

Charlotte Charke (1712? to 1760)



Lesbian, transvestite, bisexual, sensationalist: 18th century actress and writer Charlotte Charke has been labelled as all these. She was a self confessed “odd product of Nature”. *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, a monthly magazine of news and satire which ran from 1731 to 1922 wrote “She was cut out for a man, only the devil ran away with the pattern”.

Charlotte’s exact date of birth is uncertain (possibly January 13) but she was baptised at St Martin in the Fields, Westminster, London on February 8th 1712. Her parents were Colley Cibber (1671-1757), actor-manager, playwright, and Poet Laureate from 1730 until his death, and the actress and singer Katherine Shore (1669-1734). Like her parents, Charlotte became an actress and became known for playing male roles and for many years also dressed as a man off stage. In the 1750s she lived in Pill, Bristol and Bath.

Born when her mother was about 45, Charlotte was the youngest of 12 children, most of whom died in infancy. She was resented as “an unwelcome guest in the family” by her siblings and parents. From childhood she enjoyed male pursuits: shooting, gardening, riding and looking after horses. She sometimes impersonated her father by dressing up in his clothes and her male gender identification manifested itself very early on. She later wrote that from the age of four of “Having even then a passionate Fondness for a Periwig”. Charlotte studied science and languages and never had any interest or aptitude for “female” subjects such as sewing and embroidery.

In 1730, aged 17 she made her first appearance on stage and in February of the same year she married violinist and composer Richard Charke (c1709-1737/38) at the same church where she was baptised. Charke was employed at Charlotte’s father’s Drury Lane theatre where Cibber was actor-manager. Charlotte gave birth to her only child, Catherine, in December 1730 but her marriage was short lived. The couple quarrelled incessantly, Richard gambled and had affairs and, to avoid debtor’s prison, soon fled to Jamaica where he died in 1737/38.



Charlotte Charke, in pink, plays Damon as a breeches role in Colley Cibber's pastoral farce 'Damon and Phillida'.
Artist: William Jones (Tate Gallery).

Charlotte made her first appearance on stage in a male “breeches” part in July 1731 and the following year played Roderigo in *Othello*. She is said to be one of the earliest women to play Romeo and Hamlet, but there appears to be no actual evidence of this. It was popular at the time for actresses to play “travesty” roles, dressed as men in a pantomime “principal boy” style. But Charlotte’s appearances, which included in 1736 the highwayman Macheath in John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*, were more obviously masculine. It was around this time Charlotte began to wear male clothing in everyday life and, being tall and lithe, had the figure both on and off stage.

In 1733 Colley Cibber sold his controlling interest in Drury Lane and Charlotte formed her own company two years later and wrote her first play *The Art of Management*. In the 1730s Charlotte appeared in several plays by Henry Fielding (author of *Tom Jones*) and in 1736 played a character called Gaylove in Henry Carey's play *The Honest Yorkshireman*.

After her husband's death she found herself aged 24 without work, a single mother, and began dressing as a man more or less all the time. In 1738 Charlotte got a licence to run a puppet show which toured the country. It was very popular as it caricatured politicians and actors of the day much like the TV show *Spitting Image*. Her success was short lived as Charlotte became ill, was forced to sell the puppet show and was imprisoned for debt.

In 1741 she joined a touring theatre company as "Mr Charles Brown". She became "Beloved by a lady of great fortune" who wanted to marry her. This may have been a Mary Harlowe, an orphan heiress. Charlotte then had several years of a variety of "male" jobs including being valet to the notorious bigamist and libertine, Richard, 6th Earl of Annesley (1690-1761). She was subsequently a sausage maker, opened her own tavern in Drury Lane, still acted occasionally, and was now living openly as "Charles Brown". Despite this she got married again in 1746 to a John Sacheverell who died soon after.

She was then offered a job in another puppet theatre playing Mr Punch which was a short success until her employer was arrested for debt, went to prison, became insane and died.

A variety of jobs followed including a farmer, hog seller, waiter, conjuror's assistant, and running her own oil and grocery shop. In her autobiography she says two women fell in love with her and one, upon discovering her real sex, attacked her. For about a decade Charlotte lived with another woman as "Mr and Mrs Brown" (as well as marrying for a third time in 1750 to a John Harman, a man she hated apparently and who soon disappeared!). In her 2006 biography *Charlotte* Kathryn Shevelow says Charlotte's relationship with Mrs Brown was the "most enduring partnership of her life". She suspects they were lovers but concedes "the nature of their attachment remains unspecified". Shevelow further writes Charlotte was "an individual who rejected a fixed definition of her sexuality and gender, testing the permeability of the cultural line that supposedly separates women from men".

In 1747 Charlotte went on the road in the West Country with a group of strolling players accompanied by her 17 year old daughter, Catherine (known as "Kitty"), and "Mrs Brown" who was also an actress. They visited Cirencester where they stayed at The Angel Inn, Chippenham where they spent time at The White Lion, and Corsham. While in Gloucester Charlotte spent time in prison (offence unknown) and entertained her fellow male inmates singing Macheath's songs from *The Beggar's Opera*.

Sometime in 1752 she is believed to have been living in Chepstow and from June to November of the same year was running a pastry cook shop in Pill, a harbour village near Bristol. Judging from her biography, Charlotte was not impressed with the place.

"The place itself is not unpleasant, if it were inhabited with any other Kind of People than the Savages who infest it, and are only, in outward Form, distinguishable from Beasts of Prey. To be short, the Villanies of these wretches are of so heinous and unlimited a Nature, they render the Place so unlike any other Part of the habitable World, that I can only compare it only to the Anti Chamber of that Abode we are admonish'd to avoid in the next Life, by leading a good one here. A Boy there of eight or ten Years of Age is so well versed in the most beastly Discourse and the more dreadful Sin of Blasphemy and Swearing, as any drunken Reprobate of thirty."

She continues at length, describing the inhabitants of Pill as a “Set of Cannibals”. Charlotte set up shop in this “Terrible Abode of Infamy and Guilt” and put up a board over the door with the inscription “*BROWN. PASTRY COOK, FROM LONDON*”. Despite admitting she knew nothing of the “Composition of a Tart” she felt that as a Londoner her pastry must be good!

The shop did a good trade in the summer months but had little business in the winter so Charlotte went to Bristol. She writes “Whatever World we next were thrown upon, could not be worse than Pill”. In Bristol Charlotte wrote a short story which was printed in the *Bristol Weekly Intelligencer* newspaper run by printer and publisher Edward Ward in Corn Street, who then engaged her as a proof reader and writer “at a Small Pittance per Week”. Charlotte writes:

“Having secured something to piddle on, for I can call it no better, I ran back to Pill, to bless my Friend with the glad Tidings it was a long and dirty Walk from thence to Bristol, and infinitely dangerous over Leigh Down, which is full three Miles.”

The trio of women took lodgings in Bristol for two shillings a week. Sometime in 1753 Charlotte received a letter from her brother Theophilus Cibber (1703-1758) informing her that Mr Simpson of Bath wanted to engage her as prompt and stage manager at The Old Orchard Street Theatre, Bath, which opened in 1750 and ran until 1805 when it was replaced by the present Theatre Royal (the building is now a Masonic Hall).



Old Orchard Street Theatre.
Drawn by Thomas Rowlandson circa 1790

Charlotte and “Mrs Brown” stayed in Bath from September 1753 to March 1754. Kitty had by now acquired a husband who Charlotte did not take to, referring to him as “the little Insignificant” who “impertinently treated and ‘insulted’ both her and Mrs Brown”. She was soon dissatisfied with Mr Simpson’s management of the theatre and moved back to London. At some point, references to “Mrs Brown” in the biography cease without any explanation.

In 1755 Charlotte published her biography *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs Charlotte Charke* (possibly the first by a woman) which sold well, running to several editions. Chatty, witty and intimate, it is a mixture of honesty, humour and self flattery. It was published by three printers in London and a serial edition appeared in Bristol printed by Charlotte’s old employer Edward Ward.

Charlotte’s last appearance on stage in a “breeches part” was in 1755 playing Prince Volscius in *The Rehearsal* by George Villiers. In 1756 Charlotte wrote a novel *The History of Henry Dumont and Miss Charlotte Evelyn* in which a gay man professes his love for another man, dresses himself as a woman and proceeds to kiss his beloved and is then beaten up by his beloved and his friends.

Charlotte’s father, Colley Cibber, died in 1757 leaving her a token five pounds. The following year her daughter Kitty emigrated to America where she died in New York in 1773. Charlotte was now alone, her father dead, daughter abroad, and estranged from her remaining family.

She died in poverty in squalid lodgings in the Haymarket aged 47, on April 6 1760, remembered only as the *British Chronicle* reported on April 16:

“The celebrated Mrs Charlotte Charke, daughter of the late Colley Cibber Esq, Poet Laureate, a Gentlewoman remarkable for her Adventures and Misfortunes.”

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Kathryn Shevelow ‘Charlotte’: <http://kathrynshevelow.com/charlotte/charlotte.html>

Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlotte_Charke