William Shakespeare:
Appropriations and Transformations of a Cultural Icon
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Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard* and the Search for a Contemporary Shakespeare

**Abstract:** Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard* (1996) is both an adaptation of *Richard III* and a filmic essay on the aesthetic and political premises of defining Shakespeare's contemporary relevance. It is in many ways an 'anti-traditional' film, as it rejects the conservative cultural politics underlying the 'Shakespeare myth,' and questions performance practices it portrays as characteristic of a distinctly British tradition. Preferring structural irony over explicit critical commentary, the film's favoured mode is the subtle parody of vocabularies and conventions in a kind of mock reverence that distorts its object to the point of making it seem grotesque. The film's critical edge seems somewhat uneven. On the one hand, *Looking for Richard* explores some of the racial and social trouble areas of the Shakespeare myth with parodies of bardolatry whose aggressive satirical drift calls to mind the serious political critique associated with post-colonialist and cultural materialist revisionism. On the other hand, when Pacino professes to 'write back' against a 'centre' epitomised by Gielgud, Branagh, and the British groves of academe, his pretended anxiety of British influence is really part of a post-colonial comedy, whose humorous punch line consists in the playful dismissal of theatre conventions in favour of a filmic method-acting aesthetics. The film's shifts between satire and light comedy reflect its tendency to undercut itself with its own ironies.

1. Introduction

Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard* (1996) appeared on the crest of the wave of Shakespeare adaptations that followed the unusual financial success of Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990) and the paradigmatic work of actor-director Kenneth Branagh. What distinguishes the 1990s array of films from the traditional representatives of the genre (such as Sir Laurence Olivier's classic adaptations) is not only the size of the budget but also a greater willingness to fuse the conventions of theatre and film, to cast Royal Shakespeare Company actors alongside Hollywood celebrities, and combine theatrical settings with the opulent Technicolor
aesthetics of the Cineplex.\(^1\) Looking for Richard locates itself squarely in this category, as it stages a production of Richard III with a highly illustrious cast headed by the principal player of Coppola’s Godfather trilogy in the role of the eponymous hero-villain. But actor-director Pacino eschews the sumptuous textures and grandiose gestures of the 1990s revival and prefers instead a more modest documentary approach. The resulting “docu-drama-type thing” (7:40)\(^2\) is more than a reverent ‘making-of’ about a seasoned American action star’s grappling with the challenges of Elizabethan drama. With a pronounced interest in its own metatextual subtleties, Looking for Richard offers a heterogeneous collage of rehearsal scenes interspersed with clips of live acting and a wide variety of interview excerpts. The latter include more or less spontaneous opinions and anecdotes from actors, directors and producers involved in British and American theatre and film, interpretive advice from professional writers and academics, as well as the casual comments of bystanders Pacino encounters on the street or at dinner parties in New York and England. The result is a “filmic essay” on the premises of acting and staging Shakespeare today as well as “a meditation on what Shakespeare means at the end of the twentieth century.” In Pacino’s words, the central idea behind the project is to approach Richard III “from different angles” of analysis and improvisation in order to “communicate a Shakespeare that is about how we feel and how we think today” (5:40–6:20).

Looking for Richard conveys this announced intention with a visual conceit set prominently at its beginning (0:20–1:10): the opening shot presents images of gothic church architecture accompanied by the voice of Sir John Gielgud solemnly reciting Prospero’s metadramatic speech on the immateriality of the stage and the world (IV.v.148–58). As Gielgud/Prospero refers to “gorgeous palaces” and “solemn temples,” the rose windows and flying buttresses of a cathedral dissolve into the austere concrete walls of high-rise apartments in a lower-income environment, presumably in New York. With Prospero’s reference to “the great globe,” the camera zooms to a basketball court in which we recognise Pacino, clad in black and wearing a baseball cap, looking meaningfully at the

\(^1\) The most ambitious attempt at combining theatre and commercial cinema to date is Kenneth Branagh’s operatic Hamlet (1996), whose $18 million budget was made possible by the sizeable returns of his Henry V (1989) and Much Ado About Nothing (1993). Hamlet is shot in monumental 70 mm and bristles with the 360-degree camera pans of action cinema, but at the same time it is almost orthodox in its focus on Shakespeare’s text, for it follows meticulously the unabridged Arden Edition, lasting about four hours. The film’s fusion of stage and film is also reflected in its starry cast, which approximately includes cameos by the British stage eminences Dame Judi Dench and Sir John Gielgud as well as by the American movie legends Charlton Heston and Jack Lemmon.


spectator. With this visual metaphor, Pacino highlights the problematic of cultural mediation between the culturally and historically remote world of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre and the present.

2. Shakespeare in the Age of the Cineplex

The difficulty of conveying Shakespeare to contemporary audiences – which for various reasons of historical or cultural distance find themselves at odds with Elizabethan drama, if not with the aesthetics of theatre in general – has led to a number of grim assessments of the state of Western culture. Harold Bloom's *Western Canon* (1994), for instance, asserts gloomily that things must be out of joint in societies whose syllabi are flooded with "easier" fiction because their MTV-educated students increasingly find Shakespearean tragedies "beyond their attention spans." *Looking for Richard* rehearses some of the typical motifs of such pessimistic cultural criticism: we see Pacino walking the streets of New York, interviewing people from different backgrounds about their knowledge of and connection with Shakespeare, asking them, for instance, what they know about *Richard III* other than the King's famous request for a horse (3:20–4:20; 6:50–7:15; 23:50–24:00; 27:10–28:00). Their baffled responses, ranging from sheepish admissions of ignorance to confident assertions of indifference, highlight Shakespeare's loss of cultural authority bemoaned by critics such as Bloom. But *Looking for Richard* really assembles and arranges the interviews in a way to bring out the punch lines and to make the viewer laugh sympathetically rather than inspire despair about the 'state' of contemporary society. This gives the film's gesture of cultural diagnosis a comic lightness that often seems to make it a parody of Bloom's critique. The viewer's sense that the film intends to debunk rather than affirm elitist cultural jeremiads is reinforced by the narrators' self-deprecating humour. Pacino and his on-screen co-narrator Frederick Kimball display with relish their own problems with the intricacies of Shakespearean drama. While Kimball plays the part of the sophomoric explicator of the play's meanings ("It's a pun! 'Son of York' is the sun in the sky over the English country-side of York!!" [11:50]), Pacino delights in malapropisms and affects naïveté: he misreads, for instance, the title of a tome of the Bard's annotated works as the "anointed Shakespeare" (59:30); professes to be defeated by the concept of poetic diction ("Everybody says all the time, iambic pentameter, Shakespeare, iambic pentameter, what's that supposed to mean?" [19:30]), and repeatedly fails to summarise the plot of *Richard III* ("I'm confused [...] it's very confusing" [8:30]). Surely this is not the most suitable narrative tone to express serious critical despair about society's recent loss of cultural competence.

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3. The Spectre of the Shakespeare Myth

Yet despite *Looking for Richard*’s light-hearted and self-deprecating presentation of modern society’s difficulties with Elizabethan drama, the film also has its less ironic moments. Pacino’s aim to “communicate” his (and his co-producers’) “love” and “passion” for Shakespeare (5:40–6:20) seems heartfelt enough to make the viewer wonder about the film’s cultural politics. What, one is tempted to ask, are the film’s assumptions, not only about how Shakespeare is best communicated, but also about the theoretical premises on which the act of communication is to be understood and justified? Some viewers may see in *Looking for Richard* a manifestation of the “Shakespeare myth” (to appropriate Graham Holderness’s phrase). As the camera follows Pacino through the streets of New York while he proclaims his passion for Shakespeare, it is indeed tempting to interpret him as a cultural street worker bringing the light to a benighted MTV generation out of the conviction that his ‘communication’ of Shakespeare is a ‘civilising’ act. *Looking for Richard* would then be rooted in a more conservative aesthetics, one that takes Shakespeare to embody intrinsic universal value and consequently considers our living engagement with him to be indicative of and indispensable to our cultural well-being.

This idea is not restricted to the “bardolatry” of the Shakespeare industry. In Bloom’s critique, for instance, the conceptual metaphor of Shakespeare as a universal carrier of *human* (rather than historically local) value is reflected in the assertion that the Bard’s disappearance from our educational reading lists signifies our estrangement from “what we want to call ‘natural.’” The difference, Bloom asserts, between Shakespeare and lesser authors, a difference he takes to be “universally felt from Shakespeare’s time until now,” is his representation of “what is held to be most essential in us.” Accordingly, Shakespeare’s exploration of the human condition “has been felt to be more natural than anyone else’s mirroring of reality ever since the plays were first staged.” As a result, as Bloom concludes with an image of cultural decline, our “absence” from Shakespeare is tantamount to our “absence from reality.”

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8 Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 523.
4. Shakespeare and the Progress of Civilisation

What is intriguing (and perhaps at times exasperating) about Looking for Richard is that it evades any straightforward propositions about its cultural politics. It prefers to express them by ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling,’ offering an oblique collage of scenes that deal with the vocabulary of the Shakespeare myth. One of the most remarkable of these scenes involves a brief interview with one of Pacino’s well-known Hollywood colleagues, the African-American actor James Earl Jones. Recalling his initiation to Shakespeare’s work as a young boy, Jones faces the camera with the serious and almost histrionically confessional pose of someone who is about to relate a truth of immense weight and epiphanic import, one that can only be told with a great deal of pathos:

My own experience was in the fields in Michigan, when I was raised, on a farm. An uncle, who was a northern guy, a black northern guy, came out on the field one day and he started narrating Antony’s speech, the funeral oration. We had heard stuff out of the Bible, but for the first time as a kid I was hearing

[meaningful pause, significant look into the camera]

– great words – having

[meaningful pause]

great meaning, you know. (5:00–30)

Jones’s portrayal of his memorable encounter with Shakespeare’s poetry, to which he attributes an almost religious aura, seems a demonstration of the emphatic belief in the Bard’s universal reach. But one wonders how seriously we should take Pacino’s presentation of this scene, whether he in fact expects us to read it without irony. What is troubling about Jones’s story is not only the histrionic overemphasis of his narration, but also the extent to which his tale is embedded in the cultural clichés of imperial education. The image of a young boy of colour raised in a rural environment with hardly any education other than regular Bible readings, but who is nonetheless transfixed on hearing a monologue from Julius Caesar, recalls the melodramatic stories of cultural awakening that figure in the genre repertoire of travel accounts by colonial administrators or missionaries. In fact, Jones’s story could be taken right out of a treatise on colonial education such as Victor Murray’s The School in the Bush of 1929, which lists similar examples of how Shakespeare supposedly provides a bridge between metropolitan Western culture and the uneducated farm children living at its margin. Drawing on the accounts of an unnamed “wise old missionary in the Congo,” Murray argues that it is “just as easy with some boys to make a contact through Shakespeare as through a mortise-and-tenon joint,” and he refers to a fifteen-year old “boy at Uzuakoli” who “was thrilled by Julius Caesar and asked,

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‘Are people writing plays like that to-day?’” Convinced of Shakespeare’s civilising powers, Murray claims that “[i]t seems unreasonable to introduce [to Africa] rotation of crops and to withhold Shakespeare.”

While Murray’s late-colonial ideology is a far remove from the contexts of Jones’s story of initiation, both narratives are arguably based on a similar understanding of Shakespeare’s inherent universal value, its power to cross social and cultural borders. Behind what may strike us as the imperial chauvinism of Murray’s argument is the well-intentioned voice of a liberal humanist with an Arnoldian concept of culture (as “the best which has been thought and said in the world”). According to Murray, the cultural achievements of Western civilisation are an important key to a universal “republic of thought,” which should admit less privileged societies and classes. The Africans, he points out charitably, are in a similar position as “the British working men”:

For them as for us the treasures of the world’s past have been heaped up. We received the treasures of Greece and Rome and Judæa, and have added to them. And if for us, barbarians and Gentiles, Plato thought, and Vergil sung, and Jeremiah agonized—and Christ died, these things happened for the African too. For him also in later days, Beethoven played, Leonardo painted, Shakespeare wrote, Pascal disputed, and James Watt invented.

Jones’s anecdote is based on similar premises. Like Murray’s boy from the Congo, Jones’s younger self does not seem to need any acquired cultural codes to be receptive to *Julius Caesar*. Upon hearing Antony’s speech, he immediately intuits the sublimity of the “great words” and their “great meaning,” and he is as awed as the boy in Murray’s tale asking incredulously whether such powerful artefacts are indeed typical of modern civilisation. The subtext of Jones’s story is that as a young boy, on the “fields of Michigan,” he experienced his first meaningful and transformational encounter with capital-c-Culture. Analogous to how Shakespeare’s universal power is supposed to help the Central African farm labourers to join the civilised world in Murray’s account, Jones’s anecdote implies that Antony’s speech prompted a ‘civilising’ act symbolic of the American Dream, initiating Jones’s *Bildungsroman* journey from a small mid-Western farm to Hollywood stardom.

5. Mimicry, Mockery, and Satire

*Looking for Richard* does not tag Jones’s story with obvious markers of irony, but it connects it with another significant scene that explores the same problem zones with a more decidedly satiric thrust. Its main character is an unnamed

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African-American New Yorker who seems to be from a less privileged social sphere than Jones, as he has the air of a person living as a ‘panhandler’ or homeless traveller. The first part of the interview leads to the following dialogue on the meaning of Shakespeare for contemporary society:

[Interviewee]: Intelligence is hooked with nails. When we speak with no feelings, we get nothing out of our society. We should speak like Shakespeare. We should introduce Shakespeare into the academic! Do you know why? – Because then the kids would have feelings. – We have no feeling. That’s why it is always easy to get a gun and shoot each other. We don’t feel for each other. But if we were taught to feel, we wouldn’t be so violent.

[Pacino]: And you think that Shakespeare helps us with that?

[Interviewee]: He did more than help us, he instructed us! (2:50–3:20)

It is difficult to believe that Pacino does not insert this lengthy and unedited shot to make a point, for he offers a version of the Shakespeare myth so distorted as to be almost comical. In the interviewee’s account, the idea of Shakespeare’s universal value slides into the notion that we should literally begin to “speak like Shakespeare” in order to reconnect with our common humanity and be able to “feel for each other.” The humanist belief in Shakespeare’s powers of cultural healing is transformed into the eccentric idea that conversing in Elizabethan poetry should bring down the crime rate. The suggestion, moreover, that we should introduce Shakespeare “into the academic,” as he puts it, seems like a travesty of the demand, voiced by critics such as Bloom, that Shakespeare’s work must be restored to American university education, where it has been displaced by multicultural syllabi. Surely the charismatic ‘panhandler’ is used in what appears to be partly a scene of comic relief, as if Pacino had intended him to come across as a Shakespearean fool. But on another level his appearance has a sharp critical edge that functions as a satire of the Shakespeare myth. The scene’s biting sarcasm results from its demonstration of the inhumane social reality of the very person invoking Shakespeare’s humanising powers of cultural healing. His appearance and manner of speech reveal his marginalisation in the society whose mainstream slogans about Shakespeare he parrots, and it is clear that he repeats these slogans, not necessarily because he believes in their truth value, but because it is profitable to do so. Pacino’s editing of the scene, in fact, highlights the interviewee’s economic motivations, as it shows that his enthusiastic speech on Shakespeare’s power to make us “feel for each other” culminates in the matter-of-fact question “Do you have some change?” (32:40), stated as calmly as if it were the most logical conclusion of his exercise in bardolatry. This interview excerpt is a vivid demonstration of the truism that the economically motivated mimicry of the habits and values of the cultural centre is never far from mockery – since the appropriation of the dominant discourse may result in its subversively “blurred copy.” And indeed, in the interviewee’s garbled version, the notion of

Shakespeare’s universal value and powers of cultural healing appears to stare back at us in a grotesque form.\(^{15}\)

Since this scene is located in the same sequence as Jones’s, it is difficult not to take its mimicry/mocking of the idea of Shakespeare’s powers of cultural healing as a commentary on Jones’s anecdote, with the result that the latter is turned into a critique rather than an affirmation of the cultural politics associated with the Shakespeare myth. It is a commentary that makes the viewer more receptive to the ironies of Jones’s emphatic tale of initiation. As Jones’s narration begins to seem unreliable, the authenticity of his “epiphany” becomes questionable. Seen from this angle, Jones’s interview reveals that the “great meaning” his younger self encounters may be less of a manifestation of the universal reach of Shakespeare’s poetry than of the cultural capital bestowed on it by local social norms. Shakespeare’s power to transfix uneducated farm labourers, therefore, is exposed as a social effect, generated within a social system whose hierarchies of value locate African-American rural mid-Western communities at the lower end of their social scale. The “great words,” therefore, have an awe-inspiring aura because they invoke, not the ‘human condition,’ but the possibilities of social improvement associated with the self-appointed centres of capital-c-Culture.

Another level of irony that the ‘panhandler’s’ speech reinforces in Jones’s anecdote stems from its implication of an imperialist notion of race as part and parcel of the Shakespeare myth. It brings into relief the argument, made by post-colonialist critics, that the vocabulary of Shakespeare’s universality encourages a ‘cultural colonisation,’ in the process of which the local hierarchies and value systems inherent in Shakespeare’s plays – notably their Elizabethan ideas about identity and race – are passed off as general human truths. Accordingly, when Jones and the ‘panhandler’ are encouraged to mistake Shakespeare’s local vision for a vision of general humanity, they can be said to have internalised an ideology from whose vantage point their own ethnicity marks them as subaltern subjects.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{15}\) See also Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 85–86. Although the ‘panhandler’s’ utterance is not set in the classic post-colonial framework to which Bhabha refers, the structural parallels are salient, as the ‘cultural colonisation’ Pacino’s satire exposes reflects the Eurocentric implications of race and class that can be said to provide a subtext of the Shakespeare myth.

\(^{16}\) Indeed, if seen from the angle of the more radical critiques of cultural colonisation – those who tend to agree with the gist of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1986) – the irony is even more striking: the ‘panhandler’ might be seen as having internalised a self-image based on Shakespeare’s clichés of race that facilitates his own oppression. Conceiving of himself as a Caliban, he may consider his low social status not as an effect of social discrimination but a logical result of the ‘unnatural’ depravity signalled by his skin colour. By the same logic, Jones could be said to base his celebrity self-image on the brittle foundations of the so-called “Othello complex,” seeing himself as an “assimilated savage” (Thomas Cartelli, *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations* [London: Routledge, 1999] 123) whose superficial dignity thinly covers the inbred barbarism that Elizabethan discourses associate with his ethnicity. It is important to note, however, that such a reading may patronise the characters more than Pacino intended, and it presupposes a rigid notion of ‘black identity’ that is at best problematic (see K. Anthony Appiah, “Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multi-Cultural Societies and Social Reproduction,” Amy Gutman, ed., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994] 149–63).
As if to emphasize the critical potential in the two scenes described above, Pacino complements them with two shots from a third interview, in which the British actress Vanessa Redgrave uses the vocabulary of the Shakespearean myth in a way that the film can hardly mean to present as reliable commentary: "Shakespeare's poetry and his iambics," Redgrave explains in a first excerpt from her interview, "floated and descended through the pentameter of the soul," and she offers the advice to her fellow thespians that if they should "find that reality" in the text, "all the iambics will fall into place" (20:20). In a second interview excerpt, Redgrave explains Shakespeare's relevance with an emphatic theory of purity and truth:

[In Shakespeare], the music, literally I mean the music, and the thoughts and the concepts and the feelings have not been divorced from the words. And in England you've had centuries in which word has been totally divorced from truth. And that's a problem for us actors. (32:20–40)

Redgrave's assertion that Shakespeare's language represents a stage before the 'Fall,' a stage defined by unity of concepts and forms, seems like a blunted version of the idea that Shakespearean drama touches a purer level of existence beyond cultural determination. In the light of her esoteric argument, it is difficult to interpret Pacino's use of her scene other than as an intentional debunking of the Shakespearean myth. It is significant, I think, that the above quote from Redgrave's interview follows directly on the scene with the 'panhandler' suggesting that we should speak Elizabethan English. Their combination establishes a notable relation between the centre and the margin, as if to compare their respective versions of the Shakespearean myth. What is intriguing about their correlation is that the version of the centre - expressed by a distinguished British actress - is presented as no less eccentric than that of society's margin. This is not, of course, how a more conservative cultural politics would conceive of the relation between the centre and the margin. According to the Arnoldian conceptual framework of the Shakespearean myth, the voice from the centre is supposed to resonate with the most advanced vision the human "republic of thought" currently has to offer. By letting Redgrave represent the putative republic's ruling elite, *Looking for Richard* makes a mockery of the idea of the centre as the place defined by the highest degree of cultural competence.

*Looking for Richard*'s presentation of the three episodes discussed above provides a harsh critique of the social and racial implications inherent in the cultural politics associated with the Shakespearean myth. The film also distances itself from the conservative aesthetics that would prefer to see Pacino's project as an act of

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17 Redgrave's fantastic hypothesis may have been inspired by Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility" thesis (or similar new-critical theories of literary alienation), whose belief in a post-Renaissance lapse she shares. Yet while Eliot merely claimed that English poets after 1650 had begun to think and feel in turns, Redgrave's talk of the "divorce" of the "word" from the "truth" returns to romantic theories of linguistic corruption that seem esoteric today. At any rate, her wide-eyed concern about the resulting "problem for us actors" (not to mention her advice about the "pentameter of the soul") may be unwittingly comic enough to signal Pacino's satiric intention even to the most sympathetic of viewers.
cultural therapy reconnecting contemporary audiences with Shakespeare's human vision as a cure for their alienation from Culture. When Pacino therefore announces his intention to "communicate a Shakespeare that is about how we feel and how we think today" (5:40–6:20), the first-person plural implies a more modestly local scope than the capitalised notions of Culture underlying more conservative aesthetic visions. It is a Shakespeare that speaks to an interpretive community decidedly smaller than Murray's republic of thought, one that seems more at home at New York's Fifth Avenue than the human condition.

6. American Shakespeares and the British Tradition

Looking for Richard wrestles quite intensely with the question of how a Shakespeare with contemporary relevance should relate to the 'original' – or to the various eminent traditions of practical theatre and literary scholarship that claim to represent the 'original.' Again, Pacino deals with this issue performatively, addressing it with the structural irony of a double movement: on the one hand, the film is almost obsessively concerned with the English traditions of performing and reading Shakespeare; on the other hand, it portrays these traditions with an exaggerated reverence that intermittently slides into mockery. At the outset of the film, Pacino and Kimball pretend to embark on a "quest" (5:40) for a more authentic Shakespeare experience they hope to find in Great Britain. Bumbling about the landmarks of Culture in Stratford-upon-Avon and Oxford, Pacino and Kimball seem to reenact the archaic stereotype of the American tourist 'doing' England while sheepishly aware of the superiority of the 'motherland's' culture. At times Pacino appears to affect the post-colonial anxiety of nineteenth-century American writers trying to come to terms with their artistic belatedness and marginality caused by the dominance of the London-based art industry. Indeed, much of what is said in Looking for Richard suggests that the difficulty of modern audiences with Shakespeare is really a national problem, due to America's distance from the thriving cultural centres of Great Britain. "What is that thing," Pacino asks with a concerned voice, "that gets between us [Americans] and Shakespeare, that makes some of our best actors sort of just stop when it comes to Shakespeare?" (18:17). Most of the off-the-cuff comments presented as answers to Pacino's inquiry stress the importance of national differences: the British actor Sir Derek Jacobi – who acted in a number of Branagh's British-American productions – asserts significantly that the problem lies in the fear of British influence by American performers who are rendered "totally self-conscious" (18:40) by their awe of the British stage tradition. The film cuts, then, to Sir John Gielgud, the famous representative of the Olivier-generation and epitome of the tradition to which Jacobi refers. Gielgud offers the kind of explanation that tends to provoke American critics to vociferous declarations of cultural independence:

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he implies that the problems of American acting begin with the American lack of Culture: "Perhaps," Gielgud opines in his posh stage accent, American actors "don't go to picture galleries and read books as much as we do" (19:10), so that they lack the "Elizabethan feeling of period" that "one got" in England.19

This tongue-in-cheek presentation of Gielgud's diagnosis shows the facetiousness with which Pacino has edited the material: on the level of the comments and exhortations given in Looking for Richard's numerous interviews, Great Britain is celebrated as the centre of tradition, a place where people "read books," in contrast to the cultural desert of the American scene. But on a structural level—controlled in the cutting room—Looking for Richard reverses its pretended thesis by making the British participants seem ever so slightly off key. The artfulness with which Pacino turns his interviewees into unwittingly unreliable narrators in order to ironise his 'quest' is particularly evident in his portrayal of British academia, represented by the Oxford-based literary critics Barbara Everett and Emrys Jones. Their presence contributes much to the film's epic character: most reviewers agree, in fact, that it is precisely the interruption of enacted scenes with interpretive commentary that makes Looking for Richard so fascinating, because it brings alive Richard III's more obscure aspects ignored by many traditional film adaptations.20 Yet it is also hard to miss that the Oxford academics are used, to an extent, for Pacino's lampooning of Britishness. As Neil Sinyard points out, "Emrys Jones seems to have been cast not so much because of his impressive credentials as a Shakespearean scholar but because he looks the part"21—a part that John Mullan flippantly describes as "the professor from another world, odder than anyone Pacino meets on the streets of New York."22 The comic aura of this part, to be sure, is not the result of typecasting, as the film's cinema-verité approach implies. The Shakespeare scholars are made to look their part (as "intense, bespectacled, upper middle-class English academics framed against their bookshelves")23 by the film's manipulative editing. In a typical scene, in which Jones is asked to explain the reasons for Richard's interest in Lady Anne, the medium-range camera eye mercilessly rests on his uncomfortable body language.

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19 As if to demonstrate Gielgud's views, Pacino shows a class of college kids indifferently watching his performance of Richard's opening speech, while the camera zooms towards a young couple in the audience expressing their lack of interest by passionately kissing each other (11:30). What comes to mind in this farcical scene are the nineteenth-century critiques of the American theatre scene by British travellers, such as Fanny Trollope's widely read Domestic Manners of the Americans (1832; London: Penguin, 1997), which was famous for its emphasis on the lack of cultural refinement in Yankee audiences. Trollope's report from a visit to a theatre in Cincinnati tells of ill manners of dress, incessant "spitting," a "mixed smell of onions and whiskey," the postures "of the men perfectly indescribable, the heels thrown higher than the head, the entire rear of the person presented to the audience," perpetual "noises" "of the most unpleasant kind," the applause "expressed by cries and thumping with the feet, instead of clapping" (103).

20 A pertinent example is the film's portrayal of Queen Margaret (30:10–32:12). As an allegorical revenge figure she belongs to Shakespeare's medieval archaisms notoriously difficult to present to modern audiences. With its epic combination of explanatory commentary and slow-motion editing, Looking for Richard seems to succeed better with Margaret than traditional approaches.


He hardly has a chance to utter more than a few incoherent half-sentences (40:10) before the editor interrupts him with a direct cut to the more sympathetically filmed crew of American actors. The British tradition Kimball and Pacino profess to consult during their quest to England is presented as an archaic ivory tower.

7. “Shakespearean Acting” versus “The Method”

A similar tendency towards structural irony defines the film’s discussion of performance. While Pacino the narrator affects anxiety of influence vis-à-vis the British stage tradition, Pacino the editor assembles the film’s numerous shots of live acting so that the American performances look a great deal more professional than what is presented as the British school of acting. Pacino’s strategy goes beyond the citation of unfavourable interview excerpts, as practiced with Gielgud and Redgrave. Looking for Richard makes the British actors seem as eccentric as the Oxford academics by grafting shots of live stage performances into a distinctly filmic environment. The British tradition is represented by stage performers using the emphatic gestures and highly enunciated speech suited to a live auditorium but unintentionally comical within the filmic aesthetics that characterises Looking for Richard, whose close-up camera shots call for a more restrained presence of body and voice. A typical example of the film’s send-up of live acting begins with a shot of an unnamed British actor who cries out melodramatically to “the envious moon” (2:35), throwing his arms up towards the artificial limelight. The next cut shows Kenneth Branagh reciting a few lines from Hamlet in Pacino’s New York office (2:40). This scene is clearly not designed to illustrate Branagh’s formidable range of expression, but to make him look artificially histrionic. The short excerpt merely shows him rambling about “eager droppings of milk” while the close-up camera highlights his distorted face and exaggerated gestures. Arguably Branagh is offered up as a representative of what Kevin Kline, in a subsequent interview, calls “this kind of Shakespearean acting,” which Kline parodies with an impression of a pompous sounding British stage voice (4:25–40).

These decontextualised snippets from British live performances are then compared to the naturalism that defines the Lee Strasberg method-acting school, whose main representative in the film is Pacino himself. Indeed, Pacino’s performance of Richard’s famous opening monologue is a striking example of the film’s bias, of the way in which it compares the languages of film and theatre and presents them as if they corresponded to the differences between an inherently

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24 In this scene, Pacino’s presentation of Jones approaches bad faith. It is difficult to believe that Jones was unable to produce anything more substantial than a few stammers when asked to explain Richard and Anne’s troubling liaison. Thus if Pacino had been more interested in scholarly advice than in debunking academia, Jones might have explained to him that Richard’s character is a hybrid construct with traits of the medieval Vice, and that, since the Vice does not follow the rules of modern psychology, Pacino’s and Winona Ryder’s attempts to intuit the emotional truth behind Richard and Anne’s behaviour is at best anachronistic.
American practice and a characteristically British “kind of Shakespearean acting.” The sequence is prefaced with a suggestion by British actress Rosemary Harris to deliver Richard’s opening line with great emphasis, so as to “wake your audience up” (10:45). After Harris gives a rather thundering illustration, whose larger-than-life quality is enhanced by a close-up shot, we move with a direct cut to Pacino’s low-mimetic version of the same line. His performance of Richard’s famous monologue is diametrically opposed to what we have seen from Branagh and other British actors, as Pacino does the role with the utmost restraint, speaking softly and in whispers, with the controlled facial expression and body language familiar from his films (10:50–11:10; 12:60–16:20). If Pacino’s version works well, as many reviewers agree, it is surely due to the skill with which he makes use of the aesthetic premises of the movie screen, and the possibilities of sound engineering and post-production editing. But what Looking for Richard implies, somewhat self-servingly, is that Pacino succeeds because he avoids the British brand of “Shakespearean acting” and relies instead on the “method,” which is represented as the more “organic” and “down to earth” American approach.

Behind Pacino’s pitting against one another of two schools of acting lies indeed a very pertinent question: how much of the aesthetics of the theatre can we tolerate on screen before we feel we have little more than the filmic reproduction of what should be a live performance? Or, vice versa, how far can we go in submitting Shakespeare’s poetic and dramatic elements to the transformational logic of cinematic imagery and narration before his text is reduced to a lame paraphrase? Looking for Richard does not endorse any radical solution to this quandary, but it does express a critical distance to the approach represented by Branagh’s successful adaptations. Branagh has been praised for his interest in bridging theatrical and cinematic discourses, but the aesthetics of acting underlying his films is characteristically more at home in the theatre than in film. His own performances, in his Henry V (1989), Much Ado About Nothing (1993), and Hamlet (1996), demonstrate his readiness to transfer the high-pitched expressionism of the theatre to the close-range intimacy of

36 Pacino’s repeated presentations of classic method-acting – a representative scene, for instance, shows Kevin Conway rehearsing his part of Hastings by translating Shakespeare’s language into American street slang in order to work up the appropriate emotions (67:00) – resonate with confidence, advertising the “method’s” effectiveness in teasing out the layers of meaning in Shakespeare that are relevant today. Some reviewers have rejected this thesis as self-serving and hubristical. According to Donald Lyons, Looking for Richard is no more than a “document confirming the obsession of actors with themselves,” because it “demonstrates the incompatibility of Shakespeare with a certain self-important American mode of communicating: namely, Method acting” (Lyons, “Lights, Camera, Shakespeare,” 57).
film. This does not mean, as Pacino implies in *Looking for Richard*, that Branagh’s grandiose stage language is more “artificial” *per se* than other conventional languages. On the contrary, within the theatrical aesthetics of Branagh’s *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), for instance, it is precisely the filmic naturalism of some of the American actors that seems stilted. Arguably, the critical complaint that “[Keanu] Reeves did little but scowl” in his performance of Don John is a consequence of his low-mimetic style of acting, which in the theatrical context of the film stands out as much as his American accent. *Looking for Richard*, in fact, reverses this process: by presenting “this kind of Shakespearean acting” as a remnant of a stuffily archaic British tradition, the film makes the language of the theatre seem pathetically unequipped to communicate a contemporary Shakespeare. The implication of the film is, consequently, that the British Shakespeare tradition is not the most significant source of inspiration for Pacino’s project. Indeed, the viewer’s latent impression that Kimball and Pacino have been on a mock quest from the start seems to be confirmed in the film’s farcical episode of their visit to Shakespeare’s birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon. As the two narrators scramble eagerly into the Bard’s supposed room of birth, they manage to set off a fire alarm, but fail to experience the “epiphany” or “outpouring of soul” they expected from what turns out to be a “rather small” natal bed. As they depart, Kimball mumbles about their having travelled 6000 miles for an experience that teaches them nothing about their project (33:00–34:16).

8. Conclusion: *Looking for Richard* between Comedy and Satire

*Looking for Richard* is in many ways an ‘anti-traditional’ film, as it rejects the conservative cultural politics associated with the Shakespeare myth, and questions

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27 Although Branagh has been noted for “using a realistic speaking style” (Kenneth S. Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television* [Cambridge: CUP, 1999] 254) in his films to a greater extent than old-school adaptations, his performances come across as more theatrical than those by more cinematically oriented film-makers such as Loncraine and McKellen (*Richard III*, 1996) or Baz Luhrmann (*Romeo + Juliet*, 1996). Some reviewers have even criticised Branagh for a “tendency to shout out the soliloquies, as if he were still on the Stratford stage instead of in a movie” (Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen*, 258). According to O’Brian’s more favourable interpretation, Branagh’s approach is to “keep the language in front of the audience” by clarifying each line with “[a]brupt changes of vocal register, startling grimaces and seductive smiles.” This “more pointed, even jabbing style” keeps the audience from “being lulled into an iambic doze” (O’Brian, “The Ghost at the Feast,” 12), but it does not contribute as much to the illusion of natural speech as Pacino’s approach.


29 Pacino’s decision to film Richard’s opening monologue not in a European location but in the Cloisters – the medieval art collection of the New York Metropolitan Museum – can be seen as a metaphoric footnote to the film’s thesis that producing a contemporary Shakespeare is not tied to a rigorous historicism or traditionalism (see H. R. Coursen, “Filming Shakespeare’s History: Three Films of Richard III,” Russell Jackson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film* [Cambridge: CUP, 2000] 99–116, here 109–10). The Cloisters consists of fragments of five original cloisters from medieval France that were imported to America stone by stone in the early twentieth century and incorporated in a modern museum building, thus paraphrasing rather than copying the originals (as the Met’s homepage stresses).
the aesthetics of performance it associates with British adaptations. Pacino makes his anti-traditional points with structural irony rather than explicit critical commentary, his favoured ironic mode being the subtle parody of vocabularies by a kind of mock reverence that distorts its object to the point of making it seem grotesque.

What is striking about the film, however, is its uneven critical edge. When Pacino takes on the conceptual metaphors of the Shakespeare myth – and particularly when he explores the racial and social trouble areas expressed in the episodes with James Earl Jones and the ‘panhandler’ – his film displays the polemical outlook of aggressive satire and achieves a seriousness of political critique one associates with post-colonial revisions of the Shakespeare myth. The ‘panhandler’s’ exaggerated notion of Shakespeare's powers of cultural healing invites the viewer's laughter, but it is surely a laughter followed by a bitter aftertaste – all the more so as the troublesome social and racial implications of his act of mimicry concern, not a fictional abstraction impersonated by a professional actor, but a real person encountered live on a New York street.

At other times, however, the film’s mockery of tradition proceeds with the playful humorousness of what is really no more than a post-colonial comedy. Pacino’s posture of ‘writing back’ against England’s cultural imperialism, to be sure, is a pose that lacks satirical pungency, for the film’s portrayal of the US as Great Britain’s colonial ‘other’ is merely a device for the development of a comic plot, whose humorous punch line consists in the unflattering portrait of Stratford and Oxford. Lawrence Buell has said that “U.S. culture can be said to remain at least vestigially postcolonial so long as its citizens are impressed by the sound of an educated British accent.” 30 It is precisely because America’s post-coloniality vis-à-vis England is now more or less reduced to the cultural capital of ‘posh accents’ that Pacino’s revision of the British tradition seems closer to comic raillery than satire. The nineteenth-century American readers of Trollope’s Domestic Manners of the Americans 31 found it hard to laugh self-deprecatingly about the cliché of the ‘uncultivated Yank’ because it was grounded in the material dominance of the London-based culture industry. Now that Shakespearean theatre is possibly the only genre in which London can still be said to be the centre of cultural production, the revival of the cliché – in Pacino’s motley display of misbehaving college kids, clueless New Yorkers, and self-conscious American actors – seems almost ironic in itself. This point is hinted at in one of the film’s frequent self-reflexive moments, in a scene that shows the American actor Alec Baldwin dressed in a cheap-looking ‘fake-medieval’ costume that would be unacceptable for the high-budgeted films in which he usually stars. When Baldwin points out with a wry smile that “we’re getting forty dollars a day and all the donuts we can eat in this project” (2:21), the viewer is reminded of the comparatively small market share of the stage tradition against which Pacino professes to ‘write back.’ It is almost as if the film suddenly exposed Pacino and his crew of method actors as the true ‘cultural imperialists’ appropriating Shakespearean theatre for Holly-

31 See note 19.
wood's multinational industry. It is precisely this tendency to undercut itself with its own ironies that defines the film, counterbalancing, I believe, the viewer's occasional impression of "bad faith" and "high-minded posturing." By pointing to the multiple paradoxes underlying Pacino's project, *Looking for Richard* brings into relief the vexed aesthetic and political issues behind the continuing redefinition of Shakespeare's contemporary relevance.

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32 Lyons, "Lights, Camera, Shakespeare," 57.