

# ‘These our actors’: Histrionics in Shakespeare’s *King Richard III* and Al Pacino’s *Looking for Richard*

WILLIAM CHRISTIE

Al Pacino’s *Looking for Richard* opens with a speech, not from *Richard III*, but from *The Tempest*—the well-known speech in which the magus, Prospero, ceremoniously dismisses the spirits he has conjured in a ‘pageant’ staged for the edification and entertainment of his daughter, Miranda, and her lover, Ferdinand:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and  
Are melted into air, into thin air,  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a wisp behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.<sup>1</sup>

*The Tempest*’s priority at the head of the First Folio of Shakespeare’s works in 1623 ‘has been taken to imply that the play is an epitome of Shakespeare’s career, or of human experience’, writes Stephen Orgel, ‘that it was the truest expression of Shakespeare’s own feelings, and that in the magician-poet Prospero he depicted himself’.<sup>2</sup> For nearly four hundred years of theatrical tradition, this speech (like the play) has been understood as Shakespeare’s

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<sup>1</sup> *The Tempest*, 4.1.148–58, The Oxford Shakespeare, ed. Stephen Orgel (Oxford: OUP, 1987, 2008), with one variation discussed below.

<sup>2</sup> *The Tempest*, ed. Orgel, p.1.

farewell to the stage, a swansong in which the ageing playwright meditates on the imaginative power and manipulation of art, conjuring with it even as he appears to be renouncing it. The tradition may explain why, in an American documentary like Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard*, which is preoccupied with national origins and theatrical traditions and which agonises out loud about who holds authority over Shakespearean drama, the choice of accent is an English rather than an American one. (Either way, the choice seems a curious capitulation, implicitly conceding priority to the English in a way that haunts the American actors featured in the documentary.)

Al Pacino's choice of Prospero's famous speech at the beginning (and the end) of *Looking for Richard* goes to the heart of his autobiographical enterprise. For one thing, it suggests that his larger interest—his quest—is not just for *Richard III*, but for Shakespeare himself. To look for Richard in the world of modern New York is to look for the place of Shakespeare's dramatic poetry in a modern, apparently alien world. And it establishes the preoccupation of what Pacino calls his 'doco-drama type thing' with histrionics—with the theatre, that is, and theatricality, though the word 'histrionics' operates metaphorically as well as literally and has a complex psychological and metaphysical suggestiveness that extends beyond the stage. The Oxford English Dictionary records three main uses of the word:

**histrionics**, *n.*

1. Drama, theatre; acting. Also: pretence, play-acting.
2. Melodramatic or hysterical behaviour, typically intended to attract attention.
3. Technical virtuosity in a vocal or instrumental performance, esp. (in later use) characterized as showy, attention-seeking, or frenzied.

All these senses are applicable to *Richard III* and help to make sense both of the character of Richard himself and of the play as a meditation on historical (and hysterical) politics.

This is only the beginning of the speech's significance, however. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, once Prospero's spirits have been 'dissolved', they 'leave not a rack behind'—meaning 'not a trace' or, if you like, 'not a wisp', as *Looking for Richard* has it. The directorial substitution of the word 'wisp' for 'rack', for which no textual justification can be found—the kind of substitution more or less arbitrarily made on behalf of the audience in

many modern performances of Shakespeare's plays—reflects the difficulty faced by a modern director when attempting to translate an idiom and a sensibility from a period as remote as the Elizabethan. Director Peter Brook effectively grants Pacino permission to make the substitution when, in his interview for *Looking for Richard*, he advises him not to 'fetishize' the text by adhering so faithfully to the original language of the play that the audience is confused and alienated.

Using 'wisp' instead of 'rack' may seem an innocent amendment, but the substitution raises all the questions that Al Pacino wants to ask about art in and across time: about the durability of language and the canon and about how (and how much) we are able to understand transhistorically. What is it we are hearing when we attend a modern performance of a play by 'Shakespeare' and how much has it to do with 'Shakespeare' himself? So much of what we surmise about the plays and about the man exists within scare quotes. This inevitable historical distance, and whether and how far it can be overcome in the theatre, will prove central to Pacino's meditation on the place of Shakespeare in modern culture, even as the substitution of 'wisp' for 'rack' implicitly betrays the concessions he is willing to make in order (as he says) 'to communicate what I feel about Shakespeare to other people'.

'What the fuck do you know about Shakespeare?' asks Pacino's friend and second, the writer and producer Frederic Kimball. But Al Pacino is not just *seeking* Shakespeare, he is also selling—or, as he says, 'peddling'—Shakespeare to a contemporary audience, in the same way that he peddles the play and the bard to all the representative New Yorkers at the opening of the film, only to discover that, beyond someone's recognising the expression 'My kingdom for a horse', no one has the faintest idea about the play. Nor does it bode well that, when Pacino tries to rehearse the names of the rival factions and to account for what is going on amongst Queen Elizabeth's consorts as Richard's brother King Edward IV dies, he discovers how 'very confusing' the politics and history behind the play is. 'I don't know why we even bother to do this at all', he says in histrionic despair at the end of this scene—rhetorically, of course, because bothering is just what he is doing.

What this historical confusion and the alienation of the modern audience necessitate, then, is the 'doco-drama type thing' which is *Looking for Richard* and it is worth looking at what lies behind Pacino's loose, throwaway classification for what it might tell us about the enterprise. His 'doco-drama type thing' is, first of all, a self-conscious hybrid, generically and technically various: part interactive rehearsal (workshop) and dramatic

interaction, it is also part dialogue and debate (Frederic Kimball and Al Pacino) and part self-reflection, exploiting the dramatic form of the soliloquy. It involves informal banter (play) and formal paraphrase (narrative), exemplary enactment and exhibition, with audience participation, as well as literary tourism (the trip to Stratford) and literary criticism. But if we focus on the simple crossover suggested in the term 'doco-drama' we realise the central form of the film is paradoxical, like the genre of the 'history play' itself: a mixture of what purports to be reality, on the one hand, and, on the other, licensed imagination (or 'insubstantial pageant'). The 'reality' supposedly recorded in and by the documentary is, it turns out, self-consciously scripted and staged. Again, histrionics.

Because it is an American documentary, to go to England 'looking for Shakespeare' as they do—in this case, to Shakespeare's Stratford birthplace—is to go into the foreign country of the past. From here, Pacino and Kimball are ironically exiled in a scene that comically enacts the American sense of being exiled from Shakespeare by an intimidating English theatrical tradition—a sense of cultural insecurity openly discussed by F. Murray Abrams and Alec Baldwin during the rehearsal scenes. And the aloof dottiness of Shakespeare scholar, Emrys Jones, and arrogance of English actor John Gielgud are hardly likely to encourage Pacino and Kimball in their quest. As the smart young member of the public says in one of the film's interviews, Shakespeare is 'a great export'—but to export the play out of one culture and into another, out of one period and into another, requires careful adaptation and (as we saw) more or less silent modification. Recognising this, the Restoration meddled with the Shakespearean text without compunction, and for two hundred years Colley Cibber's radically abridged and adapted version of the play of 1699 exercised a stranglehold over stage performances.<sup>3</sup>

Faced with the necessary slippages and opacities of time and place and change, what Pacino offers—it is what we offer as literary critics—is interpretation, reconstruction. But who is best qualified to interpret Shakespeare, the film asks? Well, the actor, it would seem, and emphatically not the scholar. When Pacino suggests asking a Shakespeare scholar to explain what goes on in the famous seduction scene between Richard and Anne, Frederic Kimball explodes:

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<sup>3</sup> See the Introduction to the updated New Cambridge Shakespeare of *Richard III*, edited by Janis Lull (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), pp.24–32.

it is just ridiculous that you are getting a scholar, because you know more about *Richard III* than any fucking scholar from Columbia or Harvard—you're making this entire documentary to show that actors are the proud inheritors and possessors of the understanding of Shakespeare, you don't need a PhD.

As long ago as 1793, George Steevens was asking us to distinguish between the page and the stage in a way that could only reinforce Pacino's arrogation of theatrical authority here:

I most cordially join with Dr. Johnson and Mr. Malone in their [unflattering] opinions; and yet perhaps they have overlooked one cause of the success of this tragedy. The part of Richard is perhaps beyond all others variegated, and consequently favourable to a judicious performer. It comprehends, indeed, a trait of almost every species of character on the stage. The hero, the lover, the statesman, the buffoon, the hypocrite, the hardened and repenting sinner &c. are to be found within its compass. No wonder therefore that the discriminating powers of a Burbage, a Garrick, and a Henderson should at different periods have given it a popularity beyond other dramas of the same author.<sup>4</sup>

*Looking for Richard* opens with an instantly recognisable Al Pacino and Kevin Spacey in pre-rehearsal mode, as Pacino approaches what is shaping up to be an intimidating audience, opening the curtain only to discover an empty theatre with a single audience member dressed in Elizabethan clothing—Shakespeare, we presume. How far Pacino is playing to Shakespeare, as he suggests with this scene, trying to please the long dead playwright—always, along with the people in the theatre, the other demanding audience—must remain a moot point. (Pacino's joke, of course, is to have 'Shakespeare' shaking his head disapprovingly later in the film.) So we address the present and the past, mindful of how the present will shape the future, and the future will try and understand us when we are past, as well as try to rewrite us. This goes to the heart of *Richard III* and its consciousness of itself as fictional history and to the heart of the meditation of the various characters throughout Shakespeare's play on their relationship to their past. So Richard in the play, self-conscious to the last, addresses his once and future audience.

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<sup>4</sup> *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, 6 vols, ed. Brian Vickers (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974–1981), 6:594.

*Richard's play*

Al Pacino's 'doco-drama type thing' is about Shakespeare, then, about meaning and value over time, about national traditions of actors and acting, and about the protracted battle between scholarship and the theatre for authority over the Shakespearean inheritance. It is an unequivocal act of homage, both to the playwright and to the profession, designed to engage a young, contemporary audience of whom it has no expectations beyond ignorance and resistance. But in what ways does our knowledge of *Looking for Richard* modify our understanding of Shakespeare's *Richard III*—and vice versa, how does our knowledge of Shakespeare's history play affect our understanding of Pacino's documentary? In his introduction to the Arden edition of *Richard III*, James Siemon identifies those aspects of the play that have preoccupied the critics:

Over the years . . . attention has consistently returned to the play's unusual protagonist, its highly patterned language and action, its female roles and its religious, historical and political implications. Woven through these considerations are different reactions to its pervasive, multiform ironies and comic elements.<sup>5</sup>

At different times, *Looking for Richard* comments more or less directly on all these things, most obviously drawing our attention to the play's unusual protagonist. However, I want to look at the way it highlights two obviously related things: the first is the centrality of protagonist in the play—before anything else, Shakespeare's *Richard III* is an exercise in personality and its charismatic effects, and so, too, is *Looking at Richard*—and the second is the preoccupation with acting, with the theatrical, in the political world of the play.

What I am calling an 'exercise in personality' is, of course, Richard's own, no less than it is a dramatic experiment of Shakespeare's. Both playwright and protagonist audaciously test what they can get away with:

I that am curtailed of this fair proportion,

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<sup>5</sup> James R. Siemon, in the introduction to his edition, *King Richard III*, Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), pp.2–3.

Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,  
 Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time  
 Into this breathing world scarce half made up,  
 And that so lamely and unfashionable  
 That dogs bark at me as I halt by them,  
 Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,  
 Have no delight to pass away the time,  
 Unless to see my shadow in the sun  
 And descant on mine own deformity.  
 And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover  
 To entertain these fair well-spoken days,  
 I am determinèd to prove a villain  
 And hate the idle pleasures of these days.  
 Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous . . .  
 (1.1.18–32)<sup>6</sup>

*Unmade* by fate—'deformed, unfinished'—Richard resolves instead to make himself. Central to Richard's otherwise sinister appeal is his capacity to invent himself, and to perform the character he invents. With this comes a fascination on his own part, no less than on the part of the audience, with how a 'bottled spider' and 'foul bunch-backed toad' like himself manages to get away with it, until of course we realise humankind's infinite capacity to temporise and abrogate when confronted with awkward alternatives. His own relentlessly manipulative energy enforces a collective passivity on those who should oppose him in what is, after all, a war-wearied and beleaguered state.

BRAKENBURY: I will not reason what is meant hereby,  
 Because I will be guiltless from the meaning.  
 (1.4.94–5)

'We are prompted to marvel at his sheer audacity', writes James Siemon, 'his clarity of motive, his ruthless exploitation of the factional and ideological limits that constrain others, his watchful alertness among half-conscious sleep-walkers, egotists, blinkered factionalists and time-servers'.<sup>7</sup> What is attractive about Richard, as Siemon suggests, is this insight into his own character and motive—it is part of Richard's Medieval inheritance, Richard himself recognises, as a direct descendent of the Vice figure from

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the edition of *Richard III* I am using throughout this article is the updated New Cambridge Shakespeare, edited by Janis Lull.

<sup>7</sup> *King Richard III*, ed. James Siemon, p.17.

the morality plays whose self-consciousness and self-publicity were a vital part of the interactive theatrical experience. Only in Richard's case it is accomplished with more intellectual power and, with that, political power, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge remarked.

The characters of Richard III., Iago, and Falstaff, were the characters of men who reverse the order of things, who place intellect at the head, whereas it ought to follow like geometry, to prove and to confirm – . . . Richard, laughing at conscience, and sneering at religion, felt a confidence in his intellect, which urged him to commit the most horrid crimes, because he felt himself, although inferior in form and shape, superior to those around him; he felt he possessed a power that they had not.<sup>8</sup>

Prospero in *The Tempest* is an ageing egotist, a magus, who uses magic and poetry to achieve his wish-fulfilling ends—so, of course, does Richard, however much we may disapprove of those ends. And so does Al Pacino in *Looking for Richard*, though for the moment we are talking about Shakespeare. *Richard III* is a play about power in which the protagonist and other people in power show nothing but contempt for the needs and understanding of the people they rule.

*'These our actors'*

This is where the second aspect of *Richard III* opened up by Al Pacino's 'doco-drama type thing' comes in—its preoccupation with acting. Granting what Phyllis Rackin calls 'the association between the transgressive, the demonic, and the theatrical', what is especially and unsettlingly true is their further association with the political in the world of the play.<sup>9</sup> With our overexposure to modern politics as an ongoing media event, we hardly need convincing that the 'spontaneous' political life of the nation is scripted and staged:

as has long been noted, Shakespeare links his own contribution to these [political, psychological, and metaphysical]

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, ed. Jonathan Bate (London: Penguin, 1992), pp.145–6.

<sup>9</sup> Phyllis Rackin, 'History into Tragedy: The Case of *Richard III*', in *Shakespearean Tragedy and Gender*, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner and Madelon Sprengnether (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996), pp.31–53 (40).

explanations of Richard's behaviour to his medium by introducing allusions to and reflections on theater and theatrical performance. The play's metatheatrical moments allow audiences to consider the theater itself as a vehicle through which history is presented and explore the ways in which politics and the theater are implicated in each other.<sup>10</sup>

Buckingham and Richard's cynical staging of the offer of the crown in Act 3 scene 7, for example, involves an elaborate mime of humble leadership reluctantly acceding to the pleas and importunities of a needy people. Rather than be seen murderously to eliminate all opposition in a cold, calculating usurpation and brutally to grab the throne—the brutal truth has been established by Richard's confidential compact with the audience—Richard creates a stage illusion for the people of England constraining them to beg him to take power. The 'aesthetic nature' of Richard's bid for power, as Joel Slotkin reminds us, 'appears most clearly in Richard's appearance "between two bishops" (3.7.89), which is basically a pretty picture purporting to represent an act of piety'.<sup>11</sup> Earlier, Buckingham had been gathered into Richard's histrionic 'revels' –

RICHARD: Come, cousin, canst thou quake and change thy  
colour,  
Murder thy breath in middle of a word,  
And then again begin, and stop again,  
As if thou were distraught and mad with terror?

BUCKINGHAM: Tut, I can counterfeit the deep tragedian  
Speak, and look back, and pry on every side,  
Tremble and start at wagging of a straw.  
Intending deep suspicion, ghastly looks  
Are at my service, like enforcèd smiles.  
And both are ready in their offices  
At any time to grace my stratagems.

(3.5.1–11)

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<sup>10</sup> Martine van Elk, "Determined to Prove a Villain": Criticism, Pedagogy, and *Richard III*, *College Literature*, 34:4 (Fall 2007), 1–21 (3).

<sup>11</sup> Joel Elliot Slotkin, 'Honeyed Toads: Sinister Aesthetics in Shakespeare's *Richard III*', *The Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 7:1 (Spring/Summer 2007), 5–32 (10–11).

– as a dangerous division opens up between appearance and reality, word and truth, between what people say and what they do, in a play that imagines a Manichean world of almost unrelenting evil, the prevailing metaphor for which division is theatrical.

This disjunction between word and truth is especially revealing in what we might loosely (and ironically) call the 'performative language' in the play: those utterances that, rather than stating or describing things, are acts in themselves, like oaths, vows, and promises. The integrity, stability, and predictability of any society is dependent on utterance as undertaking, binding the speaker to enact the reality she or he articulates. In Act 2, scene 1—what Pacino calls the 'atonement scene'—the dying King Edward exacts 'solemn vows' of reconciliation and future friendship from all the warring factions, all of which turn out to be spectacularly empty, like Richard's oaths when protesting his love for Anne, and his and Anne's marriage vows. Pledges of fealty in *Richard III* to country, friend, family, and spouse, far from being genuine performatives, are merely performances: acting.

Again, this time in Act 3, scene 1, we witness the deconstruction and emptying out of the word 'sanctuary':

CARDINAL : God forbid  
We should infringe the holy privilege  
Of blessèd sanctuary. Not for all this land  
Would I be guilty of so great a sin.

BUCKINGHAM: You are too senseless obstinate, my lord,  
Too ceremonious and traditional.  
Weigh it but with the grossness of this age:  
You break not sanctuary in seizing him.  
The benefit thereof is always granted  
To those whose dealings have deserved the place  
And those who have the wit to claim the place.  
This prince hath neither claimed it nor deserved it,  
And therefore, in mine opinion, cannot have it.  
Then taking him from thence that is not there,  
You break no privilege nor charter there.  
Oft have I heard of sanctuary men,  
But sanctuary children ne'er till now.

CARDINAL: My lord, you shall o'er-rule my mind for once.  
(3.1.40–57)

Richard's rule, as the Cardinal suggests, is a 'rule of mind'. Richard only looks forward, imagining that, like the State in George Orwell's *1984*, he can systematically rewrite the past in order to bring people and events around to his own will. In all of this, Richard's deformity is a vital ingredient in the part—or rather parts—he fashions for himself. Not only does he rely upon 'the multiple significations of his deformities as a technology of performance to aid his bid for power', as Katherine Schaap Williams suggests<sup>12</sup>—and it is worth reminding ourselves before we resort to superstitions about bodily deformity signalling spiritual corruption in the Elizabethan period that its significations are indeed multiple and that Richard manipulates them all—that for Richard disability *is* a performance, one that the theatrical tradition has taken up with a comparable gusto on occasion. 'Richard's character fashions disability', argue David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder: 'He sets to work performing deformity'.<sup>13</sup>

How, then, can we separate profession and performance, the play asks, reality and subterfuge, documentary and drama? But it is more complex than these simple dichotomies might suggest, and the standard questions thrown up by the metaphor of theatre and performance are not searching enough. What is especially challenging about *Richard III* is that the familiar dualism of evil feigning innocence, a dualism that preserves for the reader or audience a comfortable discrimination of appearance from reality, comprises only a comparatively small part of Richard's theatrical subterfuge. Richard also commands and seduces assent from the other characters when his depredations are chillingly apparent. In Act 3, scene 4, for example, everyone knows that Richard's charges against Hastings for his withered arm are confected and nonsensical, but they act out, ritualistically as it were, Richard's scripted drama (central to which is the hysterical performance of his own deformity). The truly threatening theatrical experience is one which the audience sees through, yet accedes to nevertheless. 'The point is not that

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<sup>12</sup> Katherine Schaap Williams, 'Enabling Richard: The Rhetoric of Disability in *Richard III*', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 29:4 (2009), [1-14] <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/997> [4].

<sup>13</sup> David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 2006), p.103.

anyone is deceived by the charade', writes Stephen Greenblatt, 'but that everyone is forced either to participate in it or watch it silently'.<sup>14</sup>

SCRIVENER: Who is so gross that cannot see this palpable  
device?

Yet who so bold but says he sees it not?

(3.6.11–12)

Richard, then, is the consummate actor, and for three reasons. First, he is able to push beyond the simple binary of dissimulation in which, though evil, he is taken for virtuous and obeyed accordingly. Here, as with so many of Richard's distinctive strategies, the scene in which he prevails upon Anne is exemplary.

RICHARD: Was ever woman in this humour wooed?

Was ever woman in this humour won?

I'll have her, but I will not keep her long.

What, I that killed her husband and her father,

To take her in her heart's extremest hate,

With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,

The bleeding witness of my hatred by,

Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me,

And I no friends to back my suit withal

But the plain devil and dissembling looks?

And yet to win her, all the world to nothing?

Ha!

(1.2.231–42)

'The "palpable device", the deception that advertises its deceptiveness but works anyway, is a primary feature of Richard's attractiveness in the play', writes Joel Slotkin, and it begins 'with his wooing of Anne', who 'tries continually, but unconvincingly, to display normative responses'.<sup>15</sup> Richard's second distinction as an actor is that his 'performative concept of identity', to quote Martine van Elk, 'shows it to be constituted not merely in action but specifically in improvisation'.<sup>16</sup> Finding the part under pressure of circumstance is true accomplishment.

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1980), p.13.

<sup>15</sup> Slotkin, 'Honeyed Toads: Sinister Aesthetics in Shakespeare's *Richard III*', 12.

<sup>16</sup> Martine van Elk, "'Determined to Prove a Villain": Criticism, Pedagogy, and *Richard III*', 8.

Beyond this, the provocation of Richard's histrionics is metaphysical. Richard's third uncanny accomplishment is the suggestion, not that the self is an actor or improviser, but that the actor or improviser is the self. 'Richard empties himself out in *Richard III*', writes Janet Adelman, 'doing away with selfhood and its nightmare origins and remaking himself in the shape of the perfect actor who has no being except in the roles he plays'.<sup>17</sup> The roles we play and are, however, are likely to return to haunt us, nor are all the parts we play comfortable or compatible, for not only do we antagonize and are antagonized by other people, we are sometimes divided against ourselves. Here we focus in on Richard on the eve of the battle of Bosworth at the end of the play, wrestling with his own theatrical multiplicity. We are reminded that the very notion of self-consciousness is a theatrical one in which we double as our own audience:

O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me?  
 The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight.  
 Cold, fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.  
 What? Do I fear myself? There's none else by.  
 Richard loves Richard, that is, I am I.  
 Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.  
 Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why:  
 Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?  
 Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good  
 That I myself have done unto myself?  
 O, no. Alas, I rather hate myself  
 For hateful deeds committed by myself.  
 I am a villain. Yet I lie, I am not.  
 Fool, of thyself speak well. Fool, do not flatter.  
 My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,  
 And every tongue brings in a several tale,  
 And every tale condemns me for a villain.  
 Perjury, perjury, in the highest degree,  
 Murder, stern murder, in the direst degree,  
 All several sins, all used in each degree,  
 Throng to the bar, crying all 'Guilty, guilty!'  
 I shall despair. There is no creature loves me,  
 And if I die no soul will pity me.

(5.3.183–209)

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<sup>17</sup> Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origins in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp.8–9.

What we witness in this speech is the death and quartering of Richard, as the style and syntax literally fragment him. We watch the way the easy and familiar rhythm breaks down as his adaptability and customary eloquence (improvisation) desert him.

### *Looking for Pacino*

'Shakespeare began from a different place', as Jonathan Bate reminds us: '*He was an actor himself*'. We should not be surprised to find that the theatrical in both *Looking for Richard* and *Richard III* goes deeper than public charade—or, at least, that in both cases it is more personal than this.

Richard is quintessentially Shakespearean, supremely charismatic in the theatre, because he knows that he is a role-player. He revels, and makes the audience revel, in play-acting. He is the first full embodiment of a Shakespearean obsession which culminates in Macbeth's 'poor player' and Prospero's 'These our actors'.<sup>18</sup>

As we watch Richard stage-managing history and politics as a personal 'doco-drama type thing', we think of Pacino in rehearsal and Pacino in performance, of Pacino as interpreter compared with Pacino as writer, director, producer, interlocutor, and we become aware of all the parts *we* play, of the way in which we script and stage our lives, adopting different parts.

Richard in the play and *Richard III* in the history of performance offer object lessons on egotism and acting, and Al Pacino's egotistical project (projecting the ego) slots neatly and ironically into a vigorous and inventive stage history of the play, in which it has never fallen out of the repertoire. Just about every renowned actor-manager concerned to establish or enforce his reputation has crafted a characteristic performance of the role and the play, from Shakespeare's contemporary, Richard Burbage, through David Garrick, Edmund Kean, William Charles Macready, and (in the US) Edwin Booth, to the twentieth century, in which John Barrymore, Donald Wolfit, Laurence Olivier have all offered signature versions of the role. Since Olivier's filmed performance in 1955, it is hard to imagine a major 'actor-manager' who has not attempted it, including recent performances by Ian

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador, 1997), pp.118–19.

McKellan, Kenneth Branagh, and Kevin Spacey that articulate neatly with their careers in the modern media of television and film. In this, and in exalting the egotistical actor, *Looking for Richard* does not just make connections with Richard himself, it also makes connections with this whole theatrical tradition: *Richard III* is an actor's play, as well as being a play about acting, one of a handful of Shakespearean parts that over the centuries have become the vehicles of renown and reputation.

In this tradition, *Looking for Richard* is a 'doco-drama type thing' that betrays the obsession of its maker, and that obsession, before anything, is with the maker himself, the self-maker, Al Pacino: with Shakespeare insofar as Shakespeare can be said to have created the conditions for Pacino's performance and prefigured and prophesied his career. Pacino draws upon and reprises his role as the godfather, Michael Corleone, and anticipates his role as John Milton/Satan in *The Devil's Advocate* (1997). What does Pacino's friend and fellow producer say towards the end of *Looking for Richard*? If he had brought another ten rolls of film, Pacino would have used them all. In the end, his endless fascination is with himself and with his profession, with acting. And it is precisely in this endless fascination with himself—with performing himself—that Al Pacino establishes his affinity with and insight into his subject, Richard, Duke of Gloucester and later king of England.

After all, in desperately seeking Richard/Shakespeare and struggling to make sense of the part and the play in order to create his autobiographical 'doco-drama', Pacino is only pretending to struggle, pretending he does not understand—feigning ignorance no less effectively than Richard feigns humility and friendship and piety and love. The spontaneity of *Looking for Richard* is scripted, its organisation and incidents (like Pacino and Kimball's 'expulsion' from Shakespeare's birthplace) tendentious and argumentative. It is, supremely, pretend. It is what actors do, after all, and it is why actors love *Richard III*. Both *Richard III* and *Looking for Richard* are doco-dramas—both of them 'based on a true story', as Hollywood producers love to say, but elaborated tendentiously into fictional artifacts of the self.

After thirty five years teaching in the Department of English at the University of Sydney, William Christie recently took up the position of Head of the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National

University. He is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and past president of the Romantic Studies Association of Australasia (RSAA). His publications include *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Literary Life* (2006) – awarded the NSW Premier's Biennial Prize for Literary Scholarship in 2008 – *The Edinburgh Review in the Literary Culture of Romantic Britain* (2009), *Dylan Thomas: A Literary Life* (2014), and the forthcoming *The Two Romanticisms and Other Essays* (2016).