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'Playing at Bo-peep with the world' The Author/Actor in Charlotte Charke's *Narrative*

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Abstract

The article re-examines *The Narrative of the Life of Mrs Charlotte Charke* (1755), the first autobiography by a female actor (albeit one who consistently specialised in male roles) in terms of the strategies it deploys for showing, and hiding, the author's physical person and authorial *persona*. As the youngest daughter of Colley Cibber, Charke was a member of London's most influent theatrical family, and led a life marked by spectacular misfortune and neverending optimism. To claw her way out of the exclusion from acting that was the outcome of the Licencing Act, she undertook an extraordinary sequence of different careers, worked as a strolling player for nine years, and attempted a reconciliation with her father through her autobiography, which, deeply inscribed by the theatre in terms of both content and style, highlights the interaction between spontaneity and premeditation. Feelings seem not only expressed, but *shaped* through drama; memory becomes the bodily memory of interpreting a role, represented on the outdoor theatre of her many professional endeavours and ultimately in the pages of her book. Charke's second 'coming on the Stage', her appearance, that is, in the guise of author, is marked by both gender and *genre* indeterminacy. As a 'cartaceous' remediation of her innate and unstoppable passion for the theatre it shows a precocious understanding of the newborn 'cult of celebrity' and the possibilities for self-promotion offered by the expanding print market. Ultimately, it aims to counter theatrical censorship by educating Charke's audience/readership to a more critical awareness of the relationship between actor/role, gender/clothes and author/character.

Keywords: *Authorship, Dramatic Memory, Female Labour, Theatrical Autobiography*

> A single bad act no more constitutes a villain in life, that a single bad part on the stage. The passions, like the managers of a playhouse, often force men upon parts without consulting their judgment, and sometimes without any regard to their talents. Thus the man, as well as the player, may condemn what he himself acts.
> Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones,* Bk. VII, ch. I

1. *The* Narrative *in Context*

In 1755 three very different works jockeyed for attention in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, with degrees of success that may well surprise today: while Voltaire's important *General History and State of Europe* was dispatched in two pages and Johnson's much awaited *Dictionary* in six, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs Charlotte Charke Written by Herself* was examined and discussed over three consecutive months (Turley 1998, 181). Such interest possibly evinces an underlying editorial desire to quieten the perceived moral risks posed by the *Narrative*: indeed, the long summary à-la-*Readers Digest*, through its use of the third-person, effectively removes Charke's authorial voice, while the running commentary vastly attenuates the overall effect of the work, which was the first autobiography written by a British actress.[1]

On the other hand, the Frontispiece of the *Narrative* itself ostentatiously advertises the more 'personal' and flamboyant aspects of Charlotte Charke's 'singular career' (Fyvie 1906, 42), as well as her propensity for 'Men's Cloaths', whetting readers' curiosity for how she was 'belov'd by a Lady of great Fortune, who intended to marry her', or how she worked as *valet de chambre* 'to a certain Peer'. Thus, Charke's second 'coming on the Stage', that is her appearance in the guise of author, is marked (for reasons which, as will be shown, include, but are not coterminous with, financial gain) by gender indeterminacy. This foregrounding of gender indeterminacy is visually coupled with *genre* indeterminacy through the choice of an epigraph from John Gay's immensely successful and puzzling play *The What d'ye Call It*: 'This Tragic Story, or this Comic Jest, / May make you laugh, or cry – As you like best' (Rehder 1999,4).[2] That these words should open her narrative, should guard its entrance, as it were, by paradoxically *allowing* its readers to impose their own interpretation, is highly significant. It is to this interplay of genres, representational, fictional, non-fictional, but especially dramatic, within the *Narrative*, that a significant portion of my reading will attend, but its main focus will be the many intriguing ways in which Charke's actorial self informed her authorial stance and the structure of her autobiography.

Charlotte Charke, who was born in 1713, was the eleventh, and youngest, daughter of Colley Cibber, playwright, actor, poet laureate and manager of Drury Lane Theatre. The theatre (and theatrical behaviour in the public sphere) ran deep in her family veins, her brother Theophilus being only the most famous of her actor siblings and her sister-in-law, Susanna Cibber, the most renowned tragic actress and singer of her generation.[3] Charke displayed much youthful talent on the boards, specialising early on in *breeches parts*, which from 1732 onward gradually evolved into exclusively male roles (Rehder 1999, liv-lxv). At seventeen, as a result of a brief marriage to the brilliant but spendthrift and persistently unfaithful musician Richard Charke, she became a mother, but soon determined, on account of a set of rather nebulous circumstances which her autobiography tackles with refined opacity, no longer to change back into female clothes. She was expelled – plausibly on account of her transvestitism – from her father's house and soon after banned from the Drury Lane/Covent Garden theatrical circuit (most certainly because of her hot-headedness and the fine satirical bent of a play attacking theatre manager Charles Fleetwood). Amidst these rifts, she rather naively became the muse of

[1] Following a convention in recent academic work on the *Narrative,* I differentiate between Charke (the author) and Charlotte (the character).

[2] Further references are given after quotation in the text.

[3] Charlotte's mother came from a renowned family of musicians and acted herself in the 1690s. Her sister Elizabeth was also an actress, as were Theophilus' first and second wife and both his daughters.

her father's sworn enemy Henry Fielding at the Little Theatre, where both Walpole's government and the poet laureate's failings were bashed on a nightly basis.

Charke's official career thus took place in the period between the landmark premiere of Gay's *Beggar's Opera* (1728), which in one magisterial stroke made marginality 'fashionable', and Walpole's 1737 Licensing Act, which sanctioned the definitive closure of the lesser London theatres and ruled against the acting of any new dramatic work previously unapproved by the Lord Chancellor. A single mother and unemployed at 24, Charke next undertook – 'EN CAVALIER' (47), as she put it – a series of spectacularly unfortunate professions: she was oil vendor, puppet master, landlord, sausage higgler, pastry chef, pig farmer, proof reader, theatre prompter, conjuror, and, as mentioned above, gentleman's gentleman to the notorious libertine Lord Aglesea. For eighteen years she endeavoured to cheat a law that had effectively debarred her from a beloved theatrical career; she was arrested for debt and once imprisoned as a 'vagrant' (a label which the system enforced by the Licensing Act had extended to all unlicensed actors, including them in the definition of undesirables which had so far featured 'rogues, vagabonds, sturdy beggars, and vagrants') (Morgan 1988, 210; Baruth 1998; Folkenflik 1998, 142). Nine of these eighteen years were spent by Charke as a strolling player in the poorest companies, trudging through dirt and mud to the next village, struggling with unruly and ignorant audiences, and living openly, under the pseudonym of Mr Brown, with a fellow actress. When she returned to London, she determined to support herself by writing and in rapid succession composed the *Narrative* and four short novels which engage with themes such as family conflict and homosexuality. She was 47 years old when she died in April 1760.

2. *Four Portraits of the Author and her Many Garments*

These are, in brief outline, the salient facts of Charlotte Charke's life, which has become a key text for academic debate under a whole range of rubrics.[4] As an introduction to the ways in which she selected and presented these facts in her curious and complex autobiography, as well as to some of the different 'selves' she offers her readers, it is interesting to examine four pictorial representations of the actress. In two of these images, she is linked to her famous father; in two she is depicted as a resilient outcast, down and out in London and the provinces. Although this means to look at her, as it were, through the eyes of others before viewing her through her own, these representations offer a useful visual index of key points in Charke's autobiographical narrative, all of which will be further explored in later paragraphs. Moreover, the shifting gazes these four images afford of her remind us that, even before becoming an author, she was an actress, a creature subjected to the visual scrutiny of an audience, an inescapable feature of her existence, which Charke cleverly succeeds in weaving into her text.

An engraving by Edward Fisher, after J.B. Van Loo (the engraving is from 1758 and the earliest possible date for the painting is 1737) at the National Portrait Gallery shows Colley Cibber sitting serenely and gracefully en-wigged, surrounded by all the accoutrements of professional success, his pen poised and in his hand a sheet of paper.[5] A lively and sharp-looking young girl appears from behind his chair and elegantly places her hand on the pen (guiding, or possibly stealing it). Despite the caption describing the female figure as Charlotte, this is

[4] Baruth 1998 offers a still valuable overview of the development of Charke criticism, pointing out the preponderance of her cross-dressing, 'tracing intriguing connections between sexuality, autobiography, and subject-formation' (9).

[5] <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw35578/Colley-Cibber>, accessed 11 October 2022.

highly unlikely: in 1737 she was more notorious for her male persona and open mockery of her father's political subservience to the Walpole government in Fielding's plays *Pasquin* and *The Historical Register for the Year 1736* (the play that effectively provoked the Licensing Act), than as the playful, muse-like charmer Van Loo portrays. Nevertheless, this imaginary double portrait curiously foreshadows certain underlying elements in Charke's *Narrative*, which has been described as 'heavily indebted' (Fawcett 2016, 61) to her father's own foray into the autobiographical genre, *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber,* the most widely commented book of 1740 next to Richardson's *Pamela*. Celebrity and authorship, Cibber's and Charlotte's, are the key factors here: in a curious reversal of the traditional eighteenth-century relationship between historical figure and symbol, viewers have in this case taken what was probably a female figure representing Cibber's inspiration to be an actual depiction of his daughter continuing his career as writer, or, if we prefer, undermining his credibility by disturbing the respectability of the poet laureate with her cheekiness. It is interesting to note that, while a religious iconography underlies the portrait (St. Matthew was sometimes represented as directly guided in the writing of his gospel by the hand of an angel), Hogarth also provided a much more brilliant rendering of the theme in his *David Garrick and his wife Eva-Maria Veigel* (1757-1764).[6] The wife of the great actor and playwright is depicted in a beautifully ambiguous pose: she may be seen as either his inspiration, or as a playful lover, stealing his pen and inviting him *away* from work. Charke uses her autobiography to sing Garrick's praises, both as a master of the stage and as a human being, underscoring how she 'must revere him as a Benefactor' from whom she received 'some Acts of Friendship'. That she should chose to 'make publick' her esteem for Garrick just as she advertises her disappointment in her father is intriguing, but even more so is the adherence she remarks between Garrick's genial stance, his public persona, and his true self, precisely that adherence which, as we shall see, her father scorns. This is a brilliant manipulation of public sympathy which Charke, playing on her dual 'character' of actor and author, carries off to perfection. It is not the only one in her book.

The second image I wish to examine also resonates with the idea of Charlotte's appearance/disappearance in relation to her father's person/persona, as well as with the relationship between autobiography and fiction/fictiveness that is so crucial to the *Narrative*. A print by F. Garden in the Prints and Drawings Department of the British Museum is accompanied by the words, 'An exact Representation of Mrs Charke walking in the Ditch at four Years of Age, as described by herself in the first Number of the narrative of her own Life, lately published'.[7] The layering here, like the clothes Charlotte used throughout her life to hide herself and to play a role, is interesting: the visual image cannot, of course, be an 'exact Representation' of when, aged four, she 'took it into my small Pate, that by Dint of a Wig and a Waistcoat, I should be the perfect Representative of my Sire'. The *Narrative* recounts how, crawling out of bed before dawn she assembled her 'accoutrements', pinning up her skirts, 'to supply the Want of a Pair of Breeches' (10):

> By the Help of a long Broom, I took down a Waistcoat of my Brother's, and an enormous bushy Tie-wig of my Father's, which entirely closed my head and Body, with the Knots of the Ties thumping my little Heels as I march'd along, with slow and solemn Pace. The Covert of Hair in which I was conceal'd, with the Weight of a monstrous Belt and large Silver-hilted Sword, that I could scarce drag along, was a vast Impediment in my Procession: And, what still added to the other Inconveniencies I labour'd under, was whelming myself under one of my Father's large Beaver-hats … as thick and as broad as a Brickbat. (10-11)

[6] <https://www.rct.uk/collection/405682/david-garrick-with-his-wife-eva-maria-veigel>, accessed 11 October 2022.

[7] <https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?images=true&objectId=3484031&partId=1>, 11 October 2022.

Charlotte next tells how she worried that her 'Girl's Shoes' would alert any potential spectator to the fact she was *not* actually Mr Cibber; she therefore slipped out before the gardener and

> roll'd myself into a dry Ditch, which was as deep as I was high; and, in this Grotesque Pigmy-State, walk'd up and down the Ditch bowing to all who came by me. (11)

Though the vignette is peppered with retrospective distancing attained through framing words such as 'former Madness', 'Oddity', 'Drollery', and though the scene seems to cry out for a psychoanalytical reading – Charlotte's transgressive glee and the almost sensual pleasure-pain of her tiny cross-dressed persona under the weight of the clothes being soon punished and realigned ('alas! I was borne off on the Footman's Shoulders, to my Shame and Disgrace, and forc'd into my proper Habiliments') (*ibid.*) – it is the clever stratification of the account that should not be missed. It is a reconstruction, but is its intent really rehabilitation? Is Charlotte showing allegiance to patriarchal and societal values by this re-dressing/redressing? What sticks in the memory is how happy she was at the 'Crowd' that assembled before the stage-like ditch, which 'yielded me no small Joy', and how to solicit their 'Marks of Approbation' she 'walk'd myself into a Fever, in the happy Thought of being taken for the 'Squire' (*ibid.*). In restaging on page this and other similar scenes from her childhood and adolescence (an unusual terrain in the fiction of the time), what Charke is actually doing is attempting to show that what may be seen as sexual deviation was in fact a sign that she was a 'born actress': if the actor's talent is measured in the ability he or she displays in transformation, in 'personating', as the contemporary phrase went (Agnew 1986, 103), what is other than the self, there can be no greater talent than in performing what is most different, indeed opposite to the nature of woman – that is, a man. Interestingly, precisely at what has been identified as a mid-century watershed in the separation of gender roles and the emergence of clearly differentiated and separate spheres (Shoemaker 2013), Charlotte seems to feel that the outward signs of masculinity – Cibber's famous wig, which was rolled on stage before his famous appearances as Lord Foppington in Vanburgh's *The Relapse* (1696), and the prominent waistcoat in her brother Theophilus' favourite part, Ancient Pistol[8] – will make her a credible man. Her certainty that if, to quote Rosalind in *As You Like It*, 'I did suit me in all points like a man' (1.3.110) this would somehow suffice comes from her profound intimacy with the language of drama, her absorption in acting. Her insistence on surface as a justification should be noted, as should the link between autobiography and character formation and especially between autobiography and performance. Further – and this is a point I shall be returning to – Charlotte's reconstruction of this episode from her childhood is undoubtedly coloured (dare one say clouded?) by her memory of the Vanburgh's wigmaker's famous lines on presenting Foppington with the grotesque headpiece: 'I have made you a periwig so long and so full of hair, that it will serve you for a hat and a cloak in all weathers' (1.3).

Two engravings by William Hogarth (who, through Fielding, knew Charlotte personally) also afford a useful visual shorthand on a number of important aspects of the *Narrative*, and especially alert us to how *recognisable*, despite all her disguises ('As to my Figure, 'tis so well known it needs no Description') (50), the notorious Charlotte Cibber Charke was; how every appearance she made, both verbal and visual, was to be read as a performance.

[8] <https://digital.library.illinois.edu/items/b7a8a270-4e7d-0134-1db1-0050569601ca-0#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&r=0&xywh=-2088%2C145%2C6772%2C2868>, accessed 11 October 2022.

The most obvious feature of *Southwark Fair* (1733)[9] is its polycentricity, that surface disorder which is a constitutive element of Hogarthian aesthetics. Charlotte appears dressed as the eunuch Haly, one of the characters from Nicholas Rowe's *Tamerlane* (1701) and its 1733 afterpiece *The Fall of Bajazet*, which Hogarth records as being performed at her brother Theophilus Cibber's booth a few feet away. Just as the booth is 'falling', Haly's disguise has failed, and despite her magniloquent costume and proud plumage, the actress is unceremoniously arrested by her creditors, 'those Assailants of Liberty' (54), who attended public entertainments for this purpose, forcing Charlotte, as she notes in the *Narrative*, into 'playing at Bo-peep with the World' (141). This 'snapshot' of fair culture includes some of the professions Charlotte undertook, such as puppeteering and conjuring; it also offers a visual parallel for her frequent descriptions of meandering and jostling her way through the crowded spaces of London. What seems relevant here, in relation to Charke's autobiography, is the visual methodology Hogarth uses and what he uses it for: that she should feature so prominently in an apparently illegible scene. The painter often resorted to such surface illegibility to force his viewers/readers to look closer and carefully disentangle the various threads of his image, actively engaging them in a form of emotional perception/participation without which the scene itself would be meaningless, its multiplicity never gain unity. The unity of action (and style) recommended in academic painting as in drama is eschewed and a new form of 'composed variety' is put forward as an alternative. This simultaneity ensures 'a perceptive dynamic that is surreptitiously substituted for the former understanding of action as subject' (Ogée and Meslay 2006, 28). The responsibility is now offered to the reader/viewer: it is their 'action of perception' that now gives unity to the work. Charke's autobiography shares this representative mode with Hogarth. It deploys something like his 'units of meaning' both in its episodic structure and in its play with genres which we will be looking at in a later section: both techniques produce their effect by concomitance and layering; both strongly require the reader's attention and active participation.

In *Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn* (1738)[10] Charlotte is Ganimede, lovingly assisted by a pretty 'Siren', who offers her a dram of gin for what appears to be toothache; however, the cloth that the actress holds up to her face may also serve to dry her tears: indeed, as our gaze moves down we see, on a miniature bed at her feet (a reference to a possible sexual relationship between Ganimede and the Siren, or a visual pun on the fact Charlotte's career was 'laid to rest'), a copy of the Licensing Act lying next to her breeches (Kaier 2001, 76-99). The engraving foregrounds ideas of dressing, stripping, masquerading and appearing for what one really is: Charlotte herself is curiously double, her top half in men's clothes, her bottom half naked; her hair is long and flowing and her ungartered stockings are slipping down. Like *Southwark Fair, Strolling Actresses* is also a work of vivid, significant, surfaces and, littered as it is with broken props and threadbare costumes, it offers a visual equivalent of Charlotte's object-sensitive prose, displayed in her acute descriptions of the temporary success and frequent backsliding into poverty during her years as a strolling actor. Stockings are particularly prominent in Hogarth's engraving, and indeed the *Narrative* is populated by them (laddered or clean), as well as shirts, sleeves, corsets, coats, necklaces, spare linen, petticoats and innumerable hats, which appear to mark textually not just the part Charlotte was engaged in playing, but also her mood. Such objects function both as a signal for the tangible value of things in a precarious universe, and as a reminder that Cibber's daughter was aware of the 'theatrical' value of clothes as props

[9] <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/400729>, accessed 11 October 2022.

[10] <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/work-of-art/strolling-actresses-dressing-in-a-barn>, accessed 11 October 2022.

in her performances – something which may be seen also in the wig, the waistcoat, and the anxiety about the little-girl shoes in the 'ditch-episode' which supposedly happened when she was four. In this world, clothes are lent and circulate (just as Charlotte hopes her story will); their multiple layering affords opportunity and protection: men's clothes meant getting better work, as well as safety from rape, a fact which Charlotte points out when she is thrown into a squalid and overcrowded prison cell in Minchin-Hampton (111). But clothes also uncannily take over Charlotte herself: when her seemingly unrelentless optimism is occasionally tinged with despair, she 'becomes' her garments, as when in the space of a page, she describes first her elation at being employed by Lord Anglesea ('I marched through the Streets with Ease and Security … proud to cock my Hat at the Bailiffs') and then her sorrow when she loses her job after being discovered to be 'one of an improper Sex in a Post of that Sort' (71):

> Friendship began to cool! Shame encompassed me! … In short, Life became a Burden to me, and I began to think it no Sin not only to WISH, but even to DESIRE to die. When Poverty throws us beyond the Reach of Pity, I can compare our Beings to nothing so adaptly, as the comfortless Array of tattered Garments in a frosty Morning. (72)

The clothes motif is central to both Charke and Cibber's relationship with acting and authorship; Cibber however resorts to a strategic candour, choosing to divest himself of his theatrical apparel, and show his readers what he is like 'when the Coat of his Profession was off', judging that the 'Curiosity of his Spectators' would be excited 'to know what he really was, when in no body's Shape but his own' (Cibber 2000, 6). His daughter firmly believed that the clothes of her profession were an integral part to her authorial persona, and indeed that her readers could only truly understand her if she kept them resolutely before their eyes.

3. *Charlotte's 'obscene' Work and Its Audience*

It is a truth generally acknowledged that the crushing outcome of the Licensing Act forced theatrical discourse onto other genres and fora (Loftis 1959, 152). Charke's representation of work in the *Narrative* allowed the actress to continue, through the mediation of the account which she gives in it of her various 'careers', to act off-stage, implicitly prolonging her militancy against the Licensing Act (Morgan 1988, 216). As has been pointed out (Baruth 1998, 31), she took care to keep her work/performances as close as possible to Drury Lane, thereby ensuring her continued visibility and relevance to the theatre going public.

Nobody's Story, Catherine Gallagher's groundbreaking study on the reciprocal relationship between the terms 'woman', 'author' and 'marketplace' moves from the observation that the appearance of female authorship in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries 'coincided with the appearance of the literary marketplace' where 'many women writers emphasized their femininity to gain financial advantage and … in the process, invented and popularized numerous ingenious similarities between their gender and their occupation' (1994, xiii). By foregrounding the work she carried out in *male* habit, Charke would appear to eschew this trend. In the fiction and drama of the period, as Laura Rosenthal has brilliantly argued, work was viewed as 'obscene', in the etymological sense that it was 'not fit to be seen on stage', and crucial plays such as George Lillo's 1731 *The London Merchant* displaced 'the moral compromise of profit from the merchant onto the prostitute' (2012, 952).[11] Because prostitution was the most *visible*

[11] It should be noted that Charlotte uses the play in her *Narrative* in an attempt to win over her father's pity, and that she had debuted the part of Mrs Wilmot in another of Lillo's dramas, *The Fatal Curiosity,* 1737.

form of female labour work, there came to be seen 'something disturbing about women's work which becomes vulnerable to displacement onto prostitution' (948). Metaphorical (as well as very real) associations with prostitution commonly extended to both actresses and female authors, categories policed by both moralists and satirists, and Charke is very careful to preempt such accusations. Pressing against the boundaries of what she explicitly states, nevertheless, is the obvious fact that following the Licensing Act, for many out-of-work actresses, prostitution was the only viable means of subsistence. The *Narrative* commends well-known prostitutes as helpful neighbours who bail Charlotte (Macheath-like) out of prison, and overall gives a vivid picture of her familiarity with the whole arc of sex work, from 'a Plurality of common Wretches that were to be had at Half a Crown' (41), the 'Hundreds of *Drury*', among whom as a young wife she was forced to trace Richard Charke 'from Morn to Eve' (28), to the amiable and 'remarkably genteel' Irish mistress of Lord Anglesea (71). What should, however, be stressed, in relation to her authorial persona in her autobiography, is that harlotry was for Charke a master class in what Markman Ellis and Ann Lewis have called 'the prostitution event performance' (2016, 3). The acting-out of the roles of prostitute and client in the public sphere began in the street and ended with ' "the pay-off", in which money is exchanged for services rendered at the agreed rate of remuneration'; after this point, the prostitute and the client could experience an occasional or 'prolonged period of moral self-examination' (4) or recrimination:

> Received narratives of prostitution were in this way relentlessly recycled by popular culture, and repurposed in high culture, in novels, plays and visual culture. In their structuring of the cultural imaginary, such narrative stereotypes were fed back into real-life behaviour and perceptions of reality. (3)

As a young actress of nineteen, Charke so greatly shocked the public of Drury Lane with what must have been a hyper-realistic depiction of the brothel madam *Mother Lupine* in Charles Johnson's *Caelia* (1732), that the play closed after only one night. She could act the whole range of eighteenth-century sex-workers, from George Lillo's evil seductress *Millwood* to the eunuch *Haly*, whose main duty was to procure female prey for his master. But she also knew how to act the virtuous victim and resolutely denies ever having sold her person for money:

> For some Time I subsisted as a Higgler, with tolerable Success; and, instead of being despised by those who has served me in my utmost Exigencies, I was rather applauded. Some were tender enough to mingle their pitying Tears, with their Approbation of my endeavouring at an honest Livelihood, as I did not prostitute my Person. (73)

What is striking here is the sound of the applause, albeit muted on paper. As on other occasions that seem to cry out for the stage, the point Charlotte is making is that she is a good actress and did not deserve to be cut off from the profession. If her stint at selling sausages, just like her numerous other 'dive[s] into TRADE' (70) is redolent of the stage, this is precisely the point: her job is acting, and if she acts the prostitute it should not be inferred that she is a whore. The only body she gladly wishes to sell, it appears, is the body of her text. Charke-the-author always subtly points out her actorial stance by signalling the audience's presence (when she turns oil-vendor, she gauges her success as a businesswoman by observing that 'every Soul of my Acquaintance, of which I have a numerous Share, came in Turn to see my mercantile Face') (37), and by noting that she has elicited the correct emotional response from this audience. When she seeks employment as a waiter at the King's Head in Marylebone, she presents herself as a young gentleman of diminished fortunes, wearing 'a melancholly Aspect' (82), thus leading the landlady, Mrs Dorr, to think she may be too refined for the position and unprepared for the

lower class of people who frequented her tavern. Seeing her mistake, Charlotte launches into a speech, throwing in a few touches of *Hamlet* towards the end, for good measure:

> I … begg'd her not to be under the least Apprehensions of my receiving any Shock on that Account: That notwithstanding I was not born to Servitude, since Misfortunes had reduced me to it, I thought it a Degree of Happiness, that a mistaken Pride had not foolishly possessed me with a Contempt of getting an honest Livelihood, and choosing rather to perish by haughty Penury, than prudently endeavour to forget what I had been, and patiently submit to the Severities of Fortune; which, at that Time, was not in my Power to amend. (82-83)

Her performance works, and the Gentlewoman 'bore so large a Share in [her] Affliction, she manifested her Concern by a hearty Shower of Tears' (83). Here, as in the passage quoted above, Charlotte's account shifts between performance, reaction, and critical interpretation of the reaction. She is, for example, fully conversant with the sentimental topos of the 'tribute of … tears' (Goring 2005, 138), which is the physiological sign that a passage in a play or a novel have correctly affected the audience or the reader, although the 'single tear' required by the rhetoric of sensibility is here rewritten into the slightly more comic 'hearty shower'. In a work centrally concerned with persuading and forestalling possible objections, such reactions as that of Mrs Dorr can be set aside as 'evidence' to win the reader over to Charke's version of facts. For virtue to be true it had to posses credibility, but this, crucially, had to be proved in the public sphere, and demonstrated by public consent. Once she has successfully auditioned, as it were, Charlotte throws herself wholeheartedly into the role, and records Mrs Dorr's approbation:

> To her great Surprize, she found me quite a handy Creature; and being light and nimble, trip'd up and down Stairs with that Alacrity of Spirit and Agility of Body, that is natural to those Gentlemen of the Order of the Tap-tub; though, as *Hob* says, we sold all sorts of Wine and Punch, &c. (83)

Charlotte adapts her body and movements to those of the character of the waiter; we can almost *see* her acting a part she knew – incidentally – from one of her father's plays, *Hob, or the Country Wake*, 1711 (she is in fact slightly misquoting from the second act of John Hippisley's ballad opera *Flora, or Hob in the Well,* 1729). The somewhat simple country waiter Hob was an immensely popular character on stage throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: is it the role that prompts the quotation, a movement that prompts a memory in the actor's body? Or is it the quotation that, recollected in tranquillity many years later, colours Charlotte's reconstruction of this part of her life? We get a sense that while *being* a servant maid would have been a degradation for Cibber's daughter, by the same token, *playing* the waiter is not: she can be a waiter because she has acted the waiter on stage. By extension, when she writes about her experience as a waiter, she is asking her readers to judge her *performance*. Again, it is interesting to see the reemergence of the question of dress.

4. *The Author's Many 'threads'*

Early on in her autobiography, Charlotte colourfully takes up the pen-and-needle trope, challenging the idea that women learned to sow before they could write, and implicitly distancing herself from the text-as-textile metaphor adopted by many contemporary women writers:

> … my Education was not only a genteel, but in Fact a liberal one, and such indeed as might have been sufficient for a Son instead of a Daughter; I must beg Leave to add, that I was never made much acquainted with that necessary Utensil which forms the houswifely Part of a Lady's Education, call'd a

Needle; which I handle with the same clumsy Awkwardness a Monkey does a Kitten, and am equally capable of using the one, as Pug is of nursing the other.

This is not much to be wonder'd at, as my Education consisted chiefly in Studies of various Kinds, and gave me a different Turn of Mind than what I might have had, if my Time had been employ'd in ornamenting a Piece of Canvas with Beasts, Birds and the Alphabet; the latter of which I understood in *French*, rather before I was able to speak *English* (10).

We see here Charlotte laying the groundwork for her recognition as a writer, but because this passage immediately precedes her adventure in the ditch wearing the clothes she has purloined from her father and brother, fabric and fabrication – threads as clothes and threads as narrative lines – intriguingly intertwine. Indeed, as we have already seen, sometimes clothes and the identity they carry remain viscously attached to Charlotte, who cannot quite free herself from their expressive value. There is, to give just one example, the occasion when she meets her former employer, Mrs Dorr (she who had been moved by her performance of the 'young Gentleman Widower') and is unable to convince her that she is in fact a woman, 'I happening that Day to be in Male Habit, on Account of playing a Part for a poor Man, and obliged to find my own Cloaths' (86). Charlotte, who had been forced to reveal her sex after a young relative of Mrs Dorr's had fallen in love with her, is now wearing male clothes for a part (occasional actors had to procure their own costumes), and the clothes so completely make her a man that the 'incredulous' Mrs Dorr simply cannot accept that her being a woman is anything but fictional.

Another disturbing episode comes earlier in the *Narrative,* when Charlotte, who has just returned from a performance, finds her daughter Kitty in a fit of convulsions. For a moment she gathers her in her arms in mute terror, then rather surprisingly drops her ('Which I wonder did not absolutely end her by the Force of the Fall') and runs into the street

> … with my Shirt-Sleeves dangling loose about my Hands, my Wig standing on End,
>
> 'Like Quills upon the fretful Porcupine,'
>
> And proclaiming the sudden Death of my much-beloved Child, a Crowd soon gathered round me, and, in the Violence of my Distraction, instead of administering any necessary Help, wildly stood among the Mob to recount the dreadful Disaster.
>
> The Peoples Compassion was moved, 'tis true; but as I happened not to be known to them, it drew them into Astonishment, to see the Figure of a young Gentleman, so extravagantly grieved for the Loss of a Child. As I appeared very Young, they looked on it as an unprecedented Affection in a Youth, and began to deem me a Lunatick, rather than that there was any Reality in what I said. (52)

In this complex passage man and mother briefly meet over Kitty's apparently lifeless body, only to rush out immediately after and entertain a crowd of bystanders; costume is carefully noted, the wig points back to Cibber's wigs, but also forward to Hogarth's hypersignificant Wigs in *Five Orders of Periwigs* (1761)[12] and especially to the mechanical wig Garrick used to signify his fear and horror in the ghost scene in *Hamlet* (Roach 1993, 58-60); the exact lines are duly quoted, typographically isolated on the page; we wait for the applause. It is only gradually, through the audience's reaction, that we realize Charlotte is in male habit – she herself seems not to be aware of this – once again her clothes have stuck to her, this time making her social role as a mother difficult to read. The word 'Lunatick' serves to compound the Hamletic interpretation and that it was seen as an interpretation is underscored by the audience's doubt concerning

[12] <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/392605>, accessed 11 October 2022.

the 'Reality' of what she had said. Such curious writing, both dense and lightening-fast, recalls the visual overload of *Southwark Fair*, concentrating maximum meaning in minimum space.

The question of Charke/Charlotte's cross-dressing is too complex to be suitably addressed here, except in relation to the themes of dressing/undressing and hiding that have been touched upon. On the single occasion in which the *Narrative* mentions the matter, the prose becomes so unassailably opaque that it furnishes rather a complication than an explanation:

> My being in Breeches was alledged to be a very great Error, but the original Motive proceeded from a particular Cause; and I rather chuse to undergo the worst Imputation that can be laid on me on that Account, than unravel the Secret, which is an Appendix to one I am bound … by all the Vows of Truth and Honour everlastingly to conceal. (73)

There is, however, one important thread, as it were, that links the autobiography and cross-dressing both at the practical and the performative level: money. Charlotte's 'seemingly constant indebtedness and financial insecurity' (Mack 2007, 198), is palpable on page, and it should not be forgotten that, as an actress renowned for her cross-dressed roles, Charke was in a sense *bound* to an on-page revival of such performances if she wished her book to sell. As Felicity Nussbaum has observed, 'rather than transcending one's private self, acting involved animation and sometimes exaggeration of an alleged personal identity. Each subsequent reiteration of a familiar role allowed an actress to revise and perfect her unique combination of personal elements along with genre expectations in a given character' (2010, 20). It should be also be noted that Charlotte's male persona, when it surfaces more clearly in the text, is essentially an amalgam of three male characters connected to her father: Sir Charles Easy from Cibber's *The Careless Husband*, Carlos from *Love Makes Man* (also by Cibber) and another of his famous roles, Sir Charles in Farquhar's *The Beaux's Stratagem.* Her 'narrative impersonations', however, are by no means limited to these, and if we adapt Gallagher's idea of the 'vanishing act' of women writers to Charke, we can see it becoming something more like 'a mechanism for self-cancellation, a dispersion of any idea of self into a series of bit parts played with rhetorical flourish' (Smith 1998, 102).

5. *Character on Trial; the Author/Actor's Defence*

Just as Hogarth slightly reworked *Strolling Actresses* in order to insert a reference to the topical issue of the Licensing Act, redirecting its meaning and underlaying the grotesque comedy with tragedy, so Charke interrupted her autobiography just before its midpoint to insert a transcription of the letter that changed her life. The *Narrative* was published in eight instalments between March and April 1755: its declared aim was to effect a reconciliation with her father; the more threatening subtext was that if Cibber did not forgive her, the progressively uncomfortable account of his daughter's 'oddity' would continue to circulate. Cibber's name was inextricably linked to the dramatic stratagem of the 'last act repentance', and Charke was perhaps hoping that he would not wish to be seen as inconsistent by not extending to 'real life' what he preached on stage. Cibber's decision to return the letter unopened forced her into a change of strategy: she made room in the text for her missive and decided to use her autobiography to stage a private, family, drama (suitably adapted) before the whole of London, enlisting the sympathy of those who had been her audience and would now (she hoped) be her readers. The real-time quality of the instalments after Cibber's snub dovetails with precisely those elements in theatrical practice – adlibbing and satire on public figures – that had so worried Walpole and that were ultimately outlawed by the Act. The popularity of such gestures towards the topical testified on the other

hand to the strong and vital relationship between Londoners and their theatre, and Charke, by nature a risk taker with a strong antiauthoritarian streak, was the ideal interpreter of this type of drama. The extended episode of the letter, which she calls 'one of the most Tragical Accounts of my Life' (61), begins with a wronged Charlotte placing the 'evidence' of the epistle before the eyes of her readers. There is a forensic quality to her writing in those passages in which she tries to rehabilitate her public persona that cannot be missed (Locke believed the question of character to be of a 'forensic' nature, and memory, the primary tool of autobiography, to be its advocate). It is as though Charlotte feels she has been wronged by orality, and one of the main drives of her autobiography is therefore to set the record straight on paper. She 'confidently' affirms that

> MUCH PAINS has been taken to AGGRAVATE MY FAULTS, and STRENGTHEN his Anger; and, in that Case, I am certain my Enemies have not always too strictly adher'd to TRUTH, but MEANLY had recourse to FALSHOOD to perpetrate the Ruin of a hapless Wretch, whose real Errors were sufficient, without the Addition of MALICIOUS SLANDERS. (13)

This is a recurrent theme: Charlotte speaks of 'villainous Falshoods' (33), of a 'wicked Forger' (74), of 'malicious Aspersion' (133). It is also true, however, that one of the *Narrative*'s recurring features is to intertwine reprehension and representation, and the gusto with which she recounts the episodes that gave rise to the slander she is condemning is conspicuous. Her father meets her when she is working as a fishmonger; she accosts him and slaps him with a large flounder (74); she awaits him on the common disguised as a highwayman, knocks him out with her pistol and gleefully robs him (60): Charlotte introduces the 'rumour, if only to deny its facticity' (Smith 1998, 98), but its facticity is compounded by the vividness of the account, what Defoe in the *Preface* to *Moll Flanders* called, the elements of 'brightness and beauty … in the criminal part' (2011, 4).

One of the genres with which Charke's autobiography most flirts is indeed the *rogue narrative*, which, just like the developing genre of theatrical biography, invited its readers to transgress through the act itself of reading (Wanko 2003, 11), as well as to ponder what borders kept men and women within the pale of society and what price notoriety exacted. The last stage of the criminal's progress was the gallows, a physical and metaphorical site which, together with the prisons of Newgate and Marshalsea, hovers consistently in the background of Charke's autobiography. Against accusations that were often based exclusively on hearsay, British law courts allowed no legal defence and the only concession to another point of view was the 'criminal's defence', in which the accused perorated their innocence before the jury. In one of the opening passages Charlotte hands over the business of her defence to the *Narrative,* using the written words against the pathologies of oral communication and implicitly advancing the argument that, if there have been faults, these must be judged exclusively from the literary point of view:

> I therefore humbly move for its having the common Chance of a Criminal, at least to be properly examin'd, before it is condemn'd; And should it be found guilty of Nonsense and Inconsistencies, I must consequently resign it to its deserved Punishment. (7)

Hal Gladfelder has identified a 'poetics of the eighteenth-century criminal trial' which rested on the receptivity of the audience to feelings of 'pity, terror, and horror' associated with Aristotle's theory of drama: 'criminal trial … was at its heart an attempt to *stage* rather than determine truth' (2019, 156 italics mine); intriguingly, Charke invites her readers to see and judge *herself* as if she were a play referencing precisely these aesthetic categories: 'I always thought myself unaccountable enough in Reality, to excite the various Passions of Grief and Anger, Pity or Contempt, without unnecessary additional Falshoods' (74).

Throughout her autobiography, Charke interweaves the criminal trial metaphor with the idea of the stage as a tribunal for actors and actresses. The playhouse was a highly significant site in Georgian London, prompting one commentator to observe that 'the theatre engrossed the minds of men to such a degree … that there existed in England a *fourth estate*, Kings, Lords and Commons, and *Drury-Lane play-house*' (Murphy 1801, 381). Actors (and especially actresses) were strictly monitored by this growing public 'engrossed' with all matters theatrical. This interest for both the stories told on stage and the techniques through which these stories were told developed to levels of almost manic minuteness in theatrical reviewing (West 1991, 18-20; Nussbaum 2010, 1-6). For some famous actresses, who had become darlings of the stage, this policing took the shape of actual trials, as with the Restoration sex symbol Anne Bracegirdle, at the centre of a violent crime of passion in which her onstage partner was killed by an unrequited offstage rival (Greenup 2007); or with Charke's sister-in-law, Susanna Cibber, who, in what reads almost like a reenactment of Fielding's play *The Modern Husband* (1732), was first pushed into the arms of a lover by her unscrupulous husband Theophilus and then tried for adultery. In both cases, tickets were sold for the trial and innumerable pamphlets circulated, meticulously describing the women's performance under duress, and debating whether it conformed with or contradicted their stage persona/s – a vicious and misguided probing that inaugurated a confusion between famous actors and their most popular characters that is still very evident today (Quinn 1990, 158).

Charke's declared intention is to 'satisfy a Curiosity which has long subsisted in the Minds of Many' (8). She is well-aware of the 'public intimacy' (Roach 2005) the theatre generated with its 'engrossed' audience; so, while she tries to counter the threat of misrepresentation through her writing – by authoring her own story – she does so through a very 'audible' form of *mise en page*. Different sized capital letters (which Rehder's 1999 edition has uniformed) appeal vividly to the eye of the reader, guiding response towards her version, her *narrative*. The printed characters thus work like the emotional underscorings Charke was schooled to use on stage, and from the stage they sometimes seem to echo. This manner of acting was predicated on the 'closeness' between actor and audience, and would have incorporated many sudden raisings and lowerings of her voice to emphasise particular phrases or engross the spectators in the pathetic, comic or tragic passages. We hear in her written narrative a clear echo of the technique of 'pointing', which saw actors break the dramatic continuity by delivering speeches directly to the audience, who could judge their unique talent against a known portion of a part, and would answer by immediate applause or condemnation:

> To be denied that from a mortal Man which HEAVEN IS WELL PLEAS'D TO BESTOW, WHEN ADDRESSED WITH SINCERITY AND PENITENCE, EVEN FOR CAPITAL OFFENCES.
>
> The Prodigal, according to the Holy Writ, was joyfully received by the offended Father: Nay, MERCY has even extended itself at the Place of Execution, to notorious Malefactors; but as I have not been guilty of those ENORMITIES incidental to the forementionʼd Characters, permit me, gentle Reader, to demand what I have done so hateful! so very grievous to his Soul! so much beyond the Reach of Pardon! that nothing but MY LIFE COULD MAKE ATONEMENT? (63)

Also visible on page is Charke's familiarity – as an actress first, and later as prompter at Bath's Orchard Theatre, with dramatic punctuation, which aimed at guiding the actor in his/her part – not so much a convention to mark the flow of syntax as a 'pause for the voice', as Isaac Watts, for example, insisted in his *The Art of Reading* (1721). It may be interesting to point out that, in a very important way, the *Narrative* inverts the process described by Thomas Southerne, who in acknowledging his 'Debt' to the late Aphra Behn in his dedication to the 1695 stage adaptation

of *Oroonoko* (1688) wrote: 'she had a great command of the Stage; and I have often wondered that she would bury her favourite Hero in a novel when she might have revived him in a scene … I have heard from a friend of hers that she always told his story more feelingly than she writ it' (1977, 3-4). Though silenced by the Licencing Act and taking on so many different characters in the book, Charlotte makes herself present through typographic imitation of tone, emphasis and speed, noting with what can only seem satisfaction that she is scared creditors will recognise her because 'the sound of my Voice … is particular, and as well known as my Face' (54).

6. *A* Narrative *of Many Genres*

While the supporting structure of the *Narrative* is the story of the prodigal, this basic plot is frequently punctured by the author's gesturing towards a variety of different genres. The prodigal plot flounders because, it has been argued, without forgiveness there can be no redemption. Furthermore, in terms of narrative convention, daughters were unsuccessful prodigals, tending to die more or less quietly after their fall from favour (Perry 2004, 77-106); Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) being the obvious example here. The impulse towards confession fails essentially because, as already noted in relation to criminal biography, the *Narrative* betrays too much joyful indulgence towards its heroine's faults, which in any case tend to be described reductively either in terms of thoughtless eccentricity or performance. Around these two basic narrative directions of containment and effervescence a variety of different genres popular (or gaining popularity) at the time pushed their way in, troubling the outlines of her story – indeed, her cross-dressing is probably most usefully envisaged as genre – rather than gender-related. Charlotte seems incapable – whether by choice or out of necessity – to concentrate on one role and clearly loves her endless series of improvised or expedient selves. In this, her autobiography is crucially different from the majority of contemporary theatrical biographies, which aimed at identifying the famous actress with her most famous role, and progressively, especially towards the end of the century, tried to seamlessly sow together the private self, the public self and the actorial persona. Equally, she eschews the excesses of amorous passion which these works associated with actors (Straub 1992, 30-31). Next to the more obvious echo of Defoe's penitents – incidentally, some of the early canonical novels adopted what Madeleine Khan (1991, 3-11) has called 'narrative transvestitism', being written by men who adopted a female persona –, one can glimpse touches of the religious contrition that would become a feature of 'magdalen narratives' (first-person accounts by penitent prostitutes), as well as elements belonging to the 'wronged women' genre, the various 'laments', 'narratives of the sufferings' and 'sad adventures' of writers such as George Ann Bellamy, Mary Wrighten, Louise Françoise de Houssay and Mary Wollstonecraft, which publicised the wrongs they suffered through auto or pseudo-autobiography. In one very famous slightly later text, Lady Sarah Pennington's *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to her Absent Daughters* (1761), Pennington, whose husband had publicly accused her of pre-marital indiscretions and severed her from all contact with her daughters, interestingly argues for an inversion of the traditional perception of behaviour in the public and private sphere along lines very similar to those adopted by Charlotte: 'My private Conduct was what the severest Prude could not condemn; my public such as the most finished coquet alone would have ventured upon' (4).

Pennington's is a conduct manual with slightly uncustomary premises – a female moral monitor who, despite having been expelled from society by patriarchal power, nevertheless dispenses what is essentially patriarchal advice. Charke also minuets amusingly with the conduct manual convention at various points in her autobiography, for example when she dispenses somewhat clumsy marriage – as well as more to-the-point acting advice – to her daughter

Kitty, who was also a strolling actress. It should not be forgotten, that at the time this advice was supposedly given, Charlotte was a transvestite mother, as it were. In her Preface to *The Art of Management; Or, Tragedy Expell'd* (1735) – a pointed attack on manager Charles Fleetwood –, however, she goes one step further than Pennington in claiming the separateness of public and private in strictly actorial terms:

> I can't but say 'tis hard to be deprived of the Means of an honest Livelihood, without giving some immediate Provocation; and for my private Misconduct, which it seems, has been (for want of a better alledged as a Reason) tho' a bad one; for while my Follies are only hurtful to my self, I know no Right that any Persons, unless Relations, or very good Friends, have to call me to Account. I'll allow private Virtues heighten publick Merits, but then the Want of those private Virtues wont affect an Actors Performance.
>
> And for me, tho' I confess it with a Blush, I have paid so little Regard to my self, that I rather have made my Faults too conspicuous, than that I have conceal'd them; so the Town will hardly be surpriz'd at what they have been so long acquainted with (8).

At a more obvious and diffused level, Charke's autobiography links to the conduct manual genre in that it declares itself to be an exemplary warning against the misconduct that her own life has embraced (though we have seen the occasional flimsiness of this claim). Ultimately, the conduct manual was fashionable, a way to make some money – Cibber himself had written one in the persona of his popular repentant rake, Sir Charles Easy in *The Careless Husband.* The 'Means of an honest Livelihood', money that is (or the lack of it), is an inescapable feature – almost a 'supporting actor' in Charke's autobiography, and both its contaminating and freeing powers are often remarked. Authorship, it is pointed out, importantly rests on the material underpinnings that have allowed it to happen, and Charke names all those who have helped her, furnished her with food and hospitality, even using her autobiography to advertise their businesses, thereby foregrounding a sense of gratitude and collaboration within what amounts to an alternative, affective, economy.

Another of the genres that enter into play in the *Narrative* is the 'scandalous memoirs' of women such as the courtesan Teresia Constantia Philips or the poetess and adventuress Laetitia Pilkington, whom, despite her unsuitability, Cibber continued to frequent in what can only have appeared to Charlotte as further proof of her father's cruelty, especially if we look at how close Pilkington's wording (the *Memoirs* were published in 1748) is to certain passages in the *Narrative*. Here, for example, she promises readers

> A lively Picture of all my *Faults*, my *Follies*, and my *Misfortunes*, which have been consequential to them … so that I propose myself, not as an Example, but a Warning to them; that by my Fall, they may stand the more secure (Elias 1997, vol. I, 9)

The strategies through which such autobiographical writings appeared in and appealed to the public sphere were the exact opposite to those deployed by the 'wronged women' mentioned above, and were rather aimed at exploiting the public shame/fame nexus (see Thompson 2000). As literary objects these printed lives were precisely that: objects of consumption whose notoriety was imperfect and contingent. Charlotte's autobiography shares their 'pauperistic' origin – they were written, in other words, to eat ('This Work', she clearly states, 'is at present the Staff of my Life') (46) – but also the emphasis placed by their authors on the self as an expendable good on the literary marketplace: the actress *becomes* a text, which circulates much as she had done as a strolling player, and very much as the coins that we are told constantly slip in and out of her pockets.

In the eighteenth-century novels, plays, sermons and conduct literature were seemingly obsessed with young women: what should young women do, what should they know, what were

they for, apart from breeding and servicing men? In ventriloquizing this significant number and variety of genres, in trying her hand at interpreting their main characters, whether male or female, Charke tries, and somehow manages, to pass beyond gender. There is a sexless quality to her authorial voice, which is interesting, unusual, and sufficiently modern to have disturbed most critics until the late nineteenth-century, when both gender and genre-related reading became more sophisticated, and critics started debating whether Charke's sexuality should be understood as performative or essentialist.

7. *Shaping Autobiography through Dramatic Memory*

Because of its engagement with drama on the levels both of content and style, Charke's *Narrative* follows a path opposite to the classic autobiographical model in which events become clearer as they fade into the past and are given order and form. The present tense of drama vigorously undermines the pastness of what the actress describes; her story *replaces, becomes* the events it narrates. Placing drama at the heart of her autobiography highlights the interaction between spontaneity and premeditation, especially if one considers what a composite, stylised experience, delicately poised between artificiality and truth-to-nature, acting itself was at the time Charke was writing (Worthen 1984, 70-130; Roach 1993, 59-93). Truth at the theatre was essentially a happy mean between the correct performance of a set of conventions that represented emotions and the correct response to these from the audience; it was a matter of surface. Here lies the difficulty in this unique text: we have seen how Cibber's daughter strives to ascertain truth and discredit falsehood; she does not, however, anywhere renounce or discredit her allegiance to the theatre, a site where 'the intent to be false is undeniable – and necessary' (Barish 1985, 55). Charke's was a nature deeply inscribed by the stage: on occasion it seems reasonable to suspect that her feelings are not only expressed, but *shaped* through drama. This may be seen at different levels. There is, for example, a frequent use of character labels to describe this or that person as a 'Lady Bountiful', a 'Mock Doctor', a 'Lady Easy' (such tags are quite frequent in contemporary literature). Dramatic association then extends to linking certain actions in the *Narrative* with descriptive snatches from plays, as where Charlotte, whose mother has indulgently allowed her the use of a small gun and incautiously given her free reign of the Cibber estate, becomes 'like the Person described in *The Recruiting Officer,* capable of destroying all the Venison and Wild Fowl about the Country' (16).[13] Places evoke similar associations: the Apothecary from whom at fourteen she buys 'a Cargo of Combustibles [powders and herbs]' to help the ailing people of her neighbourhood and 'whose Shop was an Emblem of that described in *Romeo and Juliet*' (20) (5.1). Finally, whole scenes receive this treatment, as in the extended episode with the heiress who hoped to marry her (advertised, as we have seen, in the Frontispiece), which is described, down to the stage directions and the manner of delivery, through the lens of Steele's *The Funeral* (1701):

> We were exactly in the Condition of Lord *Hardy* and Lady *Charlotte* [interestingly the part of Hardy was inaugurated by Cibber] in *The Funeral*; and I sat with as much Fear in my Countenance, as if I had stole her Watch from her Side. She, on her Part, often attempted to speak; but had such a Tremor on her Voice, she ended only in broken Sentences. (58)

[13] Charke played various parts in this 1707 play by George Farquhar, whose central character is Sylvia, an heiress who cross-dresses to follow her lover, Captain Plume, into battle. The character she is 'personating' here is a poor man (5.5) on whom a wife and five children depended.

But here, in the longer textual portions in which dramatic parallels are referenced, we see other factors emerge. Charke is clearly inviting her readers not just to view the scene 'theatrically', but also to consider critically the intersections of personal history and performance, as well as of gender. In the play, Hardy is disinherited because of his stepmother's schemes and Lady Charlotte is his beloved. We find a similar instance of how Charlotte's theatrical memory worked in a later episode of the *Narrative*. Having decided to leave Pill, where she had attempted and failed to set up shop as a pie maker amidst what turned out to be a vicious and vulgar set of mortals, she made a desperate eighty-mile journey on foot to Oxfordshire to collect a much needed legacy from an aunt of Mrs Brown's. Charlotte and her partner set off, and as relief gradually sets in, she adapts some verses spoken by Oroonoko in 1.2 Southerne's play (1695) '*Whatever World we next were thrown upon, / Cou'd not be worse than Pill.*' (120). The tragic story of the African prince is intertwined with the comic plot of the two Welldon sisters, one of whom is named Charlotte (again a part Charke was familiar with), who undertake the perilous journey from London to Suriname to bag a rich husband; Charlotte, disguised as a man, will marry the deceived widow Lackitt.

Lear lurks in the background of the expanded episode which includes her letter to her father, as Charlotte recounts how a plot was hatched 'to elbow' her 'out of his Favour'. A 'Triumvirate' (formed by Colley and her two sisters) called her 'from the Playhouse to put this base design into Execution':

> After being baited like a Bull at a Stake, and perceiving they were resolved to carry their horrid Point against me, I grew enraged and obstinate; and, finding a growing Indignation swelling in my Bosom, answered nothing to their Purpose, which incensed my Father: Nor can I absolutely blame him, for 'twas undoubtedly my Duty to satisfy any Demand he should think proper to make – But then again, I considered that his Judgment was sufficient to correct the Errors of my Mind, without the insolent Assistance of those whose Wicked Hearts were fraught with my Ruin. (65)

Charlotte even prepares a little script for her father, reminding him that

> The late Mr. *Lillo*'s Character of *Thorowgood*, in his Tragedy of *Barnwell*, sets a beautiful Example of Forgiveness; where he reasonably reflects upon the Frailties of Mankind, in a Speech apart from the afflicted and repenting youth [the choice of the male parallel should be noted] – *'When we have offended Heaven, it requires no more; and shall Man, who needs himself to be forgiven, be harder to appease?'* – Then, turning to the Boy, confirms his Humanity, by saying; '*If my Pardon, or my Love be of Moment to your Peace, look up secure of both.*' (63-64)

She is here at once author, character and stage manager, evoking a scene in which she acted (having just come from the playhouse), and suggesting, in what can only be described as wishful thinking, how it can serve to restage what actually happened – a rather dizzying perspective if one stops to think about it. Though she never openly quotes *Lear,* she is appealing to her readers' ability to immediately reconstruct the missing dramatic context from which her words draw their delegated efficiency. It is a shorthand: once the parallel is clear we already know where we are going. Charlotte thus deploys dramatic modes with which the audience would have been familiar to cover the presentation of facts with a film of interpretation, reserving the power, nevertheless, to occasionally subvert tragic expectations comically or follow a farcical build-up with a serious denouement. While in the domestic novel acting out of character revealed a concern with social status, in the classless and merit-based actorial world that Charlotte tries desperately to hold on to, slips in the appropriateness of the emotion to the character, or the unsuitedness of rendition to the passage were the true crimes. Virtue becomes a rhetorical

question, a matter of finding a style suited to the situation – if theatre is appearance, there is, the author of the *Narrative* argues, a legitimacy to appearance.

The 'Lear' episode also detonates a textual pattern whereby from this moment onwards the quotations directed to her father are mostly taken from the bourgeoning sentimental drama, while those to her sister Katherine (Goneril) are packed with the conflict and passion of heroic drama. Charke justifies her use of quotation early on in her autobiography, by mentioning the superior power of literary language, adding that quotation will signal to the reader the true significance of the scene more efficiently than a diffuse description:

> I apprehend I shall be called into Question for my Inability, in conveying Ideas of the Passions which most tenderly affect the Heart, by so often having Recourse to abler Pens than my own, by my frequent Quotations; but, in Answer to that, I must beg to be excused, and also justified, as mine and others Griefs were more strongly painted, by those Authors I have made bold with, than was in the Power of my weak Capacity. I thought there was greater Judgment in such References, than in vainly attempting to blunder out my Distress; and possibly, by that Means, tire the reader in the Perusal. (66)

Initially more wooden and decorative, quotations evolve progressively towards more sophisticated irony and tragic pointedness. They may appear as subtle strokes of characterisation, evoking similitude or difference, briefly or diffusely illuminating meaning, but what should be acknowledged here is the extent to which they show the workings of Charke's prodigious theatrical memory. At just nineteen she was made 'Company Stock-Reader … in Case of Disasters' (32), while on another occasion she proudly states 'I was universally studied' (54). This memory, forcedly separated from the stage, acts powerfully throughout her autobiography, colouring, as we have seen, many scenes. When at thirteen she is trying to secure the place of gardener after her mother sacked the young man previously occupying the position, she spends eight days 'constantly traversing the Court-Yard' in an attempt to deflect potential competitors. She registers the maids' surprise with a quotation from 4.1 of Rowe's *The Fair Penitent, 'Alas! They knew but little of Calista!'* (23). There is irony generated by incongruence of course, because the passionate Callista is threatening to take her own life (we see this also in a much later example, when Charlotte registers her unhappiness with her daughter's marriage by adopting Brabanzio's words to Othello) (1.3), but what is even more striking than the mock epic deployment of the high to comment on the low, is that in this passage of Rowe's play Callista is seen pacing her cell, much like Charlotte 'remembers' pacing the yard, and that immediately after the line she quotes come the words 'but dig down deep and find myself a grave', which may or may not prompt Charlotte's grabbing a spade so that her mother may see her employed 'in my Office of Digging' (24).

Memory, on which autobiography pivots, and its opposite, forgetfulness, appear throughout the *Narrative*. Charlotte's involvement with her roles is obvious: 'I was so bewildered with the pleasing Ideas… I was entirely lost in a Forgetfulness of my real Self' (23). The memory of her past roles sustains her self-writing, though with a brilliant touch at the very close she modestly challenges the power of this memory in a final, beautifully paced, appeal to her audience:

> I cannot recollect any Crime I have been guilty of that is unpardonable, which the Denial of my Request may possibly make the World believe I have; but I dare challenge the most malicious Tongue of Slander to a Proof of that Kind, AS HEAVEN AND MY OWN CONSCIENCE CAN EQUALLY ACQUIT me of ever having deserved that dreadful Sentence, OF NOT BEING FORGIVEN. (142)

The actor's body, Marvin Carlson argues, is a 'recycled body', 'haunted' by repetition and memory that will, 'almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles

… a phenomenon that often colours or indeed may dominate the reception process' (2003, 8). Charke's *Narrative* relies heavily on her audience of readers, many of whom would have remembered her famous roles and appreciated the stratification and the engraining of her characters in her account.

8. *Authoring the Self*

Charke's autobiography has been seen as laying claim to a 'Rousseauian' mode of writing, 'an unfolding self-discovery where characters and events are little more than aspects of the author's evolving consciousness' (Peterson 1993, 102); and again, its narrative incoherence has been read as reflecting 'her manifest difficulty in coming to terms with herself' (Spacks 1976, 76). The *Narrative* is overall composed of brief, only slightly sutured parts, often coinciding with Charlotte's professional adventures, or what she calls her 'Flights', which are further punctured, as we have seen, by the 'pointing' of single speeches directed at the audience/readers. The most obvious characteristic of her protean self-performance is the easy fluctuations in tone, from heroic to farcical, from tragic to comic, from contemplating suicide to selling sausages in the space of a few lines. This, however, says something crucial about what, as an author, Charke wanted from her readers. Charlotte's shape-shifting reaches a climax in a scene in which she and fellow stroller, Mrs Elrington, exasperated by the torpid ignorant audience, give an extraordinary sample of their theatrical memory, and

> … took a Wild-goose Chase through all the dramatic Authors we could recollect, taking particular Care not to let any single Speech bear in the Answer the least Affinity; and while I was making love from *Jaffier*, she tenderly approved my Passion with the Soliloquy of *Cato*.
>
> In this incoherent Manner we finish'd the Night's Entertainment. Mrs. *Sullen*, instead of *Archer*, concluding the Play with *Jane Shore*'s Tag. (106-107)

One thinks of Diderot's *Paradoxe* that good actors have no character because, through acting all characters, they lose their specific one. The actor/author here forcefully articulates the mechanics of this particular mechanical art, but also displays the mechanism whereby it engenders a loss of free agency, enmeshing the performer in the part. Therein lies the tragedy in the overall comic structure of Charke's autobiography.

Lisa Freeman has shown that the eighteenth century developed 'an understanding of identity not as an emanation of stable interiority, but as an unstable product of staged contests between interpretable surfaces', and that eighteenth-century drama was concerned not with 'the tension between interiority and exteriority but with the conflicting meaning of surfaces in themselves … exteriors were taken not merely as symptomatic of an interior, but rather as the only basis upon which judgments about character could be formed' (2002, 27). Such a 'contingent mode of personation' (12) was construed through the epistemological framework of genre. The 'Wild-goose Chase' episodes vividly epitomises how the *Narrative* flouts the classical decorum that would prevent different genres and tones from keeping company, but at the same clarifies that the 'incoherence' (in story as in character) is the result of a bad audience, just as a good audience, as we have seen, 'makes sense' of a good performance.

Charke's *Narrative*, significantly, is dedicated to herself. The comical dismantling of the traditional efflorescent flattery of the epistle dedicatory on the one hand openly acknowledges a split between her past and her present self, and on the other, when seen in relation to the closing passages of her autobiography, establishes a *causal* relationship between the loss of any lingering hope of help from her father – '*the Author of my Being* (142) – and her 'design to pass in the

Catalogue of Authors' (143). If anonymity and pseudoanonymity were very much the norm in the eighteenth century for women writers, Charlotte Charke vigorously claims authorship, and indeed links authorship with responsibility ('PRUDENCE and REFLECTION … have lately ventur'd to pay you a Visit') (6). Cibber's *Apology*, which Henry Fielding perceived as a vortex of vanity, delighted in the fame his theatrical career accrued and rests on the older meaning of the word 'apology'; his daughter's *Narrative*, on the other hand, throws all her failures into sharp relief and (at least apparently) deploys the more modern sense of the word, as it appears in Shakespeare's *Richard III* – one of Colley's most infamous failures – ('My lord, there needs no such apology') (3.7). The to-say-the-very-least double personality of Charlotte Charke – on the one hand the pathetic heroine, on the other the girl who delights in shooting with a gun on her father's grounds – is of course epitomised in Richard's 'I am I […] I am […] yet I am not' speech (5.3), which becomes Charlotte's 'I THEN WAS WHAT I HAD MADE MYSELF' (77), placed exactly at the centre of her autobiography. Is it an admission of guilt or a proud claim to fictive prowess? What readers see, she states, is the way *I* have made myself into a character, a play, a book.

The *Narrative* dramatizes, it may be said, the relationship between self and audience, a reading that would appear to be supported by some of Charke's authorial intrusions, such as when she expresses her hopes that the 'Town' will welcome Mr Dumont's 'History' (her next novel) as well as they have welcomed her own (history), 'though it is not so well-acquainted with the above-mention'd Gentleman' (91). Here she subtly extends and even perhaps criticises the idea of the public intimacy her celebrity has brought by likening herself to a character in a novel. Poignantly, we see what may almost be a rehearsal of this split behaviour in an intriguing little passage describing the frisson of pleasure she experienced on hearing her first official performance praised by the people gathered around the playbill with her name in capitals. She is so excited by this approbation that she travels 'from one End of the Town to the other', presumably in disguise, to stand amidst the sound of similar praise – 'nor do I believe it cost me less in Shoes and Coaches, than two or three Guineas', she duly notes (30). If, as one of Charke's most insightful critics has observed in a recent study on self-writing, 'the fictional encoding of the factual is one of the great problematics of autobiography' (Folkenflik 1993, 15), one feels it is especially so in this example of the genre.

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