

Priya Shah

The World is a Stage: Theatricality, Conventionalitiy, and the Role-Playing of Charlotte Charke

Key Terms:

- Theatricality
- Restoration
- Breeches Part
- Conventionality
- Typecasting
- Dichotomy

Author



Priya Shah

Priya Shah was particularly intrigued with the study of Charlotte Charke because of this woman's unique nature and experiences. Priya advises students to only commit to a project that they feel passionately about. Passion for a subject is an integral part of any type of research. It is that passion that will motivate an undergraduate to see the project all the way through to completion; it is that passion that will make one's work rewarding. ◇

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Abstract

Eighteenth-century British actress Charlotte Charke was notorious for her cross-dressing on- and off-stage. A common theme found in research done on Charke is the theatricality inherent in her life. Theatricality is a heightened concern for representing the elements of theatre, such as performance, acting, and the dramatic, both on the stage and in other contexts. The roles Charke undertakes support her theatricality and also unearth Charke's conflicted relationship with conventionality. Firstly, along with dramatic roles, Charke played many real life male occupational roles, all retold in *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke*. Although motivations for the taking of each role differ, the underlying motivation of theatricality always exists. Secondly, there are the stage roles Charke debuted. The existence of typecasting allows for strong assumptions regarding her audience-perceived identity; it is apparent that by 1736, her audience considered Charke an irrevocably unconventional woman. In writing the *Narrative*, Charke interprets the role of author as that of playwright and reconciles the dichotomy between her untraditional life and the conventional persona she seeks to forward to her readers by emphasizing the theatricality in her transgressions. ◇

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Faculty Mentor

Charlotte Charke, the cross-dressing daughter of Colley Cibber, Poet Laureate of England and enemy of the preeminent 18th century English poet Alexander Pope, wrote this autobiography after her father disowned her, and she made her precarious living as a strolling actress in the provinces. Priya Shah began this study by working along with me as I dealt with problems connected with my editing, annotating, and introducing an edition of Charke's *Narrative* (1755). While not a laboratory, the course she took with me functioned as a workshop and introduced her to the sorts of problems scholars in the Humanities face and how they solve them. Priya's poster presentation and her later delivery of her essay, both through UROP,

were of great value in establishing and confirming her interest in going on with this kind of work as a career. ♦



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Introduction

The Restoration brought with it the return of the king and of the stage. In 1660, King Charles II called for the reinstatement of theatres and acting companies in England and proclaimed that female roles must be played by women. This warrant marked the advent of women in the theatre; in the past, only boys had played female roles. John Wilson, in his book, *All the King's Ladies*, about Restoration actresses discusses the interdependence between elements of the theatre (the actresses, playwrights, and audience) and asserts that "in the small, intimate theatrical world, it was difficult for an audience to separate the stage character of an actress from her real character" (Wilson 1958). Directors kept in mind the real-world persona of an actress when casting, for if a role blatantly contradicted the commonly held perception of that persona, the audience would not be able to take the character seriously. It follows that an examination of the roles an actress was chosen to play allows insight into her perceived identity.

Keeping this concept in mind, we come to Charlotte Charke, an actress of the 18th century who wrote her autobiography, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke, daughter of Colly Cibber*, in 1755. Much of the research done on this text has focused on Charke's consistent cross-dressing both on and off the stage. Charke played a number of male roles and breeches parts, roles in which a "male" character was played by a woman. In addition, Charke often dressed like a man off-stage; in this lies much of the fascination with her life.

Although analyses differ, some like Kristina Straub's feminist reading of Charke, and some like Erin Mackie's emphasis on Charke's conventionality, a common thread that runs through each is that of the theatricality inherent in Charke's life both on- and off-stage. Theatricality is a heightened concern for representing the elements of theatre, such as performance, acting, and the dramatic, both on the stage and in other contexts. This theatrical dimension is supported by examination of the various kinds of roles that Charke undertakes; this dimension also unearths Charke's conflicted relationship with conventionality. Firstly, along with dramatic roles, Charke also played a number of occupational roles, such as physician in her youth, and grocer and waiter later in her life, all retold in the *Narrative*. The underlying motivation behind Charke's casting of herself in these roles is

Secondly, Wilson's establishment of a relationship between the character of any actress and her stage roles uncovers the existence of typecasting. Although we cannot fully establish the extent to which a specific character is related to Charke, typecasting allows for strong assumptions regarding her identity, as perceived by her audience. Two plays by George Lillo, *The London Merchant* and *The Fatal Curiosity*, contain roles that Charke debuted. This paper examines the roles of Lucy and Agnes, respectively, rather than Charke's other roles, because of the closer relationship produced by the fact that she originated these characters. The difference between the roles (Charke played Lucy in 1731 and Agnes in 1736) marks a negative shift in audience reception towards Charke's unconventional nature.

Finally, the *Narrative* is approached as a story of on- and off-stage performances, told by the author Charke. Charke interprets the position of author as playwright and turns her life into a series of performances, the ultimate evidence for the theatricality present in the many roles of the actress. However, it is not enough to say that Charke's role-playing is motivated simply by a pleasure and skill in theatricality. Charke takes on the role of playwright in order to reconcile the dichotomy between her transgressive actions and the conventional persona she seeks to forward in the *Narrative*. This reconciliation is achieved in the autobiography through Charke's emphasis on the dramatic nature of her unconventional life.

Occupational Roles

Performance is not a phenomenon confined to the stage; it is often played out in reality. Charlotte Charke, as she recounts in the *Narrative*, is an actress who practices her craft off-stage as well as on. It is often the case that scholars of Charke refer to her in pathological terms, ascribe her male roles to the intention of asserting an abnormal masculinity, or deem her the celebrated example of early lesbian subjectivity. In order to relieve Charke of potentially unjust impositions of modern thematics, it is essential that we notice what she presents as the motives behind her various assumed roles.

One of her childhood roles is that of physician. She cultivates a fondness "of the Study of Physick" when she is sent to

fundamentally theatrical, and the manner in which she approaches each role is like that of an actress approaching a dramatic challenge.

live with a doctor uncle (Charke 1930). The Doctor entrusts Charke, the character, to help him with the care of his patients, an act that begins to weaken the claim made by some scholars that Charke was unsuccessful at what she pursued. When given the "Opportunity of fancying [herself] a Physician," Charke's tendency toward theatricality asserts itself

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(Charke 1930). Charke is concerned with representing each character in its epitome, and she displays a sense for the nuances of behavior so much so that she is able to affect the demeanor of a physician such that "some of the weaker Sort of People" were "persuaded into as high an Opinion of [her] Skill as [her] Cousin's" (Charke 1930). The writer Charke again cites a play character, this time Leander in *The Mock Doctor*, when relating her story, asking the reader to draw a comparison between the character on-stage and her youthful character on her own "stage." She says that like Leander, she is of the opinion that by learning the jargon of the occupation she seeks to represent, she will create a more believable character. She accomplishes this by learning fragments of Latin medical phrases, which "served to confound their Senses, and bring [her audience] into a high Opinion of [her] Skill in the medicinal Science" (Charke 1930). Charke's perception that she is playing a role is clear by her efforts to affect such a close representation of what she considers a true doctor.

Charke's motivation for pursuing the role of physician is more complicated than a simple desire to abate boredom. Although she does mention that it was an "Expedient for [her] Amusement," she emphasizes the gratification she received from the charitable aspect of the experience. Even as she writes the story, she finds "Happiness" in the "pleasing Reflection of not having, through Inexperience, done any Harm by my Applications, I thank the Great Creator for, who (notwithstanding my extream Desire of being distinguished as an able Proficient), knew my Design was equally founded on a charitable Inclination" (Charke 1930). Thus, along with a desire to amuse herself, she takes on the role of physician to help others in a way she could not have accomplished by carrying out traditional domestic duties; she is able to cultivate her theatrical skills by striving to portray a distinguished doctor.

Charke's occupational role-playing continues into her adulthood. One such adventure is her stint as a Grocer-woman. It is easy to assume that Charke took to this for economic reasons. However, Charke does not mention an economic motive in her decision, indeed that it is not so much a decision as a "new Whim." She felt; "[she] took it into [her] Head to dive into Trade" (Charke 1930). The motive that she does not mention explicitly, but one that is suggested by her language, is theatricality. Once again, by taking on this role, Charke is able to exercise her acting

The dramatic aspect of Charke's project is apparent, as it is in the previous example of the physician. She remarks that her friends came out to see her "mercantile Face; which carried in it as conceited an Air of Trade as it had before in Physick" (Charke 1930). The idea of putting on a face is integral to the theater, and this relationship is firmly established by Charke's conscious imitation of the appearance and persona of a true tradeswoman. Just like any good actress, Charke researches the realistic behavior and concerns of whom she is attempting to play. She actively begins reading trade papers to familiarize herself with the concerns of tradesmen. As usual, Charke does not settle for playing a mediocre version of her given role; although her "Stock perhaps did not exceed ten or a dozen Pounds at a Time," she put on the air of one who "had the whole Lading of a Ship in [her] Shop" (Charke 1930). She asserts the dramatic nature of her new occupation by being her own critic. Reviewing her antics from the perspective of a number of years hence, Charke calls her performance a "ridiculous Scene," and a "Farce" (Charke 1930). Charke's endeavor is ultimately an economic failure because she begins to stray from the character of a true grocer. Her most vital mistake is misreading the nature of the thief who stole her brass weights. However, it should be pointed out that although he was the ultimate cause of her ruin, Charke admires the boy's mastery of his given art, albeit that art is thievery. After all, she, like the boy, is engaging in the pursuit of an art; in her case, it is the art of theater.

The final occupational role examined is chosen because it is one in which Charke engages in cross-dressing. Charke obtains the position of waiter at Mrs. Dorr's King's Head Inn under the guise of a young man. The obvious motivation for taking this role is to obtain a means of "daily Bread" for herself and her child (Charke 1930). She is aided in finding this position by a friend of hers whom she tells that "there was nothing, which did not exceed the Bounds of Honesty that I should think unworthy of my undertaking" (Charke 1930). This statement serves to show Charke's determination to survive despite economic hardship, and it is a means for Charke to reaffirm that her life follows the commandments of conventionality, an affirmation that she strives to get across through her autobiography. Her reason for taking the position as a male seems to be

skills, especially since she is not able to express them on the stage at this point.

two-fold. Firstly, as a man more positions of a physical nature are open to her. Secondly, she is protected from the aggravated "Impertinence" of the "lower class of People" who would harass a female waiter more than a male counterpart (Charke 1930).

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Again, although Charke's obvious motivation to take this role is a monetary one, she approaches the position of waiter as a dramatic challenge. Initially, her guise as "a young Gentleman of decay'd Fortune" is successful, for neither her benefactor's husband nor Mrs. Dorr suspects her identity. Indeed she "was the first Waiter that was ever permitted to sit a Table with her" because "she thought [Charke's] Behaviour gave her Claim to that Respect" (Charke 1930). She even goes on to win over the foreign guests of the inn with her various language proficiencies. Thus, there is another example to show that Charke was once again successful in her off-stage pursuits, and played her role to its epitome.

The motivations of amusement, charity, and economic durability have presented themselves through Charke's retelling of her various adventures. However, one aspect binds all three roles together, that of the dramatic. Charke approaches each occupation as a role for her to play. Charke's skill is that of acting. She is brought up in a theatrical family, and as a very young woman she is introduced to the stage.

The role of physician, as we have seen, is Charke's attempt to escape solitude. As a young girl there are not many options to abate boredom, and so Charke is pressed to create her own. Her procurement of male roles is not surprising since she has a contempt for ordinary domestic duties. Charke offers a justification for the roles she takes on, both in childhood and later on. She describes a process of education different from, and more valuable than, that gained by the exercising of housewifely duties. She asserts it is "certain that [Learning's] greatest advantages are to be infinitely improved by launching into the World, and becoming acquainted with the different Places and Objects we go thro' and meet in travelling. The Observation to be made, by that Means, refine the Understanding and improve the Judgment, as something is to be gathered from the various Dispositions of people in the highest and lowest Stations of life" (Charke 1930). Charke uses her acting skills to achieve this extraordinary education. By emulating the prototype physician, Charke is able to amass new experiences although physically she is confined by conventionality. She is able to out-step the bounds of a traditional and limited childhood by acting the roles she is unable to validly pursue.

Fidelis Morgan, referring to the role of gardener that the young Charke took on, asserts that "her chief purpose in telling

reputation as an actress, rather than the motivation arrived in this argument of Charke using her acting ability to achieve what is otherwise kept from her, whether it be a worldly education or the reputation of decency that is denied her (a point that will be made authoritatively below).

As an adult, her acting skills allow her to continue her special education and perhaps more importantly, survive both economically and emotionally. Morgan points out that for Charke to take a job as chambermaid would be "an inescapable admission of failure (if only to herself); if she dressed as a man and took the job as a valet de chambre it was a triumph of her art" (Morgan 1988). As we have seen, Charke places a great value on her ability to act a character to its fullest depths. She values artistry so much so that she praises the artistry of the thief even when it is to her own disadvantage. It seems only natural that when Charke could no longer pursue her art upon the stage, she would find a way not only to continue exercising her skills, but also, to use them to earn a living. Approaching the world from a dramatic perspective allows Charke to survive economically and emotionally as well as to further heighten her knowledge of the world through new experiences.

Dramatic Roles

Indeed, by stressing the theatricality inherent in her attitude towards the roles of physician, grocer, and waiter, Charke is able to play off the unconventionality of her creating and taking such positions. In writing the *Narrative*, Charke is well aware that the common attitude towards her was of one of disdain and shock. In her prologue, Charke recognizes that she could not be matched "in Oddity of Fame," and compares herself with the wild entertainer George Alexander Stevens, whom she calls the "Knight-Errant of the Moon" (Charke 1930). Charke writes that she and Stevens, "are, without exception, two of the greatest curiosities that ever were the incentive to the most profound astonishment" (Charke 1930). It is clear that Charke knows she is perceived as untraditional, and perhaps rather dangerous in her unconventionality. This knowledge can be accessed by examining the implications of two roles that Charke debuted at different times in her life.

When, in June of 1731, Charlotte Charke created the role of Lucy in George Lillo's *The London Merchant*, she was 18 and

these stories is to enhance the theatricality of the world she created, alone, in her childhood" (Morgan 1988). Morgan goes on to show that in the role of gardener, Charke "never leaves us in any doubt that she is role-playing" (Morgan 1988). These assertions imply that Charke's motive was an advancement of her

had been acting at the Theatre-Royal in Drury Lane for little over a year. Besides knowledge of Charke as an actress, her audience was aware that she was the daughter of Poet Laureate Colly Cibber. Cibber was notorious for his "parsimonious attitudes towards his wife and children," a fact that "was a recur

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rent theme in the press" (Morgan 1988). In addition, in 1730, Charlotte had married Richard Charke, a musician and actor in Cibber's company. Charke turned out to be a philanderer, and the couple was separated by the time of their daughter's birth in November of 1730. This is the basic information the typical, informed play-goer likely possessed as he sat down in the Theatre-Royal in Drury Lane to watch Charke debut the role of Lucy on June 22, 1731.

Charke was 23 when she opened a third role, Agnes, in Lillo's *The Fatal Curiosity* on May 25, 1736 at Fielding's Haymarket Theatre. In the five years that had past between her debuts of Lucy and Agnes, Charke had played over 40 parts. An analysis and subsequent comparison of the two roles, Lucy and Agnes, (if we respect the degree of typecasting at the time), show that the audience's perception of Charke changed in the five years between the two originations. Both Lucy and Agnes are unconventional women, but in differing degrees. Lucy, as a character, called for an actress who had not completely over-stepped the boundaries of conventionality. On the other hand, Agnes is a character who could be given to an actress who displayed unforgivable travesties of convention.

The role of Lucy was designed to support and exaggerate the anti-heroine Millwood, an ardent man-hater. While Lucy was sympathetic to the views of her mistress, she acted as a questioning and moralizing presence in both Millwood's household and the play, and although she questioned Millwood's actions, she was also her accomplice. Lucy's morality grows throughout the play from a sense of sympathy with the "youth and innocence" of Barnwell, to a complete moral clarity about the wickedness of Millwood's scheme to have Barnwell kill his uncle for money (Lillo 1966). This clarity is evident in her comment to a fellow servant emphasizing the need for them to confess Millwood's plot.

Lucy's betrayal of Millwood, done without "interest, malice, or revenge," was the beginning of her religious reformation from the wicked life she led with her mistress (Lillo 1966). However, at Millwood's execution, it is clear that Lucy could still understand her mistress' justifications for manipulating Barnwell; she was intensely moved by Millwood's "anguish and despair" (Lillo 1966).

There are some obvious parallels between Charke and the character Lucy. Most simply, both Charke and Lucy are young and poor.

Like Lucy, Charke seemed to have economic and emotional reasons for wanting to take advantage of a man's world. Yet like the character, she had not really gone to such extremes in her desire for advantage as to blatantly defy conventions. It is possible that her audience knew something of Charke's early capers because of her famous father. Adventures, such as her stint as "Dr. Charke," can be rationalized as the silliness of a young girl, in the same way that Lucy's role as Millwood's accomplice is forgiven in the play with the rationalization that it was an act of ignorance (Charke 1930). Lucy and Charke are smart women who were accepted so long as they were wise enough to comprehend the impropriety of their transgressive actions. At the time of this play, it seems that Charke's audience perceived her as a woman that had the experience and common sense to play a character like Lucy. Their acceptance of Charke as Lucy also suggests that they saw her as a woman who, while having transgressed feminine domains as a child, would never stray so far from conventionality that she would be more fit to play a character like Millwood.

Looking back on the role while writing her autobiography, Charke counts her origination of Lucy among her theatrical successes. Indeed, "the Success that [she] had in that Part raised [her] from Twenty to Thirty Shillings per week" (Charke 1930). More importantly, the complimentary reception she received from her audience influenced Charke to "make Acting [her] Business as well as [her] Pleasure" (Charke 1930). Charke's perception of the play as a success is echoed by Trudy Drucker in an introduction to a compilation of Lillo's plays. This level of success supports the argument that Charke's audience conceived her to be an appropriate actress for the part of Lucy. This conception rests on the supposition that she was a competent actress, and on the suitability of her off-stage persona for the on-stage character. In the acknowledgement of audience approval, Charke must have also been wary to this perceived propriety. As we have witnessed in the text of the *Narrative*, Charke's relationship with conventionality is complicated and equivocal. In as much as she seems to be asserting her conventionality in the whole of the *Narrative*, she is obviously aware that the very unconventionality of her life is the foundation animating her story.

This comparison, of course, does not suggest that Charke was cast for this reason only. She was, after all, an actress and thus played numerous roles that did not reflect her actual age and economic status, but did reflect her versatile acting ability. However, it was known that Charke had both a selfish, ungenerous father, and a no-good husband. It is not a stretch for the audience to imagine that Charke might have perceived men as the "other" as do both Millwood and Lucy. The premise can be established that her audience accepted Charke in the role of Lucy for her familiar family situation.

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In the audience's acceptance of Charke as Lucy lies a warning to the actress of just what degree of movement is allowed outside of normal female domains. Lucy is redeemed of her "wicked," feminist ways when she accepts religion as her savior, and betrays Millwood in the name of morality. Charke does not mention religion in her *Narrative*, but another ideological force takes religion's authoritative role, that of conventionality. Charke's plea for her readers to accept her attempt to "justify [rather] than condemn" her past is indicative of her belief that this past is needy of rationalization, that it is abnormal, and therefore, "guilty until proven innocent" (Charke 1930). The implication is that she must accept and display conventionality and its dictates to be reformed of her past sins.

Agnes, the role that Charke would play five years later, is of a different variety than Lucy. She is an older woman who is described as "gloomy, proud, / Impatient," and again, along with her husband, as the "hoary, helpless, miserable pair" (Lillo 1979). Although thrust into poverty, the haughty Agnes maintains her old values, which only serve to make her situation more difficult. The most significant of Agnes' traits is her will to live. On numerous occasions she articulates her disgust of suicide as an alternative to suffering. In her perspective "death is the worst / That fate can bring, and cuts off ev'ry hope" (Lillo 1979). Agnes later displays a sense of despair when she complains that she and her husband are "The last and most abandon'd of [their] kind, / By heaven and earth neglected and despis'd, / The loathsome grave that robb'd [them] of [their] son... must be [their] refuge" (Lillo 1979). Here Agnes reveals her belief in the continued membership within a certain socio-economic class, her disbelief in the healing power of heaven and her decision that only she can help herself, and her repugnance of death, the irony being that only in the grave will she be relieved from her suffering.

When Agnes finds jewels in a chest entrusted to her by a stranger, she decides to kill him in order to keep the fortune. Once again, her main motivation is the preservation of her life, so much so that she considers the murder of a stranger a "crime much less" than "detested suicide" (Lillo 1979). Agnes' courage and determination are shown in her willingness to commit the murder herself when her husband falters. Arguably, the ultimate evidence for Agnes' valuation of life is her decision to take her own when she realizes that the murdered stranger is her son.

versatile actress and as such was able to play varying roles. However, Charke mentions her debut in the *Narrative* with the note that she and the actor playing her husband "were kindly received by the audience" (Charke 1930). The important role that audience acceptance had on the success of a play must not be ignored; for this reason the qualities that appropriated Charke to the role of Agnes are explored.

Like Agnes, Charke had been gradually thrust into increasingly dire straits. Although she was a well-received and hard-working actress, she never made much more than the 30 shillings promotion she received after her debut as Lucy (Charke 1969). Even Cibber denied her any financial support. Charke, in her mention of *The Fatal Curiosity* remarks that Agnes' fall was due to her "unbounded Pride" (Charke 1930). Ironically, even though Charke was able to perceive this flaw in Agnes, she was blind to this quality in herself. Although she was never a leading actress of a playhouse, she seems to have taken with her a sense of confidence and experience wherever she went. This is evident in her numerous quarrels with the Drury Lane company. Another trait associated with Charke was her intense will to survive in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. She was well-chosen to play Agnes in this respect, for Charke had the tenacity to continue devising ways to support her family, in spite of problems on-and off-stage.

What is the commentary being made on Charke by her audience? Agnes' drive to survive at any cost is the "flaw" that ultimately leads her to murder and her own quasi-suicide. In her effort to survive, Agnes rejects religion and turns to herself. As we have seen in the case of *The London Merchant*, religion can be applied to Charke's case through the concept of conventionality; Charke, rejecting the world that hinders her survival, takes the responsibility of her life into her own hands.

When she played Lucy, Charke was still perceived as being traditional enough to warrant audience approval. However, Agnes does not get the chance to reform. Just as the character of Lucy was an appeal to bear in mind the limits of a woman's conventional role, Agnes is a reminder that crossing these limits is suicide, both socially and professionally. In the end, Agnes, by virtue of her flaws, is the only one responsible for starting the machinery leading to her own death. In this dramatic theme there is a place for

Charke was still a young 23 when she opened as Agnes at the Haymarket, but clearly the placement of her in the role of Agnes resulted from a different analysis of persona than did her being cast as Lucy. Of course, it is again tempting to argue that Charke was simply a

Charke. Her drive to survive in a man's world leads her to act unconventionally (in her thinking, cross-dressing, and taking of male occupations) off-stage in order to make a living. However, she is persecuted by her father, by the patent theatres, and by her society. She is then forced to assert, in the *Narrative*, the characteristic of normality that, if really put to practice, would have failed to serve her survival.

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Resolution

The two roles that were examined, Lucy and Agnes, represent only a small period in Charke's life. Owing to her reputation as haughty and odd, and her past conflicts with the Drury Lane Company, Charke found herself promptly out of work after the Licensing Act of 1737. By the time that Charke sat down to write the *Narrative*, she had been remarried, re-widowed, played a man in an attempt to trick a heiress out of her money, spent the night in prison, and traveled around England as Mr. Brown with a Mrs. Brown, among other things. When Charke picked up her pen in 1755, the writing of her autobiography was to both ensure her economic survival and to allow her the off-stage role of playwright.

To say that Charke's role-playing was motivated only by a pleasure and skill in theatricality is overly simplified. Examination of the various off-stage roles played by Charke comes from the single source of Charke's autobiography. This is not an objective, factual representation of Charke's life, rather it is colored by the personality it seeks to display. Charke had a number of motivations for writing the *Narrative*, a considerable number stemming from the negative perception her audience had of her.

As we have seen through analysis of Charke's occupational and dramatic roles, the actress had an assorted past with conventionality. The dichotomy between Charke's claims of conventionality and the obvious examples of her distinctly untraditional life surfaces by the second page of the *Narrative*. In defense of her text she certifies that she has "paid all due Regards to Decency" and has been careful that her work will not be "fulsomenly inflaming the Minds of [her] young Readers, or shamefully offending those of riper Years" (Charke 1930). Another argument offered for the acceptance of her autobiography is that "there is nothing inserted but what may daily happen to every Mortal breathing" (Charke 1930). Yet, in a subsequent paragraph, Charke reiterates her promise "to give some Account of [her] UNACCOUNTABLE LIFE," and asserts that an audience familiar with her history, "if Oddity can plead any Right to Surprise and Astonishment," will award her the "Title to be shewn among the Wonders of Ages past, and those to come" (Charke 1930). In the space of one passage we

Just as theatricality is a common thread running through the varied roles of Charke, the dichotomy concerning conventionality is itself a thread running through this same thematic. In the case of Charke's off-stage roles, conventional education offered to young women is a barrier to the special worldly education that Charke advocates. The conventional domestic roles of women are a hindrance to Charke's survival, and indeed, Charke celebrates her ability to succeed (to various degrees) in the unconventional roles she pursues. However, at the same time, there is the constant reminder in Charke's *Narrative* that her transgressions from the social norm are errors, but not unforgivable crimes. The dichotomy also arises in the discussion of Charke's dramatic roles. In the five years between Charke's originations of Lucy and Agnes, the actress was perceived by her audience as increasingly unconventional and thus decreasingly acceptable. This negative perception is due to Charke's intense determination to survive, a quality that makes her life the unique and "unaccountable" one it is. Nevertheless, she gives way to social pressures in condemning many of the unconventional acts that kept her alive and by asking her audience (this time her reading audience) for their pardon.

This dichotomy is resolved in the *Narrative* by the use of theatricality. Indeed, by stressing the theatricality inherent in her attitude towards the roles of physician, grocer, waiter, etc., Charke is able to play off the unconventionality of her creating or taking such positions. When Charke vows to give an account of her life, she does so in order to advance her reception by her readers as one "who has used her utmost Endeavors to entertain 'em" (Charke 1930). She presents herself, from the beginning of her autobiography as a sort of playwright, seeking to entertain her audience; her text becomes a script, and her stories are now visualized as performances. The very epigraph of the book is a quotation from John Gay's *The What d'ye Call It* that claims "This Tragic Story, or this Comic Jest / May make you laugh, or cry ♦ As you like best" (Charke 1930).

On-stage, transgression of traditional female roles was allowed through the dramatic component of the breeches part. Breeches were not reserved for boyish or asexual characters; rather, many actresses in breeches played leading masculine

begin to understand the complexities that abound in Charke's perception of conventionality. At the same time that she presents her autobiography as evidence of normality and decency, she admits that the material of this normal, decent text is the story of her anomalous life.

roles. The acceptance and even celebration of breeches roles seems paradoxical in a culture that fixed upon its women such rigid domains of movement within the society. The answer is simple and lies in the implications of theatricality. The theater is a place where reality might be mimicked, but indeed will never be synonymous with reality itself, for ultimately it is an art. As an art, the theater, drama, and its actors and actresses are distinguished from

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"real" humans and "real" human events. The stage is a safe place where experiments in human dynamics can be played out with the security that they will not transform into realistic events.

By presenting her life as a series of performances, Charke as playwright is consciously taking advantage of the acceptability of the breeches role. In each narrative episode, Charke emphasizes the theatricality of her actions and motivations. Often, as we have seen, these actions are atypical and encroach upon the domain of exclusively masculine pursuits. If they are presented to the reading audience as performances, however, Charke becomes an exceptional actress rather than a threatening social transgressor. At least, this is how Charke wishes her story to be interpreted. It is clear that she wishes to redeem herself within the eyes of readers, but more importantly, within those of her father. For Charke to approach the writing of her autobiography as a playwright and create it into a script is especially shrewd. The readers are transformed into an audience willing to accept a female playing male "parts" within the context of theatricality, and Charke exploits Cibber's passion for theater by enveloping her apology in a medium towards which he will be more receptive.

Unfortunately, Charke's clever tactic failed in its attempt to placate Cibber. When he died in 1757, he left his youngest daughter an insulting five pounds. In fact, it is rather doubtful that Cibber even read Charke's autobiography. As for the reception by her reading audience, the *Narrative* sold well and reached two editions by the end of the year (Morgan 1988). It could be concluded that in her role as playwright she was modestly successful. The growth of modern scholarly interest in the *Narrative* establishes a certain degree of success. Posthumous achievement aside, however, Charke was able to secure neither the economic security she needed nor the societal pardon she sought. Arguably, the reason that she failed in this endeavor is similar to the cause of her failure in the role of grocer. She did not play the part correctly; the gap that persisted between Charke the author and Charke the playwright allowed her readers to see the manner in which she sought to reconcile her unconventionality. Or perhaps, she failed because the essential aspect of actress-character cohesion was missing. Her readers might have been so accustomed to the perception of Charke as irrevocably transgressive that they could not conflate their understanding of Charke with the

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portrayal in the *Narrative* of her as "penitent prodigal daughter" (DeRitter 1994).

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