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Daughter Seeks Reprieve: Charlotte Charke and Female Re/Presentation

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THE DAUGHTER SEEKS REPRIEVE:
CHARLOTTE CHARKE AND FEMALE RE/PRESENTATION

A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Nolan Marchand
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The purpose of this study is to offer a reading of Charlotte Charke's Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke. Charlotte Charke, the daughter of the Poet Laureate and Actor-Manager Colley Cibber, lived a life on the margins of society. She worked as an actress, specializing in "breeches parts," until the closure of the unlicensed theaters left her jobless. Later, she capitalized upon her ability to imitate men convincingly; and, in the Narrative, she describes this cross-dressing as the assumption of a sort of occupational uniform that allowed her access to employment traditionally prohibited to women.

Most discussions of Charke's Narrative focus on her descriptions of her courtships of women. Several male critics have read these episodes as examples of her deviancy, and recent feminist critics have argued that she was lesbian. Discussions over Charke's sexual identity and possible lesbianism can be misleading, however, obscuring Charke's attack on a monolithic conception of masculine identity and patriarchal authority.

I argue that Charke's Narrative is a complex effort to hold her father up for ransom in an act of blackmail. Unable to speak directly with her father, Charke turned to print as the medium through which to affect a reprieve from her reputation as undutiful. In doing so, Charke emerges as a freak, an eccentric; and it is the multiplicity of her voices, jobs, genders, and activities that exposes the categories of gender and status as social constructions.
THE DAUGHTER SEEKS REPRIEVE:
CHARLOTTE CHARKE AND FEMALE RE/PRESENTATION
Charlotte Cibber (1710?-1760), a self-confessed "odd Product of Nature," and daughter of the notorious actor, author, Drury Lane manager, and Poet Laureate, Colley Cibber, exhibited a "natural Propensity to a Hat and Wig" by living much of her life in men's clothing. She married Richard Charke, a violinist at Drury Lane and had one daughter; but the marriage soon failed. Deserted by her husband and eventually cast off by her father, she struggled to survive as an actress both in her father's theater and, later, in Henry Fielding's Haymarket Theater. Specializing in "breeches parts," she had a few successes, notably as Macheath in John Gay's The Beggar's Opera; however, the Licensing Act of 1737 forced the closure of the unlicensed theaters, leaving Charke unemployed. She spent the rest of her life on the margins of society, pursuing a variety of careers--working intermittently as a hog-seller, publican, green grocer, strolling player, puppeteer, sausage-maker, valet, pastry cook, and finally, writer. In a desperate effort to make money, Charke capitalized upon her relationship to her notorious father with the publication, in installments, of her autobiography, A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke (1755).

Much of the Narrative is devoted to descriptions of Charke's cross-dressing, which first manifested itself in episodes that begin in infancy. Not only did she specialize in male roles on stage, often in imitation of her father's most celebrated parts, but she also eventually began wearing
men's clothing off stage. After the closure of the theaters left her jobless, Charke capitalized upon her ability to imitate men convincingly. In the *Narrative*, she describes her cross-dressing off stage as the assumption of a sort of occupational uniform that allowed her access to employment traditionally prohibited to women. Calling herself Mr. Brown, she served as a valet to an Irish peer, worked as a pastry chef, and later, "became belov'd by a lady of great Fortune who intended to marry [her]" (p. 116).

Charke's descriptions of her courtships of women have led traditional male critics, like Leonard R. N. Ashley, to castigate her for deviancy, which has prompted several recent female critics to exonerate her of the "charges."\(^2\) Responding to Fidelis Morgan's introduction to the latest edition of the *Narrative*, which seeks to refute "charges" of lesbianism, Terry Castle, in "Trials en travesti," has found "a whiff of homophobia" in Morgan's argument (p. 171).\(^3\) The critics' obsession with Charke's sexual identity and possible lesbianism can, however, be misleading and focuses attention on an important, but too limited, issue. Charke's descriptions of her courtships as Mr. Brown do seek to confuse and titillate, as well as to raise questions of her sexual orientation. These are, however, incidents that owe much to dramatic conventions, which are themselves designed to titillate. Significantly, Charke's cross-dressed flirtations remain just that; there are no descriptions of fondling or
physical contact, only a sort of chaste playfulness.

Rather than concentrate on whether Charke was a lesbian or bisexual, an ultimately irresolvable issue, one can approach her play with gender as part of an overall attack on a monolithic conception of masculine identity and patriarchal authority. Even as sympathetic a critic as Castle oversimplifies when she writes, "The great unresolved conflict of Charke's life was that of sexual identity" (p. 171), for the oversimplification lies in associating transvestism exclusively with sexual identity. In fact, Charke's descriptions of her cross-dressing seem consistent with recent evidence uncovered by the social historians Rudolf Dekker and Lotte van de Pol, who suggest economic, rather than sexual motivations for eighteenth-century female transvestism. Dekker and Van de Pol have revealed the fact that there were indeed many eighteenth-century transvestites, yet most literary critics have overlooked the historical evidence of female transvestism in early modern Europe. Such critics ignore historical imperatives implicit in Charke's narrative, and a closer examination of her work reveals socio-economic, as well as political, motivations for female transvestism.

I want to suggest that behind the enigma of Charke's cross-dressing--even in the sexuality that Castle wishes us not to overlook--is a conflict with larger social implications. We need to assess Charke's actions and understand the ways and the extent to which she challenged or
transgressed societal constraints in context of a society that tolerated some types of transvestism. I want to suggest that her actual acts of transvestism are only a part of a larger range of transgressive activities, of which the most important is perhaps her articulation of conflict in her rôle as a daughter.

My reading of Charke's autobiography reverses the current interpretations of Charke's Narrative by showing that although her transvestism is transgressive, it does not necessarily subvert the social structure. Charke's impersonations of men, which are often impersonations of her father, often seeks to support and uphold the value of patriarchal conventions. It is true that Charke violates the limits of the masculine/feminine gender dualism by impersonating both male and female figures, and Kristina Straub argues that these figures are often quite conventional. However, Straub may go too far in concluding that Charke's most transgressive gestures--her cross-dressing, her adoption of male rôles in life and fiction, her imitation of and challenge to the father--are undertaken not to undermine but to affirm the value of the masculine on which the patriarchy and her own cross-dressing depend. Straub argues that Charke's travesties are subversive imitations, but I think one can extend her argument to show how these are corrective travesties as well.

Straub shows that Charke seeks not to liberate herself from the limitations of the patriarchy but to reinscribe the
patriarchy in a way that suits her. While Straub locates this
effort in the homophobia dominating the structures and content
of Charke's plays, The History of Henry Dumont and The Lover's
Treat, it may also be found in parts of her Narrative, as I
will argue, especially in Charke's articulation of a division
in her rôle as daughter. Furthermore, Charke's obsession with
this corrective reinscription attests to her commitment, not
to any final abolition of the father and the patriarchy, but
to their reformation and reconstitution on grounds that suit
her aims.

In Charke's autobiography this patriarchal reconstitution
is frustrated when her father, Colley Cibber, refuses to play
the part scripted for him. Charke tells her reader that she
desires reconciliation with her father, and that to accomplish
this she has written him a desperate letter of supplication.
She constructs, within her Narrative, a novelistic stage drama
with the major rôles--the biblical patriarch and the prodigal
daughter/son--to be played by Colley Cibber and Charlotte
Charke. The Narrative installments dramatize Charke's wait
from week to week for a response from her father, but her
father refuses to play along; he does not respond to her
letter. In her narrative, her stories--fictions, gossip, and
rumor--are so fabulous that even as the reformative
reinscription succeeds, the lengths required for this success
betray Charke's despair. For Charke, the narrative
reconstruction of the patriarchy as a compassionate order
requires strong measures.

Charke is suspended between two imperatives, that of a dutiful versus that of a vengeful daughter—a split which is dramatized powerfully in the central scene of the autobiography, the moment when Charke describes how her father returned her letter of supplication unopened. Beginning, "a full account of, I think, one of the most tragical Occurances of my Life, which but last Week happened to me," Charke claims her father, "forgetful of THAT TENDER NAME, and the GENTLE TIES OF NATURE, returned [the letter sent him] in a Blank [envelope]" (p. 117). Responding to his silence, Charke assumes a variety of figurative stances. She becomes a penitent, fallen daughter, who is not "joyfully received by the offended Father" (121). She becomes a convict on the verge of death:

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 formentioned 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? Which I can bring Witness was a hazard I was immediately thrown into. (p. 121)

In this passage, Charke becomes the inherently virtuous and loving daughter, wronged by a malign father figure, "who neither does, or ever will, pay the least Regard to any Part of the Family" (p. 121). She presents herself as cast away by a misguided old father who becomes a fool for not recognizing her sterling virtues. Finally, Charke demands a moral
superiority by exclaiming her own act of absolution and, thereby, exhibits her greater Christian charity.

The narrative stance as a vulnerable, penitent, victimized woman, however, cannot be sustained. In some senses, Charke calls on a sentimental voice from drama; it is much like the voice of the heroines in Nicholas Rowe's popular "she-tragedies," with which Charke would have been familiar. Running parallel to this sentimental pathos, which is a passive narrative strand, is her rôle as avenging daughter, which is an active combative strand, and one that draws upon a comic register.

At times in the Narrative, Charke sees herself as a comic actor on the world stage: "I am certain, there is no one in the World MORE FIT THAN MYSELF TO BE LAUGHED AT. I confess myself an odd mortal, and believe I need no force of Argument, beyond what has already [been] said, to bring the whole Globe Terrestrial into that Opinion" (p. 86). While mocking her own efforts to achieve meaning and public significance in her life, this narrative position has the energy and power to point out her father's failures; and through a rewriting of the event, Charke is able to offer a corrective reinscription of the patriarchy. The aggressiveness of Charke's narrative style disrupts and subverts the penitential anguish. Assuming the guise of an avenging daughter, she prefaces the prayers of the misunderstood and abused penitent with a defiant gesture of rebellion. As a way of correcting the wrongs she sustained
at her father's hands, she constructs a position as her father's Nemesis throughout the Narrative. 10

Charke exacts a vengeance on the very father she would woo when she introduces into the text two anecdotes that she labels as apocryphal. She describes how rumor has it that, dressed as a highwayman, she

Stopp'd [her father's] Chariot, presented a Pistol to his Breast, and used such Terms as I am ashamed to insert; threatened to blow his Brains out that moment if he did not deliver...Upbraiding him for his Cruelty in abandoning me to those Distresses he knew I underwent, when he had it so amply in his Power to relieve me: That since he would not use that Power, I would force him to a Complience, and was directly going to discharge upon him: but his Tears prevented me, and asking my Pardon for his ill Usage of me, gave me his purse with three score Quineas, and a Promise to restore me to his family and Love; on which I thanked him, and rode off.

(p. 114)

Categorically denying having thus accosted her father, Charke assaults him by enjoyably recounting the rumor. In the rôle of avenging daughter, she creates a father emasculated, even feminized. Pitiful, helpless, humiliated, unheroic, he is reduced to tears of contrition. Finally, she assumes the power of life and death over the father, reversing the dynamics of power in their real-life relationship. Charke may protest against the viciousness of the rumor; but as she incorporates that anecdote within the narrative, she empowers a fantasy of filial rebellion and defiance. Charke introduces a second rumor into her text, one that has to do with her response to a chance meeting with her father in a public market. Rumor has it that when Colley Cibber refused to
publicly acknowledge his now fishwife daughter, Charke reportedly slapped him in the face with a flounder. Again, in the introducing of the rumor, if only to deny it, Charke articulates her anger and resentment at the unnatural refusals of her father to accept his errant daughter's repentance. In both rumors she makes her famous father a Colley Cibber victimized by female violence, reduced to humiliating and unmanly postures. In her corrective reinscription of both stories, she is empowered to strike back, to inflict a wound upon the enemy, vigilant before the force of oppression. While slurring her father, she strikes two distinct rhetorical positions. She is the injured woman about whom false stories are spread; but in the retelling of the rumor, she is the active perpetuator of fantasy. In relating a fantastic rumor and participating in its fantasy, Charke assumes a double position, typical of her style: she is both injured and injuring, victim and aggressor.

As the narrative continues, she lashes out more directly at her father, her siblings, and strangers who have betrayed her. Specifically, she continues to undermine her father's eroded authority by questioning his generosity—both emotional and financial—and, thereby, making him into a type of the unnatural father. Colley Cibber, the Dunce of Alexander Pope's *Dunciad*, was already a figure of popular fun, and Charke draws upon this typology of her father as fool, as well as upon his reputation for parsimony. Moreover, Charke
presents to her readers the story of a notorious father and daughter that enhances their pleasure in the scandals of the rich and famous.

Charke capitalizes upon her readers' desire for sensational scandals, rumors, and gossip when she provides episode after episode of stories designed to embarrass her father. Unfairly imprisoned on suspicion, as well as for refusing to tender a bribe to a minor Gloucestershire magistrate, Charke—in boots, periwig and great coat—comically makes the best of her night spent in jail: "Since I exhibit[ed] Captain Macheath in a Sham-Prison"—i.e., on stage—"I should, as I was then actually in the Condemned-Hold, sing all the Bead-roll of Songs in the last Act" (p. 215). The spectacle of Colley Cibber's daughter dressed as a man, imprisoned in a country town, singing the songs of Macheath from The Beggar's Opera would, undoubtedly, have created a particularly titillating scandal for those interested in the lives and troubles of public figures. Clearly, the daughter of the Poet Laureate should not be in the situations that Charlotte Charke finds herself, let alone expose those scandalous exploits for public consumption. The publication of her altercations with the law, her slumming with criminals, whores, and fishwives, as well as her affairs in men's clothing, demonstrate the lack of control Cibber has over his daughter's behavior. The Cibber she correctively reinscribes, is a weak, ineffectual patriarch, unable to rule
and order his own child and household. Forced to sell her autobiographical text to support herself, Charke, then, sells a revised version of her father's along with it.

When considered alongside her accounts of run-ins with the law, various occupations, and poverty and desperation, Charke's transvestism can be read as just one more element in a work whose overriding design is to expose her famous father's neglect and lack of affection. Publicizing her cross-dressing is part of a complex scheme designed to enact her revenge on her father--in recounting gossip, rumor, and embarrassing stories--if her demands for his affection and support remain unanswered.

Many critics have ignored Charke's descriptions of her filial blackmail in discussions of the Narrative in favor of examining her cross-dressing. Felicity Nussbaum's discussion of Charke's transvestism, for example, emphasizes the progressive--that is the feminist--aspects of Charke's life and work.12 Thus, highlighting Charke's adoption of male rôles in her life and writing, Nussbaum reads the autobiography as a challenging and subversive gesture against "male life patterns and female stereotypes" (pp. 189-90). However, her conclusion that "autobiographical texts such as those by Charke, [Latitia] Pilkington, and [Katherine] Philips reproduce individual historical experience and human chronology to invent new tropes for women's lives" (p. 189), is a claim too positive to make for Charke's autobiography.
Nowhere does Charke make her life seem attractive; rather, her life is colored by descriptions of abject poverty and desperation. She does not, as Nussbaum suggests, hold up her life as a model for emulation.

Nussbaum's affirmations of the ultimately subversive nature of Charke's male rôle-playing rest on two assumptions: first, that the cross-dressed Charke is an inevitably transgressive figure; and second, that this masculine Charke is somehow more genuine and more significant than the feminine Charke, the repentant daughter eager to claim her place in her family and society. Not all of Charke's male rôles are transgressive, except insofar as they travesty masculine rôles. As Kristina Straub notes in her discussion of the Narrative, Charke invests herself in conformist and ideal masculine postures, especially in her fiction and plays, in order to reproduce conventional stage fictions of the theatrical fé/male rogue. So it seems misleading and inaccurate to claim that Charke's ideal heroes or conventional rogues constitute "new tropes."

Finally, I do not think that the hierarchy that Nussbaum sets up between Charke's male and female rôles can be validly established, even for her autobiography. Through her cross-dressed fictions, Charke reproduces a patriarchy where she may play a whole constellation of conventional rôles, both male and female, making it difficult to isolate an essential female Charke who is either empowered or betrayed by transgression. Despite
Nussbaum's self-professed "materialist vision," she cannot remove the idealist notion of an essentially feminine voice. She views Charke's final gestures toward assimilation into the family and the society she has scandalized as insignificant expedients that do not ultimately compromise the progressive and feminist value of Charke's transgressions. Thus, in Nussbaum's more generous reading, Charke is a significantly successful feminist.

By assuming male attire, Charke is not necessarily adopting a feminist position; rather, her transvestism can be read as often reaffirming conventional male rôles and figures. Significantly, Charke's cross-dressing is frequently an imitation of the paternal; thus, the recounting of these episodes to her reader becomes just one more weapon in her assault on her father's reputation. Her transgression lies not in her transvestism per se, but in her descriptions of these episodes, which are designed to humiliate her father.

Her transvestism in imitation of the paternal might better be termed double-dressing, for she offers a double imposture: not only does Charke the woman dress as a man, but Charke the daughter dresses as her father. In one of the most interesting and detailed episodes in her narrative, Charke introduces her reader to this "natural Propensity to Hat and Wig":

I shall begin with a small Specimen of my former Madness, when I was but four Years of Age. Having, even then, a passionate Fondness for a Periwig, I crawl'd out of Bed one Summer's Morning at
Twickenham...and, taking it into my small Pate, that by dint of a Wig and a Waistcoat, I should be the perfect Representative of my Sire. (p.17-18)

Charke clearly shows that her cross-dressing is imitative of her father. Interestingly, in theatrically usurping and enacting a strange performance in her father's clothing--by merely donning her father's wig and waistcoat--she presents the possibility that she can somehow become her sire's "perfect Representative." She will become her father, and, thereby, eliminate the need to gain paternal affection and attention.

As innocent as her infantile double-dressing in life may have been, Charke's recounting of this episode as an adult is designed to present not only Charlotte Charke as a ridiculous figure of fun, but Colley Cibber as well:

I took down...an enormous bushy Tie-wig of my Father's, which entirely enclos'd my Head and Body, with the Knots of the Ties thumping my little Heels...The Covert of Hair in which I was concealed, 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 Inconveniences I laboured under, was whelming myself under one of my Father's large Beaver-hats, laden with Lace, as thick and broad as a Brickbat. (p. 18)

Charke claims to omit nothing that will "raise a laugh" (p. 17), and, ostensibly, she is the figure at whom the reader is supposed to laugh. However, in her description of her father's clothing, she also makes Colley Cibber a figure of fun. She draws upon the typology of her father as the
foolish, clothes-conscious fop. The enormous tie-wig, the costly sword, and elaborate, expensive hat that Charke describes in this passage were the sartorial markers most commonly associated with the fop.\textsuperscript{14} Kristina Straub, in her discussion of Cibber's \textit{Apology}, points out that the theater-going public confused the real Cibber with two of his most famous stage characterizations, Sir Novelty Fashion and later, Lord Foppington.\textsuperscript{15} In drawing upon the confusion surrounding Cibber's public persona, Charke finds just one more tool for her revenge.

Moreover, implied in this passage are the markers of paternal neglect. In her descriptions of the extravagant lengths to which see seeks to gain her father's attention, Charke makes explicit her desperate need for paternal affection. Not only does she parade through Twickenham in her father's clothing, she searches for a certain verisimilitude in her rôle, even going so far as to roll herself in a dry ditch to conceal the fact she wears female shoes, not the masculine boots appropriate to her imposture (p. 19). In "this Grotesque Pigmy-State" she parades up and down in front of an admiring crowd until taken "into a Fever, in the happy Thought of being taken for the 'Squire" (p. 19). Cibber's neglect is made clear by the extremes to which Charke goes to gain paternal attention. This passage serves to validate Charke's later claims of her father's emotional indifference, so that, when Colley Cibber returns his daughter's letter of
supplication unopened, the reader has a firm foundation for thinking him an unnatural, emotionally ungenerous father.

At The Haymarket theater and as a country strolling player, Charke continued her impersonations of her father on stage by specializing in his most celebrated rôles. While Charke often mentions acting parts closely associated with her father, she only once provides any detail about these double impostures; and this passage is remarkably similar in tone and effect to the descriptions of her infantile imposture of her father:

One Thing I took monstrously ill, which I cannot help mentioning: Some Persons of Fashion, who had seen me in London, had a Mind that I should appear in the Part of Lord Foppington, in The Careless Husband; and, at their Request, I rehearsed it...which made them more anxious for my playing it. (p. 256)

In both episodes she claims encouragement from her audience--here, a powerful audience of persons of quality. As before, there is an implication that her audience would delight in the scandal of watching the daughter of a famous actor travesty her father's parts, and this appeals directly to the public interest in the troubles in the lives of the rich and famous. After her infantile romp in her father's clothes, Cibber merely orders her redressed in female clothing. In the adult episode, however, her father's response is quite different, for his displeasure halts the entire proceeding.

Charke runs the risk of seeming an undutiful, vicious daughter in actively taking on her father's rôles, and thus
risks upsetting her carefully constructed system for eliciting her readers' sympathies. Her rhetorical strategy in the story of her infantile double-dressing is not designed to wound her father directly, but rather, indirectly, through her descriptions of Cibber's extravagant clothing. In order to remain consistent with her oblique attack on her father, she must, as an adult, deny the desire to impersonate her father on stage. In this passage, she transfers this desire onto "persons of Fashion," since, unlike her infantile episode, she can no longer hide her need to injure her father behind her youth and innocence. She assumes the passive rhetorical stance of a wounded--and much maligned--dutiful daughter to avoid seeming to offer a public and active challenge to her famous father. Typical to her style, she cannot seem to make a full frontal assault on Cibber, but must harass at the rear.

In a smooth rhetorical move, Charke eliminates the perception of offering any direct injury to her father and, through her language, postures as victim. She is the dutiful daughter, maligned by those who would see her suffer at the hands of her indifferent father. Furthermore, when injured by her father's subordinates, she is indirectly, then, injured by her father: "...they communicated their Design to him who ought to have been their Commander in Chief, and he agreed to their Proposal, 'till two of his Subalterns...opposed it" (p. 256). In Charke's retelling of this episode, Cibber appears indifferent by placing the concerns of his "Subalterns" above
his own daughter's needs and interests. On the other hand, Charke comes across as deprived of not only the part on stage and the fame associated with it, but also the money she so desperately needed. Once again Charke attempts to place herself into a winning rhetorical position. She depicts herself as injured by her father's neglect, while in fact, offering a direct, public assault on her father's fame and reputation.

The narrative stance of the dutiful, victimized daughter is carried over into her descriptions of her other transvestite activities, especially in her depictions of her courtships as Mr. Brown. Charke tacitly claims that Cibber is behind her episodes of cross-dressing, for she assumes male clothing as a sort of occupational uniform that allows her to earn financial support independent of her father. Implicit in almost all of her descriptions of her travesties in male clothing are the unnatural refusals of her father to recognize her claims on his affection. Moreover, she emphasizes that she would not be forced to indulge in transgressive impostures, had Cibber not rejected her; and she argues that the extremes to which she goes would not be necessary if Cibber had not cast her off.

Interestingly, Sidonie Smith also reads Charke's courtships as Mr. Brown as "serving rather than challenging convention," because even at her most transgressive, Charke is unable to rid herself of male models and so of her
"androcentric fictions" (pp. 122, 44). Smith's discussion is highly responsive to Charke's commitment to conventional fictions, and she pairs this commitment with Charke's inability to construct a feminist position independent of the patriarchy. Nonetheless, Smith assumes that Charke is an essentially subversive and feminist figure, though a failed one. Smith blames this failure on Charke's desire for reconciliation with her father and links this desire to Charke's indolence, thoughtlessness, and lack of self-knowledge.

Smith raises important questions about the study of women's autobiography within French and Anglo-American feminist criticism. Moreover, she usefully complicates the idea of self as described by Patricia Meyer Spacks in her germinal discussion of Charke's autobiography in Imagining a Self. However, Smith's analysis is hampered by her inattention to the political and economic purposes that difference serves in Charke's Narrative, and the particular historical conditions in which certain textual practices erupt. While Smith recognizes the inadequacy of traditional male models of the self in criticism of autobiography, she falls into ahistorical traps when she oscillates between asserting a "poetics of women's autobiography" and declaring that she will "offer no comprehensive theory of women's autobiographical writing" (p. 18).

A type of ahistoricism is also inherent in Smith's
psychoanalytic approach, and her conclusions disregard how the eighteenth-century looked at gender. We read gender as internally regulated, but for the eighteenth century gender was often regulated by engendered rôles and activities.\textsuperscript{18} While Smith often reads Charke's transvestite episodes as exposing a fundamental confusion in her sexual identity, when considered in light of the historical record these episodes may merely be representative of her desire to gain access to male-specific occupations. As Dekker and Van de Pol point out, "In the early modern era passing oneself off as a man was a real and viable option for women who had fallen into bad times and were struggling to overcome their difficult circumstances" (pp. 1-2). Disregarding the then contemporary views of sexuality and gender, Smith haphazardly applies twentieth-century notions of gender to her discussion of the eighteenth century.

Charke's economic motivations for cross-dressing are often ignored in discussions of her courtships in men's clothing. She reminds her audience repeatedly of her extreme poverty and, in fact, frames all of her descriptions of these courtships with details of her desperation and want of money. For example, while in the guise of Mr. Brown, she cohabits in a type of "marriage" with an actress, whom she calls Mrs. Brown, only after they can no longer support themselves as country strolling players (p. 228). Together, after borrowing money from a kindly friend, they open a pastry shop in Pill,
a port city. Pastry chef was a male-specific occupation, and Charke claims to have adopted male attire in order to be suited for it. Moreover, she and "Mrs. Brown" could reside together in Pill without comment only if they posed as a married couple, for in port cities like Pill, prostitution was rampant.\textsuperscript{19} Charke's descriptions of her "marriage" raise questions of her sexual orientation and, indeed, seemed designed to do so; yet the economic necessity of this arrangement, rather than sexual desire for Mrs. Brown, seems to be the real focus of this section. Significantly, there are no descriptions of fondling or physical contact between the pair, but rather the grim details of economic hardship.

Similarly, even the passage that critics most often cite to support their claims for Charke's lesbian identity can be read as economically motivated.\textsuperscript{20} Without much encouragement on her part, Charke claims to have found herself "much belov'd by a Lady of Fortune" who intended to marry her:

\textit{I appeared as Mr. Brown...in a very genteel Manner; and, not making the least Discovery of my Sex by my Behavior, ever endeavouring to keep up to the well-bred Gentleman, I became, as I may most properly term it, the unhappy Object of Love in a young Lady, whose Fortune was beyond all earthly Power to deprive her of, had it been possible for me to have been, what she designed me, nothing less than her Husband. She was an Orphan Heiress....}(p. 106-07)

Charke constructs a scenario where the young girl is a wealthy, but vulnerable, orphan--adrift in the world without male protection, a victim ripe for the plucking. Charke claims that her imitation of a gentleman is so flawless that
she must actively choose to refrain from taking advantage of this girl's emotional vulnerability for her own financial gain. Significantly, Charke stresses the fact that she is "unhappy" about this girl's choice of her as suitor; and the heiress' love is unrequited, despite the fact that Charke is in desperate financial straits. It is clear that money, not romance, is foremost in Charke's mind.

While Charke gives no physical description of the orphan heiress, she describes in great detail the heiress' financial attractions: "I might have been possessed of the Lady, and forty thousand Pounds in the Bank of England: Besides Effects in the Indies, that were worth about twenty Thousand more" (p. 107). Clearly, Charke's disappointment lies in her inability to take possession of the lady's fortune, not the lady's body.

Charke's descriptions of her poverty encourage the reader to sympathize with her when she is tempted to "defraud" the young girl. However, Charke shows her greater Christian charity by not marrying the heiress despite her desperation: "This was a most horrible Disappointment on both Sides; the Lady of the Husband, and I of the Money; which would have been thought an excellent Remedy for Ills, by those less surrounded with Misery than I was" (p. 107). Charke minimalizes the obvious temptation to defraud the woman and, thus, minimizes the sexually transgressive aspect of this episode.

Charke emphasizes the similarities between the orphan heiress' situation and her own. Both women obviously long for
affection, and both are victimized, neglected, fatherless daughters. The scene, then, is not so much a sexual courtship between two women, but rather a reworking of the problematic relationship between the daughter and the absent father. In this passage, Charke once again offers a corrective reinscription of the paternal rôle, by demonstrating her greater Christian charity toward a victimized daughter, a charity that she implies her father should emulate.

Interestingly, Charke constructs a potentially damaging situation for herself in relating her courtships as Mr. Brown. While many types of transvestism were tolerated by eighteenth-century English society, marriage between two women was considered a criminal fraud. In this episode, Charke ingeniously refashions an illicit activity--female marriage--into a heroic situation that reaffirms her inherent, if misunderstood, goodness. Through this flirtation with criminality, Charke, once again, indirectly implies her father's neglect and unnatural refusals to recognize his daughter's need for affection. This double rhetorical position is typical of her narrative style: she flirts with the illicit with her cross-dressed impersonations, yet attempts to construct herself into a winning position in the public dispute with her father.

Kristina Straub, in the most current treatment of The Narrative, reads Charke's courtships as Mr. Brown as mirroring actions in Fielding's The Female Husband (1746) and, thus, by
reflection, affirming her claims that Charke was lesbian. Straub, unlike Nussbaum and Smith, attempts to marry psychoanalysis and history, and she offers a way of looking at both so that her argument has a strong historical foundation. Using the terms of psychoanalysis, Straub argues that Charke's self-definition by the process of "negation" allowed her to resist the cultural construction of "same-sex" sexuality around the "determining factor of the present or absent penis" (p. 135). Moreover, she charts the historical processes in the changing models of female sexual identity. Straub's study of popular representations of eighteenth-century British actors and actresses suggests women's "emergent role as the other," the image against which masculinity is defined (p. 14). She assumes that "discourse about the theater," and the men and women who worked in it, serves a particular function in relation to the emerging dominant order of "bourgeois culture in which gender and sexuality come to be organized" into separate areas of gender and "sex-object" choice--masculine/feminine, hetero/homosexual (pp. 17, 13, 135). Straub argues that Charke destabilizes her text by toying with many different rôles--masculine/feminine, father/daughter, actress/theater-goer and writer/reader.

However, Charke's descriptions of her courtships as Mr. Brown are ambiguous, multiple rhetorical acts and, as I have shown, may be read as merely one more in a variety of scandalous, criminal, transgressive activities. As when
recounting rumors, Charke equivocates here and, typical of her double style, flirts with the possibility of criminality without ever becoming explicitly criminal. Yet, Charke asserts her femaleness, not a maleness, by refusing the advances of the younger woman; for sexual behavior--not reproductive anatomy--was made the final standard for the assertion of the biological distinction between the sexes and the social distinctions between the genders. Significantly, her interest in the young woman lies in her fortune, not her sexuality, so it is not entirely correct of Straub to suggest "same-sex desire" as her only motivation in this episode (p. 135).

Charke presents herself as both the socially acceptable cross-dressed, female actress, object of the male gaze, and the transgressive "female husband," object of horror. She does not, then, as Straub would argue, "other" herself into the oppositional male/female binary. Her refusal to conform to the emerging trend of female identity, then, makes Charke both subversive and transgressive of cultural norms, but not necessarily lesbian.

Clearly, her rôle as the "almost female husband" can be read as just another one of her male rôles, and as Dekker and Van de Pol point out, women often assumed male attire to gain access to male-gendered activities (pp. 1-2). A number of eighteenth-century female transvestites were classified according to their occupations, such as "female soldiers"
(like Hannah Snell) and "female husbands." The most famous of the eighteenth-century "female husbands" was Mary, alias Charles, Hamilton, who was arrested and tried in 1746 for marrying Mary Price, who claimed in court to have been initially unaware of Hamilton's disguise. According to a contemporary account, Thomas Boddely's Bath Journal, They were bedded as Man and Wife, and lived as such for about a Quarter of a Year, during which time, She, the said Price, thought the Prisoner a Man, owing to the Prisoner's using certain vile and deceitful Practices not fit to be mentioned. (p. 24)

Although her marriage to Mary Price lasted only two months, Hamilton was convicted of fraud and sentenced to six months' hard labor and four public whippings.

Terry Castle also uses Fielding's fictional account of this episode to establish the radical nature of Hamilton's actions as a general challenge to society: "Fielding attacks sartorial ambiguity because sexual hierarchy (and the maintenance of masculine domination) depends upon the sexes being distinguished" (p. 615). Castle argues that, in relation to sexual practices, eighteenth-century female cross-dressing was directly a matter of social governance. Even in respect to sexual deviance, it was the female social rôle, and not lesbian activity alone, that was judicially regulated. According to Lillian Faderman's Surpassing the Love of Men, "In most cases of execution or other punishment for lesbianism, in both history and fiction, the accused was a transvestite" (p. 49). Yet, most women who masqueraded as men
were never charged with a crime. It was not so much lesbian relationships or cross-dressing in and of themselves, but their combination, that was considered extremely serious.

Women were not frequently disciplined, by law or by common practice, for cross-dressing; and, in fact, punishment of any kind seems to have been rare. Thus Faderman's idea---"that most women could not be transvestites with impunity"---does not fit with the English historical record. Only women who ostensibly defrauded other women by marriage were judicially disciplined. Others, including the female soldiers, like Hannah Snell, were rewarded with book contracts, stage shows, and military pensions.

In eighteenth-century England, sexual relations between women, in contrast to those between men, rise into criminality only as a social relation, of which cross-dressing is both a form and an emblem. Despite disapproval of lesbianism, female sexual relations were not judicially regulated in eighteenth-century Britain. The reasons for this lie in the assumption that female sexual pleasure required either a man, a female freak, or a mechanical fraud. It is, thus, the absolute assumption of masculinity that is judicially punished. Hamilton, for example, was convicted of deception--of a successful masculine fraud--and not for any sexual crime per se.

By using legislation against fraud to convict the female husbands, the eighteenth century defined the successful
substitution of a female for a male body as a social mistake. Thus, this defined away the ambiguity of social, sexual rôles and anatomical sex for a certainty at the moment of sexual intercourse, when the all-important penis was or was not present, or was present only as a mechanical device "not fit to be mentioned." Sexual behavior, not reproductive biology, was made the last resort for the reassertion of the anatomical distinction between the sexes and the social distinctions between the genders. Cross-dressing lesbians were singled out for reprehension because they represented the possibility of total social deviance.

Paradoxically, the rigidity and the powerful external markers of the eighteenth-century sexual definition made deception easy. In this externally rigid system, there is a trade in gender markers, so that the system, then, becomes more flexible for disguising gender, as Charke's multiple narrative stances demonstrate. However, not all transvestite activities were necessarily destabilizing impostures; a life like Hannah Snell's implicitly valorized male status and reinforced the active supremacy of men, and did not challenge male supremacy. It was Hamilton's usurpation of a phallus that made her an object of horror. Imitation is permissible; actual performance is not.

To complicate the issue, one has cross-dressing in the other direction, when a man assumes female attire. As in Charke's descriptions of her transvestism, motivations other
than sexual deviancy exist for male-to-female cross-dressing. Much like the occupational uniform of the pastry chef, soldier, and actor, female attire could be assumed by men to make them better suited for female rôles and activities. Male-to-female transvestism could even be seriously undertaken as an instrument of government. One famous example was Edward Hyde, Viscount Cornbury (1661-1723), Governor of New York and New Jersey from 1703 until 1708. Cornbury's cross-dressing is well documented in portraits and contemporary accounts. A first cousin to Queen Anne--whom he was said to have physically resembled--for his appointment he assumed female attire in order, as he said, to better represent the queen. Since the head of state was a woman, Cornbury became the "Vice-regina" rather than the Viceroy, and assumed the sartorial markers of the queen, not a king. He became, then, a manifestation of the queen in the colony, both in law and appearance.

In his later appointments in London, on the Privy Council, however, Cornbury dressed as a man, so that it seems clear that his cross-dressing involved a political rather than a sexual symbolism. In the letter of complaint from the New Jersey Assembly of 1707, he was criticized for his imprisonment for debt and for causing a minor rebellion by the ladies of the colonies, who were angered because his silks and laces were far better than even those of the wealthiest lady. What annoyed or disturbed the colonists was the quality of his
cross-dressing not the fact that their governor dressed as Queen Anne.

Another famous example of male-to-female cross-dressing, or rather double-dressing, is the Chevalier/e D'Eon, whose situation parallels that of the "female husbands." His transvestism was read, like Mary Hamilton's, as transgressive and punishable under law; for he lacked the economic or political "excuse" that made the actions of Cornbury, Snell, and Charke socially permissible. Arrested in 1777 for treason and "misrepresentation," D'Eon's habit of dueling and fencing in skirts in Hyde Park, and the fact that no one could fix his/her sexual identity, was objected to by the London authorities. His sartorial confusion, as well as the uncomfortable mixture of male activities enacted in female attire, were a cause of great consternation. While acquitted of the treason charges, he/she was made to choose "genders," and having chosen was acceptable--whatever the truth beneath the skirts. Even though D'Eon relinquished the opportunities to enact male activities--like fencing and duelling--and chose to live as a woman, the Chevalier/e was most probably a man.

Many critics have fallen into the trap of reading Charke's narrative in a way that mirrors twentieth-century conceptions of gender. There were, however, a wider range of gender markers for the eighteenth century, such as dress, wigs and gestures, so that gender was signaled by external signs that made such transvestism much easier. Unlike modern
conceptions of gender, in which sexual identity is thought to be internally regulated, gender in the eighteenth century was considered regulated by engendered rôles and activities. Clearly, Hannah Snell's impersonation of a soldier involves an economic aspect, reaffirms the structure of the ruling order, and does not challenge convention. Dekker and Van de Pol argue that female transvestite activities in the armed services were often read as a sign of patriotic enthusiasm, a zeal for country so strong that even a woman would wish to fight for her monarch (p. 95). Similarly, Cornbury's cross-dressing can be read as an overzealous "patriotic" act, for it clearly involves a political symbolism. However, sexual and sartorial confusion, as well as the usurpation or abdication of the phallus, were not tolerated during the eighteenth century, hence the severe punishment of D'Eon and Hamilton.

Charke's cross-dressing, then, is not as subversive as many critics have argued. While considered eccentric and odd, the episodes she describes in The Narrative flirt with the criminal, yet are more often than not socially tolerated forms of transvestism. Her descriptions seem to emphasize the economic motivations behind her cross-dressing, as well as her need for access to opportunities for financial independence only allowed men. Moreover, her descriptions are often in reaction to her father's neglect and are related to the reader as a way of punishing Cibber's indifference. Charke's transgressions in dress are not sexually subversive; however,
her transgressions in print serve to subvert the patriarchal authority of her father.

The very writing of her life becomes a complex effort at holding her father up for ransom in an act of filial blackmail. The reading public follows her narrative installments and, together with Charke, await her father's response to her demands for reconciliation. In the central scene of the text, Cibber ignores his daughter's demands for "re/patriation" and returns her letter of supplication unread. Yet, in the wait from week to week, Charke textualizes life itself. Charke's self-definition and life are intertwined in print. The narrative is confused precisely because she is confused; and, as in life, the outcome is not decided at the time of writing. The text incorporates a variety of rôles--a seemingly uncontainable cacophony of voices--into a contained and sustained attack on her father's reputation and authority. Her multiple rhetorical positions are contained within the confines of her text, which are, indeed, those of her life.

Charke also positions herself, as far as she can, into a winning position. If her father responds generously, and agrees to allow Charke back into the family, her financial troubles are over. If not, his actions can be incorporated into the text and earn her public financial support. At the same time she positions her father into a no-win position. If he responds generously he implicitly acknowledges her desert; if not he reveals the truth of her narrative accusations of
cruelty and neglect. Writing the autobiography affects a fishslap in her father's face.

Charke's final transgression is her writing this book as a woman. She identifies herself as a female author who acknowledges the disadvantages of female authorship: "as the following History is the Product of the Female Pen, I tremble for the terrible Hazard it must run in venturing into the World, as it may very possibly suffer in many Opinions, without perusing it" (p. 11). Talking about the fate of female works, she alludes to the more general fate of females. For a woman (as for their work), "venturing into the world" is necessarily a "terrible hazard" because it is unconventional, improper, perhaps even illicit; yet she pleads for special consideration: "I humbly move for its having the common Chance of a Criminal, at least to be properly examin'd, before it is condemn'd" (p. 11). Charke, by vaguely using the word "it," forces the association between her text--and therefore the female--and a criminal, the transgressor who, acting out of the ordinary, defies cultural codes. In writing about the hazards of female authorship, she elides the life of the text and female life. Therefore, if the autobiography had been penned as the exploits of, say, "Charles" Charke, a criminal who led a tough life, then it would not have had the same impact.

Unable to speak directly with her father, who refuses to acknowledge her claims on his love and financial support,
Charke turns to print as the medium through which to achieve reconciliation and to affect a reprieve from her reputation as undutiful. In doing so, however, she emerges as a freak, an eccentric; and it is the multiplicity of her voices, jobs, genders, and activities that reveal disturbing levels of social and personal status, as well as sexual instability.

Transvestism, however, should not be the only act one considers when examining transgressions of gender: each act must be read in different registers. Class, power, wealth, position, and how they are deployed all add to a variety in the transgressive mode. In some sense, the acceptability of cross-dressers depends upon many factors. There are, after all, licensed moments for transgression in all cultures, even ours. One has only to visit New Orleans to see modern culture's "Mardi Gras" of reversal, where not to be cross-dressing or even double-dressing, either sexually, racially, or culturally, is to break convention.³⁰

Moreover, it was not uncommon for women in the eighteenth-century to assume men's rôles, and their transgression is often more economic than sexual. One clearly sees this in Charke: her cross-dressing often manifests itself as a type of occupational uniform. What is unacceptable is the usurpation of a phallus, as by Hamilton, or the constant sexual inconstancy of a D'Eon.

In her Narrative, Charke reveals a world in which carnivalization and masquerade are not seasonable or
containable but constant; and it reveals the marks of gender and occupation as fluid and interchangeable, enabling a life of deception and instability. This instability is the narrative principle of her text--which is her most sustained and multiple act of all--dreams of access to a wide range of social and textual boundaries. Finally, however, Charke's actual physical cross-dressing, although significant, is not her only or most important transgression. Perhaps it is not so much her assumption of male attires that threaten, but her female assumption of the pen to tell a tale that castigates the father and reveals the possibilities for female acquisition of power. It is Charke the woman not Charke the man/woman who ultimately challenges her society.
Notes


2. See Leonard R. N. Ashley, pp. vii-viii, xxiii-xvii; Fidelis Morgan, ed., The Well-Known Troublemaker: The Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke (London: Faber and Faber, 1988). Morgan's version of the narrative, while interesting and thoughtful, is a bit academically suspect. Morgan is an actress with a keen interest in the Restoration stage, not a professional scholar. She follows each portion of Charke's narrative with an account that purports to tell what really happened. Many of her conclusions are speculative and not based upon any sort of historical fact.


6. I discuss the socio-economic and political motivations for female cross-dressing at length later in the paper, particularly in my examinations of the work of Felicity Nussbaum and Sidonie Smith.

7. See Straub, pp. 140-42.

8. During the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the criminal narrative became an important popular literary form, and crime became a significant subject both on stage

9. Nicholas Rowe claims in his prologue to *The Fair Penitent* (1703) that he was the first to present serious drama concerned with affairs other than the state or empire, the so-called domestic tragedy. Charke seems to draw upon this notion of domestic tragedy in places, especially when using the voice of the penitent daughter. Obviously, Charke would have known Rowe's plays from her days on stage, since they were very popular and often revived. In fact, Charke quotes from Rowe's *Jane Shore* in her *Narrative*, pp. 58-61, and seems to forge a connection at points between her situation and this heroine's.

10. The figure of Nemesis comes from Greek mythology, and is defined by *Webster's New World Dictionary* as "the goddess of retributive justice, or vengeance," and interestingly, "anyone or anything by which, it seems, one must inevitably be defeated or frustrated" (p. 980).


14. For a more complete discussion of the fop and the sartorial markers of a fop, see Straub, p. 58.

15. Straub suggests that Cibber colluded with this public perception and exploited it to further his interests. She also, interestingly, points out that Cibber is one of the first stage stars, a star system that reached its zenith in David Garrick. Straub speculates that public perception and interest in the private life of the star were important to filling the house.


19. Port cities were notorious for rampant prostitution, and two unmarried, cohabiting women would have been suspect. Charke makes this explicit in her narrative, pp. 228-31.


21. Cross-dressing was considered a felony for men, but a larceny for women under English law. See Garber, p. 9 and Bullough, p. 60.


23. Charke knew the printer Thomas Boddely quite well; she mentions him in *The Narrative*, p. 247.

24. Dekker and Van de Pol note that there was no punishment assigned for female transvestism in the legal literature they examined, pp. 48, 73-80.

25. Faderman, p. 49.


27. Sexual relations between men is an altogether different issue. See Trumbach, pp. 129-31; Garber, pp. 130-31.

28. For a more detailed discussion of Lord Cornbury, see Garber, pp. 52-53; Bullough, pp. 132-33.

29. D'Eon has been the focus of much recent critical attention, even becoming the coverboy/girl for the March 1993 issue of *PMLA*. See also Bullough, pp. 126-32; Garber,
30. Dekker and Van de Pol note the tolerance of female transvestism at festivals, masked balls, and carnivals. See, pp. 76-77. For more on attitudes towards sartorial ambiguity during the carnival and the importance not only of transvestism, but also cross-cultural cross-dressing, see Terry Castle's *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnivalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction*, (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 22, 46-47, 63-64, 73-74.
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