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BRITISH LITERATURE

牛津英国文学百科全书

David Scott Kastan

Editor in Chief

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THE OXFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

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COLLEY CIBBER

Matthew J. Kinservik

Colley Cibber (1671–1757) is best known in the early twenty-first century as the "King of the Dunces," the title given to him by Alexander Pope in the final versions of *The Dunciad.* This unflattering posthumous reputation is a rare instance of history being written by the loser, for Cibber earned Pope's enmity—and that of many others—by his conspicuous success. During the early decades of the eighteenth century, Cibber dominated the stage as a playwright, actor, and theater manager. He moved in exalted social circles, earning him the laureateship in 1730, and at the end of his career he published an innovative memoir celebrating his long and happy professional life. Little wonder Pope hated him. The power of Pope's satire notwithstanding, Cibber was a remarkable author and theater professional who exerted unparalleled influence over the theatrical culture of his day and who shaped the comic repertory for decades after.

Colley Cibber
Painted plaster bust, perhaps from the workshop of Sir Henry Cheere, c. 1740
NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

Although Cibber served as poet laureate for twenty-seven years and dutifully published the occasional verse that position required, he was not a gifted poet. His contemporary critics delighted in ridiculing his verse as doggerel, but nowadays the general consensus is that his poems are competent if undistinguished. Apart from writing some verse prologues and epilogues to plays, Cibber undertook no more poetic composition than his post required. Poetry simply was not central to his sense of himself as a writer. He became poet laureate as a result of his social connections and his political allegiance to the ministry of Sir Robert Walpole and the House of Hanover. But Cibber's election was not merely the result of political machinations; it was also an acknowledgment that as actor, playwright, and theater manager, he was a cultural arbiter of the first order of magnitude. The theater was the central cultural institution in Georgian England, and more than anyone else, Cibber dominated the stage.

Cibber's theatrical career began in 1690, when he worked (initially for no compensation) at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, where he spent nearly his entire theatrical career. Like most new actors, he started with small parts and angled for bigger ones. When the famous actor Thomas Betterton led an actors' revolt against the management and established a rival company in 1695, Cibber remained at Drury Lane. With many of the leading performers gone, he had the chance to step into roles that previously belonged to more senior actors. He also exploited the opportunity to write plays that featured roles suited to his talents and to become involved in the day-to-day management of the theater. Over the course of the next decade, Cibber became a star performer, an important playwright, and a powerful manager.

SENTIMENTAL COMEDY

As a writer and an actor, Cibber's forte was comic drama, and he is frequently cited as the creator of "sentimental comedy." Literary critics and theater historians have been debating the utility of "sentimental comedy" as a generic term for many decades. The conventional view is that sentimental comedy eschews satiric ridicule in favor of affective tears and that it ends with a strict distribution of poetic justice (rewards for the virtuous characters, punishment for the vicious). Sentimental comedy, according to this view, began as a reaction against the licentious sex comedies of the Restoration era and catered to the moral values of an increasingly bourgeois audience. Whereas satiric comedy assumes the worst of humankind, sentimental comedy believes that people are inherently good.

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Cibber is said to have inaugurated the genre with his first play, *Love's Last Shift* (1696). The play was an immediate hit, and in it Cibber provided himself with the wonderful role of Sir Novelty Fashion, an outrageous and unrepentant fop. The main action concerns the marital troubles of the virtuous Amanda and her rakish husband Loveless. Having just returned from eight years of touring and whoring on the Continent, Loveless is an avowed enemy to marriage. With the help of a friend, Amanda lures him into bed with her under the pretense that she is another new conquest. The next morning, when Loveless learns that he spent the night enjoying the sexual favors of his own wife, he undergoes an instantaneous conversion to marital fidelity. Amanda immediately forgives him, and the play ends with every indication that the two will live happily ever after.

Some critics have lambasted the play as an exercise in moral hypocrisy: Cibber gives audiences four acts of a typical sex comedy and then tries to excuse it all with a hasty fifth-act conversion. These critics have also faulted the reclamation of Loveless as unconvincing, reasonably wondering how long he will remain faithful to his newly exciting marriage bed. Cibber cheerfully acknowledges the first criticism in the epilogue he wrote for the play, calling Loveless's conversion "out of fashion stuff!" then adding, "But then again, / He's lewd for above four acts, gentlemen!" (*Love's Last Shift*). The second criticism is the more serious one, and it goes to the heart of what disturbs many commentators about sentimental comedy. The genre seems to be grounded on the assumption that people are inherently good, a view most critics do not share. As a result, Loveless's conversion strikes many as both false and temporary. This critical position seems to find its greatest enunciation in Sir John Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1696), written as a sequel to *Love's Last Shift* and premiered the following season. As the title suggests, Vanbrugh's play shows Loveless reverting to his old ways. But while *The Relapse* has been regarded as a blow to Cibber and a devastating critique of the sentimentalism of *Love's Last Shift*, it is important to note that Vanbrugh's play was performed at Drury Lane and that Cibber created the role of Lord Foppington in it. *The Relapse* certainly was a response to *Love's Last Shift*, but it was neither an insult to Cibber nor a principled assault on sentimentalism.

One is on safer ground if one regards these plays not as antithetical (satire versus sentiment) but as two innovative satiric comedies that seek to depict real-life vice and folly without offending the increasingly pious sensibilities of theatergoers. Both plays premiered two years before the publication of Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698), an antitheatrical diatribe that began a serious debate about the morality of drama now known as the "Collier controversy." Although Cibber scorned Collier as a censorious fanatic bent on abolishing public theater, he was not necessarily hostile to all of Collier's criticisms. *Love's Last Shift* was produced before the publication of Collier's book, not in response to it, and there is little in Cibber's work to suggest that he had a burning desire to write controversial plays. Rather, he was interested in writing plays that endorsed conventional morality and the political status quo.

The Careless Husband (1704) is a good example. An extraordinarily popular play, it once again offered Cibber as Lord Foppington and focused on the reclamation of a wayward husband. The most famous scene features Lady Easy discovering her husband, Sir Charles, and a maid asleep after obviously having had sex. Rather than upbraid her husband, she merely places her "Steinkirk" collar on his head to prevent him catching cold in his state of undress and subtly to indicate that she has found him out. When he awakens, he is struck by the shame of being discovered and humbled by the patient restraint she has exercised in response to his many infidelities. Like Loveless, his repentance comes late in the play but swiftly.

The Careless Husband was lauded as an original and highly effective play, one that lived up to the stage's ostensible mission to be a school of morality. The decorousness of the dialogue and action in a play that dramatizes marital infidelity was especially striking to contemporary audiences, who recognized it as an important work. In the last decades of the twentieth century the play, and others like it, was variously called "humane comedy," "genteel comedy," and "sympathetic satire." Each of these terms represents an attempt by modern critics to define the decorum and exemplary quality of the comic drama that flourished in the early decades of the eighteenth century without recourse to the generally pejorative term "sentimental."

DRAMATIST, MANAGER, AND MEMOIRIST

As a dramatist and actor, Cibber had ambitions beyond the realm of comedy. Over the course of his long career he wrote fourteen comedies, six tragedies, one masque, one opera libretto, one ballad opera (in two versions), and one pastoral interlude. Apart from the comedies already mentioned, his version of Shakespeare's *Richard III*

(1700) is his most famous legacy as a playwright. Feeling that the long play was too dense with historical references and minor characters, Cibber cut the length by a third, eliminated many scenes and characters, and added more than a thousand lines of his own composition. While this may strike Shakespeare purists as an act of heresy, the result was an effective theatrical vehicle that held the stage in place of the source play for more than a century. When David Garrick made his triumphant debut on the London stage in 1741, he performed Cibber's *Richard III.* And elements of Cibber's version have survived well beyond the eighteenth century. When Laurence Olivier gleefully shouts "Off with his head—so much for Buckingham!" in the famous film version of 1955, he is speaking words written by Cibber, not Shakespeare.

Cibber's literary legacy extends beyond the plays he wrote to include the ones he helped to the stage as a theatrical manager. By 1704 he was deeply involved in repertory decisions at Drury Lane, and in the following decade he and two other actors became comanagers and sharers in the theatrical patent. During his tenure Cibber saw many of the century's most famous comedies to the stage, including George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706), Susanna Centlivre's *The Busy Body* (1709), Sir Richard Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* (1721), and Vanbrugh's *The Provok'd Husband* (1728). Cibber collaborated in the last two, adding touches that made Steele's play more viable on the stage and completing the manuscript that Vanbrugh left unfinished at his death. Although Cibber famously passed up the opportunity to stage John Gay's ballad opera, *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), which went on to be the most popular play of the century, many of the plays he championed remained in the repertory for many decades and became important models for future dramatists.

Drury Lane prospered under Cibber's direction, yet the power he exerted over the repertory earned him many enemies. A squabble over the failure of *Three Hours after Marriage* (1717) earned him the resentment of its joint authors, Pope, Gay, and John Arbuthnot. His rejection of some of Henry Fielding's early plays did the same. Fielding scored his first hit with *The Author's Farce* (1730), which ridicules Cibber as an imperious theatrical tyrant named Marplay. Throughout Fielding's career, he returned to Cibber as a butt of jokes time and again. For the most part, Cibber blithely ignored these provocations and enjoyed the good life he had made for himself as co-patentee of Drury Lane and poet laureate. When he published *An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber, Comedian* in 1740, his sense of complacency and self-satisfaction was on display for the world to read. Significantly, the title refers to Cibber's theatrical life, not to his position as poet laureate ("comedian" in this instance means simply actor). Given that actors were still generally held in low esteem, Cibber's title holds up "comedian" as a badge of honor and indicates what he thought the source of his reputation would be. But he may not have anticipated that the *Apology* itself would become perhaps his greatest literary legacy.

Cibber's *Apology* is a wonderfully readable and informative text. Along with John Downes's *Roscius Anglicanus* (1708), it is one of the great sources for information on the English stage of the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century. Because Cibber was involved in so many aspects of the theater business, he ranges from the details of day-to-day management to firsthand accounts of the important feuds between actors and managers to brilliantly concise and vivid descriptions of the performances of actors like Betterton and Anne Bracegirdle. But more than just a resource for theater historians, the *Apology* is a witty, charming, and irreverent celebration of the author's life that manages to reveal Cibber's personality even as it carefully excludes many of the details that one normally thinks are essential in an autobiography. There is no mention of Cibber's family and little that can be called psychological insights. Instead, Cibber presents an image of himself as a whimsical and breezy fop, the sort of character he excelled in portraying on the stage. Like Sir Novelty Fashion, he is narcissistic even when discussing his faults: "But why make my Follies publick? Why not? I have passed my Time very pleasantly with them, and I don't recollect that they have ever been hurtful to any other Man living" (*Apology*). Most readers agreed: the first run sold out within a month, four editions appeared in Cibber's lifetime, and it has been reprinted several times in the twentieth century.

CRITICAL LEGACY

One of the great blessings of Cibber's life is that he ingratiated himself to powerful people who rewarded him richly for his friendship and loyalty. The great misfortune of his afterlife is that his enemies have exerted the greatest control over his legacy. He began to collect political enemies after he wrote and performed *The Non-Juror* (1717), a satire against Jacobite opponents of the House of Hanover; he gained theatrical ones as co-patentee of Drury Lane; and he attracted poetical ones after being

named laureate. Pope considered him a venal dunce; Fielding thought him a tyrannical buffoon who mangled the English language. Unfortunately for Cibber, *The Careless Husband* and the *Apology* do not enjoy the same stature as *The Dunciad* and *Joseph Andrews.* But this is not a fair comparison. Pope and Fielding were writing for their own age and for the ages, whereas Cibber was only concerned with his own age. As a playwright, he worked in a medium that was necessarily responsive to the current taste, and although he exerted great influence over that taste, his main goal was to produce viable plays with good roles for him to play. Even in the *Apology,* he seems disarmingly unconcerned about his own legacy and focuses instead on preserving the memory of the great performers he had worked with. Throughout the *Apology,* he is always conscious of the ephemeral nature of the theatrical art, insisting that it is impossible to describe the essence of a gifted performer. Yet he consistently does just that for himself and the great actors he worked with, and in the process he created the text that remains one of his greatest legacies.

[*See also* Alexander Pope *and* Poet Laureate.]

SELECTED WORKS

Love's Last Shift; or, the Fool in Fashion (1696)
Woman's Wit; or, the Lady in Fashion (1697)
Xerxes (1699)
The Tragical History of King Richard III (1700)
Love Makes a Man; or, the Fop's Fortune (1700)
She Wou'd and She Wou'd Not; or, the Kind Impostor (1702)
The School-Boy; or, the Comical Rivals (1703)
The Rival Queans, with the Humours of Alexander the Great (1703?)
The Careless Husband (1704)
Perolla and Izadora (1705)
The Double Gallant; or, the Sick Lady's Cure (1707)
The Comical Lovers; or, Marriage à la Mode (1707)
The Lady's Last Stake; or, the Wife's Resentment (1707)
The Rival Fools (1709)
Ximena; or, the Heroick Daughter (1712)
Venus and Adonis (1715)
Myrtillo (1715)
The Non-Juror (1717)
The Refusal; or, the Ladies Philosophy (1721)
Caesar in Egypt (1724)
The Provok'd Husband; or, A Journey to London (1728)
Love in a Riddle (1729)
Damon and Phillida (1729)
Polypheme (1734)
An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber, Comedian (1740)
Papal Tyranny in the Reign of King John (1745)

EDITION

Viator, Timothy J., and William J. Burling, eds., *The Plays of Colley Cibber.* Vol. 1. Madison, NJ, 2001. Part of the first modern edition of Cibber's complete plays, this volume contains *Love's Last Shift, Woman's Wit, Xerxes, Richard III, The Rival Queans,* and *Love Makes a Man.*

FURTHER READING

Ashley, Leonard R. N. *Colley Cibber.* Rev. ed. Boston, 1989. A useful overview of Cibber's career containing an annotated bibliography.

Corman, Brian. *Genre and Generic Change in English Comedy, 1660–1700.* Toronto, 1993. A revisionist consideration of the state of comic drama during Cibber's era that is sensitive to the theories enunciated by the playwrights themselves.

Highfill, Philip H., Jr., Kalman A. Burnim, and Edward A. Langhans. *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers, and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660–1800.* Vol. 3. Carbondale, IL, 1975. The entry on Cibber is authoritative and includes a list of all known likenesses of Cibber.

Koon, Helene. *Colley Cibber: A Biography.* Lexington, KY, 1986. A well-researched contextual account of Cibber's life and career.

CIRCULATING LIBRARIES

Edward Jacobs

Circulating libraries were commercial enterprises that rented books to patrons, typically for an annual or quarterly fee. Developing out of informal arrangements for renting books by a handful of booksellers during the later seventeenth century, these businesses flourished from the 1740s (when the term "circulating library" and trade practices became standard) into the mid-twentieth century. Circulating libraries played a major role in creating the modern popular culture of reading, in part by making books affordable to a wider spectrum of the public, but more importantly by increasing the number of books any single reader could afford to read. Between the 1740s and 1840s circulating libraries also contributed significantly to the production of books, with proprietors of the largest libraries consistently ranking among the most prolific publishers of their day, especially when it came to novels.

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT TO THE 1840s

In the 1660s the bookseller Francis Kirkman advertised that he rented books, as did one Widow Page in 1674. However, the earliest evidence of businesses called "circulating libraries" and centered on book rental dates from 1725, when Allan Ramsay opened Ramsay's Circulating Library in Edinburgh; sometime in the 1730s, Thomas Wright opened shop in London. Surviving trade documents indicate that by the 1750s there were at least nine circulating libraries in London, although here as elsewhere records surely underestimate actual numbers. By 1780 there were at least nineteen and by 1800 at least twenty-six libraries in London, a number that remained fairly steady until the 1820s, after which the number of independent libraries declined, as large franchise libraries expanded.

Many libraries, especially in London, were large and long-lived affairs, and the number of books they offered readers steadily increased throughout the period. According to Paul Kaufman's summary (1967) of the twenty-two extant catalogs from eighteenth-century England, the libraries of William Bathoe (founded c. 1751, succeeding to Thomas Wright; issued a catalog in 1757), Thomas Lowndes (founded c. 1751; catalog in 1766), and John and Francis Noble (founded c. 1739; catalog in 1767) all offered patrons stocks of around 5,000 titles. Roughly twenty years later John Bell (founded c. 1769, succeeding to Bathoe; catalog in 1778) and Thomas Hookham (founded in 1764; catalog in 1794) stocked around 8,000 titles. By the end of the century, William Lane's Minerva Press and Circulating Library (founded in 1770; catalogs 1796–1802) offered over 20,000 titles. Lane's enterprise is by far the single most significant circulating library of the period 1740–1840, in part because he offered to franchise provincial circulating libraries, providing them with ready-made stock, but also because of his ingenuity in advertising and in cultivating generic reading. Many of the large London libraries survived well into the nineteenth century, with the Minerva Library lasting until 1848, although after the 1820s it evidently waned in scope.

In England outside of London, circulating libraries developed more slowly, except in major spa towns such as Bath, where Lewis Bull was in business by 1731. However, during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, provincial libraries developed rapidly, with the *Monthly Magazine* estimating their number at 1,000 by 1800. Judging by the fourteen surviving catalogs for libraries outside of London, provincial libraries were generally much smaller than those in London, with an average of 3,123 titles. Significantly, among these, the nine libraries situated in the relatively large cities of Hereford, Leicester, Newcastle, Bath, and Birmingham averaged 4,619 titles, while those in the relatively small towns of Darlington, Derby, Newton Abbey, and Whitehaven averaged only 430 titles. The earliest of these catalogs date from 1770, and the average date is 1793, again suggesting that English circulating libraries developed much later outside of London than in it. No significant evidence survives about how much London libraries contributed to the development of provincial ones through specific relations such as the franchising

that Lane offered. However, the very existence of *The Use of Circulating Libraries Considered*, a 1797 how-to manual for proprietors printed in London (reproduced in Varma, 1972), suggests that at the end of the eighteenth century the proprietors of London circulating libraries were seeking to disseminate the institution.

The Use of Circulating Libraries Considered warns that "not one Circulating Library in twenty" could make a profit unless it combined book rental with some other business, especially in "country towns," so many smaller libraries were hybrid enterprises. Stationery and the sale of books and newspapers were the most common adjuncts, but libraries also frequently combined with trade in hats, medicines, teas, perfumes, and tobacco, as well as with barbering. It is unclear whether it was more common to add a circulating library to a preexisting shop or to found a circulating library as a hybrid business, but practicality would suggest the former happened more often. In keeping with the advice of *The Use of Circulating Libraries Considered*, hybrid libraries seem to have been more common in "country towns." However, especially in the nineteenth century, such libraries also proliferated in London, renting books (especially popular fiction) for around a penny per volume to lower-class readers unable to afford the annual fees at large libraries such as Lane's or Hookham's, which by the 1814 had risen to two guineas (504 pence). In 1838 the *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* identified thirty-eight such penny-per-volume, hybrid libraries in three Westminster parishes, with modest stocks of just over two hundred volumes, on average.

Evidence about circulating libraries in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales is relatively sparse, especially outside of major population centers. However, the documents that have survived suggest that the development of circulating libraries in these nations followed a roughly similar path to that in England: the institution emerged in major metropolitan areas around the middle of the eighteenth century and afterwards spread to more provincial locales, where libraries were typically much smaller affairs.

FEES AND CLIENTELE

The vast majority of circulating libraries rented books for an annual or quarterly fee, a system that notably simplified accounts. Market forces kept fees relatively standard among the large metropolitan libraries of any particular period. Between the 1730s and 1842 the standard annual fee generally amounted to about double the purchase price of a normal three-volume novel of the time, although in real terms it rose from a low of half a guinea (ten shillings and six pence) in the 1750s to two guineas (forty-two shillings) by 1814. When Mudie's Select Library opened in 1842, it undercut other libraries with a fee of only one guinea, which amounted to half rather than double the purchase price of a three-volume novel, but only because Mudie used his clout with publishers to maintain the cost of a "triple-decker" novel at a whopping thirty-one shillings and six pence. After 1894 typical fees fell to half a guinea, which initially was again about double the purchase price of a novel but became more relatively expensive as book prices fell.

Only middle- and upper-class readers could reasonably afford circulating library fees before the twentieth century. Especially during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries small cut-rate libraries like those described by the London Statistical Society (later renamed the Royal Statistical Society) to some extent made books affordable to a wider spectrum of the public. But overall, circulating libraries increased the number of books relatively well-off readers could afford to read far more than they increased the number of people who could afford to read books.

By allowing middle-class readers to consume hundreds of books for the price of buying two books, circulating libraries were key to the creation of a modern popular culture of reading, in which reading new books became a regular form of leisure activity. Circulating libraries in turn fostered more "casual" modes of reading. When people could afford to buy only a few books, they tended to buy books that could be reread with profit and to read those in a meditative mode akin to study of the Bible. By contrast, when people could afford to rent hundreds of books in the same year, they did not have to seek "new" pleasure in familiar words, ideas, and characters, but could instead take pleasure in the raw novelty of what they were reading (Erickson 1996; Jacobs 2003).

Circulating libraries also augmented the occasions books offered for social interaction by, for instance, allowing the public reading of books within families to become a regular feature of domestic sociability. Circulating libraries early gained a reputation for being patronized mainly by middle-class women and servants. However, the (admittedly sparse) evidence about clientele suggests that although women and relatively lower-class readers patronized circulating libraries disproportionately (given their lower literacy rates), both groups were numerical minorities among the patrons of circulating libraries, especially of large metropolitan ones.

RENTAL CONDITION AND LIBRARY ORGANIZATION

Subscription fees did not give patrons unlimited access to the books in circulating libraries. As the conditions set forth in extant catalogs indicate, the widespread policy was to restrict patrons to two books at a time, only one of which could be a new book. Many libraries did not circulate large and expensive folio volumes, asking patrons to read them in the library. New books had to be returned within two to six days; other books could be kept for a month. Fines were charged for late returns. From the 1790s many libraries introduced a class system of fees, whereby those paying a higher rate had exclusive access to new books and/or could take out more books at a time. Generally, the limit was six, but Lane's 1798 catalog specifies eighteen rentals at a time for three guineas (sixty-three shillings). For an extra shilling per quarter, some libraries would deliver books to patrons living within a mile or so of the library. Some larger metropolitan libraries offered to ship books to readers outside of London, who were entitled to a greater number of books at a time for the normal fee but had to pay shipping costs.

Catalogs were offered to the general public for a price between six pence and one shilling; some libraries refunded that money to those who subsequently joined the library. In a mild form of extortion, patrons were instructed to order books by catalog number rather than title. And, as the catalog of William Bathoe's library puts it, in order "to prevent Disappointments," a patron "wanting TWO BOOKS is always to send a List of TEN, and wanting One only, half that number."

The catalogs of most circulating libraries classified books first by printed format (which corresponded to size and status: folios were large "coffee-table books," while duodecimos were small "pocket-sized" books), then by genre, and within genre by alphabetized short title. This organizational strategy encouraged customers to perceive and choose books as members of genres, since it presented them with ready-made lists of books of the same size and hence "status" that brought similar generic conventions to bear on similar topics. For instance, any patron of Bathoe's library wanting to rent *Love in Distress; or, The Lucky Discovery* would, in the process of locating its catalog number (2153), also have discovered ten other small octavo novels (catalog numbers 2149–2159) whose short title began with "Love" or "Lovers."

Most circulating libraries used their catalogs as working shelf lists. Surviving illustrations of circulating libraries suggest that they shelved books in descending order of size, with folios occupying upper shelves and duodecimos the lowest ones, although some illustrations also show folios on the lowest shelves. Many illustrations show patrons browsing among shelves, a practice that would have foregrounded generic and physical classes of books by, for instance, making octavo and duodecimo novels literally more accessible, as opposed to folio volumes on divinity elevated beyond patrons' reach.

LIBRARY STOCK: "EVERGREEN TREE OF DIABOLICAL KNOWLEDGE"?

Circulating libraries quickly gained the reputation for being "an evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge"—to use the much-quoted phrase coined by Richard Brinsley Sheridan in his play *The Rivals* (1775)—that stocked mainly trashy novels. Evidence is mixed about the accuracy of this reputation, but it is probably exaggerated, at least for large, metropolitan libraries. Among the five surviving catalogs of smaller provincial libraries, with average holdings of 430 titles, over 70 percent of the titles rate as fiction, and *The Use of Circulating Libraries Considered* suggests 79 percent fiction. By contrast, among the seventeen surviving catalogs for large libraries, with average holdings of about 5,000 titles, only an average of 20 percent of the titles may be classified as fiction. However, because many large metropolitan libraries stocked as many as "twenty five copies of each modern and approved work"—to quote a 1798 advertisement by William Lane's Minerva Library—their catalogs may underestimate their actual holdings and trade in the genre, since novels probably constituted a good proportion of "modern and approved" works and since, for economic reasons, larger libraries were more likely to stock multiple copies. Still, large libraries probably dealt less in fiction than did provincial ones, although the difference may be less dramatic than catalogs would indicate.

Regardless of how much multiple copies brought the proportion of fiction circulated by large libraries in line with the proportion listed in provincial catalogs, most libraries also offered patrons works in a fairly standard array of other genres. John Bell's catalog (1778) offers a representative instance of both what these genres were and their relative proportions, at least among large metropolitan libraries, whose catalogs more often classify by genre than do provincial ones. According to Paul Kaufman, Bell's catalog listed 2,150 works of history, lives, and antiquities; 900 of romances and other books of enter-

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tainment (such as fiction); 700 of poetry and plays; 700 of *livres français*; 400 of physic, surgery, and other works of practical instruction; 300 of voyages and travel; and 200 of divinity.

PUBLISHING BY CIRCULATING LIBRARIES

Many of the proprietors of large metropolitan libraries were also major publishers, especially when it came to fiction. For instance, during the 1770s John and Francis Noble and Thomas Lowndes were the top two producers of new fiction in London, together accounting for 20 percent of such works. During the 1780s William Lane and Thomas Hookham between them produced 32 percent of new fiction in London. By the 1790s Lane and Hookham accounted for 41 percent of such fiction, with Lane alone producing 33 percent.

During the eighteenth century, publishers attached to circulating libraries were, as a group, over two times more likely than other publishers to publish fiction by women, and circulating library publishers "discovered" many important female novelists, including Frances Burney and Ann Radcliffe. During the last three decades of the eighteenth century, circulating library publishers had a particular affinity for novels that were "anonymously female," whose title pages, for instance, declared them to be "by a Lady."

THE VICTORIAN "TYRANNY" OF THE CIRCULATING LIBRARY

Charles Edward Mudie opened his Select Library in 1842, and between 1852 (when he moved to larger quarters) and his death in 1890, he transformed the circulating library institution in several ways. Most importantly, Mudie vastly increased the scale of the enterprise, advertising aggressively, setting up branch libraries throughout London, offering free pickup and delivery through a system of vans, greatly improving the speed of service to provincial customers, and launching an export department. This "industrial" scale not only allowed him to underprice most of his competitors at one guinea (twenty-one shillings) per year versus two; it also gave him substantial control over the publishing trade, since his libraries bought a large percentage of the books they sold, purchasing an estimated 7.5 million books over the course of the century. Mudie used this influence to ensure that most people could afford to read recently published novels only by subscribing to his library, pressuring publishers to maintain the price of such fiction at an exorbitant ten shillings and six pence per volume and to issue such fiction only in three volumes, with the result that a very small spectrum of the public could afford to buy new novels on a regular basis. Publishers found it profitable to sell the bulk of their output to Mudie and his main rival W. H. Smith & Son, and consequently, until the 1890s, despite complaints by authors, readers, and politicians about the limited access to new fiction, most people who wanted to read it had to go to Mudie or Smith.

In 1858 Mudie had rejected an offer from the newsagents W. H. Smith & Son to lend his Select Library books at their network of railway bookstalls. Early in the 1860s, under the guidance of William Henry Smith the younger, Smith's started its own chain of circulating libraries, using trains to move books between railway bookstalls and a few large, central libraries. The enterprise quickly expanded to a size nearly equaling Mudie's, but in fundamental ways the two competitors cooperated to foster the Mudie system, since Smith's library followed Mudie's lead both in pressuring publishers to keep the price of new novels high and in excluding books on moral grounds.

This "moral" screening of books, regardless of their commercial promise or artistic merit, was Mudie's second major innovation in the circulating library institution. Victorian society generally accepted such censorship as proper, but some social critics and authors complained bitterly, with censorship of *Jude the Obscure* (1895) probably contributing to Thomas Hardy's abandonment of novel-writing. After Mudie's censored George Moore's *A Modern Lover* (1883), Moore launched a public campaign against the practice, publishing "A New Censorship of Literature" in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1894 and the pamphlet *Literature at Nurse, or Circulating Morals* in 1895. The latter was timed to coincide with the publication of Moore's *A Mummer's Wife* in one volume at six shillings, and thereafter a growing tide of publishers followed its lead, although they did so less because they shared Moore's artistic outrage than because they now saw more profit in selling new fiction in one volume directly to a "mass" readership for as little as three shillings than in continuing to sell three-volume fiction mainly to Mudie and Smith at an inflated price.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

As the selling price for books plummeted after the collapse of the Mudie-Smith system of inflation, circulating libraries also became cheaper. Mudie's and Smith's gradually lost market share to low-cost franchises, the most

successful of which was Boots Booklovers' Library, launched in 1898 as an adjunct to the famous Boots chemists chain. Boots charged an annual fee of ten shillings and six pence (half the fee at Mudie's) and also rented books for two pence per week on a two shilling and six pence deposit. During its first thirty years it bought an average of one million books per year. Boots's library lasted until 1966, by which time the steady growth of free, tax-funded public libraries (which had been licensed by an act of 1850, but proliferated only from the beginning of the twentieth century) and the ever-decreasing cost of paperbacks put an end to the two-hundred year venture of renting books for profit.

[*See also* Popular Romance *and* Reading.]

FURTHER READING

Alston, Robin. Library History Database at http://www.ralston.co.uk/contents.htm. The most up-to-date and comprehensive master list of known circulating libraries throughout the U.K., with citations of authorities.

Altick, Richard. *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800–1900.* Chicago, 1957. Still the authoritative general work on mass readership, with documentary details about nineteenth- and early twentieth-century libraries and their role in promoting that readership.

Blakey, Dorothy. *The Minerva Press.* London, 1939. The definitive account of the library and press founded by William Lane, with a bibliography of the press and reproductions of advertisements and other publicity from the library.

Erickson, Lee. *The Economy of Literary Form: English Literature and the Industrialization of Publishing 1800–1850.* Baltimore, 1996. Chapter 5, "The Economy of Novel Reading: Jane Austen and the Circulating Library," summarizes evidence about circulating libraries and interprets libraries' effect on reading culture and publishing economics at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Griest, Guinevere. *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel.* Bloomington, IN, 1970. The definitive account of Mudie's library, with much information also about its main rival, W. H. Smith & Son.

Hamlyn, Hilda. "Eighteenth-Century Circulating Libraries in England." *The Library*, 5th series, 1 (1947): 197–222. The best short history of libraries of the period, combining concision with careful detail and documentation regarding business practices.

Jacobs, Edward. *Accidental Migrations: An Archaeology of Gothic Discourse.* Lewisburg, PA, 2000. Chapter 5, "The Gothic Library," summarizes and interprets known facts about the eighteenth-century circulating library business and provides data on publishing by circulating libraries.

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Kaufman, Paul. "Community Lending Libraries in Eighteenth-Century Ireland and Wales." *Library Quarterly* 33 (1963): 299–312. A summary and interpretation of evidence about libraries in Ireland and Wales.

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Kaufman, Paul. "The Rise of Community Libraries in Scotland." *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 59 (1965): 233–294. A summary and interpretation of evidence about Scottish libraries.

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Raven, James. "Historical Introduction: The Novel Comes of Age." In *The English Novel 1770–1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles*, edited by Peter Garside, James Raven, and Rainer Schöwerling. Vol. 1, *1770–1799*, edited by James Raven and Antonia Forster, with Stephen Bending, 15–121. Oxford, 2000. A magisterial summary and interpretation of the data compiled by this ongoing effort to "list all novels of the period whether or not surviving in extant copies, their publication and pricing details, and contemporary review information." Includes a lengthy section on circulating libraries and many tables and statistics that help to quantify their publishing activity.

Raven, James. "The Noble Brothers and Popular Publishing." *The Library*, 6th series, 12 (1990): 293–345. A

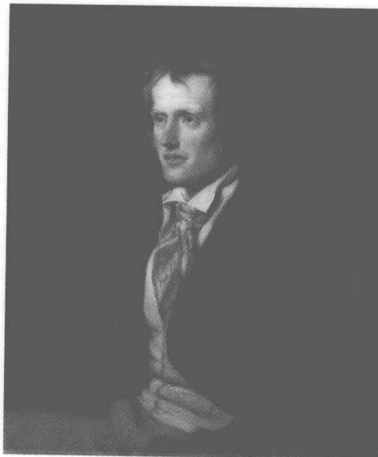
documentary account of publishing by the two brothers who were the earliest circulating library proprietors to become major publishers.

Varma, Devendra. *The Evergreen Tree of Diabolical Knowledge.* Washington, DC, 1972. A sometimes eccentric but richly documentary history of libraries to the early nineteenth century, with appendices that reproduce the 1797 instructional manual *The Use of Circulating Libraries Considered* as well as a wealth of book labels and advertisements.

JOHN CLARE

Philip W. Martin

We are accustomed to understanding the Romantic poets as authors whose lives are at least as interesting as their works. Indeed, the dramatization of autobiography, if only obliquely, is an expectation many readers bring to these writers, and the expansion of the Romantic canon in the late twentieth century did little to disturb such anticipation. John Clare (1793–1864) is a case in point. Although his poetry is not predominantly lyrical or meditative, his place in the revised Romantic canon is assured and authenticated largely by way of his most famous (and, ironically, atypical) lyric poem, "I Am," a poem that—to use a cliché with rare justification—speaks volumes, according to its enthusiastic commentators. "I Am" tells the story of John Clare's tragic life: it speaks of the alienation of madness, the tragedy of a writer lauded by fashion then subsequently ignored, and the bewilderment of the self-taught poet cruelly dislocated from his roots ("I am—yet what I am, none cares or knows; / My friends forsake me like a memory lost:— / I am the self-consumer of my woes"). Written in the last phase of Clare's life, sometime between 1842 and 1846 while he was confined in the Northampton Asylum, "I Am" is rightly regarded as an extraordinary poem, and it is a powerful valedictory. But it is not a talismanic testimony to Clare's genius. His poetry and his life are more interesting and less predictable than their easy absorption into the Romantic mythology might imply. Even so, while it is too easy to laud Clare as a poet because he began his life as a peasant and ended it as a lunatic, there are inextricable links between his life and his writing.



John Clare
Portrait by William Hilton, 1820
NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

BEGINNINGS

John Clare was born in Helpston, a small village in Northamptonshire in 1793. His twin sister, Elisabeth, died shortly after birth, and his early life was one of hardship and rural poverty. His father, Parker Clare, was a thresher, and his mother came from a nearby village where her father was the town shepherd. She could neither read nor write, but her husband read and enjoyed broadsheets and ballads, and there is little doubt that Parker Clare's enthusiasm for storytelling seeded his son's talent for writing, together with the teaching John encountered at his local schools, attended only intermittently owing to the requirements of seasonal employment. His parents did their best to balance the needs of the family with their desire to see their son educated, and in this respect their parenting was no different from that in a great many laborer families of the time. What was extraordinary was John Clare's enthusiasm for book learning: he borrowed books avidly, he read through mealtimes, he practiced his handwriting as much as was possible with the meager resources available, and he began to write verses in imitation of the poems he had read. After a series of jobs in the struggling local rural economy and a period of depression brought on in 1818 by his realization that his contributions to the family finances were insufficient to save them from public assistance, followed by employment as a lime burner in Rutland through which he was able to alleviate this hardship, Clare began to explore the possibility of becoming a published poet and earning an income from his writing. There followed a number of complex and generally unhappy negotiations with local publishers and would-be patrons, but eventually Clare met John Taylor (of Taylor and Hessey, the publishers of Keats) in 1819. Taylor agreed to publish Clare's poetry, and in 1820 his first and most successful volume, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, was published and ran through four editions in a year. The critical response was generally very favor-

able; Clare was hailed as a natural genius and taken up by influential people in the literary circles of London. He followed this success with *The Village Minstrel* (1821), which was also well received. Thereafter interest in Clare's poetry declined, and two additional volumes, *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1827) and *The Rural Muse* (1835), were unable to perpetuate his short-lived celebrity.

CRITICAL STANDING

These four volumes constitute the entirety of Clare's poems published in his lifetime, but his modern editors have made available a large corpus of poetry and prose writings transcribed from manuscript collections. Clare was a prolific writer throughout his life, and although his reputation as a poet rapidly waned, he continued to write through the periods of depression and anxiety that he suffered through the 1830s. He wrote even during his confinement (from 1842 to his death in 1864) in the Northamptonshire asylum, where some of his writings were collected and transcribed by William Knight, the house steward for part of that period.

Clare's poetry is now highly regarded, and this regard has grown, at least in part, from a revaluation of nature poetry in the last thirty years of the twentieth century. Prior to this, Clare was seen as an interesting but minor talent. Although there had been some perceptive and interesting criticism of his work by writers such as Edmund Blunden earlier in the century (indeed, Clare has regularly attracted the commentary of other poets), it failed to gain much purchase in the critical establishment of the time. The revaluation of nature poetry has occurred through three separate but not entirely disconnected strands: the politicization of landscape, the aesthetics of description, and ecocriticism (a mode of inquiry that foregrounds the ecological implications of texts). In each of these lines of inquiry, Clare has proved a rich critical subject. Taken together, the accumulation of this criticism now makes Clare a major figure in literary history, and he has emerged as a writer who opens up a highly individual vista on the rural landscape of the early nineteenth century with its wildlife, occupations, gypsies, trespass laws, and processes of enclosure. Simultaneously, his poetry is understood to work in novel ways through an apparently naive use of language that nevertheless fixes objects, and the relations between them, with a startling clarity. This pellucid quality, combining with a careful but understated accuracy of recording, seems to speak of a profound comprehension of the interdependence of local ecologies and the living forms of the natural world.

Clare's ready susceptibility to political criticism derives from his place in the English class system, his witnessing the enclosures made in the countryside around him, and the uncomfortable relations he had with his patrons, as well as, to some extent, the literary establishment. After the publication of *Poems Descriptive* in 1820, Clare was pressured by his patrons, Eliza Emmerson and Lord Radstock, to remove from subsequent editions passages regarded as offensive. This has become one of the most frequently cited incidents of Clare's exploitation by the rich and the powerful. One such passage, from the poem "Helpstone," which describes in part the changes wrought by enclosure, runs as follows (this and other quotations in this article are from the Robinson and Powell edition of 1984):

> Accursed wealth o'er bounding human laws
> Of every evil thou remainst the cause
> Victims of want those wretches such as me
> Too truly lay their wretchedness to thee
> Thou art the bar that keeps from being fed
> And thine our loss of labour and of bread
> Thou art the cause that levels every tree
> And woods bow down to clear a way for thee

These sentiments, regarded by Clare's conservative readers as too radical, troubled Lord Radstock particularly. He bullied Eliza Emmerson into attempting to persuade Clare to remove the passage, arguing that Clare's depression had twisted him into an unjust deprecation of the wealthy, who, Radstock insisted, had raised Clare from his lowly condition. Emmerson responded by writing to Clare to tell him that "gratitude" should be his theme. In the end, Clare reluctantly asked his publisher (who, to his credit, offered to defend him) to make the alterations, commenting "D—n that canting way of being forced to please I say—I cant abide it and one day or other I will show my Independence more strongly than ever."

This episode demonstrates Clare's resistance and his independence of mind, but the weight given it in accounts of his career may be a little deceptive. In fact, Clare rarely wrote poetry that included direct political commentary of this kind in any sustained way, preferring a poetic mode in which the speaking voice, often the first person, is emptied of opinion and operates instead as a remarkably equable and accurate conveyor of detail. And it is that detail, and the manner of its arrangement, that carries the poetry's statements in particularly subtle ways. "The Woodman," for example, is by no means an overtly political poem, nor does it adopt a strategy for the sub-

merged expression of political views. Rather, like a number of Clare's poems, it works almost entirely with the language of description to convey the sharpest impression of the hardships endured by the woodman:

His breakfast water porridge humble food
A barley crust he in his wallet flings
Wi this he toils and labours i' the wood
And chops his faggot twists his band and sings
As happily as princes and as kings
Wi all their luxury—and lest is he
Can but the little that his labour brings
Make both ends meet and from long debts keep free
And keep as neat and clean his creasing family

Far oer the dreary fields the woodland lies
Rough is the journey which he daily goes
The wooley clouds that hang the frowning skies
Keep winnowing down their drifting sleet and snows
And thro his doublet keen the north wind blows
While hard as iron the cemented ground
As smooth as glass the glibbed pool is froze
His nailed boots wi clenching tread rebound
And dithering echo starts and mocks the clamping sound

The poem reserves a space for a comparison between the rich and the poor, and a brief allusion to the "scant benevolence" of parish relief, and to some extent these lines are entirely conventional complaints redolent of Thomas Gray or Oliver Goldsmith. The distinction of the poem, and indeed its political power, comes from its evocation of a way of life through the detail of everyday existence, through the situation of human life in an indifferent and cruel environment, marked out here by almost uncanny details of the echoing footsteps and the winnowing snow.

Clare's use of descriptive language has been noted as singular by a number of critics and is perhaps best summarized by Seamus Heaney's much-cited phrase "the inexorable one-thing-after-anotherness of the world" and best explored by Heaney's revealing commentary on the poem known as "The Mouse's Nest" ("I found a ball of grass among the hay"). Ironically, Clare exceeds in his descriptive language the toughest strictures laid down by eminent Romantic poets. In his prose and his poetry, but by no means consistently, Clare comfortably and effortlessly meets the steep demands about plain language made by William Wordsworth in the "Preface to the Second Edition of the Lyrical Ballads." His use of the vernacular is never strained (even though he read Burns carefully and learned from him), and his descriptions of animals easily seem to fulfill Keats's requirement that the poet, in his finest moments, live beyond the self. Keats struggled eloquently to explain this by way of his observation of a sparrow. In "The Last of March" Clare blunders straight in with descriptions of lapwings and rooks to show—unwittingly but precisely—what Keats meant:

The startling pee-wits, as they pass,
Scream joyous whizzing over head,
Right glad the fields and meadow grass
Will quickly hide their careless shed:
The rooks where yonder witchens spread
Quawk clamorous to the spring's approach

Neither Keats nor Wordsworth would risk "whizzing," nor would they stoop to "witchens" or "quawk," words that come to Clare readily, although not thoughtlessly, as the perfect choice.

It is partly such descriptive facility that qualifies Clare to be read as an ecological poet, for within this dimension of his work may be found the tracing of celebratory relations between the observing human eye and the surrounding forms of natural life. Pleasure is one important element of these relations, but Clare's view, as shown in "The Thrushes Nest," is almost always represented as an intrusion in the secret and almost fabulous world of nature:

Within a thick and spreading hawthorn bush
That overhung a molehill large and round
I heard from morn to morn a merry thrush
Sing hymns to sunrise while I drunk the sound
With joy and often an intruding guest
I watched her secret toils from day to day
How true she warped the moss to form her nest

Clare's ecological poetry also extends to forms of political conservationism through poems such as "The Lamentations of Round-Oak Waters," "The Lament of Swordy Well," and "Langley Bush," rural sites destroyed in Clare's time, and with them not only their local ecologies but also the ways of life that gave them personal and social significance.

CLARE AND IDENTITY

The qualities described above are marked out clearly in Clare's early verse, but they are also to be found in his prose writings and in the poetry of the asylum period. Clare was not regarded as a dangerous lunatic (he was not locked up, as such, for much of this time, and he was allowed to wander into Northampton town and return to the asylum); his madness took the form of confusion, depression, and excessive anxiety. This being so, it is hard

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