Memories Beyond the Pale:
The Eighteenth-century Actress Between Stage and Closet

> What precisely would it signify for a woman's life and her narrative to be "representative" of a period? Very few women have achieved the status of "eminent" persons; and those who have done so have more commonly been labeled "exceptional" rather than "representative" women. Perhaps such women and their autobiographies would more accurately be "unrepresentative" of their period.
>
> Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women Biography* (8)

In a recent study investigating women's presence in the public sphere in Georgian England, Caroline Gonda raised a provocative issue of many implications. Could a woman take part in the nation's social life while maintaining a spotless and chaste reputation? Was she allowed to voice her opinions and contribute to public debate without jeopardizing her feminine modesty? In a culture such as eighteenth-century England, in which women's silence was considered a virtue and in which the recognition of women's civic, social, and ethical contribution was primarily relegated to the domestic sphere, living a public life for women was tantamount to being thrust upon a stage — where their privacy was open to violation and their speech was scandal.

The autobiographical and biographical reconstructions discussed in this paper must be read in such an ideological context - at the heart of a period of transition in which the emergence of the idea of (gendered) Self was accompanied by the consolidating of a new class identity and by the debate concerning the rights of the individual. Although the texts themselves differ one from the other, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke* (Charke 1755)*, An Apology for the Life of George Anne Bellamy* (Bellamy 1785), and the two biographies of Dorothy Jordan examined here (Boaden; Tomalin) all deal with the lives of actresses who worked in the Eighteenth Century and were remembered by later generations more for their love affairs and their much-discussed private lives than for their stage careers.

At a certain moment in their careers, these three artists decided to represent themselves by setting their own stories down in writing — in fictional or autobiographical form — following a script of their own design. Despite this firm intention to write about themselves, the record they

left was lost, filtered through the cultural tropes through which it had found expression, manipulated in the process of transmission, or even suppressed by those whose task it should have been to preserve it.

Analyzing these eighteenth-century biographies and autobiographies, as texts written from the margins of both culture and society, I shall try to contribute to the historiographical and literary project of contemporary women's studies, which calls for a rereading of the literary canon, a revision of the dominant model of femininity in the given period, and in this case, a reinvestigation of the many points of contact between Georgian theater and the rise of the novel.

A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke and *An Apology for the Life of George Anne Bellamy* belong to a vast corpus of thespian literature which flourished with the rise of the novel. During the Eighteenth Century, the lives and adventures of theater people as they appeared backstage and off stage became a favorite subject for avid readers. Among these autobiographies, memoirs and first person narratives, we must mention the autobiography of Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber, With an Historical View of the Stage during his own Time* (1740), *The Authentick Memoirs of that Celebrated Actress Mrs. Ann Oldfield* (1730, later reprinted as *Famous Memoirs of the Life, Amours, and Performances, of that justly celebrated, and Most Eminent Actress, Mrs Anne Oldfield*, 1731), *The Buskin and the Sock: Being Controversial Letters between Mr Thomas Sheridan, Tragedian and Mr Theophilus Cibber, Comedian* (1743) and later in the century *The Authentic Memoirs of the Late Mr. Charles Macklin, Comedian* (1798), as well as the various reprints of Bellamy's own biography, titillatingly entitled *Memoirs of a Celebrated Actress; Containing a True Account of her Various Amours, Adventures, Vicissitudes; and Interspersed with Curious Anecdotes of Several Distinguished Persons* and *Memoirs of George Anne Bellamy, Including all her Intrigues; with Genuine Anecdotes of all her Public and Private Connections. By a Gentleman of Covent Garden Theatre* (both 1785) These titles show a marked insistence on the truthfulness of their content, whose authenticity is explicitly guaranteed by the author. The formulaic repetition — "authentic", "true", "genuine" — assures the reader that her desire for information will be satisfied (in terms of the paradigms of rational knowledge dominant in this period) while at the same time arousing a prurient curiosity, evoking the tradition of scandalous memoirs so popular in the period (among the many examples, we may

list the memoirs of Laetitia Pilkington, 1748-54, Lady Frances Vane, 1750-1, and Constantia Phillips, 1748-9) (Nussbaum; Thompson).[1]

At the heart of this multifarious literary corpus stands the figure of the actress, whose complex status and dubious morality - tainted by the very idea of female public display - has inspired the title of this essay. "Memories" in fact refers to four separate discursive categories which are useful in defining eighteenth-century memoirs written by actresses. These categories may be defined as follows:

1. *The margins of discourse*: in that autobiographical texts written by women belong to a genre that has always been investigated in terms of its relationship to male identity. The margins of discourse correspond to those outer fringes to which women's voices were banished, the shadowy zone where they managed to break through the cultural silence imposed upon them for so long. As Sidonie Smith authoritatively asserts:

> Perhaps the absence of women's texts from the texts of autobiographical criticism, as well as the distorted readings and the cavalier dismissals of their texts when they are included in the obligatory chapter or aside, speaks to a fundamental resistance to valuing women's experience and vision. Having appropriated the idea that personal experience is a credible subject of literary attention, literary foregathers rendered the genre an *androcentric contract* dependent on the erasure of women's texts (Smith 16, italics mine)

In opposition to this dominant cultural model, over the last twenty-five years many scholars in fields connected to women's studies, feminist historicism, and the history of ideas have collaborated to bring about a thorough and radical reconsideration of the paradigms of western knowledge, a revisionist project entailing a complete reevaluation of history - and especially of the *perception* and transmission of the past over the course of centuries. Thus we have moved on from the idea of a "real solemn history"[2] - in which the civic, political, and educative function of women was determined by a sociability made of apparently impenetrable boundaries - to a "vision of the

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[1] Although moving from culturally different premises, James Boaden's pre-Victorian memorial of Dorothy Jordan aims at vindicating the actress' reputation through a narrative strategy similar to those of the sensational Eighteenth-century thespian biographies: "having had the pleasure of Mrs. Jordan's personal acquaintance for some years, and having paid unwearied attention to her professional exertions from their very commencement in London, it was not, perhaps, too extravagant a thought, that I might construct, a narrative, not without attraction of two kinds: - that should exhibit a more perfect picture of her than had been given while she occupied the STAGE, and a truer representation of her PRIVATE life, than other writers had yet been enabled to supply" ("Preface" in Boaden, I, i-ii; emphases in the text).

[2] Catherine Morland states, "history, real solemn history I cannot be interested in [...] the men so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all" (Austen 1985 123). Austen had previously parodied classic historiography in *The History of England*, an early work "with very few dates," written by a "partial, prejudiced, & ignorant Historian" (138).

past very different from that which previously held sway, as history is rewritten to include the stories of women, to make them visible once more" (Eger, Grant, Ó Gallchoir, and Warburton 2).

2. *The margins of society*: for it was to the outer fringes that the actor or actress was relegated by Eighteenth-century society. After the Licensing Act of 1737 established a monopoly on theatrical productions – the Royal patents being granted exclusively to Covent Garden Theater and Drury Lane Theater - all the independent theater companies excluded by this provision - including the company directed by Henry Fielding, in which Charlotte Charke played until 1737 - were outlawed, whilst the unrulier stage-players found themselves liable to incarceration.

The Licensing Act itself was an amendment to a previous edict issued in the reign of Queen Anne, designed to control beggars and vagabonds (An act for reducing the Laws relating to Rogues, Vagabonds, Sturdy Beggars and Vagrants into One Act of Parliament and for the more effectual punishment of such rogues and sending them whither they ought to be sent). This law transformed actors and itinerant artists into a social subclass, reduced to the status of beggars and vagrants. In this new social model, stage players were considered as heterodox figures banished to the margins of society (Straub). Victims of class discrimination, they were subordinated to the will of the audiences and public authorities alike, in a hierarchical bond.

That the institution of the theater and the profession of playwright and stage-player were bound up with immoral and illicit activities irremediably degraded the status of all professionals working in this field, in particular women. Not even fame and economic success could grant a woman respectability, authority, and dignity once she had accepted to transform herself into a public commodity. As Dorothy Jordan's cook exclaimed, scornfully slapping down a shilling on the kitchen table, " 'Arrah, now, honey, with this *thirteener*, won't I sit in the gallery? - and won't your Royal Grace give me a *courtsy*, and won't I give your Royal Highness a *howl*, and a *hiss* into the bargain!'" (Boaden I 344; emphases in the original text).

3. *The margins of genre*: although these texts profess to adhere to criteria of truthfulness and verisimilitude typical of a historical narrative or history, they belie a manipulation of facts and a reinterpretation of reality which pertains to fiction. This process of formal imitation mirrors a well-established literary convention of the period — fictitious biographical narratives such as those of Robinson Crusoe, Pamela Andrews, Clarissa Harlowe, which were presented by their authors (in the role of editors) as authentic narratives about real people. Unlike the typical diegesis of theatrical biographies (which belong to the scandalous histories architext, a sub-genre whose

protagonists perform notorious and even infamous deeds),[3] autobiography allowed the actor or actress to speak for him/herself, without editorial filters or narrative ventriloquism. In this way by becoming the impresarios of their own experiences, the players put their private lives on show in the publishers' market place and on the payroll of an audience ever more eager to snatch secret peeps behind the curtain, as in the title of a well-known contemporary theatrical record (*The Secret History of the Green Rooms: Containing Authentic and Entertaining Memoirs of the Actors and Actresses in the Three Theatres Royal*, 1790)

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4. *The margins of canon*: although Eighteenth-century theatrical autobiographies (particularly those with female authorship) were popular with the readers of the times, they have now been forgotten, or have been distorted through inaccurate editions, as is the case of Charke's once famous autobiography. In yet other instances, female thespian voices have been systematically repressed and marginalized, as in the case of Dorothy Jordan's letters to her long-standing lover, the Duke of Clarence.

Many a time the notoriety enjoyed by these memoirs depended indeed on their marginality. For example, the ample space dedicated by *The Gentleman's Magazine* to Charke's narrative between October and December 1755 (fifteen closely printed pages while Johnson's *Dictionary* had only been warranted six pages) (Turley) must not be taken as a sign of positive interest in this extraordinary heroine and her exciting adventures. Rather it may be interpreted as a detailed illustration - with crafty instructive undertones - of the infinite misfortunes and trials which awaited those women who stubbornly insisted on transgressing the prevailing rules of gender and morality.[4] In this sense, the narrative of the notorious *gender*-bending Charke was paradoxically subject to a mutation in *genre*, transformed unwittingly into an edifying parable and curiously constructive conduct-book, which cast its flamboyant heroine's transgressions into the conventional perspective of the cautionary tale.

The phrase "margins of the canon" is connected to the other theme evoked in the title of this paper, "Memories/Memoirs". While in certain contexts the term *memory* may be used in the *active*

[3] The narratives dealing with the lives of criminals may furnish us with an adequate analogy for theatrical (auto)biographies. The subtitling of judicial memoirs reflects a strategy similar to the one evinced in actors' memoirs, and represents the full affirmation of Ian Watt's concept of formal realism. See Gonda, and the works cited in Eger, Grant, Ó Gallchoir and Warburton (2, 291, and 293).

[4] The most noteworthy feature of Charke's narrative as edited for *The Gentleman's Magazine*, is her change in narratorial status, indicated by the shift from the first to the third person. This transformation corresponds to a strategy which utterly disregards narrative authority and transforms the *author* of the story into an *actress* in someone else's script.

sense, to indicate the direct record left by these eighteenth-century actresses of their lives, their times, and their profession (*memoirs*), conversely it may be also used in a *passive* form, that is, *the memory of these women* as it was passed down to later generations and the posthumous representations of which they were made the objects. As a matter of fact women's theatrical memoirs must be placed in a liminal space, between representation and self-presentation. From this cultural *limen* the actress - generally object of public scrutiny and thus victim of a specific sexual and social construction - expressed herself and told her story following specific cultural tropes, in a narration destined to be transmitted, translated, and rewritten first by the public and then by the critics.

The story of Charlotte Charke is a case in point. Up until quite recently her memoirs were published in deliberately biased editions, as a compendium of psychological oddities which marketed the cultural and sexual deviance of the author/narrator.[5] Rebellious daughter of the poet laureate Colley Cibber, actress and writer, leading lady of Fielding's Haymarket Theatre, and thus condemned to a long life of pecuniary struggle after the closure of this theater in 1737, Charke is not remembered so much for the multifarious professional expedients with which she managed to support herself and her daughter — in quite extraordinary fashion if we consider the limited number of social roles available to women of her days, and her awkward condition as single mother and, worse, as actress. [6] Rather she is renowned for her decision to adopt male attire on and off stage, with anecdotal inferences concerning her sexual orientation which up until quite recently accompanied - and often kept hid from view - her literary output. As aptly stated by a critic,

[5] *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke* was published for the first time in eight weekly installments between March 1 and April 19 1755. An abridged version appeared in *The Gentleman Magazine* from October to December 1755. In the same year Charke's *Narrative* came out in a single volume, in two different editions. The first was used by Robert Rehder (Charke 1999), while the second served as the basis for edition by Fidelis Morgan (Charke 1988). In an interesting "Epilogue" to her work, Morgan traces a semi-serious history of Charke's biographers, who have frequently paraphrased the author, intentionally distorting her meaning in order to justify her father's anger. Morgan writes: "Unfortunately, I wonder whether the authors of the reference books and biographies have strayed from the truth for so long that their version has become itself another 'truth.' " (Charke 1988 211) The target of Morgan's accusations would seem to be Leonard R.N. Ashley, the editor of a controversial facsimile reprinting of the *Narrative* (Charke 1969). In the present essay, all quotations from Charke's *Narrative* are taken from Robert Rehder's 1999 edition.

[6] Charke made her stage début on April 8 1730 at Drury Lane Theatre. After a brief spell at the Haymarket (1733-4), she moved back to Drury Lane, only to walk out definitely in 1736 to Henry Fielding's theater. Aside from the *Narrative*, Charke published the following: *The History of Henry Dumont Esq. and Miss Charlotte Evelyn* (1755 3rd ed. 1756), *The Mercer, or, The Fatal Extravagance* (1756?), *The Lovers' Treat, or, Unnatural Hatred* (1758), and *The History of Charles and Patty, or, The Friendly Strangers* (1760). She is also the author of the plays *The Art of Management, or, Tragedy Expell'd* (1735) and *Tit for Tat, or, Comedy and Tragedy at War* (1743). In 1738 she obtained a license to open a puppet theater (Punch's Theatre, St James's, which she directed), while in 1742 she established her own theatre company at the New Theatre, James Street, Haymarket. In 1752-3 she worked as a journalist and proof reader for *The Bristol Weekly Intelligencer* (Charke 1988 217; Charke 1999 lxiv-lxv). Her theater career covered the period 1730-1759.

"concern with labeling her as transvestite, crossdresser [sic], lesbian, bisexual, hermaphrodite, or sensationalist gets in the way of the literary vision she offers" (Fields 18).[7]

The historiographical discrimination to which Dorothy Jordan was victim is even more telling. Jordan - comic muse of the late eighteenth-century theater, adored by critics and public alike and simply known as "Shakespeare's Woman" after Charles Lamb's incisive epithet (Tomalin 3) - openly conducted a twenty-year relationship with William Duke of Clarence, future King William IV (1830-1837), to whom she bore ten children. Jordan dared to outrage public morality by playing the role of recognized consort to a royal prince and possible heir to the thrown. Their household unashamedly lived from 1797 to 1811 at the royal residence of Bushy House, a fact which did not evidently endear her to the royal entourage.

Dorothy's stubbornness and the courage with which she acted seem extraordinary, even more so in today's terms. In point of fact the behavior she scandalously embraced did challenge both the Royal Marriages Act as well as the injunctions of temperance and morality regularly addressed by George III to his subjects.[8] Forced by the dynastic politics of the Hannovers and by the future

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[7] According to Terry Castle, disguise (male or female) hearkens back to a form of sexual imitation that became very frequent over the course of the Eighteenth Century. According to Castle, cross-dressers were "sexual shape shifters" who acted out a parody of the "hieratic fixities of gender" through which Eighteenth-century society began to explore its "secular and artifactual nature" (Castle 3). However during the latter Eighteenth Century female on-stage cross-dressing became an "increasingly disturbing spectacle" (Marsden 21), as the nature of the actress's identification with her male character and her performative masculinity came under scrutiny. No longer seen as a form of harmless travesty, the result of playful thespian artistry, the spectacle of the woman-as-man ceased to satisfy male desire for a beautiful female object, and it came to imply the dangerous and illegitimate appropriation of male behavior and male prerogative. Boaden is careful to construct a conservative version of the actress' stage masculinity, which leaves gender differentiations unscathed by presenting the breeched actress as a beautifully sexualized spectacle, "*charmingly* dressed and *provokingly* at ease" (mine the italics): "When Woffington took up [the breeches parts], she did what she was not aware of, namely, that the audience permitted the *actress* to purify the character and enjoyed the language from a woman, which might have disgusted from a man speaking before women – […]. I am convinced that no creature there supposed it for a moment: it was the *travesty*, seen throughout, that really constituted the charm of your [Mrs. Woffington's] performance, and rendered it not only gay, but innocent. And thus it was with Mrs. Jordan, who, however beautiful in her figure, stood confessed a perfect and decided woman; and courted, and intrigued, and quarreled, and cudgeled, in whimsical imitation of the ruder man" (Boaden, I, 127).

[8] The Royal Marriages Act, issued at the behest of George III, was approved by Parliament in 1772. According to this Law, all the members of the royal family were required to obtain permission from the king himself and his councilors before they could marry. It is to this decree that Boaden refers to when he romanticizes as follows: "Not considering himself *entirely* a creature of the state, [the Royal Duke] had presumed to avow an affection for a woman of the most fascinating description" (Boaden, I, 207). The successive reference regards the proclamation "For the encouragement of Piety and Virtue, and for preventing and punishing of Vice, *Profaneness and Immorality*" (mine the italics) which under direct orders of the king, was read aloud four times a year in the churches throughout the Kingdom. The similarities between the title of this document and that of the famous anti-theatrical manifesto published by Jeremy Collier in 1698 (*A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, emphasis mine) appears not to have eluded William Cobbett, who launched a virulent attack on the Bushy household from the pages of the *Political Register*. Cobbett ironically explained that if the scandalous rumors were true, the duke would be guilty of breaking the laws of the Kingdom for the sake of a woman, "Mother Jordan," "who, the last time I saw her, cost me eighteen pence in her character of Nell Jobson" (Tomalin 196).

king's ingratitude[9] to leave her country and her children, she died in France, in extreme poverty, amid indifference. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, writes James Boaden, "it became a crime in the eyes of no small part of the public that Mrs. Jordan had listened to a prince" (Boaden I 207). Accordingly after William's ascent to the throne, all trace of his relationship with Jordan was wiped out by Victorian historiographers, who quickly concealed the actress's twenty-year long correspondence with William. Many of the letters the couple exchanged have remained uncatalogued and are presently scattered throughout public and private archives in London and the United States. It is on this interesting body of documents, for a long time overlooked, which Boaden based his vindicating biography. As stated in the Preface to the first volume:

> Certain private friends, for whom I entertain entire respect, here offered to my use a very interesting portion of MRS. JORDANCE'S CORRESPONDENCE; throwing a steady light upon the most MOMENTUOUS INCIDENTS in her *private* life. As they were eminently calculated to settle, by their AUTHORITY, every thing that had been questioned, and showed her candour and affection equal at least to the warmest wishes of her friends, I accepted them with pride and pleasure. Permitted to use the very *documents* themselves, I have printed them exactly from the ORIGINALS in her *own* hand-writing; they are unstudied compositions, but they all sprung warm from the heart, and, like her acting, speak its true and impassioned language. (Boaden I ii-iii)

Conversely, in writing the biography of William IV, historians have suppressed all evidence of his illicit relationship with "Nell of Clarence". As Tomalin writes with bitter irony,

> When *The Life and Times of William IV* was published in two volumes in 1884, Dora Jordan's name had disappeared, her twenty-year presence and ten children reduced to half a sentence: 'the king had formed a connection with a well-known actress. There is no need to do more than to chronicle the fact, as the subject is a distasteful one.' (Tomalin 316)[10]

The underlying structure of eighteenth-century female theatrical autobiographies may be represented by a paradigm opposing two sites of the period's spatial and cultural morphology. These two ideologically antithetical poles coincide with the *stage* (theatrical space) and the *closet* (private space). The stage corresponds to the sphere of OUTSIDE, that is to say to public life, which entailed the shameless and often illegal display of one's own body for financial reward. on the contrary, the closet was perceived as *the* prescribed space for women, a greenhouse of feminine sensibility which corresponded to the sphere of INSIDE. As a symbolic environment

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[9] After a lifetime at Jordan's side, in 1818, Clarence agreed to marry Princess Adelaide Saxe-Meiningen in order to gain funds to repay the enormous debts he had accumulated (Tomalin 309). In a letter to a confidential friend, Jordan writes: "MONEY, money, my good friend, or the *want* of it, has, I am convinced, made HIM, at this moment, the most *wretched* of MEN; but having done *wrong*, he does not like to retract" (Letter I [The Separation] date omitted). (Boaden, II, 273; the emphases are in the text).

[10] See the updated "Archives" section in the entry "Dorothy Jordan" of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Ranger, 7).

under the aegis of family and patriarchy, the closet offered the female writer the solitude in which she could express herself, and the women reader an intimate space where she was free to live out the fictional passions narrated in the novels.

A similar cultural polarization invested also the economy and management of the domestic realm, which in the Georgian period was divided in turn between drawing-rooms (social and conversation areas, as well as architectural miniaturizations of the limited sphere of Eighteenth-century female sociability) and private boudoirs, the archetypal room of one's own. This domestic morphology corresponded to an urban model which juxtaposed the privileged spaces of city suburbs and the aristocratic country retreats (private spaces where the middle class retired from public life) to the commercial neighborhoods and ill-famed areas of the city center, where the public spaces of coffee- and ale-houses co-existed alongside taverns, parks, and such disreputable sites as public baths and, of course, theaters.

Such a cultural model places women's theatrical memoirs in the liminal space between the closet and stage, on the fine dividing line between INSIDE and OUTSIDE, the private and public spheres. Thus these texts render more complex – and to a certain extent even "rewrite" - that clear-cut social dichotomy between public and private which has long been considered a prime characteristic of the Eighteenth Century. Just as theatrical autobiography inverts and cancels out the separation between the public sphere (*stage*) and the private one (*closet*), so the rigid hierarchy of Georgian urban space, constructed on the polarities of INSIDE and OUTSIDE, is undermined and penetrated by the figure of the actress. She gained admittance, in masquerade, to the meeting places of the noble class, her face covered by a visor, whilst at the same time her profession entitled her to be a resident of the fashionable houses located in the most exclusive areas of the capital, to which she had access thanks to the money earned on stage or, even more scandalously, through her connections. Thus Dora Jordan's professional and social ascent followed a specific urban itinerary, which led her to upscale from her early lodgings in Henrietta Street, an area chosen for its theatrical denizens (Thomas Sheridan, Charles Macklin, and David Garrick had all lived here) to the stately neoclassic villas in the residential suburb of Petersham, Richmond (near the residence of Horace Walpole), and at last to the elegant Bushy House, lordly country residence which was part of Hampton Court royal estate. Conversely, George Anne Bellamy's professional and financial downfall followed an opposite urban route, which sank her "repeatedly from fashionable to unfashionable addresses, from Richmond and Parliament Square to Soho and St

James," finally to Eliot's Row, St George's Fields, where she died nearly destitute, "under the rules of the king's bench prison." (Heddon 4)

It has been contended that the profession of actress required financial self-sufficiency, social and spatial mobility, and often a certain skill in treading the tenuous confines of the law. In this way it presents us a new and surprising model of femaleness which is both assertive and public, and which revolutionizes - and often overturns - well-established cultural, gender, and social boundaries. The themes of femininity and virtue, business and public display (and exhibitionism), all find expression in theater narratives, in which document, fiction, and performance intersect. Theatrical writings of the self deconstructed a static cultural model defined through the irreconcilable categories of public and private, replacing it with a dynamic model which was subsequently lost in traditional historical reconstructions. At the same time, by critically rewriting those histories, female thespian memoirs take issue with and critically re-propose the discursive relationship between *gender* and *genre.*

In the case of Charke, by telling the story of her private life and stage career the actress signified giving visible form to her *poiesis*, her *life*wrighting. In her *Narrative*, Charlotte explicitly admits that for her writing was not so much a genteel past time eschewing financial reward, but a genuine profession, recognized as such, and demanding economic recompense. Although she was careful to arouse the interest and pity of her powerful father, to whom the memoirs are addressed,[11] she by no means attempts to camouflage with flimsy philanthropic motives or coy apologies the pressing financial considerations that compel her to put pen to paper. Cleverly capitalizing on her family connections (in the preface of the 1755 edition, she is introduced by the words "Youngest Daughter of Colley Cibber, Esq.") (3), Charke proposes to auction her story off to the highest bidder, offering her silence to her father in exchange for his affection or her confessions to the curiosity of the public. As the actress shrewdly remarks, "This Work is at present the Staff of my Life" (46). The opening quote, "Misfortunes past prove Stories of Delight" (46), drawn from Nahum Tate's *A Duke or No Duke*, neatly sums up the mercantile philosophy Charlotte professes: her private misfortunes are cast in the form of exciting stories, as domestic interests risk being transformed into publicity and scandal.

[11] In the opening of her narrative, the author defines herself a "sincere and hearty Penitent," whose twofold aim "is [to] clear my Reputation to the World, in Regard to a former Want of Duty, but, at the same time, give a convincing Proof that there are yet some Sparks of Tenderness remaining in my Father's Bosom, for his REPENTANT CHILD" (*Narrative*, 9, emphasis in the text).

The sale of one's body as a public commodity that is implied by a stage career thus marks the ending (or at least the refashioning) of one's private life. Once the curtain had fallen on the relationship of William of Clarence and Dorothy Jordan, the Duke's zealous councilors hastily demanded the return of all the letters exchanged by the two lovers. The periodical press - ever active in following royal love affairs - spread the word that Jordan had taken steps towards the immediate publication of her sentimental correspondence with William (Tomalin 256-57). Aside from its underlying defamatory intent, this announcement signaled the possible publication of a literary product which could not but be extremely popular, a story which from its very beginning was destined to unfold before the public eye, and consequently also to conclude there.

> Royal Dukes, at this time, occupied, unfortunately, the full breath of rumour; and one unhappy business soon bared to the public eye a scene of gross and most inexcusable *folly*, on one part, and of wanton, profligate, subtle, and unblushing exposure on the other. The leveler rioted now in evidence of royal weakness; and saw […] the opening of a scene sufficient to destroy the credit of a throne, that should exist only through its virtue. (Boaden II 236)

The economic affinity between authoress and actress is thus continually reproposed: common to both is the decision to embark upon a well-paying (although damningly gendered) career in which one's talents were commercialized as goods on sale.

> Of the few professions open to women, acting was among the most lucrative, but it was self-promoting and flamboyant, and hence morally suspect. Novel writing alone offered the promise of decent earnings without demanding a lengthy apprenticeship or even remarkable genius — and a female writer's gentility might survive relatively undamaged. (Fergus and Thaddeus 191)

For Charke, as for George Anne Bellamy as we will see, the two opposing spheres of INSIDE and OUTSIDE clash and overlap in an antithesis that never stabilizes.[12] In this continuous intersection of codes, the scandalous memories/memoirs of the actress and the account of her incredible adventures, romantic entanglements, and risqué encounters (elements which link women's theatrical autobiographies to the picaresque tale, rogue literature, and scandalous histories of the late Restoration, all genres in which female protagonists challenge and often reject the patriarchal protection which characterizes the sexual ideology of the century) (Nussbaum; Ballaster) give way to expressions of penitence and contrition (constructed on popular homiletic models) and even to a genuine apology, as the *epic of the road* of the traditional novel melts into the vagabond

[12] The full title of Bellamy's autobiography is as follows: *An Apology for the Life of George Anne Bellamy. Late of Covent Garden Theatre. Written by Herself. To which is annexe her original letter to John Calcraft, Esq. Advertised to be published in October 1767, but which was then violently suppressed*. The *Apology* had run four editions by 1786. A French translation entitled *Mémoirs de Miss Bellamy, célebre actrice de Londre &c* in two volumes appeared in Paris in 1799, rpt. 1822.

geography of the thespian tour circuits. Thus the transgressive protagonist is recoded into a conventional sentimental heroine - victim, like Bellamy, of callous seducers and persecuted by cruel detractors – or, as in the case of the troublesome Charke, she is transformed into a penitent daughter, who begs forgiveness of her father and yearns to return to the familial bosom. The actress's flamboyance and recklessness, her *en chevalier* adventures and piquant off-stage love affairs are disguised as a moral tale, epistolary novel, and even conduct-book.

> Happy shall I be, if the recapitulation of my errors and misfortunes should prove a beacon to warn the young and thoughtless of my own sex from the Syren shore of vanity, dissipation, and illicit pleasures, of which remorse and misery, as I too sensibly feel are sure attendants. (Bellamy I, 2)

> Should the relation of my errors and their consequences prove a document to my own sex; warn them to shun the paths I have pursued; and inspire them with a greater degree of prudence and reflection than I have been possessed of; I shall have employed my time in some good purpose. The certain effects of an inattention to a prudential system , are poverty, distress, anxiety, and every attendant evil as I have most severely experienced. (Bellamy V, 135)

And again:

> I must beg Leave to inform those Ladies and Gentlemen whose Tenderness and Compassion may excite 'em to make this little Brat of my Brain the Companion of an idle Hour, that I have paid all due Regard to Decency Wherever I have introduced the Passion of Love; and have only suffered it to take its Course in its proper and necessary Time, without fulsomely inflaming the Minds of my young Readers, or shamefully offending those of riper Years. (Charke 1999, 7)

As in the mid-century edifying narrative and the cautionary tale, nonconformist and irregular behavior in women unfailingly leads to a fate of financial and social ruin, and to inevitable disaster, both in terms of sexual surrender and/or death.

The overlapping relation of female thespian memoirs and the sentimental novel is recorded at the beginning of the first volume of George Anne Bellamy's autobiography, where her personal experience is recounted as if it were a scene from a stereotypical seduction tale, constructed in such a way as to make known "my injury", and the "perfidy" with which the young woman had been repeatedly duped (Bellamy V 194). As cliché dictates, the innocent actress' stage debut coincides with the beginning of her sexual ordeal. Immediately following her first public performance (which is connoted as a powerful ocular deflowering) (Straub 27), this virtuous maiden becomes the helpless victim of a libertine. Lord Byron, a lustful baronet, seized with passion the first time he sees her on stage, plots to kidnap her and imprison her in the home of an helpful "mistress of the house" (Bellamy I, 71). (The model is clearly drawn from Samuel Richardson - with Bellamy in the role of the pursued maiden, speaking with the vibrant tones of the heroines of sensibility Clarissa Harlowe and Harriet Byron — but the pathetic tragedy of

Nicholas Rowe is here also alluded to.)[13] The young girl's certain downfall is miraculously avoided by the timely appearance of her brother, after years of separation, "at the top of Southampton Street just as the coach was driving off with me" (Bellamy I, 73). (Here we seem already to glimpse the grating parody of the sentimental recognition scene later proposed by Jane Austen in *Love and Freindship*) (Austen 1987).

Yet in a few lines, the comic resolution of this melodramatic adventure gives way first to farce, and then to pre-gothic drama, offering a concentration and concatenation of literary codes which within the space of a single printed page re-propose the generic variety of the Georgian stage. Unjustly accused by the press of consciously igniting Lord Byron's lust, Bellamy later has a dramatic encounter with her mother, whom she has not seen or heard from for years. In her blackest hour of despair, a mysterious vision of her parent appears before her. For one tragic moment, the girl believes she has seen a ghost and concludes that the old lady has died of heartbreak after hearing the infamous accusations against her daughter's honor. The rhetoric of apology, however, demands a happy ending to the misadventures of George Anne, an honest girl wrongly slandered, yet well-versed in the art of self-vindication. After the required fainting spell, she wakes up in her mother's arms and thus concludes her digression, "What transport did I feel to find myself, on my recovery, really clasped in her arms! It was she herself. 'Happy, happy hour!' I cried, enraptured, 'do I once more receive the endearments of a parent!" (Bellamy I, 94).

This literary double-coding turns the actress's *pen*, just as her *body,* into a neutral space, a container to fill with the identity and the voices of others. Just as David Garrick made women in his audiences fall in or out of love with him according to the *role* he played,[14] thus did Dorothy

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[13] *The Fair Penitent* by Nicholas Rowe (1703) describes the immoral relationship between Lothario and Calista, a lovely maiden seduced by Lothario in the first act, whose ritual repentance remains unconvincing. This influential tragedy was successfully staged throughout the century and it was used as a model by Samuel Richardson for *Clarissa*. Dorothy Jordan herself made her stage début in the role of the persecuted Calista. On that occasion, the spectators' tendency to substitute the performer's real identity with the role he/she played on stage is particularly evident. In effect the choice was not a fortunate one for Jordan, who was visibly pregnant and as clearly without a husband. The audience was not pleased with the actress's decision to represent a character of dubious morality, a willing victim who had allowed herself to be seduced. Tomalin relates that it was the manager of the company, Tate Wilkinson, who had suggested that Jordan take this role, as, in her condition, she would be identified with her character all the more promptly (Tomalin 26).

[14] Hester Thrale records a symptomatic remark made by a lady of the times, devoted fan of Garrick: "My Friend fell in Love with you playing king Richard, but seeing you since in the Character of the Lying Valet — you looked so — *Shabby* (pardon me, Sir) that it cured her of her passion" (Thrale I, 10). In similar fashion, Tomalin's biography of Dora Jordan is accompanied by a fascinating series of pictures, which portrait the actress in her most famous roles (from *The Virgin Unmasked, The Romp, As You Like It, Twelfth Night, She Would and She Would Not* and *The Country Girl*, among others.) It is interesting to note that Jordan is portrayed in costume, as if the actress's *role* were interchangeable with her *identity*. Even the statue commissioned by William IV of Francis Chantrey in 1831 (which

Jordan, perhaps the greatest interpreter of the character of Nell in Charles Coffey's farce *The Devil to Pay* (1731) quite simply *become* in the public eye "Nell of Clarence"[15] once her relationship with William became very public property. In similar fashion, Charlotte Charke intentionally exploited her mimetic skills as an actress, describing her personal condition and many professions as if these were all different roles in the one great play that was her life. Following an elaborate strategy of cultural cross-dressing, Charke chooses to interpret the roles of the penitent daughter *and* the wronged son, *both* Clarissa *and* Tom Jones. She finally identifies herself with the betrayed figure of Cordelia standing before Colley Cibber-Lear, who has been blinded and swayed in his affections by his other false and opportunistic daughters. Here the heroic accents of Dryden's drama accompany the witticisms of farce, Shakespeare's sublimities mingle with Gay's parodies, sentimental roles alternate with breeches parts in an irrepressible rewriting of one's own life, which keeps one eye always trained on the reader. At this point theater not only gives form and order to the actress's individual experiences, but suggests and apparently guides the public's reactions.

> I apprehend I shall be called in Question for my Inability, in conveying Ideas of the Passions which most tenderly affect the Heart, by so often having Recourse to abler Pens than my own, by my frequent Quotations, but in answer to that, I must beg to be excused, and also justified, as mine and other Griefs [sic] were more strongly painted, by those Authors I have made bold with, that was in the Power of my weak Capacity. I thought there was greater Judgment in such References, than in vainly attempting to blunder out my Distress; and possibly by that Means, tire the Reader in the Perusal (*Narrative*, 66)[16]

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inspired Tomalin's biography) proposes yet another "interpretation" of the actress, clothed in the neoclassic robes of the chaste and affectionate mother, a discreet and traditional role which William of Clarence loved to imagine she had interpreted for his eyes alone.

[15] Tomalin ascribes this epithet to Horace Walpole (Tomalin 149). In Coffrey's farce, magic enables Nell to pass from poverty to wealth. This must have appeared as an obvious reference to Jordan's own life, transported from the alleys of Drury Lane to the luxuries of a royal mistress - a role which a century earlier had been played by another famous "Nell," Nell Gwynne, which may also be one source for her nickname. By a trick of fate, Jordan was in Cheltenham playing Nell when she received Clarence's letter of farewell: "She, however, struggled on with Nell, until Jobson arrived at the passage where he has to accuse the conjuror of making her *laughing drunk*. When the actress here attempted to laugh, the afflicted *woman* burst into tears. Here Jobson with great presence of mind altered the text […], covering her personal distress, and carrying her through the scene in character" (Boaden II 272; the emphases are in the text).

[16] The mixing of genres proposed by the *Narrative* is foreshadowed by the initial epigraph drawn from *The What d'ye Call It* by John Gay (c. 1714): "*This* Tragic Story, or *this* Comic Jest/ *May make you* laugh, *or* Cry- As you like best" (*Narrative*, 3, emphasis in the text). Elsewhere Charke defined her play *Tit for Tat* a "whimsical, comical, farcical, operatical, allegorical, emblematical, Pistolatical, impromptu medley" (Thompson 4). This mingling of genres and codes is the formal expression of the author's existential polyphony as well as of her transvestitism. "From childhood," she informs us, she had loved "to imitate the Actions of those Persons, whose Characters I chose to represent; and indeed, was as changeable as *Proteus*" (Charke 1999 22). For a list of the numerous plays cited in Charke's text, see the notes to Robert Rehder's excellent edition (Charke 1999 144-71).

It seems to me that the often subversive use of the "writing-to-the-moment" technique – one of the characteristic stylistic features of the mid-eighteenth century novel - represents that formal tract which best defines the position of female theatrical autobiographies as a continual dialogue between the stage and the page. This theatrical "writing-to-the-moment" focuses on the pragmatics of fruition, according to a dramatized communicative model, in which not only passions and sentiments - the pathetic level explicated through specific prossemic and mimic conventions in the sentimental novel of the period, which has acutely been compared to a "theater of pathos" (Van Sant 33-36) - but also thoughts, opinions and judgments are transposed to the superficial level of action and ostension. Thus Bellamy, clever ventriloquist of sensibility, seeks to win the benevolence of her readers and to guide their judgments recurring to easily recognizable and therefore easily shared stylistic models.

> A tear that obtrudes itself on the recollection of scenes, which have already caused me so many, dims my sight; — others follow, and trickle in quick succession down my cheek. The subject awakens all my sensibility. — And surely, a heart more susceptible of all the tender feelings never throbbed in a female bosom. — The soft effusion overwhelms me. — I must lay down my pen. (Bellamy I 166-67)[17]

In the case of Charlotte Charke - one of the "Wonders of Ages past and to come," who vindicated her right to self-dramatization as "An Oddity [who] plead[s] the Right to Surprize and Astonish" (Charke 1999 8) - the "writing-to-the-moment" technique is employed to send an implicit message to her father, and perhaps even as an attempt at blackmail.[18] The *Narrative* is characterized by the presence of two distinct references: on one hand Colley Cibber, angry and inhuman father, deaf to his daughter's professions of penitence (and here we glimpse again the model of domestic drama, both in its narrative and dramatic forms) and on the other hand, the audience of readers to whom she presents literally 'to the moment' her passionate declarations of

[17] Bellamy's good literary education finds confirmation on a formal level in the structure she has given to her autobiography, which is conventionally written as a series of letters addressed to an anonymous "Hon. Miss--". Her continuous references to Laurence Sterne, author of the celebrated fictitious biography, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1760), confirm her interest and concern in questions of narrative discourse. Her classical knowledge is remarked upon in a sharp aside contained in a letter to John Calcraft (October 1, 1767), published at the end of the 1785 edition of her *Apology*: "I am sorry to remind you, that when Lord George Sutton first introduced me to you, you was [sic] called *honest John Calcraft*; an epithet, in my mind, infinitely superior to *Squire John*, the parliamentary man. But as you always had a great deal of *amor patriae* at heart, you may perhaps feel yourself more happy in your present exalted situation. I beg your pardon for making use of those two Latin words; I forgot you did not understand that language, though, like Bonniface, you may, perhaps, love and honour the sound" (Bellamy, V, 144-45; emphases in the text).

[18] See Bellamy's threatening letter to John Calcraft, in which she recounts in detail the responsibilities of the man towards her (which included the fathering of two children out of wedlock): "It was very impolitic in you to send your brother to me, to dissuade me from publishing this letter. You supposed that my regard for him would prevent me from exposing him in his relation; but no power on earth shall prevent me from doing it. […] Read this, and then to breakfast with what appetite you may" (Bellamy, V, 194-5).

daughterly love and the outcome of her contrite petitions. As Jean Marsden pertinently remarks, "[The mechanics of theatre] do not present drama as domestic, as in the so-called sentimental drama of the eighteenth century, but the domestic as drama- with all the trappings of the theater" (Marsden 67).

By providing a description of her father's reaction to her revelations, the central section of her *Narrative* (Charke 1999 61-66) indulges on Cibber's cold-hearted spurning of Charlotte's devotion.

> I shall now give a full Account of, I think, one of the Most tragical occurrences of my Life, which but Last Week happened to me. The reader May remember, in the First Number of my narrative I made a publick confession of my Faults; and pleased with the fond Imagination of being restored to my father's favour, flattered myself, before this treatise could be ended, to ease the hearts of every humane Breast with an Account of a Reconciliation. But how fruitless was my attempt! (61-62)

By reproposing a characteristic feature of women's theatrical autobiographies, Charke transforms intimacy into indiscretion and emotion into action, as she catapults her personal diatribe into the middle of an imaginary stage. In accordance with a clever editorial strategy capitalizing on the voyeuristic satisfaction vicariously experienced by her readers, Charke's unsuccessful plea and her deep regrets become the object of public curiosity, gratifying her audience's deep desire to know the whole story. The narrator's identity remains fluid, shifting from one genre, role, and character to another, and ultimately it splits into two: Charke/the daughter, petitioning her father while Charke the actress/author-narrator winks at her audience. For her model, she takes her cue from George Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1730), in the benevolence shown by Thorowgood to his apprentice Barnwell (Charke 1999 63-4). Thus the more confidential aspects of this private matter are presented to readers through one of the most famous domestic dramas of the age (in which once again Charke identifies with a male character), following a scheme which equates fictional experience with reality and transforms public concerns into private matters, exchanging the stage with real life.[19] "Charke as narrator not only interprets all the roles, but also *becomes* all the roles" (Fields 1, mine the italics): her theatrical autobiography turns into an existential performance, while the identity of the narrator is forced to reveal once and for all its true nature as cultural construct.

[19] Charke's choice is made all the more resonant by the fact that apparently her first ever male role was Tragedo in a version of *The London Merchant* staged on July 23 1731 (Thompson 2)

In conclusion we may say that often in order to tell their own stories, eighteenth-century actresses were forced to speak through voices, cultural tropes, and roles codified by the narrative conventions of the period. While the fictional vicissitudes of Rowe's Calista merged in the collective imagination with the real experiences of seduced actresses like George Anne Bellamy and Dorothy Jordan, the literary model most representative of the existential tensions experienced by Charke was none other than the good-hearted rogue Tom Jones - reckless but kindly, thoughtless but compassionate, the incarnation *par excellence* of the eighteenth-century prodigal son.

If the genre of autobiography is actually a metaphor through which a multiple and polyphonic subjectivity seeks order and expression, then we may say that theatrical autobiographies attempt only to represent identity as fiction by adopting equally fictitious roles and characters. The varied literary tropes staged by the actresses unite the public world to the private sphere, action to sentiment, confession to reticence, Self to Other. Eighteenth-century women actors' autobiographies occupy the intersection between the novel and theater, so that, rather than ending with the closing of the curtains like any other play, they often culminate in a more or less literal plea for a spectacular display of sensibility. This exhortation to the reader to shed copious tears upon the pages recounting the heroines' trials and travails is a fitting sentimental epilogue to their stories of incautious and pursued maidens, of penitent cavaliers, and actresses masquerading as novelists.

> May the world (particularly my readers) have the same indulgence and compassion for me, which I have unremittingly shown to others! And may Sterne's recording Angel drop the tear of piety and obliterate my faults. (Bellamy V 135)

The reader's catharsis will be at last complete after contemplating the epitaph of the century's greatest comic actress, which entreats us to weep this woman who staged a real-life "melancholic tale of *public* woe".[20] The exhortation "Mementote, Lugete" (Boaden II 338) is carved upon Dorothy Jordan's anonymous tombstone.[21] Be moved by the actress' fall, pity her end, and ponder on her profession.

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[20] This line, drawn from the Prologue in Rowe's *The Fair Penitent*, actually reads: "A melancholic tale of private woes."

[21] The inscription reads: "Memoriae Sacrum / DOROTHEAE Jordan / Quae per multos annos Londini, / Inque aliis Britanniae urbibus, / Scenam egregiè ornavit. / Lepore comico, vocis suavitate / Puellarum hilarium alteriusque sexus / Moribus habitu imitandis nulla secunda: / Ad exercendam eamque / Dum feliciter versata est artem, / Ut res egenorum

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adversas sublevarit / Nemo promptior. / E vita exiit 3°. Nonas Julii, 1816, / Annos nata, 50; / MEMENTOTE, LUGETE" (Boaden, II, 337-8). The trope of the weeping actress had been previously used by Jordan herself in a poem written after the death of her mother: "The bleeding heart, that's whelm'd with real woe, / Affects no flow'rs near Helicon that grow; / Sobs and swoln sighs ill suit smooth-number'd lays, - / The tear that water cypress, drowns the bay" (Boaden, I, 367).

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