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Michael A. Morrison

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## Prologue: Legacies

This young artist, profiting by the lessons of tradition . . . casts it boldly aside and emerges into the rarified atmosphere of a new art, greater because it is new, stronger because it is built upon an old foundation.

– *Brooklyn Times* (9 March 1920)

ON 6 MARCH 1920, the Plymouth Theatre in New York was filled to capacity with more than a thousand spectators eager to witness John Barrymore's Shakespearean debut in *Richard III*. Many in the audience that night were skeptical of Barrymore's ability to succeed. Although he had achieved noteworthy triumphs in dramatic roles beginning with his appearance in Galsworthy's *Justice* four years earlier, he was only half a decade removed from a career devoted almost exclusively to light comedy. His limitations – particularly his restricted vocal range – were widely known. Many in the audience, too, could recall the bravura Shakespearean performances of Edwin Booth, Sir Henry Irving, and Richard Mansfield. Barrymore, in effect, was challenging those great names.

By the end of the evening, however, it was apparent to most in attendance that Barrymore's skills compared favorably with those of his eminent predecessors. His repressed, psychological portrayal, coupled with a newly developed vocal technique and with ground-breaking direction and design by Arthur Hopkins and Robert Edmond Jones, had created a theatrical landmark. Barrymore's performance was praised as a welcome departure from the "tragic elevation" and orchestral tones of the Victorian and Edwardian period; the production was hailed by the leading critics of the day as the beginning of a new era for Shakespeare on the American stage.

Two years later, Barrymore again joined forces with Hopkins and Jones to present *Hamlet*. The production opened on 16 November 1922 to near-unanimous critical acclaim: Barrymore's performance, Hopkins's direction, and Jones's mise-en-scène combined to create one of the American theatre's

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most vital, exciting Shakespearean events. The production broke new ground with its Freudian approach to character; Barrymore's "intellectual" portrayal – colloquial, restrained, yet forceful and startlingly clear – electrified the audience and moved the critics to proclaim him as one of the greatest of the Hamlets seen in New York.

Barrymore won further laurels in 1925 when he brought his Hamlet to the Haymarket Theatre in London – a city where American tragedians had in the past achieved scant success. His performance was acclaimed by discerning critics such as James Agate and A. B. Walkley; many of their colleagues hailed the "modern note" of his interpretation and, like their American counterparts, opined that Barrymore's production made *Hamlet* seem like "a new play."<sup>1</sup>

The Barrymore revivals constituted a theatrical revolution, one that swept aside the modified version of the nineteenth-century "grand manner" that a number of leading actors had kept before the public through the years of the First World War and beyond. Swept aside, too, were the colorful, interpolated pageantry and crowds of supernumeraries of tradition, along with the magnificent palaces, panoramic battlefields, and other tributes to the scene painter's art that had typified Shakespearean production during the Victorian era and its aftermath. Barrymore, Hopkins, and Jones played a major role in restoring the tradition of dynamic Shakespearean production to Broadway and the West End, but their most significant contribution – often overlooked by biographers and historians – was to introduce innovative methods of acting, direction, and design that radically transformed the style and interpretive techniques of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Shakespeare and pointed the way toward modern practice.

Like all revolutions, of course, the upheaval in Shakespearean interpretation led by Barrymore and his confreres was dependent upon a traditional, established order to dethrone. In order to understand Barrymore's "new art" and the no less vital contributions of Hopkins and Jones, we must first understand the theatrical and cultural conditions that prevailed during the years preceding their bold attempts to "revitalize" Shakespeare. For a proper evaluation of the Barrymore revivals it is necessary to consider three essential questions: Who were the actors to whom audiences and critics could look as a basis of comparison with Barrymore's portrayals? What were the theatrical forces that influenced the work of Barrymore and his associates? How did the general cultural environment affect the triumvirate's approach to the classics?

Therefore, before we turn to an examination of the forces that influenced Barrymore's development as an actor, and to accounts of the *Richard III* and *Hamlet* productions, it will be helpful to set the stage, so to speak, with an investigation of the Shakespearean traditions of the then-recent past. A number

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[More information](#)**Prologue: Legacies**

5

of key factors that directly influenced Barrymore and his artistic associates provide a historical background for their innovative practices: the performances of the eminent Shakespearean actor-managers who came of age during the mid-to-late Victorian era; the decline of their tradition in the late nineteenth century; the rebellion against traditional Victorian staging in Europe and Great Britain during the 1900s and early 1910s; and the unsettled state of Shakespearean acting and production in America during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Whenever possible, both here and in the chapters that follow, I have attempted to view the Barrymore revivals from the perspective of the rapidly changing cultural life of their time. The end of the First World War brought a remarkable new beginning to American society and to the smaller world of the theatre within. The late teens and early twenties were a time when America rose rapidly to a position of cultural preeminence in the West, a time when social philosophers and psychologists predicted a “brave new world” and younger intellectuals cast off the traditions of their predecessors, rejecting what they considered to be a genteel, simplistic view of the human condition and its characteristic credos and art forms.<sup>2</sup>

Though the conclusion of the Great War is generally considered a point of demarcation for American society, the seeds of this new beginning were in fact much in evidence in the decade prior to the Armistice. The watershed 1909 Clark University Conference in Worcester, Massachusetts, attended by Sigmund Freud and a number of his European and American disciples, helped to establish the “new psychology” in America; the famed 1913 Armory Show introduced New York audiences to Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, along with paintings by Cezanne, Matisse, Van Gogh, and Gauguin, Brancusi’s sculptures, and works by American post-Impressionists; Nijinsky toured America twice during the mid-1910s, bringing a more sensual, uninhibited style of ballet; and during the 1911–12 season, Max Reinhardt’s production of *Sumurun* gave Broadway its first glimpse of Gordon Craig’s New Stagecraft. All of these events and many more helped to foster a rich period of cultural foment that burst upon the American scene, creating a climate in which new methods of Shakespearean interpretation would be welcomed.

In the postwar years, especially, there emerged a new and heady atmosphere – a rebellion against pomposity, formal Victorian manners, and prudery. Victorian notions of culture were challenged time and again by revolutionary new methods of expression: Picasso’s paintings, Stravinsky’s music, Freud’s theories that sexuality, aggression, and subconscious longings were primary motivating factors in human behavior. At the same time, Americans began to evince a growing interest in artistic experimentation, along with a diminishing tolerance for traditional methods of Shakespearean acting and production. Although the years preceding the Barrymore revivals were large-

ly a period of interregnum for Shakespeare in America – years when the tradition of Edwin Booth was carried along in the main by conservative actor-managers of limited skill, and the artistic innovations that had arisen in Europe were seldom seen on Broadway – this same period witnessed significant changes in the theatre and in American society in general. By the early 1920s, Shakespeare, ever the “form and pressure” of changing manners and aesthetic values, was ripe for reinterpretation.

### The Victorian Shakespeareans, 1860–1900

For more than three centuries prior to the Barrymore revivals, succeeding generations of actors had made the plays of Shakespeare their own, building upon the foundations established by their predecessors while reinterpreting the plays in light of shifting conceptions of “nature” and “art.” At times, these changes had taken place gradually; for example, the classic style of Thomas Betterton, who had established the tradition of Shakespeare’s bravura repertory as the measuring rod of a post-Restoration tragedian’s ability, was carried on in modified form during the early eighteenth century by Barton Booth and, later, by James Quin. In many instances, however, change had arisen as the result of sudden, revolutionary upheavals in the style of playing. David Garrick’s London debut as Richard III in 1741 in a new, more “natural” style instantly established a standard for a generation. (“If this young fellow be right, then *we* have all been all wrong,” Quin is said to have remarked.) Edmund Kean’s 1814 Drury Lane debut as Shylock similarly launched a coup d’état against the reigning formalism of the John Philip Kemble school by bringing to Shakespeare a more passionate, visceral mode of playing. (“We wish we had never seen Mr. Kean,” commented William Hazlitt. “He has destroyed the Kemble religion . . . in which we were brought up.”)<sup>3</sup>

Like most of his predecessors, John Barrymore inherited elements of an older acting style, many of which he incorporated into his own technique. Although many critical column inches would be devoted to his “contemporary” portrayals – his Hamlet, wrote Ludwig Lewisohn, was “in the key of modern poetry” and “the finest modern fiction” – the director and critic J. T. Grein was entirely correct in assessing his style as “an amalgam of modernity and tradition.”<sup>4</sup> Yet Barrymore, like Garrick and Kean, broke with tradition to introduce a more “natural” method of performing the time-honored repertory. By the early 1920s, the refined, idealized characterizations and “tragic elevation” of the “old guard” were looked upon by many American playgoers – especially the younger intellectuals – as belonging to a bygone era. Barrymore, while borrowing and adapting selectively from the older style, particularly in his emphasis on vocal range and variety and finely nuanced pantomime, reacted against tradition; he deliberately shunned many of the

conventions of the Shakespearean theatre of his youth: the vocal mannerisms, graceful poses, rhetorical gestures, and “big moments” climaxes. At the same time, however, Barrymore’s predecessors played a key role in shaping his art, and their portrayals were cited frequently by contemporary reviewers attempting to appraise his impersonations in the context of the great performances of the recent past.

The Shakespeareans who had achieved legendary status in Great Britain and the United States before the American Civil War were far too remote, of course, to be more than honored names in the pantheon. Not so their eminent late-Victorian and Edwardian successors, whose performances lingered in the memories of many playgoers, and whose legacies influenced Barrymore’s impersonations in several key respects. Four actors of this period, especially, indirectly and directly affected Barrymore’s portrayals and the response of his audiences and critics: Edwin Booth, Henry Irving, Richard Mansfield, and Johnston Forbes-Robertson.<sup>5</sup>

Barrymore was too young to have had more than childhood memories of Booth, if in fact he saw him, and the younger generation of reviewers – the Woolcotts, Brouns, and Macgowans – would have had no firsthand knowledge of his virtuosity. Nonetheless, critics of a certain age – John Corbin, Burns Mantle, Alan Dale, Percy Hammond, and J. Ranken Towse, along with a number of commentators in London – could look to Booth’s by-then legendary Hamlet (and in a few cases, his Richard III) as a basis of comparison with Barrymore’s portrayal.

To American playgoers of the period between the early 1860s and his retirement in 1891, Booth’s Hamlet (Fig. 1) – described by William Winter as “like the dark, mad, dreamy, mysterious hero of a poem,” and acted “in an ideal manner, as far removed as possible from the plane of actual life” – was the most renowned Shakespearean impersonation of their time. Booth’s purity of elocution was unmatched among his contemporaries; his low, rich, musical (though not loud) voice was almost universally praised for its range and beauty. Booth was gifted with brooding, poetic good looks and expressive eyes and features; his characterizations were illuminated by penetrating intellectual and spiritual insights. A series of personal misfortunes – the death of his wife in 1863, his brother’s assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865, the loss in 1873 of Booth’s Theatre, his “great national temple” of dramatic art, due to financial mismanagement – only deepened his awareness of the nature of tragedy. His hundred consecutive nights of *Hamlet* at the Winter Garden Theatre in New York during the 1864–5 season inaugurated the era of the Shakespearean long run in America, and he played the role, in cities large and small, for more than thirty years. He played other roles, of course, in Shakespeare and in plays that passed as “near-classics” in those days – Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *Richelieu*, Tom Taylor’s *The Fool’s Revenge*, and many more –



*Figure 1.* Edwin Booth as Hamlet. Author's collection.

but his Hamlet, as Charles H. Shattuck observed, was the part “with which he was most identified, in which the people loved him best.”<sup>6</sup> Booth’s impact still lingered in the American theatre of the 1920s, long after he had made his final bow. Barrymore later maintained (innocently or not) that he had no knowledge of Booth’s “Hundred Nights” when his own Hamlet was nearing that mark; yet he was surely aware of the shadow Booth’s accomplishments cast upon American actors who attempted his celebrated roles.

Of more direct impact on Barrymore and his audience were the performances of Henry Irving, who opened his first London *Hamlet* at the Lyceum in October 1874 to extraordinary critical acclaim and played for 200 performances. His Hamlet, noted for its haunted quality and absence of traditional “points,” had last been seen in America during the season of 1884–5



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9



*Figure 2.* Henry Irving as Shylock. Author's collection.

and would have been recalled during the early 1920s by relatively few playgoers, but he had offered his Shylock (Fig. 2), Macbeth, Wolsey, and a galaxy of roles in costume melodrama for two decades to come, both in London at the Lyceum and on his frequent American tours, the last of which had come during the 1903–4 season. Irving had a magnetic personality and a distinguished appearance. Although hampered by a voice not noted for its music, he acted with a compelling intensity that had a mesmeric power on his audiences. Barrymore would not have had an opportunity to see Irving's Richard III – his later assertion to his biographer, Gene Fowler, notwithstanding – but he did see him in a number of roles. He was doubtless impressed by Irving's intensity and intelligence, and particularly by his “between the lines” byplay – an element that would later become a hallmark of his own Shake-

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Figure 3. Richard Mansfield as Richard III. Author's collection.

spearean method. Indeed, it seems likely that Barrymore emulated this facet of Irving's style; years later, he listed Irving as his favorite actor, and at the time of his London *Hamlet*, he called him "the most arresting and exciting figure in the history of the modern stage."<sup>7</sup>

The dynamic and versatile tragedian Richard Mansfield rose to prominence in America during the 1880s in contemporary plays. In 1889, however, he turned to Shakespeare, presenting *Richard III* at the Globe Theatre in London. After modest artistic success and significant financial loss, he brought his production to the United States, where it was greeted with mixed reviews; nevertheless, it proved popular enough to warrant three revivals in Mansfield's repertory. Mansfield was gifted with mimetic powers and a "deep and thrilling" voice of exceptional range; contemporary critics often said