# COLLEY CIBBER
# The man, the Playwright and the Actor

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With the exception of a brief mention by Boswell in his biography of Dr. Johnson concerning the latter's famed letter to lord Chesterfield, our students of English literature hardly ever hear the name of a man who was granted the laureateship of England while Pope was the reigning monarch of poetry and commanded the English stage while immortal actors like Christopher Rich, Thomas Betterton, Mrs. Bracegirdle and Mrs. Barry were still the idols of the general public.

Colley Cibber's obscurity today seems to go beyond the campuses of our universities. He is so little known in England and American that Bonamy Dobrée, in his very learned study of the eighteenth century drama has to give a footnote by way of introduction when he mentions his name.[1] It is unfortunate that even the plays that he wrote for his company and the

number of the occasional poems that his incumbency prompted, would not have stopped his quick fall into oblivion had it not been for his copious and delightful *Apology* in which he gives an appealing portrait of himself as well as a detailed history of the theatre of the time.

The object of this paper is to introduce to our students of English literature, a man who in the early decades of the eighteenth century was either the scorn of the literary circles for mediocrity and egotism or the acclaim of the stage for his theatrical versatility and flamboyance. These contradictory attitudes made Cibber a fascinating eighteenth century figure who deserves far more attention than he is ordinarily bestowed upon.

Little is known of the early boyhood of Colley Cibber. His own autobiography is silent on the subject, for in it, he jumps from his birth in 1671 to his entering school in 1682. He leaves no more than an account of his ancestry to fill up the gap left by the unrecorded years.

The school which young Colley attended, and the institution which was to have the greatest influence on his young and lively character, was the free school at Grantham. Here he stayed long enough to pass through all the grades in regular order and to turn out a number of odes, essays and orations. He was not very popular with the boys of the school, for he was by far the best literary scholar of the lot, and took no pains to hide that fact from his mates.

Cibber's school-life continued at the free school until 1687 when he was sent to a theological school, to stand for entrance examinations. He had not much to recommend him except his scanty scholarship and a distant relationship to the founder of the college. As was to be expected, his application was refused. Far from being discouraged, young Cibber, who had little taste for a theological career, immediately rushed to London to indulge himself in his favorite form of recreation, watching a play.

The young poet desired to become an actor, but he did not dare to speak of his ambition at home, for fear of disappointing his parents who were bent on making Colley a preacher and had no thought of another career for their son.

Inwardly rejoicing at having been denied admission to theological school, Cibber reluctantly asked the authorities for a second trial, but hurried back to London in time to witness an evening performance at one of the playhouses, spending the money his father had given him for food for the day.

Colley spent as much of his time as possible at the playhouses of London. He attempted to secure employment as an apprentice actor. His constant companion at this time was John Verbruggen, an improvident boy who later became a great comedian. The two were ideally suited to each other, and since both were on the same quest, they fell into the habit of making rounds of the playhouses together.[2]

As time passed, Cibber grew more and more interested in acting until Christopher Rich, the manager of Drury Lane Theatre, decided to cut his expenses by hiring apprentice actors at no salary for a probationary period of six months. Cibber was among the ones who were employed. He was enraptured. The prospect of playing a lover with Mrs. Bracegirdle —the most charming actress of the time— regardless of its little likelihood, and "the joy and privilege of every day seeing plays for nothing ... was sufficient consideration for the best of [his] services".[3] He accepted the offer after he made certain that during the period of his apprenticeship his father would continue to provide him with board and lodging as well as clothes and pocket money. For nine months Cibber continued as an apprentice during which time the manager did not even seem to know that he was there. Rich was a mean manager and Cibber's opinion of him is far from complimentary: "... He gave his actors more liberty and fewer day's pay than any of his predecessors. He would laugh with them over a bottle and bite them in their bargains. He kept them poor that they might not be able to rebel and sometimes merry that they might not think of it. All their articles of agreement had a clause in them that he was sure to creep out of at."[4] Cibber did not mind, though. His ardent ambition was to be an actor and identified with the stage celebrities such as Mountford, Kynaston, Barry and Bracegirdle. The prospect, however, was none too bright becuase not only was he a novice in the profession of acting, but he also had a rather unattractive appearance. He had an insufficient voice

"to which might be added an unformed meagre person, (tho then not ill made) with a dismal pale complexion".[5] He was of the middle size with fair complexion, thick legs and so lean in his younger days ..... His figure was very unimpressive and he was somewhat clumsy.[6]

But he was learning what he wanted to learn and trying hard to be what he wanted to be and nothing else mattered. He was certain that his chance would come at last and he intented to be there when the moment arrived. That chance finally appeared and in 1691 Cibber was given the small part of the servant to Sir Gentle in the comedy *Sir Anthony Love* by Thomas Southern. Sir Gentle was being played by the celebrated Thomas Betterton. Cibber's role was very small consisting of a single appearance in which he was supposed to take a message to his master and repeat a single line. He became so nervous, though, that he forgot his line, and played his part so badly that the whole scene was practically ruined. Betterton was furious and asked the prompter who the fool was. On being told that he was "Master Colley", the veteran demanded that the novice be forfeited. The prompter informed the angered actor that Master Colley received no salary. The fire in Betterton's eye turned to a kindly twinkle and he roared, "Then put him down for ten shillings and forfeit him five."[7] And this was how Cibber got on the Payroll.

Cibber's next role came only two months later in Thomas Otway's *The Orphan.* The role was that of the chplain, a much larger part than the first one. Goodman, a retired actor who was present at the rehearsal, asked who the young chaplain was. The tyro was introduced to him. He clapped him on the back and cried, "If he doesn't make a good actor I'll be d- - -d." It was a moment of success. "The surprise of being commended by one who had been himself so eminent on the stage, and so positive a manner, was more than I could support; in a word it almost took my breath away, and (laugh, if you please) fairly drew tears from my eyes."[8]

Another fortunate opportunity which Cibber didn't fail to seize brought him what he had long been waiting for. Congreve's *The Double Dealer* was to be performed before the Queen, and Kynaston who was to appear in Lord Touchwood fell ill. Cibber was close at hand and the author remembering his

performance in *The Orphan* called him to play the part. "The flattery of being thus distinguished by so celebrated an author and the honor to act before a queen, you may be sure, made me blind to whatever difficulties might attend it."[9] Cibber played with so much confidence that he surpassed Kynaston in his portrayal of Touchwood. The grateful Congreve asked the management to increase his salary by five shillings per week.

This, however, was his last chance of having important parts before 1695 when a feud of long standing between Betterton and Rich came to the surface and caused the former to break away from the Drury Lane Theatre and open his own at Lincoln Inn's Field.[10] Cibber, unlike verbruggen, Mrs. Bracegirdle and Mrs. Barry, remained with Rich at Drury Lane and for his loyalty, had his salary raised to thirty shillings a week.

Competition between the two theatres grew hot and each tried to beat the other in the number of plays and the excellence of acting. On a certain occasion when Congreve's *The Old Bachelor* was being produced by the Drury Lane Theatre, Cibber, in spite of the opposition of many who thought he would "blow himself up,"[11] succeeded in securing for himself the part of Alderman Fondlewife, a role originally created for the famous Thomas Doggett, who had now gone over to the new establishment at Lincoln Inn's Field. Cibber did not have more than a few hours to learn his part, but as he had often watched Doggett's performance of it he had no trouble in memorizing the lines. This was Cibber's first real success in a major role. "At my first appearance," he relates,

> **one might have imagined by the various murmurs of the audience, that they were in doubt whether Doggett himself were not returned, or that they could not conceive what strange face it could be that so nearly resembled him; for I had laid the tint of forty years more than my real age upon my features, and, to the most minute placing of an hair, was dressed exactly like him: when I spoke, the surprise was still greater, as if I had not exactly borrowed his clothes, but his voice too. But tho that was the least difficult part for him to be imitated, they seemed to allow I had so much of him in every other requisite, that my applause was, perhaps, more than proportionable: for, whether I had done so much where so little was expected, or that the generosity of my hearers were more than usually zealous upon so unexpected an occasion, or from that other motive such favour might be poured upon me, I cannot say; but in plain**

**and honest truth, upon my going off from the first scene a much better actor might have been proud of the applause that followed me, after one loud plaudit was ended and sunk into a general whisper that seemed still to continue their private approbation, it revived to a second, and again to a third, still louder than the former. If to all this I add, that Doggett himself was in the pit at the same time, it would be too rank affectation if I should not confess that to see him there a witness of my reception, was to me as consummate a triumph as the heart of vanity could be indulged with.**[12]

Despite Cibber's success in Fondlewife he reduced to obscurity after the run of the play, but the "bouyant Colley", however, did not give up. He was sure to bob up more successfully every time he was shoved, "like a cork" under water.[13] He decided, therefore, to write his own comedy with, of course, a good part for himself. The play was *Love's last Shift* or *The Fool in Fashion*. This is a true sentimental comedy and the first of its kind to gain lasting favour with the audience. Thomas Southern, the playwright, was pleased with it but he warned Cibber against playing the part of the leading character—Sir Novelty Fashion. "Young man," he said, "I pronounce thy play a good one; I will assure for its success, if thou dost not spoil it by thy action."[14] Cibber, of course, was not to be put off. He played the part and he made such a good impression on the people that they seemed at a loss which one to praise, Cibber the playwright or Cibber the actor. The play had a long run and this, perhaps, encouraged Sir John Vanbrugh to write a sequel to it —*The Relapse*. Cibber was honored not only because the play was in fact a second part to his, but also because Vanbrugh cast him for Lord Foppington, the leading character, which he played admirably. Lord Foppington became a fashioable personality overnight and Cibber became the talk of the town. Dandies copied his dress and wig and fops copied the way of his talking and walking.

Frome then on Cibber had many major parts which he played successfully. He had gained so much self-confidence that he sometimes came on the stage without having fully memorized his part. But he was never at a loss and on such occasions "he skilfully would supply the gap by prolonging his words and actions, cross the stage and seriously ask the prompter "what next?"[15]

Like most comedians, Cibber wished to play tragic roles and since no

producer would cast him for one, he wrote *Xerxes* , his first tragedy, in 1699. The result was catastrophic. It ran only one night and even the masterful acting of Mrs. Barry could not make the audience like it.

After this sad experience with *Xerxes*, Cibber returned to the writingg of Comedies and his next great success came with the production of his own play, *The Careless Husband* with a bewitching actress called Anne Oldfield in the leading feminine role. It was an immediate success and had a long run, Cibber then occupied himself with writing others, many of which written with the purpose of using Mrs. Oldfield in the cast. Among the plays that Cibber wrote with an eye to using Mrs. Oldfield in the feminine roles were: *The Provoked Husbsnd, The Lady's Last Stake, The Rival Fools* and *The Non-Juror.*

By the end of 1712, the managership of Drury Lane Theatre fell to Cibber and by this time at least the following ten of his plays had been produced at the three existing theatres of London—Drury Lane, Haymarket, and Lincoln Inn's Field:

1. *Love's Last Shift*
2. *The Careless Husband*
3. *XerXes*
4. *The Double Gallant*
5. *Richard III*
6. *The Lady's Last Stake*
7. *Love Makes a Man*
8. *The Rival Fools*
9. *She Would and She Would Not*
10. *The Rival Queens*

After Cibber became the manager of Drury Lane, his writing was often neglected in the pressure of his managerial duties. The following are the few which he wrote after 1712.

1. *The Non-Juror*
2. *The Refusal*
3. *Caesar in Egypt*
4. *The Provoked Husband*
5. *Papal Tyranny*

It is said that during his acting career, Cibber played a total of 126 characters. In connection with the suspension of Cibber in 1712, as the manager of Drury Lane Theatre, Sir Richard Steele, in an article published in

*The Theatre* Jan. 23, 1712 gave the following list of parts played by Cibber:

Sir Fopling Flutter in Sir George Etheredge's *The Man of Mode.*

Sir Courtly Nice in John Crown's play of the same name.

Sir Novelty Fashion in *Love's Last shift,* by himself.

Lord Foppington in *The Relapse* , by John Vanbrugh.

Sparkish in *The Country Wife* , by William Wyeherley.

Witwould in *The Way of the World,* by William Congreve.

Attal in *The Double Gallant,* by himself.

Brazen in *The Recruiting Officer,* by George Farquhart.

Cibbet in *The Stratagem,* by George Farquhart.

Richard III in the paly so called, by himself.

Iago in *Othello,* by Shakespeare.

Syphax in *Cato* by Joseph Addison.

Burleigh in *The Earl of Essex.*

Cardinal wolsey in *Henry VIII* by Shakespeare.

"I have at first view been astonished", added Steele, "to observe a strong inclination and propensity of the town to receive with pleasure anything that tends to the personal mortification of Mr. Cibber, who with much address and capacity has pleased them in all these characters".[16] Steele went on to attribute this tendency to the fact that Cibber always impersonated vice. This was not true though. Cibber in spite of his success as an actor, was as a person, very unpopular ever since he was a boy. He was a bright student at school and often in the good graces of his teachers, yet he had qualities which made him extremely unpopular with his fellow students. Typical of the kind of trouble that he always had with the people is a school incident which he relates in his *Apology.* At play one day, the bully of the school insulted Cibber who promptly boxed the larger boy's ear. In a short time, the larger boy had Colley down, and was pummeling him soundly. One of the boys who was watching the battle, and who, Cibber thought, was a friend of his, shouted to the bully, "beat him, beat him soundly." On asking his friend afterward why he had sided with the bully, his friend replied, "Because you are always jeering, and making a jest of me." Cibber continues the story by writing, "Many a

mischief have I brought upon myself by the same folly in riper life,"[17]. In spite of himself, this irritating quality never left him. He was not the kind of person who could endear himself to the people with whom he was brought into contact. In his early years he tried to associate with the people who might help him in his career. He had, however, very few intimate friends and he never tried to make himself agreeable to his colleagues and fellow actors. In fact he was "so cordially disliked by the hired actors of his company that he seldom ventured into the green room..."[18] A story is told of a certain actor whose salary Cibber reduced from £4 to £2 a week. He had a family and, at a loss how he could support them, he challenged Cibber to a duel. The timid manager flinched and assured the actor that there had been a mistake. The salary was raised to £4 on the following saturday.[19] Cibber was often rude to the playwrights and his treatment of them was far from fair. He actually liked discouraging the young ones which he phrased "choking singing bidrs".[20] "As a member of society at large," says Davies of Cibber, "little can be said in his praise,"[21] and among his many qualities justifying the comment of Davies was his contemptuous treatment of other people. While a few nice words could have pleased his colleagues, he never avoided being insufferably insolent to them.

Cibber's greatest personal triumph after 1712 came in 1730. In that year, through the intervention of his influential patrons, he was made Poet Laureate of England. Although this may have been due to the king's approbation for having written *The Non-Juror*, it was certainly not out of regard for his ability as a poet. The appointment was a climactic point in his unpopularity and it was greeted with indignation on the part of several poets who felt that they had been in line for the appointment. The news sheets of the time were filled with satirical verses and ironic essays which derided the choice of Cibber as Poet Laureate. One anonymous quatrain ran:

In merry old England, it once was a rule
The king had his poet, and also his fool
And now we're so frugal, I'd have you to know it.
That Cibber can serve both for fool and poet.

Cibber accepted the abuse with a cynical smile, knowing the publicity was good for his theatre, and half believing that he deserved the place of honor.

At the end of the theatrical season of 1733, Cibber was a tired old man of sixty-two and independently wealthy. He spent his last years as a retired gentleman, writing only the occasional Odes that his laureateship required and regretting, perhaps, that "the animated graces of the player can live no longer than the instant breath and motion that presents them, or at least can but faintly glimmer through the memory of imperfect attestation of a few surviving spectators."[22] He died in 1757.

**NOTES**

1. Bonamy Dobrée, *English Literature in the Early 18th century* (Oxford University press: 1968), 227.
2. Dorothy Senior, *The life and times of Colley Cibber* (New York: n.d.), 90.
3. Colley Cibber, *An Apology for his life* (London: John C. Nimmo, 1889), I, 181-2.
4. Quoted in Richard H. Barker, *Mr. Cibber of Drury Lane* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 60.
5. *Apology,* I, 182.
6. Aaron Hill's desctiption of Cibber in Prompter, Nov. 19, 1734 and quoted in Barker, P.33, is less complimentary than Cibber's own: "... His shape was finely proportioned yet not graceful, easy but not striking ... His features were but narrowly earnest and attentively insignigicant. There was a peeping pertness in his eye, which would have been spirit had his heart been warmed with humanity or his brain been stored with ideas. In his face was a contracted kind of passive yet protruded sharpness, like a pig half roasted; and a voice not unlike his own might have been borrowed from the same suffering animal while in a condition a little less desperate..."
7. Thomas Davies, *Dramatic Miscellanies* (London: 1785), III, 445.
8. *Apology,* I, 183.
9. *Ibid.,* 185.
10. Edward Robins, *Echoes of the playhouse* (New York: putnam, 1895), 112.

11. *Ibid.,* 114.

12. *Apology,* I, 208-9.

13. *Robins,* 118.

14. *Apology,* I, 213.

15. *Davies,* III, 481.

16. D. M. E. Habbema, *Appreciation of Colley Cibber :* Actor and Dramatist (Amsterdam: H. T. Paris, 1928), 6.

17. *Apology,* I, 152.

18. *Barker,* 112.

19. Loc. Cit.

20. *Ibid.,* 113.

21. *Dramatic Miscellanies,* III, 481.

22. Cibber on Betterton, *Apology,* I, 99-100.