On Vanitas
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Vanitas Iconography as a Dramatic Device in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*

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I know thy works, that thou hast a name,
that thou livest, and [yet] art dead.
(Revelation 3.1)

The 'sister arts' in Shakespeare
"His images are indeed everywhere so lively"

Shakespeare's familiarity with classical antiquity[1] certainly included Plutarch. He might have known his *Moralia*: a complete English translation of this ample collection of essays and dialogues appeared no earlier than 1603[2], but a French edition by Jacques Amyot had

1 As demonstrated by Colin Burrow, 'classical antiquity' was not a common expression, at least up until the 1680s when 'the classics' started to be utilized with reference to classical authors. See Colin Burrow, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity*, Oxford Shakespeare Topics, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 3.

2 Philemon Holland translated the first complete English edition of Plutarch's *Moralia*, which was published under the title of *The Moral Philosophy*. See Laura Aydelotte, "Holland, Philemon", in *The Encyclopedia of English Renaissance Literature*, eds Garret A. Sullivan and Alan Stewart, Hoboken, John Wiley & Sons, 2012, 3 vols, vol. I, pp. 504-505.

been current since 1559[3]. Mentioning the relationship between Shakespeare and Plutarch right from the outset is essential, for it lays the ground upon which the argument of these pages is built, i.e. the complementarity of word and image[4] that is at play in the dramatic framework of Shakespearean tragedy. In this sense, Plutarch's quotation of Simonides of Ceos' well-known statement is instrumental for the advocacy of the association of painting with poetry:

> Simonides die, que la peinture soit vne poësie muette, & la poësie vne peinture parlante. Car les actions que les peintres monstrent comme presentes, & alors qu'elles se font, les lettres les racontent & composent comme aiants esté faictes, & si les vns les monstrent auec couleurs & figures, & les autres auec paroles & dictions, ils different en matiere & en maniere d'imitation, mais aux vns & aux autres y a vne mesme fin proposee. (*Moralia*, IV.xxv.346ff)[5]

By defining painting as 'silent poetry' and poetry as 'speaking painting', the emphasis is not merely placed on the discrepancies underlying these arts – namely, the fact that the former appeals to sight, whereas the latter to hearing – but rather on their embodying a unity of 'complementary opposites'. In other words, images channel meanings that words cannot and vice versa[6]. As far as theatre

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3 Peter France, *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 385. Furthermore, Burrow claims that Shakespeare might have known Plutarch's *Moralia* either from Amyot's French edition or by reading Montaigne's *Essais* (Burrow, p. 211).

4 For a detailed overview of the Renaissance treatment of the Arts, as well as the liaison between the verbal and the pictorial medium, see Rensselaer Wright Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting*, New York, Norton, 1967, and Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics Part I", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 12:4 (1951), pp. 496-527.

5 Plutarch, "De l'excellence des Athéniens", in *Les Oeuvres morales et philosophiques de Plutarque; translatees de Grec en François*, ed. Jacques Amyot, Paris, Iean Macé, 1581, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département Réserve des livres rares, RES FOL-Z DON-100 (1), f. 524*v*. The choice to quote Plutarch's *De Gloria Atheniensium* in its French sixteenth-century translation depends on the consideration that this is the version of the text that Shakespeare might have known in his days, as explained in note 3.

6 To expand this idea of interdependency, it may be useful to consider Cesare Ripa's iconographic rendition of poetry and painting. Two entries in his *Iconologia* are respectively devoted to 'Poesia' (which is both visually and verbally exemplified) and

is concerned, Shakespeare must have been well aware of the importance of keeping the verbal 'within striking distance' of the visual. Hamlet himself brings to the audience's attention the fact that words sometimes lose their meaning, do not function anymore, and it is preferable to entrust oneself to the eye, which the Prince calls the "most miraculous organ" (II.ii.590)[7].

Moving from these premises, the following sections of this essay hinge on the close bond between the 'sister arts' in Shakespeare, for the scope is to underline how visual symbolism plays a primary role in the verbal component of a theatrical piece. In his study on Shakespearean imagery, Wolfgang Clemen goes as far as to claim that tragedy is the place where the playwright's "dramatic technique [is] at its best [and] the same applies to the imagery"[8]. I personally like to define Shakespeare's concern with the visual medium as his concealed 'effectual might' – as Milton would have it – since, in the development of the plots of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, the recurrence of verbal images of decay is invested with a premonitory significance.

There are numerous perspectives through which a study on Shakespearean imagery can be conducted. For example, critics such as John Dixon Hunt and Margaret Farrand Thorp are more concerned with the Bard's interest in the visual arts in the physical sense of the term: the former draws an overview of the artistic panorama surrounding the Elizabethan age, while the latter surveys Shakespeare's adoption of objects belonging to the field of the 'visual arts' as props[9]. Conversely, what this article attempts to scrutinise is

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to 'Pittura' (merely described by means of words). Paradoxical though it may seem, all that Ripa does is to put into practice Simonides of Ceos' assertion. Therefore, in his collection of allegories, not only does the iconography of painting lack an image of its own, it is also verbally represented as a woman who denies herself that very same expressive medium through which her own description is made possible, i.e. words. On this matter, see Loretta Innocenti, "'Language thou art too narrow'. Reflections on Visual and Verbal Iconicity", *TEXTUS*, 12:1 (1999), p. 12.

7 All quotations from *Hamlet* are drawn from William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, London, Arden Shakespeare, 2000 (1st edition 1982).

8 Wolfgang Clemen, *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery*, London, Methuen, 1977, p. 89.

9 See John Dixon Hunt, "The Visual Arts of Shakespeare's Day", in *Shakespeare, Pattern of Excelling Nature: Shakespeare Criticism in Honor of America's Bicentennial*, eds David Bevington and Jay L. Halio, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1976, pp. 210-21, and Margaret Farrand Thorp, "Shakespeare and the Fine Arts", *PMLA*, 46:3 (1931), pp. 672-93.

the symbolic implications conveyed by the Bard's use of emblems that bear a *memento mori* message. In this respect, the word 'emblem' is here adopted with the meaning assigned by Mario Praz, i.e. a "representation of objects that designate a concept"[10]. Therefore, the employment of images in the two aforesaid plays is not to be considered as exclusively physical. It is, indeed, rather symbolic: scattered throughout the five acts, Shakespeare's small 'pictures of mortality' contribute to the whole meaning of the tragedy and to a structural cohesion that can only be appreciated retrospectively. Speaking about the use of death as a device in tragedy, John Bayley regards it as "the most cursory sort of dramatic convenience" and as "a way of ending a necessary dramatic discourse"[11]. Although no objections can be raised to this statement, when dealing with the two above-mentioned plays one feels that there is much more to it, since death does not merely occur in order to meet the requirements of the genre. *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are not tragedies where characters conventionally die by the end of Act V: in my view, in these tragedies characters are skilfully fashioned as already dead, right from the start of the play[12].

In his forging effigies of transience, Shakespeare develops his own iconography of death by implicitly presenting two distinct approaches to mortality. The first draws upon the medieval fondness for the macabre which, stemming from the perception of the "universal and obsessive presence"[13] of the dead among the living,

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10 Mario Praz, *Studi sul concettismo*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1946, p. 7. The term 'emblem' refers to a literary genre that found breeding ground during the seventeenth century, in which a visual image is connected to a verbal composition. As if to stress the interdependency of word and image in an emblem, the visual element and its verbal counterpart are referred to respectively as 'body' and 'soul'. Unless otherwise stated, the translation of excerpts from works written in non-English languages is mine.

11 John Bayley, *Shakespeare and Tragedy*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 49.

12 Such idea can be somehow linked to C. S. Lewis's consideration that in Shakespeare's previous plays characters "think of dying [but] no one thinks […] of *being dead*, [conversely] in *Hamlet* we are kept thinking about it all the time, whether in terms of the soul's destiny or of the body's". See C. S. Lewis, "Death in *Hamlet*", in *Shakespeare: The Tragedies: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Alfred Harbage, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1964, p. 73.

13 Michel Vovelle, *La morte e l'Occidente. Dal 1300 ai giorni nostri*, trans. Giovanni Ferrara degli Uberti, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2000, p. 13. Vovelle calls the idea that the world of the living is enclosed by that of the dead a "horizontal perspective", for both coexist as parallel dimensions. A distinction between the medieval and the Renaissance

gave rise in the late fourteenth century to the motif of the *danse macabre* (as will be explained below). The second, a direct descendant of the former, is epitomized by the mid-seventeenth-century pictorial theme known as *vanitas*, which owes its name to the idea of the transience of earthly things as expressed by the Preacher in Ecclesiastes 1.2: "vanity of vanities saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity"[14]. With regard to *vanitas* still-lives, it is very unlikely that Shakespeare could have had contact with an artistic motif that originated in the Low Countries and spread only some years after his death[15]. Yet, germs of this tradition are detectable in Elizabethan England at about the same time when Shakespeare was composing *Hamlet*. A good instance of this can be seen in one of the Queen's portraits by Marc Gheeraerts the Elder, where a rather aged version of the sovereign is painted in the company of a skeleton flashing an hourglass[16].

treatment of death is also provided by Anna Anzi in her study on Shakespeare and the visual arts. In the Middle Ages, "the idea of our latter end is the source of fears and anxieties that can only be fought by means of faith and prayer"; during the Renaissance, conversely, "man's relationship with death starts to evolve […]. Thanks to Seneca, an attitude of defiance but also of serenity and maturity [towards death] is common among Elizabethan authors" (Anna Anzi, *Shakespeare e le arti figurative*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1998, p. 49).

14 The term 'vanity' has its etymology in the Latin word *vanitas*, *vanitatis*, whence the adjective *vanus*, namely 'empty', 'without substance'. See Luigi Castiglioni and Scevola Mariotti, eds, *Il vocabolario della lingua latina*, Torino, Loescher, 2007, p. 1480. The concept of impermanence is possibly even better expressed through the meaning of the original Hebrew term behind 'vanity', that is 'hebel' (הֶבֶל), which can be translated as 'smoke', 'vapour' or 'breath'. See Luisa Scalabroni, *"Vanitas". Fisionomia di un tema pittorico*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso, 1999, p. 17.

15 "It was during the latter half of the twenties that *vanitas*-paintings gained wider popularity. This might reasonably be connected also with the outcome of the Twelve Years' Truce in 1621, after which Holland was once again racked with the horrors of war" (Ingvar Bergström, *Dutch Still-life Painting in the Seventeenth Century*, New York, Hacker Art Books, 1983, p. 158).

16 See Roland Mushat Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet: Issues and Responses in 1600*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 212.

Plate 1. Marc Gheeraerts the Elder, Elizabeth I with Time and Death. *C. 1600. Corsham Court, Wiltshire. Private collection*

The peculiarity of *vanitas* paintings lies in the deployment of a vast array of objects that, gathered around a skull, point to the hollowness of worldly goods in the face of death[17]. Ingvar Bergström has theorised a tripartite classification of these objects[18]: the second of the three categories – i.e. the one that encompasses symbols of the relentless passing of time – bears some resemblance to Shakespeare's symbolism of death in both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. With a view to demonstrating the existence of a correlation between the narrative structure of these two plays and their being imbued with a *memento mori* iconography, each of the following sections will be devoted to

[17] Bernard Lamblin's definition of *vanitas* is that of a "painting of objects that are chosen and arranged so as to deliver to the beholder, by means of their symbolic meaning, a moral lesson: the vanity of an existence focused on worldly goods". See Bernard Lamblin, "Vanitas, la symbolique de l'objet", *Revue d'Esthétique*, 3-4 (1979), p. 198, quoted in Katerine Lanini, *Dire la vanité à l'âge classique. Paradoxes d'un discours*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2006, p. 68.

[18] See Bergström, p. 154.

the analysis of three elements belonging to the aforesaid category: candles, skulls and withering flowers.

Before investigating the specifics of how Shakespeare's iconographic universe blends with his dramatic art, it is useful to introduce the notion of 'preparation', a sort of "gradual working towards a catastrophe"[19] which, spanning the five acts, constitutes the backbone of the two tragedies under scrutiny in terms of narrative technique. John Dover Wilson defines, not without reason, this device as one of "progressive revelation"[20]. In this sense, Shakespeare's masterful and yet subtle interspersion of premonitory elements – "prophetic hints concealed in imagery", as Clemen has it[21] – throughout *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* allows for an empowerment on the part of the audience, since it involves the use of symbolic images that indirectly unfold details concerning further plot developments. In other words, if correctly interpreted, these signals are meant to 'prepare' the reader or the spectator for what will ensue. Although the audience theoretically "possesses knowledge which is superior to that shared by the main character"[22], foreshadowing hints can sometimes actually be grasped only when the occurrence they foreshadow is revealed, or even when 'having a glance' at the play in its entirety with the benefit of hindsight[23].

By virtue of this necessity to conceive of a play in terms of a unity rather than as a sequence of separate acts, Wilson Knight puts forward a sort of rule of thumb for an interpretation of Shakespearean tragedies:

19 Wolfgang Clemen, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Art: Collected Essays*, London, Methuen, 1972, p. 1.

20 John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1951 (1st edition 1935), p. 231.

21 Clemen, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Art*, p. 1.

22 Clemen, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Art*, p. 5.

23 "Hints [that] can be only taken up by one familiar with the play as a whole are introduced, hints that do not in themselves arouse curiosity or anticipation but which will rather serve as an unconscious preparation". See Marco Mincoff, "The Structural Pattern of Shakespeare's Tragedies", *Shakespeare Survey*, 3 (1950), p. 60.

> To receive the whole Shakespearian vision within the intellectual consciousness demands a certain and very definite act of mind. One must be prepared to see the whole play in space as well as in time.[24]

Two renowned lines from Horace's *Epistle to the Pisos* (better known under the title of *Ars Poetica*) can function as a conclusion to this introductory section and might help to interpret a theatrical work in the guise of an 'impressionist' painting prompting the beholder to look at it from a certain distance in order to grasp its details[25]:

> A poesie is picture lyke, the which if thou stande nere,
> Delytes the much: sum picture more if further of thou were.
> (ll. 361-62)[26]

Sleep, candles and lead as deadly premonitions
"The sleeping and the dead / Are but as pictures"

The analogy between Sleep and Death has constituted a *topos* in the literary as well as in the artistic Western tradition[27]. Their relationship is continuously underlined throughout the *Iliad*[28], where

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24 G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy*, London-New York, Routledge, 2001 (1st edition 1930), p. 3.

25 The following quotation of Horace's *Ars Poetica* is derived from an English translation of this work by Thomas Drant, published in England as early as 1567. See Fred Schurink, "Drant, Thomas", in Sullivan and Stewart, vol. I, pp. 290-92. Other English specimens include a rendition of Horace's work issued by Ben Jonson in the early seventeenth century. See Burrow, p. 18.

26 "Ut pictura poesis: erit quae, si propius stes, / te capiat magis, et quaedam, si longius abstes" (Horace, "Of the Art of Poetrie", in *Horace: His Arte of Poetrie, Pistles, and Satyrs Englished, and to the Earle of Ormounte by Tho. Drant Addressed*, trans. Thomas Drant, London, Thomas Marshe, 1567, San Marino, Ca., The Huntington Library, STC 13797, f. 12*v*).

27 "Th[e] conception of death as a sleep occurs, although not as frequently as we are inclined to think, in pre-Christian Greek and Latin literature, appearing as early as Homer" (Marbury Bladen Ogle, "The Sleep of Death", *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 11, 1933, p. 81).

28 An analysis of Homer's epic poem has shown that the depiction of Sleep as Death's counterpart appears on a total of six occasions in the work, four of which deal with Death and Sleep as personified deities, the other two being rather oblique references, since sleep is no longer a divinity but a mere metaphor for 'death'. See Marcello Zanatta, "Immagini della morte in Omero", in *Homo Moriens. Ermeneutiche della morte*

they are depicted in the guise of two twin brothers[29], emissaries of peace and rest, thus projecting a perception of death as an almost comforting condition[30].

When it comes to identifying the source of Shakespeare's 'sleep of death' theme, critics agree that John Dolman's 1561 English translation of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* represents the most likely candidate[31]. Following the Epicurean train of thought according to which the end of one's life shall not be feared, for it is but absence of bodily sensation[32], the Roman orator draws a parallel between eternal rest and daily rest – experienced regularly – and reflects on how both states come as a relief from life itself:

> The nature of al things is such, as our byrth, is the originall cause and beginnynge of all those thynges whyche we have, so in likewyse oure deathe is the ende of the same: the payne of which, as it did nothinge pertayne unto us, afore our lyfe, so neyther shal it after our death. […]

da Omero a oggi, ed. Marcello Zanatta, Cosenza, Luigi Pellegrini Editore, 2006, especially pp. 86-106.

29 In classical imagery, Sleep and Death share a close family link, for both stemmed from the union of Night and Erebus, as recounted by Hesiod in his philosophical myth of creation: "Night bore loathsome Doom and black Fate and Death, / and she bore Sleep, and she gave birth to the tribe of Dreams", *Theogony*, ll. 211-12. See Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, ed. and trans. Glenn Warren W. Most, The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass.-London, Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 21. See also Robert Graves, *I miti greci*, trans. Elisa Morpurgo, Milano, Longanesi, 1981 (1st edition 1955), p. 27, and Robin Hard, *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology: Based on H. J. Rose's "Handbook of Greek Mythology"*, London-New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 27.

30 In the *Iliad*, Sleep is described as νήδυμον and γλυκύς (both adjectives meaning 'sweet') in two episodes concerning respectively Sarpedon's death and Patroclus' funeral: "but when his soul and life have left him, then send thou Death and sweet Sleep to bear him away" (*Iliad*, XVI.453-55); "the son of Peleus withdrew apart from the burning pyre, and laid him down sore-wearied; and sweet sleep leapt upon him" (XIII.230-32). See Homer, *The Iliad*, ed. Augustus Taber Murray, The Loeb Classical Library, London-New York, Heinemann, 1924, 2 vols, vol. II, pp. 199, 511.

31 See Stuart Gillespie, *Shakespeare's Books: A Dictionary of Shakespeare Sources*, London-New Brunswick, The Athlone Press, 2001, pp. 110-11. See also S. Viswanathan, "Sleep and Death: The Twins in Shakespeare", *Comparative Drama*, 13:1 (Spring 1979), p. 49.

32 "[Y]ou should accustom yourself to believing that death means nothing to us, since every good and every evil lies in sensation; but death is the privation of sensation […]. This, the most horrifying of evils, means nothing to us, then, because so long as we are existent death is not present and whenever it is present we are non-existent" (*Epistula ad Menœceum*, 125). See Epicurus, *The Art of Happiness*, eds George K. Strodach and Daniel Klein, New York, Penguin, 2012, pp. 156-57.

> Wherefore they which wil speake truly of the nature of death, do terme it a sleepe […]. So here you have slepe the ymage of our deathe, whyche you do dayly put uppon you: and do you doubte whether there be anye feelynge in death, since in the ymage and pycture of the same, there is none at al. (*Tusculanæ Disputationes*, I.91-92)[33]

Such a reassuring conception of sleep as a reprieve from pain, or even the transfiguration of a dead body into a thing of beauty, as with Cleopatra ("[S]he looks like sleep, / As she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace", *Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.344-46), is however not always applicable to the dramatic action of Shakespearean tragedy. If on the one hand Macbeth names sleep "innocent […] / [b]alm of hurt minds [and] / [c]hief nourisher in life's feast" (II.ii.34-39)[34], on the other hand, these words are pronounced at a moment when sleep acquires a rather sombre connotation. It is indeed by means of sleep that death sneaks into the play, since slumber becomes the 'place' where murder is perpetrated. Lady Macbeth plans to put an end to Duncan's life "[w]hen [he] is asleep" and to have his chamberlains slaughtered "[w]hen in swinish sleep / Their drenched nature lies as in a death" (I.vii.62-69). In the same way, upon disclosing perturbing truths as to the dynamics of his assassination, King Hamlet's ghost claims to have been poisoned while "sleeping in [his] orchard" (I.v.35).

In *Macbeth*, the "figurative link"[35] between sleep and death goes hand in hand with the depiction of the brevity of man's life by means of a candle, and both function as a structural device that abides by the above-mentioned technique of 'preparation'. The second act of the tragedy opens at night, with Banquo and his son Fleance holding converse just before Duncan's regicide. When the former gives voice to his inner turmoil, words that will prove to be staggeringly prophetic are spoken:

BANQUO

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33 Cicero, *Those Fyue Questions, Which Marke Tullye Cicero, Disputed in His Manor of Tusculanum*, ed. John Dolman, London, Thomas Marshe, 1561, San Marino, Ca., The Huntington Library, STC 5317, ff. G.iii*v*-G.iv*v*.

34 All quotations from *Macbeth* are drawn from William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir, London, Arden Shakespeare, 1991 (1st edition 1951).

35 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Albert R. Braunmuller, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 136, n. 68.

> There's husbandry in heaven,
> Their *candles are all out*. […]
> A heavy *summons lies like lead* upon me,
> And yet *I would not sleep*.
> (*Macbeth*, II.i.4-7, my emphases)

Images pertaining to the iconography of death are here unconsciously produced by Banquo and quite consciously – but, above all, adroitly – used by Shakespeare to pave the way for events occurring later on in the play, more specifically in Act III, scene iii. First of all, in order to verbally depict the lightless sky, his choice falls on a metonymy by which the stars are presented as "candles [that] are all out". Conventionally, the symbolism of the candle is metaphorically meant to exemplify human life which is as brief and evanescent as a candleflame[36]. Through Banquo's words, the iconographic overtone acquires a new layer of significance in terms of dramatic technique: what before was verbal speculation is then materially concretised some five hundred lines below, in the staging of Banquo's murder. Indeed, a stage direction informs us that "Banquo and Fleance [enter], with a torch" that the first murderer "strikes out" while the other two commit the crime (III.iii.14-18). The action is perfectly timed: the flame of Banquo's life is extinguished the moment the torchlight is put out. Thus, the iconic effect of the murderers' gestures is not merely verbal but also physical – or, better, visual – and it stands for "the realization of [a] metaphorical world in the action of the play"[37].

Pictorially speaking, the act of snuffing the flame of mortal life appears to be a 'prerogative' of rotting corpses, as is testified by both an engraving in Francis Quarles' 1638 *Hieroglyphikes of the Life of Man*

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36 The image of a candle as a symbol of the brevity of human life is both of biblical and classical derivation: "the light of the wicked shall be put out, and the spark of his fire shall not shine. The light shall be dark in his tabernacle, and his candle shall be put out with him" (Job 18.5-6); "Mortal beings did not leave with lamentations the sweet light of life in greater numbers then than now" (*De rerum natura*, V.988-90). See Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, ed. Martin Ferguson Smith, Indianapolis-Cambridge, Hackett Publishing, 2001 (1st edition 1969), p. 163. See also John Erskine Hankins, *Shakespeare's Derived Imagery*, Lawrence, Kansas, University of Kansas Press, 1953, pp. 41-52.

37 Alan S. Downer, "The Life of Our Design: The Function of Imagery in the Poetic Drama", in *Modern Shakespearean Criticism: Essays on Style, Dramaturgy, and the Major Plays*, ed. Alvin B. Kernan, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970, p. 41.

and a painting entitled *In Ictu Oculi* by the Sevillian artist Juan de Valdés Leal[38]. In addition to these two examples, it is worth mentioning a majestic specimen of a mid-seventeenth-century *vanitas* still-life attributed to the Flemish painter Carstian Luyckx. In the foreground, a chaotic heap of objects has ruinously fallen to the ground, while, still wrapped in its shroud, a full-length skeleton leans to blow out a candle with its bare phalanges. The gesture is extremely subtle: despite its camouflaging in the noisy ensemble of earthly goods and human remains, being located at the very heart of the canvas, the extinguished taper encompasses the entire *memento mori* warning that the picture conveys.

Plate 2. Carstian Luyckx, Memento Mori Still Life with Musical Instruments, Books, Sheet Music, Skeleton, Skull and Armour. *C. 1650. Oil on canvas, 73.5 × 92.5 cm. Private collection*

Candles are also to be found in close connection with the 'sleep of death' motif in the eighty-second plate of George Wither's 1635

[38] A candle figures as the protagonist in Quarles' short series of emblems. In one of the plates, Father Time is portrayed in the act of putting an arm around a skeleton's shoulder, which is about to extinguish a taper with a candle snuffer. As explained in the written dialogue accompanying the image, the two characters are quarrelling over Time's reluctance to indulge Death's swiftness in putting an end to human existence. See Francis Quarles, *Hieroglyphikes of the Life of Man*, London, printed by M. Flesher for Iohn Marriot, 1638, London, British Library, General Reference Collection 1077.c.5, p. 22.

Collection of Emblemes[39]. An epigram equating death with "*one* long Sleepe" and life with a "short Watch, *an hour before*" crowns the body of the said emblem, as a sort of translation of the Latin motto "VITA MORTALIVM VIGILIA" ('The life of mortals is a watch'). The *tondo* opens onto an indoor scene where a taper and an hourglass – typical symbols of the passing of time – are placed next to a *putto* holding a book open at a page where "DISCE MORI" ('Learn to die'[40]) is inscribed.

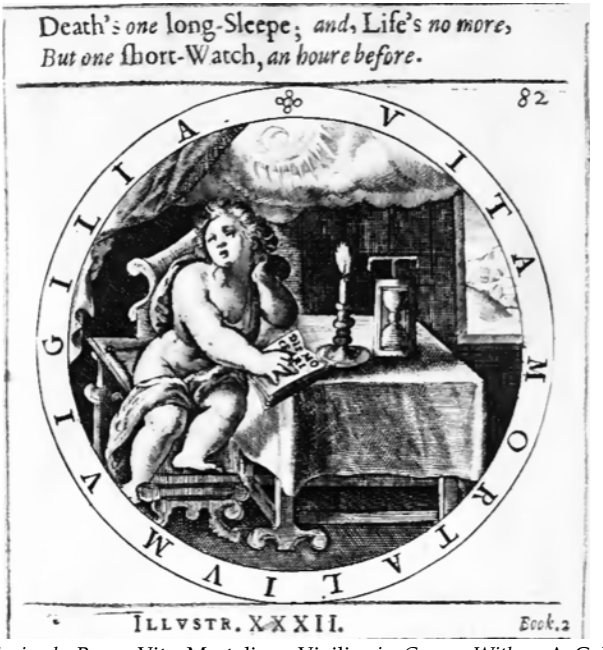

Plate 3. Crispin de Passe, Vita Mortalium Vigilia*, in George Wither*, A Collection of Emblemes*, London, 1635, Book II, Plate XXXIII*

Pursuing the analysis of the above-quoted passage from *Macbeth*, a second issue is Banquo's perception of sleep, which, in his own words, seems to be turned into an almost tangible and ominous

[39] See George Wither, *A Collection of Emblemes*, ed. Michael Bath, Aldershot, Scolar Press, 1989, p. 94.

[40] The stoic teaching was early developed by Seneca, who states that "one must spend an entire lifetime in learning how to live, and […] an entire lifetime in learning how to die" (*De Brevitate Vitæ*, X.vii). See Seneca, "On the Shortness of Life", in *Dialogues and Essays*, eds John Davie and Tobias Reinhardt, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 146.

presence looming over him, whose oppressive physicality is felt as a "heavy summons [that] lies like lead" (II.i.6). In Shakespeare, the noun 'lead' and its derivative adjective 'leaden' are often attributed to 'sleep', in a way that would, once more, highlight its conceptual association with death. Lead, indeed, was the metal with which coffins were lined[41]. In *Julius Caesar*, a similarly dismal image is evoked by Brutus when he directly addresses Sleep[42] as follows:

> BRUTUS
> O murd'rous slumber,
> Layest thou thy *leaden mace* upon my boy,
> That plays thee music? Gentle knave, good night.
> (*Julius Caesar*, IV.iii.265-67, my emphasis)[43]

In order to portray Lucius on falling asleep, Brutus gives slumber the shape of a "murd'rous" entity equipped with a "leaden mace" that is about to fall on the boy. By providing a verbal depiction of Sleep in the likeness of a heinous slaughterer, Shakespeare manifestly weaves a visual bond between sleep and death, which is obliquely reiterated

41 Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007 (1st edition 1999), p. 110. See also Antony's last words to Cleopatra before dying: "Love, I am full of lead" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, III.xi.73). The same sort of juxtaposition of lead and death is hinted at in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. On four occasions in the novel, the sound of the passage of time (embodied by both the Big Ben and Clarissa's clock) is concretely visualized by the image of some "leaden circles dissolv[ing] in the air". The last of these four occurrences is specifically tied to the protagonist's meditation upon Septimus's suicide: "The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three […]. The leaden circles dissolved in the air". See Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. David Bradshaw, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 4, 41, 80, 158. As far as classical literature is concerned, the use of metal metaphors with reference to sleep is not uncommon either: "Agamemnon seized the spear in his hand and drew it toward him furiously like a lion, and pulled it from the hand of Iphidamas, and smote him on the neck with his sword and loosed his limbs. So there he fell, and slept a sleep of bronze" (*Iliad*, XI.238-42). See Homer, vol. I, p. 499.

42 In a chapter dealing entirely with a comparative analysis of *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, Wilson Knight notes that "[s]leep imagery is recurrent in the Brutus-theme and in *Macbeth* to an extent paralleled in no other of Shakespeare's tragedies" (Wilson Knight, p. 144).

43 All quotations from *Julius Caesar* are drawn from William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. John Dover Wilson, The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009 (1st edition 1949).

if we consider that, in a matter of a few lines, the stage directions will announce the appearance of Caesar's ghost (IV.iii.272). In the same way, Banquo does not merely lament an "innocent" sleepiness but a deadly torpor which, being described as a palpable presence hovering over his body, carries a truly menacing feeling with it, almost one of foreboding. Besides, the presentiment that Banquo's momentary drowsiness will soon evolve into a perennial sleep of death is also craftily suggested in the third scene of the same act. Upon discovering Duncan's corpse and in an attempt to raise the alarm, Macduff bids Banquo to "[s]hake off this downy sleep, death's counterfeit / And look on death itself" (II.iii.76-77). Being addressed to Banquo, such an exhortation could not have sounded more prophetic.

Another Shakespearean opening endowed with an indisputable and yet cunningly concealed premonitory power is in *Hamlet*, I.iii. One of the numerous deaths in the play is implicitly announced at the very beginning of the tragedy:

> LAERTES
> My necessaries are embarked. *Farewell*.
> And, sister, as the winds give benefit,
> And convoy is assistant, *do not sleep*,
> But let me hear from you.
> (*Hamlet*, I.iii.1-4, my emphases)

Given the imminent departure for his French sojourn, Laertes' speech might well be interpreted exactly for what it is: a request from a caring brother to receive news of his sister. Were it not that, even a seemingly irrelevant scene offers the playwright a perfect opportunity to put his fatal technique of preparation into practice by turning an affectionate brother into yet another unaware 'prophet of death'. Placed in the middle of the first act, Laertes' "do not sleep" is an eerie and bitterly ironic warning, to be compared with Ophelia's

repeated 'goodnight'[44] in Act IV, shortly before she is found eternally asleep in the bed of a river[45].

Since *Hamlet* appears to be fairly pervaded by the sleep of death imagery[46], even the characters' 'goodnights' are possibly intended to sound outwardly harmless at the moment of utterance but tragically prophetical as the plot unfolds. For instance, Hamlet's speech to his mother, towards the ending of the closet scene, bears striking resemblance, in terms of repetition, to Ophelia's veiled *adieu* discussed above:

> HAMLET
> *Good night*. But go not to my uncle's bed.
> […] Once more *good night*,
> And when you are desirous to be blessed,
> I'll blessing beg of you. […]
> So, again, *good night*.
> I must be cruel only to be kind.
> (*Hamlet*, III.iv.161, 172-73, 179-80, my emphases)

From Laertes' prophetic reminder to his sister, to Hamlet's and Ophelia's 'goodnights', the overlapping of death and sleep represents a constant resurfacing act by act. Such a conceptual ambivalence peaks in "the sentence that the Prince addresses to his beloved Horatio before dying [which] may mean 'the rest is silence' but also 'the rest (i.e. death) is silence'"[47]. Thus, the long series of

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44 Ophelia addresses the following words to Gertrude, Horatio and Claudius, witnesses of her folly: "I hope all will be well. We must be patient. But I / cannot choose but weep to think they would lay / him i'th'cold ground. […] / Come, / my coach. Good night ladies, good night. Sweet / ladies, good night, good night" (IV.v.68-70, 71-73).

45 Laertes will be informed of the circumstances surrounding Ophelia's death by Gertrude: "Your sister's drowned, Laertes / […] down her weedy trophies and herself / Fell in the weeping brook […] / her garments, heavy with their drink, / Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay / To muddy death" (IV.vii.162, 172-73, 179-81).

46 "To die, to sleep; / To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub: / For in that sleep of death what dreams may come" (III.i.64-66). Besides death and sleep being equated with one another in Shakespeare's celebrated monologue, their identity is likewise expressed in one of Hamlet's meditations on human transience, which springs from the Prince's beholding Fortinbras' army marching by: "to my shame I see / The imminent death of twenty thousand men, / That for a fantasy and trick of fame / Go to their graves like beds" (IV.iv.58-61).

47 Milena Romero Allué, "'La Monna Lisa della letteratura'. Il Sonetto 20 di Shakespeare e Hamlet", in *Lingua, letteratura e umanità. Studi offerti dagli amici ad Antonio Daniele*, eds

premonitory hints comes full circle the moment Hamlet is saluted with the self-same words he had pronounced to his mother, namely 'good night'.

The analogy of sleep and death has been majestically captured on canvas by Spanish painter Antonio de Pereda y Salgado in his 1670 *El sueño del caballero* ('The Knight's Dream'), one of the best-known examples of baroque *desengaños*[48]. Playing on the double meaning attached to the term 'sueño'[49], Pereda's *vanitas* depicts a young nobleman presented with death while being fast asleep. An angel – which is painted in the act of visiting the knight in his dream – carries a scroll on which the following *memento mori* message is inscribed: "ÆTERNE PVNGIT CITO VOLAT ET OCCIDIT" ('Constantly it stings, speedily it passeth away and it kills'). Both the beholder and the protagonist of the picture are therefore provided with a moralising admonishment via traditional *vanitas* iconography – comprising material goods surrounded by two skulls[50] – which goes hand in hand with the concept of Time's swift passage as illustrated by the winged figure.

Vittorio Formentin, Silvia Contarini, Francesco Rognoni, Milena Romero Allué and Rodolfo Zucco, Padova, CLEUP, 2016, p. 235.

48 Spanish *vanitas* still-lives are usually called by this term, which means 'disillusion'. Indeed, this category of paintings is a visual translation of a typically baroque concept according to which the attachment to worldly goods is but an illusionary dream, hence the question whether sleep or wakefulness is closer to reality. See Enrica Zaira Merlo, "La morte e il disinganno. Itinerario iconografico e letterario nella Spagna cristiana", in *Humana fragilitas: i temi della morte in Europa tra Duecento e Settecento*, eds Pierroberto Scaramella and Alberto Tenenti, Clusone, Ferrari Editore, 2000, pp. 240-41. This notion is also embedded in both Shakespeare's last work and Pedro Calderón de la Barca's famous play *La vida es sueño*. Compare "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep" (*The Tempest*, IV.i.156-58) with "we live in a world so strange / That to live is only to dream. / He who lives, dreams his life/ Until he wakes. […] / The king dreams he is king, / And, under that delusion, / He orders, rules, disposes, / Until all the applause / That is only lent to him / Is scattered on the winds, / And death turns him to ashes. […] / Who would wish to be king, / Knowing that he must wake / From his dream in the sleep of death?" (*La vida es sueño*, II.xvii.2152-54, 2156-67). See Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *Life's a Dream: A Play in Three Acts*, eds Kathleen Raine and R. M. Nadal, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1968, p. 74.

49 This Spanish word translates both the English 'sleep' and 'dream'. See *Diccionario de la lengua espanõla*, Madrid, Real Academia Espanõla, 2014, pp. 2050-51.

50 For further information concerning the symbolism underlying the objects in Pereda's painting, see Alfonso Emilio Pérez Sánchez, *Pintura Española de Bodegones y Floreros de 1600 a Goya*, Madrid, Ministerio de Cultura, Dirección General de Bellas Artes y Archivos, 1983, pp. 110-11.

Plate 4. Antonio de Pereda y Salgado, El sueño del caballero. *C. 1670. Oil on canvas, 152 × 217 cm. Madrid (courtesy of Museo de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando)*

A tripartite medieval iconography of death: the Danse macabre, the Triumph of Death and the Legend of the Three Dead Kings

"Methinks their ghosts come gaping for revenge"

From an iconographic perspective, a skeleton haunting some church walls in southern Spain and the gravediggers at work in Elsinore's boneyard share the set of tools with which they are both visually and verbally depicted. Known by the title of 'pintor de los muertos' ('painter of the dead'), in 1670, Juan de Valdés y Leal produced a series of two *vanitas* named *Jeroglíficos de nuestras postrimerías* ('Hieroglyphs of our latter ends') that are nowadays hanging on the sidewalls, right at the entrance to the church of the Hermandad de la Santa Caridad in Seville[51]. In the first of these two paintings, entitled *In Ictu Oculi*[52], the character of Death appears in the form of a skeleton

51 Zaira Merlo, p. 244.

52 The Latin phrase – in English, 'in the blink of an eye' – is painted right above a candle that the skeleton is about to extinguish and it is a quotation from the New Testament: "Behold, I shew you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, […]

dragging a shrouded coffin underarm, while menacingly pointing its scythe towards the beholder. When Hamlet and Horatio make their entrance onstage in Act V, scene i, similar tools are proudly evoked as symbols of his profession by an undertaker, in a song 'gladdening' the bloodcurdling atmosphere of Elsinore's cemetery:

> GRAVEDIGGER
> A *pickaxe* and a spade, a *spade*,
> For and a *shrouding-sheet*,
> O a pit of clay for to be made
> For such a guest is meet.
> (*Hamlet*, V.i.91-94, my emphases)

There have been numerous studies tracing the iconographical source of *Hamlet*'s graveyard scene to the medieval motif of the *danse macabre*[53], a fourteenth-century ancestor of *vanitas* paintings. To this end, it is crucial to highlight the Bard's choice to have his parade of death opened by the characters of two gravediggers[54]. It has been argued that the *danse macabre*[55] possibly stemmed from a concrete

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in the *twinkling of an eye*, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall all be changed. For this […] mortal must put on immortality" (1 Corinthians 15.51-55, my emphasis).

53 In depicting his own dance of death, Shakespeare strictly adheres not only to the iconography of this medieval artistic theme by providing a list of stock characters, but also to the ideological implications of the genre, concerning the reversal of the social hierarchies and the universality of death. A thorough analysis of the graveyard scene in *Hamlet* has been conducted by Anna Anzi, who brilliantly highlights the visual component in the Bard's verbal *danse macabre* by defining it as a "vasto affresco cimiteriale" ('broad cemetery fresco'). See Anzi, pp. 53-55. See also Margaret Milne Beck, "The Dance of Death in Shakespeare", *Modern Language Notes*, 37:6 (1922), pp. 372-74; Harry Morris, "*Hamlet* as a *Memento Mori* Poem", *PMLA*, 85:5 (1970), pp. 1035-40, and Bridget Gellert, "The Iconography of Melancholy in the Graveyard Scene of *Hamlet*", *Studies in Philology*, 67:1 (1970), pp. 57-66.

54 In highlighting the role of imagery in the construction of the graveyard scene, Alan Downer claims that "in *Hamlet*, the gravediggers belong to the plot, as well as to imagery" (Downer, p. 40).

55 The dance of death (or *danse macabre*) became a widespread artistic and literary phenomenon in late medieval and Renaissance Europe. In its original form, this theme portrayed a procession of living people embodying the representatives of every social rank, each of whom was accompanied by a corpse in an advanced stage of decomposition or a skeleton. What this representation sought to convey was a message of equality in the face of death: every participant to the dance was arranged in a hierarchical order and no one among the living could escape the rule of Death. See

practice in real life. Indeed, the term 'macabre' started being employed in fourteenth-century France and its etymology springs from the Hebrew word 'meqaber', 'he who buries', in other words, a gravedigger[56]. It is not a coincidence that in France, at about the same time the expression 'danse macabre' was coined, Jewish confraternities of gravediggers used to perform annually, on the anniversary of Moses' birth, a procession through graveyards.

Before demonstrating how the dramatic structure of both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* is pervaded with a typically medieval feeling for the macabre, it is vital to mention how the *danse* flowed into England, with particular emphasis on the issue of the sources that might have been known by Shakespeare. Besides the first English specimen of the dance of death – which unfortunately was destroyed fifteen years prior to the Shakespeare's birth[57] – skulls and skeletons appeared in the English pictorial *milieu* during the Tudors' reign. When an outbreak of iconoclasm hit his hometown, the Basel-based engraver Hans Holbein the Younger resolved to set sail for England in 1532, where he was hired as court painter by Henry VIII[58]. Holbein's masterpiece is certainly the life-size anamorphic portrait of two French ambassadors[59] with a skull at their feet. However, since it has been determined that the painting was kept from the public eye at

Alicia Faxon, "Some Perspectives on the Transformation of the Dance of Death in Art", in *The Symbolism of Vanitas in the Arts, Literature, and Music: Comparative and Historical Studies*, ed. Liana Cheney, Lewiston, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992, p. 33.

56 Robert Eisler, "Danse Macabre", *Traditio*, 6 (1948), p. 200.

57 By 1425, the graveyard of the Church of the Holy Innocents in Paris had become the seat of what is held as the first known *danse macabre* representation. Not earlier than 1430, a second specimen appeared in the north cloister of St Paul's Cathedral in London, 'imported' by the Benedictine monk John Lydgate who, in 1426, had the chance to visit the Parisian dance. In 1549, the Duke of Somerset "destroyed the building to use the stone for his own grand house". See Helen Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, Arden Critical Companions, London-New York, Bloomsbury, 2012 (1st edition 2010), p. 28. See also Elina Gertsman, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages. Image, Text, Performance*, Studies in Visual Cultures of the Middle Ages, Turnhout, Brepols, 2010, p. 3.

58 See Ulinka Rublack's critical commentary in Hans Holbein, *The Dance of Death*, ed. Ulinka Rublack, London, Penguin, 2016, p. 165.

59 It has been established that the two young men in Holbein's *The Ambassadors* are respectively Jean de Dinteville and George de Selve, both ambassadors at the English court during the year in which the painting was realized, i.e. 1533. See Mary Frederica Sophia Hervey, *Holbein's "Ambassadors": The Picture and the Men. An Historical Study*, London, George Bell and Sons, 1900, pp. 5-8.

least up to 1653[60], it is more likely for Shakespeare to have had direct contact with another among Holbein's works: *The Dance of Death*. Completed between 1523 and 1525, this series of forty-one woodcuts – in which animated skeletons pay a visit to every representative of the social hierarchy – might also have been observed on the walls of Whitehall before the fire of 1697. Evidence is provided in the opening of a seventeenth-century copy of Holbein's engravings by the amateur painter Nieuhoff Piccard:

> The costly palace of Whitehall […] contains […] a *Dance of Death*, painted by Holbein in its galleries, which, through an unfortunate conflagration, has been reduced to ashes; and even the little work which he has engraved with his own hand […] and which he himself had painted as large as life in fresco on the walls of Whitehall.[61]

Thus, it is not as far-fetched to spot a possible connection between one of Holbein's woodcuts and the banquet scene of *Macbeth*, and dwell once again on the 'preparation' of its tragic climax.

With a view to expanding Agostino Lombardo's statement that Act III, scene i is to be interpreted as an introductory phase to Banquo's death[62], I would additionally argue that the audience's being accustomed by degrees to death takes place even before the central act of the tragedy. The discovery of Duncan's lifeless body

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60 A seventeenth-century parchment manuscript reports that, after its creation, the portrait was placed by Jean de Dinteville in his private manor at Polisy, France: "in this picture is represented, life-size, Messire Jean de Dinteville chevalier Sieur de Polizy […] who was Ambassador in England for King Francis I in the years 1532 and 1533 […]. There is also represented in the said picture, Messire George de Selve […]; and they two having met in England an excellent Dutch painter, employed him to make this picture, which was carefully preserved at the said place, Polizy, up to the year 1653" (English translation from the French by Mary F. S. Hervey). This passage is quoted in Hervey, p. 12. Cf.: "[The picture] was undoubtedly placed by Dinteville in the castle of Polisy […] in a large hall, before a door and next to another exit, both of which corresponded to one of the two perspectives" (Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Anamorphoses ou Perspectives Curieuses*, Paris, Olivier Perrin, 1955, p. 65).

61 Quoted in Francis Douce, *The Dance of Death Exhibited in Elegant Engravings on Wood*, London, William Pickering, 1833, pp. 141-42.

62 "[W]hat will emerge from the scene is its preparatory quality to Banquo's murder". See Agostino Lombardo, *Lettura del* Macbeth, ed. Rosy Colombo, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2018 (1st edition 1969), p. 147.

prompts Macduff to utter words which appallingly fit the unfolding of the plot:

> MACDUFF
> Banquo and Donalbain! Malcolm, awake,
> Shake off this downy sleep, death's counterfeit,
> And look on death itself. Up, up, and see
> The great doom's image. Malcolm, Banquo,
> *As from your graves rise up and walk like sprites*
> To countenance this horror.
> (*Macbeth*, II.iii.75-80, my emphasis)

Macduff's inciting Banquo to rise from the sepulchre and walk like a ghost helps project – ahead of its actual staging – the ghastly sight of Macbeth's friend's future apparition in Act III, scene iv. Even more interestingly, in the scenes preceding the actual staging of the banquet, the characters' exchanges constantly reverberate with rumblings of the murder to come. When the newly elected king invites Banquo to a "solemn supper" (III.i.14), the farewell he addresses to his friend functions as a compelling example of a kind of irony that cannot immediately be processed, although it is rather frequent in the course of the play[63]:

> MACBETH
> Hie you to horse: adieu,
> Till you return at night.
> (*Macbeth*, III.i.34-35)

Regrettably for Macbeth, despite all the efforts to dispose of his comrade in arms, the wish that the latter could 'return at night' is soon to be granted, for the 'accident' with the three assassins will

[63] Arthur Quiller-Couch has provided quite an enlightening description of the use of irony in *Macbeth*: "usual tragic irony […] consists in making the protagonist utter words which […] convey to the audience (who know what he does not) a secondary, sinister, prophetic meaning. There is, to be sure, some of this traditional tragic irony in *Macbeth*: but its peculiar irony is retrospective rather than prophetic. It does not prepare the spectator for what is to come; but rather, when it comes, reminds him – as by an echo – that it has been coming all the while" (Arthur Quiller-Couch, *Notes On Shakespeare's Workmanship*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1917, p. 56).

technically constitute no hindrance for Banquo's taking part in the coronation feast.

As for Hans Holbein's *Dance of Death*, in one of the woodcuts, the character of the King agrees to be waited on by a skeleton which almost gives the impression to be playing the part of the servant. Despite such a debasement of his role, Death's rule over humanity is in no way undermined, since the bony fellow's hourglass – placed at the right end of the table – still preserves its function as a warning for the sovereign not to forget what human fate has in store for him, even at the climax of his power and wealth.

Plate 5. Hans Holbein the Younger, detail from The Dance of Death. *C. 1523-26. Woodcut, 6.5 × 4.9 cm. Washington, National Gallery of Art*

Translated for the first time into English by Barnabe Rich in 1584[64], Herodotus' *Histories* report a slightly horrifying ritual which was common practice in ancient Egyptian culture:

64 France, p. 383.

> The rych and wealthy men of the lande in greate assemblies haue an vsuall custome, that by some in the company there shoulde bee caryed aboute in a smale coffine the liuely & expresse image of a deade man […], which hauing shewne and reuealed to all that are presente, hee sayth thus: *Beholde here, and amiddest thy pleasure and delighte remember this, for such a one after thy death shalt thou bee thy selfe*. (*Historiae*, II.78)[65]

Although it is unclear whether Shakespeare was acquainted with the pages of the Greek historian, what is certain is that the *memento mori* essence displayed by the two above-illustrated examples of Death's barging in on a festive atmosphere is central in Shakespeare's banquet as well. Announced by the stage directions[66], Banquo's ghost makes its appearance onstage by occupying the King's place, as if to perform a silent declaration of royalty. Furthermore, a plausible link between the spectre and the iconography of the *danse macabre* is established through Macbeth's portrayal of his late friend's ghost:

> MACBETH
> Avaunt! And quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee!
> Thy *bones are marrowless*, thy blood is cold;
> Thou hast *no speculation in those eyes*
> Which thou dost glare with.
> (*Macbeth*, III.iv.92-95, my emphases)[67]

Rather than a ghost, this visible shape resembles a veritable skeleton. Faced with such an appalling sight, the newly appointed king cannot

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65 Herodotus, *The Famous Hystory of Herodotus, Conteyning the Discourse of Dyuers Countreys, the Succession of Theyr Kyngs, Etc. Deuided into Nine Bookes, Entituled with the Names of the Nine Muses*, ed. and trans. Barnabe Rich, London, Thomas Marshe, 1584, London, British Library, General Reference Collection 294.e.11, ff. 90*r*-91*v*. This macabre custom is also recorded in Petronius' *Satyricon*: "As we drank and admired each luxury in detail, a slave brought in a silver skeleton […] and Trimalchio said appropriately: 'Alas for us poor mortals, all that poor man is nothing. So we shall all be, after the world below takes us away'" (*Petronius, Satyricon. Seneca, Apocolocyntosis*, eds Michael Heseltine and William Henry Denham Rouse, The Loeb Classical Library, London, Heinemann; New York, Putnam, 1925, p. 53).

66 "[The ghost of Banquo enters, and sits in Macbeth's place]" (III.iv.40).

67 Macbeth's depiction of Banquo's ghost sounds somehow close to the portrayal of a cranium provided by John Skelton: "No man may him hide / From Death hollow-eyed / With sinews wyderëd / With bonës shyderëd" (ll. 10-13). See John Skelton, "Upon a Dead Man's Head", in *English Renaissance Poetry. A Collection of Shorter Poems from Skelton to Jonson*, ed. John Edward Williams, New York, Norton, 1974, p. 4.

but acknowledge the gruesome and discomforting truth of an upside-down reality in which the dead appear more alive than the living.

The fluid boundary between the living and the dead constitutes a major concern for Horatio as well, who, prompted by King Hamlet's nocturnal apparitions, delivers a speech concerning a series of supernatural phenomena forecasting Julius Caesar's assassination:

> HORATIO
> In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
> A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
> The graves stood *tenantless* and the *sheeted dead*
> Did *squeak* and *gibber* in the Roman streets
> […]
> And even the like *precurse of feared events*,
> As harbingers preceding still the fates
> And prologue to the *omen* coming on,
> Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
> Unto our climatures and countrymen.
> (*Hamlet*, I.i.115-19, 124-28, my emphases)

Horatio's claims, too, function as a forecast of what King Hamlet's ghost will reveal to his son in Act I, scene v: his slaughter at the hands of a traitor. As in Macbeth's portrayal of Banquo's ghost, Horatio's approach to mortality is rather medieval in nature, since it is characterized by an almost obsessive fear of the return of the dead. His use of the verb 'squeak', suggesting the image of bones rattling all through the Eternal City, also makes it clear that, rather than immaterial spirits, those in Horatio's tale are tangible corpses. The dead pouring into the streets with the living is marked by a smothering physicality. Such an idea is even better expressed by Calpurnia's speech to Caesar, of which Horatio's macabre account is a self-quotation of Shakespeare's[68]. What Horatio illustrates through

[68] "Caesar, I never stood on ceremonies, / Yet now they fright me. There is one within, / Besides the things that we have heard and seen, / Recounts most horrid sights seen by the watch. / A lioness hath whelped in the streets; / And graves have yawn'd, and yielded up their dead; / […] / The noise of battle hurtled in the air, / Horses did neigh, and dying men did groan, / And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets" (II.ii.13-16, 22-24). David Daniell makes this connection explicit in the commentary to the Arden edition of *Julius Caesar*: "the list of unsettling phenomena […] overlaps with

the verbal medium transcends both the iconography and the moralising teaching of the *danse macabre*: it can more properly be identified with the *motif* of the *Triumph of Death*[69] painted by the Dutch artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder:

Plate 6. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Triumph of Death. *C. 1562-63. Oil on panel, 117 × 162 cm. Madrid (courtesy of Museo del Prado)*

Bruegel's panel features an authentic crusade of the dead: troops of skeletons breach the scenery from the right-hand side of the picture while humankind, caught off-guard, cannot but bow to the onslaught that approaches from the netherworld. Therefore, by portraying skeletons in arms, Bruegel's *Triumph of Death* gives expression to the aggressiveness of the dead towards the living and presents itself as the visual translation of both Horatio's and Calpurnia's macabre accounts. It has been argued that traces of symbolism coming from Greek mythology can be spotted in the skeleton's cart that occupies

Horatio's account of the disturbances" (William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. David Daniell, London, Arden Shakespeare, 2016, 1st edition 1998, p. 219).

69 The iconography of the Triumph of Death originated from the Italian literary tradition and is to be found in Petrarch's *Trionfi*, written between 1352 and 1354. See Vovelle, p. 88, and Petrarch's *Triumphus Mortis* in Francesco Petrarca, *Rime e Trionfi*, ed. Ferdinando Neri, Classici Italiani, Torino, UTET, 1960 (1st edition 1953), pp. 556-58.

the left corner of the composition[70]. Painted right in front of Death's chariot, a woman in a red dress, holding a spindle and a pair of shears, is on the verge of cutting a thread as a horse ridden by a skeleton is about to crush her body. The woman's gesture evokes three mythological characters that in ancient Greek imagery had power over men's fate. Μοῖραι, indeed, were called those three goddesses that, depicted as spinners, would cut the thread which stood for the lifespan of a man, in order to spell the end of each individual.

When it comes to Shakespearean tragedy, an Elizabethan rendition of the three Μοῖραι is shown in the very opening of *Macbeth*'s initial act, as three witches enter the stage[71]. Besides classical mythology, a thorough perusal of the encounter between these three mysterious entities, on the one hand, and Banquo and Macbeth, on the other, reveals that the weïrd sisters might as well epitomize another Shakespearean expression of a macabre iconography akin to the *danse macabre*:

> BANQUO
> What are these,
> So *wither'd* and so wild in their attire
> That *look not like th'inhabitants o'th'earth*
> And yet are on't? *Live you*? Or are you aught
> That man may question? You seem to understand me
> By each at once her *choppy finger* laying
> Upon her *skinny lips*.
> (*Macbeth*, I.iii.39-45, my emphases)

Echoes of Horatio's bravely questioning the Ghost can be heard as Banquo interrogates the witches[72]: by his description of their aspect,

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70 Keith P. F. Moxey, "The Fates and Pieter Bruegel's Triumph of Death", *Oud Holland*, 87:1 (1973), pp. 49-51.

71 The term 'weïrd', with which Banquo describes the three old sisters in *Macbeth* (II.i.20) is a derivation of the Old English 'wyrd', which precisely bears the meaning of 'fate'. See Kenneth Muir's critical commentary in his edition of *Macbeth*, p. 14.

72 The way Banquo's being left unimpressed by the strange creatures parallels Horatio's attitude towards Old Hamlet's ghost has been commented as follows: "Banquo, his conscience untroubled, speaks at once and boldly, seeing foul as foul. The witches […] are not enough powerful to tempt him" (Roy Walker, *The Time Is Free: A Study of* Macbeth, London, Andrew Dakers, 1949, p. 12).

one may wonder if these beings can actually be identified as women, or even as 'living' beings. Their "wither'd" skin, their "choppy finger", their "skinny lips", let alone the fact that Banquo himself questions their being alive, suggest that these enigmatic characters show physical features similar to those of corpses or skeletons. If that were the case, *Macbeth*'s Act I, scene iii can be held as Shakespeare's 'paying homage' to another version of the medieval macabre: the *Dit des trois vifs et des trois morts* ('The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead'). Widespread in both the pictorial and the literary *milieu* of the Middle Ages, this theme originated in France in the thirteenth century but was adopted in England only two centuries later, thanks to a poem by John Audelay[73]. As the story goes, during a hunting trip, three young men bump into three corpses in various states of decay, a horrid reminder of what the three living ones shall become. With reference to *The Legend* as portrayed in *Macbeth*, almost everything seems to find correspondence with Audelay's narrative: the three withered women, Banquo and Macbeth on their homeward route from the battlefield and even the admonitory – or, better, premonitory – message. Indeed, as the second witch salutes Macbeth, the latter is appointed with the title of a soon-to-be-dead man – that of Thane of Cawdor – with whom the future King will share both his fate and his faults[74]. Moreover, the rhetorical structure of the weïrd sisters' salutation to Macbeth shows clear analogies with the closing scene of the tragedy:

> 1 WITCH
> All *hail*, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis.
> 2 WITCH
> All *hail*, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor.
> 3 WITCH
> All *hail*, Macbeth! That shalt be King hereafter.
> (*Macbeth*, I.iii.48-50, my emphases)

[73] See Maria Ghiraldo, "1350-1500: temi macabri e danze della morte nell'Inghilterra tardomedievale", in Scaramella and Tenenti, eds, pp. 197-200.

[74] Macdonald, Thane of Cawdor and usurper to Duncan's throne, will perish under Macbeth's sword, who severs his head (I.ii.16-23). As noted by Agostino Lombardo, the traitor's cranium is a telling example of the Shakespearean technique of preparation: a similar image occurs in the closing act of the play, but this time it is reserved for Macbeth himself (V.ix.20-24). See Lombardo, p. 37.

The word 'hail', thrice addressed by the witches to Macbeth, is eerily echoed – following the same pattern based on a threefold repetition – during the final entrance of Macbeth onstage in the guise of a severed head:

> MACDUFF
> *Hail*, King! For so thou art. Behold, where stands
> Th'usurper's *cursed head*: the time is free.
> […]
> *Hail*, King of Scotland!
> ALL
> *Hail*, King of Scotland!
> (*Macbeth*, V.ix.20-21, 25, my emphases)

Albeit rather obliquely, the protagonist's downfall is forecast from the very outset of the tragedy. In the light of the unfolding of the plot, the words uttered by Shakespeare's Μοῖραι act as a *memento mori* which works its way through the final stage, where it resonates louder than a death knell.

Conclusions: the completion of a Vanitas *of Shakespeare's own "With fairest flowers / […] / I'll sweeten thy sad grave"*

Throughout the present study, two of the elements constituting traditional *vanitas* iconography have been analysed in the light of Shakespearean tragedy: the figurative link between sleep and death (with its derived symbolism) and the macabre recurrence of elements coming from the grave (ghosts, skulls and corpses). Nonetheless, in order for the painting to be completed, one last brush stroke requires to be delivered in terms of flower symbolism.

The image of a rose serves a dual purpose: on the one hand, it embodies the apex of beauty and youth; on the other hand, it stands for the transience of human life[75]. It is not uncommon for a rose to

[75] See the entries "simboli della morte", "bocciolo di rosa appassito" and "rosa" in *Dizionario sinottico di iconologia*, eds Norma Cecchini and Giuseppe Plessi, Bologna, Pàtron, 1976, pp. 135, 453, 467. Shakespeare employs the rose iconography in both its implications. It appears alternately as the epitome of beauty and youth in the *Sonnets* (see: "From fairest creatures we desire increase, / That thereby beauty's rose might never die", I.1-2) and as an emblem of death in *Othello*, when, meditating upon

appear in the array of objects accompanying a skull in *vanitas* still-life paintings[76]. Indeed, in Pierio Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica*, the rose is listed among the simulacra of the "IMBECILLITAS HVMANA" ('human feebleness'):

> Such a flower, which is so charming, so sweet-smelling, so appealing to the eye is a hieroglyph of human fragility and the symbol of everything which swiftly vanishes, for its life is so brief and its beauty so ephemeral that in the very same day in which it blooms, it also withers and fades away.[77]

More in general, Shakespeare's use of floral emblems in the tragedies follows that self-same rule by which his other effigies of mortality abide, namely the technique of preparation. In the opening scene of *Julius Caesar*, the occurrence of "flowers" and "blood" in two adjacent lines makes up an association between nature and mortality:

> MARULLUS
> And do you now put on your best attire?
> And do you now cull out a holiday?
> And do you now strew *flowers* in his way
> That comes in triumph over Pompey's blood?
> (*Julius Caesar*, I.i.53-55, my emphasis)

carrying out Desdemona's homicide, the protagonist portrays his beloved in the guise of a rose: "when I have plucked the rose / I cannot give it vital growth again, / It needs must wither" (V.ii.13-15). This passage – along with many others – has been quoted by Caroline Spurgeon in a chapter devoted to Shakespeare's use of elements from the vegetable kingdom in order to metaphorically portray everything that concerns the human sphere (life, death, vices, female beauty and disease). See Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005 (1st edition 1935), pp. 86-92.

76 An example of this has already been provided by Carstian Luyckx' *Memento Mori*, where the skeleton tramples over some withered roses. See Plate 2.

77 "Quod flos is tam venustus, tam suaveolens, tam pulcher visu, tam suavi odore delectabilis, humanæ sit imbecillitatis hieroglyphicum, ac boni momentanei signum: tam brevis illa vita, tam caducus decor, ut quo die florens vigensq., enituerit, eodem ipso defloreat, & elanguescat" (Pierio Valeriano, *Hieroglyphica, sive, de sacris Ægyptiorum aliarumque gentium literis*, Basel, Michael Isengrin, 1556, Venezia, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana 86 D 90, p. 683).

Provided that the significance of floral iconography is known, when the act of strewing flowers is performed with reference to Caesar, the dictator's destiny can already be inferred before its actual fulfilment (III.i.77). As to the employment of flower images with the intent of conveying a *memento mori* message, in his edition of *Julius Caesar*, David Daniell does not fail to connect the Roman tragedy to *Hamlet*[78]. In this regard, besides defining Hamlet a "rose of the fair state" (III.i.154) – which, as such, is bound to wither – Ophelia's use of flowers is not only metaphorical but also prophetically material, as the flowers she distributes in IV.v.178-83[79] are once again evoked in Gertrude's account of the girl's death:

> GERTRUDE
> Fantastic garlands did she make,
> Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples
> […]
> Down her weedy trophies and herself
> Fell in the weeping brook.
> (*Hamlet*, IV.vii.167-68, 173-74)

Sleep, candles, skulls, rotten corpses and flowers are all images through which the concept of man's transitory existence is manifestly conveyed. They all play a consistent role in Shakespearean imagery not only for their symbolic implication but more especially for their dramatic function in the tragic framework. One may hazard a pictorial reading of the two plays investigated so far. The communicative power of *vanitas* still-life paintings can be broken down to two components: a visual one, represented by the items constituting the iconographic texture, and an ideological one, rooted in the composition as a whole, conveying the vanity of earthly things. By means of his dramatic art, Shakespeare paints a 'verbal *vanitas*' of

78 See David Daniell's critical analysis in Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, p. 160.

79 "There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, / and here's some for me; we may call it herb of grace a Sundays. / Oh you must wear your rue with a difference. There's a *daisy*. I / would give you some *violets*, but they *withered all when my father / died*. They say a made a good end" (my emphases). The symbolism attached to each individual plant or flower that Ophelia distributes is discussed at length in *Shakespeare's Plants and Gardens. A Dictionary*, eds Vivian Thomas and Nicki Faircloth, Arden Shakespeare Dictionaries, London, Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 100-1, 123-25, 229, 347-49.

his own. For, in addition to preserving their visual impact on the reader, emblems of death in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* also serve a certain premonitory purpose which is shared with *vanitas* paintings.

In conclusion, one last quality links Shakespearean tragedy to the *vanitas* genre. To the beholder an hourglass is simply an hourglass; however, if combined with a grinning cranium, the seemingly innocuous timepiece acquires new meanings. In the same way, as far as a study in dramatic imagery is concerned, it may be more helpful not to peruse each single act as embodying a small detail of a bigger picture. Reading *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* as "living organism[s] of which all parts are interrelated"[80] allows for the appreciation of the quintessence of Shakespeare's dramaturgy: the obsessive recurrence of effigies of decay that weaves a web of cross-references foreshadowing the protagonists' ineluctable fate and enacting the vanity of human wishes. At first glance, this peculiarity may escape attention; in retrospect, however, the intimations of death that resurface in the language channel the feeling that Shakespearean characters die a slow and gradual death, one that is repeatedly announced yet never fully acknowledged until it is made actual.

[80] Clemen, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Art*, p. 9.