one considers the many allusions to flagellation in Sternberg's films.) The costumes, makeup, and studio decor (some of it consisting of Dietrich's personal mementos and photographs) are too theatrical by far, as if they were being used as an arty pretext for seductive poses; surely, one thinks, to take all this seriously would be to become a "tourist" in a city like Berlin. And yet the delicacy and occasional seriousness of Dietrich's face seems to *ask* us to take things in earnest. As a result the scene partakes simultaneously of a deep romanticism and of a more avant-garde attitude that, to quote Sontag again, perceives "Being-as-Playing-a-Role." In every way, it is the "farthest extention . . . of the metaphor of life as theater" (280).

Throughout, Dietrich plays her part with an alternating conviction and irony that few American actors then or now would attempt, never allowing it to lapse into travesty. Consequently, as she says to Orson Welles at one point in *Touch of Evil,* her work seems "so old it's new." Like all actors, she allows the audience to indulge in illusion, but she widens the splitting of belief a little more than movies usually allow. She is the most extravagant of the shimmering women in thirties Hollywood, her "presence" dependent on something veiled and suggested, always promised and forever deferred. She is a goddess, but if we look for an essence or plenitude in her image, we shall never find it; she knows that she is all makeup and gauzy light, the glossy surface of a photograph, and her performance relies on that fact. We might describe her collaboration with Sternberg as relatively passive and masochistic, especially since it left her sadly imprisoned in the role of glamorous woman; but it also has modernist implications, making her one of the most paradoxical figures in the history of movies. Repeatedly, she frustrates our ability to make easy generalizations about her meaning or to decide exactly where the director leaves off and the star begins.

9

James Cagney in *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938)

Like many viewers, I often have difficulty recalling or even registering the names of the dramatis personae in old Hollywood movies. For me at least, it is usually John Wayne getting on a horse, seldom the Ringo Kid or Ethan Edwards. But then who is John Wayne? In a very real sense he is as much a character as anyone else in a story, the product of publicity and various film roles, represented by a fellow whose original name was Marion Morrison. I think of him as real (Marion Morrison may have thought so, too), but he is just a construction, an image that has an ideological or totemic function.

This is one of several paradoxes about characterization and performance in films, and it raises some interesting problems for analysis. In Hollywood, as sometimes in our lived relations, we may ask where the actor leaves off and the character begins. How much does performance actually "write" or constitute the character? How much is performance itself an illusion, created by technical trickery, fame, and our fascination with actors? I doubt that these questions have definitive answers, and in one sense the Hollywood film is designed to prohibit them. The performer, the character, and the star are joined in a single, apparently intact, image, so that many viewers regard people in movies as little more than spectacular human beings, like found objects or dada art, magnified by the camera. Some may believe that the movie is simply happening at the behest of the stars. As Joe Gillis/William Holden says at one point in *Sunset Boulevard,* "People don't know that somebody actually *writes* the picture. They think the actors make it up as they go along." But even if the actors *do* make it up, even if they contribute some kind of work to produce characters, how can we identify this work, grounded as it is in their own bodies? In the illusionistic, Aristotelian drama of Hollywood movies, how can we separate the dancer from the dance?

I have been confronting such issues throughout this book; in this chapter I deal with them more systematically, through the work of James Cagney in *Angels with Dirty Faces*. I write in praise of Cagney, who is generally agreed to be one of the most compelling Hollywood performers, but I also try to show the complex, many-leveled process that constructs a familiar movie character and to demonstrate something about that character's ideological meaning.

Before turning to the analysis itself, however, it may be useful to distinguish among three elements of characterization that make up all star performances. First, there is the *role:* a character in the literary sense, a proper name attached to certain adjectives and predicates (or character "traits") in a narrative. The role may be written down in a script, or it may be revised or improvised during production (as Cagney claims to have done with the role of Rocky Sullivan in *Angels with Dirty Faces*), but it is essentially a prefilmic development, established before the cameras turn. Second, there is the *actor,* a person whose body and performing skills bring other important traits to the role. The actor is already a character in some sense, a "subject" formed by various codes in the culture, whose stature, accent, physical abilities, and performing habits imply a range of meanings and influence the way she or he will be cast. Finally, there is a *star image,* also a character, that begins as a product of the other two categories (for example, Cagney's famous performance as Tom Powers in *The Public Enemy* [1931]) but subsequently determines them (Cagney was often cast as a gangster). The star image is a complex, intertextual matter, owing not only to the actor and her or his previous roles, but to the filmic qualities of microphones, cameras, editing and projection; it derives as well from narratives written about the actor in publicity and biography and thus becomes a global category.

These three aspects of character are roughly similar to the triad listed in the earlier discussion of *Kid's Auto Race,* where I argued that people on the screen can be regarded as documentary evidence, as fictional persons, or as celebrities playing "themselves." Actually, none of the three concepts is entirely distinct from the others. In any given film, they are part of what Stephen Heath has called a "circuit of exchange," and might be thought of as points in a circular continuum.[1] In my discussion of Cagney, I will not try to make neat distinctions between them and will not be able to elaborate all their relations; nevertheless, I hope to show how a single film intermittently foregrounds each of Cagney's functions, sometimes making use of his established stardom, sometimes exploiting his specific performing skills, and sometimes requiring him to behave more like "Rocky Sullivan" than like "James Cagney." But first, because *Angels with Dirty Faces* is a vehicle from Cagney's middle period, I need to preface the analysis with a brief description of the actor and the star, showing how they relate to the specific role.

1. See Stephen Heath, "Body, Voice," in *Questions of Cinema* (178–93). Heath's theoretical discussion is more ambitious and uses a more elaborate deconstructive terminology: "agent," "character," "person," "image," and "figure." Along similar lines, John Ellis has described the commercial cinema as a dramatic text intersected by the text of a star; hence many stars "offer a supplementary signification: they are there as star; they are there as fictional role; but they are also there as actor, saying, 'Look at me, I can perform'" (105). The most detailed treatments of the evolution of star images in Hollywood have been Richard Dyer's two books, *Stars* (1979) and *Heavenly Bodies* (1986).

Cagney the actor brought two especially important qualities to early talking films. First was his reedy, nasal voice, which, although it was neither strong nor versatile, had an eccentric and ethnic sound, redolent of the streets. Even in supporting roles he would have been unusual because he spoke without the stage Irishman's brogue and without the "deeze-dem-doze" accents of Hollywood's ersatz lower class. As a leading man he was remarkable. Compare his speech with any of the leading actors in the transitional period—John Barrymore, Paul Muni, Lew Ayres, William Powell—and you have a good sense of how much he differs from the established theatrical mode. His second important quality was the lightning speed and acrobatic force of everything he did. Before him, the talkies had a leaden pace, perhaps because directors were not sure how much the audience could absorb, or perhaps because they were still following the rhythms of silent drama. Cagney was one of the first actors to show Hollywood how to give movies a truly big-city energy and tempo. For example, he saves *The Public Enemy* from William Wellman's excruciatingly slow direction: when he makes an entrance, the film changes from canned theater into sinister vaudeville.

Cagney always thought of himself as a comic song-and-dance man, and that is why he seems to engage with the audience more than other actors, as if he were trying to overcome the boundary between the screen and the auditorium. To watch him is to be aware of how much he combines ordinary realist acting skills with an older tradition that influenced the silent comics—the tradition of circus, of clowning, of improvised dance, and of slapstick violence. Because of this influence, he became one of the most mannered of the classic Hollywood stars, so busy with stylized movement that everyone can do a reasonable imitation of him. "Never relax," he is supposed to have advised a younger player—a strange idea in a profession where one of the chief technical problems is to be able to relax at all. Most amateur actors are overly tense, whereas professionals have the opposite problem, relaxing too much, resting when they ought to be poised to react. Cagney was special because he controlled the screen with the aggressive tactics of a vaudevillian or a small man in a fight: be cocky and get in the first blow; stay on the balls of your feet; always think ahead of your opponent; whatever happens, keep moving. No other actor in the frenetic thirties (with the qualified exception of Mickey Rooney) was able to do these things as effectively. When he was simply listening to somebody, Cagney drilled holes with his stare, and even

when he was standing still, he seemed on the point of dancing; in fact, he actually broke into dance steps in the midst of non-musical pictures: both *Smart Money* (1931) and *Taxi* (1932) have charming moments when he makes an entrance with a soft shoe completely unmotivated by the script.

Cagney had begun his career as a vaudeville hoofer (Barishnikov was once approached to play him in a biopic), and he always liked to remind his publicists that his first theatrical performance was in drag. This background helps explain his unusual impact in violent melodrama. He was the most graceful of the pug-ugly Warners gangsters, smiling slightly when he threw a punch or pulled a gat, and the makeup he wore in some of his thirties publicity stills made him look decidedly androgynous. Hence the opening shot of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), in which Malcolm McDowell leers into the camera, one eye painted with extravagant feminine lashes, seems derived from Cagney's face at its most troubling. There is an image remarkably like it in *The Public Enemy,* when Cagney stands under a streetlamp and grins back at us; the eyes are heavy-lidded, shaded with thick lashes and tilted up at the corners with Satanic points; the mouth is dainty, the cheeks dimpled and cherubic; the aggressive, phallic stare and the knowing smile are perverse, mocking the illusion of innocence, charming the audience as they threaten it.

There was never anything narcissistic or even self-conscious about Cagney's strutting toughness (as there is, for example, in the more neurotic performances of an actor like Richard Dreyfuss); nevertheless, he was the perfect boy sadist, small and amusing enough not to seem a monster, and it is no accident that he became a star at the moment when he rubbed a half grapefruit into Mae Clarke's nose. When he was called upon to be an actual lover, he was relatively ineffectual. He was obviously more at home in the world of Irish male bravado, where he and Pat O'Brien became buddies in film after film; in the majority of his pictures, however, he was an almost asexual figure. Middle age gave him a slight paunch, and his dancing movements were always pushed toward the grotesque; he became a mixture of urban leprechaun, stevedore, and tiny gorilla, evoking litheness and strength rather than the apish dullness of Muni's Scarface. He often stood with his feet in a dancer's turnout, his torso slightly forward, his thick arms bowed in front of his body, his stubby hands curled as if ready to make a fist. When he wore the dapper suits and snap-brim hats of crime movies, he subliminally suggested a monkey in a tuxedo, and David Thomson has made the amusing suggestion that he would have been the ideal Hyde next to Fred Astaire's Dr. Jekyll. Indeed, to appreciate just how simian Cagney could look, one has only to watch him climb the oil storage tank at the conclusion of *White Heat* (1949), muttering and giggling lowly to himself as his arms sway and his rear end juts out.

Cagney never played several roles to which he was ideally suited: Studs Lonigan, the eponymous hero of James Farrell's novels (James Agee once suggested that Cagney ought to be paired with Mickey Rooney as the young and old Lonigan); Christy Mahon in *Playboy of the Western World* (in the thirties he came close to appearing in the play, which he was going to produce himself); and Hildy Johnson, the star reporter of *The Front Page* (O'Brien got the part in the original movie version, although in 1940 Cagney, playing opposite O'Brien, portrayed someone loosely based on the character in *Torrid Zone,* an embarrassingly imperialistic and racist movie that Cagney liked to call *Hildy Johnson among the Bananas*).

As his own producer, he developed a gentle, philosophical streak, attempting a kind of populist whimsy in *Johnny Come Lately* (1943) and *The Time of Your Life* (1948). He played a blind, armless, legless war veteran in the radio adaptation of Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun;* he was a plausible, if miscast, Bottom in Reinhardt's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935); he was superb as a small-town dentist in Walsh's *The Strawberry Blonde* (1941); and in certain brash, eccentric musical comedies he was unique. Despite his range, however, he never shook off the image of a tough hustler. Like all the Hollywood stars of his period, he is remembered chiefly as a vivid type, equal to any of the great figures of melodramatic Dickensian fiction.

Nevertheless his particular image brought with it certain meanings that needed to be altered or kept under control. The sexual violence and amoral charm he gave Tom Powers in *The Public Enemy* tended to subvert the film's earnest sociology; the producers had claimed that their purpose was "to depict an environment rather than to glorify the hoodlum," but Cagney's performance immediately established him as a star villain. Forever afterward, his publicity and biography informed his more naive fans that he was an *actor*— a shy recluse (with a farm, no less) who was married only once and who liked to write Deeds-style verses as a hobby. Furthermore, his screen roles underwent significant changes during the thirties. At first Warners capitalized on his reputation by casting him in films where he roughed up women, but the formula grew stale and Cagney himself wearied of the typecasting. At the same time, the industry was under increasing pressure from the Catholic Legion of Decency. In 1934, the year when the Legion was helping to write the Motion Picture Production Code, Richard Watts, Jr., of the *New York Herald Tribune* wryly noted that Cagney was "sometimes alleged to be one of the cinema's subversive moral influences," and Regina Crewe of the *New York American* expressed fears that his work in *Jimmy the Gent* was "too swift to be followed in the sticks" (quoted in Dickens, 84–85). In 1935, when the Code went into effect, Cagney was promptly inserted into a series of films that put him in the service of the government: in quick succession, he was a sailor in *Here Comes the Navy,* a marine flyer in *Devil Dogs of the Air,* and an FBI agent in *G-Men.* By the time he returned to gangsterdom in *Angels with Dirty Faces,* he had become a more lovable character with a slightly understated technique; even more important, he was cast in the role of a man whose criminal reputation has made him potentially dangerous to children.

* * *

Angels with Dirty Faces is a rapidly-produced, assembly-line movie with no pretensions to art, but it is memorable partly because of the clever way it exploits the interaction between Cagney's star image and his ability to vary his characterizations. The filmmakers and Cagney himself built upon the public's affectionate recognition of the star's persona, using it to create some of their best effects and bending it to an ideological purpose. Such a process was typical of Hollywood under the star system, but to understand how it works in this particular instance, we must recognize how much *Angels* differs from earlier Cagney vehicles—despite its having the same urban milieu, the same general costuming and body language. *Angels* clearly belongs to the sumptuous, middle-class Warner Brothers of the late thirties rather than to the brash, cynical world of the studio's early sound period; Cagney is older, his image already somewhat altered, and is a perfect instrument for the lachrymose dramas of self-sacrifice in which director Michael Curtiz began to specialize.

Curtiz, who is not normally regarded as an *auteur,* seemed to discover in the late thirties and early forties a story he used again and again, probably because it was suited to his romanticism and to the prewar, Production Code years of the late New Deal, when personal sacrifice for the common good was a major theme in American mass culture. The story was Christian in its implications, and its agent was inevitably a hard-boiled Warners star who gave up everything for an ideal. In its early phase, this sacrifice was more pathetic than purely ennobling, as with Edward G. Robinson's performance in *Kid Galahad* (1937) or John Garfield's in *Four Daughters* (1938). In its late phase it was treated ironically, as with Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce* (1945). Cagney's role in *Angels* is one of the more straightforward and "tragic" expressions of the idea, which was to reach its perfect form in *Casablanca* (1942)—a film whose ending was probably determined as much by the formula Curtiz and Warners had discovered as by the temper of the times. *Angels* differs from *Casablanca* partly because its sacrificial character is not a disillusioned liberal but a true racketeer named Rocky Sullivan, a survivor of a Hell's Kitchen childhood, who screams and whimpers like a coward as he is dragged to the electric chair. The film's most interesting touch is that we never know whether Rocky has truly lost control or whether he is giving up his last moment of dignity for a higher cause. We know only that he has a heart of gold, that he begs for mercy before he dies, and that his behavior helps a priest back in the old neighborhood to divert the Dead End Kids from a life of crime.

Cagney's ambiguous death scene is so effective that it helps disguise some of the contradictions and absurdities of the screenplay, which begins on a note of liberal social consciousness, pointing to slums and reform schools as causes of crime, and then shifts emphasis toward the criminals themselves. (One of the authors of the script was John Wexley, who belonged to the radicalized Worker's Theater earlier in the decade.) Ultimately the viewer is asked to believe that if only Father Jerry (Pat O'Brien) could get rid of the Dead End Kids' criminal role models, he could move them out of the pool hall and onto the church-sponsored basketball court. *Casablanca,* a film with an equally absurd plot, was able to avoid this sort of reversal because World War II provided Warners with less problematic villains and an easier way to reconcile politics with melodrama. In *Angels,* however, Cagney must perform the tricky role of mediator between the underworld and the church. The film completely absorbs whatever positive values the state might have into the figure of the priest, who seems "naturally" good and who asserts moral control over every encounter between characters. The police are shown to be corrupt and cruel throughout, one of them even taking sadistic pleasure in Rocky's electrocution; but Father Jerry can act as their agent without having his role questioned. Whenever a social contradiction is raised, it is evaded by appeals to a Higher Law.

And yet the priest alone cannot entirely validate this Law, despite his having risen from the slums and despite Pat O'Brien's proletarian qualities as an actor. At one point he is allowed to assert his full-bloodedness by punching out a crook in a saloon (an almost imperative gesture for the heroes of American action cinema), but essentially he is a figure of abstract goodness, requiring help from "below" in the person of Cagney. Cagney's star image is of considerable importance to this project. After all, he is as much an ego ideal for the audience as for the neighborhood boys in the story. At the same time, he uses his actor's skill to modulate the old formula, signifying new traits and new meanings that can be read against the earlier image. Like most of the Hollywood stars, in a tradition that runs from the late thirties onward, he is able to exploit his celebrity status to create both empathy and subtle nostalgia.

Cagney's stardom is evoked by the film even before he makes his first appearance. *Angels* resembles many of the Warners crime films in having a sort of prologue describing the protagonist's youth; but this prologue is different from the one in *The Public Enemy* because the audience can so clearly recognize the boy actor (Frankie Burke) who will "grow up" to be Cagney. (*The Public Enemy* has a somewhat confusing opening. Cagney was promoted to the leading role in the midst of filming, after the prologue was completed, and the actor who most resembles him as a youth seems to be playing the wrong part.) By this point in his career, Cagney had become so well known that the boy in the first scenes seems to be impersonating him, almost in the style of a nightclub comic, by using a nasal, Lower-East-Side Irish voice ("Me old man's got troubles enough"), rapid-fire delivery, and characteristic gestures like hitching up his trousers with his wrists. He even plays out a typical Cagney incident, pulling a girl's hat down over her head and sneering at her.

This is a curious and quite interesting phenomenon—an actor portraying somebody who has already been determined by the image of another actor, as if Rocky Sullivan's characterization had been completely swallowed up by a star. Actually, however, a good many details in the boy's performance were the product not of a star image but of Cagney's specific design of the Sullivan role. In his autobiography, Cagney says that he partly modeled the character on a "hophead and pimp" he had known in New York, who would "hitch up his trousers, twist his neck and move his necktie, lift his shoulders, snap his fingers, then bring his hands together in a soft smack. His invariable greeting was 'Whadda ya hear? Whadda ya say?' . . . I did that gesturing maybe six times in the picture . . . and the impressionists are still doing me doing him" (73–74).

When Cagney himself enters the picture, in a brief montage sequence showing his adult criminal activity, we are on such familiar ground that we hardly have to see him in the rapidly passing images of bootlegging and gambling to have an illusion of a full presence. If the star system did nothing else, it enabled the classic Hollywood film to establish elements of character in a single instance, which accounts for some of the remarkable narrative economy of the better movies. We know what Rocky Sullivan will sound like before he has spoken a word, and we are prepared to be fascinated by him before the writers have invented a single speech; all the variation and development of the character will occur within the frame of a genre and a set of performing mannerisms that most of the audience can predict, and the emotional effect of the film depends on this fact.

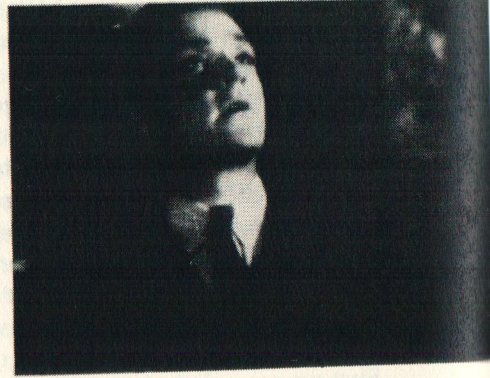
Once Cagney has established the stereotype, however, his performance becomes nuanced. Many of his familiar touches are there, together with the special movements of Rocky Sullivan (he hitches his trousers only once, at a crucial moment I discuss later), but the tone is muted, the energy level turned down a few notches. For example, in his first dialogue scene, where he is interviewed in prison by crooked lawyer James Frazier (Humphrey Bogart), the camera moves in on his round cupid's face as he squints and wrinkles his nose: "I know you're a smart lawyer," he says, broadening the "a" in "smart" and pausing for a beat. He winks and gives a tiny left-right shake of the head, adding "very smart." His stubby hand lifts into view and a finger points offscreen toward Bogart. "But don't get smart with me." He appears to be the same sly, dangerous little guy the audience has always known, but at the same time the routine is underplayed; there is no gleeful smile, no perverse joy in the threatening gesture, no underlying sense of a criminal madman. The line and the movements are delivered with a brisk, clipped speed typical of Cagney, but the voice is quiet and rational, the actor mellowed.

Cagney is visibly older (he was already thirty-two when he played Tom Powers in *The Public Enemy*), and his maturity adds to the pathos of Rocky Sullivan's life. The film emphasizes this pathos by establishing that Rocky is

a gangster because of his poor background and a stroke of bad luck: as a boy he is sent up to reform school for petty theft, refusing to squeal on his friend Jerry, whom he has saved from the pursuing police. In the opening scenes, his misfortune and his role as scapegoat are made relentlessly clear. After the talk with the lawyer, we see him returning to the old neighborhood, having just served a three-year sentence on behalf of his gang (throughout the movie he makes sacrifices, first for the crooks and then for the church). Before tracking down Frazier to claim the money he has been promised, he pays a visit to his old friend Jerry, now a priest. In a rapid, wordless, Kuleshovian sequence, Curtiz and Cagney poise the character neatly between sin and sainthood, transforming the ambiguous, potentially anarchic Cagney of old into a doomed figure in a moral allegory.

First we see a dark, low-angle view as Rocky enters the church during a boys' choir rehearsal. Wearing a dark suit and tie, he looks pencil straight, a strong backlight gleaming off his wavy, highly tonsured hair and almost no fill light on the camera side of his face. The camera tracks in and looks up at his shadowy, rather sinister, profile; he pauses, rapidly shrugs his shoulders, flexes his neck and chin, and then stands very straight, poised, glancing around cautiously. Cut to an innocent-looking choirboy singing a solo in the loft above. Cut back to a new angle on Cagney, shown full face as he looks up toward the loft; a fill light now softens the dark areas of his face, and his offscreen glance is in the direction of a diffused, religious "north light." He begins silently mouthing the words of the choirboy, as if he has heard them a thousand times before, and for a moment he seems to become one of the pretty children in the church, an Irish boy soprano. Cut back to the loft where Father Jerry conducts the rehearsal. Cut to a low angle behind Cagney's dark shoulder as he looks up at the choir and again makes a nervous shrug. Cut to the loft as the song ends and we see the soloist leaving, suddenly breaking into an unholy scuffle with one of the other boys. Return to the previous close-up of Cagney, who now laughs silently in recognition, his heavy-lidded, dark-browed eyes slanting up like a cat's. His amusement seems benign, but there is mischief in his smile. (See next page.)

These shots illustrate how the film separates out some of the range of meanings in Cagney's face, depicting him first as a dapper gangster, then as an innocent, then as an aging Puck. But what is even more interesting is the way Cagney himself seems to have achieved structural command of a familiar repertory of gestures and tics we associate with his screen performances. He "writes" the character not only by inventing new mannerisms but by controlling the old ones in systematic ways and linking them together in new combinations. For example, one of the most frequent gestures he has adopted for Rocky Sullivan is a light shrug of the shoulders, accompanied by a more typical Cagneyesque setting of the body, the feet spread slightly and the knees flexing. He repeats the shrug and the stance often, but always



Three faces of James Cagney.

when Rocky is uncomfortable, and always connecting it with movements of the head and mouth—stretching the neck, jutting the chin forward and pulling it back, scraping the upper lip with the lower teeth, running the tongue around the cheek. In every case these movements, accompanied by quick uneasy glances, convey Rocky's efforts to keep his cool in changed surroundings, his determination to fight against odds, his struggle to maintain dignity.

I should emphasize that Cagney is never as overstated as this description may indicate; his pace is so rapid, his gestures so brief, that he maintains his poise. Nevertheless his discomfort is one of the central issues of the film. As Andrew Bergman has pointed out, Rocky is "not only a criminal but an unsuccessful one, a man caught and sentenced time and again" (74). The key to Cagney's interpretation up until the end is in the way he subtly discloses the character's plight, using a great many movements but refusing to milk his scenes for their blatant emotional content. He consistently

gives Rocky a surface buoyancy, barely suggesting loneliness; for example, his tag line, "Whadda ya hear, whadda ya say," is beautifully rendered, showing Rocky's attempt to be his old self, but registering the exact distance between the man he once was and the man he now is. In Cagney's hands, Rocky seems slightly weary from experience but unapologetic for his past. Never neurotic, he may be the only mentally healthy figure in the actor's gallery of mobsters and sharpies. Hence all of Cagney's potential for derisive glee is held in check, and his busy movements are keyed to Rocky's tense integrity.

Rocky's shrug occurs often during the first encounter with Jerry in the church, where the subtext has to do with a wary, embarrassed reunion of two old friends. (Once again the star system contributes to the effect because Cagney and O'Brien *are* old friends from previous movies and from studio publicity.) Rocky seems happy to see Jerry, but he is a bit reserved and uneasy, as we can see from Cagney's forced cheerfulness. Normally Cagney laughs a great deal—so often that a sort of nasal chuckle becomes part of his speech, punctuating his jokes, giving his words a threatening or ironic twist. Here, however, his amusement is self-depreciating and lacking in affect, almost grimacing. His relative physical distance from O'Brien is also significant, because as a rule Cagney touches other players quite often. In most of his films, he is constantly reaching out to pat a shoulder, grasp a lapel, or poke somebody with a forefinger. One of the reasons for the frightening unexpectedness of some of his performances is that he makes his contact as ambiguous as his smile, mixing affection with aggression—for instance his habit in this film of gently brushing someone's chin with a closed fist (a gesture he took from his father and used as a motif in *The Public Enemy*). The very fact that he does not touch O'Brien much, except for handshakes, becomes an important element of the scene, revealing tension beneath apparent casualness.

The same principles are at work in the beginning of the next major sequence, where Rocky rents a room in the old neighborhood and meets the former "girl in pigtails," Laurie (Ann Sheridan). It would be wrong to say that his moves are completely subdued—for example, he does not simply reach up and push the rooming-house doorbell with a forefinger; he leans his body in toward the buzzer and springs gently back like a dancer. Nevertheless, he is unusually cautious and stoical, shrugging once or twice, glancing around the place in an expressionless, businesslike way, until the scene provides him a strategic opportunity to evoke the carnivalistic mood of his earlier performances. When Laurie reveals to him that she is the girl he used to tease, she slaps him and pulls his hat down over his ears, running out of the room and slamming the door behind her. Cagney stands there for a moment like a vaudevillian in a blackout sketch, then slowly turns toward the camera, the

hat crumpled over his head. He breaks into a dimpled, open-mouthed smile and crosses to his newly rented bed, walking with bouncy steps, his arms held slightly up at his sides and his hands dangling from the wrists like a marionette's. The walk and the wicked, dreamy smile are not far from the manic impersonation he was later to give of George M. Cohan in *Yankee Doodle Dandy,* and he climaxes the movement with a pratfall when he sits on the bed and it collapses; he lands like an acrobat on a trampoline, registering surprise but keeping his hands gracefully in the air, riding with the bounce instead of trying to break it.

In most of his other scenes with O'Brien and Sheridan, Cagney is relatively quiet, playing a man who has to keep his distance. It is with the Dead End Kids that he becomes a dynamo. In fact, he introduces himself to them by doing a parody of a gangster. Walking slowly down the steps of their hideout, his hat brim slanted over one eye, he pokes a hand in his coat pocket and holds the other open and out at his side. "Say yer prayers, mugs," he snarls. (The line is ironic. Father Jerry will come down those same steps at the end of the film, asking the boys to "say a prayer for a kid who couldn't run as fast as I could.") In this underground world of adolescent misrule, Cagney's delicate machismo is allowed to express itself so vividly that he seems on the verge of breaking into another soft-shoe routine. Strolling around the hideout and pointing to a place on the wall where Rocky is supposed to have carved his initials, he pops a piece of gum in his mouth, cocks the hat back, and winks at the kids—the same knowing wink he used with the lawyer at the beginning of the film, but this time filled with delight, energy, and affection, punctuated by a wrinkle of his button nose and a quiet chuckle.

The business Cagney performs with these boys is obviously not the sort of thing that the writers or director dreamed up out of thin air. Even though Curtiz has blocked and shot it skillfully, with an incessantly tracking camera, it was obviously based on the idea of how Cagney, as actor and star, would interact with this particular group. The thirties had produced a generation of pint-sized toughs like Frankie Darrow and Leo Gorcey, all of whom worked in Cagney's shadow. The boys in this film had become famous because of their appearance a year earlier in William Wyler's adaptation of *Dead End,* and Warner Brothers must have seen the advantage of pairing them with Cagney, who is in a sense their "father" as an actor. (Bogart had played a gangster role model for the Kids in the earlier film, but he was swarthy and evil, still typed as a coward and loser; Cagney could easily play a more benign figure, a gangster with a heart of gold.) Hence when Cagney performs in scenes with the Kids, he is called upon to do his star "turn" in the vaudeville sense. The audience has the nostalgic pleasure of watching a familiar actor go through his paces; the result is a subtle parallel between the fictional and professional situations of the actors as well as a stronger bond between audience and star.[2]

As Cagney's star image is foregrounded, the film takes on a heightened energy. Most of what we see is played for comedy, and Cagney's gestures become acrobatic. Inviting the Kids to his room for lunch, he orchestrates their chaos into a kind of circus act. He holds up a pickle jar while he talks, and then claps his hands together, tossing the jar across the room into somebody's lap; before it has even landed, he wheels and walks away, his hands coming apart and gesticulating at each side of his body. He eats with his hat on, pitching a sandwich over his shoulder to one boy while he talks to another, rising suddenly to stride across the room. "I'll tell ya what," he yells over the Kids' racket, pointing a finger at arm's length, turning and looking sideways down the arm like a duelist aiming a pistol; bending his elbow, he draws the finger back and seems to throw it forward a couple of times, keeping the wrist loose and flexible so that the gesture becomes a flourish.

These same choreographics take a more violent form in the basketball game Rocky subsequently engineers between the Kids and a respectable church-going group of boys. Acting as "referee," he performs a kind of Three-Stooges slapstick, his moves so rapid that he has done three things before the audience can react to one: he slaps an unruly kid and uppercuts him with the back of the same hand; then he wheels, almost pirouetting away, pointing at another kid, his mouth curled in a sneer. Although the basketball game is somewhat unconvincing (the very idea of Cagney on a basketball court is silly), it exemplifies the way the film as a whole organizes the performer's typical "act," allowing him moments of dervish intensity, but making him a far less anarchic character than he had been in the early thirties. Indeed all of his behavior is more controlled after this episode because the melodramatic plot takes over completely. Father Jerry suddenly becomes a Father Coughlin-like radio commentator, crusading against the bad influence of gangsters; the gangsters in turn plan to bump off Jerry, and Rocky is caught between his loyalty to a friend and his desire to "never be a sucker." He chooses to shoot down his untrustworthy companions in crime, a decision that ironically precipitates his last confrontation with the police.

The last sections of the film require a different strategy of Cagney the actor, a return to understatement that contrasts vividly with Curtiz's treatment of camera and *mise-en-scène*. All the Curtiz films of the late thirties had flamboyantly expressive lighting, a moving camera, and ostentatious sym-

2. One feature of the star system, as I noted in the previous discussion of Lillian Gish, is that the filmmakers often found some parallel between life and fiction that made the performance seem to grow directly out of the players. In this case, Cagney has described the Dead End Kids as a bunch of wise-guy rowdies whom he needed to tame on the set, just as he does in the movie (75).

bolism. The bottle of Vichy water that Captain Renault drops into a waste basket at a climactic moment in *Casablanca* is one of the most famous examples of a Curtiz "touch" (always underlined with a close-up), but there are equally obvious cases in *Angels*, as when Cagney shoots a gangster who falls dead over a leaflet urging citizens to express their opposition to crime. In this atmosphere, the relative subtlety of Cagney's portrayal is remarkable, and it prevents much of the film from becoming mere kitsch.

Rocky's final shoot-out with the police, for example, is staged no differently from the same scene in a dozen other crime pictures, except that Curtiz romantically backlights the exploding tear gas. Like the typical movie crook, Cagney finds himself trapped in a high place, surrounded by all the armed might of the police. He goes through a familiar routine, smashing out windowpanes and yelling at the cops down below, although when he fires his gun he does it in a Cagneyesque way, biting his lower lip, wrinkling his nose and throwing his arm forward with every shot like a boxer delivering a body punch. Most of the time, however, his moves seem measured, even a bit mechanical, showing none of the apocalyptic frenzy that marks equivalent scenes in other crime movies like *Scarface* or *White Heat*.

The implication of Cagney's performance is that for Rocky Sullivan the scene *is* a bit mechanical—still another battle with the cops that might be terminal but that he seems determined to act out to the end. Cagney never uses close-ups or his brief dialogue for their histrionic possibilities, or even for that feeling of tragic exhaustion one can see in Bogart's Roy Earle at the end of *High Sierra* (1941). Rocky is stoic, self-possessed, and uncomplaining, so that even in his most desperate moments he seems efficient and calm. He is nothing like the "Gangster as Tragic Hero" described by Robert Warshow, primarily because he never gives the impression that he is standing back to look at himself as the agent of some Marlovian drama. Quite simply, he is a man ready to deal with or accept whatever happens, a trait that will make his "breakdown" at the end of the film all the more shocking.

Cagney nicely calculates the closing scenes, never giving any more energy to a line or a piece of business than is necessary. (Notice that Bogart has served as a foil, sniveling, cringing, and generally overacting before Cagney shoots him down; at the same time, Bogart's death scene foreshadows Cagney's wild act near the end, when Rocky is strapped into the chair.) During the shootout we see Rocky in a disheveled state, his eyes burning with tear gas, but Cagney plays everything with utter calm, his age alone giving his close-ups a certain pathos. When he is captured (after throwing an empty pistol at the pursuing police), he is lit in the most extravagant, implausible way Curtiz could have chosen, the light coming from a low, unmotivated source, throwing crazy shadows up over his face. Rocky taunts the police ("So's your thick skull, copper!"), but Cagney's performance runs directly counter to the writing or the staging. Purely with the tone of his voice, he suggests that he is no hellish gunman, only an underdog who will never show fear or remorse.

This tone is maintained with considerable skill right up to the film's climax, even though the situation is pregnant with fake emotional possibilities: Rocky is on death row, waiting to be led off to the chair, and Jerry pays him a visit, asking him to die like a coward so that the Dead End Kids will be disillusioned. Everything about the scene in Rocky's cell is designed to show his undaunted spirit and toughness. Calmly smoking a cigarette, he says that Jerry can come in, but "tell him none of that incense and holy water." He flicks the cigarette butt into a guard's face, and when Jerry proposes that he make a sacrifice for the Kids, he rejects the idea immediately: "I'd have to have a heart, and that got cut out of me years ago." He says that his electrocution will be like sitting in a "barber chair," and when a sadistic guard tries to handcuff him during the last mile, he snarls "Get away from me, screw," punching him in the face. (Because this is Warners in 1939, none of the police retaliates.) "So long, kid," he says to Jerry and then marches grimly to the chair, dramatically lit by a series of spotlights that throw circles of light on the floor and provide him with a theatrical exit.

The whole thing is potentially laughable, and it presents problems for Cagney the actor. The trick is to convey Rocky's courage without making it seem braggadocio; every line and movement has to express strength, but Cagney's typical cockiness has to be muted, replaced by a kind of stoicism. Throughout the scene, therefore, he is relatively quiet, reading his speeches as fast as ever, but keeping them very soft, never inflecting them to show distress. When he speaks the "incense and holy water" line, he gives it no emphasis and no anger, only a slightly weary desire to dispense with pompous ceremony, at the same time letting us know that he is still Jerry's friend. When he slugs the cop who has been taunting him, he does it with the style of a man who is using absolutely no more energy than he needs to keep fools at bay. Only one touch of the old Cagney remains, and it is masterfully timed, signaling to the audience that he is the star they have always known: just before he begins the walk to the chair, he hitches up his pants with his wrists—the only time in the film he has used the gesture.

Rocky has refused the priest's request that he become a coward in the moment before death, but in fact he breaks down in a horrible crescendo of screams and sobs, pleading for mercy. The strategy of the film at this point is to produce an exchange or synthesis of value between the priest and the gangster. On the one hand, the Dead End Kids will adopt a new father, transferring their loyalty to the tough, authoritative priest whom we have seen using a fist in an earlier scene. For the real audience, however, Cagney's death has a reciprocal function, transferring saintliness from Jerry to Rocky, the tough star becoming a Christ figure.

In this regard it is interesting that we do not actually see Rocky being

strapped into the chair. Perhaps Curtiz had to avoid the grisly details—in any case, he represents the electrocution with a montage, never even showing the actor's face. We see only dramatic shadows on the wall, hands clutching a radiator and being pried loose, and Pat O'Brien looking teary-eyed up to heaven. Cagney has said in his autobiography that he played the scene for its ambiguity and that for a long time afterward children would come up and ask him if Rocky was really a coward (75). But the ambiguity rises more out of the way the scene is written and shot than the way it is played, and its power has relatively little to do with Cagney's acting per se. The blood-curdling screams and tearful pleading are shocking, but they would have been equally impressive if some other actor's cries had been dubbed in place of Cagney's. It is the *idea* of Cagney's star image breaking down that is disturbing, because of all the Hollywood personae, he is the one the audience least expects to crack. (In *13 Rue Madeleine* [1948], for example, he is captured by the gestapo and endures hours of torture, laughing in triumph as the U.S. Air Force bombs him and the building to rumble.)

The audience has been cleverly set up for the hysterical death scene by Cagney's theatrical, spotlighted walk to the chair, which shows the diminutive actor dressed all in black, looking younger than at any other point, going off to death as if he were on his way to a performance. These shots hint that Rocky is going to be "acting" at the same time that they confirm the star's image—a player of tough guys for whom the audience has considerable affection. Then suddenly the image is broken or qualified, and the audience cannot be sure—they are left in nearly the same confused, troubled state of mind as the Dead End Kids, who cannot believe the reports of Rocky's death that they read in the newspapers. (At another level, the terror and intensity of Cagney's screams before death may give the general public a chastened attitude toward the death penalty; for if a tough male star from Hollywood, a supposed "innocent," can break down in such a fashion, public execution must be truly horrible.)

I do not want to overstate the ambiguity of these last scenes, but the ambiguity is there, hovering subliminally behind the film's conclusion, sanctifying Rocky in the eyes of the priest and also resulting in some fine dramatic ironies. Like the group of boys who have idolized Rocky, we in the audience have watched the hero act an out-of-character death, and this provokes a dizzy swirl of problems in reading the performance. Have we seen an actor acting a character who is acting? Where does "performance" end and "reality" begin? We are then given strange comfort by Father Jerry, who pays a visit to the boys in their hideout. "Let's ask Father," the boys all say, rushing forward to learn the truth from the spokesman who is supposed to represent God. Father Jerry says that Rocky died just the way the newspapers have reported it. (Is the priest lying, or does it matter? The irony is bottomless.) He then

leads everyone off toward the church, the voices of a youth choir swelling on the soundtrack. If there have been any doubts about Cagney's toughness, any rupture of his image, this ending tries to smooth over the problem, confirming his stardom at a higher level. Indeed the film as a whole is intent on devising new structural relations between Cagney's celebrity, his fictional role, and his acting skills; it hopes thus to transform him into nothing less than a heavenly character.

10

Katharine Hepburn in *Holiday* (1938)

Although the images of players like James Cagney and Marlene Dietrich were eventually adjusted to the demands of the Production Code, stardom for Katharine Hepburn involved a series of subtler, more complex negotiations. Throughout her career, her name connoted not only breeding, intelligence, and "theatah," but also New England austerity, athleticism, and feminine emancipation. Occasionally, she played tomboys or charmingly lost her dignity in screwball comedy, but screenwriters and publicists had trouble making her sufficiently ordinary—a quality successful movie actors need, because they function both as ego ideals and as common folk with whom the audience can identify. Hepburn was badly suited to such ends, at least in terms of the usual formulas. She would have been miscast as a housewife or a dance-hall girl, and she seldom played the suffering women of soap opera. The roles critics have suggested for her include Shakespeare's Rosalind (which she attempted once on stage without much success), Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse, and Henry James's Isabel Archer. In effect, she was what Andrew Britton has described as a Jamesian "princess"—too privileged and controversial to be well liked—and it was not until her much-publicized relationship with Spencer Tracy that the public truly took her to heart.

On screen Hepburn was alert, idealistic, and active, living in wealthy or professionalized worlds. Rarely flirtatious (except to put comic quotation marks around it), she seemed too witty and willful for the average leading man. Inevitably, her films raised feminist issues, but this inclination, like her upper-class manner, had to be contained or controlled. In fact, her social class could be used as a weapon against her whenever she appeared too progressive. Like Vanessa Redgrave or Jane Fonda—her descendants in some

ways—she was frequently described as "spoiled." Her acting technique exacerbated these tensions, because it was clearly associated with "legitimate" theater. Vocally and expressively, she was too lofty for the populist mid thirties, when John Barrymore (the star of her first film) became a symbol of hammyness, and when Garbo and Dietrich were increasingly regarded as vestiges of an older, elitist sensibility. As a result, the bulk of her films developed strategies to lighten or normalize her highly ostensive, drama-school style, and they usually found ways to tame or chastise the strong-willed, aristocratic characters she played. Moreover, the extended narrative constituted by her various roles tells the story of a retreat from assertiveness, a cautious adjustment not unlike the plot resolutions in her individual pictures. Simon Watney has remarked that she "stands for a certain type of 'free woman' in her early films, until her persona is eventually overwhelmed by its very longevity, transforming her into an icon of survival, yet another version of the American dream which successfully represses the history which determines it" (61). Andrew Sarris makes a similar point, describing her career in terms of a "premature feminism" and observing that she was complicit in a move toward more conservative roles after 1939 (quoted by Watney, 39).

Like many successful stars, Hepburn selected her own scripts and managed her image to a remarkable degree—abetted by money and a series of friendships with writers. From the beginning, she was regarded as a combative, high-spirited androgyne, and not surprisingly, she achieved her first great theatrical success in *The Warrior's Husband* (1932), a modernized version of *Lysistrata*. Soon afterward, she signed a contract with RKO, where she won an Academy Award in the following year for *Morning Glory* (1933). Throughout the thirties, especially in collaboration with Cukor, Hawks, and Grant, she challenged the dominant modes of Hollywood romance, and partly for that reason, her relationship to the studio system was embattled, involving periodic returns to Broadway. Her most popular film role of the decade was Jo in *Little Women* (1933), which was followed by a disastrous failure on Broadway in *The Lake* (1934), where she provoked Dorothy Parker's famous comment that her performance "ran the gamut of emotions from A to B." Back in California, she acquired a new voice coach and a new co-star, Cary Grant, who appeared with her in *Sylvia Scarlett* (1936) and then in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). But despite the critical praise her films of the late thirties received, only *Stage Door* was popular with audiences.[1] Indeed, the poor showing of *Bringing Up Baby* led Harry Brandt, president of the Independent Theater Owners of America, to pronounce Hepburn "Box Office Poison" (a

1. It may be worth noting how *Stage Door*—in some ways the most politically progressive of Hepburn's movies—tends to foreground the "negative" traits of the star in order to defend against them. When the picture was made, Hepburn was known to the public as an aristocratic, feminist type who loved the stage and who often refused to give interviews for fan magazines. Thus, the film depicts Tracy Randall as a New England blue-blood who wants to go on stage (in

label he also attached to Garbo, Dietrich, Crawford, and Fred Astaire). RKO then began treating Hepburn badly, at one point offering her a project entitled *Mother Carey's Chickens*. In response, she bought out her contract for almost a quarter-million late-Depression dollars and moved to Columbia, where Harry Cohn assembled an attractive package: a remake of Philip Barry's *Holiday*, with Grant as co-star, Cukor as director, and Donald Ogden Stewart as writer. Once again the film was excellent, but it did not arrest Hepburn's declining fortunes. Although Cukor advocated her for Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind*, her career in Hollywood seemed virtually ended.[2]

A turning point came soon, however, and it involved Hepburn's active intervention. Her friendship with Philip Barry and her brief romance with Howard Hughes (who became a financial backer) enabled her to commission *The Philadelphia Story*, a play which, as Sarris has observed, "was about Katharine Hepburn *herself*, and what the American people thought about Katharine Hepburn in 1939, and what Katharine Hepburn realized she had to do in order to keep her career going" (quoted in Watney, 39). The result, as everyone knows, was a great stage success and a celebrated MGM adaptation. Although Cary Grant received top billing in the film version, the entire project had obviously been designed to recuperate Hepburn—not so much changing her image as dramatizing her full submission to patriarchal authority and foreshadowing her later attachment to the most conservative of American studios.[3] Grant, in fact, was much less important to *The Philadelphia Story* than James Stewart, who performed the same "service" for Hepburn as he had for Dietrich one year earlier in *Destry Rides Again*. John Kobal's rapt description of a crucial scene in the Hepburn film is a clear, if unwitting, indication of how Stewart functioned ideologically:

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a play associated with Hepburn herself); the other characters joke about her snooty-sounding accent, Adolph Menjou describes her as a "militant," and at the end, having achieved stardom, she is shown walking out on a crowd of reporters. By way of mitigating against such problems, the picture establishes Randall as a good-hearted, unpretentious democrat; it gives her an excellent reason for skipping out on the interview, and it pairs her with Ginger Rogers, who functions in exactly the same way as she had with Fred Astaire. As Hepburn's "buddy" or displaced love-interest, Rogers provides a "down-to-earth" middle-classness, making Hepburn as Randall seem more ordinary.

2. David Selznick had been as important to the "discovery" of Hepburn as George Cukor and was the producer of her first film. During the casting of *GWTW*, however, he wrote the following memo to his associate, Daniel T. O'Shea: "I think Hepburn has two strikes against her—first, the unquestionable and very widespread intense public dislike of her at the moment, and second, the fact that she is yet to demonstrate that she possesses the sex qualities which are probably the most important of all the many requisites of Scarlett. . . ." (171).

3. L. B. Mayer was fond of Hepburn, although he ordered the sexist conclusion to *Woman of the Year* (1942), in which she dons an apron and tries to cook Spencer Tracy's breakfast (Higham, 103). At MGM, she also worked regularly with her friend Cukor, but scholars make an error when they describe him as an especially sensitive exponent of women's concerns; indeed, some of Cukor's typical films—such as *The Women* (1939) and *Les Girls* (1957)—are profoundly misogynistic.

> Here the still feverishly overactive spoiled brat is brought down to earth. She is told by a man of the people (James Stewart) that she is not a creature of ice but a real woman. . . .At this moment, her transformation occurs. Stewart woos her on our behalf. Hepburn, dressed by Adrian, incandescently lit and photographed by Joseph Ruttenberg . . . sways, trembles, succumbs, and—with Stewart as our envoy—wins us. Her film career began in earnest. (32)

It was Grant, not Stewart, who "got" Hepburn at the end of the picture. Perhaps significantly, however, it was Stewart who received the Academy Award, and Hepburn and Grant never acted together again. One year later, Hepburn began her remarkable association with Spencer Tracy, an even more plain-spoken "man of the people," who provided a counterbalancing ordinariness for the extraordinary Hepburn persona. Their work together contains some of the finest pieces of comic acting in the history of American cinema, and films such as *State of the Union* (1948) and *Adam's Rib* (1949) still seem "advanced." Nevertheless, the Hepburn and Tracy performances were increasingly predicated on the audience's knowledge of an offscreen relationship, and as various critics have observed, they foster an image of "good old Kate"—a woman who might behave like a liberationist, but who is reassuringly, almost maternally, attached to Tracy and who will, in the last instance, subdue her rebellion for his sake. Increasingly, she became an emblem of safely domesticated feminism, until finally, as if in full payment for all those years of independence, she was cast as a spinster who declared admiration for aging symbols of virility like Humphrey Bogart and John Wayne.

Some of Hepburn's later appearances are outstanding—especially her interpretation of Mary Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1962)—but her most exhilarating work was done in the late thirties, at precisely the moment when her career was foundering. *Holiday* comes from that period (*The Philadelphia Story* might have been written in direct response to it), highlighting her unusual but ravishing beauty and giving full range to the dynamic of her acting. *Holiday* also had an important personal significance. Although Columbia advertised her as "the new Hepburn," she was in fact going back to her earliest theatrical experience. In 1928, just out of college, she had been the understudy for the lead role in Barry's play (written for the stage performer Hope Williams and starring Ann Harding in the 1930 movie version). Later, Hepburn had used one of its scenes as the basis for her original RKO screen test. She seems to have identified with the role, and she certainly knew that it was a good showcase for her technique.

In certain ways, *Holiday* was also an attempt to mollify the more threatening aspects of Hepburn's persona: it allows her to signify patrician manners but at the same time gives her an opportunity to seem unpretentious and even folksy; it lets her challenge the rule of an oppressive father (a typical Republican financier of thirties melodrama), but it also suggests that she will fulfill herself through fond obedience to a husband. As a social commentary, the

film is badly compromised—not least because Philip Barry was enamoured of the class he had set out to criticize; nevertheless, in qualified fashion it enables Hepburn to act out an "ideal self," providing a safe outlet for mannerisms the audience may have disliked. In this way, *Holiday* hopes to make viewers love the star.

Holiday belongs to an always problematic and nowadays virtually extinct movie genre—the well-made "comedy of manners" that gently satirizes the *haute bourgeoisie*. Typically, such films are derived from theater pieces set in drawing rooms, and they are composed of neatly rounded, almost epigrammatic speeches. George Cukor has described Barry's language as a form of "singing" dialogue (Higham, 87), and Hepburn was attracted to it. She and the other players often try to underplay the evident theatricality of the speeches by overlapping or throwing away lines; stylistically and in most other ways, however, the film remains faithful to the original text, merely rearranging a few scenes, adding some topical references, and "opening out" the action. (The chief screenwriter, Donald Ogden Stewart, was probably as fond of the project as Hepburn, since he had acted in the play when she was an understudy.)

Barry founded his drama on an opposition between two sets of values, visualized quite early in the film by a contrast between the Potter household and the Seton household. On the one hand are Susan and Nick Potter (Jean Dixon and Edward Everett Horton, who repeats the role he played in the first film version), a middle-aged, childless pair of academics, representing freedom from possessions, spontaneity, and "life." On the other hand is Edward Seton (Henry Kolker), a widowed patriarch with three children, representing old wealth, capitalism, and joyless acquistion of power. At first glance, the contrast between these figures seems to be posed in terms of social class, since the Potters live in a shabby-genteel, almost bohemian apartment, whereas the Seton mansion looks as large as the Louvre. At bottom, however, the film is offering a choice between two life-styles within bourgeois democracy. The Potters are a distinguished couple with enough income to take a "holiday" from capitalism. If they were real persons instead of fictional characters, they would be members of what Marxist theory describes as a social *fraction*—made up in this case of educated, dissident members of a privileged class who criticize the dominant ethos (the same fraction, in fact, to which Hepburn, Barry, and Stewart belonged).

Individualists rather than political activists, the Potters see life in terms of friendships and humane, egalitarian relations. They are a distinctly American couple who sometimes seem more like comics than intellectuals (an effect produced by the casting of Horton and Dixon, who play their roles fairly straight). Nevertheless, they are also professional educators who in their social position and attitude could be compared with the members of the "Bloomsbury" circle in England during the twenties and thirties: thus they

are sophisticated, disrespectful of unrestrained capitalism, and vaguely feminist. (The Hepburn character immediately recognizes Susan Eliot Potter as someone who "once gave a lecture at my school.") In more specific terms, the film presents them as unpretentious liberals whose chief weapon is wit, as when they give Nazi salutes to an especially pompous, right-wing couple at a party in the Seton home.

The plot of the picture involves a deepening friendship between Johnny Case (Grant), a virtual child of the Potters, and Linda Seton (Hepburn), a dissatisfied daughter of the capitalist. The relationship between these soulmates is complicated by two factors: first by Johnny's engagement to Linda's sister, Julia (Doris Nolan), and second, by the conflict between Johnny and Linda's father. The emotional center of the action, however, is Linda, who spends most of her time on the top floor of the mansion in a children's playroom, which her deceased mother once constructed as a "place to have fun." Not yet a madwoman in the attic, she is a vibrant character who describes herself as a "black sheep." From the beginning, it is clear that she must break completely from her father or else become a wasted personality like her brother Ned (Lew Ayres). But she must also cope with an emotional struggle between her love for Johnny and her love for her sister.

To its credit, *Holiday* does not work out a reconciliation between Linda and her father; instead, it shows Linda making an intense, heroic denunciation of the Seton values and going off to live on "holiday" with Johnny. The conclusion is a disappointment nonetheless. Linda's sister has a last-act speech in which she coolly announces that Johnny's unwillingness to adjust to the Seton way of life has made him an unworthy partner, thus leaving Linda conveniently free to fly into Johnny's arms without guilt. Moreover, the impending union between Johnny and Linda evades the central issues. Johnny Case comes from a wage-earning family, but he has worked his way through Harvard and acquired all the skills necessary to become a "young wizard of finance"; his objection to Edward Seton has less to do with capitalism than with the supposedly dreary process of making millions. The major alternatives of the plot are therefore posed in terms of a settling/wandering dichotomy typical of American popular fiction. As Andrew Britton has pointed out, the final scenes have a great deal in common with *Stagecoach* (1939), where the ideal couple simply ride off into the sunset, "free of the blessings of civilization" (Britton, 85). An even deeper evasion can be sensed in Linda's parting speech to her father, in which she declares her independence in terms of her subordination to another man and to another sort of capitalism. She is going to be with Johnny no matter what he wants to do. Even if he decides to sell peanuts, "oh, how I'll love those peanuts!"

Despite these awkward compromises and a few other problems I shall mention, *Holiday* contains a striking performance by Hepburn. In classic fashion, she enters several minutes into the action, creating a mild *coup de*

théâtre. The opening sequence shows Johnny Case returning from a vacation and breathlessly announcing to the Potters that he has found his ideal mate. "It's love fellas. I've met the girl!" Given the star system, we know that Hepburn will be his choice, and we assume she is the woman to whom he refers. That assumption is reinforced in the next sequence, when Johnny goes to meet the girl's parents, only to discover that she lives in a mansion. We expect Hepburn to make an appearance when the butler announces Johnny's arrival to "Miss Julia," but Doris Nolan enters instead, and Grant rushes to embrace her. Hepburn shows up later, symbolically intruding on the two lovers as they kiss in the mansion elevator. A door slides open and there she stands, a mink-coated figure casting an ironic glance at the couple: "For shame, Julia!" she says. "Is this the way to spend Sunday morning? Who's your partner, anyone I know?"

Until this point, the film has been relatively disappointing. Grant plays everything with characteristic pep and comic eccentricity, but his dialogue is speechy and somewhat fey. There is an intriguing moment when Lew Ayres appears as Ned—a reserved, rather *triste* drunkard who ignores Grant and asks the butler to have a drink ready at the end of church services; otherwise, however, Hepburn creates all the dramatic tension and interest. She is, in fact, a slightly more dominating presence than Barry had intended. Compare her effect to the stage direction accompanying Linda's entrance in the play, written with Hope Williams in mind: "Linda is twenty-seven, and looks about twenty-two. She is slim, rather boyish, and exceedingly fresh. She is smart, she is pretty, but beside Julia . . . she seems a trifle gauche, and almost plain." Hepburn possesses many of these traits, but clearly she is a glamorous figure, a good deal more attractive than Nolan. When she enters, the acting takes on a discernible pace and heightened energy, partly because of the sexual vitality she brings into the frame; in fact, one of the weaknesses of the film is that it never gives a plausible reason why Johnny should be interested in Julia in the first place. (The 1930 version cast Mary Astor in the Nolan role—a more interesting choice that makes Johnny's behavior plausible. Probably Columbia did not want to set Hepburn against another star, although it did test the young Rita Hayworth for the part.)

Then, too, Hepburn tends to command the screen with her flamboyant theatrical rhetoric. For example, she offers to shake Johnny's hand in a fashion that immediately announces Linda's difference from the rest of the Seton family—a strong movement, the spread palm placed exactly at the center of the shared, three-figure composition, connoting a forthright, no-nonsense offer of friendship. She repeats the movement toward the end of the sequence, when she tells Julia "I like this man," and as a signifier of character it is no less vivid than Johnny's repeated somersaults. In conventional terms the gesture is "unladylike," in keeping with the easy way she looks Grant up and down when she requests him to "step out here in the light." It is never "gauche," however, nor does it resemble the aggressive sexual innuendo of a player like Dietrich; instead, it suggests mature, aristocratic self-confidence, together with the unaffected frankness of a woman who expects to meet a man on equal terms.

There is, in other words, a likable sexiness about Hepburn's performance, a quality reminiscent of the leading women in the films of Howard Hawks, who never act coy and who engage in banter like one of the boys. Cukor allows her to exhibit those qualities immediately, and, like Hawks, he gives her plenty of opportunity to walk. One of the chief pleasures of *Bringing Up Baby*, which exerts a subtle influence on this film, comes from watching Hepburn stride confidently across the screen while Grant struggles in her wake, awash in chaos; in *Holiday*, her introductory sequence is photographed in a tracking movement designed to show her wit and physical grace. Leading Grant and Nolan briskly down a hallway, she jokes with Grant, adopting the tone of a family elder—the first of several instances where Linda Seton will parody her father: "This modern generation! Well, young man, I hope you realize what you're getting yourself in for." She pauses briefly to chat, and then as she parts company the camera tilts, watching her jog easily up a long stairway.

Linda's run up the stairs helps establish an affinity with Johnny—a physical exuberance apparent later in the film, when she joins him in a somersault. But it also functions in excess of what the story needs, pointing to Hepburn's own body. She has the flexible, slender build of a tennis player, and she walks or jogs as forthrightly as she shakes hands—legs extended, arms moving in an arc, with no suggestion of a wiggle or sway. This quality, more than any other, led to her "tomboy" roles, and it placed her virtually alone among the glamorous women of her day in suggesting a romantic line and style of movement not based on dance.[4] In certain contexts, her body could evoke a spartan schoolmarm or a willowy fashion model; its compositon and musculature, however, were developed from sport, and for a time she resembled what Kenneth Tynan has called an "outdoor Garbo." Several of her films allude to her well-known athletic skill: in *Bringing Up Baby*, she exhibits her golf swing, and in *Pat and Mike* (1952), she plays a character based on Babe Dietrichson. Earlier in her career, her more candid photographs made her look rather like a Wildean youth, especially when she was shown in short hair and slacks or when she was caught in movement. Yet no one who has seen her wearing a

4. In *A Bill of Divorcement* (1932), Hepburn's first film, George Cukor had given her a moment that convinced David Selznick she would become a star: "Not until the preview was the staff convinced that we had a great screen personality. . . . But very early in the picture there was a scene in which Hepburn just walked across the room, stretched her arms, and then lay out on the floor before the fireplace. It sounds very simple, but you could almost feel, and you could definitely hear, the excitement in the audience" (43). The effect of this shot remains electric; the distant framing and the silence allow us to focus on her body, revealing the sex appeal she could give to apparently ordinary movement.

skin-tight, silver lamé jumpsuit in *Christopher Strong* (1933) could doubt her potential as an erotic female star.

Whenever *Holiday* wants to give Hepburn a typical glamor, it emphasizes her long hair and exquisite cheekbones—all the while garbing her in a floor-length black dress, backlighting her face, and photographing her through diffused light. Even at her most "feminine," however, she is unorthodox, and her style has troubled some critics. Charles Higham, for example, has praised Cukor for concealing her "powerful stride" (actually, Cukor does nothing of the kind), meanwhile regretting that her voice is "too harsh and strident," her body insufficiently "soft and yielding" (88). Throughout her career, reviewers and co-stars made similar complaints; often she was regarded as a skinny, rather plain woman who spoke with an odd voice and knew how to create the *illusion* of beauty.[5] The idea that she was not beautiful is, of course, absurd, revealing Hollywood's difficulty in appropriating her manner to conventional norms of femininity. Besides her aristocratic features and fabled "Bryn Mawr accent," she had a lean physique and an energetic, potentially aggressive attitude; in the words of Andrew Britton, she suggested a "too militant beauty whose confidence precisely isn't contingent on male approval" (13).

In spite of all this, Hepburn was a blessing to cameramen, who knew how to accent her remarkable bone structure and who drew out her love of extravagant posing. There was also truth in the theory that she knew how to act like a beautiful woman. "Now that girl there," she once said to John Kobal, pointing to one of her old studio photographs, "liked to show off. . . . I photographed better than I looked, so it was easy for me. . . . I let myself go in front of the camera. I mean you can't photograph a dead cat. . . . it's not how you look that's important but how you come across" (109). Hepburn's way of "coming across," however, could sometimes be as controversial as her appearance. Chaplin had relied on techniques of music hall and mime; Gish had gestured like a heroine of melodrama; Dietrich had stood and posed like a singer in cabaret; and Cagney had evoked a vaudeville dancer. In contrast to these, Hepburn reminded her audience of the legitimate stage—Broadway or West End drama inflected by the older romanticism of Terry, Duse, and Bernhardt. As a result, both theater and movie critics sometimes found her pretentious, like a prima donna who was imitating theatrical conventions rather than genuinely "feeling" the part.

One of Hollywood's solutions to the problem was to cast her as an actor, so that her behavior would be normalized by the role. Thus in *Morning Glory* and *Stage Door* she freely indulges her "actressy" tendencies, projecting her resonant voice as if she were aiming at the back row of an auditorium, gesturing rather grandly, and visibly thinking about the camera. By the same token, her films often contain moments when she amusingly "quotes" old-fashioned performance. In *Desk Set* (1957), for example, she gives readings of "Hiawatha" and "The Curfew Shall Not Toll Tonight," dramatizing the latter piece with elaborate pantomime gestures. In the early thirties, publicists praised her "genius" and directors stressed the theme of theater, allowing her to play characters who adopt visible masks, as in *Sylvia Scarlett* and *Alice Adams* (1935). In such contexts, her technique looked like "fine art" (which may explain why she won three Oscars and was nominated more often than any other actor).

5. Hepburn's voice was the chief thing critics complained about, especially in the disastrous production of *The Lake*. Oddly, theater reviewers found her a weak speaker, whereas in movies she seemed just the opposite. In mid career she underwent training with Isaac Van Grove, who tried to make her sound less "affected" (Higham, 95).

As an instance of Hepburn's rather histrionic effect, notice her vivid changes in posture and voice during the scene in *Holiday* when Linda Seton confronts her father during her sister's engagement party: first she adopts an almost military stance, looking him in the eye and making a ringing declaration: "Listen to me, Father. Tonight means a good deal to me." Trying to explain why she wants time alone with a few friends, she appeals to his feelings, first bending slightly to plead, then turning away, tossing her head back, and gazing along the walls as if she were searching for some remote ideal. "It has something to do with this room, and when I was a child," she says in a tremulous, "singing" voice. When Henry Kolker suggests that she leave ("Why don't you go away? . . . You distress me. You cause nothing but trouble and upset."), she becomes teary and distraught, barely hiding her emotion by turning her back as she promises to go away forever. "I can't bear it here any longer," she says. "It's doing terrible things to me!" Her playing is invested with a good deal of emotional "contagion," but it clearly involves a classy middlebrow variant of melodramatic technique—a series of rather conventional mannerisms well-suited to "coming across" on the proscenium stage.

This style is especially evident in *Holiday* whenever Hepburn is called upon to display expressive incoherence—that is, during scenes when her character tries to mask her deepest feelings. Consider the moment early in the film when she and Doris Nolan are sitting at the bottom of a staircase discussing the forthcoming wedding: Hepburn asks to give an engagement party up in the old "playroom," and she insists that "Father's to have nothing to do with it." As she makes the point, she turns away from Nolan and slightly toward us, as if to conceal emotion from her sister. Holding her head up proudly, she gazes down to the floor in tragic dignity: "No one's to touch my party but me, do you hear?" Suddenly there is a tearful crack in her voice and a hesitation in her speech, covered by an attempt to laugh: "No, if they do I . . . I won't come to it!" In a later scene, Hepburn asks Lew Ayres if her affection for Grant has been showing too much. She stands in profile to the left of the screen, hands resting atop a grand piano. "Ned?" she asks, turning her face as if to hide her expression from him—all the while showing it more

clearly to us. She tosses her head up proudly for a moment and then indicates embarrassment by looking down to the floor. "Do you remember when we . . . New Year's Eve?" Raising her handsome shoulders and tucking in her chin, she looks downward even more, as if she were ashamed. Her voice begins to tremble. "Does it stand out all over me?" The answer of course is yes, chiefly because she is behaving so ostentatiously for the camera.

Critics were sometimes distressed by such visible tricks, regarding them as highbrow affectations; nevertheless, the same critics were quite happy when Hepburn played comedy. For instance, the *Time* magazine review of *Bringing Up Baby* in 1938 remarked that "the cinema audience will enjoy . . . seeing stagey Actress Hepburn get a proper mussing up." In fact, she was brilliant in the Hawks film—not only because she had the physical skill for slapstick but also because most forms of comedy are "stagey," relying on heightened expressiveness and crisp theatrical enunciation. For nearly the same reason, Hepburn and Spencer Tracy were a stunning combination whenever they had amusing material; like virtually all the great comic duos, they comprised what Fredric Jameson has called a "tandem" characterization: her slightly overstated elocution was set off against his dry, conversational tone; her quick, visibly rhetorical movement was played off against his slow, stolid reaction.

Holiday seems particularly well-suited to Hepburn's bravura style, not only because it contains a number of gently comic and even "screwball" scenes but also because it subtly valorizes the art of acting, turning Linda Seton into another variant of the "theatrical character" described by Leo Braudy.[6] A typical film for both Cukor and Hepburn, it uses the idea of performance thematically, contrasting the liberated antics in Linda's upstairs room with the hypocritical playacting elsewhere in the Seton household. During the engagement party, for example, the guests in the "playroom" do acrobatic stunts, stage Punch-and-Judy shows, engage in communal singing, and imitate various funny characters. The dead mother's room becomes a carnivalistic space where acting is a force of personal and social health; paradoxically, it is also the realm of authenticity, where characters regress to pre-Oedipal games or hold heart-to-heart talks that reveal "true" feelings. Meanwhile, in the paternalistic downstairs regions, people become players of a different kind and enact a stifling ritual that they take all too seriously; no joy comes from such behavior, and their staged selves are marked as deceptive or repressive.

This theme is a very old one, common to what C. L. Barber once termed "festive comedy." (Compare Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part One*, which creates

6. Braudy has remarked that such characters in the 1930s are nearly always members of the upper class, "or, better, someone pretending to be upper class. . . . Whether the aristocrat is Cary Grant, Katharine Hepburn, or Pierre Fresnay's Boeldieu in *La Grande Illusion*, the sense of self as theater, as play, is paramount" (235).

a dialectic between the two forms of playacting, reminding us that "if all the year were playing holidays, / To sport would be as tedious as to work.") An excellent basis for drama, festivity makes us aware of the craft of acting, creating a pretext for "staginess." At the same time, it implicitly justifies theater as a profession, emphasizing the therapeutic value of play and associating the performers' virtuosity with the *joie de vivre* of the most sympathetic characters. Thus the playroom sequences in *Holiday* not only enhance Hepburn's charm, they also suggest that her love of theatrics (like Linda Seton's) is consistent with humane wit and progressive idealism.

Aspects of these scenes are worth considering in detail, both as evidence of Hepburn's mastery of a variety of acting skills and as an indication of how the film merges professional attributes of the star with moral attributes of the character. Consider, for example, the quiet moment early on, when the rest of the Seton family is away at church and Linda invites Johnny upstairs for a chat. Throughout this relatively uncomplicated sequence, Hepburn is very much the center of interest, controlling the changing moods of the conversation. She moves, gestures, and poses more vividly than Grant (who, like most leading men, is reserved and less obviously on display), and as the friendship between Linda and Johnny develops, she becomes increasingly theatrical, dominating the entire space.

When Grant enters, she is munching an apple. "Wanna bite?" she asks, holding it out in a friendly gesture. This ingenious piece of business has no precedent in Barry's text, but it serves to mock the Seton family values: while everyone else is stiffly putting on a front at Sunday services, Johnny and Linda behave with childlike informality, the apple evoking an Eden where women are healthy rather than sinful. Grant accepts the fruit and walks around, his back to us, while she stands chewing and regarding him. The dramatic pause gives her time to swallow, and because the scene involves polite dialogue and several camera setups, neither character tastes the apple again—Grant merely holds it, preoccupied with the room. After a moment Hepburn picks up a cigarette and thoughtfully taps it against a box, as if considering how to begin. She keeps the cigarette unlit, using the incompleted action to show Linda's pleased response to Johnny's interest in the surroundings. First she explains the significance of the place ("This was Mother's idea . . . she was marvelous."), and as she talks she sits at the right of the screen in a favored position, crossing her legs and propping her elbow on her knee with characteristic angularity.

Answering Grant's questions about various toys, she begins moving about the room, at one point holding a stuffed giraffe named Leopold next to her face, its long neck and equine features echoing her own. "Looks like me," she says, and a medium close-up makes us aware of the actor within the role, joking about herself. When Grant finds a childhood picture of Julia Seton and admires it, Hepburn's amused tone changes, and she makes a frank avowal

Hepburn poses with a toy giraffe.

of how much she loves her sister; squatting on the floor next to him, she adopts the first in a series of overtly theatrical voices, imitating a stereotypical cop in order to ask about his past: "What about these little jaunts to Placid? Come clean, Case!" Grant answers that the skiing vacation where he met Julia was his first holiday and then expresses curiosity about her own background. Rather wistfully she confesses that she once wanted to go on the stage. "Would you care to see me do the sleepwalking scene from *Macbeth?* 'Out, out, damned spot!'" Hepburn flings the line off in her grand Yankee accent, and then turns wryly reminiscent: "The teachers at Miss Porter's school thought it was very promising," she cracks, tapping the still unlit cigarette on her thumbnail.

After Johnny confesses his plans for a "holiday" (not "just to play," but to find out "why I'm working"), the private conversation gives way to frivolous action. Ned and Julia make an entrance, having returned from church. Ned doodles at the piano, reluctantly playing a few bars of a pseudo-Gershwin-esque "Symphony in F Minor" that is supposed to indicate his latent talent as a composer, and Linda becomes gleeful, drawing Johnny into a rehearsal for his upcoming interview with Edward Seton. (Notice once again that the technique bears a resemblance to *Henry IV, Part One*, where characters parody

scenes that are later played in earnest.) "Ned," she says to her brother, "I think we can give him some coaching." Lew Ayres picks up a banjo and Hepburn goes into an act, pretending to be a sour patriarch inquiring about his prospective son-in-law. Clearing her throat and folding her arms across her chest, she looks at Grant sternly: "Well, young man?" Grant smiles: "Well, sir, at the moment I have in my pocket exactly thirty-four dollars and a coupon for a bank night."

Julia insists that Johnny ought to take things more seriously, but Hepburn quickly tosses off a whole series of impersonations. "I'm afraid he won't do, Julia," she says in a male drawl. "He's a comely boy, but probably just another of the vast army of clock watchers." When Johnny admits his humble origins, she rears back in the mock astonishment of a society matron: "You mean to say that your mother wasn't even a *whosis?*" Ned interjects that Johnny may have a judge somewhere in the family. "Yes! That might help," she says, and as Ned strums a ditty on the banjo she transforms her act into a minstrel show. "Ol' Jedge Case's boy! Evenin', Massa!" Ned then suggests that a little namedropping would be useful, and Hepburn reverts to her parody of a socialite; standing tall, one hand on her hip, she sashays over to Grant: "Johnny, she says to me (she always calls me Johnny). . . ."[7]

Later in the film during the massive New Year's Eve engagement party Edward Seton arranges for Julia, the behavior in the upstairs room becomes even more theatrical, with everyone joining in the act. Soon after the Potters arrive and introduce themselves to Linda, Ned enters like the pied piper, playing on a whistle and leading a platoon of waiters with champagne. Linda organizes the group into a quartet for a rendition of "Camptown Races," and Nick Potter acts the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* with hand puppets. Johnny, sent upstairs by Julia to persuade everyone to come to the reception below, pretends to be a butler delivering a message. As punishment for his stuffy behavior, the other four make him run the gauntlet. Nick makes a comic public speech, presenting Johnny with the toy giraffe from the earlier scene as a "trophy." Johnny stands on the couch and bows shyly to applause, and then offers to demonstrate his acrobatic skill, teaching Linda how to do a back flip.

Throughout this busy action, the players assume childlike attitudes, putting their feet on the furniture and sprawling on the floor—a device common to many of the thirties screwball comedies, in which wealthy characters are made to seem charmingly irresponsible and "human" by virtue of their posture. Despite the apparent abandon of the party, however, Hepburn is at the center of most of the compositions, and she has a good chance to display the

7. Some of this mockery seems a bit strained, since Grant and Hepburn embody all the traits of sophisticated society. The problem is especially evident in a previous scene, when Grant describes himself as a "plain man of the people." The self-deprecating, ironic twist he gives to his voice cannot save the line from absurdity.