

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62028-4 - John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor

Michael A. Morrison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

During the 1920s a wave of postwar ebullience exploded into the Jazz Age, bringing a new and unprecedented accent on youth and a generation that cast off the vestiges of Victorian culture and embraced new trends in art, music, dance, poetry, fiction, and drama. The way was open for an actor who could recapture and redefine the glamour, skill, and galvanizing presence of an earlier day.

John Barrymore is such an actor, and his Richard III and Hamlet, first seen in New York during the 1919–20 and 1922–3 seasons, stand as high-water marks of twentieth-century Shakespearean interpretation. Barrymore was an original, capable of electrifying audiences with the subtle force and brilliance of his acting. His dynamic portrayals and the groundbreaking innovations of his production team, the director Arthur Hopkins and the designer Robert Edmond Jones, helped to revitalize Shakespearean acting and production in America and Great Britain and changed the direction of subsequent revivals.

In this meticulously researched and richly illustrated book, Michael A. Morrison draws upon newly uncovered sources and firsthand interviews with witnesses who knew the actor or saw him perform. Barrymore's historic performances are brought to life through accounts of the preparations, the productions themselves, and the responses of audiences and critics. This fascinating look at one of the more revered and tragic actors of the twentieth century sheds new light on his distinctive contributions in view of past and ensuing theatre traditions.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62028-4 - John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor

Michael A. Morrison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-62028-4 - John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor
Michael A. Morrison
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-62028-4 - John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor
 Michael A. Morrison
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN AMERICAN THEATRE AND DRAMA

General Editor

Don B. Wilmeth, *Brown University*

Advisory Board

C. W. E. Bigsby, *University of East Anglia*
 Errol Hill, *Dartmouth College*

C. Lee Jenner, *Independent Critic and Dramaturge, New York City*

Bruce A. McConachie, *University of Pittsburgh*

Brenda Murphy, *University of Connecticut*

Laurence Senelick, *Tufts University*

The American theatre and its literature are attracting, after long neglect, the crucial attention of historians, theoreticians, and critics of the arts. Long a field for isolated research, yet too frequently marginalized in the academy, the American theatre has always been a sensitive gauge of social pressures and public issues. Investigations into its myriad shapes and manifestations are relevant to students of drama, theatre, literature, cultural experience, and political development.

The primary aim of this series is to set up a forum for important and original scholarship in and criticism of American theatre and drama in a cultural and social context. Inclusive by design, the series accommodates leading work in areas ranging from the study of drama as literature to theatre histories, theoretical explorations, production histories, and readings of more popular or paratheatrical forms. While maintaining a specific emphasis on theatre in the United States, the series welcomes work grounded in cultural studies and narratives with interdisciplinary reach. *Studies in American Theatre and Drama* thus provides a crossroads where historical, theoretical, literary, and biographical approaches meet and combine, promoting imaginative research in theatre and drama from a variety of new perspectives.

BOOKS IN THE SERIES:

10. Michael A. Morrison, *John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor*
9. Stephen J. Bottoms, *The Theatre of Sam Shepard*
8. Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World*
7. Rosemarie K. Bank, *Theatre Culture in America, 1825–1860*
6. Mark Fearnow, *The American Stage and the Great Depression*
5. Susan Harris Smith, *American Drama: The Bastard Art*
4. Jared Brown, *The Theatre in America during the Revolution*
3. Amy Green, *The Revisionist Stage: American Directors Reinvent the Classics*
2. Marc Robinson, *The Other American Drama*
1. Samuel Hay, *African American Theatre*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62028-4 - John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor

Michael A. Morrison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor

MICHAEL A. MORRISON



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-62028-4 - John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor
 Michael A. Morrison
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521620284

© Michael A. Morrison 1997

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1997

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Morrison, Michael A., 1953-

John Barrymore, Shakespearean actor / Michael A. Morrison.

p. cm. - (Cambridge studies in American theatre and drama)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-521-62028-7 (hb)

1. Barrymore, John, 1882-1942.

2. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616 - Stage history - 1800-1950.

3. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616 - Stage history - United States.

4. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616 - Stage history - Great Britain.

5. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616 - Film and video adaptations.

6. Theater - United States - History - 20th century.

7. Theater - Great Britain - History - 20th century.

8. Actors - United States - Biography.

9. Acting - History - 20th century.

I. Title. II. Series

PR3112. M67 1997

792'.028'092 - DC21 97-12163

CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-62028-4 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-62979-9 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62028-4 - John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor

Michael A. Morrison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For my parents

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62028-4 - John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor

Michael A. Morrison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-62028-4 - John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor
 Michael A. Morrison
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiv
Part One: Setting the Stage	
Prologue: Legacies	3
1 The Education of an Actor, 1882–1919	30
Part Two: The Productions	
2 <i>Richard III</i> , 1920	67
3 <i>Hamlet</i> , 1922–1924	120
4 The London <i>Hamlet</i> , 1925	240
Part Three: Aftermath	
5 Shakespeare in Hollywood, 1925–1942	261
Epilogue	297
Appendixes	
A The Casts	307
B The Texts	321
<i>Notes</i>	329
<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	383
<i>Index</i>	389

Illustrations

1. Edwin Booth as Hamlet	8
2. Henry Irving as Shylock	9
3. Richard Mansfield as Richard III	10
4. Johnston Forbes-Robertson as Hamlet	11
5. E. H. Sothorn as Hamlet	21
6. Robert B. Mantell as Richard III	23
7. Walter Hampden as Hamlet	27
8. Daguerrotype of Louisa Lane Drew as Ophelia	33
9. Maurice Barrymore as Orlando	35
10. John Drew as Petruchio	37
11. John Barrymore, c. 1909	47
12. Edward Sheldon	49
13. Arthur Hopkins	58
14. Robert Edmond Jones	59
15. Margaret Carrington	77
16. Robert Edmond Jones's drawing for the wooing of Lady Anne	85
17. Richard, Duke of Gloucester	91
18. Queen Elizabeth (Evelyn Walsh Hall) with her ladies-in-waiting	99
19. Richard as king	103
20. The three queens	105
21. Robert Edmond Jones's drawing of the foreground tableau curtains	139
22. A page from Lark Taylor's 1922–4 production record promptbook for <i>Hamlet</i>	149
23. The Robert Edmond Jones <i>Hamlet</i> set	153
24. The first court scene in London – a variation on the American staging	157
25. Hamlet, Marcellus (E. J. Ballantine), and Horatio (Frederick Lewis) confront the Ghost	163
26. Hamlet and Polonius (John S. O'Brien)	169
27. Hamlet with Rosencrantz (Paul Huber) and Guildenstern (Lawrence Cecil)	172
28. Hamlet and the Players	173

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62028-4 - John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor

Michael A. Morrison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Illustrations	ix
29. A pensive portrait of Barrymore in the Hamlet chair	179
30. Hamlet and Ophelia (Rosalinde Fuller)	181
31. The staging of the play scene in London	187
32. The King at prayer scene in the 1922 New York production, with Tyrone Power as the King	191
33. The Queen's closet scene; Hamlet and Gertrude (Blanche Yurka)	195
34. Ophelia's (Fay Compton) mad scene in the 1925 London production	199
35. The Gravediggers' scene in London: Horatio (George Relph), Hamlet, First Clown (Ben Field), and Second Clown (Michael Martin-Harvey)	203
36. The duel with Laertes (Sidney Mather)	211
37. The Captains bear Hamlet's body from the stage in the 1925 London production	215
38. The visit of the Moscow Art Theatre, February 1923	231
39. Poster for the second season of <i>Hamlet</i> , November 1923	235
40. Hamlet and Gertrude (Constance Collier)	243
41. A portrait of Barrymore at the time of the London production	249
42. Hamlet and Ophelia (Fay Compton)	255
43. Barrymore as Richard III in the 1929 Warner Brothers film <i>The Show of Shows</i>	269
44. An MGM publicity photo of Barrymore as Mercutio in <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> , 1936	281
45. Barrymore broadcasting his "Streamlined Shakespeare" radio series for NBC, 1937	285
46. Barrymore and his fourth wife, Elaine Barrie, in <i>My Dear Children</i>	291

Featured on the part-title pages: John Barrymore as Hamlet

Preface

JOHN BARRYMORE'S *RICHARD III* AND *HAMLET*, first seen in New York during the 1919–20 and 1922–3 seasons, stand as high-water marks of twentieth-century Shakespearean interpretation. Many of the conventions of modern practice can be traced to Barrymore's performances: He was the first actor to bring the vocal and physical manner of a postwar gentleman to Shakespeare's tragic protagonists; he was the first to reinterpret time-honored roles in light of modern psychological theory. In New York and London, he was greeted as a tragedian of the first rank. His dynamic portrayals and the ground-breaking innovations of his production team, the director Arthur Hopkins and the designer Robert Edmond Jones, helped to revitalize Shakespearean acting and production in America and Great Britain and changed the direction of subsequent revivals.

Barrymore's *Richard III* and *Hamlet* are generally acknowledged to be two of the most significant Shakespearean events in the history of the modern stage, yet surprisingly little effort has been made to situate his distinctive contributions to the acting of these characters and the innovations of his artistic associates within the broader context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Shakespearean production. Biographical studies of the actor and his family have appeared steadily over the years, and the revivals have merited chapters in production histories of the plays in which he achieved distinction,¹ but their accounts of his performances are invariably brief and utilize only a small fraction of the available information. An in-depth study of Barrymore's interpretations has yet to appear. This book aims to remedy that oversight by offering a detailed examination of Barrymore's accomplishments in Shakespeare in light of past and ensuing tradition, and by providing a more complete account than has heretofore been available of the circumstances surrounding his portrayals, the details of his performances, and the meaning the productions held for the playgoers of his time.

To understand the formidable impact *Richard III* and *Hamlet* made on the post-First World War generation it is essential to understand the theatrical

conditions to which Barrymore and his associates responded. Like Harley Granville Barker's famed Savoy revivals, the Barrymore–Hopkins–Jones productions can be viewed in retrospect as a revolutionary bridge between Victorian and modern methods of acting, direction, and design. The productions should thus be considered in light of the bravura acting of Edwin Booth and Henry Irving, the festive glamour of Augustin Daly's productions, the scenography of Herbert Tree, the neo-Victorian performances of E. H. Sothorn and Robert B. Mantell, and the innovative Shakespearean revivals directed by Barker and Max Reinhardt. Consequently the Prologue is devoted to the many Shakespearean legacies Barrymore and his associates inherited. Chapter 1 looks at Barrymore's family background and formative influences and discusses his years on the stage between 1903 and 1919 while examining the forces that shaped him as an actor: Syndicate commercialism; his friendship with the playwright Edward Sheldon, at whose urging he abandoned the ephemeral comedies in which he had won popular stardom; and his early collaborations with Arthur Hopkins and Robert Edmond Jones, pioneering American practitioners of the New Stagecraft.

The second and third chapters examine in detail the 1920 Barrymore–Hopkins–Jones *Richard III* and the 1922–4 *Hamlet*. Both chapters include documentation of the preparation for these productions, performance reconstructions based on promptbooks, reviews, memoirs, and other evidence, and an analysis of the critical response. Chapter 4 documents Barrymore's 1925 production of *Hamlet* at the Haymarket Theatre in London – a noteworthy triumph for an American, and a seminal influence on a younger generation of English actor-practitioners. Chapter 5 features a discussion of the many attempts at Shakespeare, some successful, others not, made by Barrymore during the seventeen-year period (1925–42) he devoted mainly to motion pictures. The Epilogue examines the far-reaching impact of *Richard III* and *Hamlet* on subsequent generations of actors, directors, and designers.

Throughout, my focus is also on Barrymore and his production team's accomplishments in the context of the cultural revolution that swept across Western society after the First World War. Barrymore was emblematic of the theatrical changes that accompanied the postwar rebellion against Victorian and Edwardian values in much the same way that Edmund Kean had symbolized the Romantic revolution of a century earlier. Barrymore's efforts, and those of his associates, were a response not only to Shakespearean tradition but also to the spirit of artistic reinvention that permeated postwar culture.

An issue central to this study bears explanation. At various times I refer to the "bravura" repertory. By this, I mean simply the body of Shakespeare's plays that had, over the course of several centuries, emerged first and foremost as vehicles for a leading actor's skill. Examining the repertories of the eminent Shakespearians of the late seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62028-4 - John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor

Michael A. Morrison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

centuries one sees these plays time and again: *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *King Lear*. At times, of course, these were joined by *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *Richard II*, *Henry V*, and one or two more. The latter grouping generally occupied a secondary place, however, and the plays were performed less frequently. It has become common to refer to the first group, the heart of the repertory, as “Shakespearean tragedy.” In fact, the actors who performed these plays came to be known as “tragedians”; yet this grouping properly incorporates a history (*Richard III*) and a comedy (*The Merchant of Venice*), both integral parts of a repertory in which a leading actor’s portrayal, rather than the play itself, was often the primary attraction.

The need for this designation is clear when considering *Richard III* and *Hamlet* in the context of the longstanding American tradition of dynamic, exciting Shakespearean performance. Barrymore’s impersonations can in many ways be viewed as the final flourishing of a tradition that had prospered in America for more than a century, a tradition enriched by charismatic interpreters such as Edwin Forrest, Junius Brutus and Edwin Booth, and Richard Mansfield, and enhanced by the frequent visits of foreign Shakespeareans such as Henry Irving and Johnston Forbes-Robertson. Great Britain has subsequently claimed Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud, but the United States, although witnessing no shortage of Shakespeare in the years since Barrymore’s portrayals, has yet to produce an actor whose performances merit favorable comparison.

Although Barrymore attempted only two Shakespearean roles on stage – far fewer than the number attempted by the theatrical “greats” of an earlier era and the eminent British actor-knights to come – he achieved phenomenal success in parts that for centuries had been proving grounds for a tragedian’s ability. His performances and the productions with which he was associated made an extraordinary impact on playgoers of his era. If the opinions of the critics, theatre artists, and other witnesses to his portrayals are to be trusted – and I have given them ample room to speak in the pages that follow – he stands as an original, an innovator among actors of Shakespeare, a tragedian capable, at his best, of electrifying audiences with the subtle force and brilliance of his acting. His impersonations created a furor in the theatrical capitals of the English-speaking world, and the influence of his portrayals, particularly his *Hamlet*, reverberated in the theatre for decades to come. To his contemporaries, his Shakespearean performances were among the modern theatre’s towering achievements.

It is not my intention here to dwell on the details of Barrymore’s complex and colorful private life except as they affected his development as an actor, and particularly his attempts at Shakespeare. Similarly, I make only brief mention of Barrymore’s substantial film career, a fascinating realm but one that

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-62028-4 - John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor
Michael A. Morrison
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

xiii

lies beyond the scope of this work. Rather, the main focus of this study is the manner in which Barrymore and his confreres revolutionized Shakespeare in performance during the 1920s and, in doing so, set the stage for much to follow.

Acknowledgments

IN THE NINE YEARS I worked on this book I received valuable assistance from many institutions and individuals. I am grateful to the staff of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection and the Hammerstein Collection of Recorded Sound, New York Public Library, Lincoln Center; to the 42nd Street branch of the New York Public Library and its Manuscript and Newspaper Library divisions; to Louis Rachow and Raymond Wemmlinger of the Hampden–Booth Library at The Players; to Lynn Doherty, Kathy Mets, and Marty Jacobs of the Theatre Collection, Museum of the City of New York; to the Harvard Theatre Collection; to the Houghton Library, Harvard; to the Manuscript Division, Muggar Memorial Library, Boston University; to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; to the Museum of Television & Radio; to the Film Division, Museum of Modern Art; to the Shubert Archive; to the Library of Congress; to Sam Gill of the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; to Jenni Inman of the University of Colorado at Boulder Special Collections; to Melissa Miller of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin; to the Special Collections, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University; to the Folger Shakespeare Library; to the Huntington Library; to Georgianna Ziegler and Nancy Shawcross of the Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania; to Lorraine Brown of the Federal Theatre Archive, George Mason University; to Nena Couch of the Lawrence and Lee Theatre Collection, Ohio State University; to Jon Reynolds, Georgetown University Archivist; to Nelson Maurice of Wesleyan University; to Geraldine Duclow of the Philadelphia Free Library Theatre Collection; to the Philadelphia Public Library; to the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library; to the Metro Toronto Central Reference Library; to the Emgee Film Library; and to the Minna Rees Library of the City University of New York and its inter-library loan division.

In England, I am indebted to the staff of the Theatre Museum, London; to Joe Mitchenson and Richard Mangan of the Mander and Mitchenson Col-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62028-4 - John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor

Michael A. Morrison

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

xv

lection, Beckenham, Kent; to the British Library and the British Newspaper Library, Colindale; to Steve Atkinson of the Haymarket Theatre archive; to F. R. Miles, Archivist, King's College School, Wimbledon; to Stephen Chaplin, Archivist, Slade School of Fine Art–University College, London; to the Shakespeare Library, Birmingham Central Library; to the library at the Garrick Club; to the BBC Sound Archive; to the British Sound Archive; and to Jonathan Barnes and Jessica Wood and Patrick Newley and Diana Galvin, who provided hospitality and encouragement while I was in London.

There were many people who shared their recollections of John Barrymore as an actor and individual and helped to provide cultural and theatrical context through in-person and telephone interviews and correspondence. Regrettably, a number of these witnesses to theatrical history have died since I began this book. I am grateful to Dame Judith Anderson, Wilva Davis Breen, Alexander Clark, Claudette Colbert, Joe De Santis, Dorothy Dickson, Honor Earl, Maurice Evans, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Dame Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies, Robert Flemyng, Sir John Gielgud, Robert Harris, Helen Hayes, Katharine Hepburn, Evelyn Laye, Alison Leggatt, Robert Morley, Matthew Norgate, Elliot Norton, Philip Rhodes, Sybil Rosenfeld, Margareta Scott, Athene Seyler, Louis M. Simon, Rosamund and A. C. Sprague, J. C. Trewin, Maurice Valency, Edward Wagenknecht, and Margaret Huston Walters.

I must also thank, for their pioneering contributions, the authors of the many biographies, studies, and articles about Barrymore and his family that have come earlier – several of whom have offered counsel and assistance – along with the authors of a number of valuable works on Shakespeare in performance. I have tried to acknowledge my debts to these sources in the notes and bibliography.

Finally, John Barrymore was assisted in his ascent to Shakespearean distinction by a “Board of Regents,” consisting of Edward Sheldon, Arthur Hopkins, Robert Edmond Jones, and Margaret Carrington. Their wise and generous advice contributed much to his accomplishments. I have been equally fortunate. I am particularly grateful to James Kotsilibas-Davis for his hospitality, encouragement, editorial guidance, and advice, and for introducing me to the joys of collecting theatrical memorabilia. Stanley Kauffmann gave me the benefit of his considerable wisdom and provided helpful comments on the manuscript on many occasions. Marvin Carlson and Judith Milhous read this work in a number of its early drafts and offered valuable suggestions for improvement. Special thanks are due to Hollis Alpert, John C. Burnham, Anna Kay France, Michael Gnat, John Istel, Rosamund Krueger, Karl Levett, William Luce, Dana Sue McDermott, Martin F. Norden, Margot Peters, Joan Pollock, Lawrence J. Quirk, Jean Rawett, Loren Ruff, Charles H. Shattuck, Rakesh Solomon, Peggy Stewart, and Simon Trussler. Don B. Wilmeth and

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-62028-4 - John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor
Michael A. Morrison
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Anne Sanow, my editors at Cambridge University Press, believed in this project from the first and helped to guide this book from manuscript to finished volume.

I am grateful to the Research Foundation of the City University of New York for providing travel and research grants, and to Vera M. Roberts for endowing a fellowship that enabled me to spend a year of uninterrupted writing. To my wife, Jeri E. Bullock, who has lived with this project for practically as long as we have known each other, my love and gratitude.

For permission to quote from published and unpublished material acknowledgments are due to the following: to Antony John Barrymore Fairbanks for published and unpublished writings of John Barrymore; to Fred W. Hall Jr. for unpublished writings by Robert Edmond Jones; to Margaret Huston Walters for unpublished writings by Margaret Carrington; to Phyllis Wilbourne for Constance Collier's unpublished essay on John Barrymore's acting; to the University of Pennsylvania Special Collections for John Jay Chapman's 24 November 1922 letter to H. H. Furness Jr.; to the Vanderbilt University Special Collections for unpublished writings by Lark Taylor; and to the Society of Authors for Bernard Shaw's 22 February 1925 letter to John Barrymore. The chapter dealing with John Barrymore's London *Hamlet* appeared in earlier form in *New Theatre Quarterly*.