

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.

*Hoc est*

*Vivere bis, vitâ posse priore frui.*

Mart. lib. 2.<sup>1</sup>

*When years no more of active life retain,  
 'Tis youth renew'd, to laugh 'em o'er again.*

Anonym.

LONDON:

Printed by JOHN WATTS<sup>2</sup> for the AUTHOR.  
 MDCCXL.

- 1 From Marcus Valerius Martialis ('Martial', AD 40–104), *Epigrams*, Book 10 no.23 (c. AD 87): 'this is to live twice, to be able to enjoy your earlier life'; Cibber repeats the quotation below, p.287. *The Laureate* questioned his knowledge of Latin: Cibber 'had humour and a kind of wit, but not conducted by any judgment or reflection, nor seasoned with any tincture of letters. He affected to know much; and as it must often happen to those who would be thought knowing when they are ignorant, he frequently got out of his depth and exposed himself to ridicule and contempt' (p.106).
- 2 For Watts and his other projects for Cibber, see Introduction, pp.xlii–xliiii.

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Excerpt

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TO A  
 CERTAIN GENTLEMAN.<sup>1</sup>

SIR,

Because I know it would give you less concern to find your name in an impertinent satire than before the daintiest dedication of a modern author, I conceal it.

Let me talk never so idly to you this way, you are at least under no necessity of taking it to yourself.<sup>2</sup> Nor, when I boast of your favours, need you blush to have bestowed them, or I may now give you all the attributes that raise a wise and good-natured man to esteem and happiness, and not be censured as a flatterer by my own or your enemies (I place my own first because as they are the greater number; I am afraid of not paying the greater respect to them).<sup>3</sup> Yours, if such there are, I imagine are too well-bred to declare themselves, but as there is no hazard or visible terror in an attack upon my defenceless station, my censurers have generally been persons of an intrepid sincerity.<sup>4</sup> Having therefore shut the door against them while I am thus privately addressing you, I have little to apprehend from either of them.

Under this shelter, then, I may safely tell you that the greatest encouragement I have had to publish this work has risen from the several hours of patience you have lent me at the reading it. It is true, I took the advantage of your leisure in the country, where moderate matters serve for amusement;<sup>5</sup> and there, indeed, how far your good nature for an old acquaintance

- 1 Since Thomas Davies's *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick*, 2 vols. (1780), II.359, the consensus has been that Cibber's dedicatee was Henry Pelham (1695–1754), MP for Sussex, loyal supporter of Sir Robert Walpole's Whig government, and younger brother of the Duke of Newcastle, Thomas Pelham-Holles (1693–1768). In 1740 Pelham held the office of Paymaster of the Forces and in 1743 became Chancellor of the Exchequer. During the 1719–21 dispute about the Drury Lane patent, a serious threat to Cibber's position, the Duke of Newcastle had been the Lord Chamberlain and Pelham his Secretary; Pelham received a number of representations from Steele about his (then) lost patent (*Document Register* nos.3016, 3017, and 3058). Here, withholding Pelham's name further helped gloss over an unpleasant episode not mentioned in the *Apology*.
- 2 i.e. Pelham is not obliged to accept any of Cibber's compliments since he has not been named.
- 3 Cibber's claim to have more enemies is, notwithstanding Pelham's position, plausible: according to the entry in *DNB*, Pelham was 'a timid and peace-loving politician' with a conciliatory manner and tolerant opinions (XV.691).
- 4 i.e. because no one has anything to lose from attacking a retired theatre manager as opposed to a politician, they can afford to be as direct as they like.
- 5 In 1729 Pelham had bought Esher Place in Surrey and employed William Kent (1695–1748) to improve the estate (Figure 1). Alexander Pope (1688–1744) saluted Kent's work and the power of Pelham's patronage; he wrote of 'Esher's peaceful grove / Where Kent and Nature vie for Pelham's love', in 'Epilogue to the Satires' (Pope, *Poems*, p.697, lines 66–7).

(or your reluctance to put the vanity of an author out of countenance) may have carried you, I cannot be sure – and yet appearances give me stronger hopes. For was not the complaisance of a whole evening's attention as much as an author of more importance ought to have expected? Why then was I desired the next day to give you a second lecture? Or why was I kept a third day with you, to tell you more of the same story? If these circumstances have made me vain, shall I say, sir, you are accountable for them? No, sir: I will rather so far flatter myself as to suppose it possible that your having been a lover of the stage (and one of those few good judges who know the use and value of it under a right regulation) might incline you to think so copious an account of it a less tedious amusement than it may naturally be to others of different good sense, who may have less concern or taste for it. But be all this as it may; the brat is now born, and rather than see it starve upon the bare parish provision,<sup>6</sup> I choose thus clandestinely to drop it at your door, that it may exercise one of your many virtues – your charity – in supporting it.

If the world were to know into whose hands I have thrown it, their regard to its patron might incline them to treat it as one of his family; but in the consciousness of what *I* am, I choose not, sir, to say who *you* are. If your equal in rank were to do public justice to your character, then indeed the concealment of your name might be an unnecessary diffidence. But am I, sir, of consequence enough in any guise to do honour to Mr—? Were I to set him in the most laudable lights that truth and good sense could give him, or his own likeness would require, my officious mite<sup>7</sup> would be lost in that general esteem and regard which people of the first consequence, even of different parties, have a pleasure in paying him. Encomiums to superiors from authors of lower life, as they are naturally liable to suspicion, can add very little lustre to what before was visible to the public eye. Such offerings (to use the style they are generally dressed in), like pagan incense, evaporate on the altar and rather gratify the priest than the deity.<sup>8</sup>

But you, sir, are to be approached in terms within the reach of common sense. The honest oblation<sup>9</sup> of a cheerful heart is as much as you desire or I am able to bring you – a heart that has just sense enough to mix respect with intimacy, and is never more delighted than when your rural hours of leisure admit me with all my laughing spirits to be my idle self, and

6 i.e. relief as specified under the Poor Relief Act of 1662 (14 Car. 2 c. 12).

7 Metaphorical: a small amount of money (*OED* 2).

8 An analogy often used to discredit Catholics and the conventions of the Roman Church.

9 i.e. presentation of a gift, often to God, sealing for Cibber the distinction between Protestant sincerity and allegedly empty Catholic rituals.

in the whole day's possession of you! Then, indeed, I have reason to be vain; I am then distinguished by a pleasure too great to be concealed, and could almost pity the man of graver merit that dares not receive it with the same unguarded transport! This nakedness of temper the world may place in what rank of folly or weakness they please; but till wisdom can give me something that will make me more heartily happy, I am content to be gazed at as I am, without lessening my respect for those whose passions may be more soberly covered.

Yet, sir, will I not deceive you. 'Tis not the lustre of your public merit, the affluence of your fortune, your high figure in life, nor those honourable distinctions which you had rather deserve than be told of, that have so many years made my plain heart hang after you. These are but incidental ornaments that, 'tis true, may be of service to you in the world's opinion; and though, as one among the crowd, I may rejoice that Providence has so deservedly bestowed them, yet my particular attachment has risen from a mere natural and more engaging charm – the agreeable companion! Nor is my vanity half so much gratified in the *honour* as my sense is in the *delight* of your society! When I see you lay aside the advantages of superiority and, by your own cheerfulness of spirits, call out all that Nature has given me to meet them, then 'tis I taste you! Then, life runs high! I desire! I possess you!

Yet, sir, in this distinguished happiness, I give not up my farther share of that pleasure, or of that right I have to look upon you with the public eye, and to join in the general regard so unanimously paid to that uncommon virtue, your integrity! This, sir, the world allows so conspicuous a part of your character that, however invidious the merit, neither the rude licence of detraction nor the prejudice of party has ever once thrown on it the least impeachment or reproach.<sup>10</sup> This is that commanding power that in public speaking makes you heard with such attention! This it is that discourages and keeps silent the insinuations of prejudice and suspicion, and almost renders your eloquence an unnecessary aid to your assertions. Even your opponents, conscious of your integrity, hear you rather as a witness than an orator.<sup>11</sup> But this, sir, is drawing you too near the light; integrity is too particular a virtue to be covered with a general application. Let me therefore only talk to you as at Tusculum<sup>12</sup> (for so I will call that sweet retreat which

10 Cibber's flattery contains some truth. Pelham had voted against his own party's government in 1737, when he supported an opposition motion to convert the national debt.

11 According to *DNB*, Pelham was 'not a brilliant orator [but] an able debater and an excellent parliamentary tactician' (XV.691).

12 Ancient Roman resort, 15 miles south-east of the capital, favoured by the Roman aristocracy; Esher is, similarly, 18 miles from central London.

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your own hands have raised), where, like the famed orator of old, when public cares permit, you pass so many rational, unbending hours. There, and at such times, to have been admitted, still plays in my memory more like a fictitious than a real enjoyment! How many golden evenings, in that theatrical paradise of watered lawns and hanging groves, have I walked and prated down the sun in social happiness! Whether the retreat of Cicero<sup>15</sup> in cost, magnificence, or curious luxury of antiquities, might not out-blaze the *simplex munditiis*,<sup>16</sup> the modest ornaments of your villa, is not within my reading to determine; but that the united power of Nature, Art, or elegance of taste could have thrown so many varied objects into a more delightful harmony is beyond my conception.

When I consider you in this view, and as the gentleman of eminence surrounded with the general benevolence of mankind, I rejoice, sir, for you and for myself: to see you in this particular light of merit, and myself sometimes admitted to my more than equal share of you.

If this *Apology* for my past life discourages you not from holding me in your usual favour, let me quit this greater stage the world whenever I may, I shall think this the best acted part of any I have undertaken since you first condescended to laugh with,

SIR,  
 Your most obedient,  
 most obliged, and  
 most humble servant,

COLLEY CIBBER.

Novemb. 6.  
 1739.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero (b. 106 BC), celebrated orator, kept a country villa at Tusculum.

<sup>16</sup> i.e. a simple or natural elegance, from Horace, *Odes*, Book 1 no.5, line 5.

<sup>17</sup> The date of Cibber's sixty-eighth birthday.

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