"Instrument and Screen of All Your Villainies:" Charlotte Charke, Deviant Bodies, and Disguise in George Lillo's *The London Merchant*

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Abstract

George Lillo's *The London Merchant*, 1731, was required viewing for leagues of apprentices due to its seemingly straightforward moral: men and women should do as their positions, masters, law, and God require; transgressions are not to be tolerated. However, Millwood, the play's powerful prostitute, rails against the aforementioned ideals, pointing out how men consume all that is beneficial to them, and how they subsequently dispose of the rest. She seduces and manipulates George Barnwell and uses him to lie, steal, and murder. At the play's end, Millwood and George are hanged. This suggests that her ideas and those influenced by them die with her. Since this play was so widely viewed, it is important to take note of which actors were filling which roles in the production. Charlotte Charke—a notorious cross-dresser—played the role of George in 1734 and 1744. She played the role of Millwood twice in 1735. In the role of George, Charke's performances imbue the role with a sense of deviance, if not ridiculousness, before his encounter with Millwood, who is unfairly blamed for his transgressions. Millwood crafts a story of abandonment for economic survival; Charke's lived experiences as a women abandoned by her husband, her father, and her family, imbue this role with authenticity. While scholars have respectively discussed Charke's life and autobiography and *The London Merchant*'s morality, the intersection of this actress's personal history and her performance in this play has not been analyzed. Charke's life experiences, celebrity, and presence on stage point to the fact that the consumption of transgressive female bodies sustain the prevailing systems of morality of the play. Looking at the eighteenth-century drama and Charke's role in it through Marvin Carlson's work on the haunted stage, and Felicity Nussbaum's work on celebrity culture, this play illustrates the ways in which performance serves to utterly disrupt the meaning of a play as cultural icon and broken hegemonic symbol.

1 George Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731) was required viewing for leagues of apprentices due to its seemingly straightforward moral: men and women should do as their positions, masters, law, and God require; transgressions are not to be tolerated. However, Millwood, the play's powerful prostitute, rails against the aforementioned ideals, pointing out how men consume all that is beneficial to them and dispose of the rest. She seduces and manipulates George Barnwell and uses him to lie, steal, and murder. At the play's end, Millwood and George are hanged. This suggests that her ideas, and those influenced by them, die with her. Since this play was so widely viewed, it is important to analyze the effects the cast could have on

the audience. Charlotte Charke—a notorious cross-dresser and famous actress—played the role of George in 1734 and 1744 and the role of Millwood twice in 1735 (Highfill 168-173). In the role of George, Charke's performances infuse the role with a sense of deviance, if not ridiculousness. Charke's female body was concealed in the clothing of a male character, signaling to the audience that they should pay attention to what is being concealed and revealed in the play. When cast as Millwood, Charke's lived experiences as a women abandoned by her husband, her father, and her family, imbue the role with the authenticity that Millwood must invent for economic survival. The importance of authenticity is two-fold. If George does not believe her story of woe is authentic, then he will not try to assist her. If the audience does not find her story authentic, or at least plausible, then they can easily dismiss her other assertions. It is important to note that apprentices were frequently required to see this play, and Lillo purposefully wrote a play about an apprentice for an audience of apprentices in order to "obtain sustained influence over their actions and moral sentiments" (Freeman 114). While scholars have respectively discussed Charke's life and autobiography as well as *The London Merchant*'s morality, the influence of Charke's presence on stage would have changed the audience's perception of the moral lesson of the play. Charke was a celebrity actress and the daughter of famed actor, playwright, theater manager, and poet laureate Colley Cibber ("Colley Cibber"). The eighteenth-century was a time of celebrity obsession, not unlike today's celebrity culture. Charke's life experiences, celebrity, and presence on stage invite the audience to question the play's destruction of Millwood and George and brings to light the ways in which the play's moral of obedience does not serve the apprentice audience in the least. I will investigate the eighteenth-century drama and Charke's role in it in order to show the ways in which performance can utterly disrupt the meaning of the stage play as a cultural icon and broken hegemonic symbol.

2 Charlotte Charke, née Cibber, was a well-known English actress with a penchant for cross-dressing, male roles, and odd jobs (Highfill 167-178). Several critics focus on Charke's autobiography *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke* and the ways in which theater, her roles, and her writing intersected. Her autobiography came out eleven years after her last performance as George Barnwell in *The London Merchant* (Charke). In spite of the gap between Charke's performances and the publication of her 'tell-all' autobiography, critic Christine Cloud's reference to Charke as "the notorious 18th-century English actress/cross-dresser,"

indicates the extent to which Charke's body and her history of cross-dressing would have been legible and known to the audience (860). When Charke cross-dressed on-stage, audience members noticed her or noticed her name in the playbill, and if they did not notice her, the newspapers of the time made sure to point out her cross-dressing. In the same theatrical season in which Charke played George Barnwell, "The *Daily Journal* of 21 May reported: 'We hear the Mad Company at the Haymarket {last winter} design to keep up that Character, by performing the Beggar's Opera in Roman Dresses, and exhibiting Hurlothrumbo, in which Mrs Charke attempts the Character of Lord Flame" (Highfill 169). This is, in short, to say that the audience was well aware that Charke was filling these traditionally male acting roles.

3 While Cloud accurately describes important historical information about Charke and reinforces her level of celebrity, she misreads Charke as a "transvestite figure" and does not acknowledge the full extent to which Charke's cross-dressing was for survival and not for rebellion or to express her identity. In order to get work and "afford but daily Bread for [her] poor Child and Self", Charke must play the role of a male waiter off the stage (Charke 156-157). Additionally Cloud over-emphasizes Charke's role as "a deviant" (869). As Cloud notes, Charke may have been referred to as "'the known trouble maker, Charlotte Charke'; 'Colley Cibber's queer daughter'; or even Cibber's 'unsatisfactory daughter'" (870). However, sentimental tragedies, domestic tragedies, or she-tragedies of the eighteenth-century courted the tears and sympathy of the audience through a main character's deviant act and subsequent punishment. Since cross-dressing was a regular occurrence in the theater, the audience would more likely be moved to sympathy by Charke's tragic backstory than morally offended by her on-stage cross-dressing.

4 In addition to the sheer number and variety of roles Charke played throughout her career, everyone from Polly in *The Beggars Opera's* to Roderigo in *Othello* to George, Lucy, and Millwood in *The London Merchant*, she played many roles in life off the stage: daughter of Colley Cibber, wife, man, mother (Highfill 167-169). As a young girl, she cross-dressed in her hometown, but as with her on-stage cross-dressing, as soon as she started cross-dressing, she started being discovered beneath her disguise (Charke 19-21). In pointing to Felicity Nussbaum's argument about the ways in which celebrity actors' lives and roles intersected during the eighteenth-century, it is likely that the audience would have known something of Charke's personal life: "rather than transcending one's private self, acting involved animation and

sometimes exaggeration of an alleged personal identity" (Nussbaum 20). Charlotte Charke's marriage to Richard Charke, her first husband and "a Drury Lane Theatre jack-of-all-trades," was hardly charmed (Highfill 167). Richard was unfaithful and irresponsible with the money Charlotte earned (170). Charke's husband took financial advantage of her until they ultimately split, leaving Charke with their daughter to support themselves (Smith 85). Additionally, after attempting—and failing—to reconcile Charlotte Charke and a theater manager and learning of Richard Charke's embarrassing behavior, Charke's father Colley Cibber broke with his daughter and refused to further assist her (170-171). It is at this point that Charke's cross-dressing shifted from being voluntary as a young woman and a welcome challenge on stage to a survival strategy upon which her and her young daughter depended. At many points in her autobiography, Charke details how she and her daughter were often financially destitute. In between acting jobs, Charke would resort to asking friends and relatives for money, begging, or cross-dressing in order to acquire a job in a male-only field. In one part of her autobiography, Charke describes how she, dressed as a man, worked as a waiter for a gentlewoman for a period of time, having to leave the job because of solicitations of marriage to the maid's female friend and the ultimate discovery of Charke's gender (Charke 156-165). When Charke cross-dressed off-stage, it was under tragic circumstances but clearly to great effect; she was is able to acquire economic as well as romantic gains, if she so chose.

5 The success with which Charke can cross-dress in both the theater and the street indicates that London's legal tenets against cross-dressing and the play's moral tenets against duplicity can be undercut. Charke's history as a cross-dresser should make the contemporary audiences of her performance question the point of such tenets when those who violate them do so in order to merely survive. Charke's autobiography gives us clues about the extent to which the audience was aware of her troubles. In the introduction to her autobiography, Charke notes that she attempts to "satisfy a Curiosity which has long subsisted in the Minds of many" (13). This indicates that her story was inquired after, if not found out, and she would add to this curious buzz by pulling stunts like writing a play about a conflict with her manager (62). Additionally, her father "endeavoured to promote [her husband's] Interest extreamly amongst People of Quality and Fashion," before Richard Charke proved to be a scoundrel (52). Her husband's association with 'people of quality' and the acting community made it more likely than not that Charke's "new Pair of Horns" or other marital troubles were the gossip around town (54). Her

financial difficulties off stage were suspected to influence the recipient of a 'benefit' performance. A 'benefit' performance is one where an actor or actress receives the bulk of ticket sales for that evening. In the same summer she played Millwood (1735), Charke also played "Sir John Loverule in *The Devil to Pay* and danced a minuet and the *Black Joak* with Miss Brett for the entertainment of visiting 'Chinese Mandarins' and for the benefit of a family in distress—possibly her own" (Highfill 169). Those performances feature Charke cross-dressing on stage, as opposed to performing in a 'woman in breeches' role. When a 'woman in breeches' character appears in a play, the character is cross-dressing. However, when a woman plays a male role, the actress is cross-dressing. This carries with it the legal, economic, and social ramifications of successful cross-dressing. While cross-dressing on stage, be it a woman in breeches role or a woman playing a male part, was simply a matter of changing costumes, Charke's external cross-dressing, in the position of the waiter for example, was illegal (Cloud 858). Similarly to Charke's own autobiography, *The London Merchant* features many transgressions.

6 The multiple seductions in this play involve a series of putting on and taking off 'arts' formed by body language and speech. The most immediate is Millwood's seduction of George. In performances where Charke acted the part of George, the audience would have seen a woman seducing another woman, which would simultaneously foreshadow the fact that George was beginning to fall into a life of sin and, consequently, show a scintillating seduction scene between two women. Felicity Nussbaum, in her work *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater*, states that "the eighteenth-century audience's pleasure in cross-dressed roles, as many critics have argued, was aroused partly though its recognition that the character was in camouflage, and that the woman's body beneath the disguise could be readily distinguished" (197). Therefore, in Charke's performances in male roles we have the dual forces of eroticism and rebellion at play. Before George arrives at her house, Millwood decides what disguise she should affect:

> MILLWOOD. Now, after what
> manner shall I receive him? Let me consider…If to seem what one is not in order
> to be the better liked for what one really is, if to speak
> one thing and mean the direct contrary be art in a
> woman, I know nothing of Nature. (1.2.80-91)[1]

[1] All references to the play are from *The Broadview Anthology of Restoration & Early Eighteenth-Century Drama*, listed in the Works Cited page at the end of the text.

Millwood's emphasis on the "Nature" of women as duplicitous makes herself and other women seem untrustworthy to the audience. Charke's disguise or 'manner' of acting the part of George, a man of supposedly pure virtue, doubly endorses this idea of female dissembling. However, in the context of both Charke's life experiences and the discovery of Millwood's mistreatment later in the play, this so-called natural inclination to 'say one thing and mean another' actually becomes a survival strategy. Additionally, the preceding line complicates this "Nature." The goal of this "seem[ing] what one is not" is in service of preserving or gaining approval for authenticity, "for what one really is," in a roundabout way of preserving personal safety until that affection is guaranteed. Later on, George comes to regret his transgressions and promises himself that he will never see Millwood again (2.1.191-194.). She tries again to use her beauty and femininity, but when that fails, she weaves a tragic tale—told through her maidservant Lucy—that wins George to her favor again (2.2.73-169). After hearing Millwood's story, George's resolve melts away:

> GEORGE. Oh where are all my resolutions now? Like early
> vapors of the morning dew chased by the sun's
> warm beams, they're vanished and lost as though
> they had never been. (2.2.159-162)

Here we see an uncovering mixed with imagery from nature. These 'warm beams,' seemingly natural to Millwood's pitiful story, are in fact artifice. Additionally, the beams uncover what has been present all along—George's desire and affection for Millwood. Grass under morning dew is still grass; George's desires cloaked in guilt and regret are still desires; Charke's body is still read as female. Charke's presence points to the idea that an inclination towards vice can be hidden, but not totally deleted or ignored. When combined with the natural imagery in the text and Millwood's discussion of feminine-duplicity-as-nature, the play presents a paradox: if it is natural for women to say one thing and mean another or to act 'better' than they are, and George's well-intended 'resolutions' disappear like a covering of dew, then the audience gets the sense that while women rely on duplicity for survival in nature, it is because men's system of morality is equally duplicitous. Charke, when cast as Millwood, emphasizes to the audience that women try to survive based on any means necessary because that is how Charke herself was forced to live off stage.

7 Millwood weaves a tale about her current situation in order to trick George into giving her more money. This tale contains the threads of abandonment, male betrayal, and financial

distress found in Charke's lived experience. The story is, more specifically, as follows: Millwood had a rich guardian, then the guardian's wife dies; he falls in love with Millwood and demands that she marry him or "[he'll bring] in an account of his/ executorship, wherein he makes her a debtor to him" (2.2.111-146). When the guardian discovered that Millwood had an affair with George, he demanded sex from her or total ruin (2.2.111-146). Destitution and ruin at the hands of a man ties Millwood's fake tale to Charke's lived experience with a husband who used her financially and pursued other women. Without Charke's actual experiences of male betrayal, Millwood would be received as a villain at this point in the play: someone who manipulates a young person to her advantage, much like the man in her story. However, Charke's celebrity—or notoriety—and lived experiences soften the character's actions and begs the question to what extent Millwood's is story actually a fabrication. The audience knows, on the one hand, that Millwood invented this story with the purpose of manipulating George. However, with Charke's background of male betrayal and the knowledge that Millwood is a prostitute, it is plausible that, while different from the exact story she tells, Millwood definitely experienced "villanies" that put her in the position she is in (4.2.299). The aforementioned 'villanies' are Millwood's way of describing the hypocritical, destructive patriarchal moral of the play.

8 While Charke's performance in the role of Millwood might make the audience more sympathetic to Millwood's position, Millwood does reproduce the system of manipulation for financial gain, convincing George to rob, lie, and eventually, murder. However, when Millwood's part in the plot was discovered, she reveals that her motivations and actions were modeled off the way in which men in power use that power in order to reach their ends, no matter what violence ensues because of it:

> MILLWOOD. I found it therefore
> necessary to be rich, and to that end I summoned
> all my arts. You call 'em wicked, be it so; they were
> such as my conversation with your sex had furnished me withal
> …War, plague, and
> famine has not destroyed so many of the human race
> as this pretended piety has done
> …What are your laws, of which you make your boast,
> but the fool's wisdom and the coward's valor, the
> instrument and screen of all your villainies (4.2.248-299)

Not only does Millwood claim that she learned her 'arts' from her interactions with men, but also she accuses larger structural factors, such as religion and laws, of barely concealing the evil men

are doing. The image of the screen is particularly powerful here: a screen is always simultaneously concealing and revealing what it stands in front of. The function of the screen in this scene invokes Marvin Carlson's theory of 'ghosting' in *The Haunted Stage*, wherein typecasting and stock characters created this web of audience expectations, 'ghosting' the currently viewed cast and play with previous casts (53-59). For example, if Charke is cast as George and then is cast as Millwood, audiences would have in mind Charke's performances as both characters, as well as other actors' performances of those characters. Millwood also reminds the audience that a screen may obscure a message, but it still functions as a literal and figurative dialogue: "they were / such as my conversation with your sex had furnished me withal". When confronted with a 'screen' of male conversation, laws, or religion, Millwood had to mimic the behavior of those holding the screen—those men in power—in order to survive. Millwood heard 'through' the screen when she interacted with those in power who had mistreated her, thereby teaching her to mistreat others. Her attempts to name the screen or come through the screens reveal the harmfulness of a morality of masculine production and feminine obedience, and tip the audience's sympathies towards the transgressive voice of an oppressed woman. When Charke is cast as George, clothing and disguises function similarly to the screen Millwood points to above.

9 George's experience of guilt and the inclination to literally cover his crimes draws attention to the thinly veiled female body on stage. This calls into question whether George's innocent body was even innocent in the first place. If George's clothing could conceal a criminal body, Charke's body, then the audience might question the extent to which George's professed morality is actually covering up its nefarious motions. Unlike Millwood, George does not recognize that his obedience and naïve attachment to ideas of sin ultimately serve to control him. He is overcome with guilt throughout the majority of the play. For example, after losing his virtue to Millwood and stealing from his master, he discusses the seemingly eternal misery that stems from concealing one's sins:

> GEORGE. Though hypocrisy may awhile *conceal* my guilt,
> at length it will be known, and public shame and ruin
> must ensue. In the meantime, what must be my life?
> Ever to speak a language *foreign* to my heart, hourly
> to add to the number of my crimes in order to
> *conceal* 'em. (2.1.8-13 emphasis added)

Language such as "conceal" and "foreign" indicate that to be dishonest is to be covered or othered, even from the self. Here, the actions and silence of a body are what conceal his guilt and crimes. Continuing to act normally covers the deviant's transgression, as opposed to a mask or lie covering the face or reputation. George could find peace and self-familiarity in confessing, peeling back the façade of normality that conceals his crimes, and accepting his punishment. However, George is forced to continue to disguise his feelings and actions when Thorowgood, his master, rejects his confession.

> BARNWELL. Hear me on my knees confess.
> THOROWGOOD. Not a syllable more upon this subject. (2.1.182-183)

As Charke must keep her body hidden in plain sight, so must George keep his crimes hidden from the sight of his mentor. If George were to be found out for stealing or cavorting with a prostitute, then he could lose his position as an apprentice, "eliminat[ing] the possibility of social security" (Wallace 132-133). There is a tension, a dramatic irony, because the character George is so concerned with revealing his 'true' sinful self to Thorowgood in order to be forgiven, and the actress Charke is concerned with covering herself, so as to be legible as male. The audience is aware both of Charke's body and George's transgressions, regardless of a confession from either, which allows them to see the ways in which Thorowgood's suppression of George's confession is a harmful act of control. George disguises himself, doubly covering Charke's body, and much like the laws and religious institutions Millwood cites, gives George access to a screen that allows George to commit murder.

10 Later on in the play, George actually puts on a vizard, or mask, before he murders his uncle. This is unnecessary, as dead men can tell no tales, and the audience knows that it is George behind the mask, but the fact that it happens nonetheless draws further attention to the repeated acts of covering and uncovering that destabilize the play's promoted message. The physical covering 'allows' George to commit the crime; in covering himself, he is no longer himself or bound by his moral code. This is similar to the freedoms cross-dressing allowed women both on and off stage (Nussbaum 195). He has disguised himself, even from his own conscience:

> GEORGE. Now for my disguise. (*Plucks out*
> *a vizor*.) This is his hour of private meditation. Thus
> daily he prepares his soul for heaven whilst I—but
> what have I to do with heaven! Hah! No struggles,

conscience—
Hence! hence remorse and every thought that's
good;
The storm that lust began must end in blood.
Puts on the vizor and draws a pistol. Exit. (3.3.35-43)

George sends out his remorse and conscience and then conceals his face. In acting as a different person, he is able to separate the actions of his 'character' from those of his personhood, but as we see above in Carlson's work, an actress cannot separate himself or herself from the character being played, and George cannot separate himself from his sin.

11 Even after he throws off the mask in disgust and regret, there is still an actively transgressive body hidden in plain sight: Charlotte Charke's body (3.3.36). This crime of parricide becomes even more frightful for the audience when they consider the fact that it is a penetrative act, stabbing, that kills Uncle Barnwell (3.3.32). A woman, playing a male role, stabbing a father figure in the play invokes this idea that when women or feminized bodies enact maleness and dominance, they can destroy the patriarchal order. From Cloud, we see that cross-dressing is a powerful act because it avoids categorization; it occupies a liminal space between male and female; it "expose[s] the construction of the gender binary…[and] demonstrate[s] just how permeable the borderline between the 'Self' and 'Other' really is" (857-859). In not choosing to 'be' male or female off stage, or act exclusively in male or female roles on stage, Charke's presence is an act of defiance against gender norms. It is one thing to have this dissent from Millwood's character, but it is entirely another to see these ideas filtered through George. When George returns to Millwood's doorstep and she offers to hide him, George says in despair, "Oh hide me from myself, if it be possible" (4.1.21). This line is a chilling misrecognition; it is impossible to hide from oneself. Behind this line lies the sense that the hidden or repressed moral narrative is ever-present, much like Charke's female body on the stage. This putting on and removing of disguises mirrors the earlier seduction of George, in which he tries to keep his virtue 'on' in the face of Millwood's wiles.

12 We have previously discussed Millwood's tale of abandonment and the influence of Charke's casting on that story. It is important to note, however, that while Millwood invented the story, her maidservant Lucy is the one who tells it to George, punctuated by Millwood's cries of agony and despair. The displacement of narrative further emphasizes the idea that the story could have happened, and in the case of Charke did happen, to any woman, virtuous, deviant, or

otherwise. Essentially, like the men in the play use religion and the law to 'screen [their] villainies,' Millwood uses Lucy to screen her own. That is to say, Millwood uses masculine methods for financial gain. While Lucy is giving George the details of Millwood's 'situation,' Millwood only speaks to either emote or to pretend to prevent Lucy from talking to George. Millwood gives several dramatic lines throughout like "I have said too much" and "How I shall live hereafter, Heaven knows" (2.2.103, 122). These outbursts could be considered comical, depending on the actress playing the role of Millwood, but in this case, since Charke was negotiating issues of abandonment, mistreatment, and financial insecurity, her presence on stage would have imbued even this false scene with a sense of authenticity. Millwood also positions herself and Lucy as actresses, fully knitting together Charke and these characters:

> MILLWOOD. Alas! (*Weeping.)*
> LUCY. (*Aside*.)
> We are right I find; that's my cue.—Ah, dear sir, she's
> going she knows not whither, but go she must. (2.2.86-86)

Actresses 'play acting' within the framework of the play works to draw attention to the notion of acting itself. If Lucy looks to Millwood for her cue, then so should the audience look to Charke for a cue about where the morality cracks at the edges. What is especially interesting is that Lucy, during this performance for George, notes that she has encouraged Millwood to simply have sex with the guardian, as he demands (2.2.163-165). Openly exchanging sex or one's body for money both serves the patriarchal structures, especially in this case where the offer is coercive, and subverts them. Millwood's actual position as a prostitute and Charke's actual job as an actress require them to display their bodies in order to be financially independent outside of the support of a husband.

13 Charke's ability to cross-dress, ultimately, gives the viewer of the play a way to empathize with Millwood's point of view. Charke turned to cross-dressing in her life off the stage in order to survive when she was destitute and needed work. Robert Mack, while predominantly interested in Charke's autobiography, gives some insight into the practical benefits Charke gained from cross-dressing. "On the whole, modern readers are likely to agree that it is considerably more probable that the actress's initial reasons for deciding to pass on occasion 'EN CAVALIER' (*Narrative*, 47) were connected as much to her seemingly constant indebtedness and financial insecurity as they were to an more personally complex or psychosexual motives" (198). This understanding of Charke's financial situation connects her to

Millwood even more. During her debate with Thorowgood, Millwood outlines a system in which men are free to follow their inclinations and consume all those who are weaker than them:

> MILLWOOD. I know you and I hate you all. I expect no mercy
> and I ask for none. I followed my inclinations, and
> that the best of you does every day. All actions
> seem alike natural and indifferent to man and
> beast who devour, or are devoured, as they meet
> with others weaker or stronger than themselves. (4.2.276-281)

Charke follows her inclinations to dress like a man to survive. This quote calls attention to the ways in which Millwood makes money through the seduction and manipulation of those who are weaker than her. It is because of Charke's deviation from Millwood's story—Charke has not used her cross-dressing to incite a murder—and the legitimacy Charke's biography lends Millwood's survival strategies that Millwood's character becomes more sympathetic to the audience, rendering her protestations against the way men act in the world as fact, lived experience. Millwood is a woman who is destroyed because she acts like a man in a man's world, but not as successfully as Charke. Before Millwood and George's destruction, by hanging, there is an additional scene of seduction that further calls the audience's attention to the ways in which the play's moral system is constantly being undermined: a scene of seduction between George and his fellow apprentice Trueman.

14 This less obvious seduction scene that comes towards the end of the play becomes more evident when we consider the casting of Charke as George: Trueman's seduction of George back into their homosocial friendship. Trueman states,

> TRUEMAN. We have not yet embraced and may be interrupted.
> Come to my arms…Our
> mutual groans shall echo to each other through the
> dreary vault. Our sighs shall number the moments
> as they pass, and mingling tears communicate such
> anguish as words were never made to express. (5.2.111-127)

Here we see a level of anxiety—the embrace might not happen or might be interrupted. The sense of urgency is not unlike the scene between Millwood and George, but in this case, the seduction does not result in monetary gain. This is right before George is taken away to the scaffold. Before the doubly transgressive body of Charke as George is removed from our sight, we see in this moment a more surface-level viewing of the play is subverted. Instead of a pure friendship between two young men, we see and immediately eroticized moment of death and the

female body, taking liberties and embracing a(nother) man on stage. Charke's body causes viewers to be skeptical of George's initial virtue and eroticize him in a way that draws attention to the ease with which those not in power can fall from grace in this moral system.

15 Charlotte Charke's presence on stage, cast as George Barnwell and Millwood in *The London Merchant*, subverts a traditional reading of the play's moral through Charke's performance as a cross-dressed woman, cross-dressing in her daily life, and her ill treatment at the hands of her husband and family. Charke's notoriety in the press, her female body in man's clothes, and her experiences as an economically disenfranchised woman all contribute to how the audience might 'read' her performance. There is not only the ghost of Charke's personal experiences but also the ghost of her past theatrical characters. Charke's role as George then Millwood then George again would have shown how complicated and interrelated their characters' relationships were on stage, and, truly, how similarly they are rendered in the play. George appears to be a pre-Millwood character: an innocent person who is destined to be snuffed out by the prevailing ideology of the play. Additionally, playing Millwood before playing George again compounds the deviant ghosts that always already haunt Charlotte Charke's acting roles. While *The London Merchant* seems to establish two conflicting ideologies—obedience and 'rightful' manipulation versus a rejection of patriarchal systems of control—in order to snuff out any inklings of disobedience in the minds of the apprentice audience, casting Charke as George and Millwood in various productions only draws the audience's attention more directly to the places where the violence and deception behind the 'screen' comes through.

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