March 2001

The Idea of a John Barrymore

Douglas Lanier

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 37, no.1, March 2001, p.31-53

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
A studio portrait of John Barrymore in his later years.
The Idea of a John Barrymore

by DOUGLAS LANIER

Andrew. Gary, you don’t understand, about the theater. About why people do Shakespeare.

Barrymore. They do it because—it’s art.

Gary. Andy ... Andy, my multi-talented prime-time delight. You don’t do art. You buy it.

Paul Rudnick’s 1991 play I Hate Hamlet tells the saga of prime-time heartthrob Andrew Rally, a TV actor compelled to star in a Shakespeare-in-the-park performance of Hamlet when his hit series, LA Medical, is unexpectedly cancelled. The insecure Rally, who proclaims loudly that he hates Hamlet and all it stands for (high culture, New York theater, the burden of an artistic tradition reaching back “from Burbage to Kean to Irving” [24]), longs for the easy financial security and fame offered by Hollywood. Only after he’s convinced that playing Hamlet is a test of his mettle does Andrew come to think of himself not as a TV star but as a serious actor. Although his performance is disastrous, through it Rally discovers himself as a theatrical artist (as well as his sexual potency). Rudnick’s play is an unabashed paean to Shakespeare and the high cultural tradition he and classical theater have come to represent in contemporary American culture. This contest between Shakespearean theater and Hollywood takes place in the former New York apartment of John Barrymore, a space haunted by the ghost of the affable ham himself, who materializes to rally the self-doubting Andrew to his appointed task. A hodgepodge of gargoyles, grand staircases, and knights in armor, Barrymore’s ersatz gothic apartment seems nothing less than a set for some dated costume drama, an apt metaphor for the place of Shakespearean theater in the contemporary American cultural imagination. It is no accident that Barrymore should be Rally’s mentor as he wavers between the easy commercial rewards of Hollywood and the hard-won artistic legitimacy offered by Shakespeare, for, as I hope to demonstrate, his persona has been a remarkably long-lived and influential force in forming America’s conception of the Shakespearean.

The success of Paul Rudnick’s I Hate Hamlet and other Barrymore plays of the 90s suggests that his star persona continues to resonate even fifty years after his death. Barrymore, the most famous member of “the royal family of
Broadway” and arguably the dominant American Shakespearean of this century, has been featured, imitated, and parodied in a variety of works concerned with imagining the place of Shakespeare in a postwar America dominated by Hollywood and the moving image. Here I do not intend to document or evaluate Barrymore’s career as a Shakespearean. Rather, I want to examine the idea of a John Barrymore, that is, the ways in which his image has been appropriated and deployed by the American film industry as it sought to shape a mass audience’s view of Shakespeare and in the process fashion its own cultural authority, and the ways in which recent theater has sought, in the midst of the current Shakespeare film boom, to reappropriate Barrymore’s afterimage for its own institutional ends.

My emphasis on the idea of a John Barrymore springs from concepts taken from what film scholars have dubbed “star studies.” For the film and theater industries and their audiences, stars (along with genre) are often more important and productive principles of meaning than those which have traditionally preoccupied scholars, that is, directors or writers. The “star” is to be distinguished from the “actor”: the actor performs a role, but the star is a persona imbued with a special significance and charisma that extends beyond any specific role. This persona is established and developed over a series of performances and often reaches beyond them to details of the actor’s “real” life; it is a creation produced and sustained by collaboration (sometimes willing, occasionally not) between the actor and systems of publicity. Appreciation of a given performance often depends upon an audience’s prior knowledge of the star’s persona; a star’s sequence of roles can be—and is often designed to be—read as a set of variations on a central theme or set of qualities.

Stardom is, in short, not merely a matter of celebrity or focus for desire but a principle of interpretation. Richard Dyer has argued that the magical appeal of stars does not spring from their personal magnetism. Rather, stars offer their audiences an iconic means by which a compelling ideological contradiction can be resolved or cultural ideal can be asserted. He posits that this symbolic resolution is all the more compelling because the persona as sign is naturalized through its supposed connection to the performer’s “real” personality. Dyer offers Marilyn Monroe as an example. Her film persona offered a reconciliation of a split within the postwar American conception of femininity, the contradiction between moral innocence and overt eroticism (“Monroe and Sexuality” and Stars 36). Monroe, he notes, “seemed to ‘be’ the very tensions that ran through the ideological life of fifties America,” and

1. For biographical information, see Barrymore, Fowler, Kobler, and Peters. Essential for understanding Barrymore’s Shakespearean performances is Morrison’s meticulous study; especially relevant for this study is the chapter “Shakespeare in Hollywood, 1925–1942,” pp. 261–96. Norden corrects many errors and offers a very complete annotated bibliography. Studlar’s study of Barrymore’s star persona is extraordinarily detailed and suggestive, but addresses only Barrymore’s very early film career. For other studies of Barrymore’s star persona, see also Le Strange, and the chapter on Barrymore in Card.

2. See Stars, esp. pp. 22–37. Dyer extended and refined this argument in Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society. On star studies, see also Kindlem, Ellis, Staiger, King, and Jeremy Butler, as well as the collections Stardom and Star Texts and, more generally, Marshall.

3. For another example of this type of analysis, see Dyer’s “Four Films by Lana Turner.”
the audience of the period was capable of reading her image as “heroically living out the tensions or painfully exposing them” (Stars 36). Though Dyer is interested primarily in explaining a star’s appeal in his or her own “moment,” his perspective might be fruitfully extended to explain why some stars’ images persist long after their particular performances have faded from view. Such stars have become abstracted types that address a particularly long-lived ideological tension or become once again resonant within new historical circumstances.

My argument is that Barrymore’s afterimage has been so productive because it spoke to a cultural realignment during Hollywood’s Golden Age (and after), a realignment which definitively restituted Shakespeare in American culture. This period saw key changes in the cultural status and authority of theater as a series of new media—film, radio, television—and their supporting institutions sought to carve out distinctive spaces and audiences for themselves, each in relation to the other and often at the expense of the stage. Whereas the early silents often existed in the shadow of live theater, borrowing heavily from the visual vocabulary of melodrama, the advent of talkies and the rise of the studio system from the thirties to the fifties initiated a decisive shift in the cultural center of gravity. By mid-century Hollywood film (and later TV) had definitively displaced commercial theater (epitomized by touring companies, Broadway, and the theatrical chains) as a dominant cultural institution of America. During this period, the mass-market film industry consciously recast its relationship to the stage, often depicting the stage as highbrow and elitist in opposition to film’s more democratic, mass-market offerings. Shakespeare often served as a synecdoche for the theater as a whole, and Barrymore and his various avatars as synecdoches for “the Shakespearean.” Arguably, then, it was in no small measure through the durable star persona of John Barrymore that a mass audience came to imagine the Shakespearean actor, and with it the nature of classical theater. Though certainly other actors straddled the stage and the cinema during this period, Barrymore’s star status and special Shakespearean pedigree—a uniquely American one—allowed the mass-market film industry to pose the question of high art’s relationship to the commercial cinema through his image with particular economy and force.

Barrymore’s reputation as a Shakespearean rests largely on two extraordinary performances, his Richard III (1920) and, more famously, his Hamlet (1922, for a then unprecedented 101 performances, supposedly outdoing Edwin Booth’s previous record). Both performances garnered near unanimous critical praise. Of Barrymore’s Hamlet, reviewers singled out his ath-

4. For the relationship between stage and screen in this period, see Vardac, Poggi, McLaughlin, and May.
5. For a collection of reviews of Barrymore’s Richard III, see “Jazzing Up Shakespeare.” See also Clark, and Morrison’s discussion in John Barrymore 67-119. Interestingly, Kobler reports that Barrymore, rehearsing for his film Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde as he was preparing his Richard III, imported elements of his Hyde into his physical characterization of Richard.
leticism, his Hamlet's agility of mind, the immensity of his Hamlet's suffering, and his amplification of the play's Oedipal subtext, at the time a daring innovation. Of particular note was Barrymore's stress upon the virility of his Hamlet—he famously claimed that he wanted the audience to "hear my balls clank" when he made his entrance—which broke ranks with the languid passivity of late-Victorian Hamlets and, not incidentally, fed Barrymore's image as a figure of legendary sexual appetites. Heywood Broun spoke for many when he proclaimed Barrymore "the finest Hamlet we have ever seen," "excel[ling] all others we have known in grace, fire, wit and clarity" (11). That critical imprimatur was decisively sealed when in 1925 Barrymore took his Hamlet to London's Theatre Haymarket Royal for a much acclaimed three-month run. As Barrymore later observed, "the important thing was that John Barrymore, once a wild, irresponsible, no-good comedian"—he might have added "and American"—"had pulled himself together, had worked so hard and conscientiously and so effectively that London praised his performance in Hamlet" (qtd. in Norden 24).

Even so, equally important to Barrymore's achievement was the box-office success of these performances, a success fueled, at least at first, by Barrymore's reputation as a matinee idol in Broadway melodramas and comedies. Barrymore himself claimed that "objectively speaking, Hamlet is a melodrama" (qtd in Norden 13), and he shaped his performance accordingly, pointedly maintaining an appeal to the tastes of a mass audience. In the popular imagination, then, Barrymore's Shakespearean performances had managed to bring together what was widely regarded as incompatible, the mass audience appeal of commercial theater with the artistic perfectionism associated with classical theater. One indication of this is Barrymore's appearance in Warner Brothers' The Show of Shows (1929), a film compendium of vaudeville routines, theatrical bits, and musical numbers. Amidst this showcase of popular entertainment Barrymore appears as Richard III, delivering Gloucester's "Ay, Edward will use women honorably" soliloquy from III Henry VI in what was the first talkie to feature Shakespeare.

If, on the one hand, Barrymore's presence is meant to lend Shakespearean prestige to Warner Brothers' showcase of talent and new sound technology, his performance in this venue also claims a kinship with other commercial entertainments of the day. Perhaps it was to claim that kinship that Barrymore...

6. For the innovative "Freudianism" of Barrymore's Hamlet, see Mills, Teague, and Morrison's discussion in John Barrymore 129-32.
7. Köhler 174. Remembering Barrymore's Hamlet fifty years later, Margaret Webster claims that "it had enormous fire and eroticism" (Cent 14).
8. This approach to the role accords well with Studlar's commentary on how Barrymore increasingly linked his romantic matinee idol image with more robust conceptions of masculinity; it becomes the subject of grotesque parody in the film Playmates, where Barrymore deploys his Shakespearean savoir-faire in the service of seduction, at one point metamorphosing into a large-horned bull.
9. Indeed, in reviewing his Richard III, writers repeatedly remarked on Barrymore's "new-found" powers and "unexpectedly skillful and fine" performance, as if Barrymore's earlier achievements as an actor were incompatible with the demands of classical theater.
10. According to Eyman (316), Barrymore's role in the film was originally to be much larger than it came to be in the final cut.
characterized his London performances of Hamlet as "a wonderful advertising stunt" (qtd. in Norden 15).

Barrymore's success as a Shakespearean quickly led to a career in feature film. He signed a multi-film deal with Warner Brothers on the strength of his success with the London Hamlet run, and he was not to return to the theater until late in his life, with the disastrous tour of My Dear Children in 1939. Yet despite that fourteen-year hiatus from the stage, Barrymore typically played roles that traded upon the audience's awareness of his pedigree as a "man of the theater" and specifically a Shakespearean actor. His Shakespearean characterizations were sufficiently well-known to theater audiences to inspire Barrymore imitations by Elsie Janis in the stage revue Puzzles of 1925 and by Albert Carroll in The Grand Street Follies (1927, committed to film as a Vitaphone short in 1930 as Albert Carroll in Impressions). Barrymore himself worked to maintain his credentials as a Shakespearean, at one point seeking to make a film of his Hamlet, appearing as Mercutio in MGM's "prestige" production of Romeo and Juliet (1936), and hosting the "Streamlined Shakespeare" series on NBC Radio in 1937. This type-casting as a Shakespearean was particularly acute in his later work, where the line between Barrymore the man, Barrymore the former Shakespearean star, and the characters he played became more and more indistinct. The play My Dear Children, which marked Barrymore's brief and disastrous return to the stage in 1939, is a case in point. Bizarrely inverting King Lear, this light comedy presents the story of Allan Manville, an aging, self-destructive matinee idol with a Shakespearean past, who is reunited with his three daughters (all with Shakespearean names, Portia, Miranda, and Cordelia) after they have long been estranged from one another. The type-casting merely imitates a pattern set earlier in Barrymore's film career: in, for example, George Cukor's Dinner at Eight (1933), based upon a Kaufman and Ferber play, Barrymore portrays Larry Renault, an alcoholic, washed-up star who philanders with a businessman's daughter in order to support himself and who, in the midst of his suicide by gas, strikes a carefully lit profile, giving his death a kind of Pyrrhic heroic dignity. This moment epitomizes the Barrymore persona in its tragic mode: the romantic who, frustrated in the pursuit of his ideals, engages in extravagant, histrionic acts of self-destruction. It would become the hallmark of his antic portrayal of Mercutio in the 1936 Romeo and Juliet, where in his much admired death scene he dies with a smirk, not the traditional curse, on his lips.

However, as Barrymore's alcoholism, broken marriages, and financial problems eroded his film career in the 30s, the romantic side of his star iden-

11. Barrymore's "Streamlined Shakespeare," originally broadcast as summer broadcasts on the less prestigious NBC Blue Network, was designed to compete with another Monday night Shakespeare program, the "Columbia Shakespearean Cycle," which featured such stars as Burgess Meredith, Leslie Howard, Rosalind Russell, Tallulah Bankhead, Humphrey Bogart, Walter Huston, and others. The press dubbed these broadcasts "The Battle of the Bard." For more on this cycle, see my "WSHK."

12. As Norden observes, this role is "eerily prescient of Barrymore in the latter stages of career" (117), and all the more so since Barrymore improvised much of the dialogue and death scene.
tity waned, largely because in the context of so much public scandal it was no longer believable. Instead Barrymore began to play parodies of his own persona, emphasizing his self-destructiveness and hamminess for comic effect. This pattern was initiated in his most famous comedy, *Twentieth Century* (1934). There he appears as Oscar Jaffe, a Napoleonic Broadway director who, after shaping salesgirl Mildred Plotka into stage star “Lili Garland,” loses her to Hollywood and thereafter becomes destitute. The plot turns on Jaffe’s attempts to coax Garland to abandon film and return to the stage as they travel on a train appropriately named the Twentieth Century. Barrymore’s image as a theatrical sot was galvanized in 1937 by two works that exploited his scandalous reputation, the short-lived play *Hitch Your Wagon!* and the film *A Star Is Born.* Though not directly linked to Barrymore, *A Star Is Born* in particular, with its powerful portrait of a stage star in tragic alcoholic decline, provided the interpretive template through which Barrymore’s much-publicized financial and personal difficulties came to be read, and his reputation as a Shakespearean only deepened the sense that high culture was somehow to be associated with decadence and self-destruction.

By decade’s end, Barrymore’s career consisted entirely of playing roles that evoked the star’s faded greatness, repeated with slight variation in such films as *The Great Man Votes* (1939) and *The Great Profile* (1940). Barrymore also exploited that image in his regular appearances on *The Rudy Vallee Show* on radio in the late 30s, where he would alternate playing the sodden, pompous Shakespearean with occasionally offering serious Shakespearean performances. In all of these works, the aging Barrymore became a symbol not merely for his own deteriorated matinee idol persona but for Theater itself, trading on its former glory, insisting upon its artistic pretensions, unable to compete with the more modern, conventionally bourgeois Hollywood protagonists. That is, the later films meditate upon and subvert Barrymore’s serious theatrical credentials—credentials which have their ultimate source in Shakespeare—even as they tap into Barrymore’s enormous fame for their own commercial gain.

Although Barrymore’s image of the Shakespearean actor as an alcoholic ham struck a nerve on several levels in American culture, it was particularly useful for Hollywood at a crucial moment of its public self-definition. Films from the thirties to the fifties tended to demonize the cultural authority associated with the Shakespearean actor in the form of Shakespeareans as megalomaniacs, murderers (*A Double Life*), or unwitting, self-important buffoons (*To Be or Not to Be*). By offering in the form of Barrymore an icon of the Shakespearean theater gone decadent, self-destructive and self-parodic, the cinema could, by contrast, legitimate itself as a commercial, popular, psychologically healthy alternative. If the younger Barrymore was lionized for his self-consciously virile Hamlet, the aging Barrymore extended his career by

---

13. Barrymore himself was considered for the lead role of Norman Maine, but he botched the audition.
willingly playing vain satyrs; where once his stage performances had held the promise of a genuinely popular Shakespeare, in later films Barrymore seems enervated by the very text upon which his reputation as a “great” actor once stood. The later films often struggle with tone, at times cruelly delighting in the spectacle of Barrymore’s demise, at others making it palatable by cloaking it in “respectful” pathos or nostalgia for a lost greatness. That exploitation was all the more complex because Barrymore actively participated in it, all too willing to play caricatures of himself (or, in his final film, just himself) to remain in the public eye and pay his mounting debts. Indeed, that complicity, the audience’s awareness of which the movies depended upon, worked to legitimize the ideological uses to which Barrymore’s image was put.

The epitome—or perhaps nadir—of this process can be witnessed in _Playmates_ (1941). One of several wartime films starring corny Kay Kyser and his big band, _Playmates_ is an example of the durable Hollywood genre in which a highbrow authority figure—often a professor—must join forces with a lowbrow live wire—often a woman (Ball of Fire, The Male Animal, She’s Working Her Way Through College, in tragic mode _Blue Angel_). The difference here is that the authority figure is not given the distance of fiction: John Barrymore plays “John Barrymore” in an uncomfortable parody of himself as a faded, boozy Shakespearean with money problems. The film explicitly takes up the problem of Barrymore’s and Shakespeare’s commercial viability in American culture in its opening scenes, where Barrymore’s manager, Lulu Monahan, decries her inability to market her client. Kyser’s manager Peter Lindsay sympathizes that Shakespeare, unlike swing, is “tough stuff to peddle.” The film is remarkable in its self-reflexive irony about its stars’ images, wringing humor from the audience’s awareness of the circumstances and unlikeliness of its making. (At one poignant moment, “Barrymore” exclaims “I’m dying”—which he was—“and you’re making jokes.”) Trouble with the IRS propels “Barrymore” (as it had Barrymore) to join forces with the more popular Kyser for a high-society Shakespeare benefit on the estate of businessman Nelson Pennypacker and his snobbish wife. “Barrymore” is horrified by the prospect of acting alongside the homespun Kyser, a bumpkin who confuses a volume of Shakespeare’s works for the Sears and Roebuck catalog, and so he secretly concocts a plan to sabotage Kyser’s performance. The film pits highbrow—Shakespeare, opera, Barrymore—against lowbrow—Hollywood musical, swing, Kyser—and takes pains to unmask the exponents of high culture as hypocritical poseurs. For all her social pretensions and self-proclaimed “breeding,” Mrs. Pennypacker, born in the Bronx, doesn’t know better than to massage her feet in public. Hearing that he will have to appear with Kyser, “Barrymore” pitches a fit, loudly standing upon his artistic integrity and devotion to “the immortal Bard.” “Rather than befoul me art for filthy lucre,” he declares, “I will gladly and willingly starve to death.

14. All film citations in this essay are transcribed from the films themselves.
STARVE!” whereupon a bellhop arrives with his breakfast. The claims of high art stand against the more wholesome, democratic pleasures of American popular culture, catalogued and celebrated in the film’s first production number, “Thank Your Lucky Stars and Stripes.” And the trajectory of the film’s romance plot underlines the point: although love interest Ginny Simms is initially charmed by Barrymore’s savoir-faire and sex appeal, she finally opts for Kyser because the latter is much younger, that is, more modern.

Yet the film does not entirely reject Barrymore and Shakespeare. Instead, in another of its self-reflexive moments, it adapts highbrow Shakespeare to a popular culture idiom. When his plan to eliminate Kyser fails, Barrymore resorts to putting alum in his throat spray, only to have Kyser discover the plot and switch the performers’ sprays. The effect is to silence Barrymore and with him Shakespeare in the classical manner. In its stead is the film’s grand finale, based upon Romeo and Juliet, which opens with Ish Kabibble, the band’s resident idiot, reciting Shakespeare’s prologue and remarking on the difficult idiom: “It sounds like English,” he avers, “but I know it ain’t.” As if in answer, Kyser, as Shakespeare himself, bursts through the giant pages from which Kabibble has been reading and offers to do Shakespeare “in the modern way.” What he offers is the tale of Romeo Smith and Juliet Jones, a couple separated by Juliet’s devotion to opera and Romeo’s passion for big band swing. Entering to vaguely Wagnerian strains, Juliet’s father declares his disapproval for lowbrow music and for that reason stands in the way of the couple’s romance; as the Chorus explains, Juliet’s family “never heard a hot lick on a horn / The only thing they know is stately com.” (The obvious parallels to Barrymore’s Shakespeareanism are reinforced by reaction shots of him weeping with dismay.) Only when Juliet’s father learns that Romeo has been offered a lucrative contract as a band leader does he relent and even vow to join the band, as the cast in Shakespearean costume dance to a swinging reprise of “Romeo Smith and Juliet Jones”: “Cheek to cheek / Bless you, I say, / 30 grand a week / That ain’t hay.” Here, the film declares, is Shakespeare shaped to the demands of a contemporary audience, popular genre, and mass-market success, with the conflict between high and hip substituting for the feud between the Capulets and Montagues. And, ironically, at least within the film this Shakespeare of Barrymore’s late career, is wildly successful, for the crowd thunders its applause and Mr. Pennypacker rushes to offer “Barrymore” a contract for radio advertisements.

If in the final analysis the film makes popular appeal the only criterion for success, aligning commerciality through Kyser with sincerity, decency, bourgeois taste, and patriotism, it does imagine the possibility of a genuinely “popular” Shakespeare, geared specifically to Ish Kabibble’s level of (un)refinement. Playmates’ final sequence is thus not so much a parody as an acknowledgment of what it takes to make Shakespeare (and “serious” theater) something other than “box-office poison”: it must conform to the generic and ideological demands of the Hollywood musical. Even so, the film’s final
moment registers some ambivalence even about this popular (re)production of Shakespeare. When Kyser (who plays Shakespeare in the play-within-the-film) goes to take his bow, he accidentally takes a drink from the alum bottle and, like Barrymore, chokes up on stage. In its final tableau of Kyser and Barrymore side by side, the film reduces both “authentic” Shakespeare and popular Shakespeare to comic silence. In the end Playmates is not truly willing to cede the Shakespearean stage—and the cultural authority that goes with it—to Kyser and the popular form he represents. In effect, the film returns to the assertion with which it began, of the utter incompatibility of Shakespeare in any form with Hollywood and popular taste. Pointedly, the film’s final image presents the two incarnations of Shakespeare, “authentic” and “popular,” under erasure, both finally incommunicative objects of ridicule.

Playmates was to be the last film in which Barrymore participated in the development of his persona, for he died less than a year after its completion. Yet Barrymore’s afterimage was to extend well beyond the movies with which he was associated and would persist for nearly a generation after his death in the popular media. Barrymore’s later career had had the effect of overlaying his Shakespearean credentials—which Barrymore exploited throughout his career—with his drunken theatrical ham persona, creating of the two a caricature of the has-been Shakespearean that later representations elaborated upon for their own purposes. That elaboration typically took two forms, a comic version which emphasized the Shakespearean’s pretentiousness and self-absorption, and a tragic version which focused on his self-destructiveness or outcast status. Barrymore comedies began to appear as early as 1937, in such fare as the two-reeler Hamlet and Eggs about a deep-toned Shakespearean actor hopelessly out of place at an Arizona dude ranch. Indeed, in 1942, the year of Barrymore’s death, the sentimental comedy-drama Life Begins at Eight-Thirty appears, in which a distinguished Shakespearean actor, laid low by drink, disrupts his daughter’s life and ends up working as a pitiful street Santa. Monty Wooley, the star of the film, was to make something of a career of extending the Barrymore persona, in the early 50s starring in the radio sitcom The Magnificent Montague. This show chronicled the comic misfortunes of Edwin Montague, a one-time Shakespearean who, embittered by the demise of the classical theater in modern America, finds himself reduced to playing Uncle Goodheart on a vapid afternoon radio serial and plotting a return to the stage he never manages to achieve. One Warner Brothers’ cartoon of the late 1940s, A Ham in a Role, features the Goofy Gophers tormenting a dog who has decided to quit the zany antics of cartoons for a career in Shakespearean drama. The voice of the dog unmistakably evokes Barrymore’s portentous baritone. Even a passing mention of Barrymore’s name could carry a powerful and ambivalent resonance, as illustrated by an episode of the radio show The Damon Runyon Theatre, “The Melancholy Dane,” first broadcast on 11 November 1949. The episode concerns critic Ambrose Hammer and his nemesis Mansfield Southern, a star of musical comedy making his first foray into serious theater.
with *Hamlet*. Hammer writes a scathing review after seeing only the first act of Southern’s performance, but he later ends up at the actor’s mercy: as a war correspondent, Hammer is wounded and stranded behind enemy lines with Southern his only hope of rescue. Reciting Shakespeare all the while, Southern saves his life, and upon his return the critic finds himself once again assigned to review Southern’s performance as Hamlet. The notice is glowing until it reaches the final exquisitely double-edged comparison:

Mansfield Southern’s inspired performance of Hamlet last night leads us to the hope that in this stellar young actor we have a new dramatic force of power in Shakespearean roles of all the mighty figures of another day, including even the immoral John Barrymore.

As Southern observes, Hammer’s mention of Barrymore betrays a lasting “streak of venom,” for it evokes not only Barrymore’s triumph as a Shakespearean, but also his vulgar hamminess and the downward trajectory of his subsequent career.

It was in films of the period, however, where diffuse allusions to Barrymore the Shakespearean were to prove most useful ideologically, as a means to recode the theater as outmoded or decadent and to establish film as the proper yet popular heir to the theater’s former cultural preeminence. For postwar American cinema, Shakespeare remained a touchstone for cultural prestige but one increasingly colored by a class-coded suspicion of high culture, and the afterimage of John Barrymore provided an iconic focus for that shift. Perhaps one of the most important of these postwar films was John Ford’s *My Darling Clementine* (1946), a work that sought to use the Western to articulate a vision of a postwar American cultural order and Shakespeare’s (largely negative) place within it. The film’s hero is a soft-spoken, populist Wyatt Earp, played as a quiet Westerner of understated decency and common sense by Henry Fonda. Throughout he is set against Doc Holliday (played by Victor Mature), an intellectual Easterner of ambiguous moral character troubled by drink and self-doubt. Early in the film Doc Holliday and Wyatt Earp encounter the Clantons, a group of drunken louts, confronting an alcoholic Shakespearean actor Granville Thorndyke. As Thorndyke delivers the “To be or not to be” soliloquy, he is harassed by the Clantons, but Doc Holliday, entranced, asks him to go on. When Thorndyke falters, Holliday completes the soliloquy, though he breaks into coughing—an indication of illness both physical and moral—near the end of the speech. What we watch is the passing of a Shakespearean legacy from the British Thorndyke to the Eastern-bred and educated Holliday, one that makes him as self-doubting and unable to act as is Hamlet. It is left to the unproblematic and courageous Wyatt Earp, who has remained silent throughout this sequence, to defend Thorndyke from the threats of the Clantons, and his defense springs not from any love of Shakespeare or any special claim to cultural authority but from a visceral distaste for outlaw boorishness.

15. For a discussion of this suspicion and its connection to representations of villainy in postwar popular culture, see Hawkins 16-18.
Here Shakespeare is no longer a civilizing force; American moral decency is. That we are to recall Barrymore in this sequence is confirmed by the tag line “Good night, sweet prince,” delivered by Thorndyke as he mounts the stage to leave town. This was, of course, the Shakespearean epitaph famously placed on Barrymore’s tomb by his brother Lionel, and it often functioned as a kind of shorthand to evoke Barrymore’s image. Here that image serves as counter-legitimation, suggesting how the true bearer of civilization has passed from Shakespeare (i.e., British cultural cachet, the theatrical institutions of the East Coast, high culture, all of which can be represented as decadent through the afterimage of Barrymore), to the American West (and with it Hollywood).

But the idea of a Barrymore was not uniformly linked to such counter-legitimation. Indeed, his image occasionally served precisely the opposite purpose, as in *In a Lonely Way* (1950), a film noir addressed to rising suspicions about leftist Hollywood writers and directors. It focuses on Dixon Steele (played with delicious ambiguity by Humphrey Bogart), a hotheaded screenwriter who sneers at the commercial demands of Hollywood and its mass-cult audience. In the film that audience is exemplified by a dimwitted, star-struck cocktail waitress whom Steele comes under suspicion of murdering (wrongly, we later discover). The exposition sequence, in which Dixon visits a nightclub, goes out of its way to establish Steele’s artistic integrity by displaying his contempt for Hollywood. An important symbol of that integrity is his close friendship with Charlie Waterman, a former matinee idol and Shakespearean actor who addresses Steele as “sweet Prince” and offers the comfort of Sonnet 29 in his hour of need. The sonnet neatly captures the complicated emotional dynamic of the entire film. As the lover in the sonnet finds himself “in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,” so Steele finds himself suspected of murder; as the lover finds consolation in his thoughts of the beloved, so Steele takes solace in his romance with Laurel Gray and friendship with Waterman. Even so, for all his Shakespearean “class,” Waterman is pointedly a drunk, an unemployable anachronism despised by the Hollywood elite. And the Shakespearean consolation turns out to be fruitless, for Steele and his romance are finally destroyed by the police’s persistent, unwarranted suspicions, a trope for the effects of rising anti-Communist hysteria. Steele is clearly the inheritor of Waterman’s (and Barrymore’s) tarnished Shakespearean mantle, but it comes with Waterman’s suspect status. Indeed, the film cleverly invokes the conventions of B-movie crime drama in order to coax the viewer into sharing those suspicions, only to reverse them, powerfully, in the final scene. It is a rare case in which a commercial work of the period invokes the highbrow/lowbrow distinction in order to problematize it.

More typical is the opposite, as in the case of *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952). An apologia for the virtues of the studio system, this film details the career of studio executive Jonathan Shields, whose manipulative tactics appall his friends and employees even as those tactics enable them to create their best work. In the film’s central sequence, Shields seeks to promote the career of a sodden starlet, Georgia Lorrison. She is crippled, we and Shields...
learn, by the onerous theatrical legacy of her famous father, George Lorrison, a former matinee idol and eminent Shakespearean actor. When Shields visits Georgia’s apartment and discovers her “shrine” to her father, the camera pans over pictures and artifacts (a helmet from Macbeth, souvenirs from her father’s stage productions) that unmistakably identify Lorrison with Barrymore (including a sketch of Barrymore in profile). As Shields plays an LP of Lorrison performing Macbeth 5.4.19-28, he berates the legacy of Georgia’s Shakespearean father, a burden that prevents her from achieving commercial success: “Because he was a drunk, you’re a drunk. Because he loved women, you’re a tramp. But you forget one thing—he did it with style.” Like many evocations of Barrymore in the 50s, this odd moment betrays a certain nostalgic ambivalence toward Barrymore, connected as he was with the glory days of the studio system as well as with Shakespearean theater. Shields’s rant memorializes Barrymore’s legendary sense of the theatrical even as he underlines his self-destructiveness.

In this context the passage from Macbeth becomes a multilayered commentary on the relationship between Shakespeare and Hollywood. On one level, Macbeth articulates Georgia’s despair, the anguish of a film actor (and potentially of the film industry) condemned to walk in the shadow of a forbiddingly prestigious theatrical past, embodied by Lorrison the Shakespearean. Yet, on another level Macbeth’s reference to the “poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more” (5.4.24-26) becomes, in George Lorrison’s mouth, an interesting case of self-condemnation. It is only by “desecrating” Lorrison’s artifacts, breaking the idolatry attached to her father and to Shakespeare, literally shattering the recording of her father’s Shakespeare performance, that Georgia can succeed as a film actress. You can never be a star, Shields tells Georgia, “until you can see people as they really are, yourself as you really are. Until you can do this to your father’s picture [draws a moustache on the portrait] and laugh the way he would’ve laughed. That’s not a god talking, Georgia, it’s only a man.” It is important, then, that Lorrison (like Barrymore) authorizes his own “desecration” with his own rakish behavior. Because he refused to take “serious” theater seriously, Shields (and the studio system he represents) is free to take commercial film seriously, and to help Georgia conquer her alcoholism and pursue a successful Hollywood career. At every turn the film is at pains to stress that for all Hollywood’s commercialism (shown in great detail), Shields’ studio nevertheless produces art and is the proper heir of Lorrison and Shakespeare. The logo of Shields’ production company, a coat of arms, displays the very helmet we see in Lorrison’s shrine, and it bears the Shakespearean family motto, “Non sans droit.” Yet Shields’ dismantling of cinema’s burden of its theatrical high-cult past is not without its ironies: as if to underline that this appropriation of Shakespearean cultural authority is under erasure, early in the film Georgia draws a moustache on Shields’ coat of arms, the very act of symbolic disrespect that Shields had earlier made to her father’s portrait.
In many ways, the 1958 melodrama *Too Much Too Soon*, a film adaptation of Diana Barrymore's biography of the year earlier, is an unintended companion piece to *The Bad and the Beautiful*, like its counterpart stressing the self-destructive legacy of the legendary Shakespearean for those who attempt to follow in his footsteps. In this instance, Diana Barrymore’s rise and precipitous fall as an actress turns on her stormy relationship with her father, in whose Los Angeles mansion, empty except for a bar and a symbolic caged eagle, she eventually goes to live. When the two first meet on Barrymore’s yacht, the actor’s Shakespearean past recalled with respect and poignancy, emerges as the key to his personality. Bored by his daughter’s questions about the life of a Hollywood star and coaxed by old friends who pull alongside in their boat, Barrymore offers snippets from *Henry V* that increasingly seem to refer directly to the actor’s faded career—a friend’s citation of Cambridge’s insincere protestation of love, “Never was a monarch better loved or feared than your majesty,” brings Barrymore’s wistful reply, “Alas, your too much love and care for me are heavy orisons against this poor wretch.” Bathed in a light from the boat that seems both theatrical spotlight and movie projection, the tipsy Barrymore begins Henry’s “Once more into the breach” soliloquy, building slowly into a genuine grandeur underlined by a slow zoom, at the end delivering the speech as much to himself as to his silhouetted friends and daughter. Henry’s talk of acting one’s way into heroic stature—“imitate the action of a tiger,” “disguise fair nature with hard-favored rage”—becomes a commentary on the finally illusory nature of Barrymore personal legend and, paradoxically, an evocation of the actor’s genuine talent as a Shakespearean. Here Shakespeare serves as a symbol of theatrical achievement and heroic idealism that Barrymore has lost in pursuing the vacant pleasures of film stardom, yet it remains the standard against which he continues to be measured. Indeed, later in the film after Barrymore dies, Diana discovers a leatherbound script for *Hamlet* which on its cover bears the name “William Shakespeare” and the familiar profile of Barrymore, as if the two were somehow conflated. Diana soon discovers, like her father before her, that what the public wants to see is not high art—a producer warns her that “movies are a business, not poetry”—but the spectacle of a film star, the Barrymore legend on display.

What begins on the yacht as moving epic is doomed to end in farce. Raising his spirits-filled glass, Barrymore declares “follow your spirits,” and when with a drunken flourish he urges all to “cry ‘God for Harry, England, and St. George,’” he loses his balance and plunges over the deck railing into the water below, afterward abandoning his daughter to join his friends on their yacht. This sequence is given special piquancy by the casting of Errol Flynn in the part. Like his onetime drinking companion Barrymore, Flynn had found himself type-cast by Hollywood and thus barred from consideration for serious dramatic roles, and by the late forties he had developed a reputation for hard living, roguish behavior, and drunkenness. Henry’s instruction on acting the part of the hero thus takes on added resonance in the
mouth of Hollywood’s most famous swashbuckler. Ironically, Flynn’s Barrymore was one of several portrayals of wastrels with which he was attempting to resurrect his film career in the late 50s, a comeback cut short by a heart attack in 1959. If *The Bad and the Beautiful* stresses the virtues of abandoning enervating high artistic pretensions in pursuit of commercial success and middlebrow standards of excellence, *Too Much Too Soon* suggests how devastating Hollywood’s commodification of stars can be for those capable of “poetry.”

Diana’s biography, interestingly enough, allows the audience to rewrite the seemingly inevitable trajectory of the Barrymore story. Though she follows her father down a path of alcoholism, broken romances, and degrading parts, she manages in the final reel to reject the glossy lure of stardom. The emotional climax of the movie involves Diana, who has sunk to stripping in order to pursue her craving for audience approval, imitating the gestures of models as she looks over cosmetics advertisements in a drugstore window. When she sees her own grotesque reflection in the window superimposed on the idealized images of beauty, she breaks the window and is committed to an asylum where she is visited by writer Gerald Frank who offers to help her write her story. At movie’s end, what emerges from this critique of stardom and the system of media idealization that supports it is an alternative middle-class ideal, one concerned with mundane good-heartedness and lack of pretense rather than the self-destructive pursuit of celebrity. When Diane returns to New York, she accidentally meets up with the revealingly named Link, the faithful “good Joe” from her childhood, who commiserates with her, declaring, “I once had money. Now I’ve got something else. I’m a real nice guy.” As if to underline his rejection of any facade of the masculine ideal, he doffs his hat to reveal that he is bald. What allows Diane to achieve this kind of self-acceptance is not psychotherapy, which she explicitly rejects, but the talking cure of writing an anti-celebrity celebrity biography. The latter is an exercise which, the movie does not acknowledge, depends upon her father’s legendary status for its interest and allows her finally to achieve the fame that has eluded her on the stage.

*Too Much Too Soon* effectively marks the end of Barrymore’s presence in American film, in part because the generation that remembered Barrymore’s films and stage performances was passing, in part because by this time Richard Burton had assumed the mantle of the Shakespearean star in Hollywood, in the process modifying the type and responding to different circumstances. It is striking, then, that Barrymore’s afterimage (literally as a ghost in two cases!) has reemerged on the stage in the 90s with the appearance of four plays that feature him prominently: Paul Rudnick’s *I Hate Hamlet* (1991), Nicol Williamson and Lionel Megahey’s *Jack: A Night on the Town with John Barrymore* (1994), William Luce’s *Barrymore* (1996), and Jason Miller’s *Barrymore’s Ghost* (1996). Why such a sudden Barrymore stage revival, beyond the obvious observation that Rudnick’s highly successful comedy has sparked imitators? It is. I want to argue,
because Barrymore's persona has become a useful means by which the theater, particularly Shakespearean theater, can speak about its problematic relationship to Hollywood and American popular culture, an issue reactivated by the Shakespeare film renaissance of the 90s. Through the figure of Barrymore, the theater can articulate the romance and power of a popular Shakespeare specific to the stage, one that has the force of history and legend behind it and responds to film's reassertion of itself as a vehicle, increasingly the primary vehicle, for Shakespearean performance in the 90s. Behind this reemergence of Barrymore is a long-standing struggle between the theater and film for cultural authority in America, a struggle conducted in part through claims to Shakespeare. The theater's reinfection of the idea of Barrymore, in other words, amounts to a barely displaced case for the theater as a medium and potentially popular institution, conducted through an emblematic figure who deserted the Shakespearean stage for the screen.

In Rudnick's I Hate Hamlet, no small part of that case turns on the issue of presence. Benjamin famously observed that a key effect of the mechanical reproduction of images is the dissipation of the artwork's "aura," the mystique and special authority of the original. Nowhere is that dissipation more evident than in film (and, one might add, TV) where the lost aura of the stage actor's live performance is replaced by "an artificial build-up of the 'personality' outside the studio":

The cult of the ... star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of the personality' the phony spell of a commodity.

(Benjamin 231)

I Hate Hamlet anatomizes this commodification of the actor as star, which it represents as yet one more manifestation of a general commodification of American culture wrought by Hollywood. TV star Andrew Rally is well aware that in Hollywood he is "network candy" (18) with "the right twinkle, the demographic appeal" (39), a product repackaged and marketed by his producer-friend Gary. His TV series and commercial endorsements offer Andrew easy money and celebrity, but those rewards are linked to mass market institutions that, Gary never tires of telling him, reduce everything to commodities. The marketplace establishes instant, utterly clear, exclusively commercial standards of quality and legitimacy to which theatrical performances, and particularly Shakespearean performances, simply cannot respond:

Gary. [M]aybe, with Shakespeare, there's no difference between good and bad. And everyone's afraid to say it. I mean, at the movies, on the tube—either you're funny, or you're canceled. You're good-looking, or you're best-supporting ... But with Shakespeare—it's just

16. Sheldon Rosen's play Ned and Jack, portraying Barrymore and Ned Sheldon on the eve of his 1922 Hamlet, appeared in November 1981 on Broadway. Despite direction by Colleen Dewhurst and a moderately respectable run at Stratford the season before, negative reviews closed the show after a single performance. This footnote in theatrical history only reinforces the point that the stage revival of Barymore's image in the 90s has by no means been a sure thing; it has depended for its success upon the resonance of a historically specific set of issues.
real hard to tell who’s good, without nudity. (47)

As Gary’s quip about “good-looking” or “best-supporting” suggests, those categories of evaluation hardly take into consideration Andrew’s actual acting abilities, and they force him into a Hamlet-like crisis of inauthenticity, the suspicion that he has been subsumed by the star persona on which he trades. Though Andrew is terrified by the prospect of playing Hamlet, doing so gives him the chance to test his mettle as an artist, and it allows his struggle between melancholy acquiescence to a corrupt system and active resistance to lay claim to Hamlet’s heroic precedent.

Like Hamlet Sr.’s spectre prompting revenge upon the forces that destroyed him, the ghost of Barrymore guides Andrew toward a symbolic victory over the easy rewards of Hollywood, a victory that involves the hard-won artistic legitimacy offered by stage Shakespeare. Barrymore’s career articulates a more general cultural trajectory for the actor which Andrew has the chance to reverse, if only in his own case. “Andrew is my last vain hope,” Barrymore claims, “my cosmic lunge at redemption” (56). And throughout the play Barrymore is the voice of resistance to the standards of value dictated by Hollywood. For example, he sets his own self-conscious overacting against televisual conventions of realism that privilege the “truth” of method acting, superficial contemporary “relevance,” and “real-world” genres like the preposterous hospital or high-school TV series Gary pitches for Andrew. Like the campy flamboyance of his apartment, Barrymore’s hamminess becomes a virtue rather than a liability. His overacting celebrates theater’s theatricality, insisting upon the self-conscious artifice, physical presence, and personal agon of the stage actor. Shakespeare’s florid diction and outmoded declamatory mode, particularly in soliloquies, emerge as proud emblems of the theatrical mode, resources for exhibiting one’s personality and craft. Indeed, for Rudnick this insistent self-display is a sign of authentic vitality, one index of which is the phallic bulge in Barrymore’s Shakespearean tights. To Andrew’s euphemistic accusation that Barrymore’s acting was notoriously “larger than life,” he replies:

What size would you prefer? Gesture, passion—these are an actor’s tools. Abandon them, and the result? Mere reality. Employ them, with gusto, and an artist’s finesse, and the theater resounds! I do not overact. I simply possess the emotional resources of ten men. I am not a ham; I’m a crowd. (27)

Likewise, the dangerous sword fight that ends Act I and the elaborate bows that Andrew and Barrymore take at play’s end both self-consciously stress the bodily presence of the actors on the stage before the audience, in ways that film and TV simply cannot match.

Rudnick is savvy enough to appreciate some of the irony in his recuperation of theater. I Hate Hamlet does not so much reject the Hollywood star system as manage the theater’s relationship to it. Rudnick distinguishes between the false “cult of the star” and the genuinely artistic “aura” created by the alchemy of live stage performance, but he does not imagine the the-
atrical *institution* outside the ideological parameters established by Hollywood. Indeed, his discussion of stardom simply makes clearer the compensatory ideological function of theater in the wider cinematic cultural system: theater legitimates cinematic stars (and the star system) by providing them (and it) with artistic “aura,” while cinematic stars return the favor by subsidizing the theater with their box-office appeal. Yet throughout this exchange the hegemony of Hollywood remains intact, a fact acknowledged by the Pyrrhic nature of Andrew’s “success.” The morning after Andrew’s opening as Hamlet, Barrymore is slumped before the TV, surrounded by junk food wrappers and bags of chips, listening to Andrew’s vapid snack-food commercial. For all of Barrymore’s talk of grand artistry, we learn that Andrew’s performance was an embarrassing failure and that the pull of junk-food culture and easy money remains as strong as ever. As Barrymore sardonically quips, “Me? I didn’t even see the play. I was home watching television. I’m an American” (62). Yet Andrew’s foray into “serious” theater is all the more *heroic* precisely for its failure, for Rudnick presents failure as a necessity guaranteed by one’s devotion to the impossibly high standards of an art concerned with more than mere commercial profit. Through Rally, the marginal status of theater in a culture that regards an actor as “just some English guy who can’t get a series” (37) becomes the very mark of its status as *art*. Andrew’s triumph, such as it is, lasts a brief moment, noticed only by himself, when in “To be or not to be” he breaks through to a bored sixteen-year-old in his audience (who also clearly hates Hamlet). That moment of triumph has its compensations—it prompts Andrew to refuse Gary’s offer of a lucrative new TV series, and it impresses his girlfriend Deirdre with his passion and (ironic) bravery. But even so, the future Gary paints of Andrew doing Chekhov “off-off-nowhere” (61) in a basement with folding chairs reminds us that the compensations Andrew discovers in his performance are largely symbolic, ephemeral, and individual. Barrymore offers a romantic image of American theater’s glorious last hurrah and a cautionary example of the consequences of forsaking the stage for the screen, and his ghostly stage presence provides an interestingly timed riposte to the first salvo of 90s Shakespeare on film. But in the final analysis Rudnick’s paean to theater is less interested in Shakespeare itself than in theater as a metaphor for antibourgeois style. It also inaugurates what is the dominant recuperative strategy of this group of Barrymore plays—a nostalgia for “serious” theater, evoked within the certainty of its demise. In the absence of a viable market for Shakespearean theater, nostalgia for Shakespeare sells.

17. *I Hate Hamlet’s* considerable commercial success (it has become a staple among regional repertory companies) depends upon Barrymore’s reputation as a bad-boy film star and the opportunities it provides for a virtuoso impersonation for the actor playing Barrymore. In its original New York run, the part was played by Nicol Williamson, cast in large part to tap into the acclaim surrounding his film portrayal of Hamlet in 1969. Williamson went on to exploit his characterization with his one-man show *Jack* in 1994 (revived in Los Angeles in 1996), a show which itself seems to have served as a model for the recent one-man shows *Barrymore* and *Barrymore’s Ghost*. Williamson’s differences with his co-star Evan Handler and author Rudnick fueled the notoriety of the show’s original New York run: see Rothstein and Witchel.
Both Miller’s and Luce’s plays, unlike Rudnick’s, purport to offer us the man behind the star persona. *Barrymore’s Ghost* is a cautionary fable about the intoxications and dangers of fame. Its relatively straightforward chronicle of Barrymore’s life is organized around two turning points, both of which involve Shakespeare: the first, his reading of *Hamlet* (supposedly given to him by his sister Ethel) which, he says, “gave me back my life in the theatre and a respect and love for the craft of acting” (21), and the second, his desertion of the Shakespearean stage for Hollywood, a self-destructive choice which symbolizes a potential institutional status of American theater now lost: “… if John Barrymore had stayed on Broadway he could have created a theatre of elegance and distinction. The American theatre has vanished because of his abandonment” (29). What Miller’s Barrymore discovers again and again is the emptiness of stardom (particularly without Shakespearean substance), what he calls its “ominousity … a deep feeling of … nothingness” (31), exemplified in the ignoble, lonely deaths of his famous parents and siblings. The irony is that the play that made Barrymore a star articulates with its most famous soliloquy the kind of impulse to self-negation celebrity breeds. When Barrymore launches into “To be or not to be” at the end of Act I, the implication is that he was (and is) so compelling as Hamlet because the role gave voice to something deep within his character, the melancholy burden of his membership in a theatrical royal family. At play’s end, the ghost of Barrymore returns to the issue of fame, asking whether consolation is to be found in the fact that he shall “live forever in the flickering images projected upon a bare white screen, entertaining an eternally dreaming audience” (44-45). Here Barrymore takes up a key difference between stage and screen. The cinema had once attracted him, so he claims, because, “Theatre is ephemeral. Film is forever” (28). But in the end Barrymore reverses the argument with an extraordinary metatheatrical gesture:

Here I am and there you are. You get the gist of it? … What really matters is that I’m alive now, in front of you, because, and remember this, I didn’t need anything, anyone. John, Jack, Jake Barrymore is not dead. I am here with you in this instant of time, more alive than ever, because all I ever needed was an audience. (45)

What substitutes for the “ominousity” epitomized by Hollywood stardom is the face-to-face presence of performer and audience to each other in the present moment, stripped of the apparatus of celebrity and encountering each other as human beings, an experience which only live stage performance can provide. And, as if to underline once more Shakespeare’s uncannily emblematic place in this defense of theater, the ghost of Barrymore ends the play by declaring “That’s all there is, there isn’t anymore. The rest is silence” (45), a phrase which suggests the truth of Barrymore’s story can be found only in (his) theatrical presence, not in the afterimages of film or Hollywood legend. Of course, this very gesture only reinvests the Barrymore legend with mystique—it is just that the mystique finds its proper expression in the kind of experience the theater, and theater only, can provide.

Luce’s *Barrymore* is by far the most ambivalent of this group of works,
concerned with loss of memory, both personal and cultural, and with it the irretrievable loss of theater's once potent cultural authority. Luce locates his Barrymore in 1942 (the year of his death), seeking to revive his career by attempting a comeback in his first great Shakespearean role, Richard III. But in rehearsal it becomes painfully apparent that his ability to remember his lines is gone—what he substitutes for the play he’s supposed to be rehearsing is an associative ramble through fragmentary personal anecdotes, bits of contemporary songs, bawdy limericks, and one-liners. It is the Barrymore persona presented in the manner of *Krapp’s Last Tape*. What holds these fragments together is not a clear narrative line or a moment of *anagnorisis* but their sheer dash and wit, and it is Barrymore as an emblem of self-dramatizing debonair charm that the play celebrates.18 But where Rudnick’s Barrymore puts the actor’s theatricality in the service of resisting the vapid safety of mass culture, Luce’s Barrymore uses the flourish and quip to keep at bay his awareness that he and the institution he represents have passed out of America’s cultural memory. When he asks, “Do you think my fans will remember me when I’m a has-been?” the tellingly named prompter Frank answers patronizingly, “Of course, they do, Mr. Barrymore” (16). The relationship between the oblivion Barrymore fears and the bravado he uses to deny it is encapsulated in his anecdote about the home of his grandmother Mum Mum, matriarch of the Barrymore dynasty. In her Victorian mansion he dubbed “The Tomb of the Capulets”—a home similar in its antiquated flamboyance to Barrymore’s apartment in *I Hate Hamlet*—the young Barrymore feared being called to the dark at the top of the stairs. Against that terror Mum Mum urged the boy to repeat, as if a charm, the phrase “I have a wonderful power” (33). The tidbits of theatrical myth and well-worn punch lines with which Barrymore regales us have the same incantational quality, and they take on pathos insofar as we penetrate the glib surface and recognize the anxiety and loss they seek to repress.

So too the few Shakespeare passages that come unbidden to his memory: for the most part Barrymore invokes them with a wink and a nod to justify his own roguishness. One important exception comes at the end of Act I with his spontaneous recitation of Richard’s “I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,” the longest Shakespearean passage of the play (and incidentally the speech with which Barrymore ushered Shakespeare into the talkies). Richard’s private self-loathing and attraction to the compensatory delights of extravagant pretense become Barrymore’s only real acknowledgment of the psychology behind his own self-destructive impulses. (Act II offers a similar moment when Barrymore launches spontaneously into Hamlet’s “I have of late ... lost all my mirth.”) Elsewhere, when he tries to perform the part of Richard, despite the urgings and encouragement of the prompter, he cannot hold the

---

18. One must acknowledge that these Barrymore plays have been constructed as star vehicles, a means by which contemporary Shakespearean actors like Nicol Williamson and Christopher Plummer can mythologize themselves by borrowing something of Barrymore’s mystique. In the case of *Barrymore*, nearly all reviewers of the play picked up on and remarked about that process: see especially Brantley, Canby, and Winn.
part in his memory, and eventually he recognizes that the evanescent glory of his earlier Shakespearean performances is irrecoverable:

Actors are like the waves of the sea. They rise to separate heights, then break on the shore and are gone, unremembered. Nothing as dead as a dead actor. Nothing. (55)

Like Rudnick’s and Miller’s plays, Luce’s work recognizes (and laments) the passing of the kind of Shakespearean theater Barrymore represents. Yet Barrymore pointedly refuses to see that demise in institutional terms. At one point Barrymore grumbles, “Broadway versus Hollywood, Hollywood versus Broadway. What’s there to compare? Sodom with subways or Gomorrah with palm trees—it’s all the same” (51). Rather, the play accepts the diminished space of Shakespearean theater, now narrowed to an audience of one, the prompter Frank, and it imagines Shakespeare’s second life not in terms of a return to the stage but as the subtext of celebrity, a gloss upon the psychology of stardom.

In the wake of cultural materialism and cultural studies, scholars have been intensely engaged with charting how various social formations reproduce and contest Shakespeare’s cultural meaning and function. The dominant focus of that concern has been to examine how various cultural agents appropriate or adapt the Shakespearean text, its language, plots, characters, and motifs. This survey suggests that an equally powerful—if underappreciated—site of cultural reproduction of Shakespeare is the image of “the Shakespearean.” It is through that image that social conceptions of Shakespeare are established, disseminated, debated, revised, and recuperated, often in relative freedom from the actual Shakespearean text. In the case of John Barrymore, that process of reproduction is remarkably long-lived and complex, involving several constituencies (including Barrymore himself) inflecting and reinflecting his star persona for a variety of ends. From the history of Barrymore’s afterimage emerges a larger struggle between two culture industries, the stage and the screen, at a crucial period of American cultural re-formation, a struggle to establish their respective claims to cultural authority, with Barrymore’s star persona as a means for articulating their conceptions of Shakespeare, his institutional place, and his cultural significance. Such an approach invites speculation about the ideological function of other Shakespearean stars, of, to name but four, Maurice Evans, Richard Burton, Kenneth Branagh, or Patrick Stewart, all of whose status as “popular” Shakespeareans shaped perceptions of Shakespeare in their own historical moments.19 If stars are representational sites where ideological dynamics or ideals find expression, it is time to recognize fully the productivity of the idea of “the Shakespearean,” for it has become bound up in a set of tensions—between high- and lowbrow, commercial and “serious” art, theater and film—that form an important context for the Shakespeare of our century.20

19. One example of this sort of work is Anderegg’s superb study of Orson Welles.
20. I would like to thank Martin Norden and William Luce for supplying me with information and materials for this article.
Works Cited


http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq/vol37/iss1/5


LANG, WALTER, dir. The Great Profile. With John Barrymore, Mary Beth Hughes, and Gregory Ratoff. 1940. Twentieth Century Fox.


