

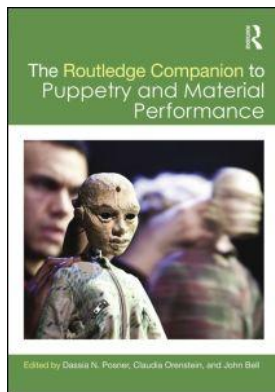
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## **The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance**

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### **Making a Troublemaker**

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## Part II

# NEW DIALOGUES WITH HISTORY AND TRADITION

*Edited and Introduced by Claudia Orenstein*

Societies of every kind across the globe have given birth to puppetry, endowing crafted objects with life from the earliest periods of human history. Many of these practices have come and gone, while others have bequeathed us iconic figures such as Punch, now inextricably associated with the very idea of “puppet.” However, since puppetry is frequently a popular art that de-emphasizes text, written documents that chart its past can be scant and frustratingly incomplete. Sometimes its vestiges remain encased only in objects whose context for use has long vanished. Nonetheless, with the traces of the past carved into their very bodies, puppets and performing objects can attest to anterior practices in concrete, material terms, re-invoking them and drawing them forth from their temporarily inert, sculpted forms.

Contemporary scholars are moving beyond merely documenting puppet histories to reassessing them, applying new theoretical models drawn from multiple academic disciplines to offer fresh approaches and reveal puppetry’s connections to myriad academic discourses. Likewise, scholars in contiguous fields, such as literary studies, art history, or material culture, are turning to puppet theory to shed new light on their own areas of research.

Moreover, in many situations puppetry’s antecedents have not been erased but persist in performance traditions passed down from one generation to the next. Practitioners refashion these forms over time to accommodate new audiences or their own particular tastes and skills. Such artists must strike a balance between embracing the codes of performance that keep them within their traditional frameworks while meeting the dynamic circumstances that force transformation in their arts. During the last hundred years, rapid technological growth and globalization have put many traditional forms in danger as they lose audiences to television and film. At the same time, many practitioners feel the cultural contexts that previously

gave their arts purpose eroding under their feet. Local traditions are changing to respond to global artistic and economic pressures as much as local ones, bringing seismic shifts beyond more familiar incremental transitions.

The lines dividing puppetry's history and contemporary negotiations with tradition are not clearly drawn. Both areas form part of the broader dialogue taking place between puppetry's past and present. This portion of the book, therefore, focuses on contemporary puppetry's engagement with the past. The first section, "Revisiting History," looks at several of the new scholarly models reshaping puppet history, while the second, "Negotiating Tradition," considers the transformation of long-standing puppet traditions.

Chapters in "Revisiting History" bring fresh scholarly perspectives to bear on historical material. Amber West draws on contemporary feminist views to reassess the contributions of eighteenth-century actress and puppeteer Charlotte Charke to the theatre, the culture of her times, and the field of puppetry. West's analysis amplifies our understanding of how women and puppetry have both been undervalued within theatre research. Dassia Posner expands on this theme by bringing to light the mostly forgotten theoretical works of Russian writer and critic Iulia Slonimskaia and visual artist Nina Simonovich-Efimova. During the modernist period, when Russian artists and theorists were enamored of the puppet in metaphorical terms or for what it could contribute to live-actor theatre, these women embraced puppetry itself, theorizing its own artistic potential. Lisa Morse turns to the issue of race in puppetry, analyzing how the problematic image of the Saracen is encoded in many aspects of traditional Sicilian rod puppetry. This racially marked figure, long used by Sicilians as a cultural means of grappling with their own sense of inferiority to other mainland Italian cultures, becomes more problematic today as Arabs and Middle Easterners flood into Sicily as migrant workers. Bringing an anthropologist's view to puppetry, Jane Marie Law details the sustained and ubiquitous Japanese custom of using *ningyō*, or human-shaped figures, as repositories for highly charged emotional experiences, such as the loss of a child. The background she reveals exposes the cultural underpinnings of Japan's exquisite *bunraku* tradition, now widely seen and emulated beyond this original context. Finally, Debra Hilborn draws on theoretical models from puppetry to analyze the worship of the cross in the medieval Catholic Holy Week ceremonies. Hilborn finds that the cross's meaning shifted for participants throughout these rituals as they manipulated and anthropomorphized this object in various ways. Her analysis demonstrates the wider application of puppetry theory to other fields, such as medieval material culture.

The second set of chapters, "Negotiating Tradition," traces the various ways in which practitioners are responding to new forces reshaping their art forms, both in terms of production and reception. Matthew Cohen identifies two important trends within Indonesia's *wayang kulit*, or shadow puppetry tradition, offering the term "post-traditional" to distinguish shows that take the form into radically new territory from those that more practically shift standard performance models to accommodate changing circumstances. "Post-traditional," in Cohen's analysis, delineates practices rooted in tradition but not confined by notions of "traditionalism." It speaks to the attempts of many performers to stake out new artistic territory more responsive to current circumstances and their own creative impulses. Kathy Foley

examines the challenges facing traditional Korean puppetry as performers attempt to recast their ribald tradition as an elite art for today's national and international markets. My own chapter outlines the complex web of artistic and personal choices performers of *tolpavakoothu* – or leather shadow puppetry in Kerala, India – face as they struggle to sustain traditional performance within that country's rapidly changing social and economic circumstances.

While the Asian context, with its rich history of puppetry often linked to religious ritual or court activities, offers ample examples of hereditary forms confronting change, Ida Hledíková submits an impressive European case. She describes how, since the fall of Communism, Eastern European directors have revived the previously banned religious *vertep*, or Nativity play, transposing it to reconnect to their lost cultural heritage while simultaneously exercising their new artistic freedoms.

Even as puppetry diversifies today, it is not unbound from its past. Anterior practices and figures continue to link us to a notion of what puppetry is in its paradigmatic forms. To transform puppetry in the present is inherently to be in dialogue with its history.

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## Section III

# Revisiting History

## 12

# Making a Troublemaker

## Charlotte Charke's Proto-Feminist Punch

*Amber West*

"[Y]ou are, without Exception, [one] of the greatest Curiosities that ever were the Incentives to the most profound Astonishment."

The author to herself, 1755, in *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke*

### Charke and the eighteenth-century stage

The eleventh child of one of England's leading theatrical families, Charlotte Charke (1713–1760) was a born performer. Her parents were both well-known actors, particularly her father, Colley Cibber, who was also Poet Laureate, a playwright, and manager of the Theatre Royal at Drury Lane. Charke made her debut there in 1730 and became renowned as a comedic actress deft at breeches roles and impersonations of famous men, most notably her father. Since women were not allowed to perform on the English stage until after the Restoration in 1660, actresses during the eighteenth century were considered novel curiosities and, because they defied gender decorum, frequently presumed to have loose morals.

Charke was an even greater curiosity. Not only an actor but a playwright, she was also an offstage cross-dresser who often passed as a man, one of the first English women ever to manage a theatre company (and later, a puppetry company), and one of the first secular women to publish an autobiography. She gained notoriety, and lost familial class privilege, when her father disowned her for leaving Drury Lane to "become the leading player in an upstart theater troupe run by Henry Fielding ... London's leading avant-garde playwright, and Colley Cibber's bitter enemy" (Shevelov 2005: 5). Their troupe's anti-government satires helped to "inspire" Parliament to pass the 1737 Licensing Act, which restricted dramatic productions to two patent theatres and required all plays to be government-approved prior to performance. Fielding, Charke and other rabble-rousers were effectively banished from the "legitimate" stage. Charke did not let this stop her, taking her subversive parodies to the puppet theatre and traveling the countryside for years as an itinerant performer. Government restrictions on "legitimate" drama in this and the previous century inadvertently helped puppetry to flourish in popularity in England among all classes. Referring to the eighteenth century, George Speaight writes that "never before or since



Figure 12.1 Inspired by Charke's tale of stealing her brother's and father's clothes to imitate her father, the engraving reads, "An exact Representation of Mrs. Charke walking in the Ditch at four Years of Age, as described by herself in the first Number of the Narrative of her own Life, lately published" (F. Garden, 1755). © The Trustees of the British Museum

have puppet theatres so successfully made themselves the talk of the town" (Speaight 1955 [1990]: 92). And though she is rarely given credit for it, the astonishing Mrs. Charke had much to do with puppetry's success and evolution during this time.

### Making a troublemaker

Perhaps the only thing more astonishing than Charke's life, more astonishing than the candor and wit of her self-portrayal in her popular autobiography *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke*, published in installments in 1755, has been the glib response of so many scholars to that life. In the first book-length critical study of this enigmatic actress, writer, puppeteer, and theatre manager, editor Philip Baruth writes, "Charke has been treated with notable unfairness for nearly all of the last two



centuries, due to a discomfort with her cross-dressing and a concerted attempt on the part of Cibber's biographers to absolve the father through the casual defamation of his children" (Baruth 1998: 11). Reviewing a handful of remarks by scholars makes clear this defamation has been far from casual. Leonard Ashley describes Cibber's "wildly exhibitionistic and uncontrollable offspring" as a "buckeen" whose memoir was merely a desperate attempt for money and "lacking in literary merit" (Ashley 1969: vii, xxiv). Other scholars have described her as a "psychopathic lesbian" with a "perverse predisposition towards vagabondising" (Speaight 1955 [1990]: 108). Likened to "an opium-smoker or a Bedlamite," she was said to have been "disowned by her family as an 'alien'," and rebuked as an unfit mother, a flighty failure at her many business ventures, and a drunken, "bellicose and dissolute woman" (cited in Morgan 1988: 210–211).<sup>1</sup>

From an intersectional feminist standpoint, Charke – an impoverished single mother who lived much of her life as a man, obscured her sexual orientation, and created artistic works primarily categorized as "low" entertainments – has suffered from multiple, overlapping forms of subordination.<sup>2</sup> The same patriarchal systems she actively resisted in her lifetime, in part through her innovative and oft-overlooked puppet shows, have also caused her contributions as an avant-garde, multidisciplinary, entrepreneurial, and proto-feminist artist to go largely unrecognized.

Thankfully, more recent criticism, particularly from queer and feminist theorists, has focused on recovery and correction, illuminating the ways in which sexism, classism, and homophobia led to Charke's discrediting and historical erasure from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries (Shevelow 2005: 380).<sup>3</sup> I aim to contribute to the critical conversation by discussing Charke's work as a puppeteer, one of the least examined of her creative endeavors, in part due to the fact that puppetry itself is often disregarded in the West as an artistically valid form of cultural production. Examining her work as a puppeteer, as well as critical misrepresentations of that work, I argue that Charke's puppetry, like her cross-dressing, should indeed be considered an active challenge to, and rejection of, the binary discourses of a patriarchy transitioning from feudalism to capitalism. Charke's puppetry illuminates the ways in which Western hierarchal binaries separating "high arts" like drama from "low entertainments" like puppetry are, in fact, deeply entwined with oppressive, dualistic constructions of gender, race, and sexuality.

### Failed puppeteer?

Charke's contributions to puppetry did not begin to be recognized by historians until the mid-twentieth century. Paul McPharlin's seminal 1949 history of American puppetry includes a sizable chapter on eighteenth-century England but acknowledges no particular contribution to the art form by Charke. Describing her experiences in Tunbridge-Wells spa in the summer of 1739, McPharlin characterizes Charke as a failed puppet troupe manager who proved herself incapable of "making money in a watering place" (McPharlin and McPharlin 1949 [1969]: 45). Speaight's 1955 discussion of the same incident stays truer to Charke's own account, though he chides her for not discovering in advance "what a sensible preliminary visit would have told

her – that a successful puppet theatre, managed by Lacon, had already been established there for many years” (Speaight 1955 [1990]: 105). Though both puppetry scholars frame it as such, nowhere in her *Narrative* does Charke imply or describe this tour to be a failure. Rather, she tells an upbeat tale of leading her “wooden Troop” into battle against “a General who had taken the Field before [her].” She and her “living Numbers” exhibited professionalism and flexibility by renting Ashley’s Great Room and, upon discovering that Lacon had cornered the local puppet show market, performing several comedies with human actors instead of puppets (Charke 1999: 45). Speaight presumes the troupe then “made their way back to London, penniless” (Speaight 1955 [1990]: 105), although based on Charke’s own account, this seems unlikely. Her managerial decision to fight “against Lacon in *Propia Persona*” (Charke 1999: 45) rather than risking her wooden troupe’s defeat at the hands of a veteran army on familiar turf seems, in fact, quite a strategic business choice.

It is also worth noting that this tour was neither Charke’s first nor only experience in theatre management. In 1734, she rented the Haymarket, a main London house, for her “Mad Company” of human actors, financing and managing a full summer season in which she also acted in myriad roles, male and female. At only 21, “She may have been, in fact, the first woman on the London stage to assume the sole responsibility of management” (Shevelow 2005: 186). In 1738, shortly after the Licensing Act banished her from the stage, she leased another space in London and created Punch’s Theatre, producing and performing at least ten puppet plays in less than three months (Shevelow 2005: 267). Though Speaight spends more time discussing Charke than McPharlin does, his analysis exemplifies the prejudicial tones in most accounts of Charke up until the late twentieth century. Speaight’s history was first published in 1955, but the section on Charke in the second edition from 1990 remained unchanged:

In our portrait gallery of puppeteers Charlotte Charke takes an obvious and important place for her eccentricity. She has, too, provided us with the unique documentation of her autobiography. This fascinating book is neither literature nor history, but the inconsequent and madly egocentric memories of an aging and desperate woman, a glimpse into a twisted and distraught human soul. Modern psycho-analysis would, no doubt, neatly label Mrs. Charke as a psychopathic lesbian, but we need not here peer too far into the deep well of loneliness from which this unhappy woman drew her inspiration. We ... may salute her as a puppet showman of unusual intelligence, taste, and courage.

(Speaight 1955 [1990]: 108)

Speaight’s final “salute” is rendered disingenuous by the litany of backhanded compliments and sexist, homophobic remarks pulsing through this and, unfortunately, much Charke scholarship. Speaight remains, however, a primary authority on English puppetry, his research fundamental in an undersized field of study. Though all research on Charke’s puppetry, including my own, is necessarily based on Speaight’s, more intersectional and interdisciplinary approaches by subsequent critics have shifted the grounds by which we can more accurately acknowledge her contributions.

### Correcting the record

In her lively biography, Kathryn Shevelow provides a useful corrective by highlighting the intense physical and mental demands of puppeteering and theatre management in this era (Shevelow 2005: 266). These factors, combined with impoverished single motherhood, more accurately explain the illness that caused Charke to cut short her season at Punch's Theatre and, after the Tunbridge-Wells tour, to lease and later sell at a loss her unique celebrity-faced marionette collection, which I will discuss in more detail below. The short-lived nature of Charke's London puppetry company does not negate the fact that her "grand Puppet-Show over the Tennis Court, in James Street" was highly successful (Charke 1999: 40). Henryk Jurkowski speaks to Charke's abilities as an artist and entrepreneur by acknowledging that she thoroughly refurbished the space she had leased, producing and performing ten different plays in eight weeks at the rate of at least two shows per day (Jurkowski and Francis 1996: 186).<sup>4</sup> Perhaps Charke's puppetry has been overlooked, in part, because her own discussion of herself as a puppeteer focuses almost entirely on those three months in Punch's Theatre. She was, however, a much more devoted practitioner of puppetry than her memoir reveals. Charke worked with two of the most well-established puppeteers of the day, Yeates and Russell (Speaight 1955 [1990]: 102).<sup>5</sup> The former helped her to acquire her marionettes and later leased them from Charke when she fell ill, while the latter hired her to manipulate Punch, his star performer (Speaight 1955 [1990]: 107). Additionally, her sense of fluidity and ease in performing on both human and puppet stages; puppetry's extreme popularity and the resulting abundance of puppet shows by itinerant artists (of which Charke was one for over ten years); and her aesthetic innovations in the genre speak to the significance both of puppetry's place in Charke's repertoire and her contributions to the art form.

### Revolutionizing the puppet stage

Charke adapted literary dramas to the puppet stage, which prior to her had been home primarily to folk and biblical tales. Shevelow writes, "Charlotte used her puppets in a way new to the history of English puppet theater ... stag[ing] real plays that might be seen at the same time at Drury Lane or Covent Garden ... compet[ing] with the plays offered by the playhouses, at a cheaper price, and offer[ing] the added attractions of novelty, farce, and parody" (Shevelow 2005: 263). Jurkowski believes Charke had "ambitions to raise puppet theatre to a higher artistic level ... [and] to compete with her previous employers" (Jurkowski and Francis 1996: 185). Speaight, conversely, criticizes this innovation, asserting that "her lack of any previous experience with puppets may have limited her approach." He states that overall her "emphasis was, perhaps, too literary, and not sufficiently in the puppet tradition of folk-drama" (Speaight 1955 [1990]: 104). In light of the modernist puppetry revival initiated at the turn of the twentieth century by Englishman Edward Gordon Craig – which like Charke's work illuminates puppetry's capability for complex artistic expression – Speaight's suggestion that Charke should have stuck with what had

been done before seems misguided and denies her contributions as an innovative forerunner in the field. As Shevelov and Jurkowski point out in their more recent analyses, Charke's adaptation of "legitimate" plays to the puppet stage demonstrates her entrepreneurial savvy, undercutting the patent houses while parodying their repertoire with marionettes whose faces she had carved to look like "eminent persons" (Charke 1999: 43) of the day.

Records indicate that Charke obtained a license for Punch's Theatre from the Lord Chamberlain in March of 1738. Scholars wonder why. Since puppetry was not considered "real" theatre because it did not include human actors, such a license was not actually required, a fact that Charke does not mention when she boasts that hers was "the only [puppet theater] in this Kingdom that ... had the good Fortune to obtain so advantageous a Grant" (Charke 1999: 40). Shevelov suggests that Charke obtained the license as a precaution (Shevelov 2005: 260). This seems possible considering that her former colleague, James Lacy, had recently been imprisoned for performing an unlicensed one-man show (Morgan 1988: 63). Charke also used the license as a marketing tool, flaunting a royal connection to distinguish hers from other puppet shows. The license might best be understood, however, as another subversive protest from an artist who displayed an impressive facility for satire. Considering both her scathing critique of sinking artistic standards in increasingly profit-driven patent houses in the first play she penned, *The Art of Management* (1735), and her exit from said houses to become a key player in the rabble-rousing avant-garde theatre that prompted the Licensing Act that left her unemployed, Charke's decision to license her puppet shows seems more significant than the "fear of retribution" or "marketing ploy" arguments suggest. Her description in the *Narrative*, particularly her "*good Fortune to obtain so advantageous a Grant,*" (my italics) might be better interpreted as tongue-in-cheek wit. The unnecessary license calls attention to corrupt government meddling in the arts, and the inconsistencies and injustice of a system so clearly created to privilege a few well-connected houses, guaranteeing their profits through a virtual monopoly.<sup>6</sup>

In publicizing her uniquely licensed puppet theatre, Charke also regularly "remind[ed] her audience that the plays were to be performed by puppets while announcing them exactly as if they were to be acted by actors: [e.g.,] 'The part of Father Martin [to be] performed by Signior Punch from Italy'" (Morgan 1988: 64). This technique exemplifies Charke's competitive business acumen in presenting "a sturdy classical season" that included many of the day's favorite dramas, such as *Henry VIII* and *Richard III* (Morgan 1988: 64). Scott Cutler Shershow argues that by advertising her marionettes as actors, Charke "burlesques the discourse of [the] commercial stage and pretends to treat puppetry with equal dignity" (Shershow 1995: 158). To suggest Charke merely feigns respect for puppetry overlooks her serious dedication to the art. Treating her puppets as actors seems, in fact, to subvert Western ideologies that figure the puppet as "low" by humanizing her puppets and – in light of her innovative use of portrait puppets – "puppetizing" humans.

Charke writes that she "bought Mezzotinto's of several eminent Persons, and had [her puppets'] Faces carved from them" (Charke 1999: 43). These celebrity-faced marionettes (only one of whose identities is still known: the Italian castrato Farinelli) were "constrained, within the puppet show ... to act side by side with Punch and

Joan” (Shershow 1995: 156). Such a “demotion” might likely have been infuriating to the “legitimate” theatre-makers, including her own father, whom Charke was already notorious for critiquing. Her choice of puppets dissolves the division between high literary drama and low puppet show by outing it as a manipulable construct. Her “curious” (Charke 1999: 43) decision to supplement traditional puppets based on stock *commedia* characters like Punch with portrait puppets might best be understood in relation to her own successful career in male impersonation. She most notoriously played her father in several plays that openly mocked him, written by Fielding, and Shevelow posits that Charke likely had her Punch carved in the likeness of her father (Shevelow 2005: 261).<sup>7</sup> Charke seems to have had a keen, proto-feminist understanding of the ways in which puppetry, perhaps even more so than cross-dressing, can illuminate the human ability to create and re-create ourselves in the likeness of or in opposition to identities socially constructed for us.<sup>8</sup>

Eileen Blumenthal’s discussion of portrait puppets further illuminates the effectiveness of Charke’s celebrity-faced marionettes. “[P]ortrait puppets have played virtually every head of state. ... [They] spark that peculiar pleasure of recognition that impersonators and impressionists evoke” (Blumenthal 2005: 88). Since puppetry has long been utilized around the world for seditious political satire, Charke was clearly participating in a larger tradition within the art form. Blumenthal cites examples as early as the ninth century in China (Blumenthal 2005: 166). Charke’s use of *portrait* puppets for political satire, however, has recently been acknowledged as an original and influential idea that was then “repeated in many theatres of the time.” She was “one of the first to introduce personally directed satire in her shows” (Jurkowski and Francis 1996: 186). This aspect of her art must be considered in relation to negative reactions to and portrayals of Charke in her time and since. The specificity of her satire was unapologetically bold. Though Fielding continues to get most of the credit for it, their Haymarket company’s critiques were so charged as to inspire legislative censure. At the same time that Britain’s first prime minister, Robert Walpole, was driving the Licensing Act through Parliament with support from theatre establishmentarians like Cibber, Charke was starring in *The Historical Register* and *Eurydice Hiss’d*, two satires by Fielding that “specifically and comprehensively” critiqued Walpole and his affiliates (Shevelow 2005: 242–245). She not only spoofed Shakespeare, Dryden, and her father’s plays in her puppet theatre, but she also poked fun at religious authorities by performing Fielding’s anti-Catholic burlesque *The Old Debauchees* with puppets (Jurkowski and Francis 1996: 187). An acknowledgement of the significance, boldness, and relentless variety of Charke’s critiques has been slow to emerge, perhaps because, coming from a poor, outspoken, cross-dressing actress, the criticism was particularly offensive and in need of suppression. Much of what makes Charke so important to the artistic and historical record has nearly erased her from it.

Continued biases against itinerant performers and “lesser” art forms contribute to sluggish acknowledgement of Charke’s contributions. Her active opposition to the theatrical powers-that-be and her innovative and bold evasions of a licensing act created in an attempt to suppress dissident artists like her are important both in terms of how Charke ended up becoming a puppeteer and what she did with the art form once she took it up. A closer examination of her 1738 adaptation for the

puppet stage of Fielding's burlesque drama *The Covent Garden Tragedy* (first performed six years earlier) reveals Charke's prescient conception of the political and expressive potential of the arts, particularly puppetry. It was precisely in her parodic puppetry that Charke's socially engaged art was most bold.

### Punch in petticoats

Shershow examines Charke and Fielding's use of puppetry in his detailed study of the ways in which puppets in Western discourse since antiquity have been appropriated and "enlisted in the construction of a series of interlocking social and aesthetic hierarchies" (Shershow 1999: 8), including man as superior to woman and drama as superior to puppetry. Though Shershow acknowledges Charke's "keen awareness of the puppet's participation in a multiply hierarchical system of literary, class and gender distinction" (Shershow 1999: 144), he ultimately dismisses her puppetry (in the same way so many scholars have pooh-poohed her autobiography) as "little more than a desperate and ultimately unsuccessful effort to exploit her own notoriety for financial gain" (Shershow 1999: 159). He arrives at this conclusion through a somewhat cursory discussion of Charke's casting of Punch as Mother Punchbowl in *The Covent Garden Tragedy*, interpreting her decision through only one side of contemporary feminist debates, represented most extremely by Erin Mackie, who describes Charke's personal and artistic "impersonation of the masculine" as "reinforc[ing], reinstat[ing], and maintain[ing] the value of masculine, patriarchal conventions" (Mackie 1991: 843). Shershow's argument discredits Charke as both a puppeteer and proto-feminist. My perspective on Charke's "Punch in petticoats," and her broader life's work is more aligned with feminist scholars like Kristina Straub, who argues that Charke's "performative, 'unnatural' masculinity ... unsettles newly dominant assumptions about gender as legitimized according to fixed and oppositional categories" (Straub 1992: 138).

Since there is so little information regarding many of her adaptations, and due to her own cross-dressing, Charke's casting of Punch in "The part of Mother Punchbowl ... being the first time of his appearing in petticoats" (Charke cited in Morgan 1988: 64) has been of particular interest to scholars. Fielding based the character on Elizabeth Needham, a well-known London brothel keeper who had recently been pilloried to death. Like Speaight, Shershow suggests Charke's casting choice was another easy publicity technique, as it "must inevitably have suggested Charke's own celebrated cross-dressed roles on the stage" (Shershow 1999: 158). Charke likely also could not resist the extra laughs her Punch would get playing this *Punchbowl* madam, whose lines include, "A house like this without a bully left, / Is like a puppet-show without a Punch" (Fielding 1902: 124). The choice may also have been inspired by Fielding's original casting of Mr. Bridgewater in the role, though Fielding's casting was nothing unusual. Male actors had long played female characters because the presence of an actual woman onstage was considered immoral. And though eighteenth-century women performing breeches roles may appear subversive by contemporary standards, "despite their apparent gender-bending, breeches roles played into an entirely conventional sexual system. Appealing to the heterosexual

fantasies of men in the audience, breeches emphasized the lower half of the actress's body" (Shevelow 2005: 176). Charke, however, did indeed bend gender, pushing the boundaries even further by developing a notable reputation for performing travesty roles (i.e., playing actual men instead of women disguised as men). This was "considered by many to be a risky and disreputable step" for an actress, but one which helped to solidify Charke's "reputation for eccentricity and masculinity" (Shevelow 2005: 186). Through her acting, writing, puppetry, and in her daily life, Charke actively crossed boundaries of gender, class, and genre.

Although Fielding's original production closed after only one performance in 1732, Peter Lewis believes "[t]he reasons for the thoroughgoing condemnation the play received were moral, not aesthetic" (Lewis 1987: 135), describing it as "one of the few masterpieces of Augustan dramatic burlesque ... [in which Fielding] subjects many features of contemporary tragedy to devastating criticism" (Lewis 1987: 149). Critics at the time ignored Fielding's critique of drama in favor of outrage over the play's brothel setting and prurient characters. There was particular concern for the upper-class ladies in the theatre's boxes, who one outraged critic said Fielding "tells ... without any ceremony, that there's no difference betwixt the best of them, and the bawdy-house trulls they had been seeing on the Stage; and that, pretend what they would, they were all a parcel of downright arrant whores" (cited in Paulson and Lockwood 1969: 58). Both Fielding and Charke show gumption in staging this controversial play, but there are interesting differences in their productions that speak both to Charke's importance as a politically progressive, proto-feminist, avant-garde artist and to her keen understanding of the power of puppetry.

Jurkowski describes *The Covent Garden Tragedy's* significance as "the first time in dramatic literature that a writer stood up for a prostitute, and presented the nobility of sentiment of a 'fallen woman' – and the practicality of her behavior." He cites Charke's "opposition to the new bourgeois morality" in her decision to adapt this piece to the puppet stage (Jurkowski and Francis 1996: 187). Blumenthal likewise describes the play as a satirical political "farce by Henry Fielding about the brutality of the sex trade" in which, in Charke's adaptation, "Punch (in drag) played a madame, clobbering whores and johns alike" (Blumenthal 2005: 171). Interpretations of the play as a critique of the sex industry, however, are uncommon in scholarship on Fielding's original production. Analyses focus primarily on Fielding's ongoing critiques of the deterioration of "high" theatrical forms, such as tragedy, which in his day "laid itself increasingly open to attack as it became more elevated, heroic, and neoclassical" (Lewis 1987: 3). More politically progressive readings are, indeed, enticing, particularly in light of what were likely the play's most controversial lines. The prostitute Stormandra expresses her humanity and the notion of prostitution as work, separate from matters of the heart, when she tells the man she loves, "But though my person be upon the town, / My heart has still been fixed on only you" (Fielding 1902: 126). In the play's epilogue, Kissinda, the other prostitute, suggests the radical notion that all women enjoy sex but are expected to pretend they do not: "For though some prude her lover long may vex, / Her coyness is put on, she loves your sex" (Fielding 1902: 134). I would argue, however, that Jurkowski and Blumenthal's interpretations are better applied to Charke's adaptation of the play than to the original. Though Fielding may have had some interest in humanizing

prostitutes and critiquing the sex industry, more so “his aim is to ridicule ... contemporary tragic drama, especially its language and rhetoric” (Lewis 1987: 135). As is also evident in his more famous 1730 play, *The Author’s Farce*, in which he had human actors play puppets, Fielding regularly critiqued “how the purely economic considerations of the actor-managers ... deformed the hierarchy of literary value” (Shershow 1999: 148). Since Fielding ridiculed problematic trends he believed were destroying the theatre (with bad tragedies and puppetry, as I will discuss momentarily, on his list of culprits) by aligning these trends with the “moral reprehensibility” of prostitution, interpreting his version of the play as empathetic to prostitutes is problematic.

Whereas Fielding depicted the lives of sex workers as a metaphor to serve his aesthetic critique of drama, Charke knew personally more than a dozen “Ladies who kept Coffee-Houses in and about the Garden” who were close enough friends that she publicly expresses gratitude to them for their attempt to pool enough money to bail her out of debtor’s prison (Charke 1999: 48). These friendships, as well as her own position as an actress and an impoverished woman, arguably gave Charke a different perspective on Needham and her employees. Charke likely had a much more intimate sense of the most controversial sentiment in the play – that all women, regardless of class, are commodities in the patriarchy – as expressed in the epilogue:

In short, you [men] are the business of our lives,  
To be a mistress kept the strumpet strives,  
And all the modest virgins to be wives.  
For prudes may cant of virtues and of vices,  
But faith, we only differ in our prices.

(Fielding 1902: 134)

With this context in mind, I interpret Charke’s casting of the wife-beating Punch in the role of Mother Punchbowl as a scathing critique of a patriarchal system that commodifies all women, which also illuminates the socially engaged possibilities of puppetry.

Punch, the perennial patriarch of the puppet stage, has been described as a working-class hero who rebels against the institutions of marriage, church, and state by beating his wife, the clergyman, and the constable to death. In Charke’s hands, Punch in petticoats is “a wolf in sheep’s clothing,” a symbol of the patriarchy upon which the sex industry should rightly be blamed, rather than the women inevitably contracted to participate in it. Her adaptation draws attention to the oppression of women that is often erased in Punch and Judy. In part because of Punch’s position as a working-class man, his abuse of his position of power in relation to his wife is at times overlooked. Charke’s proto-feminist Punch in petticoats forces us to take notice.

The differences between Fielding and Charke’s versions of *The Covent Garden Tragedy* also illuminate Charke’s artistic sensibilities as more radical and ahead of their time than Fielding’s, another reason why she is in need of more critical attention. Though he did not completely object to the existence of puppet theatre, Fielding thought it “must be kept in its place ... [He] dislike[d] the puppet’s incursion into live theatre, and consider[ed] its proper place to be with simple folk tales and ‘Punch and his wife Joan’” (Arnott 1964: 37). Charke had more foresight



regarding puppetry's capabilities, radically exploding the divisions between high and low art that Fielding strived to maintain. Time has proven Charke correct. Puppetry continually proves itself at least as capable as human theatre of dealing with complex themes and serious subjects. And although Charke's puppet productions were surely influential in her lifetime, discrimination and oversight by scholars has prevented her contributions from aiding puppetry's recognition as such. As late as 1964, for example, Peter Arnott was still trying to prove that puppetry is "an artistic medium of significant potential" that "could be used for the performance of serious drama" (Arnott 1964: 25) in a study in which he discusses Fielding as contributing to the hindrance of this understanding, but makes no mention of Charke.

As previously discussed, Shershow illuminates the reasons for puppetry's perpetual appropriation as stand-in for all that is "low" or "other." This ideology is no small part of the Western misunderstanding of puppetry's artistic possibilities. Unfortunately, Shershow's focus on the myriad ways in which puppetry has been framed as such causes him to misinterpret Charke's cross-dressed Punch, as well as her own cross-dressing, as "recreat[ing] the theatrical and cultural hierarchies that ... excluded and subordinated her" (Shershow 1999: 159). Rather, Charke's cross-dressing, her manifold *Narrative*, and her petticoated Punch are all, indeed, proto-feminist illuminations of "the discontinuous acts that social custom usually smooths over to produce gender roles" (Wanko 1994: 81), as well as the equally problematic hierarchies of high art versus low entertainment. One final aspect of Charke's puppetry, her use of voice distortion, is key to understanding the ways in which her adaptations of dramas to the puppet stage, like her cross-dressing, reject rather than reinforce patriarchal ideology.

### Battling patriarchy with a swizzle

Frank Proschan explains that "[f]olk puppeteers around the world, in diverse and often unrelated traditions ... make use of voice modifying instruments ... to let the puppets speak ... demonstrat[ing] their profound understanding of some of the essential attributes of language and speech" (Proschan 1981: 528). Charke's utilization of voice distortion – she "used the traditional tin or wooden tubes called squeakers to create the puppets' voices" (Shevelow 2005: 263) – demonstrates her sophisticated understanding of puppetry conventions, as well as her innovative spirit in applying long-standing techniques of folk puppetry to literary plays. By doing so, Charke deprioritizes the literary text (and the newly developing authority in this period of the "author-god" who wrote it), while creating space for the audience, puppeteers, and puppets to participate in meaning- and story-making. She does so in adaptations of several plays by Shakespeare no less, the pivotal author-god who, according to Shershow, is second only to Ben Jonson in the theological construction of authorship that emerged in the Renaissance (Shershow 1999: 44). Perhaps Charke's puppetry might be considered a precursor to the socially engaged resistance to authorial and textual dictatorship that appears in the work of modern theorists such as Roland Barthes, who writes:

[A] text does not consist of ... a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions ... [R]efusing to

assign to the text (and to the world as text) ... an ultimate meaning, liberates ... for to refuse to arrest meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law.

(Barthes 1967: 5–6)

Cheryl Walker reframes Barthes's theory from a feminist perspective: "[W]riting is not 'the destruction of every voice' but *the proliferation of possibilities of hearing*" (Walker 1990: 568). Charke's swazzling of literary dramas rejects the sanctity of the author-god and his "sacred" text, as well as longstanding Western patriarchal ideologies that situate man over woman, drama over puppetry. Proschan explains that when puppeteers utilize voice distortion, "the audience's work is increased, their interpretive burden enlarged, as their creative role expands" (Proschan 1981: 551). Proschan's insights lead to an interesting connection between Charke's puppetry, her cross-dressing, and her *Narrative*. Her elusiveness about her sexual orientation and her reasons for offstage cross-dressing, her nonlinear "multifurcated" (Wanko 1994: 87) *Narrative*, and her enthusiastic mixing of seemingly disparate theatrical forms all speak to Charke's bold and subversive refusal of the limits within which the patriarchy sought to fix her.

### Power to the puppets

In her *Narrative*, Charke wrote that she was "certain that [learning's] greatest Advantages are to be infinitely improved by launching into the World, and becoming acquainted with the different Places and Objects we go thro' and meet in traveling" (Charke 1999: 17). Her genuine openness to people, ideas, and artistic practices, as well as her stubborn optimism, are still radical necessities in the continuing struggle against systemic inequality. Charke embraced a more difficult life by refusing and resisting the patriarchy in as many ways possible, and despite the inevitable hardships that she suffered because of this (in her own life and in the historical record), she remained convinced "that no Misfortune, of ever so dreadful a Nature, should excite us to despair" (Charke 1999: 51). Christine Cloud argues that Charke's memoir exemplifies the ways in which "autobiographical writing by transvestite figures both constitutes and occupies a third space where identity is hybrid, multiple and disconcerting ... explod[ing] the myths that both underlie and uphold gender-based binary thinking" (Cloud 2009: 858). Similarly, in Charke's *Punch in petticoats* and swazzled Shakespeare, we see puppetry's potential, perhaps more so than any other art form, to illuminate the socially constructed nature of gender and genre binaries, and thus to help us dissolve categories so often used to divide and control us.

### Notes

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- 1 Though Fidelis Morgan usefully summarizes discriminatory scholarship on Charke, she exudes homophobia by arguing that Charke's cross-dressing and long-term relationship with Mrs. Brown do not prove queer identity due to "Charlotte's frequent declarations that her

- book was intended to be moral” (Morgan 1988: 203), implying that morality is exclusive to heterosexuals.
- 2 “[A] theoretical framework of intersectionality ... view[s] race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age, among others, as mutually constructing systems of power. Because these systems permeate all social relations, untangling their effects in any given situation or for any given population remains difficult” (Collins 2005: 11).
  - 3 Charke’s potential as a feminist or queer hero at times mires critics in discussions of her cross-dressing in relation to her sexual orientation, though the latter is “a question that arguably can never be answered” (Baruth 1998: 50). Related debates regarding whether Charke’s cross-dressing and her artistic works (most often the *Narrative* itself) reject or reinforce patriarchal ideology seem more productive. Taking the latter position, Erin Mackie, for example, admits “Charke violates the discretion of the masculine/feminine gender dichotomy,” but disagrees with scholars who argue this makes her a feminist because “even Charke’s most transgressive gestures – her cross-dressing, her adoption of male roles ... are undertaken not to undermine but to affirm the value of the masculine on which the patriarchy and her own cross-dressing depend” (Mackie 1991: 843). Baruth provides a useful summary of the contemporary feminist and queer debates (Baruth 1998: 52–57).
  - 4 Charke’s ten known puppet play adaptations are Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*, *King Henry IV*, and *Richard III*; Fielding’s *The Mock Doctor*, *The Covent Garden Tragedy*, and *The Old Debauchees*; Cibber’s *Damon and Phillida*; *The Beggar’s Wedding* by Charles Coffey; *The Unhappy Favourite* by John Banks; and *The Miller of Mansfield* by Robert Dodsley. John Dryden’s *Amphitryon* was announced but never shown (Jurkowski and Francis 1996: 186–188).
  - 5 Yeates’s and Russell’s first names are unknown.
  - 6 Baruth provides another interesting example of Charke’s subversiveness when he frames her short-lived career running an oil and grocery shop once the Licensing Act was passed as antecedent political performance art. “Not only was Charke taking off the London merchant, but part of the point was that her comedic talents were being wasted. By ‘div[ing] into the Trade,’ Charke could most publicly register a form of absurdist protest ... [keeping] alive ... the memory of the Haymarket Company [and] its place as symbol of the opposition” (Baruth 1998: 31–33).
  - 7 A portrait marionette of her father would be a great attraction due to Cibber’s celebrity status, Charke’s notoriety for impersonating him, and their tumultuous public relationship, but could likely not replace Punch entirely. We know Charke had at least two Punches (Shevelow 2005: 267) because she advertised that in her adaptation of *Amphitryon* “[t]he part of the two Sosias [was] to be performed by two Punches” (Charke cited in Morgan 1988: 64). So perhaps one Punch was indeed Cibber-faced.
  - 8 Considering it in relation to her puppetry would further enrich feminist and queer theorizing on the significance of Charke’s cross-dressing.

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