At first glance, John, Lord Hervey (1696–1743) and Charlotte Charke (1713–60) might seem an incongruous pair for study. Hervey achieved standing first as a Member of Parliament, then as George II’s Vice Chamberlain and later Lord Privy Seal, and, perhaps most significantly, as a favourite of Queen Caroline. Son of the first Earl of Bristol, he was an effete aristocratic courtier who moved in the highest circles of power. Charke, daughter of the actor, playwright and theatre manager, Colley Cibber, failed at every occupation she undertook, lived on the outskirts of society and died in penury. Both, however, married precipitously when young, then went on to set up a household with a member of the same sex (in Hervey’s case while continuing to give his wife regular pregnancies). Hervey’s effeminacy and Charke’s cross-dressing on and off the stage brought them public notoriety. His political position and her renown as an actress appeared ascendant in the 1730s and both ended their lives with frustrated ambitions and disappointment. Each penned reminiscences, but these texts could not have been more different generically. Written over a long period and published posthumously, Hervey’s memoirs left a seemingly indelible and wildly antipathetic picture of George II’s court and its leading politicians as their author affected distance and objectivity. Charke, in contrast, chose autobiography, a form that allowed her the starring role, and produced a hastily penned performance for quick cash.1

1The author would like to thank Jill Campbell, Jacqueline Foertsch, D. Harland Hagler, Deborah Needleman-Armintor, Stephen Taylor and Aurora Wolfgang for their feedback on earlier versions of this study and to express gratitude for Nicole Pohl’s continued interest in its various incarnations and unflagging critical acuity.

2Unless otherwise indicated, all biographical information regarding Hervey and Charke is drawn from, respectively, Robert Halsband, Lord Hervey Eighteenth-Century Courtier (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1974) and Fidelis Morgan, The Well-Known Troublemaker: A Life of Charlotte Charke (London, Faber and Faber, 1988).
Yet, for Hervey and Charke, writing served as a means of self-vindication and, thus, a site for self-fashioning. Because of their differences, the qualities that they had in common appear even more striking. A comparison between Hervey and Charke offers insights into the nature of same-sex relations in early modern England and the impact that sexual object choice had on an individual’s reputation and sense of self before the notion of sexual orientation existed. Although the two refrained from straightforward revelations regarding their erotic natures, their accounts of interactions with others in these chronicles and their other writings demonstrate how the nonsexual relationships in their lives shaped their identities in as significant ways as did the personal associations that appearances suggest had a sexual component. Hervey and Charke experienced a range of complex and often ambiguous affective bonds with others. Unhampered by the freight of sexual orientation, their writings display the wider possibilities of erotic desire and its impact on public and private identities during the early modern period.

With the creation of the notion of sexual orientation in the late nineteenth century, sexuality became as palpable a category of individual identity as gender, class and race. In spite of Eve Sedgwick’s first axiom in *Epistemology of the Closet*, which questioned why, in the face of the vastly different ways in which people could differ from one another in their sexual preferences, sexual object choice continues as the primary category of classification for sexual identity. Scholars continue to debate the question of whether or not transhistorical gay and lesbian identities existed. Historians such as George Haggerty and Alan Bray have sought to bridge the schism between essentialist and social constructionist approaches to the history of sexuality that the question of gay and lesbian identities generated, as well as overcome the limitations of premodern evidence, by shifting their focus away from physical eroticism. They both posit a more nuanced view of intimacy by turning their attention toward the visible emotional, spiritual and economic aspects of same-sex relationships.

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