



# Britwits

We only embarrass ourselves when we try to be Britty.

Recently, a black Briton, writing in the *Washington Post*, said that the only advantage he could see in being British was that his black American cousins spotted him ten IQ points just for his accent. So too in the movies, when it comes to “history” or “literature,” we tend to assume that the Brits will do it better than we do. And generally they do. This is partly because the small, highly specialized British film industry has been doing “Masterpiece Theatre”-style costume dramas for so long that it has got really good at them, and partly because they have not yet dumbed down their educational system to American levels. So, until the happy day when our two nations are equals in imbecility, we will tend to come off looking rather badly when we try to beat the Brits at their own game.

Al Pacino’s *Looking for Richard*, for instance, really ought to be called “Richard III goes to Sesame Street.” It is a film based on the by-now old-fashioned notion that Shakespeare can be made “relevant” to the happening youth of the nineties—kids who might not, were it not for Al and his pals in Mr. Rogers’s neighborhood, ever bother to tear themselves away from MTV. But I doubt the efficacy of slicing and dicing Shakespeare and serving him up in quick cuts to pander to a bunch of no-mind slackers. They probably won’t like him anyway, and they won’t realize that the real Shakespeare takes work—though not so much work as they might imagine. He cannot be made

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into a music video with old-fashioned language, and people who suppose he can are in for a big shock in the unlikely event that they ever put themselves in a way to encounter the real thing.

The Australian Baz Luhrmann’s Americanized *Romeo and Juliet* is not as condescending as *Looking for Richard*, but it is even more the victim of its own desperation to be hip. This movie, like several of its main characters (including Leonardo DiCaprio’s Romeo), is wired and, with its nervous camera-work and intense, shouted dialogue, deliberately resembles a two-hour gangster rap video. At times you think this approach might almost have worked. The stylization of the violence, the clothes, the cars, the guns (Romeo carries a “Rapier 9mm”), like the setting in a vaguely futuristic “Verona Beach,” USA, weirdly complement the artificiality, in such a context, of the language. But though it is often funny and always clever, the film has no respect at all for Shakespeare, who ought to get a “based on a story by” credit, or his text. Even where the latter is ostensibly to be understood in its Shakespearean sense, the characters speak the lines as if they were rap lyrics and less to be understood than to strike an attitude.

Not that the “Masterpiece Theatre” treatment is necessarily superior. *Jude*, an adaptation of Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* directed by Michael Winterbottom, is a good example of how the British film industry churns out nicely atmospheric period pieces, like Laura Ashley fabric, for the culture-starved masses. True, it is not so vulgar as most of the production of the Merchant-Ivory work-

shop—an example of which is also currently on show in *Surviving Picasso*, which reduces the life and art of the great painter to women’s magazine fare (though that may be just the fate that the old coot deserves)—but it is still resolutely middlebrow. As usual in these productions, the acting is the best thing about it, and it is hard to find fault with Christopher Eccleston’s lugubrious Jude, or Kate Winslet’s surprisingly flirty Sue Bridehead. I had always pictured Sue as one of the worst kind of female intellectuals, the sort of person who wears Birkenstocks and uses expressions like “sex object,” but Miss Winslet makes a believer of me.

The problem lies with the overall dramatic conception, which is unequal to the quality of the materials. To be fair, this is as much the fault of Thomas Hardy as it is of the filmmakers. A great poet, Hardy as a novelist is little more than Galsworthy on speed. Instead of just confining himself to eviscerating middle-class morality, Hardy lets “God” (or, as he sarcastically calls Him in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, “the President of the Immortals”) have it as well—for allowing Himself to be associated with middle-class morality. When one is young and full of self-importance and self-pity, this kind of thing looks frightfully profound. It makes perfect sense to think that the universe is controlled by a malign power who has set the stars in their courses just so as to prevent one from having any fun. But in maturity it is a ludicrous idea, and an even more ludicrous one when put on film. In this respect, *Jude* is actually an improvement on Hardy, since it tones down a bit the idea of malevolent fate.

One of the great things about the usually high-toned British entertainment industry is that its art can be applied even

to anti-British purposes, as it is in Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins*. Of course, when it comes to Irish independence, no amount of political oversimplification ever seems too much. Never in the course of this film's two hours and a quarter does it so much as hint that every murder in it takes place after the British had already agreed to Home Rule. Even when it becomes clear that the fighting is just jockeying for power between thugs—De Valera (Alan Rickman) versus Collins (Liam Neeson)—the myth of British perfidy is carefully cultivated, for instance as a tank drives onto a football field and slaughters players and spectators at random.

The Brits kill children in the street and torture their guiltless victims, while the Irish have pangs of conscience even about shooting paid informers. So Collins agonizes about the conscience-stricken Irish lad who has just killed a British agent: "I hate the man who put a gun in his hand, and I know that it was me. I hate myself. I hate them for making hate necessary." Such lines are delivered without a hint of irony and point up the dreadful writing of which the film is full. Cliché piles on top of leaden cliché as again and again we are told that "We can't take much more" and "It's going to get rough," "How rough?" "Very rough." "Rougher than you can imagine" "Are you up to that?" "How much longer can we hold out?" "Who will give up first, Joe. Us or them?"

Well, I, for one, was ready to cry "uncle." But most amazing of all is the note at the end which tells us that Collins "died, paradoxically, in an attempt to bring to an end the rule of the gun in Ireland." Paradoxically indeed! It is almost inconceivable that a writer dealing with any other subject would not see a line like this as an occasion for irony, if he dared to use it at all. Yet the subject of Irish independence is remarkably free of any such nuances. It's like tales from the Bible were a century ago.

You begin to see the pattern? Finely wrought cinema reliably produced in the service of highly suspect ideas. The same may be said of *The English Patient* by Anthony Minghella, from the novel by Michael Ondaatje. The story is extremely complicated but can be summed up in a few words: friends and lovers are more

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important than politics and war. Both Minghella and Ondaatje would doubtless agree with E.M. Forster's celebrated dictum that, forced to choose between betraying his friends and betraying his country, he would hope to have the guts to betray his country.

Once a country has assimilated that particular lesson, it is only a matter of time before defending it at all becomes impossible. But if you are going to watch propaganda for the victory of private feeling over public duty (and, by the way, a few more satisfying swipes at the British empire) you could spend your time a lot more painfully than in watching *The English Patient*. For one thing, it does not treat its moral choices as simple or unproblematic. Its main characters, played by Ralph Fiennes and the delectable Kristen Scott-Thomas, betray *both* their country *and* their friends. But they are not happy about it, and that is, of course, the main thing.

I wish I had space to discuss my doubts about Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies*, a perfect example of absolutely terrific British acting in the service of what amounts to a therapeutic banality. But let us instead end on the high note of our Movie of the Month, Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*. This, to my mind, is the best Shakespeare there has been on film since Zeffirelli's great *Romeo and Juliet* nearly thirty years ago.

Here the acting is not just good but stunningly good. Ben Kingsley's Feste and Nigel Hawthorne's Malvolio are particularly impressive, and even Helena Bon-

ham Carter seems just right for the mournful Olivia. Imogen Stubbs as Viola and Steven Macintosh as Sebastian really do look like twins, and there is a brilliant scene at the beginning in which they costume themselves in Turkish harem dress to perform a little gender-bending cabaret number on board their ship just before it hits the rocks. Its climactic moment, in which Sebastian is to remove Viola's false mustache, is deferred until the final unmasking scene.

The play's setting in a vaguely Edwardian and Ruritanian Illyria (one of the funniest bits is when Sebastian is shown coming to town with a Baedeker's guide to Illyria) is also beautifully handled and makes its contribution to the sumptuousness of the photography. This society just at its peak of ripeness before a sad decline is the perfect match of period with theme. In general, this sense of counterpoise—of joy and sorrow, sanity and madness, male and female—so central to the play has never been better conveyed, especially in the songs. I especially liked the intercutting of two simultaneous performances of "O Mistress Mine" with its melancholy conclusion ("Then come and kiss me sweet and twenty:/ Youth's a stuff will not endure")—one by Feste on the squeezebox and one (melody only) by Viola on the piano—while Viola and the Duke (Toby Stephens) have their portentous chat about the supposed woman that Viola's fancy "hath stayed upon."

Never have I seen the play's themes of love and music and transience and frustration and gender mix-ups so effectively brought together in a single emotional movement. I wanted to stand up and cheer. Similarly, Feste's final song—with its refrain, "the rain it raineth every day"—is intercut with scenes in which those who are excluded from the film's happy resolution make their sad departures from Illyria/Elysium: Malvolio, Antonio, and finally Feste himself, whose concluding, repeated assurance of striving to please "every day" is heartbreaking. It reminds us that, though the British may have lost an empire, they still can't half do Shakespeare. ❀

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# Resurrecting Harding

## The Strange Deaths of President Harding

Robert H. Ferrell

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REVIEWED BY

Florence King

The parallels are intriguing: a big, white-haired, womanizing president with a shrouded medical history, an aggressive First Lady with an interest in spiritualism, a scandal-ridden administration, a mysterious suicide, and a shelf of tell-all books.

So far, so good. But if we add rumors that the First Lady poisoned the president, that he was sterile, that he had Negro blood, and that he signed over government oil leases to his cronies while drunk, we realize this is not the politically correct, calorie-counting White House of current ill fame but that of Warren Gamaliel Harding three-quarters of a century ago.

Harding invariably has placed last in presidential ratings, trailing even Millard Fillmore. His obloquy has been total and seemingly beyond the reach of revisionist rescue, but now relief has arrived. *The Strange Deaths of President Harding* is a scrupulously researched and vividly told overview by Robert H. Ferrell, emeritus professor of history at Indiana University, who demolishes or casts doubt on most of the accusations and suspicions surrounding America's twenty-ninth president.

Ferrell, author of *Ill Advised: Presidential Health and Public Trust*, is on his surest ground with the poison rumor. Harding died on August 2, 1923, in the Palace Hotel

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in San Francisco after a cross-country train trip to Tacoma, where he boarded a Navy ship for Alaska. This voyage was memorable for two macabre reasons. One was the coffin that the White House doctor had ordered placed in the ship's hold—not for the president but for Mrs. Harding, who was seriously ill with the nephritis that would kill her the following year. The other was shellfish, always the chief suspect when someone gets sick. When Harding vomited, it put the words "food poisoning" on the wire, and that, as later events would prove, was enough.

The 58-year-old president was actually a prime candidate for a heart attack, says Ferrell, and showed all the signs during the western trip. Overwhelmed by the presidency, he had sought to banish fears of inadequacy with frenetic "busyness" until he was exhausted, yet refused to admit it for fear of sending down the stock market. Now the western trip wore him out, the turning point coming in a Seattle motorcade when he pumped his arm up and down for hours as he tipped his hat, straining a heart that his doctor afterwards discovered was enlarged.

He collapsed as the train neared San Francisco, but loath to let people see him being carried, he insisted on donning morning dress and walked unaided up the steps of the Palace. As soon as he entered his suite he fell headfirst across the bed, where he would die three days later of what his doctors called "apoplexy," the old name for stroke and a common mistaken diagnosis in an era when cardiology was in its infancy. But stroke victims don't die instantly, and Harding did, of a massive coronary.

His funeral train is the one we never hear about. In Cheyenne crowds stood in a dust storm, in Chicago they filled the freight yards until the train could not move; silent awestruck masses who remembered the funeral procession of the Unknown Soldier two years before,

when Harding had presented the very picture of a noble Roman. After the bulbous Taft and the wizened Wilson, the man who "looked like a president" had stirred their spirits and won their hearts.

The Teapot Dome scandals changed the perception, and Mrs. Harding's death in 1924 opened the floodgates of calumny. The first book to advance the poison theory was a 1926 novel, *Revelry*, by Samuel Hopkins Adams, about a president who accidentally poisons himself when he takes the wrong medicine and then decides not to tell his doctors, choosing a martyr's death to escape his political scandals. One of the many taken in by it was Herbert Hoover, Harding's secretary of commerce, who read it in manuscript and told a friend it described "many things which are not known."

The success of the Adams novel prompted a bimbo eruption. Her name was Nan Britton. Born in 1896, she had grown up in Marion, Ohio, and had known Harding all her life. A giddy teenager when Harding was editor of the town paper, Nan had developed such an intense crush on him that her father had seen fit to warn him about it. Harding no doubt was tempted by the warning because Nan had a well-established reputation among the townsfolk for being "fast." Something very likely happened between them, but Ferrell believes it was less a case of Harding seducing her than of her pestering him until he weakened, and produces enough old hotel registers to dispute the assignations she described in *The President's Daughter* (1927).

In 1919 Nan gave birth to Elizabeth Ann Christian, ostensibly conceived in Harding's Senate office. The child was adopted by Nan's sister and brother-in-law. In her book she claimed she continued her affair with Harding, who wrote her letters promising to marry her. She never could produce any of these letters, having destroyed them, she said, out of discretion.