



## Charke, Charlotte (1713-1760)

by Linda Rapp

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Actress and writer Charlotte Charke was known for portraying male characters on stage and for cross-dressing in private life. Born in 1713, she was the eleventh and youngest child of Colley Cibber, an actor and manager of London's Drury Lane Theatre who became poet laureate of England and the target of Alexander Pope's satire in *The Dunciad*.



© 1755 Charlotte Charke.  
An engraving of  
Charlotte Charke from  
the frontispiece of her  
autobiography (1755).

Charke early became estranged from her father due in part to her eccentric behavior and in part to the machinations of her oldest sister, Catherine Brown.

Without support from her family, Charke had to live by her wits. She gave an "account of my unaccountable life" in her autobiography, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke* (1755).

In the *Narrative* Charke states that her education was "sufficient for a Son instead of a Daughter." Her memories of her childhood escapades reveal her to have been a free and adventurous spirit, engaging in some activities "inconsistent with the Character of a young Gentlewoman." She spoke with pride of her proficiency at shooting.

In February 1730, seventeen-year-old Charlotte Cibber married Richard Charke, a composer and dancing master at the Drury Lane Theatre. On April 8 she made her stage debut in Sir John Vanbrugh's *The Provok'd Wife* at Drury Lane. She almost immediately became pregnant, however, and gave up acting until after the birth of her daughter, Catherine.

Charke was soon to become a "provok'd wife" offstage. Her husband left her and moved in with a mistress but continued to claim Charke's earnings after she returned to acting. In 1736 Richard Charke, accompanied by his mistress, went to the Indies to escape gambling debts. He died there the next year.

Charlotte Charke, meanwhile, "being . . . under [her] Father's Displeasures," left his theater company to work for his rival Henry Fielding at New Haymarket. Over the next several years she would move back and forth from one theater to the other, and she also had her own company for a short while.

Among Charke's roles at New Haymarket was a "breeches part," Lord Place, a parody of her father, in Fielding's *Pasquin*--a curious choice considering her often-stated desire for a reconciliation. She also played other male roles as well as ambiguously-gendered characters such as a eunuch in Nicholas Rowe's *Tamerlane* and Mrs. Otter, a mannish woman, in Ben Jonson's *The Silent Woman*.

Charke's theatrical career permitted her to provide for herself and her daughter until 1737, when the Stage Licensing Act imposed considerable restrictions on the production of plays, making it difficult for many actors to have steady work.

With acting jobs scarce, Charke took up other lines of employment. Appearing in public in male clothing, she often chose typically male jobs, including puppeteer, grocer, groom, manservant, pastry cook, sausage-

maker, and innkeeper. None was extremely successful, and at one point she was arrested for debt.

In 1746 Charke married John Sacheverell. In the *Narrative* she does not mention him by name, alluding only to "an honourable, though very secret Alliance" with "a worthy Gentleman." This secrecy is puzzling because her marriage was a matter of public record, and she was listed on playbills that season as "Mrs. Sacheverell, late Mrs. Charke." Sacheverell, of whom little is known, soon died, leaving Charke "deprived of every Hope and Means of a Support."

Around 1747 Charke began living and traveling with a woman identified only as Mrs. Brown. Charke herself adopted the name Charles Brown. How long the two women remained together is unknown, but a contemporaneous report shows that Charke was living with another woman--possibly Mrs. Brown--shortly before her death in poverty in 1760. In the *Narrative* Charke never reveals the exact nature of her relationship with the "good natured Gentlewoman" who was her companion.

For about seven years Charke/Mr. Brown worked as a "strolling actor" in the countryside. In the *Narrative* Charke reports that "an orphan Heiress" was smitten with the actor "Mr. Brown." Charke/Brown met with the infatuated young woman and revealed her/his real identity, "the youngest daughter of Mr. Cibber."

It is significant that Charke defined herself in terms of her relationship with Cibber. However much she may have contributed to their estrangement, Charke longed for the approval of and reconciliation with her father. The publication of the *Narrative* in 1755 was in part an attempt to bring this about.

She seems to have hoped that telling her own story and expressing regret for her (unspecified) errors would end her "painful Separation from [her] once tender Father"--a description that appears more wishful than factual. Charke's plan did not succeed, and the two never reconciled. When Cibber died in 1757, he left the bulk of his estate to his oldest daughter, varying amounts to other heirs, and, to Charke, "£5 and no more."

In addition to the *Narrative*, Charke wrote three plays, *The Carnival* (1735), *The Art of Management, or Tragedy Expell'd* (1735), and *Tit for Tat, or Comedy and Tragedy at War* (1743), as well as four works of fiction, *The History of Charles and Patty* (no date), *The Mercer; or Fatal Extravagance* (1755), *The History of Henry Dumont, Esq. and Miss Charlotte Evelyn* (1756), and *The Lover's Treat; or Unnatural Hatred* (1758).

The work of Charke's fiction that has received the most attention is *Henry Dumont*, which includes a homosexual character, Billy Loveman. Loveman writes a letter declaring his love for the title character, Henry. When the two meet, Loveman, dressed in women's clothing, ardently kisses Henry, whereupon Henry and two of his friends beat him. A mob then gathers and dunks Loveman in a fish pond, a punishment usually given to women.

Interpretation of Charke's treatment of Loveman varies widely. Robert Rehder declares the scene with Loveman "entirely gratuitous." Erin Mackie believes that Charke included it to distance herself from "transvestism, homosexuality, and marital travesty . . . those very violations on which her own life bordered so closely."

Kristina Straub finds the novel "viciously homophobic." Polly S. Fields, on the other hand, feels that Charke, whose "own life bore similarity to Loveman's" was sympathetic to the character and that the novel is "a graphic depiction of society's hypocritical treatment of homosexuals." Charke herself left no commentary on her motivation for including the scene.

Confusion over the reading of the episode mirrors the variety of views on Charke's sexual orientation and its relation to her cross-dressing.

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