

AN
APOLOGY
for the LIFE of
Mr COLLEY CIBBER,
COMEDIAN and late PATENTEE of the
THEATRE ROYAL

A Modernized Text



Edited with an Introduction by
DAVID ROBERTS

An Apology for the Life of
Mr Colley Cibber,
Comedian and Late Patentee
of the Theatre Royal

Colley Cibber was one of the most derided men in eighteenth-century London. Mocked for his work in the theatre and as Poet Laureate, he was nevertheless a successful actor and playwright, and co-managed the Theatre Royal Drury Lane for twenty-four years. His response to his critics, *An Apology for the Life of Mr Colley Cibber*, is often described as the first theatrical autobiography, and even as the first secular autobiography in English. But what kind of text is it? Intimate confession or cunning pose? History of the stage or political polemic? Rambling or purposeful? Or perhaps, even, the first celebrity memoir? Including comprehensive notes and a detailed scholarly introduction, this modernized text makes Cibber's enigmatic literary landmark accessible to a wide readership for the first time and allows both specialists and general readers to explore Cibber's extraordinary career against the rich, turbulent background of London theatre in the eighteenth century.

DAVID ROBERTS is Professor of English at Birmingham City University. His book *Thomas Betterton* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) was a finalist for the Freedley Award. His other scholarly editions include *Lord Chesterfield's Letters* (1992) and William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (2019). His essay on Beethoven and Shakespeare was Editor's Choice in the June 2019 issue of *The Cambridge Quarterly*.



FRONTISPIECE. Engraving of Colley Cibber and a young woman by Edward Fisher of the portrait by Jean Baptiste van Loo, from the first edition of the *Apology*.

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To Evie

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I am very grateful to my editor at Cambridge, Bethany Thomas, for her faith and guidance, and to George Laver, Liz Davey, Dr Chris Jackson, Mr Denesh Shankar, and the production team for their characteristically expert support. The advice of the Press's two anonymous readers was impeccably thorough as well as instrumental in the decision to produce a modernized text, which it is to be hoped will open up this landmark work to a wider readership. One day, perhaps, it may even be read by the latest addition to my ever-loving family, who by happy chance was delivered in the same month as the revised manuscript for this edition: a first grandchild, Evelyn Rose, to whom this book is fondly dedicated.

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INTRODUCTION

A Theatrical Life

One hundred and forty-eight roles, at least; many thousands of stage appearances spanning the six decades from his debut in 1690; twenty-six dramatic entertainments with more eighteenth-century outings than any playwright other than Shakespeare;¹ nearly a quarter of a century co-managing London's leading playhouse: the theatrical career of Colley Cibber (1671–1757) was in variety and volume a match for any before or since. The same may be said for the vitriol Cibber attracted, whether as actor, writer, or manager. Yet none of his achievement would be quite as significant, or criticism of him quite so bruising, had he not become more than a subject of theatre history – had he not, that is, become a pioneering author of it.

An Apology for the Life of Mr Colley Cibber (1740) is often described as the first theatrical autobiography; one recent critic goes so far as to label it 'the first secular autobiography in English'.² Landmark text it certainly is, but precisely what kind of text, and why Cibber wrote it, remain contested. Confession or crafted pose? History or polemic? Ramblingly digressive or purposefully organized? The memoir of a 'peacock strutting on the public stage', the 'impudently titled' work of a 'publicity hound'?³ Or a 'sober history' of London theatre by an 'opinionated' but 'remarkably accurate' reporter who, against the odds, wrote a work of 'something like genius'?⁴ Or perhaps an attempt at self-definition that presents the 'illusion of interiority only to expose it as an illusion'?⁵ The full title of the work poses many possibilities. *An Apology for the Life of Mr Colley Cibber, Comedian and late Patentee of the Theatre-Royal. With an Historical View of the Stage during his Own Time. Written by Himself*: the promise of autobiography, self-justification, objective history, and eye-witness memoir is complemented by the diverse guises in which the author appears, at once actor ('comedian'), owner-manager ('patentee'), and historian. Even that is an underestimate. No mention is made on the title page of Cibber as playwright or even Poet Laureate, the post he occupied from 1730 to his death twenty-seven years later.

1 Based on the estimates of Robert D. Hume, 'Reevaluating Colley Cibber and Some Problems in Documentation of Performance, 1690–1800', *Eighteenth-Century Life* vol. 43, no. 3 (September 2019), 101–14.

2 Fawcett, p.2. 3 Schoch, p.230. 4 Hume, 'Aims', 687, 690, 695. 5 Fawcett, p.3.

In its abundance and elusiveness, the *Apology* is a fitting counterpart to the disconcertingly lifelike bust of its author in London's National Portrait Gallery (cover illustration), probably crafted to celebrate the book's instant notoriety.⁶ Brightly coloured, smoothly self-assured: the thin-lipped smile suggests an amused thought withheld, the piercing blue eyes averted so that the viewer has to lean and bend to catch their gaze. At first, it seems as though the man is really there, but that shock dissolves into an unsettling puzzle, the decoding of an ironic wink frozen in time. Unmistakably it is the image of a man comfortably retired in his black turban cap, the gold embroidered waistcoat announcing membership of the *beau monde*. Who made it is aptly enigmatic. It used to be thought the work of Louis-François Roubiliac, sculptor of Shakespeare and Handel; now it is tentatively attributed to the less celebrated Sir Henry Cheere and his brother John, sculptor and plasterer respectively.⁷

If the form of Cibber's *Apology* and his reasons for writing it resist easy definition, its distinctiveness is not in doubt. No previous work had offered such insight into the daily business of acting and theatre management; none had attempted to chart in such detail the relationships between licensed companies and the agencies of state; none had featured a mere actor placing himself so comprehensively in the sightlines of readers. Without the *Apology*, our knowledge of London theatre from 1690 to 1732 would be drastically diminished. Recalling the great actors of his time, Cibber developed a critical language of performance of unprecedented vividness and subtlety. Rather than setting forth the gestural and rhetorical conventions thought by some to underpin good acting as they did other kinds of public speaking, the *Apology* examines the individual qualities of actors and their impact on audiences, allowing readers a glimpse of what it was like to witness first-hand the greats of the Restoration stage.⁸ This, the first theatrical autobiography, therefore also ranks as the first body of theatre criticism.⁹ Not content with observation, Cibber asks us to re-evaluate his profession,

6 Notes published by the National Portrait Gallery give the date of the bust as 'circa 1740'. See www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw01301/Colley-Cibber (last accessed 12 October 2021).

7 See John Kerslake, *Early Georgian Portraits* (London: HMSO, 1977), p.54.

8 Compare, for example, John Downes's *Roscius Anglicanus* (1708), which had represented great acting as an imitation of predecessors' practice, while Charles Gildon's *The Life of Mr Thomas Betterton* (1710) included a lengthy treatise on the rhetorical and gestural language of acting, said to be useful for actors, lawyers, and clergymen alike. See Wanko, pp.38–48.

9 See, for example, Stanley Wells, ed., *Shakespeare in the Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.18, which includes Cibber's appreciation of Thomas Betterton as the first piece of theatre criticism in the language.

identifying in the best performers an art equal to any playwright's, composer's, or painter's.

A Life in Brief

Colley Cibber lived through part or all of the reigns of six monarchs: Charles II, James II, William III (with Mary II), Anne, George I, and George II. Unlike most of the major playwrights to emerge in the Restoration period (depending on definitions, 1660–1714), he was a Londoner by birth and, when it came to representing city life, less disposed to satire than many of his contemporaries.¹⁰ His heritage was European and artistic. Born in 1671, he was the son of the distinguished Danish sculptor Caius Gabriel Cibber and his second wife Jane, née Colley.

Caius Gabriel's commissions meant an itinerant childhood; young Colley attended school in Lincolnshire. He missed out on scholarships to Winchester College and therefore Oxford University, episodes he describes in the *Apology*. After a brief spell in military service, in 1690 he joined what was at the time London's only licensed theatre company, playing minor roles and seeing his name recorded in the cast lists of printed editions as, variously, 'Sibber', 'Zibber', 'Colly' and 'Zybars':¹¹ as if he needed reminding, clumsy signals that he was the child of an immigrant father, bearing a foreign-sounding name that attracted derision throughout his career.¹² It is little wonder that he offered his credentials as a self-made man ('the weight of my pedigree will not add an ounce to my intrinsic value'),¹³ that he craved respectability, and settled for integration when others preferred rebellion.

- 10 Of the more prolific dramatists to emerge in the period, only Cibber and John Crowne (1641–1712) were Londoners. William Congreve (1670–1729) was from a Shropshire family and attended Trinity College Dublin. John Dryden (1631–1700) was a Northamptonshire boy who went to Cambridge; Thomas Durfey (1653–1723) was from Devon, while Sir George Etherege (1636–92) grew up in Berkshire and came to London to study law. George Farquhar (1677–1707), of Scots planter heritage, went to school in Londonderry and university in Dublin (like Cibber, he was apt to see his unfamiliar name gratuitously misspelled). Thomas Otway (1652–85) was born in Sussex and failed to complete his degree at Oxford; Thomas Shadwell (1641–92) grew up in Norfolk and went to school in Bury St Edmunds. Like Congreve and Farquhar, Thomas Southerne (1660–1746) and Nahum Tate (1652–1715) attended Trinity College Dublin. Sir John Vanbrugh (1664–1726) spent most of his childhood in Chester; William Wycherley (1641–1715) was baptized in Hampshire but had family roots in Shropshire. Little is known of the early life of Aphra Behn (1640–89) other than that she probably spent some time in Surinam.
- 11 See lists of dramatis personae for Thomas Durfey, *Bussy d'Ambois* (1691, 'Sibber') and *The Marriage-Hater Matched* (1692, 'Colly'); Nicholas Brady, *The Rape* (1692, 'Zibber'); and Elkanah Settle, *The Ambitious Slave* (1694, 'Zybars').

- 12 For example, *Apology*, pp. 328–9 n. 51. 13 *Apology*, p. 14.

Initially he worked under the penny-pinching, bullying management of the lawyer and theatre-owner Christopher Rich. In 1695, when a group of senior actors left with Thomas Betterton to form a new company at Lincoln's Inn Fields, Cibber remained behind and ended up assisting Rich. The two men evidently socialized, but in the *Apology* Cibber distances himself from the relationship; it did not fit a narrative that promotes the union of art and lucre, Rich's interests having embraced only the latter.¹⁴ Doubtless for the same reason, Cibber skates over the many later occasions when he proved himself, in turn, a managerial penny-pincher.¹⁵

The 1695 division of companies created opportunities for Rich's younger actors, but to achieve his breakthrough Cibber had to take a first step in the project of self-authoring whose peak is the *Apology*. He created the fopish Sir Novelty Fashion in his own *Love's Last Shift* (January 1696), itself a landmark in the evolution of comedy, showing a penitent hero who learns to entertain generous feeling at the expense of aggressive lust and wit.¹⁶ The following November he repeated the role, now ennobled as Lord Foppington, in Sir John Vanbrugh's *The Relapse*, and then again in his own play, *The Careless Husband*, in 1704. The association of actor and role stuck. In a series of post-retirement benefit performances during the 1740s Cibber was still playing it, serving up living relics of his career to a nostalgic audience. He was even painted in the role by Giuseppe Grisoni (Figure 7). It is arguable whether he plays up to it in the *Apology*.¹⁷ What is clear is that he devotes little space to discussing it. If he knew the association would be taken for granted, he also had more important, less obvious, and less personal topics to write about.

While other fop roles featured prominently in his repertoire (Osric in *Hamlet*, Tattle in Congreve's *Love for Love*, Sparkish in Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, and Sir Fopling Flutter in Etherege's *The Man of Mode*), he was a highly versatile performer, with character roles including Captain Brazen in Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*, Ben the Sailor in Congreve's *Love for Love*, and Justice Shallow in *2 Henry IV*. Middling classical roles such as Gloucester in *King Lear*, Syphax in Addison's *Cato*, and Worcester in *1 Henry IV* were staples. Villains are almost as conspicuous in his career as fops: he played Richard III, Iago, and Volpone; in more recent work, Renault in Otway's *Venice Preserved* and Young Woudbe in Farquhar's *The Twin Rivals*, a role that drew on the success of both his Richard III and

¹⁴ *Apology*, p.171. ¹⁵ *Apology*, p.285 n.30.

¹⁶ For an account of the different comic elements in *Love's Last Shift*, see Hume, *Development*, pp.411–12.

¹⁷ See below, pp.lvii–lviii.

his Lord Foppington. Still, he was accused of disliking villain roles because audiences came to believe he was really playing himself – a charge he rebuts in the *Apology*.¹⁸ Tragic heroes and romantic leads were, he admits, beyond him; he was very much the ‘comedian’ of the title page rather than a tragedian.¹⁹ Relishing the chance to send himself up (in *The Egoist* he admits to an ‘utter insensibility of being ridiculous’), he played the hapless playwright Bayes in Buckingham’s *The Rehearsal* and the unfunny Witwoud in Congreve’s *The Way of the World*, a role he may well have inspired: the essence of that character is captured in Congreve’s devastating summary that *Love’s Last Shift* ‘had only in it a great many things that were like wit, that in reality were not wit’.²⁰

That put-down was a further instance of Cibber’s being felt not quite to belong, while his cheerful recycling of Congreve’s verdict suggests that, like Witwoud, he was happy to play along with occasional humiliation if it kept him near the centre of things (on more than one occasion, it might be added, Congreve’s words are no less true of the *Apology* than of *Love’s Last Shift*). He was as critical as anyone of his own plays, which were as diverse as his portfolio of roles. Tragedy, comedy, burlesque, Shakespearian adaptation, Molière imitation, masque, pastoral interlude, ballad opera: he attempted them all between 1696 and 1730. When he came to publish a collected two-volume edition in 1721, only half of his existing dramatic output featured. He knew he was not a great originator but largely retained an instinct for what would work in the theatre with a particular company of actors. His best plays – particularly *Love’s Last Shift* and *The Careless Husband* – were repertory standards long after his death, and his modern editors aptly summarize his dramaturgic strengths: ‘plots that involved the standard formulas of his day’ and ‘the presentation of memorable characters’.²¹ Just as importantly, he understood the relationship between commercial viability and political loyalty.

As a manager – a period lasting formally from 1708 to 1732 – Cibber was at pains to portray himself as a cautious, mollifying intermediary. He gained his managerial apprenticeship in the late 1690s and early 1700s, as buffer between the financially driven Christopher Rich and his discontent-

18 As reported by Steele in *Town-Talk*, no.2; see *Document Register* no.2638. In the *Apology*, Cibber states that some actors declined villain roles for the same reason, a practice he mocks as ‘theatrical prudery’ (*Apology*, p.99).

19 *Apology*, p.127. Compare the title of Charles Gildon’s 1710 *Life of Mr Thomas Betterton, the Late Eminent Tragedian*.

20 *Apology*, p.150; *Egotist*, p.34.

21 *The Plays of Colley Cibber, Volume I*, ed. Timothy J. Viator and William J. Burling (Cranbury, NJ, and London: Associated University Presses, 2001), p.12.

ed actors. As one of the Drury Lane triumvirate with Robert Wilks and Barton Booth – the latter from 1713 – he was apparently the umpire, caught between contrasting talents and temperaments; in the *Apology* he misses no opportunity to mention Wilks's short fuse. Cibber's diplomatic skills were further tested in contractual disputes with other partners such as Thomas Doggett and Sir Richard Steele.²² Whether they were tested beyond their limit is an open question. During his years in management he was involved in at least eight significant legal disputes relating to theatre governance; a further case pursued him for years after.²³ His retirement was calculating but messy. In July 1731 a patent was drafted to enable Cibber, Wilks, and Booth to run Drury Lane for a further twenty-one years, effective from September the following year.²⁴ Before it could come into effect, Booth sold half his interest to John Highmore; soon after, Wilks died.²⁵ Cibber assigned his own share to his son Theophilus for the duration of the 1732–3 season in return for a one-off rental reported to be worth £442, plus a further 12 guineas a week for acting.²⁶ Theophilus proved a disastrous manager, and in March 1733 Cibber sold his entire interest to Highmore for a reported 3,000 guineas.²⁷

An appetite for reasonable accommodation served him well enough during his lifetime but has hardly helped his reputation since. A loyal supporter of Sir Robert Walpole's Whig government (1721–42), he became Poet Laureate partly on the strength of his Molière adaptation, *The Non-Juror*, which transformed the hypocritical priest Tartuffe into the rapacious Jacobite Dr Wolf, another role he wrote for himself. The *Apology* occasionally disguises his partisanship, attributing the success of Addison's *Cato* to its pleasing rival Whig and Tory factions equally, but for his detractors his name continued to give the game away: like the Hanoverian dynasty

22 For Cibber's account, *Apology*, pp.303–7 (Doggett) and 333–41 (Steele).

23 As recorded in *Document Register* nos.2026 (Christopher Rich), 2120 (Owen Swiney), 2228 (Thomas Doggett), 2526 (William Collier), 2831 (John and Christopher Mosyer Rich), 3283 (Richard Steele), 3298 (Francis Henry Lee, Master of the Revels), 3525 (Josias Miller). In 1736, along with other parties with a current or former interest in Drury Lane, Cibber was pursued for money owed to James Calthorpe (C11/1268/13, in *Document Register* no.4008).

24 LC 5/202, pp.407–9, in *Document Register* no.3568, and C66/3586, no.5, in *Document Register* no.3623.

25 *Daily Courant*, 13 July 1732, in *Document Register* no.3639.

26 Barker, p.167.

27 *Daily Post*, 27 March 1733, in *Document Register* no.3695; for alternative figures, see *Apology*, p.197 n.73. For 3,000 guineas, the Bank of England inflation calculator suggests an equivalent current value of £760,073. For an account of Theophilus's brief period in charge, including a dispute with Highmore, see Barker, pp.169–73.

he supported or his own Taruffian incarnation, he was an intruder in the house who had snatched the keys.²⁸

When the *Apology* covers the foremost regulatory controversies affecting the theatre, Cibber advertises his moderation. Jeremy Collier's 1698 diatribe, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, led to a pamphlet war and the prosecution of actors and playwrights; Cibber himself was tried but acquitted.²⁹ In his plays he observed standards of moral decency appropriate for the post-Collier age, while the *Apology* stresses the need for performers to live unimpeachable private lives – an assertion some early readers found questionable given Cibber's reputation (how far warranted it is hard to tell) for gambling and womanizing.³⁰ When Walpole's government introduced a Licensing Act in 1737, the culmination of several years when anti-Whig satire (much of it from the pen of Henry Fielding) had proliferated alongside a growth in theatre buildings, Cibber was robust in his defence of new measures that restricted the number of licensed theatres to two. The arguments about artistic quality he advances in the *Apology* were underwritten by seasoned understanding of the commercial advantage that accrued to managers of theatrical monopolies or (at worst) duopolies, the system in which he gained his own stage apprenticeship. But where money was involved, compliance had its limits. He was evidently proud of refusing to pay the Master of the Revels a licensing fee demanded merely by convention rather than statute, although the *Apology* conveniently fails to mention the adverse consequences.³¹ Even so, it is easy to characterize Cibber as a classically dislikeable establishment figure: an upholder of bourgeois morality who welcomed state censorship as long as he did not incur it; who gained office by deference; who sat in judgment on the work of playwrights and actors more talented than himself; who drew handsome profits from the theatre while squeezing pennies owed to dress-makers and scene-painters.

Family matters are thinly represented in the *Apology*, but the youngest of Cibber's six children to survive infancy stretched his capacity for harmonious co-existence well past breaking-point. Charlotte – actress, baker, sausage merchant, playwright, transvestite, and autobiographer – outraged her father by mocking him in performance and by her convention-defying

²⁸ *Apology*, pp.327–8.

²⁹ Report in *The Post Boy*, 24–6 February 1702, of Drury Lane actors summoned for 'some immoral expressions contained in the plays acted by them' (*Document Register* no.1683).

³⁰ As documented and challenged by McGirr, pp.145–80.

³¹ *Apology*, pp.185 and 332 n.2.

lifestyle.³² Her *Narrative of the Life of Mrs Charlotte Charke* was published in 1755, two years before her father's death. It reflects on the difficulties of their relationship and appears to ask for forgiveness, which duly came in insultingly small measure via Cibber's will. His granddaughters, Jenny and Betty, received £1,000 each; Charlotte, a mere £5. Even her wayward brother Theophilus was allowed £50. Neither child is mentioned by name in the *Apology*, but two awkward children do not necessarily make a bad parent. In Elaine M. McGirr's recent study, Cibber is painted as the man depicted by Jean Baptiste van Loo (see frontispiece) to coincide with plans for the *Apology*: at ease over his writing desk, attended to by a young woman McGirr argues is one of his granddaughters. Cibber's forty-one-year marriage to Katherine Shore, McGirr claims, 'seems to have stepped from the boards of one his comedies: genteel, affectionate and productive'.³³ If only we could be sure.

The pursuit of gentility characterized Cibber's life after the *Apology* and the critical furore it provoked. He was 68 when the book appeared but, in Richard Hindry Barker's words, continued to behave 'like a much younger man' with a social life and an interest in much younger women to match, Katherine having died in 1734.³⁴ He befriended the actress Peg Woffington, the author Laetitia Pilkington, and the society belle Elizabeth Chudleigh. The Laureateship opened doors that might have been closed to a mere retired actor, but reports of his behaviour are at odds with the more pious protestations of the *Apology*. He did not impress Samuel Johnson, who thought it 'wonderful that a man who for forty years had lived with the great and the witty should have acquired so ill the talents of conversation', adding that 'one half of what he said was oaths'.³⁵ Cibber continued to write. *The Character and Conduct of Cicero* was published in 1747 and *The Lady's Lecture* the year after. In 1751 he published *A Rhapsody upon the Marvellous, Arising from the First Odes of Horace and Pindar*. The title pages of all three works identify him either as 'Servant to His Majesty' or 'P.L.' (i.e. Poet Laureate), so reminding the public that he was no mere actor, playwright, manager, or theatrical apologist.

Among his literary acquaintance the foremost was Samuel Richardson, who in 1740 had also published a groundbreaking book. Fielding skewered both the *Apology* and Richardson's *Pamela* in his 1741 spoof, *An Apology for the Life of Mrs Shamela Andrews*, advertising it as the work of 'Conny Keyber' and 'necessary to be had in all families'. Both Pamela and Colley, he alleged, were attention-seeking upstarts who drew readers into a taw-

32 See below, pp.lviii–lix n.201. 33 McGirr, p.150. 34 Barker, p.233.

35 Boswell, I.542.

dry, linguistically inept world of obsessive selfhood. Cibber took a close interest in the evolution of Richardson's subsequent masterpiece, *Clarissa*; according to Laetitia Pilkington he was horrified when he learned of the dire fate that awaited its heroine. His reaction ('he shuddered – nay, the tears stood in his eyes') was that of the ideal sentimental reader; he concluded that 'he should no longer believe Providence, or eternal wisdom, or goodness governed the world, if merit, innocence, and beauty were to be so destroyed'.³⁶ Cibber's relationship with Richardson and his circle ran into greater difficulties when he proposed that the pure-hearted hero of *Sir Charles Grandison* should prove his moral worth by first taking a mistress and then forsaking her, as though reborn into virtue like the hero of *Love's Last Shift*. Richardson's correspondent, Rachel, Lady Bradshaigh, was horrified, complaining that Cibber was 'the most finished coxcomb that ever humanity produced' and asked never again to hear the name of 'that irreclaimable sinner of seventy-nine'.³⁷

By then, Cibber had identified an unlikely successor for the Laureateship. Henry Jones was an Irish bricklayer and poet who had been brought to London by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Chesterfield, whom Cibber describes admiringly in the *Apology*.³⁸ Warming to the idea of another self-made man rising to literary celebrity, Cibber encouraged Jones and in 1753 assisted him with what turned out to be a popular play, *The Earl of Essex*. Falling dangerously ill, Cibber sent a message to Charles Fitzroy, Duke of Grafton and Lord Chamberlain, proposing that Jones become the new Laureate. But Cibber recovered; Jones offended Chesterfield, took to drink, and died in a workhouse.³⁹ Without showing any more sign of being equipped for the task than he had in 1730, Cibber continued to write the celebratory odes required of a Laureate up to his death on 11 December 1757. Soon after, his troublesome son Theophilus, disappointed in the provisions of Cibber's will, accepted an engagement in Dublin but drowned en route, shipwrecked off the Scottish coast. The Laureateship went to the Cambridge-educated playwright and poet William Whitehead, whose poetic gifts were, it is fair to say, not far removed from Cibber's.

Apologies, Lives, Memorials

Apology: 'the pleading off from a charge or imputation, whether expressed, implied, or only conceived as possible; defence of a person, or vindication

³⁶ Letter from Pilkington to Richardson of 1745, cited in Barker, p.251.

³⁷ Rachel, Lady Bradshaigh, Letter to Richardson of 1750, cited in Barker, p.255.

³⁸ *Apology*, pp.20–22 and n.25. ³⁹ For further details see Barker, pp.255–7.

of an institution, etc., from accusation or aspersion'; thus the Oxford English Dictionary defines the word as it was used from the sixteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century. As a literary genre, the Apology has a much older history, beginning with Plato's *The Apology of Socrates*, which records a defence mounted in 399 BC against charges of corruption. Cibber's basic classical education may have introduced him to the work; he twice refers to Socrates in the *Apology*.⁴⁰ If he also knew the two foremost examples of English Apologies, Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* (1595, also known as *A Defence of Poetry*) and Thomas Heywood's *An Apology for Actors* (1612), both would have appealed to his sense of the moral and civic role of the arts.

The hundreds of Apologies published between 1612 and 1740 embraced a far wider group of people, institutions, trades, books, ideas, and belief systems. Often the subjects were religious: witness two works published in the year of *The Non-Juror* (1717), *A Brief Apology in behalf of the people in derision called Quakers*, and *An Apology for the foreign Protestant churches having no episcopacy*. Such appeals on behalf of the underdog or the socially marginal were common: Catholics and Baptists, debtors and usurers, younger brothers, and those disgraced in office were all the subjects of Apologies. The promise was a defence of conduct undertaken in the public realm, or such as to raise questions about the public realm's assumptions, conventions, and expectations. It follows that a 1740 Apology for a *Life* did not quite herald what today would be classed as an autobiography. Instead, it pointed to what was already in the public domain: a defence less of a life than of a career.

Cibber goes out of his way to declare personal matters off limits, but with inconsistent results. Of his fellow managers, he writes, 'whatever might be our personal errors, I shall think I have no right to speak of them farther than where the public entertainment was affected by them'.⁴¹ When it comes to actors, he is just as forthright:

If therefore, among so many, some particular actors were remarkable in any part of their private lives that might sometimes make the world merry without doors, I hope my laughing friends will excuse me if I do not so far comply with their desires or curiosity as to give them a place in my history.⁴²

Considered in that light, the *Apology's* aims might seem clear enough. It is plainly the self-justification of one of the most frequently and virulently derided men in early eighteenth-century London: a man who stood up

40 *Apology*, pp.24 and 35. 41 *Apology*, p.288. 42 *Ibid.*

staunchly for what was still a widely maligned species (he refers to 'that disgrace and prejudice which custom has thrown upon the profession of an actor').⁴³ It is unquestionably an account of a career in which acting, writing, and theatrical management were for four decades so all-consuming an obsession as to make private life a luxury. So emphatic is Cibber's search for professional as opposed to private justification that he is prone to lapse into smugness, or digression, or simply an excess of optimism. Making his own work the centre of his narrative, he is inclined to be a little catty about former associates, but only as long as they are dead; the book concludes at the point he fears depicting 'some persons living in a light they possibly might not choose to be seen in'.⁴⁴ Conscious of his own longevity, he is sombre in marking the passing of his former colleagues, and by so honouring their memory he seeks to exonerate himself from being thought a mere gossip.

Beyond his fractious relationships with Theophilus and Charlotte, family miseries such as his father's intermittent periods in the Marshalsea prison, a feud with an uncle, an arrest for assault, and what appears to be an accusation of rape, are entirely omitted.⁴⁵ Robert D. Hume's rough statistical analysis lays bare the gaps: a mere 17 per cent of the text is 'personal', of which less than one-third might be described as 'strictly autobiographical'.⁴⁶ It is, Hume concedes, not quite that simple for a work significantly made up of eye-witness testimony, but the conclusion is hard to dispute: Cibber had no intention of laying bare his emotions or personal relationships. Whether there were precedents for doing so is debatable. Hume cites studies of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writing about the self by Paul Delany and Meredith Skura that give priority to the organization of worldly experience over any exploration of inner life.⁴⁷ A more recent study by Kathleen Lynch offers an alternative perspective, albeit in the context of religious narratives largely alien to Cibber's purpose, whatever his occasional nods towards 'Providence'.⁴⁸

43 *Apology*, p.56. 44 *Apology*, p.370.

45 For Caius Gabriel Cibber, his debts, and his feud with his brother-in-law, Edward Colley, see Faber, pp.17–21; for Cibber's brief detention in prison during April 1697 at the suit of Jane Lucas, see *Document Register* no.1553; for allegations against him by Mary Osborne, see McGirr, pp.154 and 182 n.24; for his relationships with Theophilus Cibber and Charlotte Charke, see McGirr, pp.160–73.

46 Hume, 'Aims', 662.

47 Paul Delany, *British Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969); Meredith Skura, *Tudor Biography: Listening for Inwardness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). See also Adam Smyth, *Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

48 Kathleen Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century Anglophone World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Those who have visited the *Apology* hoping for prolonged introspection have therefore tended to leave disappointed, while some prefer to find its gaps psychologically significant. According to Donald A. Stauffer, the book reveals the enigmatic emptiness of its author.⁴⁹ Leonard R. N. Ashley bemoans its want of existential despair or even self-doubt.⁵⁰ J. Paul Hunter claims the *Apology* for the tradition of Puritan confessional literature in which 'no secrets [are] wilfully kept [and] no flaws unmentioned', only to blame Cibber for failing to shape up: he was not, Hunter concludes, 'an especially perceptive viewer of himself'.⁵¹ In recent criticism, performance has often taken the place of introspection. If the text reveals little of Cibber the private man, it must be because the *Apology* is a studiously contrived pose, or perhaps catalogue of poses: either an outsize version of Lord Foppington or a series of performances depending on the topic, like roles selected from an actor's repertoire. Cibber himself tantalized his readers with the idea that the book might excite 'the curiosity of his spectators to know what he really was when in nobody's shape but his own', only to insist that it is his 'theatrical character' that is on display (leaving open the question of whether that was the same thing as his managerial character).⁵² At the start of the final chapter, he invites us to imagine him in another persona entirely, that of a plaintiff in Chancery: 'let the scene open, and at once discover your comedian at the Bar!'⁵³

Although the *Apology* is silent on many aspects of Cibber's private life, its opening chapters give an account of his childhood which explains, in classic autobiographical fashion, how the child was father to the man: 'I remember I was the same inconsistent creature I have been ever since.'⁵⁴ Typically, self-deprecation is a route to self-celebration. He recalls how he was whipped by his teacher for writing poorly but in the same instant told that 'what was good of it was better than any boy's in the form', an anticipation of what he later admits are the sunny uplands and muddy swamps of his playwriting.⁵⁵ Professing a naivety that makes him still, at the age of 68, incredulous that anyone could be 'capable of envy, malice, or ingratitude', he admits that a loose tongue and a habit of joking at others' expense continue to land him in trouble.⁵⁶ If those are diversionary tactics designed to show that no criticism of him can be as accurate as his own, they are

49 Donald A. Stauffer, *The Art of Biography in Eighteenth-Century England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), p.38.

50 Leonard R. N. Ashley, *Colley Cibber* (New York: Twayne, 1965).

51 J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century British Fiction* (New York: Norton, 1990), p.330.

52 *Apology*, p.12. 53 *Apology*, p.333. 54 *Apology*, p.17. 55 *Apology*, pp.17–18.

56 *Apology*, p.18.

folded into a scheme of reflection typically characterized in literary history as 'sentimental'. *Love's Last Shift* is often described as the first sentimental comedy, and the *Apology* bathes in its warm principles. 'Wit is not always a sign of intrinsic merit', pleads Cibber, partly in self-reproach, and partly as a defence against those who doubted he had any wit at all; 'so the want of that readiness is no reproach to a man of plain sense and civility'.⁵⁷

This notably non-confessional *Life* nonetheless invites reading as an instance of what Jacques Derrida described as 'circumfession': a life reconstructed not from introspection but from circles of friendship and professional acquaintance.⁵⁸ Here, it is male relationships and their vicissitudes that preoccupy Cibber, from a school friend who turned against him, to his father; from Lord Chesterfield, to the patentees Christopher Rich and Henry Brett; from Master of the Revels Charles Killigrew, to the actor-managers Robert Wilks, Thomas Doggett, and Barton Booth; and finally to Sir Richard Steele, a legal dispute with whom, following a long period of 'agreeable amity', is described as 'painful'.⁵⁹ One brief mention of his marriage aside, Cibber is silent on relationships with women, a charitable explanation of which is that he paid actresses the compliment of treating them purely as professionals (even as he admits to having been somewhat unprofessionally dismissive of the young Anne Oldfield).⁶⁰ His focus is on his ability to reconcile his fellow managers and to please or occasionally defy men in positions of greater influence. Reference is made to the institutions of male society that lay beyond the theatre: to coffee houses and the less salubrious establishments apparently enjoyed by Christopher Rich.⁶¹ In particular, Cibber is drawn to anecdotes, personal and otherwise, that blur hierarchies between men. The composer Corelli elegantly corrects a patron and, in an episode remarkable only for blending schoolboy japes with suppressed eroticism, Cibber swaps shirts with his soon-to-be-master, Henry Brett.⁶² His dedication of the *Apology* to a man believed to be the politician Henry Pelham is rapturous to a degree unusual even in that overheated genre. 'When I see you lay aside the advantages of superiority', he writes, 'then 'tis I taste you! Then, life runs high! I desire! I possess you!'⁶³ As will be seen, the *Apology* may owe its very existence to evenings that combined friendship with patronage in a way that crystallized Cibber's craving for respectability.

⁵⁷ *Apology*, p.19.

⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Circumfession', in Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp.3–315.

⁵⁹ *Apology*, p.333. ⁶⁰ *Apology*, p.202. ⁶¹ *Apology*, p.171.

⁶² *Apology*, pp.365 and 245. ⁶³ *Apology*, p.5.

So much for the *Life* of its title: what sort of *Historical View* does the *Apology* offer? Richard Schoch argues that its roots lie in Gilbert Burnet's *History of his own time* (1724–34), a text Cibber quotes, the 'key advantage' of which was Burnet's 'privileged access to great people and...important events'.⁶⁴ Burnet's plain style communicated the vividness of personal experience. His highly individual perspective meant he felt no obligation to write about what immediate observation did not tell him: 'Where I was in the dark, I passed over all', he wrote.⁶⁵ With Burnet as Cibber's model, the *Apology* becomes 'history [understood] as coterminous with the historian', but with a catch: the Cibberian historian is 'a figure so outsized that it risks eclipsing the very knowledge to which he claims privileged access'.⁶⁶

Hume extends the field of reference (as well as diminishing the risk of Schoch's 'eclipsing') by referring to the many 'secret histories' published between 1660 and 1750. He counts no fewer than 448 of them: some devoted to unsubstantiated and occasionally smutty rumours, but all concerned with opening up to a reading public forbidden spaces, whether personal or institutional.⁶⁷ It is an appealing context for a book that charts the jealousies and machinations of off-stage life. Nevertheless, when it comes to detailing some of his more sensitive transactions, such as multiple series of legal actions involving patentees and fellow managers, or adverse orders from the Lord Chamberlain that might have ended his career altogether, Cibber is no more forthcoming than he is about his family life.⁶⁸ If this is a secret history of the theatrical state, the author maintains tight control over which state secrets to leak, often according to whether they show him in a good light.

How well Cibber organized his history is no less debatable. He confesses he is inclined to favour the 'mere effect of chance or humour' over 'policy' even as he aspires to 'the fidelity of an historian'.⁶⁹ That preference finds voice in digressions that recall the asides when actor confides in audience; at one point Cibber even compares his digressions to a dance between the acts of a play.⁷⁰ For Schoch, as for most critics, the effect is to create a 'rambling', poorly structured narrative thrown together from the three ingredients of autobiography, stage history, and 'a gathering of anecdotes

64 Schoch, p.228; also *Apology*, pp.14 n.8, 26 n.41, 52 n.33, 342–3 ns.29 and 31.

65 Burnet, I: B IV, cited in Schoch, p.228. 66 Schoch, pp.247–8.

67 Hume, 'Aims', 682–3.

68 See, for example, the lawsuits involving Christopher Rich in 1709 (*Document Register* no.2026) and Owen Swiney in 1711 (*Document Register* no.2120), and his suspension from acting and managing by Lord Chamberlain Newcastle in 1719 (*Document Register* no.2957).

69 *Apology*, pp.248 and 318. 70 *Apology*, p.326.

and comments upon actors and acting'. Sometimes, Schoch adds, the three 'follow sequentially but other times they are jumbled and frequently overlap'.⁷¹ The digressions are there, Schoch argues, to satisfy readers' yearning for familiar, foppish Colley. In the *Apology* Cibber agrees with the need for such a leavening, foreseeing a mixed audience of 'the wise and learned' as well as 'readers of no more judgment than some of my *quondam* auditors'.⁷²

However, the summary of chapters that appears at the beginning of the *Apology* does not immediately suggest disorganization. In fact, reading the book in its entirety supports the idea that Cibber set out with a plan. For the first three chapters, he describes his aims and method, and charts his life before he became an actor in 1690. Chapters 4 and 5 cover the London stage and its performers between 1660 and 1690, while Chapter 6 moves on to Cibber's first years as an actor and playwright, describing the breaking up of the United Company in 1695. Chapter 7 is largely concerned with growing indiscipline in the breakaway company, with a digression on Cibber's failed attempt to imitate the much later success of *The Beggar's Opera*. In Chapter 8, he turns back to his own company and to the impact of Jeremy Collier's *A Short View*. The opening of the Haymarket Theatre in 1704, and the vicissitudes of ownership, regulation, and technology that followed, dominate Chapters 9 to 11, with Chapter 10 featuring a series of reflections on censorship. Since the Haymarket became the prime venue for performing opera, Cibber's mistrust of that genre looms large in Chapter 12, alongside a review of further changes in management and personnel, including Cibber's rise to leadership. Christopher Rich's acquisition of the old Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre in 1709 introduces further observations about competition and regulation in Chapter 13, while the final three chapters are devoted largely to Cibber's experience of co-managing the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, including an account of a dispute in the mid 1720s with Richard Steele, who had been awarded a patent in 1715. If that falling out of friends propels the narrative forward at speed in its final chapter, it is only a sign that Cibber felt he had important business to settle for both professional and personal reasons. The same may be said for his concluding reflections on his managerial colleagues, Booth and Wilks.

Cibber's basic chronological plan is not, of course, either exhaustive or consistent. He can glide forwards from the reopening of Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1714 to attacks on him in *Mist's Journal* from 1717, and occasionally – whether knowingly or not – he reverses the order of events.⁷³ 'About this time' is a preferred, conveniently non-committal linking device. There is

71 Schoch, p.237. 72 *Apology*, p.326. 73 *Apology*, pp.280–1, n.16.

only so much autobiographical material as is needed to fill the gap between his birth and the point at which he began his theatrical career; it made sense to deal with his early life first before tracking back to explain how his first theatre company came into being eight years before he joined it as an 18-year-old. From start to finish he is clear about the scope of his history, his penultimate sentence referring us back to what was advertised on the title page:

What commotions the stage fell into the year following, or from what provocations the greatest part of the actors revolted and set up for themselves in the little house in the Haymarket, lies not within the promise of my title page to relate.⁷⁴

Hume goes a step further in defending the book's structure: while the *Apology* 'seems like rambling free association', it is really 'a focused discussion of regulatory issues' and a 'seriously thought-out attempt to tell theatre history and draw conclusions from it'.⁷⁵ Cibber's digressions are better understood as moments where key concerns are reviewed: the civic and moral role of theatre, the most and least favourable styles of management, the ideal regulatory environment, questions about his own conduct as a manager and performer, and what it is that counts as excellence in acting. Those are Schoch's 'overlapping and interwoven purposes' of the *Apology* as Hume construes them. The result: not a rambling series of reminiscences, but a more or less linear history of theatre that constitutes 'an utterly astonishing and unprecedented enterprise for its time'.⁷⁶ Cibber's own statements about his method, self-indulgent as they may seem, do not necessarily contradict that verdict. He declares that he can 'no more put off [his] follies, than [his] skin'; he admits that his 'frequent digressions may have entangled [the reader's] memory' and makes no claim to a 'regular method'; variants of the word 'digress' appear throughout the book.⁷⁷ We might expect a 'focused discussion of regulatory issues' to show more development and less repetition than Cibber bestows on the principles of theatre regulation and management: 'I believe I may have said something like this in a former chapter' he admits at one point; half-way through he fears he has bitten off more than he can chew.⁷⁸ Yet the very use of such language suggests, paradoxically, that Cibber was confident of his material, that he knew when he needed to move from core narrative to topic-based reflection and back again, but wanted (as any actor might) to re-create the atmosphere of a live audience.

⁷⁴ *Apology*, p.370. ⁷⁵ Hume, 'Aims', 680–1. ⁷⁶ Hume, 'Aims', 684 and 681.
⁷⁷ *Apology*, pp.13 and 198. ⁷⁸ *Apology*, pp.284 and 198.

Hume further defends Cibber's historical method by speculating that he may have been allowed access to the records of Drury Lane and Covent Garden by their respective managers, Charles Fleetwood and John Rich.⁷⁹ On that question Cibber is clear: he states that he relied on memory. From that 'repository alone', he declares, 'every article of what I write is collected'.⁸⁰ Like many people advanced in years, he remembered distant events more sharply than some more recent ones. His errors are explained in the footnotes to this edition. Depending on what is counted, there are approximately fifty of them. Sometimes he gives the wrong year; sometimes he conflates separate events or reverses the order in which they happened; sometimes he misquotes. But the error count includes secondhand reports, such as stories about the early Restoration period relayed to him by senior members of the United Company. He evidently did pay attention to the 'veracity' or otherwise of his sources.⁸¹ In short, there is nothing in the *Apology's* history of the stage to suggest Cibber ventured an idle boast in claiming to have relied on memory (a faculty which, after all, he had honed during five decades of acting), or indeed to undermine the view that the book is, when all is said, the astonishing, deceptively coherent, and accurate feat celebrated by Hume.

Occasions of Writing

So why did he write it? It is easy to imagine that the *Apology* was conceived from Cibber's desire once and for all to answer those who had attacked him for being either an undeserving Poet Laureate, an indifferent actor, an unsympathetic manager, a peremptory judge of new scripts, a toady of the Walpole government, a supporter of the Licensing Act, a social climber, a plagiarist, a defacer of Shakespeare, or all of the above. His appointment to the Laureateship in 1730, from a list that included only those loyal to the government, sparked widespread mockery. One newspaper declared after the announcement, 'there is a report the renowned Keyber is learning to spell', the reference to foreign provenance compounding the indignation.⁸² His acting was not universally praised. A hostile witness to one of his signature roles, Richard III, recalled that 'when he was killed by Richmond, one might plainly perceive that the good people were not better pleased that so execrable a tyrant was destroyed than that so execrable an actor was

79 Hume, 'Aims', 690. 80 *Apology*, p.294. 81 *Apology*, p.351.

82 *Fog's Weekly Journal*, 12 December 1730. For Cibber and the Laureateship, *Apology*, pp.39–42.

silent', and went on to claim that 'the general taste was against him'.⁸³ Cibber incurred the wrath of playwrights whose work he judged flawed or too subversive, while his eye for popular success deserted him when for reasons of political sensitivity he rejected the single most transformative play of the eighteenth century, John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*; the error was compounded by Cibber's botched attempt to mimic its success with his own rather less impressive *Love in a Riddle*.⁸⁴ *The Non-Juror* annoyed opponents of the government and, to make things worse, earned him royal favour.⁸⁵ Throughout his twenty-four years of theatre management he retained a vested interest in securing the highly controlled environment that would come into being with the Licensing Act (even 'two sets of actors, tolerated in the same place, have constantly ended in the corruption of the theatre', he claims).⁸⁶ As a playwright he was often accused of plagiarism, and the new connections opened up by the Laureateship made others despise the pretensions of this mere actor (even those who, like Alexander Pope, had admired Thomas Betterton). On top of all that, Cibber had been the butt of Pope's withering irony in the 1728 *Dunciad Variorum*, classed among those with '[l]ess human genius than God gives an ape'; in the 1743 version of the same poem, he would be installed as the sleeping epitome of dullness.⁸⁷

The text of the *Apology* contains warrant for all those motives for self-justification. Sometimes the defence is indirect. Cibber's reflections on the Licensing Act and the principles of good acting and management suggest he thought of this as both a topical book, useful for future generations, and one that would make readers yearn for times past. In the event, it was times past that formed the best education for the future; he had considered writing 'a select dissertation upon theatrical action', but found that describing Betterton's performances did the job for him.⁸⁸ Whatever the initial motive, impetus for the project as it eventually turned out was, as befits a work of circumfession, supplied by friendship. The dedication tells us Cibber had stayed with a man believed to be Henry Pelham, former Secretary to Lord

83 McGirr, pp.118–20, assesses this often-quoted extract from *The Laureate* and concludes it may have been prompted by one of Cibber's comeback performances in the 1730s rather than when he was in his prime as an actor.

84 The antagonism with Fielding may date from Cibber's rejection of his *Don Quixote in England* (1729) and/or *The Temple Beau* (1730). See also below, p.190 n.49. For a comprehensive account see Fielding, *Plays*, I.101–4. John Dennis accused Cibber of obstructing the hoped-for success of *The Invader of his Country* (1720); *Apology*, p.146 n.76. On Cibber judging new scripts, see Stern, pp.207–11.

85 *Apology*, pp.327–9. 86 *Apology*, p.324.

87 Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad Variorum*, I.236, and *The Dunciad* (1743), IV.20, in Pope, *Poems*, pp.368 and 767.

88 *Apology*, p.88.

Chamberlain Newcastle, and reminisced to him for three days about his career in the theatre. Pelham exercised 'several hours of patience' in listening to Cibber reading the manuscript aloud and commenting on it as 'a lover of the stage (and one of those few good judges who know the use and value of it)'.⁸⁹ The text of the *Apology* bears the mark of this genial origin, with 'sir' used as a term of address several times, but with diminishing frequency as patron morphs gradually into reader, the latter addressed sometimes proprietorially ('my reader'), sometimes in a more cautionary manner ('a good-natured reader' or 'a sensible reader'), and always, as befits this survey of male friendships, as a man. Throughout, Cibber attempts to re-create the feeling of a live exchange: 'now I have shot my bolt, I shall descend to talk more like a man of the age'; 'you may naturally suspect that I am all this while leading my own theatrical character into your favour'; 'if there you are not as fond of seeing, as I am of showing myself in all my lights, you may turn over two leaves together, and leave what follows to those who have more curiosity and less to do with their time than you have'.⁹⁰ He even stages momentary lapses of memory: 'Let me see – ay, it was in that memorable year ...'.⁹¹ Those and a host of other moments of feigned intimacy mimic the presence of a living voice while seeking to pre-empt, manipulate, or provoke the reader's response. His hesitations and digressions anticipate the meanderings of Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759–67); partly the accident of a written style lacking in formal elegance, they are also key to his project of self-defence. We may be reassured that in the course of this exchange between celebrity author and curious reader we are at our 'own liberty of charging the whole impertinence of it either to the weakness of my judgment or the strength of [Cibber's] vanity', but we are constantly made to feel our debt.⁹² The *Apology* ushers us to the Pelham fireside, inviting us to eavesdrop. Opening the door to the green room of the theatre, it simultaneously invites us into a community of refined taste, with its vision of what an appreciation of theatre might look like in times when 'the general taste' is not 'vulgar' or 'insulted by the noise and clamour of ... savage spectators'.⁹³ Cibber's snobbery can be excruciating (no more so than when he reflects without irony on the honour of being the butt of Lord Chesterfield's jokes),⁹⁴ but it is a component of the genre which the *Apology* foreshadows: the *bildungsroman*, in this case a story of unpromising beginnings followed by self-improvement to a life of fame, connections, and ultimately leisure. *Otium cum dignitate* – leisure with honour – was one

89 See *Apology*, pp.3–4. In 1754 Cibber would publish 'Verses to the Memory of Mr Pelham'. For Pelham's country home, Esher Place, see Figure 1.

90 *Apology*, pp.239, 144, and 26. 91 *Apology*, p.199. 92 *Apology*, p.340.

93 *Apology*, pp.302 and 158. 94 *Apology*, p.21.



1 Sketch of Esher Palace, Surrey, by Luke Sullivan; home of Henry Pelham and birthplace of the *Apology*.

of Chesterfield's own catchphrases, imparted many times to his son as the object of life, and apparently imbibed by Cibber.

What is the relationship between the familiar conversational mode of Cibber's readings to Pelham and the idea that the *Apology* is a sustained pose, perhaps contrived to distract us from the living being who was the author? Unlike many recent critics, Hume finds Cibber's command of facts a more fruitful topic than his alleged posturing. Still, he argues that the *Apology* is 'written to seem as though a chatty and digressive old raconteur were just rambling on to a friend, allowing others to overhear', suggesting that the 'humble, bumbling' result is 'radically at variance with the smart, tough-minded, and highly political administrator we see at work' elsewhere in the *Apology*.⁹⁵ Unless the book's dedication lays a false trail, it originated precisely as the intimate recollections of an 'old raconteur'. The introductory chapters (1–3), with their deliberations on method, childhood, and adolescence, may not have featured in Cibber's evenings with Pelham; the latter occasions are described in the dedication as 'lecture[s]', the kind of 'carefully considered history' Hume finds in the finished product.⁹⁶ Nev-

⁹⁵ Hume, 'Aims', 688 and 675.

⁹⁶ *Apology*, p.4; Hume, 'Aims', 688.

ertheless, it is reasonable to conclude that the bulk of the *Apology* took shape in distinct phases, from a chronologically structured draft, to the live delivery from Cibber to Pelham, to a more considered manuscript (at one point Cibber refers to writing during a stay at Bath), to the first edition, each stage strongly marked with traces of its predecessor(s), the outcome self-consciously poised between talking and writing, between the lived moment and the professional self crafted for posterity.⁹⁷

Since Paul de Man's celebrated essay, 'Autobiography as De-facement', it has been commonplace to argue that 'life writing' does not represent its subject but, via conventions of narrative prose, constructs it, so rendering the concept of a true self somewhat elusive, if not fictional.⁹⁸ At least one early reader agreed, protesting that the *Apology* is a calculated performance, a distraction from the acquisitive, self-serving manager, actor, and playwright: 'Colley Cibber is not the character he pretends to be in this book', *The Laureate* protested, 'but a mere charlatan, a persona dramatis, a mountebank, a counterfeit Colley.'⁹⁹ That bruising charge has it both ways: if the narrator of the *Apology* is 'a counterfeit Colley', the real 'Colley Cibber' is also 'a mere charlatan' – perhaps a more productive insight than to argue that the book is simply a sustained reprise of Cibber's signature role. He had, certainly, acted Lord Foppington so often that the line between self and role must sometimes have been hard to discern (the two men are undoubtedly linguistic cousins), and it is true that the *Apology* bears witness to a literary culture of impersonation.¹⁰⁰ But it stretches credibility that Foppington could have been thought an ideal vehicle for narrating

97 On the draft, *Apology*, pp.3–4; on talking and writing, p.29; on Bath, p.204.

98 Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement', *Comparative Literature* vol. 94, no. 5 (December 1979), 919–30.

99 *Laureate*, p.15.

100 For Foppington, *Love's Last Shift*, V.iii.469–78, in *The Plays of Colley Cibber*, I.110:

Why this, sir – You must know, she being still possessed with a brace of implacable devils called revenge and jealousy, dogged me this morning to the chocolate-house, where I was obliged to leave a letter for a young foolish girl, that – (you'll excuse me, sir) which I had no sooner delivered to the maid of the house, but whip! she snatches it out of her hand, flew at her like a dragon, tore off her headcloths, flung down three or four sets of lemonade glasses, dashed my Lord Whiffle's chocolate in his face, cut him over the nose, and had like to have strangled me in my own steinkirk.

For suggestions that Cibber wrote spoof letters about himself, *Apology*, p.40 ns.46 & 47. *The Egotist* suggests that Cibber had been 'so used to play the fool in comedy' that he became 'quite as easy in the same character in real life', and that the success of the 'coxcomb' Lord Foppington was explained by Cibber himself having 'a good deal of the same stuff' (*Egotist*, pp.35 and 38).

the pressures of theatre management; or, for that matter, that such a performance could have been sustained for the 488 pages of the early editions.

When Cibber refers to the 'part I have acted in real life' and states that it 'shall be all of a piece', he means not a particular role, but the social persona he had cultivated for decades. He will not attempt 'to be wiser than I can be, or by being more affectedly pensive than I need be', or even to assume a 'new character' when the one he has inhabited for so long has served him well.¹⁰¹ Moreover, 'if vanity be one of my natural features, the portrait would not be like me without it'; this is, he writes, a portrait like most others, painted to cast the sitter in a favourable light, a work of knowing impudence.¹⁰² To the extent that he has engaged in 'honest examination of [his] heart', the result is merely an affirmation of his right to be selective, a picture created not in full daylight but 'chiaroscuro', a conscious mingling of light and dark.¹⁰³ The result, he hopes, is consistency, but that of the lifetime performer: a consistent reflection of the part he has always acted in real life, whether on stage or off it.¹⁰⁴ Three years after the *Apology* he maintained the image of a man confessedly self-obsessed, acknowledging Henry Cheere's painted bust with an octavo volume called *The Egotist, or Colley upon Cibber. Being his own face retouched to so plain a likeness that no one now would have the face to own it but himself*.¹⁰⁵ The book takes the form of a dialogue between a sceptical reader of the *Apology* called Frankly, and an 'Author' (Cibber), who is caught surveying the 'parcel of rubbish' that is his literary output.¹⁰⁶

Cibber's posturing and selective reporting, in other words, do not necessarily make the *Apology* a less authentic representation of Pelham's fire-side companion (who presumably gave something of a performance at the time), or of the cajoling, simpering, passive-aggressive manner that probably served him well as a manager in tiptoeing round the interests and egos of his fellow managers. There is therefore merit in Patricia Meyer Spacks's conclusion that Cibber 'recognized an identity between story and self', even if that relationship is fraught with contradictions (as such relationships generally are).¹⁰⁷ The book's origins in oral narrative invite slippage and inconsistency but also serve to bring story and self closer together. To argue that the *Apology* is nothing more than a pose is to risk assuming what

¹⁰¹ *Apology*, p.23. ¹⁰² *Apology*, p.13. ¹⁰³ *Ibid.* ¹⁰⁴ *Apology*, p.153.

¹⁰⁵ While the title may suggest another author, this does appear to be Cibber's work; see DeWitt C. Croissant, 'A Note on the *Egotist, or Colley upon Cibber*', *Philological Quarterly* vol. 3 (1924), 76–7.

¹⁰⁶ *Egotist*, p.5.

¹⁰⁷ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p.195.

Cibber and the author of *The Laureate* knew to be false: that somewhere in London there was a pure Colley uncontaminated by his long history of acting and of dodging the bullets that came the way of theatre managers. A habit of studious omission does not make a persona; it may equally characterize a person, not least someone seeking vindication from memory alone. In de Man's terms, the persona may be a construct, but not alone for the purposes of the *Apology*.

Cibber had reason to present his self-portrait in chiaroscuro. The consequences of an actor biography over-indulging on private business were all too familiar. He refers disapprovingly to the biographies of his former colleagues Anne Oldfield, Barton Booth, and Robert Wilks that had been published 'in less time after their deaths than one could suppose it cost to transcribe them'.¹⁰⁸ Benjamin Victor's 1733 biography of Booth contains a stomach-turning account of the actor's post-mortem, while the publishing war that broke out after Wilks's death was alarming.¹⁰⁹ Cibber's co-manager for more than two decades, the recently deceased Wilks, was accused of bigamy in a colourful memoir by a man claiming to be an old schoolmate. A counterblast from the house of Edmund Curll, purporting to represent the views of Wilks's brother-in-law, did nothing to dampen the controversy, adding a suggestion of military desertion to the list of charges.¹¹⁰ Promoting the status of acting was, as far as Cibber was concerned, continuous with promoting the good name of actors. To be author of his own life – to listen to the prompting of 'something inwardly inciting' – was far preferable to leaving the job to a coffin-chasing hack.¹¹¹

He cannot but have sensed a commercial opportunity honed by years of scheduling plays that tapped more or less successfully into the mood of their times. When actor biographies were emerging into the market, he was uniquely placed to give the public an inside view of the country's most successful theatre. Keen to see his work enjoy an after-life on terms strictly designed to enhance his reputation, the collection of his plays published by subscription in 1721 omitted those that had flopped in the theatre or seemed of lesser merit. *Love's Last Shift*, *The Careless Husband*, and eight others made the cut; those he valued less did not.¹¹² If the *Apology* is reticent

108 *Apology*, p.12.

109 For commentary on Victor's biography, see Fawcett, p.12.

110 *Apology*, p.13 n.4. 111 *Apology*, p.12.

112 Besides the two titles mentioned, the two-volume quarto *Plays Written by Mr. Cibber* (1721) includes *The Tragical History of Richard III*, *Love Makes a Man*, *She Would and She Would Not*, *The Lady's Last Stake*, *The Rival Fools*, *Ximena*, *The Non-Juror*, and *The Refusal*. It excludes *Woman's Wit* (1697), *Xerxes* (1699), *The Rival Queens* (1703), *Perolla and Izadora* (1705), *Venus and Adonis* (1715), and *Myrtillo* (1715).

when it comes to Cibber's plays, it is because he knew some of them had little value artistically or commercially. The *Apology* itself was another matter. At a time when, in spite of the 1710 Copyright Act (8 Anne c.21), many authors were still handing over rights in their work to booksellers, Cibber elected to claim his life story for himself. The decision would pay off, if not quite as handsomely as his detractors would claim.

Publishing the Apology

He did not have to look far for a publisher who shared his appreciation of the *Apology*'s commercial potential, not to mention the need to present it as though it were a proper object of interest for people of taste. Early in his career, he had worked with a variety of booksellers, some of them undistinguished operators who probably paid him no more than £10 for the copyright to a play.¹¹³ For the *Apology*, however, there was one who for prestige, quality, and trust was the obvious choice.

Born in 1682 and baptized at St Martin-in-the-Fields, John Watts was apprenticed to the bookseller Robert Everingham on 3 October 1698. He became a Freeman of the Stationers' Company on 9 June 1707 and ran a business at Little Queen Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields. Watts began printing under his own name from 1715, sometimes in partnership with Jonas Brown and John Pemberton, but some of his most distinguished work was produced in partnership with Jacob Tonson the Younger, such as the duodecimo editions of Greek classics prepared by Michel Maittaire between 1713 and 1719 (Maittaire, incidentally, was known to Cibber's acquaintance Lord Chesterfield as tutor to his illegitimate son, Philip). Watts published a number of prestigious editions, including *The Architecture of A. Palladio*, 4 vols. (1715–20) and *The Works of Molière, in French and English*, 10 vols. (1739 and 1748). He was also active in publishing plays, including the first seven editions of the runaway success Cibber did not take, *The Beggar's Opera* (1728–54).

Before the *Apology*, Watts had published a number of works by Cibber, often reissues of older plays: *Love in a Riddle* (1719, 1729, and 1736); *Caesar in Egypt* (1725 and 1736); *The Careless Husband* (1725); *The Provoked Husband* (1728 and 1735), Cibber's completion of an unfinished Vanbrugh play; *Damon and Phillida* (1729 and 1737); *An Ode for His Majesty's Birthday* (1731), which was Cibber's inaugural and much-maligned outing as Poet Laureate;

113 An exception was his first play, *Love's Last Shift*, which because of its success in the theatre attracted the interest of the better-known partnership of Richard Parker and Samuel Briscoe. For some of his more 'offbrand outlets', see Milhous and Hume, *Publication*, pp.72–3.

She Would and She Would Not (1734); *Love Makes a Man* (1735); *The Refusal* (1735 and 1736); *Ximena* (1735); and *The Tragical History of King Richard III* (1736). Watts's final Cibber project was a 1753 edition of *The Refusal*. If the deal Cibber struck for *The Provoked Husband* is any guide, Watts offered relatively generous terms; it is equally true that the same deal suggests Cibber could be shameless in his appropriation of others' work. Three-quarters of the play had been completed by Vanbrugh under the title *A Journey to London*, before his death in 1726. Cibber completed the piece and on 15 September 1727 received from Watts no less than £105 for the rights.¹¹⁴ He appears to have regarded that sum as par. In 1724 the Drury Lane prompter, William Rufus Chetwood, had paid Cibber £105 for the rights to *Caesar in Egypt*, a moderate success at Drury Lane that December. Probably as a kindness to Chetwood, Cibber agreed to the immediate onward sale of copyright to Watts for £110.¹¹⁵

Watts's most celebrated compositor, between 1724 and 1726, was Benjamin Franklin (1706–90), whose autobiography includes a remarkable account of life in the Watts workshop, where it was usual for employees to drink liberally.¹¹⁶ It is a matter for speculation whether those habits explain the existence of a curious, perhaps discarded, copy of the second edition of the *Apology* that recently came into the present editor's hands.¹¹⁷ Instead of sitting between the dedication and Chapter 1, the Contents page may be found nestling by some accident in the middle of Chapter 2. Someone – presumably Cibber himself – could not resist using the purely functional genre of the Contents page as a vehicle for the *Apology*'s characteristic irony: '*The author's distress in being thought a worse actor than a poet*', he records for Chapter 6.

The first edition was published on 7 April 1740, handsomely presented in leather-bound quarto format with a full-page frontispiece engraving of the author, re-presented as the frontispiece to this edition. Unlike the title page, the engraving advertises Cibber's position as Poet Laureate. This quarto first edition is fully the equal in material quality of Watts's editions of Maittaire and Molière, so offering a further source of potential irritation to Cibber's critics. The steep price of 1 guinea (a probability, it must be said, since there is no authoritative record) reflected the exclusive market value Watts placed on the inside story of Drury Lane Theatre. That it was 'Printed by John Watts for the Author' suggests Cibber may have contributed to production costs: an act of vanity publishing in dual respects. The following month, on 14 May,

114 BL Add.MS 38,728, fol.43, in *Document Register* no.3377 (current value c.£23,000).

115 *Document Register* no.3250.

116 *The Private Life of the Late Benjamin Franklin* (London: J. Parsons, 1793), pp.31–2.

117 Thanks to the kindness of Professor David Hopkins, University of Bristol.

a second and much cheaper octavo edition appeared, but not because the first edition had sold well; the respective markets were quite different. Cibber made a number of amendments to the text – some in response to readers who had mocked his occasional errors – and Watts sold it at 5 shillings a copy (still, Hume estimates, equivalent to somewhere between £50 and £75 in current values).¹¹⁸ Doubtless for economy's sake, the grand frontispiece was dropped. Cibber defended his rights in the work, going to court to block a pirate edition; ten years later, the book retained sufficient market value for him to dispose of the copyright to Robert and John Dodsley for a further 50 guineas.¹¹⁹ The Dodsleys reissued the book in 1750, 1756, and 1761.

However exquisite the material appearance of the first edition, in other ways it was a jumble. Faced with Cibber's stylistic exuberance and occasionally erratic grasp of sentence structure, the compositor (perhaps partaking liberally of the regime noted by Benjamin Franklin) scattered commas and other punctuation marks with an abandoned disregard for – or possibly bafflement at – the text's meaning, a problem exacerbated in the octavo edition. The consequences for future editions, including this one, are explored in the last section of this Introduction.

On Acting

Defending his own career, Cibber goes to great pains to defend his profession. In the *Apology*, good actors demonstrate 'industry', like careful members of any other profession; they are, besides, required to be 'sober' in every sense of the word. Mindful of those who accused him of social climbing, Cibber argues that for an actor who 'excels on the stage, and is irreproachable in his personal morals and behaviour, his profession is so far from being an impediment that it will be oftener a just reason for his being received among people of condition with favour'.¹²⁰ Chapter 7 of the *Apology* concludes with the more drastic assessment that 'the briskest loose liver or intemperate man ... can never arrive at the necessary excellencies of a good or useful actor'.¹²¹ As Cibber antagonized some theatrical associates with his defence of the Licensing Act, so he risked being thought to align himself with another canonical enemy of free speech, the Reverend Jeremy Collier, whose 1698

118 Hume, 'Aims', 664.

119 Document of assignment dated 24 March 1750 and quoted by Lowe as being in the possession of his acquaintance, Julian Marshall. For the piracy action, Cibber v Walker in the National Archive, C11/1559/15 (<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C10512890>; accessed 30 July 2021). 50 guineas is equivalent to £13,000 in current values.

120 *Apology*, p.62. 121 *Apology*, p.175.

Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage had led to actors and playwrights facing prosecution for blasphemy.¹²² The outrage that characterized Collier's response to the rakish comedy of the Restoration period is echoed in the *Apology*: 'It has often given me amazement', Cibber writes, 'that our best authors of that time could think the wit and spirit of their scenes could be an excuse for making the looseness of them public'; such plays, he maintains, 'are sometimes too gross to be recited'.¹²³

When it came to the business of writing about acting, Cibber had scant models to work from. What is now called theatre criticism – that is to say, concerning performance rather than dramaturgy – did not emerge in periodical form until the late eighteenth century. Lewis Theobald's *The Censor*, published between 1715 and 1717, claimed to 'entertain the town with the beauties or defects in writing, as well as the graces or imperfections in action', but went through dozens of editions without so much as mentioning the theatre.¹²⁴ The *Universal Spectator* and the *Grub-Street Journal* promised similar fare but frequently descended to character assassination (sometimes of Cibber's).¹²⁵ Not until Aaron Hill's *The Prompter*, which ran from 1734 to 1736, did performance criticism start to emerge in a recognizable form. Hill found plenty of other topics to write about, including bad management, bad playwrights, bad proposals for regulating the stage, bad behaviour by audiences, and bad preparation by actors, whom he accused of 'relax[ing] themselves, as soon as any speech in their own part is over, into an absent unattentiveness'.¹²⁶ Many of his barbs were directed against Cibber, whose managerial legacy he lamented and in whose *Richard III* he saw merely 'a succession of comic shruggings' that resembled 'the distorted heavings of an unjointed caterpillar'.¹²⁷ Contemplating Hill's own brief and utterly disastrous record of theatre management, Cibber could afford to consign him to the *Apology*'s ranks of the scarcely mentioned.¹²⁸ Hill's reflections on Robert Wilks's *Hamlet* may have encouraged Cibber not just to proclaim the superiority of Thomas Betterton's, but to adopt a language of critical mediation that mirrored the balancing forces of the actor's performance. 'When he grieves, he is never sullen: when he trifles, he is never light', wrote Hill of Wilks's *Danish Prince*; '[w]hen alone, he is seriously solid; when in company, designedly flexible'.¹²⁹ To such summary appreciation

122 *Apology*, pp.182–3. 123 *Apology*, p.178.

124 Cited in C. Harold Gray, *Theatrical Criticism in London to 1795* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), p.53.

125 Gray, *Theatrical Criticism*, pp.76–7.

126 Aaron Hill, *The Prompter* (London, 1734–6), no.62, 13 June 1735.

127 Hill, *The Prompter*, no.3, 19 November 1734. 128 *Apology*, p.280.

129 Hill, *The Prompter*, no.100.