Chapter 2

The Growth of Celebrity Culture

Colley Cibber, Charlotte Charke, and the Overexpression of Gender

Like the early modern kings whose images he evoked (and deformed), Colley Cibber passed on to his heirs not only his elaborate headdresses and his celebrity status, but also his strategy of overexpression. His youngest daughter, Charlotte Charke, describes her inherited celebrity as a curse when, in a curious scene from her own autobiography of 1755 (a narrative heavily indebted to her father's), her recognizable figure prevents her escape from some angry creditors. Charke's proclivity for male attire doesn't seem to help matters, and her pursuer easily picks her out of a crowd, she writes, "by Dint of a very handsome lac'd Hat I had on, being then, for some substantial Reasons, en cavalier [i.e. dressed as a man]; which was so well described, the Bailiff had no great Trouble in finding me."

The pitfalls of fame were not foreign to the irascible Charke, who spends much of her narrative in deep debt and in male dress, pursuing the promise of a steady income and dodging the creditors who pursue her through her many failed careers as strolling player, puppeteer, merchant, sausage seller, baker, and gentleman's gentleman, among others. Her adoption of the celebrity autobiography to tell her story—and her adaptation of overexpression to scramble it—provide insights into how eighteenth-century women might use such strategies differently from their male counterparts. Charke's Narrative of the Life of Charlotte Charke has attracted some notice in recent years from scholars of eighteenth-century genders and sexualities, who have attributed Charke's transvestitism to everything from a feminist desire to challenge the status quo of eighteenth-century gender categories to a homosexual desire.
for her female companions to an unfulfilled desire to be welcomed as the long-lost son of the father who disowned her.² None of these possible motives, however, explain the actions that follow her arrest in her “handsome laced hat.”

Betrayed by a costume too easily visible and marked out in a cap “so well described,” Charke is dragged off to jail. She is soon released, but worries that without a disguise she will be spotted by still more creditors. So she improvises: “The Officer [of the prison] advised me to change Hats with him, that being the very Mark by which I was unfortunately distinguished, and made known to him,” Charke writes. “My Hat was ornamented with a beautiful Silver Lace, little the worse for wear, and of the Size which is now the present Taste; the Officer’s a large one, cocked up in the Coachman’s Stile, and weightened with a horrible Quantity of Crape to secure him from the Winter’s Cold. . . . [W]e each of us made very droll Figures; he with his little laced Hat, which appeared on his Head of the Size of those made for the Spanish Ladies, and my unfortunate Face smothered under his, that I was almost as much incommoded as when I marched in the Ditch, under the insupportable Weight of my Father’s.”³ Charke describes in miniature the cultural shifts (and the sartorial shifts) that, as chapter 1 addressed, were transforming the ways that selves were expressed and regarded in the eighteenth century. As an increasingly secular nation was replacing the spectacular king with the unmarked bourgeois man as the locus of English authority, Charke replaces the spectacular laced hat linked to the cavalier courts of the early modern era with the less dressy and markedly more middle-class cap of the “Coachman’s Stile.”

Yet if Charke means her change of clothes to make her less conspicuous within the increasingly bourgeois and increasingly gendered public sphere, it seems odd that she should trade her old hat for one that is even larger, even more spectacular, and—“cocked up” and “weightened with a horrible Quantity of Crape”—even more obviously transvestite. Odder still is the trick’s effectiveness. While it renders her figure more “droll,” Charke’s dress here seems to enable her disappearance: she strolls out of the prison unafraid of further assault, for, she assures us, “this smoaky Conveniency (for it stunk insufferably of Tobacco) was a Security and absolute Prevention from other threatening Dangers.”⁴ Charke’s conspicuous disguise makes sense only if we consider it not as her attempt to transform herself into a man, but rather as her attempt to exaggerate into illegibility the signifiers—and the accessories—that mark a body as male or female. These signifiers include the headpiece that, when Charke wore it, seemed an obvious index of masculinity but that, on the officer’s head,
resembles a hat “made for the Spanish Ladies.” They include the “cocked-up” cap that shifts from a symbol of normativity to a symbol of spectacular masculinity atop Charke’s “unfortunate face.” And they include also the overweight wig of Charke’s father, to which she alludes in the final line of the passage and which exemplifies the oddly gendered performances I examine throughout this chapter. All of these accessories suggest not mere disguise but overexpression, the only strategy available to a woman “so well-known [she] needs no description.” Unable to make herself nondescript, Charke destabilizes the signifiers of eighteenth-century gender to make herself indescribable—and she slips through the London streets “droll” but undetected.

I begin with this anecdote because it introduces two features of overexpression that this chapter will develop and to which future chapters will return. First, Charke’s trading of her “cavalier” costume for a cocked-up cap demonstrates how her overexpressions deviated from her father’s—and suggests one way an eighteenth-century woman’s overexpressions must necessarily deviate from those of an eighteenth-century man. As Mr. Spectator’s title indicates, the eighteenth-century man need not disguise or obscure his gender (whatever he might conceal about his “Name, [his] Age, and [his] Lodgings”) in order to pass freely through London’s public spaces. But a woman lacked this liberty, and thus all of the women that I examine throughout this book—including Charke—had to portray themselves in a role that made their publicity permissible before they could overexpress that role in ways that made their privacy imaginable. For Charke, this role was sometimes the role of the bourgeois man—dressed “en cavalier.” And it was sometimes, more specifically and more poignantly, the role of her bourgeois father, whose words (and whose wigs) haunt her own autobiography.

Like her father’s, Charke’s autobiographical performances in male dress seem at some points to be the effects of a clever disguise and at other times to be the expressions of her inner desires (for the liberty of a man, for the love of a woman, for the recognition of her father). The difficulty Charke’s audiences had in distinguishing between these two meanings suggests the cleverness of the overexpressive project. Yet while Cibber’s audiences merely threw up their hands in frustration, Charke’s audiences, as we shall see, worked even harder to impose their meanings on her words and her costumes. In this sense, Charke’s overexpressions—and, indeed, the overexpressions of all the women I examine throughout this book—failed to deflect her spectators’ examinations. In the second half of this chapter I ask why. What is it about the extra disguises that women like Charke, Bellamy, and Robinson must take on to appear in public that make their overexpressions, ultimately, ineffective?
Charke’s curious allusion to her father’s wig in this passage suggests a second point that will become crucial to the theory of overexpression that this book explores: that is, the way that this strategy destabilizes seemingly static signifiers (a costume piece, a stage property, a printed word) and attaches their meanings to the body that wields them. We might think here of Cibber’s wig, as well as of the “cavalier” cap that signifies masculinity on Charke’s body but becomes feminine as soon as it is placed on the officer’s head. The hat’s transformation is surprising, since we often consider the sartorial signifiers of gender to be stable even if the bodies they signify are not: a skirt, for instance, will always convey femininity within a certain culture, as a “cocked-up” cap will always be read as masculine. If an accessory changes meaning every time it changes bodies, however, what hope might the spectator have of interpreting it? Similarly, if a word’s meaning depends on and always refers back to the famous body that writes it, what hope do we have of interpreting a book unless we know something of its author?

Overexpression works in part by inviting its spectators to ask such questions, challenging again and again the languages through which identity, in the mid-eighteenth century, was read. But Charke’s suggestion that an accessory’s meaning shifts depending on the body that wears it does something else, too. By attaching the object’s meaning to the body that performs with it, Charke implies that the object’s meaning holds only so long as the performer lives—only so long as the show goes on. In this way, the object takes on the ephemerality of performance. And, like the gesture or attitude of a performance, it changes slightly every time a new body takes it up—ensuring, as it does, that the power of meaning-making lies with the performer rather than the spectator and depends on his or her (fleeting, elusive) presence.

In the pages that follow, I explore this phenomenon by focusing on the great white wig that Cibber wore in his most popular role, the fop Sir Novelty Fashion (later crowned Lord Foppington), and that, by 1740, had become an emblem of his identity. The eighteenth-century wig was a symbol of upright masculinity that transformed, on Cibber’s body, into a symbol of suspect sexuality—and that transformed again as soon as Charke slipped it onto her head. The wig’s shifting meanings frustrate any attempt to interpret it—or the celebrity that wields it—as masculine or feminine, as normative or not. The words of Cibber’s Apology and Charke’s Narrative work in much the same way, replacing their dictionary definitions with personal inflections and thus locating the meaning of a printed page, like the precise shape of a performed gesture, in the body that tries it on. This argument will lay the groundwork for my discussion of Laurence Sterne’s odd language in Tristram Shandy, tak-
The growth of celebrity culture | 65

en up in chapter 3. More broadly, it will begin the exploration of women’s overexpressions—and why they so often fail to protect their performers—that I will continue in chapters 4 and 5. By tracing the tendrils of Lord Foppington’s great wig as they wind through Cibber’s most celebrated stage roles, through some of the most memorable scenes in his Apology, and through the pages of The Narrative of the Life of Charlotte Charke, this chapter explores overexpression as a strategy that not only endures past Cibber’s 1699 performance of Richard III but that takes up and takes part in many of the debates central to the formation and the imagination of the eighteenth-century self.

The Trouble with Eighteenth-Century Genders

Part of what made Cibber’s and Charke’s manipulations of gender signifiers so frustrating to their spectators—and so clever as overexpressive strategies—was the importance that gender and sexuality began to assume in mid-eighteenth-century discourses about identity. It was during this time, as Dror Wahrman and others have argued, that “prevailing gender norms were redefined as essential and natural, thus pulling the cultural rug from under behavior or images that seemed to offer alternatives to these dominant norms.”

Even as deformities like Richard III’s were becoming less prescriptive and more performative, in other words, genders and sexualities were increasingly regarded as traits permanently grafted onto the body that bore them. All one need do to police these traits would be to probe that body, to strip it of its disguises and gaze upon it.

If these new gender ideologies demanded a body stripped of its disguises, we might expect the theater, with its dependence on disguise, to be one of the last places that such ideologies might take hold. In part this is true, and Kristina Straub includes both Cibber and Charke in her book Sexual Suspects, which describes the complications that eighteenth-century actors and actresses introduced to emergent gender norms. Yet as Straub points out, the theater also offers a kind of magnifying lens through which we might view these emergent ideologies in high resolution. Many of the developments in theatrical practices during Cibber’s and Charke’s lifetimes might be understood to reflect developments in ideologies of gender and sexuality that portrayed the naked body as natural, bounded, and clearly gendered. Whereas the theater of the Renaissance and Restoration seemed to delight in disguise and deception, the sentimental plays of the early eighteenth century betrayed some anxiety about any character who lied about his or her “true”
desires or covered his or her “natural” body, and it rewarded characters unafraid to reveal themselves. Thus the English stage went from being the site of the character’s dressing up (in, for instance, the dressing-room scenes so essential to the portrayal of the Restoration rake) to the site of the character’s dressing down, revealing to the audience the naked sincerity of his or her “true” feelings, his or her “authentic” self.

This transformation is evident in the changing attitudes toward cross-dressing and gender play in the English theater with which Cibber and Charke were familiar. In the all-male companies of the Renaissance and early Restoration stage, men cross-dressed as women, and audiences accepted the femininity of their costumes as synecdoche for the femininity of the characters they portrayed. With the introduction of women into the acting companies in the late seventeenth century, however, cross-dressing roles became the purview of female players—like Charlotte Charke—who used masculine costumes not to conceal their gendered bodies but to reveal them. Their form-fitting breeches were designed to show off their feminine figures and to remind their spectators (coyly or not so coyly) of the “true” identities peeking from behind their assumed roles. These developments allowed the English stage to participate in the gender significations that had begun to designate bodies as either male or female and accessories, attitudes, and object choices as either normative or not.

What this meant for celebrities like Cibber and Charke was that the theater and its disguises no longer offered concealment from a nosy public determined to trace a star’s “true” self. For what Felicity Nussbaum calls the “Interiority Effect”—the suggestion of an interior self beyond that or aligned with that of the character the actor played onstage—works both ways. The moment that the spectator perceives the illusion of interiority in one actress’s performance, he or she begins to expect it in all performances. As the Interiority Effect took hold on the eighteenth-century stage, praise for a player’s performance began increasingly to take the form of praise for his or her personal character. Hence the vocabularies of literary and theatrical criticism, of celebrity gossip, and of gender critique often, in this period, overlap and intertwine. So much is clear from an anonymous pamphlet entitled The Laureat, published in 1740. Attacking Cibber as an “Author who is obscure, unconnected, and wrapt up and conceal’d in the clinquant Tinsel of Metaphor, and unnecessary figures,” the pamphlet promises “to explain the Meaning, or to expose the no Meaning, to take off the Vernish of the rhetorical Flowers, and to undress a certain Book lately publish’d, intituled, An APOLOGY FOR THE LIFE OF MR. COLLEY CIBBER.”
The pamphleteer’s attack confirms the early eighteenth century’s privileging of the naked and naturalized body over the disguised body, the new preference for a self that was revealed rather than constructed. Moreover, it links this body explicitly—through metaphors of dressing and undressing—to the text that describes it. Cibber’s book, like his body, is unsatisfactory because it remains “wrapt up and conceal’d in the clinquant Tinsel of Metaphor, and unnecessary figures.” In order to be understood it must be “undress’d.” Of course, the same undressing that reveals the meaning of Cibber’s prose—and, metaphorically, the gendered contours and sexual desires of his body—also leaves him vulnerable to the pamphleteer’s critique. The language of *The Laureat* emphasizes the position of the early eighteenth-century celebrity as a catch-22: to “wrap up and conceal” oneself in disguise and metaphor was to invite one’s critics to undress one—and to dress one down. But to present oneself as sincere and undisguised was to leave oneself—in Cibber’s words—“helpless, and expos’d” to an increasingly normative gaze.

The pamphleteer’s language thus helps to explain the particular form that Cibber’s and Charke’s overexpressions of gender would take. The celebrity who wishes to stave off such critiques—to prevent such “exposure”—cannot simply disguise him- or herself, for critics and spectators will simply strip him or her of all disguises. Instead, he or she must seem to reveal a naked body—an “authentic self”—while at the same time dismantling the binary between the naked body and its disguises, between “authentic” desires and dissembling. This means both imbuing the naked body with the same dissembling power as the body in costume, and it means destabilizing the way that the costume itself signifies or constructs character. In other words, it means mixing up the body natural and the body performed, blurring the boundaries between corpus and costume. And this, as I will argue in the next part of this chapter, is precisely what Colley Cibber does.

**Big Wigs: The Fop’s Hair as Excessive Masculinity in Cibber’s Sentimental Comedies**

Cibber’s performances of nakedness begin with his performances as the fop, a Restoration character known for self-conscious outfits and fawning speeches but who, in Cibber’s eighteenth-century version, became a character so elaborately dressed as to be naked and so overt as to be unreadable. I will explain these apparent oxymorons by examining Cibber’s most famous costume piece, a large white wig that he wore in his role as Sir Novelty /
Lord Foppington but that soon became part of his everyday dress—and that we might interpret either as a disguise over or as a metonymy for the male anatomy. Similarly, I will argue, we might associate the fop’s gender as easily with superfluous as with insufficient masculinity. Understanding the complex significations of the mid-eighteenth-century fop—as well as the complex significations of his most obvious costume piece, the wig—helps us to understand why Cibber should adopt such a persona for his ramblings on stage, on street, and on page—and how Charke would revive and revamp these significations in her own performances of self.

Even more than the deformed king, the fawning fop marked Cibber’s celebrity persona and made his career. In 1696, frustrated by his inability to rise in the Drury Lane company, Cibber created a star vehicle for himself in his comedy *Love’s Last Shift*. The play introduced the world to Sir Novelty Fashion, who would reappear (as Lord Foppington) in two later plays: *The Relapse* (1696), Sir John Vanbrugh’s sequel to *Love’s Last Shift*; and Cibber’s *The Careless Husband* (1704). The fop soon became a recurring role in Cibber’s career—and, later, a role ghosted with his memory. David Garrick named his own fop “Fribble” (in his 1747 comedy *Miss in Her Teens*), echoing Henry Fielding’s parodic tribute to Cibber in *The Author’s Farce* (1730). As his fame in the part grew, Cibber began to incorporate the fop’s elaborate dress and flowery language into his everyday performances of self.

It was an odd persona to settle on. Like the gender ideologies that shaped them, the significations of the fop were changing rapidly by the time Cibber introduced Lord Foppington. In one of the earliest articles on Cibber’s foppishness, Lois Potter argues that the character acted less as a threat to than as a model of masculinity, a (somewhat less successful) version of the Restoration rakes and princely heroes that Cibber had once longed to play. Susan Staves, similarly, has described the Restoration fop as a precursor to the properly domesticated man of the sentimental stage. Such arguments suggest that the fop presents not an alternative to masculinity, but an excess of it.

In more recent criticism, however, scholars have more often characterized the fop as an outmoded throwback to the spectacular politics of the previous era. Both Kristina Straub and Thomas A. King oppose the fop to the normative identity of the unmarked eighteenth-century man: the fop’s obsession with self-display, they argue, associates him with a diminished or even with a castrated masculinity. For King, the castration of Cibber’s private manhood results from his imitative production of a public manhood. In describing a portrait of Cibber in which an elongated quill pen points to a “negative space in his breeches,” King writes that Cibber’s quill/phallus “requires the displace-
ment of his penis . . . and therefore of his own personal embodiment into a chain of imitations. At the same time the quill points to the place of mimetic transformation, signaling that Cibber’s writings and his foppish display do not originate or inhere ‘in’ his body but in the structure of publicness.” 9 Cibber is unfit for the new order of the bourgeois public sphere and the unmarked signifiers of eighteenth-century manhood, according to King, because he requires an exterior prop to indicate a masculinity that should be inherent.

But in what is otherwise an insightful reading of Cibber’s portrayal of the fop, King neglects to mention the most famous stage property with which Cibber’s fops performed their masculinity: Lord Foppington’s great wig. Wigs were not uncommon atop the heads of eighteenth-century men, and they were often read as signifiers of masculinity. But Cibber’s wig was uncommonly over the top: puffed and plumed, curled and furbelowed—and, when it appeared in The Relapse, large enough to require a servant with a sedan chair to haul it across the stage. An engraving by John Simon from the first part of the century shows Cibber’s hair standing in twin bouffants on top of his head and cascading down his back (figure 4). In such magnificent proportions, Cibber’s wig blurs King’s neat division between a masculinity “originat[ing] or inher[ing] ‘in’ [Cibber’s] body” and the “structure of publicness” that constitutes, for King, Cibber’s failed privacy. Such proportions blur even the division between the territories of interiority and exteriority—between corpus and costume—upon which King’s argument depends. As a marker of gender identity, in other words, the wig was problematic, and in eighteenth-century representations it might indicate either masculinity or femininity, either total discretion or egregious insincerity, depending on how (and when) it was worn. In choosing as his emblem the eighteenth-century wig, Cibber is picking up and playing up the ambiguous significations of the wig as both a signifier of masculinity and metonymy for the male body it conceals. On Cibber’s body and within his texts, however, the wig becomes a costume piece whose very overtness makes it suspect and whose excessive masculinity makes it illegible.

The ambiguous representations of the eighteenth-century wig are the subject of a recent article by Lynn Festa, who traces the accessory’s transformation over the course of the century from “a sign of the autonomy” of the middle-class male subject to “a humbling intimation that we may be possessed as much by things as things are possessed by us.” 10 The wig’s importance as a constitutive part of the male body has been noted elsewhere by Marcia Pointon, who writes that the wig “might be seen as a register of socialized masculinity from the seventeenth to the beginning of the nineteenth
century.” In several representations from the long eighteenth century the wig served as a metonymy to the male body: its loss or disorder indicated a depletion of masculine virility or a disruption of a decidedly masculine decorum. Illustrative of the wig’s inseparability from the body and its sexual significations was the popularity throughout the eighteenth century of the merkin, a wig especially designed for the pubic region of both male and female bodies. Wigs on the head—as well as those less in sight—served as both the expression of a healthy sexuality (since hair loss was one of the most recognizable symptoms of syphilis) and as a practical defense against lice. For this reason, they became synonymous with virile masculinity.

Yet even as it symbolized, the wig also disrupted the eighteenth-century notion of the proper masculine subject. Festa notes in particular the problems that the periwig presented for the notion of “possessive individualism” that, as C. B. MacPherson argues, formed the basis for English subjecthood in the eighteenth century. Most peruke makers, Festa explains, fashioned their wigs from human hair that they had collected from the heads of lower-class country girls, a fact that literalized anxieties about the body’s permeable boundaries and the potential for men’s subjection to and dependence on inferior women. “The paradox of the wig in the context of ‘possessive individualism,’” according to Festa, “lies in the fact that the object meant to proclaim its wearer to be a freestanding individual is harvested from the bodies of other people: to wear a wig is to make another’s parts an integral part of one’s own appearance.” For this reason a wig too unwieldy—a masculinity too overwrought—might signify nonnormativity and chaos just as easily as the modest wig advertised masculinity and decorum.

Against King’s description of Cibber as a “residual pederast” who mistakes the nonnormative identity of the eighteenth-century fop with the more acceptable masculinity of the Restoration fop, I want to suggest that Cibber assumed his foppish accouterments and donned his enormous wig precisely in order to call up the confusion of identity that King interprets as nonnormative. Cibber’s wig is not merely a signifier of femininity, in other words. It is, more complexly, a signifier of bourgeois masculinity so overt that it becomes ambiguous. In short, it is an overexpression of Cibber’s gender that allows him to remain in the spotlight without ever being “expos’d.”

The unstable significations of the gentleman’s periwig surface again and again in Cibber’s most two most successful comedies, Love’s Last Shift and The Careless Husband. Both plays feature Sir Novelty / Lord Foppington as the hero of their comic subplots, and both suggest Sir Novelty’s wig as a signifier of masculinity that in its very obviousness becomes impossible to interpret.
In order to understand the associations of the wig and the meaning of masculinity in Sir Novelty’s subplots, however, it’s important that we look first at the plays’ main plots. Both *Love’s Last Shift* and *The Careless Husband* are typical of the sentimental comedies that were so popular in Cibber’s day in that both pivot around a promiscuous libertine’s transformation into a proper gentleman and a model of upright masculinity. And in both plays, the libertines in question negotiate their newfound masculinity through the putting on or the taking off of a periwig.

In *Love’s Last Shift*, the rake Loveless is transformed into a sentimental man and a loving husband after his long-suffering wife, Amanda, lures him into her bed by disguising herself as a high-class courtesan. Significantly, it is a wig that greets Loveless and his servant, Snap, when they enter Amanda’s house in pursuit of the promised liaison. The stage directions inform us: “The SCENE changes to an Anti-chamber, a Table, a Light, a Night-Gown, and a Periwig lying by.”

Amanda, it seems, has placed the periwig in anticipation of her husband’s arrival, and Loveless takes the hint: “Ha! this Night-Gown and Peruke don’t lie here for nothing,” he tells Snap. “I’ll make my self agreeable.—I have baulk’d many a Woman in my Time for want of a clean Shirt.—[Puts ’em on.]” Here the periwig seems an integral part of Loveless’s masculinity, a costume he must put on in order to enjoy intimate and heteronormative relations with a woman he later learns is his wife. Laura Brown pinpoints Loveless’s conversion in the final act of the play as an important moment in the transformation of the comedy of manners—a genre that rewarded wit and social affect—into the sentimental comedy—a genre that celebrated naked sincerity. Loveless’s wig crowns his own transformation from Restoration wit to eighteenth-century man of feeling and serves as a metonymy for the naked and undisguised body he will offer up to his wife.

The wig reappears with a similarly metonymic purpose in *The Careless Husband*, though its contours have grown even larger and its significations of masculinity even more complex. In this play the rake to be redeemed is Sir Charles Easy, who spends much of the first four acts pursuing indiscreet affairs with everyone except his wife. The climax of the sentimental plot occurs when Lady Easy comes upon her husband and her lady’s maid sleeping near each other in a parlor, their clothes in disarray. Most disturbing to Lady Easy is not that her husband has betrayed her (she has known about his affairs since act 1) but that now he sleeps before her with his head indecorously uncovered, his wig having become unfastened during the strenuous activity of the preceding hour.

“Ha! Bare-headed, and in so sound a Sleep!” she says to herself as she
stands before his prostrate body. “Who knows, while thus expos’d to th’ un-
wholesome Air, / But Heav’n offended may o’ertake his Crime, / And, in some
languishing Distemper, leave him / A severe Example of its violated Laws.”
As in Love’s Last Shift, so in The Careless Husband the gentleman’s periwig
stands not as an emblem of but rather as a shield against the now transgres-
sive libertinism of the previous era. Without it, Sir Charles “expos[es]” him-
self to disease—both physical and moral—and provides a “severe Example
of [Heaven’s] violated Laws.” The solution here is moderation: if an improper
man is one who exposes too much of himself to those outside his domestic
sphere or too little of himself to those within it, the proper man is one who
reveals his sincere self willingly, but only to those in his family and only at the
appropriate time.

This is the lesson that Sir Charles has learned by the end of the play, as
he returns to his wife openly shedding tears of shame and of sentiment. But
complicating the gendered symbolism of this scene is the method by which
Lady Easy teaches her husband this lesson, corrects his “expos[ure],” and elici-
ts his emotions. Rather than replacing the wig or waking Sir Charles to re-
proach him for his unfaithfulness, she discreetly “Takes a Steinkirk [handker-
chief] off her Neck, and lays it gently on his Head.” A late eighteenth-century
painting of the scene by Francis Wheatley emphasizes the discretion of Lady
Easy’s action, the delicacy with which she places the handkerchief on her
husband’s head without disturbing his rest (figure 5). Charles, waking to find
his head covered with his wife’s handkerchief and his wig still lying nearby,
suddenly feels the pangs of conscience. He returns the wig to his head and,
reformed, rushes off to beg Lady Easy’s forgiveness.

The wig signifies masculinity, then, but it also suggests an uneasy alliance
between proper masculinity and proper femininity. Sir Charles’s masculinity
is redeemed from the charges of a deviant and indiscreet libertinism only
after his head has been covered in the clothes of a woman. Discretion—the
prized quality of the unmarked eighteenth-century man—seems here to de-
pend on at least a modicum of sexual ambiguity and of empathy, the ability
to put oneself into the shoes (or under the headpiece) of a member of the op-
posite sex. In suggesting a masculinity allied with or empathetic to feminini-
ty, Sir Charles Easy’s modest wig seems less distinguished from than aligned
with Sir Novelty Fashion’s more ostentatious updo. This alignment suggests
that the masculinity of Cibber’s fop characters differed from that of their
sentimental acquaintances in degree, not in kind: if Charles Easy’s wig was a
symbol of a new sort of masculinity, Foppington’s wig was merely its overex-
pression. And by inviting us to read Foppington’s wig through the canopy of
its more masculine companions, Cibber prevents us from reading it as a clear or stable signifier, whether of femininity or of a nonnormative sexuality.

In order to tease out the ambiguous significations of Lord Foppington’s great wig, let’s turn briefly to the *Apology*, which itself makes frequent reference to its actor-author’s signature prop. In a much-discussed (and much-maligned) passage toward the middle of the autobiography, Cibber describes the wig’s role in establishing his friendship with Colonel Henry Brett, a nobly born but financially strapped rake (and later a comanager of Drury Lane theater) who has come to London in pursuit of a wealthy wife. Cibber links

Brett’s performances as libertine to his own performances as fop through the exchange of the famous wig, which Brett admires while watching Cibber’s performance in *Love’s Last Shift*. In a complexity prefigured in Cibber’s most famous comedies, the wig serves at once as an expression of Brett’s nonnormative libertinism and as the vehicle of his reform into a happily (and heteronormatively) married man. But these categories of rake and fop and of normative and not become increasingly difficult to distinguish in the heaped-up clauses of Cibber’s prose.

Cibber describes his meeting with Brett in the sexually ambiguous language typical of the *Apology’s* most overexpressive moments:

And though, possibly, the Charms of our Theatrical Nymphs might have had their Share, in drawing him [backstage]; yet in my Observation, the most visible Cause of his first coming, was a more sincere Passion he had conceiv’d for a fair full-bottom’d Perriwig which I then wore in my first Play. . . . Now whatever Contempt Philosophers may have, for a fine Perriwig; my friend . . . knew very well, that so material an Article of Dress, on the Head of a Man of Sense, if it became him, could never fail of drawing him to a more partial Regard. . . . This perhaps may soften the grave Censure, which so youthful a Purchase might otherwise, have laid upon him: In a word, he made his Attack upon this Perriwig, as your young Fellows generally do upon a Lady of Pleasure; first, by a few, familiar Praises of her Person, and then, a civil Enquiry, into the Price of it.  

Cibber is intent on assuring his readers that Brett’s “sincere passion” for the periwig is part and parcel of Brett’s sincere passion for women: his comparison of the wig to the Lady of Pleasure implies, in one sense, an identification of the wig as a commodity circulated among heterosexual men, one that confirms both their heterosexuality and their masculinity within a homosocial network.

On the other hand, the wig seems at times indistinguishable from (or metonymy for) the body of the man who wears it—an observation that might further explain Cibber’s nervous anticipation of “whatever Contempt Philosophers may have” for Brett’s object choice. If the wig is a mere accessory that can be taken off and given away like an ill-fitting coat, it serves here as a tool abetting Brett’s pursuit of a worthy woman—and thus a signifier of both men’s normative heterosexuality. Cibber’s surrender of it to Brett indicates, in that case, his possession of a “true” identity not dependent on his possessions and not subject to the changes in his attire.
But if the wig is a metonymy for Cibber’s body, as Loveless’s wig is a metonymy for his body, it signifies Brett’s pursuit of Cibber himself. The sartorial clues that might allow Cibber’s spectators to distinguish a feminine identity from a masculine one—or well-ordered discretion from outlandish display—thus become entangled within the fop’s great mop of hair. By adopting and adapting the eighteenth-century man’s wig as the emblem of his identity offstage as well as onstage, Cibber creates a gender identity so blatant it is ambiguous and presents to his audience a body so unabashedly visible that it can be neither denied nor described. In this way, he preempts his critics’ threats to “undress” him by seeming to strip without actually “exposing” anything of himself.

Perhaps the most brilliant articulation of Cibber’s overexpressions of gender occurs in The Relapse, composed by Cibber’s friend and eventual business partner, Sir John Vanbrugh. It is Vanbrugh who promotes Sir Novelty to Lord Foppington—and who promotes the wig to its most monstrous proportions. He also introduces Foppington’s wigmaker. “My lord, I have done what I defy any prince in Europe t’outdo,” the wigmaker tells Lord Foppington as he unveils his newest creation. “I have made you a periwig so long, and so full of hair, it will serve you for hat and cloak in all weathers.” So much more than your average accessory, Foppington’s wig serves a number of different purposes for a number of different personae: it is both hat and cloak in both summer and winter; it is (much like Cibber himself) both frustratingly impenetrable and unabashedly obvious; and it is both a signifier of upright masculinity and a signifier of excessive femininity. But even when it constitutes full dress in and of itself, the wig is not full enough for Lord Foppington. He demands that the periwig maker enhance his hair even further, for, he says, “A periwig to a man, should be like a mask to a woman nothing should be seen but his eyes.”

Lord Foppington’s declaration drips with the uneasy significations of the eighteenth-century hairpiece: his words establish the wig as the marker of masculinity (the opposite of the mask as the marker of femininity) even as they suggest a destabilizing affinity between wig and mask, between what has come to signify “man” and what has come to signify “woman.” In Nobody’s Story, her book about the self-fashioning strategies of women in the eighteenth-century literary marketplace, Catherine Gallagher discusses the woman’s mask—a common costume piece of the eighteenth-century prostitute—as an accessory that “signals the availability of the body but also implies the impenetrability of the controlling mind.” She presents the mask as a metaphorical tool for the female writer who must sell her work as self-
representation while withholding “her true self” as the unseen and unseeable “sold self’s seller.” The mask, in other words, changes the gendered dynamic between subjectivity and objectification, allowing the women to be the object of the gaze without surrendering herself entirely to the gaze’s penetration. Cibber’s wig achieves a similar effect, but it does so by enhancing rather than by concealing his distinguishing features. By scrambling precisely what these distinguishing features distinguish, by vacillating uneasily between masculine and feminine identities, the wig makes Cibber illegible and impenetrable. In doing so, it reduces his body from something that is seen to something that does nothing but see. Peering from behind his unwieldy wig, Colley Cibber as Lord Foppington becomes an overexpressive version of Mr. Spectator, “nothing seen but his eyes.”

“THE PUBLICK EYE” AND THE PUBLIC “I”: LOOKING AT CIBBER’S LANGUAGE

I have described the foppish wig that Cibber adopted in his performances of self as a stage property that capitalizes on eighteenth-century anxieties about men’s dependence on women and on things. In emphasizing the wig’s ambiguous significations, Cibber creates a persona that is as illegible as it is seemingly revealing and a nakedness that is impossible to read. As he does, he reminds his spectators that sartorial signifiers are not as stable or as legible indicators of gender as we might like to believe. It is a reminder that Charlotte Charke will take up and expand as she incorporates Cibber’s famous wig into her own performances and adapts its gender significations to her own purposes.

Before I turn to Charke’s Narrative, however, I want to linger for a moment on Cibber’s autobiography in order to explore how his written language takes on the same sexual and gender ambiguities as his sartorial choices. In his promise to “undress” Cibber’s prose, the writer of The Laureat implies that sentences, like clothes, encode and dissemble, and all one need do to interpret the persona they describe is to strip them down to their simplest elements—much as the new sexual ideologies taking shape during Cibber’s lifetime promise that we can identify a person’s “true” gender by stripping him or her down to a naked, naturalized body.

Yet as Cibber’s cascading wig destabilizes the distinctions between naturalized body and theatricalized costume and between masculinity and femininity, so his convoluted prose resists attempts to interpret it. In particu-
lar, Cibber destabilizes the grammatical distinctions between subject and object—that is, between who is speaking and who is being spoken about, who is looking and who is being looked at. As Straub and others have argued, these distinctions were, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, increasingly gendered. By confusing the hierarchical relationship between the subject and the object of his sentences—much as his wig confuses the hierarchical relationship between the subject and the object of the gaze—Cibber destabilizes not only the gendered significations of the fop’s fawning language but also the power dynamics that these significations imply. His prose becomes as illegible as his body—and as immune to attempts by his critics (like the anonymous writer of The Laureat) to “undress” it.

The Laureat focuses on a particular passage early on in Cibber’s autobiography, chastising it as full of the superfluous clauses and ambiguous sexuality that, he argues, was so typical of Cibber’s prose. Significantly, the passage is one in which Cibber, addressing his unnamed patron, attempts to mediate between the (often feminized) visibility required of his profession and the invisibility demanded for admission into the (masculine) bourgeois public sphere. “When I see you lay aside the Advantages of Superiority, and by your own Cheerfulness of Spirits, call out all that Nature has given me to meet them,” Cibber begins, “then ’tis I taste you! then Life runs high! I desire! I possess you! Yet, Sir, in this distinguish’d Happiness, I give not up my farther Share of that Pleasure, or of that Right I have to look upon you, with the publick Eye, and to join in the general Regard so unanimously pay’d to that uncommon Virtue, your Integrity! . . . This it is, that discourages, and keeps silent the Insinuations of Prejudice, and Suspicion; and almost renders your Eloquence an unnecessary Aid, to your Assertions: Even your Opponents, conscious of your Integrity, hear you rather as a Witness, than an Orator——But this, Sir, is drawing you too near the Light.”

King reads this passage as further evidence of Cibber’s residual pederasty, arguing that Cibber’s unbridled obsequies to his patron exemplify the kind of deference appropriate of a lower-class man addressing his social superior in the seventeenth century but marked as nonnormative and emasculating by the beginning of the eighteenth. Yet Cibber is savvier than King gives him credit for. His refusal to reveal his patron’s name indicates some awareness that spectacle no longer guarantees power, and that revealing his patron’s identity might in fact diminish the patron’s authority by “drawing him too near the Light.” Wedged somewhere between spectacular politics and Mr. Spectator, Cibber attempts to recognize his benefactor without undermining his benefactor’s authority in a public sphere that awards anonymity over self-display.
Cibber’s deference to his benefactor’s desire for invisibility indicates that he is aware of the new politics of spectatorship emerging as he is writing. He is aware, too, that his own position as actor, as autobiographer, and as public icon—at the same time that it elevates his fortune and his social status—bars him from seizing such power for himself. “As there is no Hazard, or visible Terror, in an Attack, upon my defenceless Station” in the public eye, he writes, “my Censurers have generally been persons of an intrepid Sincerity.”

When his career choice makes it impossible for him to escape public display, Cibber flaunts it: to his patron’s anonymity Cibber contrasts his own “Nakedness of Temper” and claims, “I am content, to be gaz’d at, as I am, without lessening my Respect, for those, whose Passions may be more soberly cover’d.”

Again, we might read such declarations as pleas for attention by a man unaware that such attention will no longer guarantee him the authority he seeks. Certainly this has been the assumption of several of Cibber’s critics, both modern and contemporary. The anonymous author of The Laureat detects in Cibber’s declaration of public “Nakedness” and in the breathless encomiums of the earlier passage the evidence of a sexuality that, deemed non-normative, must be critiqued: “I taste you, I desire, I possess you,” the pamphlet mocks. “Fye, Colly, Fye; have some small Regard to Decency; you cou’d go no higher than this if your Patron were of the Feminine Gender.” The same ambiguities that drew his contemporary’s “Fyes” have also caught the eyes of Cibber’s more recent readers. Straub interprets the Laureat’s critique as evidence for the growing cultural anxiety about spectacle and disguise, as well as for an increasingly common tendency to label as deviant the man who puts himself on display. Such readings take Cibber’s declaration of his own “Nakedness” at face value, interpreting it as Cibber’s sincere wish to lay himself bare for the perusal (and at the mercy) of his audience members.

Yet what strikes me as odd about the Laureat’s critique of Cibber is the way that it chastises the author for revealing himself blatantly—with no “small Regard to Decency” or decorum—at the same time that it scolds him for “conceal[ing]” himself beneath the “clinquant Tinsel of Metaphor” and the obscurities of overly elaborate prose. What might we make of the contradictions in such a critique? And what might we surmise from the fact that, when Cibber does finally embark on the “honest Examination of [his] Heart” that seems to offer up his persona in all of its “Nakedness,” the only fault he admits is a “natural Vanity”—a quality that might make us suspect that its very naturalness is contrived? I want to suggest that what King and Straub describe as Cibber’s “queerness” here—the overly spectacular and ambiguous language that so bothers the author of The Laureat—is part of the overex-
pressive strategy through which Cibber guarantees his privacy. As we shall see, the language he employs in the dedication of the *Apology*, like the wig he wore both on and off the stage, actually works to dissolve the distinction that his critics draw between the spectator and the spectacle, between the speaking subject and the object of the gaze.

Nowhere is this dissolution more apparent than in the very passage that invites *The Laureat*'s ire: “When I see you lay aside the Advantages of Superiority, and by your own Cheerfulness of Spirits, call out all that Nature has given me to meet them,” Cibber writes, “then ’tis I taste you! then Life runs high! I desire! I possess you!” The most obviously overexpressive moments in this sentence lie in the exaggerated enthusiasm of those final exclamations—exclamations that, as Straub notes, muddy the distinction between homosocial politics and homoerotic desire and that complicate our attempts to read Cibber’s gender identity as either masculine or feminine or to read his relationship with the patron as either normative or not. I want to focus, however, on the confusion between subject and object that results from the sentence’s great heap of clauses and its proliferation of sensory verbs.

The primary agent of the first part of the sentence seems to be Cibber’s patron, who “lays aside” his noble birth in order to “call out” his description of Cibber. Here the patron acts as the subject of the sentence and as the spectator charged with the task of seeing and defining Cibber, the object of his gaze. But the additional clause that launches Cibber’s overexpressive sentence complicates this structure. Introducing the main action of the sentence with “when I see you lay aside” transforms “you” (the patron) into an object, and “I” (Cibber himself) into the primary agent and definer. With the addition of this seemingly superfluous clause, in other words, Cibber metamorphoses from spectacle to spectator, from “Orator” to “Witness,” from defined to definer.

The confusion between subject and object grows as the paragraph continues and Cibber—formerly “content to be gaz’d at, as I am”—sidles slyly out of the spotlight and declares “that Right I have to look upon you, with the publick Eye.” Here again, Cibber tempers his earlier admissions of “Nakedness” by casting himself as a gazer gazing upon his patron—only to find that his patron, seen “rather as a Witness, than an Orator,” is casting his gaze back on Cibber. Cibber hovers around (or yo-yos rapidly between) his role as “publick Eye” and his role as public “I” until the distinction between spectator and spectacle becomes impossible to discern. Accordingly, the gendered hierarchies that Straub and King (not to mention the author of *The Laureat*) assign to this relationship begin to dissolve. Cibber here, as elsewhere, is both on
display and indescribable, both object and subject—“Naked” but nonetheless not “expos’d.”

It is telling that even the author of *The Laureat*, despite his determination to “undress a certain Book lately publish’d, intituled, AN APOLOGY FOR THE LIFE OF MR. COLLEY CIBBER” should, finally, give up his attempts to interpret Cibber’s prose.34 “Upon reading and endeavouring to understand this difficult Author,” he writes, “I found, that to go thro’ and examine him particularly wou’d be more than an Herculian Labour, and that the cleansing this Augean Stable, was a Work unequal both to my Inclination and Strength. And therefore I determined only to give the Publick just so much of him as might convince them, that this long and labour’d Performance of our most celebrated Laureat, is something over-rated.”35 Instead of interpreting Cibber or attempting to “examine him particularly,” the pamphleteer can do nothing but repeat the most egregious excerpts of Cibber’s “long and labour’d Performance.” Unable to “explain the Meaning” of Cibber’s complex sentences, he must be content merely to “expose the no Meaning” to which Cibber freely admits.36 Like the author of *The Laureat*, many critics of Cibber’s work lodged their complaints in the form of parody or in a hybrid of parody and critique. It was as if, incapable of distilling Cibber’s rampant exaggerations and superfluities into their own words, they could do nothing but exaggerate and repeat them further.

After abandoning his attempt to interpret Cibber’s Apology, the author of *The Laureat* admits that all those labyrinthine sentences and crowded pages that make it up actually reveal startlingly little of the private life they promise to explicate: “Colley Cibber is not the Character he pretends to be in this Book,” the author declares, “but a mere Charletan, a Persona Dramatis, a Mountebank, a Counterfeit Colley. . . . In my Opinion, his very Nakedness is a Disguise.”37 It isn’t, the critic makes clear, that Cibber refuses to reveal himself to us. It’s that the very substance of his self-revelations—the big wig with which he makes himself up and the uncreating words through which he marks himself out—make him impossible to decipher, to dissect, or to “expose.” If we can’t rely on the stability of sartorial signifiers or of subject-object relations, we can no more define the limits of Cibber’s body than we can translate the meanings of his prose. In the great wig that scrambles even as it seems to proclaim his masculinity and with the convoluted sentences that dissolve even as they seem to promise his self-revelations, Cibber even in his nakedness seems somewhat overdressed.

Yet even Cibber himself could be outdone. In the second half of this chapter, I turn to the performances and printed works of Charlotte Charke,
Cibber’s youngest daughter, who published her own _Narrative of the Life of Charlotte Charke_ in 1755, fifteen years after Cibber’s _Apology_ set the tone for celebrity autobiography. Charke’s _Narrative_ recalls the _Apology_ in more than its genre. As we shall see, the role of heir to the great Colley Cibber was one of many roles that Charke adopted—and altered—in her own interpretations of overexpression. These interpretations—like the autobiography itself—begin when, as a four-year-old child, she places the great white wig of Lord Foppington on her own small head. As she does, she complicates even further the significations that the wig contains. If we interpret the wig as a signifier of proper masculinity when donned by Loveless or Sir Charles Easy and as an identifiable but illegible trademark of Colley Cibber as fop when worn by the man himself, how should we read it when it reappears on the body of Charlotte Charke—a woman, but a woman known for dressing as a man? This question leads me to two others that the remainder of this chapter will take up. First, how does Charke’s gender affect her performances of overexpression? How, in other words, do societal anxieties about women in public roles necessarily change how female celebrities adopted and adapted Cibber’s strategy? (And how do they account for Charke’s ultimate failure?) Second, how does overexpression change when it is incorporated into a new performance, enacted by a different body? How is overexpression passed down?

**OVEREXPRESSION ON OTHER BODIES: CHARLOTTE CHARKE’S “UNACCOUNTABLE LIFE”**

At the beginning of her 1755 _Narrative_, Colley Cibber’s youngest daughter sets herself a seemingly impossible (and undoubtedly overexpressive) task: “to give some Account of my unaccountable life.”[^38] Her _Narrative_ keeps its promise, introducing a narrator nearly as descriptive as she is impossible to describe.[^39] If Cibber’s story can be traced through the boldly printed appearances of his given name in periodicals and gossip columns, playbills and puffs, Charke’s story must be told in a series of pseudonyms. In her youth she was Charlotte Cibber, the favorite daughter of a famous father until her marriage to Richard Charke changed her name and estranged her family. Before the passage of the 1737 Licensing Act made employment on the stage harder to come by, she was Miss Charlotte Charke, famed for her roles in breeches and as impudent servants—as well as for parts that parodied her father staged by his nemesis (and Charke’s sometime employ-
er) Henry Fielding. To readers of novels she was Miss Charlotte Evelyn or Jane Elstone or even Henry Dumont, the long-suffering protagonists of fiction often read as autobiographical. And throughout much of her adult life she was Mr. Brown, a male guise that allowed her to pursue several careers denied to women and that facilitated her living with (and sleeping with?) a mysterious female companion whom she called, simply, “Mrs. Brown.”

Like her father before her, Charke vacillates throughout her autobiography between craving visibility and legibility as a means of acquiring property for herself and avoiding visibility and legibility as a trap by which she might become the property of someone else. Yet as this series of pseudonyms and costumes hints, Charke’s status as a woman makes her status as a celebrity somewhat more complex. Like Cibber, Charke must negotiate between her own desire to be a private individual—that is, one relatively protected from the jibes, jests, and critiques of the public—and her audience’s demand that she be a celebrity—that is, one who willingly surrenders herself to her public as if she has nothing to hide. Charke’s audience had another demand that further complicated the first: that Charke be a woman—a role that denied her entry into many public spaces (like the coffeehouses that Mr. Spectator was said to have inhabited) and that charged her with impropriety should she venture from the private sphere. In appearing onstage or in public, in other words, Charke was fulfilling the demands for celebrity at the same time that she was violating the rules for womanhood. Not only did her public life open her up to her spectators’ dissections of her private thoughts and activities; it opened her up to her spectators’ critique of her gender as well. A detailed examination of Charke’s description of her first appearance onstage reveals several similarities and a few key differences between her brand of overexpression and her father’s—and begins to suggest some reasons why her overexpressions, ultimately, failed to blunt her spectators’ critiques.

Charke’s means of acquiring property depended on her willingness, as a player, to show herself off, as well as her willingness, as a celebrity, to make herself legible. She enjoyed her first taste of financial independence as an actress of bit parts on the Drury Lane stage—an experience she introduces by describing her eagerness to see her name written legibly and recognizably in the playbills. “I must beg Leave to give the Reader an Idea of that Extacy of Heart I felt, on seeing the Character I was to appear in the Bills,” Charke writes about snagging her first role, as Mademoiselle in Vanbrugh’s The Provok’d Wife; “though my Joy was somewhat dash’d, when I came to see it inserted, By a young Gentlewoman, who had never appear’d on any Stage before.”

For the young actress, the passage implies, her legitimacy as a professional and as a wage-earner depends on her legibility as a name on the Drury Lane playbills.

Craving the recognition of her name rather than a general reference to her station, Charke is delighted when, upon her second appearance, she is upgraded from a “young Gentlewoman” to a proper noun. “My name was in Capitals [in the playbills] on this second Attempt,” she continues; “and I dare aver, that the Perusal of it, from one End of the Town to the other, for the first Week, was my most immediate and constant Business: Nor do I believe it cost me less, in Shoes and Coaches, than two or three Guineas, to gratify the extravagant Delight I had, not only in reading the Bills, but sometimes hearing myself spoken of, which luckily was to my Advantage.”41 Thus Charke celebrates her legibility and visibility, enjoying the repetition and distribution of her name “from one end of town to the other” and taking great pride in “sometimes hearing [herself] spoken of.” Like her father, the young actress is quick to recognize that increased visibility produces increased privilege and increased profits.

Such visibility also, however, produces increased liability. Only a page later Charke has found much to regret in her newly minted fame. She echoes her father’s discomfort with the scrutiny exacted upon the eighteenth-century actor when she reveals her apprehensions that her first attempts should suffer by comparison to the performances of the great actresses of her day. “Now I leave to any reasonable Person, what I went through, in undertaking two such Characters, after two of the greatest Actresses in the Theatre, viz. Mrs. Oldfield and Mrs. Porter,” Charke writes of her early performances as an understudy. “I solemnly declare, that I expected to make an odd Figure in the Bills of Mortality——DIED ONE, OF CAPITAL CHARACTERS.”42 By “CAPITAL CHARACTERS” Charke suggests not only the choice theatrical characters that she will play in lieu of her more famous peers but also the “name in capitals” that clearly identifies her on the playbills. While they are necessary to Charke’s acquisition of property, both sets of characters also betray Charke by forcing her “odd Figure” into a set of conventionalized definitions—the standardized language of the playbill, the standardized letters of the printed page, and the stock characters of the eighteenth-century stage. Like the identity supposedly expressed by her “handsome lac’d Hat,” the obvious significations of such “capital characters” imprison Charke in an identity that can be “so well described.”43 The same visibility that facilitates her possession of property also marks Charke as the property of the spectators who gaze upon her and rename her according to the nouns they think she deserves.
Charke’s problem here resembles her father’s, if it increases the stakes: for both father and daughter, fame demands servitude to increasingly normative ideals of gender—and to others’ definitions of self. But for Charke, unlike for Cibber, obscurity is not only unthinkable (her fame, after all, was thrust upon her at birth); it also bars her from one of the few (and certainly the most profitable) careers available to eighteenth-century women. With her social status more precarious, Charke must discover a strategy more radical than her father’s. She does so, I will suggest, by adapting Cibber’s overexpressive strategies to perform her gendered body as a blank. While Cibber’s overexpressions portray his gender as both-at-once—the wig so masculine it is feminine—Charke’s restage her gender as neither-at-all. And while Cibber strips down to a “Nakedness” layered with both masculine and feminine signifiers, Charke presents a nakedness to which no gender can be assigned and through which no gender can be interpreted.

Charke hints at this strategy when she imagines her appearance in the “Bills of Mortality” not as a male or a female (as the bills often divided the dead) but rather as the ungendered pronoun “one.” She develops this strategy further throughout her Narrative, in which her layers and layers of disguises serve only to emphasize the illegibility of the body they seem both to express and to conceal.

Charke’s promising career as an actress on London’s licensed stages was short-lived, for soon after her debut she was banned from Drury Lane by decree of the theater manager Charles Fleetwood (the primary target of Charke’s biting satire The Art of Management) and banned from all other city stages by the decree of the 1737 Licensing Act. Banned, too, from her father’s household, Charke struck out on her own, wandering London and the countryside beyond in the employ of several companies of strolling players—and in the guise of a man. The stories she relates of her adventures suggest the ways that she used gendered costumes, gendered props, and gendered language to overexpress a body marked as feminine until it became blank of any recognizable gender at all.

One of Charke’s most successful ventures after 1737 was as a puppet master, a disguise that allowed her to earn money without disobeying the Licensing Act’s ban on “plays” in the strictest sense. Extant playbills and puffs advertising Charke’s popular performances list as their headliner a spectacular Punch “in petticoats.” A stock character of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English puppet theater, Punch was a doll marked by a bulbous nose and overly enlarged facial features that suggested a rampant and overly legible masculinity. Punch wears his masculinity on his sleeve in much the same
way that Cibber wore his masculinity on his head—or, rather, in his flowing, phallic wig. Cibber’s wig invites us to read his exterior as an indication of what lay beneath. By dressing Punch “in petticoats,” however, Charke seems to suggest a disconnect between Punch’s body and his costume—a disconnect that renders his gender as nonnormative as that of the woman who operated his body (and who was known, on occasion, to don a “cocked-up” cap). Yet even as we draw comparisons between Charke’s transvestitism and that of her petticoated Punch, it’s important to keep in mind that Punch is but a puppet. Charke’s reference to a puppet’s gendered anatomy necessarily calls to mind not only Charke’s own anatomy but also the most famous scene of Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair*—a play frequently in repertory over the course of Charke’s career. The climax of the scene occurs when a puppet lifts his costume to reveal his lack of genitalia, thus exposing not only his blank gender but also the hypocrisy of his antitheatrical interlocutor, who has been fooled into thinking him a man. Playing with the gender of a performer that by definition has no gender, Charke suggests that the bulbous nose and unmistakable face that expose Punch’s “natural” masculinity are as performative as the petticoats that supposedly conceal this “nature.” Beneath his nose—as beneath his clothes—Punch’s gender is a blank. Similarly, Charke implies, any spectator who looks for her gender or sexuality beneath the clothes she wears necessarily exposes himself as a fool who looks for an interior self where there is, she suggests, no interior at all. Here again, Charke’s gendered performances trump her father’s: his exaggerated costumes suggest a body so masculine it is feminine, but her exaggerated puppets challenge the very existence of—or at least the relevance of—a gendered body beyond its exterior performance.

When Charke incorporates the details of her puppet show into the pages of her *Narrative*, the confusion that her performance suggests between masculine bodies and feminine bodies and between costume and corpus re-appears as a grammatical confusion between subject and object. “For some Time I resided at the *Tennis-Court* with my Puppet-Show, which was allowed to be the most elegant that was ever exhibited,” Charke boasts. “I was so very curious, that I bought Mezzotinto’s of several eminent Persons, and had the Faces carved from them. Then, in regard to my Cloaths, I spared for no Cost to make them splendidly magnificent, and the Scenes were agreeable to the rest. This Affair stood me in some Hundreds, and would have paid all Costs and Charges, if I had not, through excessive Fatigue in accomplishing it, acquired a violent Fever, which had like to have carried me off, and consequently gave
Unclear throughout the passage is who, in Charke’s puppet show, fulfills the role of the critic and who is criticized. Who, in other words, is being exposed here? In his book *Puppets and Popular Culture*, Scott Cutler Shershow points out that the exaggerated facial features of Charke’s puppets transform into a low-brow, “popular” form the faces of the “several eminent persons” who likely made up at least a portion of Charke’s audiences. Charke reinforces the class dynamics of this transformation when she mentions that her caricature-like puppets have been carved from “Mezzotint[s].” Because of its relative expense, mezzotint was a form of printmaking consumed mainly by the upper classes. Charke has taken expensive portraits of her upper-class neighbors and reproduced them as caricatures. By projecting her patrons’ faces back to them in these deformed, distended versions, Shershow argues, she makes her spectators into the spectacles, as she conceals herself behind the stage on which her marionettes perform.

The syntax of Charke’s sentences accomplishes a similar reversal. When she describes herself as “one of the principal Exhibiters for those Gentry” who attended her shows, her wording leaves ambiguous whether she exhibits her puppets for the pleasure of the upper classes or whether she exhibits the upper classes themselves. The convoluted clauses of the sentence following this one only compound the ambiguity of the spectator-spectacle/subject-object relationship: “I was one of the principal Exhibiters for those Gentry; whose Mouths were, like many others we have seen move without any Reality of Utterance, or at least so unintelligible in the Attempt, they might as well have closed their Lips, without raising an Expectation they were unlucky enough to disappoint, whether ORATORS or PLAYERS, is not material.”47 The antecedent to which Charke’s “whose” here refers is, like the subject of the earlier sentence, significantly ambiguous. Is Charke describing as “unintelligible” the utterances of her patrons, who speak in a tongue so class-consciously verbose that it is nonsensical? Does this description apply instead to Charke’s puppets, whose mouths move as she lends them a voice as “unintelligible” as the sentence that describes it? Or is the description instead a commentary on those tragic players who fail as orators by strutting and fretting their hour upon the stage—actors, perhaps, like Charke’s father, who was parodied as a nonsensical puppet in *The Author’s Farce* and whom Charke ventriloquizes throughout her own *Narrative*?

I return to Cibber here because Charke’s refusal to distinguish between
subject and object in this passage from her *Narrative* recalls Cibber’s similar refusal to distinguish between “Witness” and “Orator” in the Dedication to his *Apology*. Like Cibber’s, Charke’s convoluted sentences dissolve the standard (and often gendered) hierarchy of subject over object, observer over observed. Yet like her performances, Charke’s language, too, goes above and beyond her father’s. Referring to but revising her father’s gendered language, Charke presents a gender identity that cannot be described as either masculine or feminine—and that cannot even quite be described as Cibberian. Instead, as a further example will confirm, it becomes unrecognizable, indescribable—as the gender of the body that writes it becomes a blank.

Both the self-consciousness and the gendered significance of Charke’s borrowings from her father come into focus late in the *Narrative*, when Charke recalls (but does not quite reproduce) one of her father’s most egregious misspellings. The scene begins when Charke, her puppet show dissolved and her London theater career unsuccessful, takes her show on the road. After the grandeur of the London stages, the resources of the traveling players seem impoverished. “One Scene and a Curtain, with some of the worst of their Wardrobe, made up the *Paraphernalia* [sic] of the Stage, of which I was Prime Minister,” she writes; “and, though under as many Disadvantages as a Set of miserable Mortals could patiently endure, from the before-mentioned Reasons, and an inexhaustible Fund of Poverty, through the General Bank of the whole Company, . . . we all went into a joint Resolution to be industrious.”

48 As in her earlier replacement of the laced hat of the “cavalier” for the crepe-covered hat of the “Coachman,” Charke rejects the royal spectacle for which her father was known. If Cibber portrayed himself as the deformed king of the theater, Charke strips herself down to the accoutements of its more modest (and more unmarked) “Prime Minister.”

Charke’s misspelling of the word *paraphernalia*, however, implies a performance that is less normative—and more Cibberian—than an initial reading might suggest. As Fidelis Morgan notes in her edition of the *Narrative*, Cibber himself had famously misspelled this word (as “paraphonalia”) in his preface to *The Provok’d Husband*.49 (This was the same preface, interestingly, where he committed his most egregious overexpression in describing an actress who “outdid her usual Outdoings.”) The mistake delighted Cibber’s critics, most notably Henry Fielding, who immortalized it in *The Author’s Farce*, a play with which Charke was intimately familiar. I will return to Charke in a moment, but I want first to examine Cibber’s use of the word—and its gender implications—in order better to understand the significance of Charke’s repetition of it.
Cibber’s preface to *The Provok’d Husband* consists mainly of praise for the play’s leading lady, Anne Oldfield, who appeared as the reformed female rake Lady Townly. Cibber writes, “The Qualities [Oldfield] had acquired, were the *Genteel* and the *Elegant*. The one in her Air, and the other in her Dress, never had her Equal on the Stage; and the Ornaments she herself provided, (particularly in this Play) seem’d in all Respects, the *Paraphonalia* of a Woman of Quality.” In Cibber’s usage, the word refers to the stage properties and “Ornaments” that make Anne Oldfield into a “Woman of Quality”—or, more accurately, to the stage properties that she supplies to express her true identity as a “Woman of Quality.” Like the wig that enables the transformation of Cibber’s male rakes into men of feeling, *paraphonalia* suggests the accessories that refer to Oldfield’s naked sincerity, which enable her properly (and legibly) gendered performance as the reformed Lady Townly.

Cibber’s misspelling of the word works against the apparent propriety and legibility of this gendered performance, problematizing the relationship between Oldfield’s performance and increasingly codified categories of gender as it problematizes the relationship between Cibber’s word and increasingly standardized methods of spelling it. It was perhaps for this reason that Fielding—an author already known for scolding Cibber’s deformations of language as well as for depicting and descrying nonnormative genders in works like *The Female Husband*—chose the misspelled *paraphonalia* to anchor a ballad he inserted into *The Author’s Farce* (1730). In his lullaby for the Queen of Nonsense in the play within Fielding’s play, Sir Farcical Comic (a foppish writer of comedies who bears a marked resemblance to Cibber) croons:

```
Can my Goddess then forget
Paraphonalia,
Paraphonalia?
Can she the crown to another head set,
Than of her Paraphonalia?
If that had not done too,
Remember my bone too,
My bone, my bone, my bone.
Sure my goddess never can
Forget my marrow bone.52
```

Morgan points out that Fielding’s repetition of the word “bone” pokes fun at a particularly unpopular double entendre later in *The Provok’d Husband*, when the innkeeper Mrs. Motherly asks her guest Sir Francis Wronghead,
“Will you give me leave to get you a broiled Bone, or so, till the Ladies come home, Sir?” In Cibber’s play, “bone” suggests the male genitalia. Fielding plays with this suggestion in his parody, which converts paraphonalia, too, from a word that signifies Oldfield’s accouterments to a word that signifies Cibber’s male body as he offers it up to his Queen. Fielding’s association of this paraphonalia with the Queen of Nonsense, moreover, attaches the word to the former age of spectacle rather than his own age of the unmarked bourgeois. But Fielding echoes Cibber’s own overexpressive language and suggests the illegibility of Cibber’s gender as he repeats (“my bone, my bone, my bone”) and deforms (the perpetual misspelling of paraphonalia) these words. As Jill Campbell has noted, Fielding often expresses some ambivalence about whether gender constitutes an essential or a performative aspect of identity. His language here suggests that Cibber’s gender, at least, is performed, but performed poorly, made illegible by its overexpressive accouterments.

When Charke takes up these accouterments in her own performance, she renders them even more illegible, miring them even deeper in contradictory meanings. In Charke’s Narrative, as in Cibber’s preface, “Paraphernalia” suggests the accessories of a gender identity; it signifies the props and costumes that Charke employs in her performances in breeches roles. Rather than the props and ornaments of a “Woman of Quality,” however, Charke’s “Paraphernalia” consists of the trappings of a man. The same word that for Cibber suggests a recognizably female body and for Fielding a deformed (or a too obviously performed) male body suggests for Charke a body that is unrecognizable according to the definition of either. By misspelling paraphernalia, Charke evokes her father’s overexpressed, illegible signification of gender. But by misspelling it differently than her father has misspelled it, she goes beyond the efforts of his parodists—who simply reproduce his overexpressions—and instead dissolves their meanings even further. Not recognizably feminine, not recognizably masculine, and not even recognizably Cibberian, Charke’s language here makes both undeniable and unreadable the “capital characters” through which an identity might be “so well described” and through which a well-accoutered body might be arrested and contained.

Such passages shed new light on the first and most famous passage from her Narrative, in which the four-year-old Charke rises early, creeps to where her father’s “enormous bushy Tie-wig” hangs on its hook, and places its billowing bulk on her diminutive head. The episode has become the centerpiece not only of Charke’s 1755 autobiography but of recent critics’ readings of that autobiography as well: a way of including Charke among the queer writers
hunting for ways to express their nonnormative genders in normative language. I want to suggest, however, that Charke’s first adventure in transvestitism marks her indoctrination not into queerness—a failed masculinity that we must read as her attempt to express nonnormative gender—but rather into overexpression—an exaggerated masculinity that we should read as her attempt to avoid expressing any gender at all.

Charke’s many adventures in male dress begin, as she narrates them, just shy of her fifth birthday, when she enters the servants’ hall of her father’s summer home in Twickenham before the rest of the family has awakened. “By the Help of a long Broom, I took down a Waistcoat of my Brother’s, and an enormous bushy Tie-wig of my Father’s,” she writes, “which entirely enclos’d my Head and Body, with the Knots of the Ties thumping my little Heels as I march’d along, with slow and solemn Pace. The Covert of Hair in which I was conceal’d, with the Weight of a monstrous Belt and large Silver-hilted Sword, that I could scarce drag along, was a vast Impediment in my Procession: And, what still added to the other Inconveniences I labor’d under, was whelming myself under one of my Father’s large Beaver-hats, laden with Lace, as thick and broad as a Brickbat.” Modern readers of Charke’s Narrative have described its most famous passage as Charke’s trying on a masculinity that proves insufficient. “Charke’s textual cross-dressing,” writes Kristina Straub, “acts out with a vengeance a threat posed by the cross-dressed actress as a reflection of ‘failed,’ ideologically inadequate masculinities” such as the castrated male, a role that Straub identifies with Cibber’s fops.

As we have seen, however, Cibber’s wig signified not a “failed” but rather an overly abundant masculinity—one that, in its overtness, troubled the boundaries between the body natural and the body performed. So, too, Charke’s description of her father’s costume emphasizes not its inadequacies but rather its excesses. What is most striking about this passage is the sheer enormity of Charke’s masculine attire. On Cibber the wig was hardly discreet, but on Charke’s body it appears voluminous—even more so as an accompaniment to the “monstrous belt and large [and phallic] silver-hilted sword,” the beaver lined with lace that, far from suggesting delicacy, is “as thick and broad as a brickbat.” Like the cocked-up cap of Charke’s generous bailiff, the costume she assumes here suggests a masculinity that exceeds its bounds.

Where queer readings of Charke’s transvestitism fall short, then, is in their failure to account for the obviousness of the signifiers she employs. Despite their disagreements, such readings share the assumption that her performances on stage, street, and page attempt to express an identity that doesn’t fit into normative categories of gender and sexuality. Instead, Char-
ke’s ambiguously gendered performances work to dissolve and unmark her identity by suggesting that the very signifiers that mark those categories don’t mean what they are assumed to mean. Charke’s performances are not expressions of an interior self struggling to make itself known through inadequate languages. Rather, they are attempts to expose the signifiers of gender as not so clear after all—and as such to enjoy the privilege of being looked at without suffering the limitations of being defined.

The overexpressive implications of Charke’s gendered performances compound as the passage continues. After her playful description of taking the wig from its hook and marching through the back halls of her father’s house, she decides to proceed into town. “Being thus accoutred,” she writes, “I began to consider that ’twould be impossible for me to pass for Mr. Cibber in Girl’s Shoes, therefore took an Opportunity to slip out of Doors after the Gardener, who went to his Work, and roll’d myself into a dry Ditch, which was as deep as I was high; and, in this Grotesque Pigmy-State, walk’d up and down the Ditch bowing to all who came by me.”

The print composed for early editions of the autobiography (figure 6) makes some sense of the staging that Charke describes in the first sentence quoted here. Wearing a large man’s coat and small girl’s shoes, the four-year-old child stands in a ditch as high as her shoulders, so that her head, burdened with its big wig and beaver hat, is just seen over the top of the ditch by the passers-by who stand outside of it.

Her tumble into the ditch, Charke notes, has covered her in dirt, leaving her in a “Grotesque Pigmy-State” that indicates both exaggeration and indescribability. As a grotesque, Charke appears a clown: a figure, much like her Punch in petticoats, marked by exaggerated and distorted body parts, an all-too-visible corporeality. Yet at the same time that this corporeality is overt it is also unreadable. Describing herself as a “Pigmy,” Charke compares her dirt-encrusted face to the dark skin of an unreadable racial Other. The effectiveness of black paint at transforming an actor’s famous face into illegibility was well known by Charke’s contemporaries: fourteen years before the publication of Charke’s Narrative, David Garrick made his professional debut as Aboan in Thomas Southerne’s adaption of Oroonoko—“a part in which his features could not easily be discerned,” notes Thomas Davies. “Under the disguise of black countenance, he hoped to escape being known, should it be his misfortune [in his first attempt on the stage] not to please.”

Here, the mud on her face seems not only to obscure Charke’s features but also to remove her from categories of non-normative genders and sexualities altogether. The racial identity she takes on seems to exempt her from all considerations of the gender or sexual identity she embodies. Charke proposes
her “Grotesque Pigmy-State” as an alternative to the implied ridiculousness of trying to “pass for Mr. Cibber in Girl’s Shoes.” Unable to reconcile her male dress with her “Girl’s Shoes,” she implies, she instead takes on an identity that makes such reconciliation unnecessary—an identity that, like that she creates with her misspelled Paraphanalia, is so Other that it presents her gender as a blank.

6. Francis Garden, An Exact Representation of Mrs. Charke Walking in the Ditch at Four Years of Age (1755). © Trustees of the British Museum.
Combining the illegibility of the unknown “Pigmy” and the supreme visibility of the “grotesque,” then, Charke’s performance in her father’s wig erases her identity even as it makes her the center of attention. And yet like so many of her borrowings from her father, this one takes Charke above and beyond even Cibber’s most outrageous overexpressions. If the wig is large on him, it is even larger on her. If on him it suggests an identity so masculine it is feminine, on her it points to the ridiculousness of making such distinctions and the foolishness of any spectator who analyzes a celebrity’s costume—or even dissects his or her anatomy—for signifiers of his or her “self.”

CHARLOTTE CHARKE AND THE FAILURE OF OVEREXPRESSION

Charke’s overexpressions in performance and print, in big wigs and misspelled words, differ from her father’s overexpressions in one other significant way, however, and that is in their failure. Like the anonymous author of The Laureat, declaring himself incapable of the “Herculian” task of translating Cibber’s prose or of determining Cibber’s sexuality, Cibber’s critics ultimately surrender their efforts to interpret him. Not so the readers of Charlotte Charke. Before I conclude this chapter, I want to turn briefly to Charke’s reception by both contemporary and modern readers to ask why, in her case, overexpression failed to make her illegible.

As I have discussed, several critics attempted to mimic or parody Cibber’s Apology, and faux autobiographies of Cibber and his descendants proliferated in the years following the book’s 1740 publication. Charke’s imitators, however, went a step further. In October 1755, only a few months after The Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke appeared in bookshops, the Gentleman’s Magazine offered its own story of Charke’s life. The short article was not a parody or a tribute. It reproduced excerpts from Charke’s Narrative nearly verbatim, but with one crucial difference: the (unauthorized) biography translated Charke’s first-person narrative into a third-person narrative, replacing all of the subjective pronouns “I” with the distancing and obviously gendered “she.” Further contributing to the normative language of the Gentleman’s Magazine excerpts were several interjections by the editor pointing out the unacceptability of Charke’s behavior toward her father and of her gender play.

The Magazine’s appropriations of Charke’s text represent a failure of overexpression in three ways. First, the magazine’s plagiarism of Charke’s text weakens her attempts to make money by her visibility by siphoning off her
royalties from readers who might decide to purchase the Magazine rather than her Narrative. Second, its commentary on Charke’s actions impose on her prose precisely the normative viewpoint that overexpression attempts to elude or avoid. Third—and perhaps most interestingly—the Magazine’s rewriting of Charke’s pronouns circumscribes the precise relationship between subject and object (changing “I” to “she,” the person speaking to one who is spoken about) and between masculinity and femininity (replacing the ambiguous “I” with a clearly gendered “she”) that Charke’s Narrative itself seems bent on keeping ambiguous. The revisions suggest a discomfort with the blank gender that Charke presents, an effort to replace Charke’s evacuation of a gendered body and a gendered identity with a clear affirmation of her as a woman, as a nonnormative sexuality, and as the object of the gaze.

As egregious as these attempts by the Gentleman’s Magazine to determine and cement Charke’s gender and sexuality may be, we can see hints of that same desire in the more recent, “queer” readings that have dominated criticism of Charke’s Narrative for the past three decades. By excerpting Charke’s Narrative in her 2003 collection The Literature of Lesbianism, for instance, Terry Castle emphasizes the very passages that the Gentleman’s Magazine condemned; and her attempts to mark Charke’s pointedly ambiguous prose as definitively sexual recall the Magazine’s similar attempts to mark her pronouns as definitely gendered. By labeling her transvestitism as either an inner proclivity toward a masculine identity or a deep desire for her father’s love, moreover, scholars like Erin Mackie, Cheryl Wanko, and Felicity Nussbaum imply that we must read Charke’s ambiguous Narrative for its true confessions.

Overexpression, however, gives us a new way of thinking about autobiography: it is no longer only an attempt—necessarily imperfect—to express the self through normative language. It may also be an attempt to avoid expressing the self—or, more accurately, to make a self impossible to read. So why do we seem to be so much more hesitant to give up on interpreting Charke’s meaning than we were to interpret her father’s? Why do we continue to ask, more than 250 years after Charke published her ambiguous and gender-bending Narrative, who she really was or what inner desires she was really trying to express?

I want to hazard a speculation that later chapters will flesh out more fully, and that is that our understanding of Charke as a female writer makes us more willing to read her autobiography as a confession—or her performances as expressions—of her true self. If we understand a man’s costume as cover-
ing or distracting from his true self, in other words, we understand a woman’s
costume as expressing that self; and if we understand Cibber’s eccentricities
or omissions as clever manipulations of his persona, we are always tempted
to understand Charke’s eccentricities or omissions as attempts, never entire-
ly successful, to confess her true self in a language that seems inadequate
to her femininity, or to her lesbianism, or even to her relationship with her
father. Such readings are conditioned, too, by the impact that studies of
the novel—to the exclusion of performance—have had over theories of the
eighteenth-century self. Works like Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel* and Nancy
Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, as well as more recent studies such
as Wahrman’s and McKeon’s, have taught us to understand the emergence of
a stable and legible self in eighteenth-century England as both inevitable and
essential to the makings of modernity. Charke’s struggles to exempt her body
and its performances from the categories of selfhood emerging to contain
them, however, suggest the powerful advantages that illegibility might offer
the modern individual and the crucial role that performance studies—in its
attention to disappearing selves, illegible selves, and unstable selves—might
play in our understanding of eighteenth-century culture.

In excavating what I have described as the overexpressive elements of
Charke’s prose and performances, then, I have tried to resist this temptation
to read all of Charke’s public pronouncements as private confessions. What
happens, I have asked, if we allow Charke (as we have allowed Cibber) a public
persona separate from any private inclinations? How might our readings of
women’s autobiographies in the eighteenth century change if we understand
their eccentricities not as failed attempts to express an inexpressible identity
but rather as clever attempts to overexpress personae that their audiences
demanded they make public?

In my examinations of the autobiographies of George Anne Bellamy and
Mary Robinson in chapters 4 and 5 I attempt to do precisely that, and, in do-
ing so, to understand how and why overexpression works differently for the
women than for the men that I examine. For now, I want only to suggest that
the differences have to do not with the way women write or perform their
autobiographies but rather with the ways that we read those writings, those
performances. Faced with the absent or ambiguous gender that Charke’s au-
tobiographical performances produced, we must resist the temptation voiced
by the *Gentleman’s Magazine* to fill in the blank. If we do, we might under-
stand Charke’s *Narrative* not as a confession but rather as an overexpression,
designed to resist rather than to construct a gender identity.
CONCLUSION: IF THE CAP FITS, SPARE IT

Charke’s debt to her father does not end with her 1755 Narrative but haunts her three novels and her extant plays as well. She begins her 1735 satire The Art of Management with an epigram that introduces her father’s 1704 comedy The Careless Husband and that reverberates, as well, throughout the Narrative: “Qui capit ille facit”—or, “If the cap fits, wear it.”64 In Charke’s Narrative the cap in question is a masculine one: the big beaver hat and whitened wig of Charke’s father, or the cocked-up and creped-over hat of Charke’s generous bailiff—both of them humongous appendages that dwarf her feminine body. In The Careless Husband, the cap isn’t a cap at all, but a woman’s handkerchief, a feminine accessory that tops the rakish head of Sir Charles Easy and turns him into a proper man. In neither work does the cap exactly fit. But in their ill-fitting clothes and their misfit identities, in the copiously capital characters of their autobiographies and performances, Cibber and Charke achieve a sort of imbalanced equilibrium between celebrity and spectatorship, between publicity and privacy, and between the spectacular politics of the early modern period and the politics of the gaze that had come to dominate the gender ideologies of the early eighteenth century.

And as the ill-fitting cap slides from body to body—from the foppish head of Lord Foppington to the all-too-masculine head of Colley Cibber, from the body of an actor to the body of a bailiff, and from the masculine frame of an English celebrity to the tiny form of his four-year-old daughter—as the cap slides from body to body and from gender to gender, it suggests the ways that methods of self-concealment like overexpression, too, might be passed down. The words and costumes that Charke employs don’t exactly reproduce those for which her father was known, but by referring to and expanding on her father’s performances Charke implies that the tools he used to render his persona illegible comprised not an isolated strategy but a grammar of sorts: a tradition that could be adopted and adapted to individual need. Of course, Charke herself—cast out of the theater at a young age and dying penniless in a hovel—lacked the influence to take this grammar into the mainstream. Such a task would require a man who was eccentric enough to see the value of concealing his private foibles, savvy enough to theorize it, and famous enough to spread it far and wide. As luck would have it, in the very years in which Charke was reaping the meager rewards from her autobiography’s publication, a poor parson in the town of York was madly scribbling away at a book that would make him just such a man.