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The Right to Write; or, Colley Cibber and The Drury-Lane Monster

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The Right to Write; or, Colley Cibber and The Drury-Lane Monster

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, here is the chapter's first paragraph:

During the eighteenth century, it was a matter of some dispute whether Colley Cibber (1671-1757), actor, manger, playwright, and poet, had raised the business of theatre to an art or lowered the art of drama to a business. Though officially the King’s servants, the Drury Lane actors and managers had always made their living by commercial success, not patronage. Yet Colley Cibber’s very public attempts to turn a profit, please the public, and still rise in stature among men of letters, made him repeatedly the focus and emblem of heated discussions of taste, propriety, and power.

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Chapter 12
The Right to Write; or, Colley Cibber
and The Drury-Lane Monster

Melissa Bloom Bissonnette

Good actors ... ought to be encouraged and esteemed; yet to be encouraged and
esteeemed as actors, not as gentlemen.

John Dennis, *Two letters to Sir John Edgar* (1720)

During the eighteenth century, it was a matter of some dispute whether Colley
Cibber (1671–1757), actor, manager, playwright, and poet, had raised the
business of theatre to an art or lowered the art of drama to a business. Though
officially the King’s servants, the Drury Lane actors and managers had always
made their living by commercial success, not patronage. Yet Colley Cibber’s
very public attempts to turn a profit, please the public, and still rise in stature
among men of letters, made him repeatedly the focus and emblem of heated
discussions of taste, propriety, and power.

The ire Cibber aroused is intimately connected to the growing unease
concerning the mingling of commerce and culture. As more and more men of
undistinguished birth entered the world of letters, as knowledge and taste seemed
to become democratized, professional critics, like John Dennis, took on in public
the role that well-bred men of taste, like Burlington, performed in private social
circles.¹ Figures like Colley Cibber, who countered cultured knowledge with the
marketplace, aroused outrage. The threat Cibber posed to the arts was that of profit
confronting tradition.

The concurrent rise of the monster as a metaphor for farce reveals how farce,
like the working artist, disturbed orderliness throughout the literary and social
worlds. In the growing rhetoric of class-based genre distinctions we hear concern
that parvenus are rising to prominence, eroding previous social distinctions. Class
anxiety among literary men met the monstrosity of farce and of the market with
a resounding clamor in 1717, in the uproar over John Gay’s comedy *Three Hours
after Marriage.*² That play, itself about monsters, theatre, literary pretensions, and
uncultured judgment, was produced by and starred Colley Cibber at Drury Lane.

¹ To Alexander Pope, the Earl of Burlington (1694–1753) was ‘the symbol of all that
is judicious and correct in artistic taste, combining natural good taste with an enlightened
classical perspective.’ David Nokes, *John Gay: A Profession of Friendship.* (New York,

Cibber had recently become not only a manager of the company, but also a part owner. Although the hostility aroused by the play was originally directed toward the author(s) for the insulting parody of John Dennis which made up the central scene, Cibber quickly became its focus.³

As a result of layers of intentional misinterpretations, the play was subsequently remembered as in part a parody of Cibber, a joke made all the richer by his own ‘gullibility’ in performing in it. This rendering accords neatly with Cibber’s role in literary and theatre history as a greedy, ill-cultured clown, but it obscures much of the genesis of that reputation. In direct contrast to what the play itself says about farce and market forces, the accepted revision of history accepts the division between literary quality and theatricality that condemned Cibber—and, some might argue, English drama—for so very long.

*Three Hours* offers a pointed commentary on farce, writers, and propriety which has been all but erased from history. Because both farce and Cibber were later held in such low esteem, contemporary intentional misinterpretations have themselves been misunderstood. Many scholars—including Gay biographer David Nokes and Cibber biographers Leonard Ashley and Helene Koon—hold that the play was a failure and/or a satire on Cibber.⁴ In re-examining the play and the events surrounding it, we can see that these assessments originated as intentional devaluations of the play and the men involved on a social more than an aesthetic basis.

**Cibber and Theatrical Controversies**

Throughout his career, Cibber stood at the crux of theatrical disturbances and controversies. In addition to acting, the young Cibber wrote several successful comedies, most notably *Love’s Last Shift* (1696), *She Wou’d and She Wou’d Not* (1702), and *The Careless Husband* (1704).³ These plays helped bring audiences

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³ The degree to which John Arbuthnot and Alexander Pope contributed to the composition of the play continues to be a critical controversy and is part of the discussion below.
⁴ Nokes is among several scholars who consider Gay’s ‘most audacious satiric stroke’ in the play the ‘ridicule’ of ‘the actor-manager Colley Cibber in the part of Plotwell, and then get[ting] Cibber to play the part himself’ (p. 241). For discussions of this legend, see John Fuller’s notes in his 1983 edition, pp. 435–43. Leonard Ashley, in *Colley Cibber* (Boston, 1989), and Helene Koon, in *Colley Cibber: A Biography* (Lexington, 1986) accept it as truth, though George Sherburn began to discredit it as early as 1926 in ‘The Fortunes and Misfortunes of Three Hours after Marriage,’ *Modern Philology* 24 (1926): 91–109.
⁵ These were ‘several of the most popular and enduring plays of the eighteenth century.’ Timothy J. Viator and William J. Burling, *The Plays of Colley Cibber*, vol. 1 (Madison, NJ, 2000), p. 11. They would remain ‘the touchstone of genteel comedy for more than a hundred years.’ Richard Hindry Barker, *Mr Cibber of Drury Lane* (New York, 1966), p. 53. Cibber also wrote a fairly large number of failures, among his ‘twelve comedies, six
into Drury Lane during the decade between 1695 and 1706, when the more experienced actors of the company seceded and set up a rival company. Cibber, still a fairly inexperienced actor, remained behind at Drury Lane, taking advantage of the opportunity to perform in roles otherwise monopolized by senior actors.

Legal permission to perform was solely in the hands of the ‘pettifogging lawyer’ Christopher Rich, at Drury Lane, who ‘knew little and cared less about the drama: he was interested only in profits.’ With greater resources and fewer scruples than the offended veteran actors, he mounted crowd-pleasing spectacles and operas, financing them in part by withholding actors’ pay. During the later years of this rivalry, Cibber advised Rich on the management of his company, including sometimes the bilking of the actors. The actors’ company fought back with established comedies and tragedies, but needed also to import singers and dancers to survive, theatre audiences in London having become accustomed to non-dramatic entertainment as part of the bill. Critics and actors continued to debate the place and propriety of these “irregular” entertainments throughout Cibber’s career, and to link them to him, as his fault, as his illegitimate children, and as his mercenary imposition on a helpless public.

The rebel acting company failed, and reunited with Rich’s company at Drury Lane, but after a brief period of quiet monopoly, a new group of actors, this time including Cibber, established another rival theatrical company. This latter group was granted an official license, and, partly due to Cibber’s management, successfully challenged Rich’s power.

Whether under Rich’s authority, under the actors’ own license, or (from 1715) under Sir Richard Steele’s patent, Cibber seems to have taken central responsibility of reviewing, accepting, rejecting, and altering new plays for production, and was,

tragedies, two ballad operas, two masques, a farce, an interlude, and a “comical tragedy”.'


These failures loom large in the contretemps which this chapter discusses.

6 Barker, Mr. Cibber, p. 54. Permission to perform might be under license, which acting companies did sometimes obtain, but more securely by letters patent, granted by the king. Patents could be purchased (as Rich had done) as well as bequeathed (as Rich also did, passing it to his son John at his death).


8 See Milhou’s Thomas Betterton, especially chapter 5, ‘Cutthroat Competition, 1698–1702’, for a careful examination of management and repertory choices made by the rebel Betterton company and by the royal patent holder Christopher Rich during these years, which saw the rise of the double bill and a radical increase in what would come to be called ‘entertainments.’

according to one biographer, 'ruthless (and tactless) in rejecting plays that did not offer one of the principal actors a meaty part, or that were not "theatrical,"' Cibber seems to have based his evaluations of scripts not on their grandeur of ideas, their morality, or their poetry, but rather their practical stage potential. He accepted plays which offered 'effective situations, plenty of opportunities of stage business, [and] good acting parts suitable' for the leading actors of the company; he rejected unplayable dramas. He certainly seems to have done so with cavalier insensitivity in many instances, though ultimately this distinction, between theatre and drama, seemed to many the larger crime.

Accusations of high-handed vulgarity became more frequent as Cibber garnered power over other—more genteel, more well-educated—playwrights and poets. Complaints about Cibber's power were generated mostly during the years when there was little or no competition between the theatres (roughly 1708–1714, and again in the 20s), and when Cibber, with an inordinate amount of control over the stage, presented an insurmountable obstacle to playwrights. Delariviere Manley belittles Cibber as Rich's pet in her comments about him in her New Atalantis of 1709, and complains that he rejects plays superior to his own, sacrificing better authors to his vanity as a writer. John Dennis wrote scathingly about an episode during the same years when 'three peers of England, a duke and two earls, both the one and the other some of the most illustrious of their respective benches, wanted power to get one poor comedy acted; a certain insolent, impertinent actor... had... power to withstand them all.' Neither Manley nor Dennis comments on the quality of performances, the balance between regular and irregular plays, or the propriety of Cibber's artistic judgments. Both present Cibber as inappropriately wielding power over his betters—those with more talent and those higher in society.

Yet both Manley and Dennis had suffered theatrical failures at Cibber's theatre, disappointments in large part due to audience preference for spectacle and stage business. Manley's play Almyrna closed after three performances, competing against an opera at the other theatre, in 1706. In his prefaces, Dennis repeatedly blames particular actors, rehearsal conditions, and party prejudice for his failures.

10 Ashley, Colley Cibber, p. 63.
11 Barker, Mr. Cibber, p. 113.
12 As an example of the abuses and injustice in the 'little commonwealth' of the theaters, she notes that 'the favourite poet (in concert with the master) has of course the reading of all new pieces brought to him for his approbation which he is sure never to give to what seems more meritorious than his own, lest he should put their reputations upon a level.' D. Manley, New Atalantis, ed. Rosalind Ballaster (New York, 1992), p. 112.
13 Quoted in Barker, Mr. Cibber, p. 59.
14 Manley frequently complained that the players or the managers or the scheduling was at fault for her failed plays. Milhous notes that in 1696, Mrs. Manley's 'The Royal Mischief'... was in rehearsal at Drury Lane when outbursts of temper from both actors and author resulted in her withdrawing the play. The comparatively young actors at the Patent house, who had not cut their teeth on seventies horror and heroic plays, found Mrs Manley's
His last original play, the 1709 tragedy *Appius and Virginia*, closed after a short run, and his adaptation of *Coriolanus* was refused in 1709, revised in 1718, accepted, postponed, and then finally damned.15

Moreover, it was only as Cibber gained power that he became a target. When Steele received a patent in 1715, he offered shares to the triumvirate of managing actors—Cibber, Robert Wilkes, and Barton Booth. They were now part-owners, entitled by monopolical patent to perform and to profit from the performances of others.16 Cibber’s actions thus gained a stamp of respectability and official approval that struck his many enemies as unseemly. Thereafter his decisions were more closely scrutinized. He was caricatured and satirized, disparaged and scorned. He was also respected and a little feared.

His enemies argued that he abused his public and revealed his lack of education by promoting ‘entertainments’ (a term given to any irregular performance, from dancing and spectacle to farce and, eventually, ballad opera). Both his critics and his supporters posit an ideal theatre on the one hand and a theatre degraded (by commercial pressures, by machinery, or by politicking) on the other, but the majority of theatrical productions fell somewhere on a continuum between purely spectacular entertainment and highly literary drama. Technically advanced scenery, new music and costumes, and sound effects were becoming regular parts of all productions, not just spectacles and processions. All of these elements were part of the theatrical relationship between the theatre professionals and the audience, part of the evening of entertainment spectators paid for. Yet that relationship is disregarded in contemporary discussions of the theatre, which are posited in terms of ‘the people’—whether those people ought not to be pandered to for their own good, or whether ‘the people’ are being served substandard goods or otherwise being cheated.17 ‘Serving’ the public and ‘pandering’ to it represent different approaches to market forces, not necessarily different approaches to theatre. Despite the aesthetic terms in which these debates were couched, the strongest voices of condemnation were asserting social superiority and political stability against market forces.

piece hard to take seriously. Feelings hurt, she stormed out, vowing never to work for them again’ (*Thomas Betterton*, p. 98).

15 Dennis wrote the above complaint when this latest failure brought the earlier ones to mind, and blamed all on Cibber. See H.G. Paul’s *John Dennis: His Life and Criticism* (New York, 1911), pp. 38–45, and Barker, pp. 119–24.

16 Previously senior actors might profit from a share or part of a share in a patent during their career, but forfeited it if they retired or died. Steele’s arrangement offered lasting property to the Triumvirate, whose ownership was not contingent upon their acting, and could be sold or passed on to heirs.

Cibber drew more ire than other purveyors of entertainment (Edmund Curll, for example, or Christopher, and later John Rich) because he promoted not only spectacle but also himself. Cibber wanted respectability as well as wealth. As the social stricture that encouraged gentlemen to write dramas but discouraged them from acting testifies, the business of theatre was on the borderline between craft and art, skill and genius.

**Farce, Art and Aberration(s)**

The perception of farce as ‘low’ coincides with an increase in its popular appeal and with increased competition between the theatres.\(^{18}\) That more voices were raised against it indicates that the public was more aware of it, not necessarily that farce became a different, more vulgar thing. After 1714, when the two licensed theatres, Lincoln’s Inn Fields and the Theatre Royal at Drury Lane, were again in competition, ‘the farce-afterpiece became a regular part of the theatrical bill. Although many kinds of dramatic novelties were used for the afterpiece—acrobatic and scenic spectacles, comic and pastoral operettas, for example—farce provided the mainstay.’\(^{19}\) At one time or another those types (collectively ‘irregular’ or ‘entertainment’) all were called farces. Such a crisis of definition goes to the heart of the play at hand.

In *Three Hours after Marriage*, Gay mocks the new miser of knowledge who accumulates artifacts rather than wisdom. The play undermines claims to superior knowledge or taste and repeatedly reinforces common sense and public response. Yet partly because the play was rumored to be ‘really’ written by Pope, it became the occasion for a cannonade of criticism about the propriety of works and of authors, a controversy that re-enacted that conflict (an ignorant, self-appointed expert versus the wiser public opinion) against the play itself. The notoriety surrounding the play and the rhetoric of its critics mark a turning point in the reputations of both Cibber and farce. Both came to be seen as aberrations garnering an inappropriate amount of attention. Both occupied ambiguous positions in polite society as well as in the theatre world and were difficult to define or precisely pin down; by their nature, an actor and a farce are continuously, maddeningly, fluid.

The barrage of invective against *Three Hours* was out of proportion to its faults. Such disproportionality was, paradoxically, appropriate, for the play bursts with category violations. Actors parade across the stage as various unnatural creatures: exotic monsters, unchaste wives, ink-stained nieces, cuckold, bastards, and fraudulent authors. A mummy and a crocodile defy the boundaries of real and fraud and provide the key for reading the other ‘monsters’ in the play who defy the lesser and more conventional boundaries between virgin and mother, poet and woman, manuscript and scrap paper. The sins which earned the play the epithet

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‘The Drury-Lane Monster’ were its own generic confusion, social indecorum, and moral instability. Colley Cibber, whose role in the play was intentionally misconstrued as a satire upon his own writing, was doubly condemned for aping his literary betters and being fool enough to ignorantly mock himself.

This misinterpretation was instigated by allies of the play’s targets. Three Hours lampoons Dr. John Woodward as Fossil, a collector, cuckold, and all-around fool, and John Dennis as Sir Tremendous, a thundering, hostile pedant. Both men were widely satirized for years and were the particular enemies of, respectively, Dr. John Arbuthnot and Pope. In the play, their expert opinions place them above or against general opinion but also beyond common sense. Both, in satirical characterizations, focus so intently on detail that they fail to comprehend meaning.

Combining the themes of bad science and bad writing, the play contrasts knowledge with wisdom. In the thin plot, physical disruptions mask social and intellectual ones. Fossil, an elderly doctor, collects scientific curiosities. In his medical practice he applies purges to all patients, no matter what their complaint. He has secretly married young Mrs. Townley, who claims to be a virgin. Immediately her lovers Plotwell and Underplot begin their attempts on Fossil’s house and bride. They first gain entrance (to the house) by impersonating a learned scientist and a desperate patient respectively and later smuggle themselves into the house disguised as a mummy and a crocodile, ‘curiosities’ Fossil has been impatiently awaiting. Though Mrs. Townley shows herself willing to entertain whichever of her lovers finds her alone, neither succeeds. The play ends in a whirl of chaos. The mummy and crocodile run out of the house, fearing a proposed autopsy. A man appears with an infant, which, through a complicated series of events, is revealed to be Mrs. Townley’s bastard child just as she escapes Fossil’s house to return to a long-lost first husband, never accounting for the child that is neither Fossil’s nor her true husband’s. Although his unconsummated marriage is null, Fossil is left with the baby as the heir for which he wished at the start of the play. The cuckold and the bastard replace the crocodile and mummy as aberrations.

Mirroring the central plot’s questions of domestic truth and value, questions of literary and theatrical value form the heart of the subplot. Fossil’s niece Phoebe Clinket neglects the womanly cares of dress and housekeeping to write poetry. She invites the players to her uncle’s house to hear her tragedy The Universal Deluge which she pretends is Plotwell’s, since he is friendly with the actors. Plotwell, played by Cibber, also unites the two plots and reinforces the focus on frauds. He connects the story of illicit sex to that of substandard writing, and his name alludes both to his schemes to win Townley and to his association with the theatre.

As the pivot between the two plots, Plotwell translates monsters into meanings. He escapes Fossil’s detection as the mummy only when Clinket claims that he is part of a masquerade that she designed and so he moves fluidly between the worlds of the curious, the licentious, and the theatrical. His deceit is redefined as bad art and the rarity of a mummy is transformed into the banality of the lecher/adulterer; a physical monstrosity reveals a moral one. Plotwell rarely appears as
himself, so intent is he on finding a way to be alone with Mrs. Townley. One of the few times he is in the house ‘in no body’s Shape but his own’, as Cibber later referred to himself in his autobiographical Apology, is for Clinket’s reading, and even then he is ‘posing’ as the author of her play. The fluidity of the meaning of Plotwell’s various characters, the open question of what or who he is, would later be paralleled in a critical struggle over the nature of the role itself and of Colley Cibber, who performed it.

Clinket’s Deluge parallels Fossile’s universal purge, her poetry an injudicious adaptation of Ovid’s account of the flood. Her histrionic claim ‘If this Piece be not rais’d to the Sublime, let me henceforth be stigmatiz’d as a Reptile in the Dust of Mediocrity’ (I. II. 314–16) directs the audience to do just that. Her striving, hyperbolic language is matched by the theatrical absurdity of transforming Ovidian imagery into a play—for example, she strands a whale in the treetops when the Deluge recedes. The players reject everything about her play, and Plotwell, only present at the reading in hopes of seeing Mrs. Townley, cavalierly invites the players to ‘blot and insert wherever you please’ (I. I. 505), sacrificing Clinket’s poetic offspring before her eyes.

Clinket’s artistic mediocrity is inextricably linked to her disdain for the public. She believes her work transcends the public’s limited capacity to appreciate and disparages the actors who determine whether to perform it as a prejudiced rabble. ‘Ah! what a Goût de travers rules the Understandings of the Illiterate!’ (I. II. 308–11). Their ‘taste of travesty’ is both the reversal of good taste and an enjoyment for travesty—for burlesque and farce, such as that Gay’s present audience enjoys while watching Three Hours. Clinket disdains the very audience before her.20 The players, who are not gentlemen, have the power to determine the fate of hers or any play, based on the experience of their trade, not literary training. Her attitude is later mistaken as the play’s own assessment and condemnation of Cibber.

The uneducated aesthetic, the overeducated aesthetic, and the mercantile motive contend here for primacy. The evaluations of the (financially disinterested) playwright and critic serve only their egos. Sir Tremendous (John Dennis), the critic, dictates to audiences; he is ‘a Gentleman who can instruct the Town to

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20 ‘That injudicious Canaille’ (I. I. 375). By 1737 (if not sooner), Pope would agree with her. In his Imitations of Horace Pope considers farce, and the taste for it in the more vocal portion of the audience, as the enemy of the poet.

There still remains, to mortify a wit,
The many-headed monster of the pit:
A senseless, worthless, and unhonour’d crowd;
Who, to disturb their betters mighty proud,
Clatt’ring their sticks before ten lines are spoke,
Call for the farce, the bear, or the black joke.
What dear delight to Britons farce affords!
Farce once the taste of mobs, but now of lords (304–11).
dislike what has pleased them, and to be pleased with what they disliked' (I. ll. 387–88). He commands a vocabulary and an encyclopedic knowledge that serves to awe the public. He, like the playwright, is isolated from stage realities, and he approaches drama as logic and numbers, defining it but not understanding it as drama.21 Dennis had made a respectable name for himself as a critic around the turn of the century, but some of his later criticism was tinged with personal bitterness.22 While Clinket’s poetry is absurd—‘Tho’ Heav’n wrings all the Sponges of the Sky,/ And pours down Clouds, at once each Cloud a Sea’ (I. ll. 488–89)—Tremendous’s objections to the play address rules, not theatrical effect. Discarding tradition and common sense as touchstones of value, he claims that all poets, back to and including Homer, are thieves of previous work (I. ll. 421–25) (though he fails to recognize Clinket’s Ovidian source).

On the other hand, the two players base their judgment on the needs of the theatre and the demands of the audience. Plotwell and the players may agree with Tremendous’s objection that a ‘whole Scene is monstrous’, but less because it is ‘against the Rules of Tragedy’, than because ‘it neither can take, nor ought to take’ (I. ll. 501–502, 517). Audience taste is their only arbiter, and the projected audience in this case makes a respectable judgment.23 The scene does not defend what Cibber would later call ‘monstrous Medlies’, irregular entertainments that did ‘take’ with audiences of the day, but the representatives of the theatre, and the imagined spectators, are the only reasonable characters in the scene—not the higher-class poet or critic.

Cibber was ridiculed for overuse of the word ‘theatrical’,24 which goes directly to the heart of performance realities. His attention to the craft of the stage—to casting and costuming and the cutting and alteration of speeches, as well as the selection of plays—frequently made him vulnerable to charges of egotism and to valuing sensation above sense. Three Hours itself is highly ‘theatrical’: the character Plotwell takes on three different disguises in the play; the character of Clinket is an atypical female role and a rich comic figure, if an unflattering one; and the entire play takes place in one space (Fossile’s house) and over the course of three hours, announcing its own compliance with the unities of time and space. Clinket’s tragedy, on the other hand, is ‘not in the least encumber’d with Episodes’ but is rather ‘Three Hours’ of ‘a rainy Day, and a Sculler in a Storm’ (I. ll. 320–21,

21 ‘Thus Criticks, of less Judgment than Caprice,/ Curious, not Knowing, not exact, but nice,/ Form short Ideas; and offend in Arts/ (As most in Manners) by a Love to Parts’ (Pope, Essay on Criticism, pp. 285–8).

22 Barker, Mr. Cibber, p. 119.

23 ‘Cibber wrote for the stage, not for the literary critics of his own time—or ours. He was, first and last, concerned with how a play would work in performance. While his texts contain numerous passages of excellent dialogue, his fortes were plot construction, stage business, and the creation of vivid characters.’ Viator and Burling, The Plays of Colley Cibber, p. 11.

24 See Barker, Mr. Cibber, p. 113 and Ashley, Colley Cibber, p. 63.
462–3). Though she has no action, she imagines a spectacular setting in which rain showers onto the stage and cattle swim in the fields. Impractically, ‘almost all the Persons of [her] Second Act start out of Stones’ that the main characters throw behind them (I. II. 477–8).

Evaluating her script, the players consult the marketplace, concluding simply ‘We shall lose money by it’ (I. 528–9). Their reductive evaluation of the play on the basis of projected receipts demonstrates the problematic situation of the theatre at the intersection of commerce and culture. To some, the very connection of commerce and culture that allowed Cibber to decide what would be seen in London was itself monstrous. Dennis complained, in 1720, of the power in the hands of ‘a certain insolent, impertinent actor.’²⁵ The proper hierarchy of taste and power is completely inverted by Cibber’s reign. Certainly, Dennis’s attitude about Cibber is Clinket’s attitude about the players. Dennis’s failed Appius and Virginia featured a storm for which Dennis had invented a machine to create thunder. Though the play failed, the thunder succeeded, and Cibber forthwith used it in other plays, further infuriating Dennis. Sir Tremendous/Dennis is not only pedantic critic, he is simultaneously dreadful poet, as Clinket justifies her ‘rainy day’ by reference to other authors who thunder. Identifying Dennis with his failed tragedies reinforces the implication that his criticism was motivated by personal envy.

Later critics have assumed that the satire on Cibber was in Plotwell’s careless disregard for Clinket’s play, revealing his insensitivity to playwrights and his cavalier preference for profit. But Plotwell’s decisions and determinations are patently superior to those of Clinket and Tremendous. The financial pressure of audience approval moderates personal vanity. Whereas Dennis and Tremendous expect those with titles to dictate to those without, the unnamed actors (1st and 2nd Player—nameless themselves until cast) obey the voice of the public. The triumph of the actors over Clinket recasts the contest between a self-promoting authority and an anonymous public as one between a dictator and a democratic community, and so aligns theatricality with public spirit.

Monstrous Language, Learning, and Legitimacy

The literary indecency of Three Hours—both the burlesque of pedants and poets and an abundance of salacious innuendo—aroused an ‘hysterical chorus of complaints.’²⁶ The focus of those complaints on the play’s ‘lowness’ obscures its critique of literary critics and its intellectual disdain. Evidence that the outrage was more personal and social than moral is that ‘those loudest in their protests at its alleged obscenity were Addison, Blackmore, Leonard Welsted, and Giles

²⁵ Quoted in Barker, Mr. Cibber, p. 59.
Jacob’, all aligned, politically and socially, with John Dennis. To complain about the characterization of Dennis would be to admit its aptness; to complain about the aesthetic indecencies would be to align themselves with Tremendous. As would later be the case with Gay’s The Beggar’s Opera, those stung by the satire respond with concern for the demoralizing effect the play presumably has on the impressionable public.

However anxious Addison and company were to take the high road, other writers were willing to get dirty. Attacks on the abnormalities of the play attribute them explicitly to its unnatural heredity. The anonymous poem ‘The Drury-Lane Monster’ dissects the play methodically, outlining its approach. ‘And such are the Marks of this Wonderful Creature,/ Each Parent is seen in each odd sort of Feature’ (11–12). Each of the three reputed parents, Pope, Arbuthnot, and Gay, contributes his own peculiar aberration. J.D. Brevial wrote the pamphlet drama The Confederates, under the name of Joseph Gay, claiming ‘Let Brother Wits impose on JOHNNY GAY;/ But JOES’S no Father for Another’s Play’ (Prologue, italics reversed). The accusation that Pope and Arbuthnot wrote the play entirely and simply passed it off on the genial Gay upon its failure echoes the attempts of Plotwell and Underplot to father Townley’s child and pass it off on Fossile. Like the child bestowed on Fossile, the play itself is neither lawfully begotten nor socially acceptable.

The first attack, ‘The Drury-Lane Monster’, begins with a hit at the ‘categorical effrontery’ of the play’s form. ‘Near the Hundreds of Drury a Monster was shown/ For five Days together, the Talk of the Town,/ What Species it was, or what was its Frame,/Whether Human or Brute, or whence it first came,/ It puzzled the Criticks of Gresham to tell’ (1–5). (The play actually ran for seven days, not five, a more than respectable run with two author’s benefit nights.) A similar accusation came in The Confederates, published two months later, which purports to tell the true story of the play’s authorship and opening night. In it, ‘Cibber’ describes the script: ‘Here bawdy Prose, and there of Verse a Scrap;/.../ Such Monsters breeds your Nile (the Learned say)/ One half is Frog, and t’other Half is Clay’ (24). The Cibber character is skeptical of the play’s value, as the actors are of Clinket’s,
and his concern, like theirs, is financial security—he produces it only after being paid to do so.\(^{32}\) There is no hint in either of these early satires on *Three Hours* that Cibber was a target, except insofar as his market philosophy allows him to be bribed, for money is money.

Like Buckingham’s 1671 burlesque on Dryden, *The Rehearsal*, with which it was soon associated, *Three Hours* is about bad writing.\(^{33}\) Both (and we can add *The Dunciad* as an extension of this quarrel)\(^{34}\) admonish literary presumption and address the question of who has the right to speak with a public voice. Yet from the start critics reversed the attack, criticizing the play and its writers as exactly the kind of monstrosity Clinket tries to pass off within it. The transgression is patently a class transgression. The strange unidentifiable ‘three legged’ beast in ‘The Drury-Lane Monster’ is examined by Dr. Woodward, who says it was engendered by ‘Three Mongrels ... who never were bred/ To any School-Learning, but to Write and to Read’ (10, 7–8). They are not (this accusation runs) of good families. They are not socialized through the channels of power and learning.\(^{35}\)

But of course, Pope and Arbuthnot were gentlemen and men of letters. One could attack Pope’s body or religion, or Arbuthnot’s behavior, or their misbegotten play, but their capacity as intellectuals and writers could not really be called into question. Gay’s could, and was, but as these same pamphleteers claimed he hardly wrote the play at all, they could not also blame him for its failures. Hence the play’s enemies quickly turned on Cibber. Cibber could represent the lower instincts of these writers, since he was a writer, and simultaneously represent the

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\(^{32}\) Again, the rumor circulated (reflected in or begun by *The Confederates*) that three maids of honor gave 400 guineas to urge the actors to produce *Three Hours* (Nokes, *John Gay*, 239–40), as in the play itself, Clinket commits to ‘deposit a Sum ... upon the Success of’ her play (I. 530).

\(^{33}\) *The Rehearsal*, by George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, was frequently updated, adapted, and produced throughout the eighteenth century. It satirizes playwright and poet laureate John Dryden and his popular heroic tragedy *The Conquest of Granada* in the form of a rehearsal of the new tragedy from the playwright ‘Bayes.’ Two gentlemen observing provide caustic commentary on the ridiculous play and its vain and stupid author. Bayes is continually on stage, pointing out his own wit and meaning, berating the actors, and exposing both himself and his play as utterly worthless. Revivals freely substituted famous lines, scenes, mannerisms, and nicknames of contemporary playwrights and poets for ridicule.

\(^{34}\) Pope’s *The Dunciad* (1728) is a mock-heroic epic, celebrating the ascension to the throne of ‘Dulness’ (as the King of Dunces) of poet Lewis Theobald. When Cibber was named Poet Laureate, in 1742, Pope revised and expanded the poem, making Cibber its central target instead.

\(^{35}\) The class basis of monstrosity parallels classes of writers and classes of plays, in which aesthetic considerations are secondary or predetermined. See Cohen, ‘Monster Culture’, pp. 3–25. ‘The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is ... to become monstrous oneself’ (p. 12).
manifestation of that instinct, the farce. As producer, promoter, and performer—and not a gentleman—he embodied the presumptions of the play itself.

The earliest misinterpretations read the scene with Plotwell and the players as a hit at Cibber as a writer, not as actor and manager. The Key offered late in 1717 by ‘E. Parker’ says:

Plotwell’s fathering Clinket’s Play, is levell’d at Cibber, and the Satire bites, when he is told, That a Parrot and a Player can utter human Sounds, but neither of them are allow’d to be Judges of Wit. This is hard upon poor Colley, who has oblig’d the Public with The Bulls and the Bears a Farce. Perolla and Izadora, An original Tragedy of his own Composing; he has also Naturaliz’d the Cid of Corneille into an English Heroick Daughter. 36

While Cibber had written the above failed plays, his oeuvre included several extremely successful and respected original comedies. The identification of him as Plotwell was made solely in order to mock him as a writer. Cibber is, like Clinket, a ‘Monster of Impropriety’ (I. 81), and like Plotwell, a fraudulent and impotent ‘father’ of other men’s plays. By identifying his efforts to write with farces and failures only, the writer of the Key tries to put him back in his place, parroting the words of others, playing the roles he is assigned.

Dennis wrote that ‘Good actors... ought to be encouraged and esteemed; yet to be encouraged and esteemed as actors, not as gentlemen, nor as persons who have a thousand times their merit; but even the best actors, with the most unblamable conduct, are never to be trusted with power.’ 37 His Letters, addressed to patentee Sir Richard Steele in 1720, asks Steele to tighten the reins on his underling, striking the tone of most anti-Cibber writing until the late 1720s. The problem wasn’t the quality of his writing but his social quality (an actor, not a gentleman). Cibber’s place was to serve his master (the patentees Rich or Steele) not to be a master; to speak the words (as a ‘parrot’) of writers patronized by dukes and earls, not to write them himself. Personally offended by Cibber’s acting (in the 1717 play) and his rise in esteem in the theatre where Dennis had failed, the critic insists upon his higher position in society. His response to a world in which Cibber’s works, and Cibber’s judgments, take priority over his, in which his Thunder is more popular than his poetry, is to attempt to put Cibber in his place, taking orders, serving those above him. This pattern would recur in later attacks on Cibber by Pope and eventually Henry Fielding: a gentleman with an uneasy grasp on his own public status lashes out at Cibber’s uncertain class position.

36 E. Parker, A Complete KEY to the New Farce, call’d Three Hours after Marriage (London, 1717), p. 8. Viator and Burling note that The Bulls and the Bears, a farce from 1715, ‘was never acknowledged by Cibber as his own’ but was satirically considered so in at least one other pamphlet. The Plays of Colley Cibber, p. 15.
37 Two letters to Sir John Edgar quoted in Barker, Mr. Cibber, p. 123.
Cibber would also call into question the status of his attackers. Later in 1717, Cibber produced his own version of *The Rehearsal*, which was "by his present Majesty... commanded to be reviewed." In the role of the bombastic playwright Bayes, Cibber ad libbed an eager desire to shove an alligator and a mummy into his already ridiculous play, playing off of some of the criticisms of the inclusion of those monsters. According to Cibber's account in his hostile and gossipy *Letter from Mr CIBBER to Mr POPE* (1742), Pope was in the audience. Deeply offended (by the mockery of *Three Hours* and by the equation of himself with Cibber/Bayes), Pope marched backstage and angrily demanded that Cibber remove the reference. When the poet came behind the scenes—"his Lips pale and his Voice trembling... almost choked with the foam of his Passion"—Cibber, with complete self-possession (in his own retelling), scolded him. "Mr. Pope—you are so particular a Man, that I must be ash'm'd to return your Language as I ought to do: but since you have attacked me in so monstrous a Manner, This you may depend upon, that as long as the Play continues to be acted I will never fail to repeat the same Words over and over again" (19). Monstrous language belongs *in* a farce, but not *at* one. Cibber takes the high road. Since his joke had caused offence, as a gentleman he would retract it, but Mr. Pope's behavior—his monstrous language—shows him to be ungentlemanly and so unworthy of such considerations. As reprimand (for the monstrous language, for the monstrous comedy itself), Cibber perseveres with his satirical addition.

Written 25 years after the events, Cibber's narrative farcifies history, making mock-heroic what was likely an unpleasant encounter. We must read Cibber's description alongside both the circumstances of 1717 and those of 1742, when, after becoming Poet Laureate, Cibber learned that he was to be the target of Pope's revised *Dunciad*. The encounter behind the scenes is corroborated by contemporary accounts, but Cibber's tone in this passage applies to emotions surrounding *The Dunciad*, not *Three Hours*. When he says Pope has attacked him monstrously, he is applying his present circumstance to the past. *The Rehearsal* was not the retribution he presents it as here, because *Three Hours* did not insult Cibber. Rather, the *Letter* is an attempt to raise Cibber's reputation as a writer by emphasizing his social status, presenting him as a gentleman, a favorite of kings, and a successful poet.

Pope attacks Cibber with 'monstrous' language behind the scenes, but also by implication with the satire on Cibber in Plotwell, and in 'real' time, with the approaching coronation of Cibber as Dunce. It is with this last in mind that Cibber claims here *not* to have been deceived in 1717; he knew who Plotwell 'really' was, just as he knew that Pope was 'really' the author. Although Cibber knows that

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38 Colley Cibber, *A Letter from Mr. CIBBER to Mr. POPE* (Los Angeles, 1973), p. 17.

39 And he continues, ‘Now let the Reader judge by this Concern, who was the true Mother of the Child!’ (19), underscoring Pope's association with Clinket. Pope is further effeminized in this narrative by having subsequently sent the more physically imposing Gay backstage to cudgel Cibber for him.
neither is true, he banks on public misperception of both of these points. Having retired from the stage but still selling his ‘stage’ life in his *Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber* (1740) and collecting a pension as Poet Laureate, Cibber recuperates himself as a writer at the expense of his character as a manager. Pope, in his tiny, ill-formed fury, represents one kind of writer, whereas Cibber’s healthy, cool control of language, truth, and turf represents another. Cibber’s intelligence and Pope’s bad taste are both on display—in 1742. A battle ostensibly about theatrical legitimacy, one which the famous actor and powerful manager certainly wins, is used as a cover for one over poetic legitimacy, between the son of a craftsman who became the official Poet Laureate and the Catholic but widely acknowledged great poet of the age.

**Audience and Authority: The Monsters among Us**

Audiences loved Cibber’s *Rehearsal* and other farces with topical references. But although unbiased records of *Three Hours* show little general displeasure, and Drury Lane’s receipts never dropped dangerously low, by the late twenties satirists regularly suggested that Cibber willfully abused audience intelligence and taste with his productions, with *Three Hours* as a central example. Instead of insulting the audiences who disliked their plays, writers reviled Cibber, whose success depended on gauging the tastes of that audience. Cibber would later defend himself against the charge that he was responsible for the flood of entertainments; ‘I did it against my Conscience! and had not virtue enough to starve, by opposing a Multitude, that would have been too hard for me’ (*Apology*, vol. 2, p. 182). Cibber casts himself as a slave of the marketplace to counter the opposition vision of him as a tyrant.

Through the 1720s and 1730s the ubiquitous metaphor for Cibber’s absolute control was government, while Cibber reflected on his own career in the older trope of authorship as paternity. ‘[M]y Muse, and my Spouse, were equally prolifick; the one was seldom the Mother of a Child, but, in the same Year, the other made me Father of a Play’ (*Apology*, vol. 1, p. 264). Henry Fielding sarcastically extended the metaphor in *The Champion* 69, 1740, suggesting that the *Apology* itself was stillborn, monstrous, or illegitimate, and that ‘the vast Difference between the pale Countenances of those Children, which at all resemble the Father, such as Master Ceasar in Egypt, the Heroic Daughter, the Refusal, and Love in a Riddle, all dead long ago, and the stronger Complexion of some others, have brought the Chastity of his Muse into Question.’ Again we hear the old charge from 1717 that Cibber’s failures define him as a writer, and that he was not the father of the successes carrying his name but was instead the unwitting cuckold of a prostitute muse. And, once again, an attack on Cibber as a writer, in Fielding’s series of articles critiquing the *Apology*, comes from a borderline gentleman whose gentility Cibber has tarnished or questioned. In the *Apology*, among other snide remarks, he had referred to Fielding as a ‘broken Wit’ (vol. 1, p. 286). To respond openly
questioning Cibber’s gentility would be tantamount to admitting him as an equal, a brother wit. To ridicule his writing—that which reveals his class most surely, more surely than his clothes or his companions—seemed the best way to silence his impudence, as it had to Dennis and to Pope.

The battle for the high road was staged on ‘low’ ground: on public stages and in penny pamphlets, not only in sight of the mob but by means of them. Theatrical monsters of impropriety—Three Hours after Marriage, Cibber’s Apology—aroused an outrage expressed invariably in moral and national terms. It is bad for the masses. It is bad to please the masses. It degrades the English stage, the English Muse, the English language. In commentary, each side assumed a voice of superior taste and authority, declaring a disinterested aesthetic concern. But throughout the eighteenth century, neither The Rehearsal nor Aphra Behn’s popular farce The Emperor of the Moon, on which Three Hours was based, ever inspired such a response. Both farce and Cibber were acceptable in their proper place, as flavoring to an otherwise conventional experience. Both became disturbing once they attracted too much attention. Just as farce provoked no major outcry until it began to crowd more traditional entertainments, causing financial losses for producers of comedies and operas, the social clamor against Cibber rose as he gained authority and official recognition.

Despite strident voices like Dennis’s, farce was not a diversion only of or only suited for the lower classes. Like Cibber, that multi-headed monster the audience crossed classes. The sudden and overwhelming presence of the monster in theatrical discourse from 1717 through the late 1740s as a metaphor for farce points to a new need to distinguish audiences and aesthetic values, or to distinguish them in a new way. The monsters at the center of Gay’s play became emblematic of a new anxiety over generic instability, mob rule, and the ascent of the low: reptile to man, farce to comedy, Colley Cibber to patentee, Smithfield Muse to the Ears of Kings.

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40 Pender points to ‘[t]he notion that the monster was in some ways a ‘common ground’ between popular and elite cultures’ (p. 145) as the source of its power to disturb as well as its continual interest. Stephen Pender, “‘No Monsters at the Resurrection’: Inside Some Conjoined Twins,” in Jeffery Jerome Cohen (ed.), Monster Theory: Reading Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).