

LAW 32

PLAY TO PEOPLE'S FANTASIES

JUDGMENT

The truth is often avoided because it is ugly and unpleasant. Never appeal to truth and reality unless you are prepared for the anger that comes from disenchantment. Life is so harsh and distressing that people who can manufacture romance or conjure up fantasy are like oases in the desert: Everyone flocks to them. There is great power in tapping into the fantasies of the masses.

THE FUNERAL OF THE LIONESS

The lion having suddenly lost his queen, every one hastened to show allegiance to the monarch, by offering consolation. These compliments, alas, served but to increase the widower's affliction. Due notice was given throughout the kingdom that the funeral would be performed at a certain time and place; the lion's officers were ordered to be in attendance, to regulate the ceremony, and place the company according to their respective rank. One may well judge no one absented himself. The monarch gave way to his grief, and the whole cave, lions having no other temples, resounded with his cries. After his example, all the courtiers roared in their different tones. A court is the sort of place where everyone is either sorrowful, gay, or indifferent to everything, just as the reigning prince may think fit; or if any one is not actually, he at least tries to appear so; each endeavors to mimic the master. It is truly said that one mind animates a thousand bodies, clearly showing that human beings are mere machines. But let us return to our subject. The stag alone shed no tears. How could he, forsooth? The death of the queen avenged him; she had formerly strangled his wife and son. A courtier thought fit to inform the bereaved monarch, and even affirmed that he had seen the stag laugh. The rage of a king, says Solomon,

is terrible, and especially that of a lion-king. "Pitiful forester!" he exclaimed, "darest thou laugh when all around are dissolved in tears? We will not soil our royal claws with thy profane blood! Do thou, brave wolf, avenge our queen, by immolating this traitor to her august manes. " Hereupon the stag replied: *"Sire, the time for weeping is passed; grief is here superfluous. Your revered spouse appeared to me but now, reposing on a bed of roses; I instantly recognized her. 'Friend,' said she to me, 'have done with this funereal pomp, cease these useless tears. I have tasted a thousand delights in the Elysian fields, conversing with those who are saints like myself. Let the king's despair remain for some time unchecked, it gratifies me.'"* Scarcely had he spoken, when every one shouted: *"A miracle! a miracle!"* The stag, instead of being punished, received a handsome gift. *Do but entertain a king with dreams, flatter him, and tell him a few pleasant fantastic lies: whatever his indignation against you may be, he will swallow the bait, and make you his dearest friend.*

FABLES, JEAN DE LA FONTAINE, 1621-1695

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

The city-state of Venice was prosperous for so long that its citizens felt their small republic had destiny on its side. In the Middle Ages and High Renaissance, its virtual monopoly on trade to the east made it the wealthiest city in Europe. Under a beneficent republican government, Venetians enjoyed liberties that few other Italians had ever known. Yet in the sixteenth century their fortunes suddenly changed. The opening of the New World transferred power to the Atlantic side of Europe—to the Spanish and Portuguese, and later the Dutch and English. Venice could not compete economically and its empire gradually dwindled. The final blow was the devastating loss of a prized Mediterranean possession, the island of Cyprus, captured from Venice by the Turks in 1570.

Now noble families went broke in Venice, and banks began to fold. A kind of gloom and depression settled over the citizens. They had known a glittering past—had either lived through it or heard stories about it from their elders. The closeness of the glory years was humiliating. The Venetians half believed that the goddess Fortune was only playing a joke on them, and that the old days would soon return. For the time being, though, what could they do?

In 1589 rumors began to swirl around Venice of the arrival not far away of a mysterious man called “Il Bragadino,” a master of alchemy, a man who had won incredible wealth through his ability, it was said, to multiply gold through the use of a secret substance. The rumor spread quickly because a few years earlier, a Venetian nobleman passing through Poland had heard a learned man prophesy that Venice would recover her past glory and power if she could find a man who understood the alchemic art of manufacturing gold. And so, as word reached Venice of the gold this Bragadino possessed—he clinked gold coins continuously in his hands, and golden objects filled his palace—some began to dream: Through him, their city would prosper again.

Members of Venice’s most important noble families accordingly went together to Brescia, where Bragadino lived. They toured his palace and watched in awe as he demonstrated his gold-making abilities, taking a pinch

of seemingly worthless minerals and transforming it into several ounces of gold dust. The Venetian senate prepared to debate the idea of extending an official invitation to Bragadino to stay in Venice at the city's expense, when word suddenly reached them that they were competing with the Duke of Mantua for his services. They heard of a magnificent party in Bragadino's palace for the duke, featuring garments with golden buttons, gold watches, gold plates, and on and on. Worried they might lose Bragadino to Mantua, the senate voted almost unanimously to invite him to Venice, promising him the mountain of money he would need to continue living in his luxurious style—but only if he came right away.

Late that year the mysterious Bragadino arrived in Venice. With his piercing dark eyes under thick brows, and the two enormous black mastiffs that accompanied him everywhere, he was forbidding and impressive. He took up residence in a sumptuous palace on the island of the Giudecca, with the republic funding his banquets, his expensive clothes, and all his other whims. A kind of alchemy fever spread through Venice. On street corners, hawkers would sell coal, distilling apparatus, bellows, how-to books on the subject. Everyone began to practice alchemy—everyone except Bragadino.

The alchemist seemed to be in no hurry to begin manufacturing the gold that would save Venice from ruin. Strangely enough this only increased his popularity and following; people thronged from all over Europe, even Asia, to meet this remarkable man. Months went by, with gifts pouring in to Bragadino from all sides. Still he gave no sign of the miracle that the Venetians confidently expected him to produce. Eventually the citizens began to grow impatient, wondering if he would wait forever. At first the senators warned them not to hurry him—he was a capricious devil, who needed to be cajoled. Finally, though, the nobility began to wonder too, and the senate came under pressure to show a return on the city's ballooning investment.

Bragadino had only scorn for the doubters, but he responded to them. He had, he said, already deposited in the city's mint the mysterious substance with which he multiplied gold. He could use this substance up all at once, and produce double the gold, but the more slowly the process took place, the more it would yield. If left alone for seven years, sealed in a casket, the substance would multiply the gold in the mint thirty times over. Most of the senators agreed to wait to reap the gold mine Bragadino promised. Others, however, were angry: seven more years of this man living royally at the

public trough! And many of the common citizens of Venice echoed these sentiments. Finally the alchemist's enemies demanded he produce a proof of his skills: a substantial amount of gold, and soon.

Lofty, apparently devoted to his art, Bragadino responded that Venice, in its impatience, had betrayed him, and would therefore lose his services. He left town, going first to nearby Padua, then, in 1590, to Munich, at the invitation of the Duke of Bavaria, who, like the entire city of Venice, had known great wealth but had fallen into bankruptcy through his own profligacy, and hoped to regain his fortune through the famous alchemist's services. And so Bragadino resumed the comfortable arrangement he had known in Venice, and the same pattern repeated itself.

Interpretation

The young Cypriot Mamugnà had lived in Venice for several years before reincarnating himself as the alchemist Bragadino. He saw how gloom had settled on the city, how everyone was hoping for a redemption from some indefinite source. While other charlatans mastered everyday cons based on sleight of hand, Mamugnà mastered human nature. With Venice as his target from the start, he traveled abroad, made some money through his alchemy scams, and then returned to Italy, setting up shop in Brescia. There he created a reputation that he knew would spread to Venice. From a distance, in fact, his aura of power would be all the more impressive.

At first Mamugnà did not use vulgar demonstrations to convince people of his alchemic skill. His sumptuous palace, his opulent garments, the clink of gold in his hands, all these provided a superior argument to anything rational. And these established the cycle that kept him going: His obvious wealth confirmed his reputation as an alchemist, so that patrons like the Duke of Mantua gave him money, which allowed him to live in wealth, which reinforced his reputation as an alchemist, and so on. Only once this reputation was established, and dukes and senators were fighting over him, did he resort to the trifling necessity of a demonstration. By then, however, people were easy to deceive: They wanted to believe. The Venetian senators who watched him multiply gold wanted to believe so badly that they failed to notice the glass pipe up his sleeve, from which he slipped gold dust into his pinches of minerals. Brilliant and capricious, he was the alchemist of their fantasies—and once he had created an aura like this, no one noticed his simple deceptions.

Such is the power of the fantasies that take root in us, especially in times of scarcity and decline. People rarely believe that their problems arise from their own misdeeds and stupidity. Someone or something out there is to blame—the other, the world, the gods—and so salvation comes from the outside as well. Had Bragadino arrived in Venice armed with a detailed analysis of the reasons behind the city's economic decline, and of the hard-nosed steps that it could take to turn things around, he would have been scorned. The reality was too ugly and the solution too painful—mostly the kind of hard work that the citizens' ancestors had mustered to create an

empire. Fantasy, on the other hand—in this case the romance of alchemy—was easy to understand and infinitely more palatable.

To gain power, you must be a source of pleasure for those around you—and pleasure comes from playing to people's fantasies. Never promise a gradual improvement through hard work; rather, promise the moon, the great and sudden transformation, the pot of gold.

No man need despair of gaining converts to the most extravagant hypothesis who has art enough to represent it in favorable colors.

David Hume, 1711-1776

If you want to tell lies that will be believed, don't tell the truth that won't.

EMPEROR TOKUGAWA IEYASU OF JAPAN, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

KEYS TO POWER

Fantasy can never operate alone. It requires the backdrop of the humdrum and the mundane. It is the oppressiveness of reality that allows fantasy to take root and bloom. In sixteenth-century Venice, the reality was one of decline and loss of prestige. The corresponding fantasy described a sudden recovery of past glories through the miracle of alchemy. While the reality only got worse, the Venetians inhabited a happy dream world in which their city restored its fabulous wealth and power overnight, turning dust into gold.

The person who can spin a fantasy out of an oppressive reality has access to untold power. As you search for the fantasy that will take hold of the masses, then, keep your eye on the banal truths that weigh heavily on us all. Never be distracted by people's glamorous portraits of themselves and their lives; search and dig for what really imprisons them. Once you find that, you have the magical key that will put great power in your hands.

Although times and people change, let us examine a few of the oppressive realities that endure, and the opportunities for power they provide:

The Reality: Change is slow and gradual. It requires hard work, a bit of luck, a fair amount of self-sacrifice, and a lot of patience.

The Fantasy: A sudden transformation will bring a total change in one's fortunes, bypassing work, luck, self-sacrifice, and time in one fantastic stroke.

This is of course the fantasy par excellence of the charlatans who prowl among us to this day, and was the key to Bragadino's success. Promise a great and total change—from poor to rich, sickness to health, misery to ecstasy—and you will have followers.

How did the great sixteenth-century German quack Leonhard Thurneisser become the court physician for the Elector of Brandenburg without ever studying medicine? Instead of offering amputations, leeches, and foul-tasting purgatives (the medicaments of the time), Thurneisser offered sweet-

tasting elixirs and promised instant recovery. Fashionable courtiers especially wanted his solution of “drinkable gold,” which cost a fortune. If some inexplicable illness assailed you, Thurneisser would consult a horoscope and prescribe a talisman. Who could resist such a fantasy—health and well-being without sacrifice and pain!

The Reality: The social realm has hard-set codes and boundaries. We understand these limits and know that we have to move within the same familiar circles, day in and day out.

The Fantasy: We can enter a totally new world with different codes and the promise of adventure.

In the early 1700s, all London was abuzz with talk of a mysterious stranger, a young man named George Psalmanazar. He had arrived from what was to most Englishmen a fantastical land: the island of Formosa (now Taiwan), off the coast of China. Oxford University engaged Psalmanazar to teach the island’s language; a few years later he translated the Bible into Formosan, then wrote a book—an immediate best-seller—on Formosa’s history and geography. English royalty wined and dined the young man, and everywhere he went he entertained his hosts with wondrous stories of his homeland, and its bizarre customs.

After Psalmanazar died, however, his will revealed that he was in fact merely a Frenchman with a rich imagination. Everything he had said about Formosa—its alphabet, its language, its literature, its entire culture—he had invented. He had built on the English public’s ignorance of the place to concoct an elaborate story that fulfilled their desire for the exotic and strange. British culture’s rigid control of people’s dangerous dreams gave him the perfect opportunity to exploit their fantasy.

The fantasy of the exotic, of course, can also skirt the sexual. It must not come too close, though, for the physical hinders the power of fantasy; it can be seen, grasped, and then tired of—the fate of most courtesans. The bodily charms of the mistress only whet the master’s appetite for more and different pleasures, a new beauty to adore. To bring power, fantasy must remain to some degree unrealized, literally unreal. The dancer Mata Hari, for instance, who rose to public prominence in Paris before World War I, had quite ordinary looks. Her power came from the fantasy she created of

being strange and exotic, unknowable and indecipherable. The taboo she worked with was less sex itself than the breaking of social codes.

Another form of the fantasy of the exotic is simply the hope for relief from boredom. Con artists love to play on the oppressiveness of the working world, its lack of adventure. Their cons might involve, say, the recovery of lost Spanish treasure, with the possible participation of an alluring Mexican señorita and a connection to the president of a South American country—anything offering release from the humdrum.

The Reality: Society is fragmented and full of conflict.

The Fantasy: People can come together in a mystical union of souls.

In the 1920s the con man Oscar Hartzell made a quick fortune out of the age-old Sir Francis Drake swindle—basically promising any sucker who happened to be surnamed “Drake” a substantial share of the long-lost “Drake treasure,” to which Hartzell had access. Thousands across the Midwest fell for the scam, which Hartzell cleverly turned into a crusade against the government and everyone else who was trying to keep the Drake fortune out of the rightful hands of its heirs. There developed a mystical union of the oppressed Drakes, with emotional rallies and meetings. Promise such a union and you can gain much power, but it is a dangerous power that can easily turn against you. This is a fantasy for demagogues to play on.

The Reality: Death. The dead cannot be brought back, the past cannot be changed. The Fantasy: A sudden reversal of this intolerable fact.

This con has many variations, but requires great skill and subtlety.

The beauty and importance of the art of Vermeer have long been recognized, but his paintings are small in number, and are extremely rare. In the 1930s, though, Vermeers began to appear on the art market. Experts were called on to verify them, and pronounced them real. Possession of these new Vermeers would crown a collector’s career. It was like the resurrection of Lazarus: In a strange way, Vermeer had been brought back to life. The past had been changed.

Only later did it come out that the new Vermeers were the work of a middle-aged Dutch forger named Han van Meegeren. And he had chosen Vermeer for his scam because he understood fantasy: The paintings would seem real precisely because the public, and the experts as well, so desperately wanted to believe they were.

Remember: The key to fantasy is distance. The distant has allure and promise, seems simple and problem free. What you are offering, then, should be ungraspable. Never let it become oppressively familiar; it is the mirage in the distance, withdrawing as the sucker approaches. Never be too direct in describing the fantasy—keep it vague. As a forger of fantasies, let your victim come close enough to see and be tempted, but keep him far away enough that he stays dreaming and desiring.

Image: The
Moon. Unattainable,
always changing shape,
disappearing and reappear-
ing. We look at it, imagine,
wonder, and pine—never fa-
miliar, continuous provoker
of dreams. Do not offer
the obvious. Promise
the moon.

Authority: A lie is an allurements, a fabrication, that can be embellished into a fantasy. It can be clothed in the raiments of a mystic conception. Truth is cold, sober fact, not so comfortable to absorb. A lie is more palatable. The

most detested person in the world is the one who always tells the truth, who never romances.... I found it far more interesting and profitable to romance than to tell the truth. (Joseph Weil, a.k.a. "The Yellow Kid," 1875-1976)

REVERSAL

If there is power in tapping into the fantasies of the masses, there is also danger. Fantasy usually contains an element of play—the public half realizes it is being duped, but it keeps the dream alive anyway, relishing the entertainment and the temporary diversion from the everyday that you are providing. So keep it light—never come too close to the place where you are actually expected to produce results. That place may prove extremely hazardous.

After Bragadino established himself in Munich, he found that the sober-minded Bavarians had far less faith in alchemy than the temperamental Venetians. Only the duke really believed in it, for he needed it desperately to rescue him from the hopeless mess he was in. As Bragadino played his familiar waiting game, accepting gifts and expecting patience, the public grew angry. Money was being spent and was yielding no results. In 1592 the Bavarians demanded justice, and eventually Bragadino found himself swinging from the gallows. As before, he had promised and had not delivered, but this time he had misjudged the forbearance of his hosts, and his inability to fulfill their fantasy proved fatal.

One last thing: Never make the mistake of imagining that fantasy is always fantastical. It certainly contrasts with reality, but reality itself is sometimes so theatrical and stylized that fantasy becomes a desire for simple things. The image Abraham Lincoln created of himself, for example, as a homespun country lawyer with a beard, made him the common man's president.

P. T. Barnum created a successful act with Tom Thumb, a dwarf who dressed up as famous leaders of the past, such as Napoleon, and lampooned them wickedly. The show delighted everyone, right up to Queen Victoria, by appealing to the fantasy of the time: Enough of the vainglorious rulers of history, the common man knows best. Tom Thumb reversed the familiar pattern of fantasy in which the strange and unknown becomes the ideal. But the act still obeyed the Law, for underlying it was the fantasy that the simple man is without problems, and is happier than the powerful and the rich.

Both Lincoln and Tom Thumb played the commoner but carefully maintained their distance. Should you play with such a fantasy, you too must carefully cultivate distance and not allow your “common” persona to become too familiar or it will not project as fantasy.