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The Ancien Régime of Identity

"The World's All Face"

In the middle of the eighteenth century one A. Betson, an idiosyncratic writer with a scholarly bent, published a treatise on masquerades, setting the scene with a seemingly innocuous definition: "Masquerades, or Masqueraders, are *Persons in Disguise*, representing or acting other Personages, than what they are commonly known to be." Now read this definition again, paying particular attention to how its ending betrays an archaic way of thinking. We might say, "masqueraders are acting personages different than what they *are*", but we are less likely to say that they act personages different than what they *are commonly known to be*. It is not much of a stretch to hear in this formulation an admission that real life was itself not unlike a masquerade: both, it seems, involved assumed identities. The difference appears more one of degree than of kind: whereas in real life one is known to be a particular character most of the time, in a masquerade one sports a character only for an evening.

Betson, accordingly, made it clear that masquerades, contrary to what some may think, had very little to do with that other familiar arena of role-taking and dressing up, the theater. "Plays were originally a Kind of Mimicks of Masqueraders, representing the Actions of others in different Views." Theater was artifice, mimicking the actions of *others*: masqueraders, by contrast, were simply expressions of alternative truths of the masqueraders themselves, allowing people "almost [to] change their Nature with their Habit". Furthermore, Betson claimed, perhaps most radically, that the imperative to do so was an essential aspect of human nature: the declared purpose of his learned treatise was to establish masquerades as a natural and universal phenomenon, one "as old as the Worlds second Infancy . . . [and] common to most Nations". More than a person's identity, it was masquerading itself that came closest to characterizing the essence of humankind.[1]

I am not aware of anyone else in eighteenth-century England repeating Betson's historical, or rather ahistorical, line about the primordial and universal origins of the masquerade. But in other important ways, pertaining both to the institution of the masquerade and to its underlying assumptions about identity, Betson was certainly at one with conventional wisdom. Thus, contemporaries would not have been particularly surprised by Betson's suggestion that the masquerade had some fundamental affinity with real life. Quite the contrary: the observation that the masquerade offered a singularly apt lens through which to view and understand broader aspects of "The Times" was put forth by so many eighteenth-century Britons so often that we would be foolhardy not to heed whatever insight they took to be behind it. Witness this (modest) string of examples: "the World being a Masquerade, where borrow'd Vizors so disguised e'ry one, that none knew ev'n his own acquaintance" (Charles Gildon, 1692). "What is human Life, but a Masquerade" (John Trenchard, 1720). "[The present is] such masquerading times/ . . . 'Tis not a world, but Chaos of mankind" (Edward Young, 1728). Society is "a vast Masquerade, where the greatest Part appear disguised" (Henry Fielding, 1743). "The globe is all masquerade" (street ballad, 1750). "The rich and the powerful live in a perpetual masquerade, in which all about them wear borrowed characters" (Samuel Johnson, 1750). "This metropolis is a vast masquerade" (Tobias Smollett, 1753). "Every Place is Masquerade now: There's no knowing a Man by his Face; he always wears two" (a self-consciously cross-dressed dramatic heroine, 1755). "The world's a masquerade! the masquers, you, you, you" (Oliver Goldsmith, 1769, addressing a theater audience). "Society [is] . . . a meer chaos, in which all distinction of rank is lost . . . 'tis one universal masquerade, all disguised in the same habits and manners" (Hannah Cowley, 1781).[2]

On one level, to be sure, such pronouncements were simply recycling that vaunted image in Western social criticism, the *theatrum mundi*, or the world as a stage. And yet, counter to Betson's ahistorical perspective, these speakers were giving this theme, often self-consciously, its own time-specific particularity. "Poets and philosophers, both ancient and modern, have compared this world to a theatre, and considered human life as the grand drama thereof," declared an essayist in the *St. James's Magazine* in 1774; "but as mankind in general seem to act the impostor, I think we may with equal propriety compare human life to our modern masquerade." The timeliness of the invocation of the masquerade as a metonym for society writ large was especially evident in a letter from Elizabeth Montagu to Hannah More in the early 1780s: "it is the ton of the times to confound all distinctions of age, sex, and rank; no one ever thinks of sustaining a certain character, unless it is one they have assumed at a masquerade." We shall return to Montagu's evocative formulation later. For now, it is sufficient to note the resonance of this repeated refrain, as a clue to

eighteenth-century presuppositions – presuppositions about disguise and human nature, identity and fluidity – that gave specific meaning to the claim that "the world's all face".[3]

As we unfold these presuppositions that made up the *ancien régime* of iden-tity, the reader will recognize affinities with the patterns identified in part I of this book for the history of specific categories of identity in the short eighteenth century. It bears repeating that, a priori, there was nothing inevitable about such affinities: the fact that in this particular historical configuration they did occur – a synergy that the masquerade embodied so well – points to a powerful shared epistemological framework that underpinned these patterns. In our pursuit of these common underpinnings, two important characteristics of the *ancien régime* of identity stand out. The first is malleability: the sense that one's "per-sonal identity" (a clunky term, but, as we shall see, a contemporary one with a reputable provenance), at least in principle or under certain circumstances, could be imagined as unfixed and potentially changeable – sometimes perceived as double, other times as sheddable, replaceable, or moldable. The second and closely related point is somewhat harder to formulate in its own terms, because we conceive it initially as an absence. This is the absence signaled in the phrase "before the self": indicating a time that lacked a sense of a stable inner core of selfhood like that which will emerge at the turn of the eighteenth century. This "pre-self", as it were, had not been contained or well represented by the spatial model of surface versus depth, which was later to become the main modern visual aid for understanding selfhood. "The world's all face", it will turn out, was more than a metaphor. Instead, we can visualize this eighteenth-century configuration as a set of positions within which one identified oneself – a set of coordinates, or a matrix. One's position in this matrix, which could be pre-scribed or adopted (thus allowing for both subordination and agency), was rela-tional. Alternatively, we can think of this eighteenth-century configuration as a "socially turned self", to borrow Sarah Knott's felicitous phrase, indicating that its primary leanings were outward rather than inward.[4] Within a post-Romantic terminology, or within the definition of "self" that I insisted on at the beginning of this book, a "socially turned self" is a contradiction in terms. But this contradiction – which also allowed categories of personal iden-tity (as we shall see) to be primarily *collective* rather than individual – actually captures rather effectively this elusive characteristic of the *ancien régime* of identity.

Proteus Unbound: Personal Identity in the Short Eighteenth Century

"Why, then I'd be any thing – and all! – Grave, gay, capricious – the soul of whim, the spirit of variety." Thus exclaims a woman in love in Hannah

Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem* of 1781 as to the lengths to which she would go for her husband. But how far *was* she willing to go in becoming "the spirit of variety"? She would, as we see, change her temperament. She would "feast with him in an Esquimaux hut, or a Persian pavilion". She would go as far as to "change [her] country". Finally, and more startlingly, she declares her will-ingness to change even "my sex" (for her lover, no less!). This woman's confi-dent willingness to transform herself extended from behavior and disposition through national identity all the way to gender identity and identity *tout court*; a fact underscored by the playwright's decision to set her profession in the midst of a masquerade scene, thus parading before the play's audience, with all the visual lushness of fancy costuming, the many possibilities of personal meta-morphosis. The fact that this masquerade scene, in turn, followed close on the heels of an earlier pronouncement of society – of everyone on and off stage – as "one universal masquerade", guaranteed, in typically unsubtle eighteenth-century fashion, that the audience would not miss the point.[5]

Lord Monboddo surely would not have missed it. A few years earlier he had the opportunity to proclaim his unshakable belief in the fundamental muta-bility of man. The occasion was his publication in English of the story of a French feral child, Mademoiselle le Blanc, who, allegedly, began her life as a white girl, was abducted to be sold into slavery and therefore painted black in order "to make her pass for a negroe" (note again the ease of racial passing here taken for granted), before being shipwrecked in France and thus found as the "savage girl" who was now in the process of becoming civilized. Monboddo was quick to dismiss the skeptics. The facts of this story, he affirmed, could only be doubted by such people who against

all testimony, ancient or modern . . . are resolved to believe that man, the most various of all animals, in the many different states through which he passes, continues still the very same animal, endued with the same powers of mind and body, living in the same manner, and governed by the same notions and opinions; a proposition which appears to me incredible in itself, though it were not contradicted by the whole history of mankind.

Both history and common sense – not to mention the adventures of Made-moiselle le Blanc – proved the protean nature of humankind. James Boswell was another who was glad to make the same announcement. "I have discov-ered", he exclaimed with excitement several years earlier, "that we may be in some degree whatever character we choose."[6]

To be sure, people in every generation can be found to make such pro-nouncements. But in the short eighteenth century they may well have meant them in a different and more literal way. The female soldier who succeeded in her masquerade for years undetected; the European captive who became

indistinguishable from his or her Indian captors; the heroine who lost her own sense of herself at a masquerade; Mademoiselle le Blanc who was painted to pass for black; and likewise a great many of the characters who have paraded before you in the previous chapters with borrowed, assumed, and replaceable identities, together with their public or their audiences who were willing to give credence to their stories; all of them signaled a sense of malleability of identity that is far from our own when *we* say – to borrow a refrain from a 1970s musical – "we could have been anything that we wanted to be". It is for this reason that we have taken the roundabout, hopefully scenic route through eighteenth-century culture in order to see all these characters in their various identity-flexing moments. After all, it was much rarer for contemporaries to formulate and record their understandings of identity in an explicit, self-conscious fashion.

At the same time, certain contexts – typically rather high-brow ones – did occasionally encourage a more direct reflection on the malleability of identity. One such context was, not surprisingly, that of the theorizing of the theater. Where Betson drew a stark distinction between the "real" identity transmutations at the masquerade and the artificial identity charades at the theater, others made precisely the opposite claim for the stage, stressing how *unartificial*, or natural, Georgian acting really was, at least when it was done properly. In the process, their understandings of the potentialities and the limits of identity play came through unusually loud and clear.

In an early contribution to the English theory of acting, the playwright Aaron Hill began with the "first dramatic principle" that "must be always upper-most": "To act a passion well, the actor never must attempt its imitation." Rather, he must move his mind so that he actually *feels* that passion itself, as "when 'tis undesigned, and natural": only in experiencing real feeling can the actor make the audience experience it too. The subsequent step was perhaps more surprising. In order for the actor to "strongly impress the illusion of his performance upon us", repeated John Hill (no relation) in another key work of acting theory adapted in part from French sources, "he must first impress it as strongly upon himself"; and – here comes that next step – as a condition for "his utmost success, it is necessary that he imagine himself to be, *nay that he for the first time really is*, the person he represents". "The player of true spirit" – John Hill again – "is no longer himself, when he assumes his character . . . he lives, not acts the scene." Not step, one might say, but leap: a leap from imaginative representation to actual embodiment. "An *Actor*", Charles Gildon flatly insisted in the first English contribution to this genre earlier in the century, "must transform himself into every Person he represents." A model actor – thus another critic – was a "delightful Proteus, so wholly transforming himself into his part, and putting off himself with his clothes, as he never (not so much

as in the tiring-house) assum'd himself again until the play was done." This metamorphosis should hold even away from the view of any audience, in the privacy of the "tiring-house". The same wisdom was echoed in a 1743 essay in the *Gentleman's Magazine*: a good actor is "so much of the *Person* he represents, that he puts the *Playhouse* out of our Heads, and is actually to *us* and to *himself*, what *another Actor* would only *seem to be*". Note the essayist's under-scoring of "*is*". Unlike the verisimilitude of bad actors – those examples of "unnatural acting" (thus another authority) who "perform in *disguised* charac-ters" – a good actor *is* whomever he represents.[7]

This good actor, in mid-eighteenth-century England, was no mere academic ideal type, but rather had a well-known identity and an established name: David Garrick. Or rather, this idealized actor had made an established name for himself by conspicuously placing the knowability of his identity in question. Garrick's claim to fame was precisely his ability to lose himself in his roles. Garrick "obtains your Applause", Samuel Foote explained, "by persuading you that *he is the real Man*"; in comparison to him, lesser actors simply appear "ridiculous". Henry Fielding famously capitalized on – and paid tribute to – his friend Garrick's reputation in *Tom Jones*. Upon being taken for the first time to a play, the "unimproved" Partridge – part barber, part schoolmaster – ranked Garrick's performance as Hamlet below that of the strutting, mouthing performer who personated the King, since it did not seem to him like acting at all. This protean reputation, moreover, extended to his life off stage, as in the anecdote about how Garrick, upon encountering a carriage driver who refused to set off with only him and a friend as passengers, re-entered the carriage four times in different characters, thus "succeed[ing] in convincing the man that he had six fares". The ultimate act of passing by the man whose identity was infi-nitely variable: in the parting words of his friend Oliver Goldsmith, "Here lies David Garrick, describe me who can . . ."[8]

Now consider Garrick's reputation within the context of the broader ques-tions that are the focus of this book. For, as Shearer West reminds us, the wide-spread belief that Garrick succeeded so well in actually becoming the characters he was supposed to represent on stage was not just a statement about Garrick's singular acting talent, but also, and perhaps primarily, a reflection of the assumptions and expectations of his audiences, who were confident in his ability – and the general possibility – to do so. Nor were these expectations simply the result of a desire for faithful realism on stage: on the contrary, Garrick's characters, like others before the late-eighteenth-century turn to "authenticity", were often played against the backdrop of incongruous, ahis-torical, and unrealistic settings. Rather, these assumptions and expectations of Georgian theatrical audiences offer a revealing glimpse into contemporaries' willingness to imagine personal identity, albeit in unusual circumstances, as

fluid and mutable. For, as Paul Friedland has persuasively argued, in contrast to our familiar understanding of the theater that supposes its successful effect to result from the belief (or rather the suspension of disbelief) of the spectator, the onus in the *ancien-régime* theater was placed on *the actor*. It was the actor who was expected to believe in his own actual metamorphosis in order to achieve the ideal dramatic effect. Acting was taken to involve a difficult process in which – to quote one authority of 1759 – the actor "make[s] a temporary renunciation of himself" and "forget[s] if possible, his own identity". Edmund Burke, recounting a personal experience of trying to imitate a passion that resulted in his mind actually "turn[ing] to that passion", likewise admitted that his own attempts paled in comparison with those of the ultimate mimic, the man "able to enter into the dispositions and thoughts of people, as effectually *as if he had been changed into the very men*". As Garrick himself once wrote, the superior actor "will always . . . be transported beyond himself". "If you cannot lend yourself to these metamorphoses," cautioned another, "do not venture upon the stage."" These metamorphoses, involving the suspension of one's identity, were certainly admitted to be difficult; but the significant point is that they were considered *possible*.

So what *were* eighteenth-century audiences thinking? Or actors, for that matter? Did they all simply believe in complete transformation of the identity of performers on stage? This was the difficulty that Dr. Johnson captured so well when he observed, "If Garrick really believed himself to be that monster, Richard the Third, he deserved to be hanged every time he performed it." Think again of *Tom Jones's* Partridge, mistaking Garrick's acting for real-life behavior. After all, Fielding was winking at the reader at Partridge's expense: a collusion that presupposed that both reader and author knew something about the theater that the barber-schoolmaster did not. At the beginning of the century, the playwright George Farquhar wrestled precisely with this question. In watching Alexander the Great on stage, he wrote,

we must suppose that we see the very *Alexander*. . . . Yet the whole Audience at the same time knows that this is Mr. *Betterton*, who is strutting upon the Stage. . . . And that the same Person shou'd be Mr. *Betterton*, and *Alexander* the Great, at the same time, is somewhat like an Impossibility, in my Mind. Yet you must grant this Impossibility in spight of your Teeth, if you han't Power to raise the old Heroe from the Grave to act his own Part.

A person, Farquhar seemed to suggest hesitantly, could embody two identities at the same time, however difficult this was to comprehend. Occasionally we can find a critic driven by this difficulty to the language of mystery and the preternatural – like John Hill, who at one point likened the actor to "the priestess of the Delphic God, who as soon as she ascended the sacred tripod, became

possessed, and uttered with a voice and mien, not her own, the sacred oracles". But I want to call attention to the suggestive possibility raised by Farquhar that drew less on notions of magic – more typically a feature of earlier, seventeenth-century acting theory – than on a potential inherent in contemporary understandings of personal identity: its possible doubleness.[10]

Nobody, to my knowledge, drew these connections more explicitly than Dr. Johnson's close associate James Boswell. In 1770, Boswell published a series of essays in the *London Magazine*, as a plea to Garrick to write his "Theatrical Testament"; and presumably, if Garrick did not oblige (he did not), to become a substitute for it. In a way, these essays can stand as a testament to the entire *ancien régime* of acting, shortly before it was about to turn obsolete (as will be recounted in chapter 7). Boswell began by "tak[ing] for granted" the conventional eighteenth-century wisdom "that a good player is indeed in a certain sense the character that he represents, during the time of his performance". Insisting repeatedly that the fact that the player "*is* what we behold" is a "mysterious difficulty", Boswell then felt obliged – not least, because of the question of moral responsibility raised by Johnson as well – to qualify his argument: "I beg leave to remind my readers", he fidgeted, "that I qualified my proposition by saying that a player is the character he represents only *in a certain degree*; and therefore there is a distinction between his being what I have said and his being the character he represents in the full sense of the expression." Admitting he was "at a loss" to explain, he tried anyway: "If I may be allowed to conjecture what is the nature of that mysterious power by which a player really is the character which he represents, my notion is, that he must have a kind of double feeling. He must assume in strong degree the consciousness of the character which he represents, while he at the same time retains the consciousness of his own character." Like Farquhar, Boswell was seeing double: in order to account for the difficulty of one person sporting two identities at the same time he pointed to identity's lack of inherent unity, invoking, as we shall see later, philosophical authorities to support his point.[11] "Be two or not be two, that was the question; and when posed by Garrick's Hamlet, Partridge, for one, did not know the answer.

So the misconception that Johnson mocked, and that Partridge was mocked for, was the failure to understand the complexity of the identity duplication involved in the "mysterious" process of the actor's metamorphosis. At the same time, what both Johnson and Fielding presented as the simpler understanding, the default of the uninitiated with less discernment than themselves, is telling: namely, that actors' identities are truly shed as they assume those of their characters. Not identity-splitting, then, but identity substitution. But ultimately, what is important for us is that both the vulgar and the educated views allowed – however differently – for the possible mutability of identities, thus revealing cultural presuppositions about the meaning and nature of identity that they

held in common. It is this shared cultural ground, moreover, that may help explain how Boswell, after professing the mysterious and difficult nature of the transformation undergone by an actor like Garrick, could suddenly turn around to claim that in truth "the double feeling" that he had identified in the actor was "experienced by many men in the common intercourse of life", and even that without it "society would not be half so safe and agreeable as we find it". Suddenly everyone turned out to be Garrick. "Like players", Boswell concluded, we all "are to a certain degree a different character from our own"; or, as many would have put it, and did put it, the whole world was a masquerade.[12]

We shall see shortly that the possible doubleness or splitting of personal identity surfaced in multiple eighteenth-century contexts, and was a defining feature of the *ancien régime* of identity. But for the time being let me call on just one contemporary witness to give a foretaste of the broader conceptual environment within which these discussions of acting were taking place. Explaining his notion of "sympathy" (which will demand our detailed attention later), Adam Smith gave the following description of how it works:

when I condole with you for the loss of your only son, in order to enter into your grief I do not consider what I, a person of such a character and profession, should suffer, if I had a son, and if that son was unfortunately to die: but I consider what I should suffer *if I was really you*, and I not only change circumstance with you, but *I change persons and characters*.[13]

The affinity between Smith's meaning in this passage, which itself was closely related to his understanding of theatricality, and the thoughts of the eighteenth-century dramatic theorists about the metamorphosis of the actor, is unmistakable.

For the modern reader, the most remarkable aspect of such statements is that their speakers appeared to be suggesting, indeed often insisting, that they were to be taken literally rather than metaphorically. As we increasingly realize this, familiar themes will re-emerge in a rather new light. Take for instance a statue of Shakespeare that Garrick had commissioned from Louis-François Roubiliac for his Hampton villa, a statue recently rescued from obscurity when its copy was chosen to grace the entrance to the new British Library in London. Garrick, famously, had offered himself as the model for Roubiliac's Shakespeare, a fact that left its indubitable marks on the statue's pose, appearance, and expressive gesture (fig. 30). To what extent then was this statue meant to be seen not simply as Garrick *posing* as Shakespeare, but more literally – and certainly well in tune with other contemporary pronouncements – as Garrick *being* Shakespeare, his actual living embodiment?[14]

Or consider again our encounters with Boswell. In 1762, as we recall, Boswell reported his excited discovery "that we may be in some degree whatever char-

acter we choose". Now, almost a decade later and in a completely different context, his words were almost identical: the actor "is the character he represents only *in a certain degree*"; and again – like the actor, we too "are to a certain degree a different character from our own". Boswell's detailed dissection of the latter statements may thus further our appreciation of the literalness with which the earlier exclamation could be uttered by himself and understood by his contemporaries. Likewise, we should keep in mind this conceptual environment in reflecting back on some of the formulations in earlier chapters that conjured up the possibility of identity play. In particular, given the present discussion of the eighteenth-century theater, we would do well to consider how Garrick's reputation as the epitome of protean identity added weight and immediacy to the meaning that contemporaries were likely to find in his own confident attribution of protean mutability to *others* – like Hannah More or the Chevalier D'Eon in the prologue to *Percy*).

While bringing to mind episodes from previous chapters, let us also

30. Garrick as Shakespeare: terra-cotta model (1757) for Louis-François Roubiliac's statue of Shakespeare at David Garrick's Hampton villa, posed for by Garrick himself. The final marble statue was somewhat less expressive and theatrical than this earlier model

remember that we have encountered the contemporary notion of identity-splitting on stage once before; and that together with many turn-of-the-century critics we have already been puzzled by the difficulty of comprehending what eighteenth-century audiences were actually experiencing or thinking. Recall Peg Woffington, the actress who brought the house down whenever she came on stage in male clothes – which she did as often as she could. Recall further the formulations that enthusiastic admirers invoked to characterize her success. Audiences reputedly could not decide "whether she was the finest woman, or the prettiest fellow"; under her double charms, *"both sexes vanquished lie"*; she was "A creature uncommon / Who's both man and woman"; it was "nature, who her gave / This *double power* to please".[15] Woffington's claim to fame, like that of other actresses in breeches parts, was precisely her ability to achieve a doubleness on stage: to be both man and woman at the same time. If one looks at gender as one specific aspect of identity, this reputation appears very much like that of Garrick (Woffington's erstwhile lover), albeit encompassing a more limited repertoire. Eighteenth-century audiences insisted that they were experiencing the performances of actresses in breeches parts as a playful splitting of identity, a splitting literal rather than metaphorical: we may now have arrived at a deeper understanding of what they actually meant. More generally, we may now be able to put a more fundamental gloss on the meaning and experience of *passing* in the eighteenth century: opening up the possibility that a female soldier, say, or the Chevalier D'Eon, or a dressed-up masquerader, together with their audiences, actually believed that they *were* the roles they were assuming, even as they retained consciousness of their original identity.

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A word of caution: our language is becoming slippery. When Garrick's contemporaries suggested that actors, or masqueraders, or whoever, *were* the roles they were assuming, they did not necessarily imply the same meaning that this phrase is likely to conjure up in our own minds. For the modern ear, who a person "really *is*" invokes the person's true essential self – which is precisely the presupposition that I wish to historicize and problematize rather than let in again through the back door. When eighteenth-century Britons like John Hill and James Boswell used this phrase, as we saw both do, what it connoted for them was indeed, as they insisted, a literal transformation, but it was one predicated on a looser and more mutable sense of what a person's identity was to begin with. What made such views about the doubling, splitting, or transmigrating of identities possible, and to some even plausible, was a non-essential notion of identity that was not anchored in a deeply seated self, which is what rendered it so different from what was to follow.[16]

Nothing, perhaps, illustrates this difference more visibly than where so many eighteenth-century people did locate the semblance of an anchor of personal identity: *clothes*. We have crossed paths with this contemporary notion many times in the previous pages, when the putting on or taking off of clothes constituted the gist of a successful change of identity. Thus, recall Juvenal's female athlete who, in the hands of pre-1780 translators, put her gender identity on or off with her helmet. Or more generally, the significance of the breeches not only in signaling but also in effecting the crossing of the gender boundary. "What is there in the *breeches*", exclaimed one dramatic heroine, "but the *mearing!*" "I must own," declared another, "the Breeches please me most / Tho' in the Wearing, my weak sex is lost." The very wearing of the breeches constituted the transformation of gender identity; and this was the case, as a 1774 speaker accurately put it, "literally as well as metaphorically". The full meaning of such statements informed the reception of stories like that of a supposed real-life heroine whom nobody recognized when dressed in the clothes of a male sailor, and when she reverted again to women's clothes, the man was once more unrecognizable in the woman: a double identity shift that led an observer in the know to exclaim, "*what an Alteration can Dress make?*" What an alteration indeed. On another occasion, a boy dressed up as a girl for a school play was entrusted with a clear answer:

What comes from dressing like a Girl, a Lad?
With my new Garb, I must confess the Change;
No more I think o'er Hedge & Ditch to range;
No! I grew nice, as I ungrew a boy,
And am a Lady – Delicate, – & Coy.
Stand off Companions; I'm no more yᵉ same.

The humor with which the boy's companions presumably received this confession should not obscure the logic of transformation, the relations of cause and effect, that made it work. It was the same logic that underlay the praise – no joke here, nor mere figure of speech – for the actor who had "wholly transform[ed] himself" on stage by "putting off himself with his clothes".[17] It was the same logic too that underlay, in reverse, the conviction that the unmistakable difference embodied by the Moroccan ambassadors who turned up in London in 1726 must have been the consequence of their donning masquerade costumes. And it was the same logic that allowed Benjamin West to portray Indians and Europeans with equal conviction as very much alike and as very different in the two images accompanying Colonel Bouquet's expedition to the Ohio country.

Of course, the role of dress in the constitution and performance of identity was anything but a peculiarity of the eighteenth century. What *was* more specific to the *ancien régime* of identity was the possible literalness with which dress

was taken to *make* identity, rather than merely to signify its anterior existence. As Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass have brilliantly argued, this understanding of dress – thoroughly different from our own – had deep roots in premodern Europe. Its origins were in external authority: the constitution of a person's identity – as a monarch, or a freeman of a guild, or a household servant – through the investiture of clothes. Consequently, dress was taken literally to "transnature" the wearer, a phrase taken from a late-sixteenth-century moralizing tract but still meaningful in Betson's mid-eighteenth-century vision of masqueraders "almost chang[ing] their Nature with their Habit". Again, to match Stephen Greenblatt's Renaissance vignette of the skin-clothed brutish Newfoundland savages that were transformed by English apparel to become supposedly indistinguishable from Englishmen, we can recall eighteenth-century variations on the same theme: be it John Long, say, whose dress made him indistinguishable from the Indians, or, conversely, the Indians mistaken by Mary Rowlandson for Englishmen because of their European clothes.[18]

By the eighteenth century, to be sure, the role of external authorities in conferring identity-constituting dress was long gone (outside some specific professional settings), replaced by the drives of the commercialized market. Clothes were now seen as the products of commodified fashion, and therefore as capricious and meaningless, even as they retained their former power to constitute identity. It will be seen later how this particular conjuncture, in which clothes were still taken to have constitutive power but the authorities that had previously shaped and controlled them did not, contributed to the peculiar tenor of contemporary anxieties about the consequences of fashion. But for now let us note the implications that this conception of the function of clothing had for eighteenth-century understandings of identity. For if clothing was in one sense the anchor of identity, in another it was of course precisely the opposite of an anchor, indicating instead – as in the myriad examples peppering the pages above – the mutable and non-essential nature of what can be assumed or shed at will. It was not yet self-evident that the way to establish a person's identity was by "seeing through clothes". This telling phrase is the title of an influential late-twentieth-century study of dress in Western art, whose wonderful insights are constrained precisely by the presupposition of the universality of the relationship between "inner" self and "outer" costume. Eighteenth-century identities, by contrast, could readily be established by *not* seeing through clothes.

A wonderful indication of this, difficult to document but very revealing all the same, is the theatrical casting of *twins*. What did theatrical managers do when they wanted to signal not difference but rather the opposite, sameness? From the little we know about contemporary casting choices for identical twin roles in plays like *The Comedy of Errors*, it seems clear that actors were not cast

for such roles because of their physical resemblance. Instead, and here is the key, the twinness of actors – whatever two actors were available for the parts – was achieved through identical costuming: twins were people who dressed alike. Moreover, the fact that Restoration and eighteenth-century audiences accepted this sartorial generation of identity – here, also in the sense of identicality – without raising too many eyebrows can be inferred from the contrast with the clearly audible resistance with which the practice was to be dismissed, as we shall see, by their turn-of-the-century successors.[19]

Finally, recall what led us to the topic of clothes – the suggestion that the *ancien régime* of identity lacked that key characteristic of the modern understanding of self, its depth. As Jones and Stallybrass point out, the assumed power of clothes to shape identity – to permeate the wearer – cannot be accommodated within the determinative surface/outside versus depth/inside scheme that shapes modern thinking about essential constant self versus artificial ephemeral fashion.[20] We tend to think of "the self" as inwardly turned. For the eighteenth century, by contrast, a more helpful image may be of a self (but is it still a "self"?) that was outwardly or socially turned.

The Characterization and Orientation of *Ancien-Régime* Selfhood

In the middle of the eighteenth century, the members of the Society of Dilettanti, a highly exclusive London gentlemen's club "for which the nominal qualification [was] having been in Italy" – thus Horace Walpole – "and the real one, being drunk", decided to have their portraits painted. The importance of the project was recorded in the minute books of the society: financial penalties were to be imposed on members who did not participate in this venture. To execute the portraits the society chose one of its own members, an insider: the well-respected artist George Knapton, later to be appointed Keeper of the King's Pictures. Knapton accordingly delivered twenty-three such portraits between 1741 and 1749, and they remain the property of the Society of Dilettanti to this day.[21]

Two things strike the modern beholder of these portraits (figs. 31a–c). The first is what they do *not* do – namely, distinguish the sitters by their individual traits. Portraits are often interpreted as revealing the interior self, through the painter's ability to represent psychological depth in the sitter's face. But the portraits of the Society of Dilettanti do anything but that: rather, they stand out for their uniformity – of size, of format, of pose, and even (take a close look at the examples reproduced here) of the subjects' facial features, so spare in distinguishing marks. The second remarkable feature of these portraits is how Knapton, who was personally acquainted with the sitters, *did* introduce individualizing distinctions between them – namely, through their dress and

accessories. Jones and Stallybrass have pointed out the emphasis on clothing in seventeenth-century portraiture, to which facial features were more the background: they thus quote an (approving) account of mid-seventeenth-century portrait artists who had "in readiness a dozen or more Cards ready prepared, and ground laid of severall Complexions", so that for every sitter they could "choose a Card" – that is, a face – "as neare the complexion of the party as they could". Knapton's portraits followed this seventeenth-century practice in introducing clothing to constitute identity, where we might have expected a glimpse of the putative depths of selfhood. "The *common and usual Dress* of a Person is a great addition to *Likeness*," a mid-eighteenth-century authority on portraiture asserted with a similar logic; "for no sooner is the Dress altered, but the Look does the same."[22]

But there is still more to this particular set of portraits, which has to do with the specific garments in which Knapton clothed his sitters. In many cases the members of the society were presented in *masquerade costumes*. Most explicitly, among the examples reproduced here, note the portrait of Samuel Savage (above right), who has a masquerade domino flung over his shoulder – a lady's domino to boot, suggesting his costume involved gender-bending – and a mask in front of him. Here then was a more peculiarly eighteenth-century twist (and one that could be readily found in other eighteenth-century paintings):[23] rather than the habitual clothes of a sitter, signifying profession, status, gender, and so on, individual identity in some of the portraits of the Society of Dilettanti was constituted through the assumed characters of the masquerade.

31. George Knapton's 1740s portraits of the Society of Dilettanti: Thomas Brand, Samuel Savage, and Baron Hobergh

The agency offered by masquerade characters, the role of clothing in constituting identity, the generic representation of a group of individuals, the absence of commitment to the depths of selfhood: Knapton's portraits of the Society of Dilettanti are in themselves a full set of keys for unlocking the different aspects of the *ancien régime* of identity. Of all these, the most surprising, perhaps, remains the last: that is, the suggestion that I have raised in several different ways that Knapton's contemporaries were not very much invested in notions of inner depths of selfhood. How can that be, you may well ask: did eighteenth-century England not famously witness the emergence of the cultural form uniquely suitable to the exploration of interiority and psychological depth, the novel?

Indeed it did. At least, that was the basic thrust of the narrative set up half a century ago by Ian Watt in his influential *The Rise of the Novel*, and which has been restated by countless followers since. According to this view, the superior roundness of character in the novels of Jane Austen and subsequent nineteenth-century writers was simply the natural progression from the more tentative and incomplete attempts to achieve the same psychological depth in the earlier novels of the eighteenth century. The most notable signpost on this road was supposedly Samuel Richardson, "whose fifteen-year-old Pamela" – thus the more recent words of Carolyn Steedman – "is all selfhood, all inside, and whose depth as a point of reference for female interiority has been immense". The intrinsic potential for mirroring inner subjectivity – and the imperative to do so – were inherent in the novel genre, we have been told, from its eighteenth-century beginnings.[24]

Recently, however, this "rise of the novel" orthodoxy has been debunked with a loud thump by literary critic and closet cultural historian Deidre Lynch, who in the process has done more than anyone to liberate the eighteenth century from its retrospectively imposed interiority complex. We need to see eighteenth-century novels, Lynch insists, and especially their portrayal of character, "within systems for categorization and valuation that seem alien to us". As she demonstrates persuasively, characterization in the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century – not only in novels, but also in art and theater – was primarily generic, exhibiting *types* rather than individuals: so much so that over-particularization of a character was actually frowned upon by eighteenth-century critics.[25] This was a period, after all, in which narratives that had *objects* as protagonists – a veritable eighteenth-century mini-genre – were read as avidly as *Pamela*. With titles like *Adventures of a Bank-Note*, such tales were "more intent on imagining society than imagining the self" and cannot really be said to have had "characters". Nor was the interchangeability of the protagonist confined only to the history of a banknote: Lynch points to a surprising number of contemporary narratives whose main characters were deficient in distinguishing features and were consequently mistaken for people they were not. Furthermore, even the letter form of a novel like *Pamela*, a form that latter-day critics have often read as offering intimate glimpses into individual psychology, was in fact, as Carol Kay has argued, not an unmediated window into personal inner depths but rather a *social* performance whose addressees stood for "representative social authorities". In short, the function of character in eighteenth-century literature and arts – what Lynch calls the "*pragmatics of character*" – was primarily not about depth but about "legibility and replicability". It therefore stood in sharp contrast – not continuity – with the expanded inner lives of fictional characters in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[26]

The affinity and debt of my argument to that put forth by Lynch is obvious. In particular I want to follow up on her demonstration of the generic or typo-logical nature of eighteenth-century characterization, in which "the individual specimen of character is meant to refer to an overarching standard of imper-sonal uniformity". This was true, as Lynch shows, of works of fiction, func-tioning as "characterological compendia of human nature". It was true of "the business of a poet", at least as defined by Imlac in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, namely "to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general prop-erties and large appearances". It was true of what the eighteenth century under-stood by physiognomy, which was in fact – as we shall see in more detail in chapter 7 – about the commonality of types rather than the distinctions of indi-viduals. (Were it not for the playfulness of nature, John Ray wrote in 1691, "I see not but the Faces of some Men might be as like, as Eggs laid by the same

Hen"; that is to say, essentially men's faces, within groups, are the same.) It was often true of eighteenth-century portraiture, which despite the apparent imperative to reproduce exact likenesses ended up producing large groups of seemingly indistinguishable portraits – think again of the Society of Dilettanti, or of the scores of portraits of apparently identical bewigged Georgian gentle-men in standard "Kit-Cat" format – a phenomenon that art historian Marcia Pointon has described as an "intractable historical problem".[27] It was true of eighteenth-century fashion, which had the distinct effect of blotting out indi-vidual character: be it through impersonal accessories like the wig or hair powder (under "the Mode", wrote a 1736 observer, "one Man's Hair is as like that of another as two Drops of Water"), or even more through the treatment of the face, painted by both sexes to conceal natural skin coloring or blemishes. Finally, it was true – to go back to our touchstone of contemporary notions of identity – of the eighteenth-century masquerade, in which people put on not individualized disguise but what one contemporary described as "Charact'ric dress". Famously, the master of masquerading ceremonies "Count" Heidegger refused entry to anyone not dressed in a recognized costume type. The seeming exception, which wasn't really one at all, was the costume of a classical figure, like Hercules or Pallas Athena, in which the individual *was* the type: think, like-wise, of the ubiquitous eighteenth-century penchant for public pseudonyms – in publishing pamphlets, in writing letters to the press, even in private cor-respondence – that were clearly recognizable classical or otherwise generic types, achieving again that same impersonal uniformity.[28]

These peculiar eighteenth-century meanings of characterization as generic and unparticularized had been clearly laid down early in the century by a work of "characterology" with the title *The English Theophrastus* (Theophrastus being the classical author of a work on thirty hypothetical characters, each typi-fying a single fault). The work opened with a declaration of intent: "*The Subject Matter of the following Sheets is the* Grand-Lesson, *deliver'd by the* Delphian Oracle, Know thy self". But "know thy self" in this work of the early 1700s did not at all signify what the modern reader might expect. Far from soul-searching or introspection of any kind, the book contained a heavy dose of generalized aphorisms and maxims ("*Caprice*, in *Women*, is generally an attendant of *Beauty*", and the like). "Know thy self", it turned out, meant knowing the generic type to which you belong and abstracting yourself, as it were, into a collective category: its imperative was outward, not inward.[29]

Eighteenth-century Britons were frequently explicit in asserting the primacy of collective categories or groupings over the individuals who constituted them. The physician John Arbuthnot seemed at first to go the other way when he acknowledged that human faces are of such infinite variety that "since the Creation of the World, perhaps there were never two that . . . perfectly

resembled one another". But he then quickly proceeded to what he saw as a more meaningful observation: faces that "are characteris'd" – that is to say, that have legible meaning – are "not only individual, but gentilitious and national; *European, Asiatick, Chinese, African, Grecian* Faces". Arbuthnot, we may recall, was a great believer in the transformative effects of climate on human appearance – "Transplantation changeth [man's] Stature and outward Shape" – which presumably turned the reading of the individual face into a futile task. Likewise, James Macpherson and John Millar (separately, but in almost identical words) found "the character and genius of a nation" to be stable and meaningful. "But the case is very different with respect to individuals, among whom there is often a great diversity, proceeding from no fixed causes that are capable of being ascertained." In contrast to the intelligible identity of a large grouping, the distinction of every individual was "random", arbitrary, and ultimately meaningless. One is reminded here of the categorizing logic of the naturalist Buffon, who similarly contrasted the "capricious variation" of individuals – among humankind, as well as animals – with the "remarkable stability" of the "general prototype" of the species. Species were "*les seuls êtres de la Nature*, as ancient and as permanent as Nature herself", Buffon delivered his definitive verdict, while "an individual, of whatever species, is nothing in the universe". [30]

Now consider the implications of this generic or typological way of thinking, in which the individual, even if not quite "nothing in the universe", was subsumed under the more salient collective categorizations. Indeed, it can help account for a striking aspect of the *ancien régime* of identity: the relative ease with which, as we have seen, eighteenth-century men and women were willing – so often to acknowledge, humor, and sometimes even celebrate the cases of individuals who appeared to defy prevailing categories and boundaries of identity. But if eighteenth-century identity categories were primarily collective, pinpointing groups ("women", "aristocracy", "Indians", "species") rather than individuals, then their conceptual integrity was not unduly shaken by the occasional individual who slipped through their net.

In fact, we have heard the physician-cum-essayist Peter Shaw prefigure precisely this observation. It was in the middle of a paean to gender distinctions, one confident in their reliability rather than anxious about their subversions, that Shaw interjected his revealing caveat. His words bear repeating: "We only propose to consider the two sexes, in general," he insisted, "without comparing particular men with particular women. Many of the female sex are, both in body and mind, formed much stronger than many of the male: but ... we find that the females, in general, are, both in their bodies and minds, weaker than the males." The salient categories – here, "men" and "women" – were collective, conceptualized "in general" (a phrase that Shaw repeated twice). This

allowed "particular" individuals the potential freedom to fall between the cracks, without having the whole conceptual edifice of contemporary understandings of identity come tumbling down after them. A couple of years earlier William Hogarth had made precisely the same point in commenting on the differences in facial proportions between men and women. "Women," Hogarth observed, "when they are dressed in mens-cloaths, look so young and boyish: but" – he hastened to add – "as nature doth not always stick close to these particulars, we may be mistaken both in sexes and ages." Nature allowed some individuals to deviate from its general, collective norm. In such a framework identity signified "identicality" (to invoke again the clumsy terms of the preface) rather than uniqueness: it implied looking outward, toward what one shared with others, rather than inward, at one's quintessence. If you begin splitting categories too often, John Hunter warned apropos his ridiculing of the polygenetic notion of distinct human races, "would not different species be produced in almost every single family? Could it not be said of the same man at different times that he in like way was of a different species from himself?" If anything, it was the over-particularizing gaze, insistent on narrower and narrower distinctions culminating in the uniqueness of every individual, that had the potential to bring down the ceiling on the *ancien régime* of identity. [31]

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Let us take one more cue from the novel. In the standard retelling of the emergence of the eighteenth-century novel as the birth ground of inner selfhood, novels supposedly contributed to the development of interiority not only in their fictional characterizations but also in their readers. "Reading a novel (in the eighteenth century and not before)" – in the recent words of one historian – "a reader identified with an ordinary person unknown to him or her personally but with whom the reader empathized thanks to the narrative form itself. The novel disseminated a new psychology ... [it] made the point that all selves are fundamentally similar because of their inner psychic processes; reading the novel drew the reader into those psychic processes." [32] But this assertion is problematic not only in attributing inner psychologies to eighteenth-century novel characters. It also makes significant assumptions about how contemporary readers "identified" or "empathized" with what they were reading: assumptions that can benefit from further scrutiny.

The fundamental eighteenth-century framework for thinking about empathy or identification with others – be they fictional or real-life others – was that of *sympathy*), a key term within the broader language of sensibility. It was the language of sensibility, more than any other, that provided the novel-reading classes in the middle decades of the century with practical guidance about

"well-being", in a peculiarly integrated sense that joined together the physical, emotional, and moral aspects of one's life. To be sure, it is often suggested that together with the "voyage into the self" offered by novels – this particular formulation is Roy Porter's – "the key late Enlightenment concept which validated the inner self was sensibility". But did it really? The basis of sensibility, as the word implied, was the senses. Drawing on prevalent medical understandings of the nerves together with the cognitive ideas of association, which explained how primary sensations were compounded into feelings, the notion of sensibility allowed for – and extolled – acute feeling derived from external circumstances. Sensibility, in its eighteenth-century sense, did not originate in the heart: it originated in the surrounding environment, and only subsequently left its marks on the heart. This observation is important: for, as Sarah Knott has forcefully argued, to the extent that one could talk about a "sensible self" (which does stretch my own terminology considerably), it was an externally constituted self, drawing its being and nourishment from the outside rather than from one's inner depths.[33]

We should further keep in mind that the notion that one is molded by external stimuli and impressions was not confined to the understanding of sensibility. That it was the *raison d'être* of associationism, formulated most importantly by David Hartley, has already been mentioned. More broadly, it was the most famous tenet that the eighteenth century inherited from the influential educational ideas of John Locke. We are born with no innate ideas, Locke had asserted in his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, which went through a staggering twenty-five editions during the century; so that an infant's mind is like "white paper, or wax, to be moulded and fashioned" by the surrounding environment. This image – of the *tabula rasa* – was endlessly recycled in the mushrooming pedagogical literature of subsequent decades, enthralled as it was by the shaping power thus conferred upon education and educators. We have encountered its traces before, in those mid-century writers who confidently asserted that even the most pronounced human differences, like those between Europeans and Hottentots, depended entirely upon education. We even encountered some who were willing to extend this logic to animals: as Joseph Priestley pointed out in his restatement of Hartley's theories, in a framework that emphasized the impressions of the senses and the absence of innate ideas, even the difference between humans and brutes was one of degree, not of kind. The *tabula rasa* will concern us again later, when we ask how this notion fared at the turn of the century. At this point I only want to note the familiarity of the assumption of humans as malleable beings shaped by external forces: an assumption within which the contemporary notion of sensibility made a lot of sense.[34]

Closely associated with sensibility was the notion of sympathy – the feeling

extending to fellow men or women and the fundament of sociability. Through the close alliance of sensibility and sympathy, to return to Knott's argument, "this 'sensible self' was socially-turned and socially-useful"; that is to say, again turned outward, not inward, not only in its origins but also in its constitutive leanings. David Hume, for one, had no doubts about this constitutive social bent of the "sensible self". "Whatever other passions we may be actuated by: pride, ambition, avarice, curiosity, revenge or lust," he insisted, "the soul or animating principle of them all is sympathy." Consequently, "we can form no wish, which has not a reference to society". Moreover, the very working of sympathy, as it was understood in the eighteenth century, militated against a notion of a deep, well-bounded self. As Hume influentially explained it, sympathy was the process whereby an idea that we conceive of an emotion in others, through external signs in their countenance or behavior, is "converted into an impression, and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion [in us], as any original affection". The operation of sympathy – Edmund Burke described it as "a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man" – was possible, to return to Hume, only because "nature has preserv'd a great resemblance among all human creatures". It was "a very remarkable resemblance" that "must very much contribute to make us enter into the sentiments of others; and embrace them with facility and pleasure". Sympathy in this sense was based on what people shared, not on what distinguished them from each other. As Hume explained further, "we must be assisted by the relations of resemblance and contiguity, in order to feel the sympathy in its full perfection". So the very notion of sympathy blurred the boundaries between "sensible selves", and emphasized again the generic – the similar and the contiguous – over the particular.[35]

Indeed, for David Hartley at mid-century this was the ultimate meaning of human coexistence. Hartley's dense psychological theory involved a full cycle of selfhood from initial vacancy, devoid (a la Locke) of innate ideas or character, through shaping by physical responses to external impressions and by social conditioning, to an ultimate final state of the "perfect annihilation" of "self" (itself understood as just a locus of contradictory impulses). This final state was the supreme triumph of sympathy: the moment in which socially turned identification with others overwhelms every other self-oriented inclination, and thus eradicates particularity – or the boundaries between those "sensible selves" – in favor of a unity of them all under God.[36]

Once again, then, we find ourselves in a conceptual environment in which there was considerable fuzziness about personal identity. Sensibility and sympathy partook of a world where "self" was externally constituted and socially turned rather than inward-looking, and where we cannot readily locate "the"

concept of a bounded, stable ego", as literary critic Catherine Gallagher has noted. Gallagher in fact discusses sympathy in the context of people reading novels: if this is what eighteenth-century readers meant by relating to another person's experience, she suggests, then fictional characters were those with whom they must have found it easiest to identify – or sympathize. (Listen to Samuel Johnson's description of reader identification with novel characters, which could have been taken straight out of Hume, and indeed would also not have been out of place next to contemporary acting theories: such identification, Johnson wrote, "is produced by an act of the imagination, that realises the event however fictitious . . . by placing us, for a time, in the condition of him whose fortune we contemplate; so that we feel, while the deception lasts, whatever motions would be excited by the same good or evil happening to ourselves").[37] So, given the understanding of identification through sympathy, and the implications of contemporary notions of sympathy for the meaning of personal identity, surely we cannot simply announce the birth of interiority, as brought into the world by the twin eighteenth-century handmaidens of sensibility and the novel.

I want to pause briefly to consider the other well-known discussion of sympathy from this period, that in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. I have already invoked a passage from Smith on the doubling of identity for its affinity with contemporary acting theory: a passage in which Smith suggested that my sympathetic identification with your grief takes place only when "I change person and characters" as "if I [were] really you". Smith said this again, indeed on the very first page of his hefty treatise. "By the imagination", he explained, we place ourselves in another person's situation, "we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him", thus reproducing his sensations in ourselves. (This is in contrast to the senses, which on their own, without the imagination, "never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person".) This is why sympathy, for Smith, could not be "a selfish principle": since "this imaginary change is not supposed to happen to me in my own person and character, but in that of the person with whom I sympathize".[38] In fact, as David Marshall has pointed out, although Smith's notion of "sympathy" involved "a loss of self, a transfer and metamorphosis", he did not simply mean a total identification whereby we exchange persons and characters with those we identify with. Thus, we can feel sympathy for a madman, while he himself is perfectly content, or even for the dead who can feel nothing at all. Rather, precisely like Boswell's difficulties in making sense of the transformation of the actor without falling into Partridge's misconception, Smith wanted to hold to a *doubleness* of personal identity that allows us both to remain ourselves and to experience a transference of identity at the same time, even if this sounds – as Smith himself admitted – "perhaps . . . impossible".[39]

The Philosophical Debate on "Personal Identity"

In the last few paragraphs we have started to listen in to the most self-consciously high-intellectual conversations taking place in eighteenth-century Britain. Readers familiar with eighteenth-century philosophy may have wondered why it has taken us so long to get here, and in particular why no reference has been made in the preceding pages to one debate during this period that confronted the questions of the unity and stability of identity head-on: the debate on personal identity begun by John Locke and carried on by many subsequent philosophical and theological luminaries. The reason for this omission bears repeating. The goal of this book has not been to reconstruct a historical

Doubleness was equally key to the other pillar of Smith's moral theory, the concept of the impartial spectator. Smith's impartial spectator was a mental construct, an imaginary "inmate of the breast" that passes judgment on our conduct and thus helps us behave in ways that we would feel are worthy of approbation. A conscience, we might say. But listen to Smith's own language: "When I endeavour to examine my own conduct, when I endeavour to pass sentence upon it . . . it is evident that, in all such cases, I *divide myself, as it were, into two persons*; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of." Smith was in fact following a path along which the Earl of Shaftesbury had already traveled half a century earlier. "That celebrated *Delphick* Inscription, RECOGNIZE YOUR-SELF," Shaftesbury had written in his essay on soliloquy, "was as much as to say, *Divide your-self*, or *Be* TWO"; it is through soliloquy that a person "becomes two distinct *Persons*. He is Pupil and Preceptor. He teaches, and he learns." Lest the reader took this transformation lightly, Smith added: "But that the judge should, in every respect, be the same with the person judged of, is as impossible, as that the cause should, in every respect, be the same with the effect."[40] We are right back where we started – recall again Boswell's or Farquhar's thoughts on acting – that is, with an insistence, joined with an awareness of the ensuing difficulties, on the possibilities of literal doubleness, splitting, and transference of identity. Now again, to be sure, these passages do allow for a more literal or a more figurative reading (and by the final revision of his text in the 1790s, as we shall see, Smith would nudge them noticeably toward the latter). But given the potential for polymorphous identity play – and interplay, and double play, and counter-play – that was never far from the surface of the *ancien régime* of identity, a literal reading of these passages would have leapt off the page much more readily for Smith's mid-eighteenth-century readers than for us.[41] All the more so, indeed, for the well-informed readers of Shaftesbury, Hume, Hartley, and Smith, for reasons that must now demand our attention.

string of ideas, an inquiry in which the most self-conscious and articulate discussions of identity would have been at a premium. Rather, what it has been striving to reconstruct – to return to the image of the violin – is the cultural soundbox that produced the resonance and echo of the plucking of this string; and for this purpose it has placed its emphasis on patterns within a cultural environment, patterns that accrue meaning by virtue of their diffusion through (typically) far less articulate – but far more widespread – soundings. The philosophical debate that I am about to discuss now should therefore be seen as yet another manifestation of the possibilities opened up by the *ancien régime* of identity, but not necessarily as the most important one or the driving force behind the others. Indeed, by placing this debate within the much broader ensemble of eighteenth-century voices hinting at the imaginable possibilities for thinking about identity, I want to circumvent the (largely unanswerable) question of assessing relative importance. To play further with my musical metaphors, there is little value in arguing whether the woodwinds are more important than the strings: it is only their combined and mutually reinforcing effects, joined with all the other instruments of the orchestra, that create the harmony of the symphony.

And indeed, in turning our attention now to this particular episode in the history of philosophy, it is remarkable how its definitive study, written from a completely internalist perspective of the philosophical tradition and without any concern for (or apparent awareness of) external cultural links, has ended up with a narrative that parallels very closely the one offered here for this broader cultural context. "In the eighteenth century in Britain," Raymond Martin and John Barresi open their excellent account, "there was a revolution in personal identity theory." They explain:

the self as immaterial soul was replaced with the self as mind. This replacement involved movement away from substance accounts of personal identity, according to which the self is a simple persisting thing, toward relational accounts of personal identity, according to which the self consists essentially of physical and/or psychological relations among different temporal stages of an organism or person.

This "revolution" remained a heatedly debated topic throughout the eighteenth century, before petering out at the beginning of the nineteenth. The endpoint will interest us later, when we look at the patterns of change at the end of the *ancien régime* of identity. But here, first, allow me to give a quick account of what this very specific philosophical revolution was all about. In retelling this story, I am concerned less with the details of the positions offered by this or that contributor to the debate than with the range of possibilities that they found imaginable, let alone discussable.[42]

To begin, then, with Locke, the unchallenged father of modern identity theory. Writing in 1694 against the Cartesian dictum that thinking itself guarantees the existence of a substantial self, as well as against the early-modern belief in the immaterial and immortal substantiality of the soul, he asked the question: in what inheres the persistence of "personal identity"? Locke meant "identity" in the sense of "identicality" rather than uniqueness: in this case, identicality over time – what guarantees that I will be the same person tomorrow that I am today. In response he made two fundamental points, one negative, one positive. First, the persistence of a person cannot depend on any material substance of which a person is composed, since all such material is replaced over time. Second, what guarantees a person's identity (i.e. temporal identicality) is consciousness: having the same consciousness tomorrow is what will make me the same person I am today. In Locke's words: "as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past Action or Thought, so far reaches the Identity of that *Person*; it is the same *self* now it was then." But having identity be determined by consciousness had its pitfalls. "But that which seems to make the difficulty is this, that this consciousness, [is] being interrupted always by forgetfulness", not to mention by sound sleep; and consequently, "doubts are raised whether we are the same thinking thing; *i.e.* the same substance or no." Personal identity turned out to be insubstantial, indeed mutable. Moreover, it could even, theoretically, be split. "Could we suppose", Locke speculated, "two distinct incommunicable consciousnesses acting the same Body, the one constantly by Day, the other by Night", in which case, "the same individual Man [would] be two as distinct Persons, as *Socrates* and *Plato*". And if "the same individual Man should be two distinct Persons", perhaps it was also possible that one consciousness would inhabit two distinct bodies, thus having one person – one identity – double up.[43] In short, as Locke spins out the consequences of his reflections on personal identity, we find insubstantiality, mutability, and doubleness: precisely those fluid aspects of the *ancien régime* of identity with which we are by now familiar, all wrapped up together in a neat theoretical package.

"The nature of *personal identity*", David Hume wrote some half a century after Locke, "has become so great a question in philosophy, especially of late years in *England*." And so it had. Locke had provided the script for this debate; his disciples and his detractors acted it out; and England's educated elite was the part-bemused, part-anxious audience. Thus the Earl of Shaftesbury, Locke's personal pupil, returned repeatedly – if not always with the profundity of his master – to the point that if identity depended only on memory, since "Memory may be false", there was nothing left for him but to "take my Being *upon Trust*". "Tis good fortune", therefore, "if a Man be *one and the same* only for a day or two. A Year makes more Revolutions than can be

number'd." Not that this was a cause for concern: "If, whilst I am, I am but as I should be," Shaftesbury wrote in his journal, "what do I care more? and thus let me lose self every hour, and be twenty successive selfs, or new selfs, 'tis all one to me." (Or was it? One wonders, in reading Shaftesbury's rather desperate private portrayals of himself as "hav[ing] lost My Self" or as populated by two contrasting and incommensurable personalities, whether he had not in fact taken Locke's Day-man and Night-man example quite personally.) George Berkeley in the 1730s concurred, proposing again that the same man might be several persons, if there is a break in consciousness between them (and recall his revealing note to himself, given the heterodox nature of such thoughts: "Mem: Carefully to omit defining of Person, or making much mention of it"). "The *identity* of [a] person", Edmund Law (soon to become the bishop of Carlisle) repeated in 1769, "consist[s] in nothing more, than his becoming sensible at different times of what he had thought or done before." And there were others. But of course, the best-known formulation of this line of thought after Locke was that of Hume himself. In fact, Hume contributed little to the philosophical debate on personal identity (which he took to be a mere game of words), focusing more on the psychological origins and uses of one's mistaken belief in the substance of self. But it was his categorical declarations, that we "are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions", and that "the identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictious one", that summed up best for his well-read contemporaries – as well as for subsequent scholars – the radical possibilities opened up in this conversation among philosophers.[44]

Others, of course, were apprehensive about those radical possibilities, and did their utmost to quash them. For them, the Lockean argument was patently absurd. "You make *individual Personality* to be a mere *external imaginary Denomination*, and nothing in reality," complained the eminent scholar Samuel Clarke to Locke's friend Anthony Collins in a six-part debate in the early 1700s: surely everyone could see how preposterous this was? "If Consciousness be the ground of Personal Identity" – thus the Dissenting minister Henry Grove (1720) – "and where the same consciousness is wanting there no longer remains ye same Person, a man may and may not be one and ye same Person at the same time." Absurd. Identity, Grove's friend Isaac Watts echoed (1733), "must not stand upon such a shifting and changeable Principle, as may allow either one Man to be two Persons, or two Men to be one Person, or any one Man or Person to become another, or to be really any thing but himself". The suggestion "that Personality is not a permanent, but a transient thing", the divine Joseph Butler agreed, has "been carried to a strange Length". Those who say that "since our present Self is not, in Reality, the same with the Self of Yesterday, but another like Self or Person coming in its Room, and mistaken for it", and thus is the

same self only "in a fictious Sense", were speaking nonsense which required little further attention. "The bare unfolding [of] this Notion", Butler triumphantly concluded, "seems the best Confutation of it." But Butler knew all too well that this notion, however many times it was denounced as "nothing but absurdity and contradiction" (Abraham Tucker, 1763), continued to attract attention. In fact, despite such dismissive attempts to make the problem go away, the stakes in the debate remained high. What was at issue was not only the metaphysical questions of survival, immortality, and resurrection – hardly trivial in their own right – but also the all-important practical question of moral responsibility. If the substantive continuity and unity of personal identity were not guaranteed, asked the self-appointed defenders of personal identity, how can anyone be held responsible for acts committed in the past? (Dr. Johnson, we recall, raised the same concern, however jocularly, regarding the possible consequences of doubleness in contemporary acting theory.) As James Beattie put it in 1770, "to a man who doubts the individuality or identity of his own mind, virtue, truth, religion, good and evil, hope and fear, are absolutely nothing." Naturally, the other side made considerable efforts to show how their reasoning did *not* undermine the basis for a sustainable theory of morality.[45]

Ultimately, for my purposes here, it matters little what were the specific contributions of every participant in this debate (a story that in any case has been told before), or who appeared to have the upper hand (which in fact no side really did). What matters to this inquiry, first and foremost, is that this debate actually *happened*: that is, that such configurations of identity were within the realm of the conceivable in the eighteenth century, and furthermore that this was a singular development in the history of philosophy, unparalleled until the second half of the twentieth century.

It also matters to us that this debate had an audience, and that this audience received it, again, as within the boundaries of the imaginable. Several of the contributions to the debate went into multiple editions; the nub of their claims also circulated in periodical publications like *The Spectator* or the *Monthly Review*, and in popular reference works like Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopædia* of 1728, whose entry for "Identity" was in effect cribbed from Locke. This debate may also have left its mark in the oft-quoted identity-puzzle exchange in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: "my good friend, quoth I – as sure as I am I – and you are you – And who are you? said he. – Don't puzzle me, said I." It certainly left its mark in the opening pages of Charles Johnstone's popular *Chrysal: Or, the Adventures of a Guinea* (1760), in which a coin launches its musings about the world with a long, footnoted disquisition on the fluidity of self-as-consciousness, manifested in the self's grammatical – and gender – doubleness.[46] Likewise, Boswell was quite aware of the philosophical debate on personal identity when he penned his essays on acting theory. He therefore

made sure to draw the line between his own thoughts on people's "double feeling" and their potential to be "transmuted into various characters", and "what Mr. David Hume very seriously says of man in general, that 'they are nothing but a bundle of perceptions'", a formulation that Boswell obviously found more extreme than his own purpose required.[47]

Finally, I cannot fail to mention one more place where the debate on personal identity left its stamp, provoking in the process what was perhaps the most ingenious treatment of the difficulties posed by the eighteenth-century willingness to contemplate the fluidity of identity: the "memoirs" of Martinus Scriblerus. In this satirical production of the Scriblerus Club – which included among its members John Arbuthnot, Jonathan Swift, John Gay, and Alexander Pope – the "hero" has the misfortune to fall in love with one half of a pair of Siamese twins conjoined in their sexual organ. (The twins, incidentally, are described as complete opposites: in this they joined a whole sequence of fictive disharmonious or disparate twins that appear to have been an eighteenth-century innovation, contrasting with earlier portrayals of twins as indistinguishable in appearance and character.[48] Was this another manifestation, or projection, of the eighteenth-century interest in the splitting and mutating of identity?) The challenge to Scriblerus from the lover of the other twin, involving charges of rape and incest, leads to a learned argument in court, whether "the individual wife of the Plaintiff, is not one, but two Persons". This "disputation" allows the locus and essence of individuality to be debated at length before they are declared to inhere in the organ of generation. This elaborate and fantastic episode drove *ad absurdum* the ramifications of the debate on personal identity – a debate that the satirists invoked explicitly as the "great noise about this Individuality" – in connection with the potential divisibility of the self.[49]

But, the inherent interest of such examples aside, the broader argument I want to make with regard to the eighteenth-century debate on personal identity ultimately remains one about congruity and resonance rather than influence. We can be fairly certain that the consumers of female warrior ballads, or the travelers who left accounts of the Hottentots, or the provincial writers on bees, or most frequenters of masquerades, or the authors and readers of stories about captives who turned Indian, or the actresses who appeared on the Georgian stage in breeches parts and their enthusiastic audiences, or those contemporaries who fell for Mary Toft's rabbit breeding, or the many other eighteenth-century people who populate these pages, were not for the most part within earshot of the circumscribed philosophical conversation on personal identity, and were rarely molded by it – whether consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly – in their participation in this cultural milieu. But at the same time it also seems undeniable that all of them shared a common episte-

mological environment with the philosophers: it is this environment, with its clear and distinctive characteristics, that I have called the *ancien régime* of identity. The philosophical debate on personal identity, in the end, was but one symptom – albeit one distinguished by a unique level of reflexivity – of this particular historical configuration, one thread in the thick mesh of cultural indicators signaling the *ancien régime* of identity that I have been weaving throughout this book.

Rather than looking for the marks of the philosophical debate on personal identity in this broader cultural context, therefore, we can turn the question around and look for the marks of the broader cultural context in the contributions to the debate on personal identity. Thus we can note, for example, that when Shaftesbury wanted to explain the mutability of personal identity that allows a person to become "*another Creature*", the analogy with which he chose to introduce this notion was to a friend who through sickness or through travels to "the remotest parts of the East, and hottest Countrys of the South, return[ed] to us so alter'd in his whole outward Figure, that till we had for a time convers'd with him, we cou'd not know him again to be the same Person".[50] How familiar. Not, of course, that this climatic understanding of human diversity was exactly the same kind of metamorphosis as the one Shaftesbury was about to propose: but it was one that he obviously felt would resonate well with his readers, and was thus an effective analogy to draw upon as a pedagogical aid.

Or we can note that in the whimsical arguments put forth by Martin Scriblerus's legal counsel regarding the perhaps divided identity of the Siamese twins, his insistence that individuality resides in the sexual organ is based on the observation that "when we behold this one member, we distinguish the Sex, and pronounce it a *Man*, or a *Woman*". He therefore proclaims "the Sameness and Individuality of each sex" as equivalent to the sameness and individuality of identity. But the supposed clarity of the sameness and individuality of each sex, as we by now know well, was hardly taken for granted in the eighteenth century. The Scriblerians knew it too: they made this very clear in two separate invocations of hermaphroditism inserted completely gratuitously into the Siamese twins episode – one highlighting the analogy between the conjoined twins and a hermaphrodite, the other a matter-of-fact discussion of the legal standing of hermaphroditical marriage immediately preceding the legal arguments of Scriblerus's counsel. What the satirists were actually doing, of course, was to recall to their readers' attention familiar understandings of the *limits* of gender identity in order to undermine further the clarity of identity that this facetious "argument" was supposed to shore up. (It is worth noting that this predominant contributor to the Scriblerians' *jeu d'esprit* was probably John Arbuthnot, whose belief in the malleability of human complexion we have

already encountered; and, more to the point, who also penned an analogous satire on the confusion of the sexes that was supposedly going to result from "the *Metamorphostical Conjunction*" of the planets, a satire that in a similar manner drove *ad absurdum* the possibilities inherent in unreliable gender boundaries.)[51]

In these examples, then, the interlocutors on personal identity were drawing on familiar understandings of identity categories – whether of gender or race – in order to help get their points across. But I find even more suggestive the occasional moments when contributors to the philosophical debate not only drew on this broader context of the *ancien régime* of identity, but actually, because of their level of articulate self-awareness, gave its key features – as I have been trying to reconstruct them – unusually forceful expression.

Take the *Monthly Review*. In 1763, it published a skeptical critique of Abraham Tucker's attempt to defend the "unchangeable individuality" of personal identity, countering that he was "not *quite so great a* master in the *noble science of SELF-defence*" (Tucker's book title begged this quip). "Suppose", the *Review* conjectured, "that a man or woman should be so much altered in their size, make, features, voice and sentiment as not to be known again by others". (Again, the reviewer's beginning point presupposed that the possibility of a person's transformation to the point of indistinguishability – of complete passing – could be taken for granted.) Suppose further that their memory was impaired as well, so that "their external form and interior constitution are so altered, that they are not known to be the same persons, either by themselves or others". In this case it was only the memories of other people that could maintain this changed person's former identity: had this transformation taken place on a desert island, the review triumphantly rested its case, there would be nothing to preserve it at all. But it is the general conclusion that the reviewer drew from these considerations that I find most interesting: "it appears pretty evident that personal identity consists not in the sameness of any particular Being, independent of other Beings; but in the sameness of the relations which such Being bears to all others".[52] This is as close a contemporary formulation of the argument proposed here regarding the relational making of *ancien-régime* identity, determined outwardly by a matrix of social relations, as one could hope to find.

Or take a letter from an unnamed friend that Edmund Law appended to his own 1769 defense of Locke, a letter that again made some very clear points in its dismissal of "personality" – or personal identity – as "an absurd expression". "The word person", it stated, should be taken as "standing for a certain guise, character, quality, i.e. being in fact a mixed mode, or relation, and not a substance". The words "relation" and "mixed mode" echoed the relational, outwardly turned social matrix of the *Monthly Review*. But in this case it is the

significance of "guise" and "character" to which I want to draw attention. "When person is considered as a character, and not a substance," this letter explained further, "it amounts to no more than saying, a man puts on a mask – continues to wear it for some time – puts off one mask and takes another."[53] Identity – here equated with character – can be put on or taken off like a mask: a mask that is not only easily replaceable but that also does not hide a "true" substance underneath. Recall now the importance of masks and masquerading, and of the wearing of character, to the arguments made in the above pages: again, it would be hard to sum up the *ancien régime* of identity more succinctly or forcefully.

For my last example I want to return to Locke. In particular, to his distinction between person (or self) and man. "I know", Locke wrote, "that, in the ordinary way of speaking, the same Person, and the same Man, stand for one and the same thing." But Locke wanted to be more precise. "Man" he took to mean a certain biological kind to which all individual humans unproblematically belonged. Person was something different: "*Person*, as I take it, is the name for this *self*. . . . It is a Forensick Term, appropriating Actions and their Merit; and so belongs only to intelligent Agents capable of a Law, and Happiness and Misery." Person was the sum of the attributes of the man's consciousness, which necessarily included thought, moral responsibility, and emotion. The thrust of Locke's argument, in short, was that personhood, or selfhood, can in certain cases roam away from the man, move to another man, or be superseded by another self within the same body, though his definition of "person" singled out moral responsibility as its sole essential attribute.)[54] Surely this sounds familiar? One can hardly fail to notice the close parallel between the relationship of person to man as Locke conceived it and the relationship of gender to sex as I have laid it down earlier in this book. Gender, we said, the behavioral-cultural scaffolding erected around biologically grounded sex, was conceptually allowed during this period to roam away occasionally from the sexual body. This was the basis of the "*ancien régime* of gender" that prevailed until the late eighteenth century. Likewise we noted the analogous configurations of civilization and race, or the political and class, for which eighteenth-century people could envision similar dissonances that were later to become much harder to imagine.

We can say, then, that person in Locke was to man as gender was to sex, or civilization to race, or the political to class; and thus that in its different permutations, this conceptual doubling, and especially the dissonances that it allowed one to imagine as possible, appear to have been a persistent thread that ran through the *ancien régime* of identity. Locke's formulation, therefore, situated him, and the debate on personal identity that followed from it, snugly within the broader logic of this *ancien régime*.