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A Nakedness Rejected: Inverting Paradigms of Sovereignty between *Breaking Bad* and *Macbeth*

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The present essay traces the intertextual relationship between *Breaking Bad* and *Macbeth* looking at two main areas of structural correspondence. The first one consists in issues of rhythm, pace, and textual overlapping, with regard to which specific attention is given to scenes from the TV series that echo moments in the Shakespearean tragedy. The second area of analysis is constituted by the focus both works bring on the question of sovereign power. Through the lens offered by Agamben's theory of the perturbing similarities between the structural positioning of the sovereign and the homo sacer at the margin of the law, the article looks at Macbeth's and Walter White's respective parabolas as attempts to attain sovereign power, while at the same time rejecting the inevitable implications such positioning brings with it.

Keywords: *Breaking Bad*, *Macbeth*, Walter White, Power, Sovereignty, Rhythm, Diegesis, Sleep

Comparisons between contemporary U.S. TV series and Shakespeare's theatre have been circulated repeatedly at the level of journalism and specialized websites, especially with reference to productions belonging to the so-called Platinum Age of U.S. television. Typically, an article, blog entry, or forum thread advancing such parallel offers insights into how a certain TV show rewrites the characters or re-elaborates the themes of a specific play, claiming that knowledge of the Shakespearean text allows a fuller understanding of the series. The relationship of intertextuality thus propounded functions to further promote the cultural prestige currently attached to so-called 'quality' TV series, conferring on them the same aura of high culture and universalistic

reach we typically see associated to Shakespeare's works. At the same time, since the insights into the workings of the human soul provided by his verses keep speaking to audiences today, often under the guise of apparently unrelated narratives, it reinforces the idea that all human experience has been effectively and lastingly captured by the Bard and indeed no story can be told that is, after him, totally original.

Breaking Bad is no exception in this sense. Starting off as an average performing series in terms of ratings in 2008, the AMC creature by Vince Gilligan raised to the status of cult TV over the course of its five seasons, and by the time its final episode aired in 2013 it was hailed as one of the highest achievements in the genre, lauded for its writing, acting, cinematography, and even soundtrack. At its most basic, *Breaking Bad* can be described as the story of how, following a diagnosis of terminal lung cancer, non-descript, mild-mannered, and terribly frustrated high-school chemistry teacher Walter White (Bryan Cranston) from Albuquerque (New Mexico) turns into the most feared drug kingpin of the U.S. Southwest border region, fights to defend his dominant position against both the other big shots in the drug trade and the DEA, and stays unrepentant until his death, despite the decline of his empire and the tragic impact of his choices on his family and loved ones. It is around the time when the final season aired, and with a certain sustained recurrence over the following years, that the connection between *Breaking Bad* and Shakespeare, and more specifically *Macbeth*, is advanced by commentators of the series at different levels, from journalistic reviews to scholarly publications[1].

Indeed, the similarities are striking, making the comparison almost unavoidable: both *Breaking Bad* and *Macbeth* bring the audience in close contact with the appalling and seemingly unstoppable spiral of violence and crime in which the main character is precipitated as a consequence of his ambition and thirst for power. The goriness of repeated bloodshed, an absence of remorse that signals the full embracing of evil over good, the

[1] See, among others, Bossert 2012; Gualtieri 2013; Brown 2013; Bellis 2013; NerdcoreMovement 2013; Cantor 2019; Chisum 2019.

obsession with preserving the power conquered at the cost of turning one's back to the community's shared moral values, the increasing and eventually utter isolation of the protagonist are all elements common to both narratives and thus actively suggesting a parallel between the two that is picked up not only by TV pundits, but also by Shakespeare's scholars and, more generally, specialists. Director Jack O'Brien, for example, interviewed by *Variety* about the Broadway debut of his production of *Macbeth*, called the latter "the original template for *Braking Bad*" (Setoodeh 2013). But what is meant by "the original template"? To put it in the words of Shakespeare's scholar Ray Bossert: "Among Shakespeare's 'breaking bad' characters, Macbeth's internal mind – guilt-ridden, insecure in its masculinity, and thoroughly preoccupied with patriarchal duties – will most help us understand why we believe in Walter White as a character" (Bossert 2012, 67). Paul Cantor says something similar when, advancing the idea that "we have to analyze the series in terms derived from high culture", he states that "we all know a famous figure in literature who is as criminal as Walter White and yet is generally accepted as a hero – Shakespeare's Macbeth" (Cantor 2019, 93-94). Judging from these words, and the analyses that the two authors construct around them, it seems that the main, if not the only, point of contact between the two texts is the similarity between Walter White and Macbeth, or better, the way in which the former makes sense to us as a character who is simultaneously an incarnation of evil and a hero especially because we have an antecedent in the Scottish play that sets the terms of this complex ethical relation. However undisputable such a claim may be, though, it does not say much about the Shakespearean "original template", nor about the articulate influence it has been long exerting on our popular culture. By being only used for the purpose of providing analytical categories that are relevant to 'read' Walter White, Macbeth (both the play and the character) is presented in terms that are certainly well-known, yet inevitably flattened as well.

As Bossert's passage quoted above indicates, Macbeth is only one of the several Shakespearean characters who 'break bad', so that further textual evidence must be offered to establish a parallel between the two works. Regardless of how much of a villain a

protagonist is, in fact, can we have Macbeth without the "Weird Sisters"? Or can we have Macbeth without "Lady Macbeth"? While for several commentators the first question is quickly answered by equating the Weird Sisters' prophecy to Walter White's cancer diagnosis, the answer to the second question is much more elusive. Skyler White (Anna Gunn) is in fact surely a manipulative and emasculating wife, yet she never acts towards her husband in Lady Macbeth's seductive manner, nor does she in any way push him to 'break bad'. In an attempt to identify who "serves the same dramatic role of Macbeth's consort" in the AMC series, Bossert resorts to White's partner in crime, Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), as the one who provides the protagonist with "resources, inspiration, and sometimes simply the additional manpower needed to conduct crime" (Bossert 2012, 75), only to acknowledge shortly after that "Walter also serves as Pinkman's own Lady Macbeth" (75), who pushes him deeper and deeper into the criminal world. This swinging of the "dramatic role" of the Lady back and forth between Walter White and Jesse Pinkman actually tells us that what we are witnessing here is the partial overlapping between the characters' definitions rather than a structural similarity between them and their functions within the narrative. First of all, far from just serving as a spur to her husband's ambition, Lady Macbeth constitutes a textual site from where a fatal combination of mutual passion, personal ambition, sensuality, and domineering attitude emanate, all qualities that have hardly anything to do with the relationship between White and his young partner Pinkman. Furthermore, there is a co-dependence between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as characters or dramatic roles that does not allow the one to exist and be fully recognizable without the other. In other words, if at times in the narrative Walter White serves as Pinkman's Lady Macbeth, shall we conclude that, albeit within the circumscribed space of those episodes, Jesse Pinkman is himself Macbeth?[2] On the other

[2] The textual function we see as embodied in Lady Macbeth may be disseminated across different characters in *Breaking Bad*, yet it seems to me that it is the enigmatic Gus Fring (Giancarlo Esposito), officially the owner of the fast-food chain Los Pollos Hermanos and actually the man who efficiently runs a huge drug operation across New Mexico, who most approximates the Lady through

hand, calling Macbeth a "criminal", as Cantor does, cannot but be an oversimplification of a question that is actually central to the definition of "breaking bad" in the Shakespearean play, namely the nature and the limits of sovereign power in its relationship to the law. If it is true that Macbeth's blameful actions constitute a crime in moral terms, the same cannot be quickly and unproblematically established in their relationship to the law of the country (something that fully applies, instead, to Walter White). As Emma Smith clarifies, "*Macbeth* depicts a series of murders for which the law cannot give redress, since the king himself is their perpetrator" (Smith 2013, 5), and the shift from regicide king to self-made kingpin is too consequential not to be given close attention within the context of an intertextual analysis of the two works.

The following pages are an attempt to pursue such an analysis by focusing on two areas of poignant relevance to the relationship between the two works. First, I will look at the formal elements (rhythm, pace, instances of overlapping) that produce structural echoes between *Breaking Bad* and *Macbeth*; then I will move to the ethical interrogation both works produce with regard to the issues raised by hubristic agency and the fact of giving/fearing death.

1. Echoes

There is a scene in *Breaking Bad* that is quite representative of the way in which the parallel between the TV series and the Scottish play runs deeper than it might be expected. I am referring to the "fugue state" that Walt White simulates in the episode "Bit by a Dead Bee" (season 2, episode 3). Having been kidnapped and kept prisoner by Tuco Salamanca (the meth-sniffing and borderline mental cartel man in Albuquerque), Walt knows that he needs a good story to reappear in the midst of the frantic search his family

his coaxing and manipulations. See especially season 3, episode 5, when, in order to convince White to work for him, Fring shows him the state-of-the-art chemistry lab he would be responsible for and motivates him by appealing to his masculinity, offering him a chance to finally see himself in the role of the heroic husband and father: "And a man… a man provides. And he does it even when he's not appreciated, or respected, or even loved. He simply bears up and he does it. Because he's a man".

has launched to find him. He thus goes to a supermarket and undresses completely as he walks along the aisles, a behavior that of course leads to hospitalization and psychiatric evaluation as he claims not to remember anything from the past few days and tries to blame chemotherapy and cancer-induced stress for the situation. Since no amount of reassurance on his side that he feels fine now seems to satisfy family and doctors alike, and having been reassured that their conversation is protected by absolute confidentiality, he decides to spin the lie differently to the psychiatrist who has now almost full control over his life and future:

> There was no fugue state. I remember everything. The truth is… I couldn't stand to spend another second in that house. I just had to… get out, and so I left. I didn't think about it, I just did it. […]
> Doctor, my wife is seven months pregnant with a baby we didn't intend. My fifteen-year-old son has cerebral palsy. I am an extremely overqualified high-school chemistry teacher. When I can work, I make $43,700 per year. I have watched all of my colleagues and friends surpass me in every way imaginable, and within eighteen months I will be dead. And you ask why I run?

The moment encapsulates Walt's capacity to simultaneously lie and say the truth, and foregrounds the way in which utter vulnerability and mental health issues are seen as interconnected and justifying one another. Appearing stark naked in public, in fact, lands credibility to Walt's story but also exposes his helplessness as a terminally ill man, thus producing a tautological circle by which Walt's overall wretchedness triggers and explains his borderline psychiatric state, while the latter further constitutes him as vulnerable and dependent. His naked body thus becomes a powerful manifestation of this mechanism and his conversation with the psychiatrist an attempt to manipulate it and establish that, despite his precarious mental health, which would be confirmed by a need to escape his own family and might even authorize forms of institutional limitation to his freedom, he can still be in control of his own life. By leveraging his pitiful state as a rational explanation for his actions, Walt turns the attempts to reduce him to bare (i.e.,

naked) life – institutionalized, exposed, vulnerable – into a form of power that he wields precisely to revolt against such condition and reclaim uncompromising agency.

A plausible albeit not immediately apparent connection with *Macbeth* is suggested by the presence also in the tragedy of a scene in which the protagonist's mental health is exposed as frail and an effort must accordingly be made to preserve his power and authority in the face of this form of vulnerability. I am of course referring to the scene of the banquet during which Macbeth is the only one who repeatedly sees Banquo's ghost, a taunting and accusing presence that sends him into fits he is unable to disguise even in public and that both he and his wife explain as an infirmity that should be ignored:

> LADY
> Sit, worthy friends; my lord is often thus,
> And hath been from his youth. Pray you, keep seat,
> The fit is momentary; upon a thought
> He will again be well. If much you note him
> You shall offend him, and extend his passion.
> Feed, and regard him not.
> (Shakespeare 2015, III.iv.50-55)

> MACBETH
> I do forget.
> Do not muse at me, my most worthy friends,
> I have a strange infirmity, which is nothing
> To those that know me.
> (82-85)

What I find of interest here is not so much that both texts deal with the question of the protagonist's precarious psychological state, but rather the fact that this common theme is used in *Breaking Bad* and *Macbeth* alike to point at a specific weakness of the leading character which is wielded as a confirmation of power in the form of an exception. Because he is now the king, his lords must pretend that Macbeth is fine and perfectly in control of himself, accepting the clearly false explanation that his affliction is an old and innocuous one. Nobody in fact has ever witnessed anything like his current

state of mind, despite having presumably shared with him the service of Duncan and the battlefield for a quite long time. It is exactly because he is the sovereign that he claims for himself (and Lady Macbeth supports him in demanding it) the right to exist and act in a space that is in a certain sense separate from his illness, as if his agency were not affected by it despite his obvious impairment. There is, between the two scenes, a structural correspondence given by the fact that not only both deal with the connection between mental health and power, but also do it within a similar paradigm of norm and exception: both Walt White and Macbeth demand to be acknowledged and treated as special cases, the former because of his helplessness in the face of death – what we might call the fact of being reduced to bare life – the latter because of his sovereignty that allows him to legitimately give death – what we might refer to as the king's sacredness.

Scenes like the one discussed above and reflecting a consonance between the two works that is somehow inscribed within the structural organization of the *Breaking Bad* narrative vis-à-vis *Macbeth* are not an isolated instance, as is intimated also by the most apparent formal similarities between the play and the TV show: both are divided into five parts (acts/seasons), yet the beginning and end frame the protagonist, as we will see, in significantly different ways; both make a peculiar use of the customary form of their respective genres, *Macbeth* being the shortest and fastest moving of Shakespeare's tragedies and *Breaking Bad* featuring an uncharacteristically short first season and a longer final one[3]; both can be seen as dividing the narrative in three movements (vs. the five parts) revolving around the confrontation between the main character and three (groups of) antagonists (Duncan/Tuco, Banquo/Gus, Macduff and Malcolm/the Aryan Brotherhood)[4]. Yet, rather than any immediate formal correspondence (such as the repartition of the plot into the same number of acts/seasons), I want to bring forth the presence of specific moments that, by functioning

[3] The production of *Breaking Bad* was affected by the 2007-2008 writers' strike in Hollywood, which explains the relative shortness of the first season.

[4] For this three-movement organization of the text in *Macbeth*, see Smith 2013, 66-67.

as a recognizable punctuation in the development of the narrative, signal the momentarily alignment between the otherwise unlike rhythms of the Elizabethan play and the twenty-first-century TV series.

The first of these moments is provided by the prophecy/diagnosis, that is, the sudden confrontation of the protagonist with what he has reasons to consider a reliable prediction about his future. The encounter with the Weird Sisters/oncologist precipitates Macbeth/Walter White in the depth of a moral crisis that seizes and agitates his conscience with unprecedented violence, making it possible for him to contemplate crime as a viable route to pursue, rather than just a fantasy to be (half-)secretly entertained. The two episodes, however, while having in common the fact of projecting the protagonist towards a foreseeable future, are also discordant in ways that seem to me crucial in order to fully appreciate how Macbeth morphs into Walter White. First of all, the Scottish Thane meets the Weird Sisters at the pick of his military career: a member of the nobility and a successful general who has just almost single-handedly crushed a rebellion against the Crown, he is widely honored and publicly praised for his courage on the battlefield and his loyalty to King Duncan. By luring him with the prospect of becoming himself the King of Scotland, the Witches only add to an already impressive list of triumphs, thus forcing him to confront and acknowledge his own insatiable ambition. Despite the caveat that the glory they predict for him is a transient one and will not be passed down onto his progeny, there is little doubt that for Macbeth himself the prophecy is a magnificent one.

The situation could not be more radically different for Walter White when in the pilot episode of *Breaking Bad* he is told that he only has a few months to live due to inoperable lung cancer, a diagnosis that is all the more ironically tragic as the fifty-year-old patient has never smoked in his life. The man is struck with the news at an already very low point in his life, marked by professional frustration, social humiliation, and family difficulties. The father of a disabled teenage son and the husband of a beloved yet emasculating wife who is pregnant with an unplanned second child, White is in fact a once brilliant scientist who ended up

resentfully teaching chemistry to bored high-school kids for a wage that is so low as to force him to take up a part-time job at a local car wash to make ends meet. It comes as no surprise, then, that while Macbeth can barely disguise the excitement provoked by the vision of his future and immediately writes his wife with a full account of the events, White initially reacts by doing absolutely nothing, absorbing the news and, all by himself, slowly coming to the decision of turning to crime, ostensibly to provide for his family after his death.

Regardless of the nature of the prognostication – be it the happy promise of inscrutable powers or the inescapable catastrophe announced by medical diagnosis – the prophecy carries out the structural function of opening up a space of radical agency for the two men. In this territory, they perceive themselves as being finally outside the reach of customary punishment – Macbeth because he is going to be king and embody the law, and White because he is going to die before the law can get to him – so that their actions are not exactly exempt from consequences but are, in a certain sense, indifferent to them. We can appreciate the shift in the ethical ground of their ruminations (from weighing the burden of doing evil to including a sort of impunity in the equation) by looking at the subtle way in which both the tragedy and the TV show stage the prophecy not as the inaugural moment in their moral corruption but as the outside intervention that eventually unleashes the tempting thoughts they had been already entertaining. As Lady Macbeth points out to her husband as she tries to resolve him to carry out their plan, in fact, the idea of seizing the power by killing Duncan is not a seed planted in him by the encounter with the "fatal sisters", but had been already contemplated by him long enough to consider its feasibility: "Nor time nor place / Did then adhere, and yet you would make both" (Shakespeare 2015, I.vii.51-52). By allowing him to think of his accession to the throne as a fact already known to forces placed beyond the realm of human experience and rational understanding, the prophecy projects the regicide onto a horizon made of preordained events, where Duncan's violent death is not only perfectly justifiable but to a certain extent even necessary for a superior will to be satisfied. This self-reassuring interpretation of

the purposefully ambiguous words used by the three witches contributes to determine Macbeth to action by pressing him to face the crucial ethical dilemma posed by the idea he now toys with of being the predestined next King of Scotland, that is, whether to wait for events to unravel by themselves or to maneuver to hasten their coming to fruition: "If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me, / Without my stir" (I.iii.146-47); and then: "I am settled, and bend up / Each corporeal agent to this terrible feat" (I.vii.80-81). In other words, what is really at stakes is not so much his kinghood but his agency.

Despite being mostly described as an excessively meek, law-abiding citizen for whom the terminal cancer diagnosis constitutes the proverbial last straw in an unusual accumulation of misfortunes, Walter White as well is not exactly the innocent character his own creator Vince Gilligan described as Mr Chips turning into Scarface[5]. As acutely noticed by Cordelia E. Barrera, in fact, the pilot episode already gives us a glimpse into White's troubled conscience and its possible disposition to corruption before the devastating conversation with the doctor, thus indicating how blaming his transformation solely on that trauma is part of the character's self-delusional attitude that has for a considerable part of his life resulted in disappointing and backfiring choices. Commenting on how at Walt's birthday party his brother in law and DEA agent Hank Schrader (Dean Norris) steals the scene bragging about a recent drug "bust that yielded over $700,000 in cash", thus adding to Walt's sense of "eroded masculinity", Barrera points out that

> Hank does more than impose a masculine script intended to reflect the imbalance of power and physical prowess that he continually lords over Walt. He helps seed an idea in Walt's mind. "It's easy money… until we catch you", jeers Hank. […] Significantly, this seed is sown *before* Walt learns that he has cancer. (Barrera 2016, 21)

[5] The expression was used by Gilligan in an interview to explain how he had originally pitched the show to AMC. Since then, as noticed by Wood, the line has "stuck and proliferated wherever the series is discussed" (Wood 2015, 24, note 8). See also MacInnes 2012.

Not unlike Macbeth, once he is given the chance to see what awaits him in the near future, White is faced with the dilemma of agency: should he just wait for the inevitable to happen, enduring his fate while subjecting himself to one humiliating job after another[6], or should he finally act upon the resentment and indignation he has been nursing for much of his adult life and that by now constitute a core part of his true self? If he is really going to die in a matter of months, the ethical responsibility of his actions will stay with him, but he counts on escaping the social consequences deriving from them, which reveals how his apparent adjustment to society and its rules is to be interpreted rather as begrudged endurance than as moral rectitude.

Set right after the beginning of their respective narratives and ostensibly offering impunity alongside inevitability, the prophecy/diagnosis does not work merely as the removal of some inner moral sentinel, but rather functions as an injunction to choose, before the events void their choice of its ethical content, between passivity and agency, the latter emerging as the true object of desire for both Macbeth and Walter White. In other words, even as they rationalize bending their ethics to suit their desires, the real reckless move for both Macbeth and White is embracing guilt rather than giving up agency in the face of a preordained fate that would make them perfectly innocent, but also perfectly passive. We can then understand how the happy news that his cancer is in remission and his life predictably longer (season 2, episode 9) throws Walt in an uncontrollable fit of rage that he tries to dominate by punching the towel-dispenser in the hospital restroom: unwilling to go back to his life of Job-like resignation (Izzo 2015), he realizes that the future looms ahead with the injunction to indefinitely repeat what he had thought of as a single act of reckless, amoral courage, a resource he will now have to tap into unreservedly for his gradually emerging sense of self not to be crushed.

In the iconic "Fly" episode (season 3, episode 10), haunted by a fear of contamination in his lab that is as irrational yet tangible as

[6] The fact that even high-school teaching is humiliating for this man who has an acute sense of being a veritable genius cannot be overemphasized.

Macbeth's horror at the sight of Duncan's blood on his hands, Walt ruminates on the conundrum produced by his unexpectedly prolonged life: "I've lived too long", he tells Jesse, a line that echoes the famous "I have lived long enough" from the fifth act of the Scottish play (Shakespeare 2015, V.iii.22). Both men mourn with these words the loss of what they aimed to secure, together with and through power, that is, a revered position in their circle: "You want them to actually miss you" (Walt), yet "that which should accompany old age, / As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have" (Shakespeare 2015, V.iii.24-26). These undeniable echoes notwithstanding, the conceptual difference between "too long" and "long enough" and the structurally heterogeneous positioning of the two lines invite further consideration. While Macbeth's line, occurring in the final act of the tragedy, expresses the awareness of his declining reputation as a king, regardless of the outcomes of the military confrontation with Malcolm and Macduff that is about to take place, White's reckoning occurs almost at the exact centre of the narrative (i.e., in the thirtieth episode out of sixty-two) and stems from his realization of having no other choice than to continue to lead a double life as Heisenberg, even at the cost of losing his family, since the perfect moment to die, still loved and appreciated, has eluded him: "I missed it. There was some perfect moment that passed me right by". Rather than, or in addition to, evoking the declining king of the fifth act, a compelling intertext for the "Fly" episode can be found in the third act of the Shakespearean play (again, we are approximately half way through the narrative), where Macbeth comes to terms with the evil he has committed and that which he knows he is going to perpetrate:

> MACBETH
>
> I am in blood
> Stepped in so far, that should I wade no more,
> Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
> (Shakespeare 2015, III.iv.134-36)

The passages commented above show how, despite proceeding at a pace that is apparently independent from that of the Scottish

tragedy, *Breaking Bad* repeatedly intersects it at critical points and even reproduces its alternation of extraordinary accelerations, marked by chaotic violence, and moments of introspection, with Walt's repeated attempts at retiring from the drug business echoing Macbeth's soliloquys. A particular striking instance of structural overlapping between the two works is provided by the insertion in the first part of both *Macbeth* and *Breaking Bad* of a scene that somehow stands on the threshold of diegesis, a rhetorically rich yet quite cryptic comment on the protagonists' respective parabolas. I am referring to the "Porter" scene in the second act of *Macbeth* (II.iii.1-20) and the "Negro y Azul" narcocorrido that opens the seventh episode of the second season of *Breaking Bad*.

Irreverent and verging on obscenity, the Porter's monologue has long seemed so at odds with the dark tone of the tragedy that for centuries directors tended to cut it from representations and several critics considered it an interpolation[7]. More recent readings, however, have insisted on its role in materializing the spatial threshold between the inside of the castle – which is turned into a hell by Duncan's murder – and the outside, as well as in calling attention to a temporal threshold splitting time between a before preceding the regicide and an after following it. The third threshold evoked by the character is that between the diegetic world and the extradiegetic one, the most obvious reason for this being provided by the fact that the scene can be read as a thinly disguised commentary on the Gunpowder Plot[8]. Moreover, while the knocking at the gate, despite taking place off stage, is part of the diegetic dimension, as is confirmed by the fact that the Porter will eventually open the door to allow Macduff and Lennox in, the first part of his speech eerily refers to the act of welcoming in a series of imaginary and totally invisible characters, whom he drunkenly addresses as if they were bodily present on stage and through

[7] The alternating fortune of the Porter's speech is well-known in Shakespeare's studies, from Coleridge's rejection of the scene as vulgar to De Quincey's defense of it as hauntingly relevant. For an anthology of critical writings on *Macbeth*, including Coleridge and De Quincey, see Shakespeare 2013.

[8] Critics have noted how the use of "farmer" and "equivocator" by the Porter might be a coded reference to Father Garnet, the mind behind the Gunpowder Plot. See Wills 1995.

which he obliquely communicates about the whole play with the audience. By foregrounding delusion (in the figure of the farmer), duplicity (the equivocator) and greed (the tailor), the speech not only incapsulates in fact some of the main themes of the play, but also offers a key to interpret Macbeth's actions as resulting from his arrogant blindness to the possible ambivalence of words and circumstances. The blurring of the border separating the fictive and the real world is reiterated in the last line of the Porter's monologue that accompanies the opening of the door: "I pray you, remember the porter" (II.iii.19-20). The words, while expressing a request to Macduff and Lennox for a tip, are in fact often delivered to the audience, adding a sense of divination to the whole scene.

A similarly liminal diegetic space is occupied by the only narcocorrido featured in *Breaking Bad*, "Negro y Azul", which constitutes the teaser to the episode by the same title (season 2, episode 7)[9]. Visually, it functions as a pop music videoclip, announced as such by the name of the band, Los Cuates de Sinaloa, and the title of the song that appear in the footer of the opening frame. The overall aesthetics is that of a Mexican low-budget production mixing a catchy traditional sound with old-fashioned video transition effects, both characteristics evoking a music scene in sharp contrast with the glossy U.S. entertainment industry and its costly pre- and post-production practices. In ways that can be compared to the structural function of the Porter's speech in *Macbeth*, "Negro y Azul" is apparently a purely entertaining interlude that actually accumulates perturbing elements calling attention to the blurring and crossing of borders at several levels. Under the guise of a straightforward pop music video narrating the irresistible rise of a new drug lord, it directly addresses in fact the impact produced by the new player on the border-crossing meth trade, which goes beyond questions of power and involves historically laden issues of identification and cultural affiliation, as is marked by the opposition between the 'cartel' and the 'gringos'. The dimension of the borderland is emphasized by the presence of Spanish lyrics and English subtitles, with a line from the final part of the song stressing how there is actually no distinction between

[9] For the narcocorrido as a music genre, see Jamarillo 2014 and Barrera 2016.

the two countries anymore due to a common drug culture and economy: "Ahora sí le quedó bien a Nuevo México el nombre. / A México se parece / En tanta droga que esconde"[10]. The visuals further complicate the concept of borders by pointing at the separation between the diegetic and the extradiegetic worlds as an unstable and blurry threshold. Los Cuates de Sinaloa – a real Mexican band based in Phoenix (Arizona) and popular also for its narcocorridos – are featured playing guitars and looking straight into the camera while occupying the same scenic space – a staple image of the (New) Mexican desert landscape – of a man viewed from behind and impersonating the mysterious Heisenberg with his signature porkpie hat.

So far, despite the ambiguity introduced by the overlapping between the real "Cuates" and their diegetic counterpart, the singers might be read as characters – that is, as a representation of a narcocorrido band and its cultural function of narrating the drug trade as a heroic form of self-affirmation and resistance – within the fictional world of *Breaking Bad*. However, adding to the feeling of disorientation produced by this unusual opening of the episode, these images are interspersed with what appear to be police stakeout videos showing members of the cartel belonging to the fictional world of the series, such as Tuco Salamanca and Tortuga. Since this fictive footage would be available just to the DEA within the perimeter of the diegesis, the band can use it as visual material accompanying their narcocorrido only if they do not belong to the same level of the narration and are in a position to comment on it from the outside. And yet, such comment emanates from a peculiarly partial perspective, one in which the visual narrative has (and gives) access to what the police knows about the cartel and what the cartel knows about Heisenberg, but not to the latter's real identity, which is unknown to both the police and the cartel, thus producing a skewed point of view that ambiguously reflects multiple and shifting diegetic positionings while resting on the threshold of them all. Confirming its belonging to a liminal

[10] The English subtitles provided for the TV series audience are as follow: "Now New Mexico's livin' up to its name. / Looks just like Mexico / In all the drugs it's hiding".

narrative space, one that allows for deep insights yet not omniscient knowledge, the narcocorrido can retrospectively be seen as correctly predicting White's death as a consequence of his involvement in the drug business (rather than his cancer), while it incorrectly attributes his execution to the cartel's retaliation for usurping their territory.

Indeed, White is not killed by any of his antagonists, who are instead eliminated by him one by one, but finds his death in a carefully planned suicidal attack on the Aryan Brotherhood, the neo-Nazi gang that, after briefly taking the cartel's place as Heisenberg's criminal associates, has stolen his $80 million stash and killed Hank. This finale is where *Breaking Bad* takes a decisive turn away from *Macbeth* and sheds light on the Americanization of the paradigmatic villain/hero character and on the structural differences and similarities between the two systems of power within which the two protagonists operate. The end of the Scottish play portrays Macbeth as utterly isolated, already defeated even before Macduff kills him off stage, humiliated by the sudden revelation of having fallen prey to the Weird Sisters' ambiguous words. In the final scene of the tragedy, it is not Macbeth but the ghastly sight of his severed head that is on stage surrounded by acclamations of his successor, Malcolm. There is no doubt that *Breaking Bad*, despite ending on the death of its protagonist, produces a completely different sense of closure. Having spent a considerable time estranged from his family and hiding out in New Hampshire under a false identity, with cancer no longer in remission and the end of his life fast approaching, Walt White goes back to Albuquerque to see his family one last time and die what he considers a more dignified death than the one he faces because of his terminal illness. Producing one last acceleration in the narrative, we see Walt finding a way to bequest nearly $10 million to his children through Gretchen and Elliot Schwartz[11], fatally

[11] Since Jr. refused his money and the police would trace and seize it if he tries to transfer it, Walt intrudes in the Schwartz's mansion and makes them believe that he has hired two hitmen to kill them unless they make a donation corresponding exactly to the sum he leaves with them in cash to a trust fund in the name of his children when Jr. turns eighteen. Thus, believing the money to be part of an

poisoning with ricin Lydia (Laura Fraser) – the uber-greedy and fastidiously prissy partner in crime presiding over the transnational meth distribution – and exterminating the Aryan Brotherhood that had meanwhile literally enslaved Jesse to force him to cook Heisenberg's blue meth formula for them, only to be fatally hit by a round of bullets shot by an ingenious automated weapon he had himself designed and assembled.

As noted by Emily Nussbaum, despite the main character's death, this is not a tragic end, but rather a perturbingly "closure-happy" one: "It's not that Walt needed to suffer, necessarily, for the show's finale to be challenging, or original, or meaningful: but Walt succeeded with so little true friction – maintaining his legend, reconciling with family, avenging Hank, freeing Jesse, all genuine evil off-loaded onto other, badder bad guys – that it felt quite unlike the destabilizing series that I'd been watching for years" (Nussbaum 2013). Even though I do not agree with some of Nussbaum's conclusions – e.g., it is hard to say that Walt truly reconciles with his family when Jr. (RJ Mitte) stays unflinching in his decision to cut off any tie with him – it is true that the closure the series pursues comes at a price, with too many 'wins' for the protagonist to stay consistent with the relentlessly disturbing and often catastrophic character of the moral choices he has made up until the final episode. The latter thus mixes the series' ambition towards tragedy with the aesthetics of western and action movies, whereby the (anti)hero dies substantially undefeated and only once his thirst for revenge and his personal sense of justice are appeased through violence spectacularly inflicted on his enemies[12]. Despite the demise of his meth empire and the loss of his family, White cannot be said to be unequivocally defeated in the series finale, nor in any way humiliated the way Macbeth is, but rather rises as still the hero of his own story – "I did it for me", he tells Skyler (season 5, episode 16) – and a powerful force in and over the lives of many around him. It is exactly the specific positioning of Macbeth and

effort by the two philanthropists, Jr. would be in a position to take it without violating his own staunch morality, and the police would not be able to trace it back to White.

12 Alessandra Stanley, in *The New York Times*, describes the shooting against the Aryan Brotherhood as "a scene from a Quentin Tarantino movie" (Stanley 2013).

White around the axis of power that the last part of this essay will be concerned with.

2. Symmetries

Both of them studies in the nature of evil, *Macbeth* and *Breaking Bad*, as we have seen, position their respective protagonists – at the beginning of their moral descent into crime and towards the end of their parabola – at a very different and even symmetrical angle with regard to power, a positioning that is all the more relevant since the structural echoes as well as the instances of thematical intersection and overlapping between the two texts are unmistakable. A quite emblematic illustration of this nearly specular positioning is the relationship the two men have with sleep, with Macbeth who, lamenting he has murdered sleep itself, famously starts suffering from an impairing insomnia the moment he kills Duncan, and White who confesses that: "Ever since my diagnosis, I sleep just fine" (season 2, episode 8). Given the quite evident connection between *Breaking Bad* and *Macbeth* especially with regard to the characterization of the protagonist, the comparative analysis of this nearly perfectly flipped scenario can shed some light on a relevant aspect of the Shakespearean play and the way in which it is treated in the TV show. This aspect, I will try to demonstrate, is the nature and the operational sphere of sovereign power and its connection to the physical body of the man claiming and wielding it, for which Agamben's formulation of the relationship between the paradoxical life of the *homo sacer* and the "excessive" life of the emperor will provide fundamental insights[13].

In a thought-provoking article about sovereign sleep that tries to reconcile within a comprehensive interpretative paradigm Kantorowicz's theory of the king's two bodies and Agamben's concept of bare life, Benjamin Parris argues that "[i]f sleep can be murdered, then the play suggests it has, or better yet *is*, a body with a strange life of its own, which carries a holy valence in the case of sovereign sleep" (Parris 2012, 123). It is because of this mystical

[13] See Agamben 1998, especially the chapter "Sovereign Body and Sacred Body" (91-103).

holy valence that, Parris further argues, "[i]mmediately upon killing the sovereign […] Macbeth is visited by a voice that condemns his act *not* as an act of homicide, but rather as a metaphysical violation that murders sleep itself" (129). In maintaining that sleep is a body with a life of its own which is mystically sealed to the king's natural body, Parris is somehow aligning his thinking to Kantorowicz's general notion that the sovereign has more than one body, whereas the concept of an act of killing which does not fall under the rubric of homicide clearly brings forth Agamben's understanding of sovereignty and regicide as juridically inhabiting a space that is not that of ordinary law (a regicide is 'more than' a homicide). Agamben, however, develops his notion of the sovereign's "sacred life", which would make him a figure perturbingly akin to that of the *homo sacer*, exactly in order to supersede the theory of the two bodies, stating that "it is as if the emperor had in himself not two bodies but rather two lives inside one single body: a natural life and a sacred life" (Agamben 1998, 100). Death is then the moment when these two lives – which are both sealed to the same body natural and, for the structure of sovereignty to be upheld and effectively exert its power, are indistinguishable from each other – get suddenly separated from the body and from each other, so that while the natural life is buried with the body, sacred life survives and is passed on to the king's successor: "for the sovereign, death reveals the excess that seems to be as such inherent in supreme power, as if supreme power were, in the last analysis, nothing other than *the capacity to constitute oneself and others as life that may be killed but not sacrificed*" (101).

Because sleep resembles death and exposes the extreme vulnerability of the defenseless natural body, sovereign sleep is a condition that eerily allows to glimpse the otherwise unfathomable separation between the two lives of the king. Sleep, however, as Lady Macbeth insists to her insomniac husband, is also a much-needed physiological process, and the alternation between wake and sleep a rule to be observed in order to lead a healthy life. In light of the disorder brought about by Duncan's killing, it is possible to read sleep as a metaphor transposing the rule of law into the language of biological functions, and insomnia as its suspension, an image of a state of exception inaugurated by the

regicide. In taking the king's life, Macbeth violates the metaphysical order sustaining sovereign power by forcing the separation of the two lives of the king at the moment when their existence, intertwined in the same body natural, becomes perceptible through sleep. By treating Duncan's vulnerable sleeping body as killable bare life, Macbeth produces the suspension of the law without being king, opening a breach into the fabric of sovereignty that immediately translates into the absence of sleep. He even captures the fracture his usurpation of sovereign power produces in him and in the state with extraordinary precision when he tells his wife of the voice he heard after committing the crime: "Still it cried, 'Sleep no more' to all the house; / 'Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more. Macbeth shall sleep no more'" (Shakespeare 2015, II.ii.42-44). "Glamis" is the title Macbeth has at the beginning of the play, when he still is considered an honorable nobleman and a valiant soldier, and it is this world that he shatters by killing sleep (the norm) in Duncan's body. "Cawdor" is the title that Duncan had just conferred on him, and it is at this stage of his career that he allows his ambition to prevail on his loyalty; thus, in killing sleep, he produces a suspension of the law that legitimately made him Thane of Cawdor and which retreats from him. "Macbeth" evokes his name as a king, so a projection into the immediate future; being the outcome of usurpation, the title only exists in a state of exception and the absence of sleep signals the impossibility for Macbeth to fully access sovereignty by embodying the norm. For this reason, in becoming king he cannot reconcile himself with sleep (i.e., embody the law he himself as a sovereign constitutes) since, in killing the sovereign – and in actively choosing to do so even though he could have simply waited on his prophesized accession to the throne to come to fruition – Macbeth embodies a fully secular, utterly individual, vicious ambition that radically challenges the "unselfconsciously theologically authorized sovereignty" embodied by Duncan (Drakakis 2013, 135). Thus, despite trying to perform, through the regicide, the constitutive violence by which sovereign power comes into being, Macbeth only attains "a starkly reductive imitation of what is, in reality, the inexplicable paradox that resides at the heart of the institution of sovereignty itself" (139). In other words, he can

no longer sleep because the king's two lives do not adhere perfectly to his body natural, and his sovereign power only embodies the exception and not the norm.

The longing expressed by one of the lords for an ordinary time under the law when

> LORD
> we may again
> Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights,
> Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives;
> Do faithful homage, and receive free honours,
> All which we pine for now
> (Shakespeare 2015, III.vi.33-37)

further confirms Macbeth's rule to consist in the indefinite perpetuation of a state of exception marked by the reiterated performance of constitutive violence, such as the killing of Banquo and the massacre of Macduff's family. No reference is made, in the lines quoted above, to the moral shortcomings of the tyrant as a source of distress, "faithful homage" being tied not to any personal quality of the king but only to his sovereignty, fully embodied as the power to declare the state of exception without the need to perpetuate it endlessly. This fine distinction is foregrounded again in the fourth act, through the quite lengthy exchange between Macduff, who tries to convince him to confront Macbeth and claim the throne of Scotland, and Malcolm who, fearing treason after his father's killing and wanting to test Macduff's allegiance to his cause, gives of himself a hyperbolic account as a quintessential sinner with none of the honorable qualities becoming a king. However, none of the listed vices, from lust to avarice, seems to deter Macduff from his hope that Macbeth will be eventually replaced by Duncan's son, until the young man proclaims that

> MALCOLM
> had I power, I should
> Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell,
> Uproar the universal peace, confound
> All unity on earth.
> (IV.iii.97-100).

Malcolm too pretends here to be willing to throw the country into a state of exception like the one it is going through under the rule of the usurper of his father's throne.

Signaled by the absence of sleep as exception to a necessary rule, Macbeth's overreaction to the regicide he himself commits can be seen as originating in the sudden realization that, following Agamben's argument, the sovereign inhabits the same liminal territory defining the law as the *homo sacer*, and that the king's sacred life has its symmetrical correspondent in the *homo sacer*'s bare life[14]. As the latter cannot in any way leave his condition of bare life and stop being the exception producing the law, thus the former cannot in any way separate his body natural from his sacred life and stop determining "the complex dialectic of 'rule' and 'exception'" (Drakakis 2013, 138).

It is exactly this shared liminal space inhabited by both the king and the *homo sacer* that helps us understand how the apparently inconsistent treatment of sleep and insomnia in *Macbeth* and *Breaking Bad* accurately reflects the different positioning of the two protagonists vis-à-vis sovereign power. Whereas Macbeth nearly recoils before the revelation of the king's sacred life and clings onto wakefulness as a sort of protection from the inescapable vulnerability tied up to power, White's reaction to his diagnosis is a pondered one and produces a sweeping shift from an apparently passive surrendering to his fate to a conscious revolt against his ultimate designation as bare life. As he talks to the doctors and learns that not only is his cancer medically incurable but it is also socially and politically untreatable, since any available therapy or support is financially beyond reach for him, Walt comes to realize his positioning at the margins of the sociopolitical order which, by

[14] In her analysis of *Breaking Bad*, Serena Fusco briefly touches upon Agamben's theory reading Walt and Gus as "fac[ing] each other as sovereign and homo sacer", and noticing how the opposition is "both absolute and *reversible*" since "the sovereign and the homo sacer both inhabit the sphere where law and violence transmigrate into each other and found each other" (Fusco 2016, 36).

abandoning him with no resources, exposes him to death[15]. Paradoxically, instead of being deprived of peace because of his utter destitution, White finds determination in knowing exactly the space he inhabits. As he tells a visible shaken new patient in the oncology ward:

> I have spent my whole life scared. Frightened of things that could happen, might happen, might not happen. Fifty years I've spent like that. Finding myself awake at 3 in the morning. But you know what? Ever since my diagnosis, I sleep just fine. […] I came to realize it's that fear that's the worst of it, that's the real enemy. (season 2, episode 8)

Coming to terms with the fact that for society he is already dead (because of incurable cancer) and has long been not really alive (because of both his self-harming choices and the workings of neoliberal capitalism that marks lives like his as expendable) allows Walt to realize how misplaced his fear was. "Things that could happen", "might happen", or "might not happen", in fact, cannot in any way affect his structural positioning as already bare life, since the *homo sacer* is a figure of radical marginality for whom no route is available to be fully included back in the sociopolitical order that depends on his "inclusive exclusion" for its existence[16].

We can thus better understand White's refusal of Gretchen and Elliot's offer to pay for treatments that would prolong his life but that, falling under the category of charity, would still deny him agency and the chance to exert it in ways consistent with his moral code, including the successful performance of prototypically masculine and heteronormative traditional roles (the bread-winner husband, the charismatic father, the high-achiever scientist). For a brief moment in season 1, episode 5, Walt believes and happily reacts to the possibility that Elliot is offering him a job at Gray

[15] Slongo traces to Foucault's seminars of 1972-73 the first evocation of that specific figure of archaic Roman law that Agamben will later bring to the fore of his theory. Foucault does not refer to this figure by the name of *homo sacer*, yet describes it as someone who is not directly condemned to death, but is rather exposed to death by being placed outside the law and its protection, to the point that anybody could kill them with impunity. See Slongo 2019, 641.

[16] Agamben calls "*relation of exception* […] the extreme form of relation by which something is included solely through its exclusion" (Agamben 1998, 18).

Matter, the company he had helped founding and from which he had later been estranged, a moment that can be seen as the primary act of exclusion that leaves an indelible mark on Walt's life and is bound to be endlessly replicated until his cancer diagnosis. By rejecting his millionaire friends and their help, Walt is certainly acting out of self-destructive pride, but is also pointing at and revolting against a smaller scale, symbolic version of the sovereign decision including life through its ban. In turning to crime as the sole form of effective agency that is really available to him, he unwittingly exposes and acts upon "the structural analogy between the sovereign exception and *sacratio*" (Agamben 1998, 84), that is to say, the capacity of the former to produce the latter. Moreover, intuitively discarding the structurally impossible transition from the liminal state of bare life to full and empowered citizenship, he boldly attempts to move from one pole of this relationship to the other. As noted by Izzo, in fact, "Walter White becomes the sovereign figure that suspends the law and produces a state of exception claiming for himself the power to decide over the life and death of others" (Izzo 2015, 326, my translation)[17]. In other words, since "the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns" (Agamben 1998, 84), these two symmetrical figures occupy a contiguous, even overlapping space where the law is suspended, and where the king can kill without committing a crime and the *homo sacer* can be killed with impunity. The cancer diagnosis roots Walt in this space of indistinction and allows him to see the symmetrical opposite figure of his condition, a positioning which he then tries to claim for himself. When Jesse, trying to convince him to sell their meth operation and retire with millions of dollars each, asks a reluctant Walt whether he is in the meth business or in the money business, he hubristically replies: "Neither. I'm in the empire business" (season 5, episode 6).

Like Macbeth, White compulsively reiterates acts of constitutive violence whereby he tries to establish his own sovereign order,

[17] Izzo reads *Breaking Bad* as a post-9/11 narrative and Walter White as a figure for the U.S. response to the attacks, a response based on the claim to unilateral suspension of the law in order to wage preemptive war against the so-called "rogue states".

which rests precariously on his arrogant belief that, due to his exceptional qualities as a chemist, he cannot be replaced, and Heisenberg will reign over the production and distribution of the finest meth in the world until his death. This extreme self-confidence betrays his delusional belief that by accessing sovereignty he can leave behind all traces of utter vulnerability connected to bare life. Unlike Macbeth, White starts sleeping well exactly because he is blind to the intimate interdependence between sovereignty and *sacratio*. It is for this reason that, in probably one of the most famous scenes of the series, he tells his wife: "I am not in danger, Skyler. I am the danger. A guy opens his door and gets shot, and you think that of me? No! I am the one who knocks!" (season 4, episode 6), as if his power exempted him from any form of vulnerability.

In the last part of the series, Walt is pushed back towards the pole of bare life as he loses his family, money, influence, even his name, and is left with only his frail, cancer ridden body to protect from the DEA and the Aryan Brotherhood alike. He spends several months into hiding, living in an isolated hut in New Hampshire under a false name and letting the realization of his condition slowly sink in. The surrounding landscape – cold, snowy – marks such a stark difference with suburban New Mexico and its warm colors as to become a constant visual reminder of his ban: hunted, invisible, he has no right other than to die or let himself be killed. When he goes back to Albuquerque, the way he moves across space draws attention to his condition as a *homo sacer*, a paradoxical figure of undeadness, and anticipates his actual death. Between visiting Skyler, watching Jr. get back home from school, illegally buying weapons, meeting with his once partners Lydia and Uncle Jack, breaking into the Schwartz residence, Walt always appears and disappears from houses, streets, public venues like a ghost, unseen by most and manifesting his presence only to those he decides to meet. And yet, even in this we can see a claim to agency, a revolt against one's condition. It is not society that marks him as invisible, but Walt who removes himself from the field of visibility to exert some leverage in the world despite his condition of ban. Again, and until the very last moment of the narrative, Walt reiterates his challenge to a sociopolitical order that constitutes him as

expendable bare life. Dispensing retribution and bequeathing what remains of his fortune, dictating even the terms of Skyler's negotiation with the DEA after his death, Walt incessantly repeats his uncompromising claim to agency in the face of a structure of power that depends on the capacity to produce him as bare life in order to preserve its own existence. By choosing how and when to die, thus taking such decision away from any external force, Walt brings a radical challenge to sovereign power that, regardless of its efficacy, aims at exposing its constitutive capacity to decide over life/death.

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