It is high time that we had a few kind words for Colley Cibber. Someone who evoked strong feelings on all sides during his lifetime, Cibber since his death has remained fixed atop Pope’s Throne of Dulness, where most readers first encounter him. He has fared better with theater scholars, who value his foppish performances, several of his plays, and his colorful reckoning of London’s star players in An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber. But even this assessment is, Ms. McGirr suggests, inadequate. Her book expands our sense of Cibber’s achievements by looking beyond the fop and considering Cibber’s tragic characters, Shakespearean adaptations, and theatrical family. And in the process, it advocates for a more critical application of archival documents to make such figures as Cibber more than exemplars of a “partial history.”

The mental image one conjures up of Cibber the actor is likely the one in Giuseppe Grisoni’s portrait, featuring him clad as The Relapse’s Lord Foppington taking a pinch of snuff. But Ms. McGirr argues that we have both overemphasized Cibber’s fops at the expense of his villains, and misinterpreted the fop character. Fewer than one-fifth of Cibber’s characters were fops, and the large number of performed villains indicates his success in those parts, despite critics’ mockery. Fops, moreover, were more rakish and dangerous than we tend to consider them, and here Ms. McGirr offers a helpful reassessment of that character type. Regarding Cibber as comanager of Drury Lane Theater, a post he held for nearly a quarter century, the anecdotes of his apparent mismanagement originate from those whom he rejected, like Fielding, not from those who worked with him. Ms. McGirr’s arguments for a new assessment of him as actor and theater manager are important not only for the fresh light they cast on Cibber—he comes across as a more versatile performer and a more capable manager—but also for their measured approach to the archive. The prior “partial history” of Cibber has concentrated on the most popular aspects of his biography at the expense of a more comprehensive assessment. Ms. McGirr demonstrates that attending to the anecdotes’ originators and their personal beefs with Cibber occasions a more equitable assessment of his career.

The discussion of how Shakespeare became Shakespeare continues apace in eighteenth-century studies, and to this debate Ms. McGirr’s work on Cibber contributes significantly. One of the ongoing questions within this field is when eighteenth-century audiences stopped preferring adaptations of Shakespearean plays to the originals. His adaptations of Richard III and King John, and their supposedly poor receptions, have prompted some scholars to identify Cibber as the catalyst. In countering this perspective, Ms. McGirr identifies later writers such as Garrick and Tate as still adapting Shakespeare, reclaims the merits of Cibber’s Richard III (something she does elsewhere for his version of King John), and cites the popularity of his performances of Richard, including in-demand performances that brought him out of retirement.

Ms. McGirr also reconsiders Cibber’s family. In recent years Charlotte Charke, Cibber’s youngest daughter, has garnered the most positive press, including her reissued autobiography, an essay collection, and Katherine Shevelow’s popular biography. To this state of affairs Ms. McGirr poses a significant counterargument. While acknowledging the compelling nature of Charke’s voice, especially in a time when actress studies and
queer studies are thriving, Ms. McGirr reminds us that in detailing her break with her father Charke tells only one side of the story, omitting her own contribution to that rupture: her portrayal of “Lord Place,” a mean-spirited lampoon of Cibber, in Fielding’s *Pasquin*. Cibber saw Charke’s debut—the first of over sixty performances—and never forgave her. Ms. McGirr’s discussion of his relations with his other theatrical child, Theophilus, is not as substantial but there is not as much to correct. More illuminating is her discussion of Cibber’s other familial relations, showing him to be more of a family man than previously thought.

The study is strong but not perfect. Although Ms. McGirr specifies that her work is not a biography but rather a critical reappraisal, an articulation of the book’s relationship to Helene Koon’s 1986 biography would have been helpful. In some areas accurate editing is wanting. There is a reference to a Table 2.1 that purports to give Cibber’s performance and publication details but this table does not exist though the appendix helpfully offers the first and last known performances Cibber gave in each of his roles. Another table compares “Cibberian” and “Other” productions of the plays he authored, but “Other” needs more clarification—other theaters? during what years? in which cities? Picture captions have also been reversed on two pages, and the index is inadequate. In terms of content, glossed over in the family chapter is mention of Cibber’s being arraigned twice for sexual assault, with the first arrest leading to jail time.

*Partial Histories* is an important book in several ways—in its reevaluation of Cibber, an important personage to eighteenth-century theater and the literary world at large, and in its careful sifting of archival documents, weighing “partial” accounts in an effort to make the story of Colley Cibber less biased.

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Lloyd Evans concluded a recent review of a revival of *The Threepenny Opera* with the assertion that “this is the last century in which [Brecht’s] work will be performed” (*The Spectator*, June 11, 2016). For Evans, Brecht is chained to a particularly preachy version of Marxism, and his work feels ever more “puerile and dated.” Joel Schechter could not disagree more. For him, Brecht has never been more relevant. I suspect Mr. Schechter is closer to the truth than Evans: one need not be a doctrinaire Marxist to appreciate anew Brecht’s critiques of a world run by corrupt plutocrats.

But while Mr. Schechter may have started out with a promising subject, the finished product is frustrating. The basic claim is that the writers attempting to criticize Walpole under the restrictions of the Licensing Act were “early Brechtians.” This argument is interesting enough—if somewhat vague, since “Brechtian” is used very liberally—and even plausible at points. But the desperate attempt to show the “relevance” of both eighteenth-century satiric drama and Brecht pretty quickly leads Mr. Schechter into some very odd places. Every academic wants his or her work to be “relevant,” but Mr. Schechter’s approach is scattergun and far from subtle. Occupy Wall Street is named several times. Chelsea Manning shows up randomly. Fictional interstitial chapters (“lost Mes-