employed was to present Mary with the apparition of her godmother. To this end a 'gastly ghost, walking in a sheet knit upon the head, came unto her where shee lay in her bed'.[3] The pale and wan spirit touched Mary with 'a hand cold as earth or iron' and said 'shee was come from Purgatory, where she had long endured torture and torment'. She wanted to help Mary avoid the same fate by urging her to reject the Protestant faith. 'By all meanes see that you tell my children what you have seene, and how their Mother appeared unto you, and what counsel she hath given you.'[4] The apparition appeared one more time urging Mary to become a nun. When her mother got to hear of the stratagems being employed to convert her daughter she managed to rescue her from the snare of popery. Gee claimed to have visited Mary sometime later to verify the story. Whether Gee's account

is to be trusted is another matter. He had good reason to be publishing anti-Catholic ghost stories. He himself was under suspicion of being in the service of Rome. He certainly mixed with Catholics in London and was present at a terrible disaster on 26 October 1623 when a building near the French embassy collapsed during Catholic evensong, killing nearly 100 people.[5] Following the publicity surrounding the event, Gee, who saw his escape as a 'spiritual deliverance', made amends for his apostasy by publishing a lengthy exposé of Catholic proselytising activities in England. By producing a second pamphlet focusing on the Boucher apparitions Gee had an eye on the popular appeal of the subject, seeing it as providing a good vehicle for spreading word of his renewed enthusiasm for Anglicanism.

Suspicions of Catholic machinations were even raised during the Cock Lane affair, with one pamphleteer remarking that he was 'sometimes almost tempted to suspect; that those constant Dabblers in puddle Waters, the JESUITS, may be at the Bottom of this Affair, as they were in that of the Boy of Bilston'.[6] But there is little clear and conclusive evidence that Catholic priests really were busy faking ghosts and other supernatural phenomena in early modern England. Reginald Scot referred briefly to two cases of priests having been caught simulating 'walking spirits' at Canterbury in 1573 and Rye in 1577.[7] Suspicions of Catholic activity were raised regarding a case of haunting in Minehead in 1637.[8] Otherwise there is not much to work on other than accusations and rumours. The Catholic clergy were certainly active in some parts of the country, such as Lancashire, practising and advertising exorcism as a propaganda exercise. The trial of the Samlesbury witches in 1612 revealed that the accusations of witchcraft made by a 14-year-old girl, Grace Sowerbuts, had apparently been inspired and shaped by the 'subtil practise and conspiracie of a Seminarie Priest' named Thomson in order to convert local people. It was 'a bloudy practice, fit for a Romanist', said the clergyman Richard Bernard a few years later.[9] The Boy of Bilson (Bilston), referred to above, was another such case exposed in 1620–21. The twelve-year-old William Perry, whose parents were Roman Catholics, exhibited all the classic signs of possession, vomiting pins and the like, and several recusant priests were requested to exorcise him. The Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry, Thomas Morton, caught the boy faking, and suspected the whole case was a propaganda ploy by priests in the region to promote Catholicism.[10] To what extent his suspicions were justified is difficult to gauge. All that can be said with certainty is that accusations of Catholic fakery and supernatural deception far outweighed any actual evidence of such practices. On this note, we shall move on to firmer evidential ground.

LOOKING THE PART

As we have already seen, ventriloquism and illusion could be used to simulate certain types of haunting, but these required either natural ability or acquired skills. For the average person the easiest and most successful way to fake a ghost was to don a white sheet. Reginald Scot remarked in 1584 that 'one knave in a white sheet hath cozened and abused many thousands that way'.[11] To show the venerable nature of the ruse let us begin with a story by that scathing critic of papal corruption, Erasmus. He had spent a year at Oxford in 1499 and then stayed at Cambridge University between 1509 and 1513, and it is possible that real events inspired him to set his story of a ghost hoax at a farm near London.[12] His colloquy, entitled 'The Exorcism: Or, The Apparition', tells of a local prankster named Pool who raises a rumour in the neighbourhood that a tormented soul haunts a local bridge, and can be heard emitting 'hideous Howlings'. He then suggests to a local village priest that, 'as he was a Holy, and a Learned Person, he would do his best toward Relieving of a poor Soul out of that terrible Affliction'. The priest attempts several exorcisms at the bridge, and each time Pool, with the help of some accomplices, stages a series of elaborate pantomimes to convince the priest he is in communication with not only the tormented ghost but also the Devil, who roars 'This Soul is mine, and you have no Power over it.' Pool gets his son-in-law to play the ghost. He 'wraps up himself in a Sheet, like a Corps, with a live Coal in a Shell that shew'd through the Linnen, as if something were a burning'.[13] The priest is thoroughly taken in by the hoax, and, turning the usual Protestant accusation of priestly deception on its head, Erasmus pokes fun at clerical credulity. That such an elaborate hoax on the clergy was not beyond the realms of possibility in the period is evident from a court case in 1605/06. It concerned the accusation of John Mountford, Rector of Radwinter, Essex, that the church clerk and others had tried to force him out of his incumbency. He said that by some 'devise or sleight', they

> did procure fearfull & uglie shapes & formes of evill spirittes or divilles sundrie tymes by day & night to haunt and walke about the church & churchyard visiblie to be seene, sometimes in the shape of a man, sometimes of a dogg, catt or such like.

Invisible blows also buffeted those who ventured into the church and churchyard. The jury found the defendant not guilty.[14]

Most hoaxes were neither so elaborate nor conspiratorial, and merely consisted of individuals prowling around in a white sheet emitting groans.

They were most commonly perpetrated in urban areas where the streets and churchyards, even at night, provided a large and captive audience. In 1761, residents around Westminster Abbey and St John's churchyard, Millbank, got up a subscription of five guineas as a reward for any person or persons that captured a ghost impersonator that was terrorising the neighbourhood and frightening the 'weak minded'. The servant of a local gentleman was duly caught wrapped in a white sheet with the corners hanging over his head.[15] One night in April 1804 a ghost was pursued through the streets around St Paul's churchyard, London, until it found itself cornered, rather fittingly, in a dead end. It turned out to be a man who had dressed in a white muslin robe and whitened his legs with chalk. He was brought before an alderman and it was considered that the man was mentally deranged. It is not clear whether this was a conclusion drawn from his general behaviour or because only an idiot would perform such a prank after the Hammersmith shooting a few months earlier.[16]

In October 1830 consternation was caused in Angel Street, Bedford, after a ghostly figure was seen peering into windows. The following week a local newspaper cleared up the spooky mystery:

> The other night a foolish fellow walked about New Town, covered with a white sheet, and a mask on. We would caution him against a repetition of such folly, or a punishment may await him that he little dreams of.[17]

This warning proved uncomfortably true for the ghost impersonator who terrified the village of Handsworth in December 1844. A posse of six men beat him so badly he required hospital treatment. Another prankster who tormented a village on the outskirts of Shrewsbury in February 1888 narrowly avoided a similar fate. Some 50 villagers armed with sticks caught him, and they only released him on the condition that he donated £5 to the Salop Infirmary.[18] Apprehending a ghost hoaxer was not always so easy in urban areas. For a couple of weeks in September 1885 the police in Derby were inundated with complaints about several young men dressed in white sheets roaming the streets at night frightening local women and children. When a soldier caught one of the hoaxers, an errand boy named Christopher Burrows, aged around 16, he threw off his sheet and brandished a pistol at his captor.[19]

To create a ghost scare one did not even need a sheet. Appearing in white clothing at night was sometimes sufficient to terrify people. The 'Camberwell Ghost' Joseph Munday, aged 43, was imprisoned in 1872 for loitering and making 'menaces and gestures'. He had frightened numerous people, particularly local children. One victim was a young girl named Eyre who

described how she was walking along Cator Street, Peckham, when Munday 'darted out, threw open his coat, to display a white slop [smock], and threw up his arms and uttered some strange sounds'.[20] One night in May 1830, an unfeeling prankster, on seeing a woman named Marshall and her friends keeping vigil over the grave of her infant in St Philip's churchyard, Birmingham, stripped to his shirt, put on a white night cap and 'made a sudden dart to the spot where they were assembled'. The women fled in terror except for the mourning mother, who, determined to fend off a possible resurrectionist, seized hold of the ghost and called for the assistance of a watchman, who had him arrested.[21]

SPRING-HEELED JACK

A notorious and vicious ghost prankster, who plagued the outskirts of London in late 1837 and early 1838, generated the enduring legend of Spring-Heeled Jack thanks to copycats and his subsequent portrayal in popular sensational literature.[22] The affair began when reports circulated in London and outlying villages in Hertfordshire of a frightening figure dressed in a large cloak that revealed itself variously in the form of a ghost, a devil or a hairy beast. The apparition primarily targeted women and on several occasions apparently tore their dresses with claws. On 8 January the Lord Mayor made public the details of an anonymous letter he had received from a Peckham resident stating that several women from villages on the outskirts of London had been severely frightened, to the extent of becoming insane, after being assailed by the 'spectre'. 'This affair has now been going on for some time,' said the author, 'and, strange to say, the papers are still silent on the subject.' However, she (for the letter was presumed to have been written by a woman) intimated that the spectre was the prank of a man from the 'higher ranks of life' who made a wager that he would visit several villages near London in three different guises – that of a ghost, a bear and the Devil – in order to cause a sensation. The Mayor treated the letter with inappropriate light-heartedness and said that 'as the terrible vision had not entered the city, he could not take cognisance of its iniquities'.[23] However, following the publication of the letter and the Mayor's response in *The Times* and other newspapers, the Mayor received letters from other concerned residents detailing further outrages by the 'Peckham Ghost'. Thomas Lott, of Bow Lane, said that the scoundrel had been active in the neighbourhood of his Hornsea residence, 'where if I catch Mr. Ghost on any part of my premises, I shall administer that to his substantial part that if ever he reappears it shall be only his serial essence, or as a ghost in fact'. An

inhabitant of Stockwell wrote to say that several people in Stockwell, Brixton, Camberwell and Vauxhall had been frightened into fits, some to death, and expressed the hope that the Mayor would 'not think lightly of this matter'. A Middlesex magistrate related how a former servant of his had recently informed him that the female population of Hammersmith feared to go out after dark for fear of being molested by the ghost or monster. He promised to enquire into the affair and apprehend the 'miscreants' who were 'undoubtedly working real mischief'. Another letter-writer expressed similar concerns regarding events in Lewisham, Blackheath and St John's Wood.[24] Despite such correspondence the Mayor continued to express scepticism about the severity of the effects on the female population, and was not inclined to launch a full-scale manhunt or ghost hunt.

By mid February the ghost had been given the name of 'Spring-Heeled Jack' by some and an urban legend was born. Rumours of further attacks circulated in and around London, though those who doubted the existence of the ghastly attacker had to revise their opinion when confronted with news of the terrifying assault on Jane Alsop, the 18-year-old daughter of a wealthy gentleman who lived in an isolated spot between the villages of Bow and Old Ford. At about a quarter to nine one night in mid February someone violently rang the bell, and when Jane opened the door she was confronted by a man in a large cloak. He identified himself as a policeman and said 'For God's sake, bring me a light, for we have caught Spring-heeled Jack.' When she gave him a candle he lit it and threw open his cloak, presenting 'a most hideous and frightful appearance'. He was dressed in some garb that Alsop described as resembling a white oilskin. He also wore some sort of helmet through which he 'vomited forth a quantity of blue and white flame from his mouth'. He grabbed her, clawing at her dress, neck and arms until she was pulled from his grasp by one of her sisters. Members of her family cried for help and the attacker ran off. The police launched an investigation and Mr Alsop offered a reward of ten guineas for the capture of the ghost impersonator.[25]

On the 22 February, PC Lea reported that, from what he had found out, the same person 'had been in the neighbourhood for nearly a month past, frightening men as well as women; and had, on one occasion, narrowly escaped apprehension'. Lea also believed that a number of young men were assuming ghostly guises in imitation.[26] By the beginning of March two men had been charged with the Alsop outrage: one was a master bricklayer named Payne and the other a carpenter named Milbank. Both of them were in the vicinity after having been shooting. Suspicion was focused most on Milbank who was wearing a white shooting jacket and a white hat that night. However, after two days of hearings at Lambeth Street police court, the presiding magistrate came

to the conclusion that despite the fact that Milbank claimed to be so drunk that night that he could not remember anything, he was innocent and the charges were dropped. It would seem that no one was ever prosecuted for the Alsop assault.[27] A few weeks later, however, two crude imitators were arrested: a youth named Daniel Granville, who was caught in Kentish Town wearing a mask with blue glazed paper coming out of the mouth, and James Painter, who was fined for dressing up in a bearded mask and sheet and frightening people in Kilburn.[28] For a month or so the press continued to attribute strange sightings and assaults, which had little connection to the original attacks, to the now legendary Spring-Heeled Jack. On the 14 April, for example, the *Brighton Gazette* reported that 'he had found his way to the Sussex coast', a gardener in Brighton having seen a bear-like creature run along a wall topped with broken glass, which then jumped down and chased the frightened man before scaling the wall and escaping.[29]

SOUNDING THE PART

The decision on what hoax strategy to adopt depended on the environment in which the hoaxer wished to or had to operate, due to constraints of time or social and physical access. The white sheet technique was most appropriate for the rural outdoors and urban streets. It was more difficult to effect successfully indoors unless buildings were unoccupied. The white-sheet was usually only employed in occupied houses for criminal purposes. Otherwise the best strategy to create hauntings in confined spaces was to simulate auditory or noisy ghosts, which people did not necessarily expect to be accompanied by any visual apparitions. The spectral voice, for example, could be achieved by ventriloquism, but there were other simple tricks that could be employed. In the 1580s Pierre Le Loyer cited a French case where a long hollow reed or cane was secretly placed through a wall near the bed of a woman, and from another room her manservant spoke into it at night mimicking the voice of her dead husband. The same ruse was apparently used around 1603 to deceive a widowed gentlewoman of Cannington, Somerset, into giving her estate to a 'special friend' rather than her son. As a high court heard in 1605, the culprit used a ladder to climb up to her bedroom window one night. He wore a mask and a frightful wig and held a dark lantern in one hand. Seeing his victim was asleep he 'did putt the one end of the cane upon her pillow close to her eare, & puttinge the other end to his mouth did throw the said cane with a counterfeit voice'. He whispered that he was the Devil and would carry her off to hell if she did not do as he said.[30] The vocal haunting of the Hartt

family home in Orford Hill, Norwich, in 1826, was rather less sophisticated. It was the work of a servant boy who gained surreptitious access to the attic from an unoccupied house next door. He scared the inmates by calling out in an ominous voice, 'Beware! Leave off your wicked life, Hartt!! Read your Bible.' After several nights the boy was obviously getting rather desperate in his hideaway, as the ghost was once heard moaning 'Bread and butter – ham, bread and butter – blow my guts, I am so hungry!' A thorough investigation by a Sheriff's officer led to his arrest. The *Bury Gazette* expressed its 'sincere hope the magistrate will make him suffer for his fun'.[31]

Basic poltergeist phenomena such as knocking and rapping on walls were fairly easy to orchestrate by a variety of subterfuges and with the help of accomplices. The cause of a haunting that shook a house in Somerset during the eighteenth century was revealed to be a large boy who broke into an abandoned adjoining property and jumped up and down on a large central beam that ran through both houses.[32] The confession of a twelve-year-old girl named Baker, the daughter of a working man, who in 1857 was sentenced to 14 days in Wandsworth gaol for criminal damage, revealed a simple technique for simulating the ghostly movement of objects. She tied a strand of her long hair round the article she wished to disturb and tugged on it, thereby making it appear as if it had been moved by an invisible hand.[33] As several cases discussed shortly will show, stone-throwing was a particularly satisfying and relatively easy manifestation to emulate. Lavater related the case of a novice friar whose faith in spirits was tested by his colleagues. They began by throwing stones into his chamber at night, before one of them entered draped in a white sheet.[34] In most instances stone-throwing led to rumours of a haunting, but it would seem that on some occasions, as with the white-sheet wearers, hoaxers were inspired by an existing ghost scare. Such would seem to be the case regarding an 'extraordinary outrage' in Pimlico in October 1823. For a couple of weeks the neighbourhood had been alarmed by reports that a ghost had been seen in nearby fields. Then the stones started to rain down on houses in Elizabeth Place, Queen Street, with nearly all the windows in several properties being smashed.[35] In many instances, particularly of the stone-throwing type, the culprit was never caught, thereby providing confirmation to some in the neighbourhood that the activities were, indeed, of a spiritual origin.

Sheet-wearing was a typically male form of ghost hoax mostly perpetrated by young men, while the simulation of obstreperous ghosts or poltergeist activity appealed more to young females. This gender distinction is in part explained by the social spaces in which young men and women were to be found. In rural villages and small towns in particular, it was socially unacceptable for young women to roam the streets and fields unaccompanied at night, and