

Negative Empathy in Shakespeare and Verdi's *Macbeth*¹

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This essay explores the concept of negative empathy in literature, with a focus on William Shakespeare's theater and Giuseppe Verdi's *Macbeth*. Negative empathy arises when readers or spectators engage emotionally with morally troubling characters, oscillating between identification and ethical distancing. The analysis begins with a theoretical discussion of the idea of negative empathy and then shifts to literature and Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Richard III*, highlighting how characters like Iago and Richard fail to evoke genuine negative empathy due to their (almost complete) lack of inner torment. In contrast, *Macbeth* – both in Shakespeare's play and Verdi's opera – provides a compelling case study. The protagonist's psychological depth, inner conflicts, and mad descent into tyranny generate an aesthetic experience where the audience simultaneously empathizes with and recoils from his plight. Through an interdisciplinary and intermedial approach that combines aesthetic and literary theory with textual and musical analysis, the essay shows how Shakespearean theater creates a space where negative empathy emerges as a powerful, unsettling aesthetic experience.

Keywords: Negative empathy, negative literary characters, Shakespearean theater, *Macbeth* (William Shakespeare and Giuseppe Verdi), moral ambivalence

Negative Empathy, Literature, and Shakespeare

The history of the arts is populated by figures and representations characterized by moral ambiguity, violence, and negativity – charac-

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ters such as Medea, Macbeth, Humbert Humbert, Maximilien Aue, Walter White, and Arthur Fleck; artworks like Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, Hermann Nitsch's *Theater of Orgies and Mysteries*, Robert Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio*, Anselm Kiefer's *Seven Heavenly Palaces*, and Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*. These examples evoke complex emotional responses combining attraction and repulsion. This ambivalent mode of aesthetic reception is what we term "negative empathy", a concept developed from ideas originally formulated by Theodor Lipps (1903; 1906; 1909), the founding figure of the contemporary debate on empathy in philosophy and psychology.

Negative empathy represents a distinctive aesthetic phenomenon, highlighting the paradoxical capacity of art to engage audiences empathetically with morally troubling scenarios and characters. Contrary to prevailing positive connotations typically associated with empathy, recent scholarship has begun critically reassessing empathy's ethical implications. Paul Bloom, for instance, criticizes empathy for being an unreliable moral guide (Bloom 2016), while trauma and perpetrator studies emphasize the potential ethical pitfalls inherent in empathizing with victims or perpetrators naïvely (Davis and Meretoja 2020; Knittel *et al.* 2020). Our work aligns with this critical approach, emphasizing that empathy's darker manifestations are central to a deeper understanding of aesthetic experience and the moral dimension of art.

Our interest in negative empathy partly emerges from Georges Bataille's provocative assertion that literature (and, by extension, art) devoid of engagement with evil quickly loses its compelling nature (Bataille 1958, 2012). Despite contemporary cultural trends toward sanitizing art or instrumentalizing it for explicitly moral purposes, we argue that restoring attention to negative empathy recaptures art's fundamental subversive, anti-hierarchical, and cathartic capacities. Negative empathy provides a vital counterpoint to these reductive perspectives, reinstating moral ambiguity and ethical complexity at the core of aesthetic reflection.

Central to our conceptual framework of negative empathy is Hans Robert Jauss's (1982) notion of cathartic identification (177), which he defines as an aesthetic attitude enabling audiences to achieve a state of liberation through empathetic engagement with suffering characters. This form of identification relies upon maintaining a safe cognitive

and emotional distance. Aristotle's foundational insights on tragedy and catharsis similarly underscore the essential role of such distance (1996, 1449b24-b28), further developed by David Hume (1978, II, 2;7; 6) and Edmund Burke (1998, 1; 14) in their explorations of sympathy and the sublime, respectively. Burke argues explicitly that terror experienced at a safe remove can become a source of aesthetic pleasure, while Hume highlights compassion as emerging precisely from a position of experiential asymmetry.

In contemporary philosophical discourse, Peter Goldie (2011, 302-17) distinguishes between "strong" empathy (full mental immersion in another's experience, which he critiques as unattainable) and "weak" empathy (an imaginative, partial perspective-taking). The distinction between these forms parallels Alvin Goldman's (2006) differentiation between "basic" (or low-level) empathy, driven by immediate neurological responses such as mirror neurons, and "reenactive" (high-level) empathy involving sophisticated inferential processes. Adam Morton (2011, 318-30) further complicates this by addressing barriers – particularly the "barrier of decency" – that limit empathy towards real-life individuals committing morally reprehensible acts, but which are less restrictive in fictional contexts.

Fictional narratives indeed provide uniquely rich contexts for negative empathy. Unlike real-world scenarios, narratives offer comprehensive psychological, historical, and motivational frameworks that facilitate complex emotional engagements. Literature and other narrative forms can thus sustain intense empathetic relations with morally ambiguous characters – relations typically intermittent and partial rather than totalizing. For instance, Fyodor Dostoevsky's character Nikolai Stavrogin in *Demons* presents readers with morally shocking acts explained through detailed introspective narration, inviting a profound, albeit disturbing, empathetic response. However, negative empathy does not exclusively pertain to identification with fictional characters. Rita Felski's (2019, 81-122) work broadens empathy's scope, suggesting audiences also empathize with non-anthropomorphic aspects of art such as narrative style, setting, or atmospheres (*Stimmungen*). Audiences may resonate empathetically with abstract elements in artworks, including purely instrumental music or installations, thus expanding empathy's boundaries beyond strictly human or animal subjects.

The communicative dimension of cathartic identification also merits attention. Artworks do not simply mirror emotional states but actively generate affective responses, capable of prompting social, individual, or political actions. Elaborating on Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* (1982), Jauss notes that catharsis can result either in collective behaviors or personal introspection, emphasizing its fundamental ambivalence. Empathetic engagement does not predetermine altruistic outcomes; rather, it remains open-ended, reflecting varied subjective reactions.

Following this, our definition of negative empathy can now be articulated precisely. Negative empathy constitutes an aesthetic experience characterized by cathartic emotional engagement with morally ambiguous or violent figures, performances, objects, compositions, or environments. These entities provoke profound empathetic anguish coupled with moral reflection. Crucially, negative empathy does not inherently lead to prosocial behavior; it equally allows for antisocial outcomes or purely introspective reactions. It underscores the unpredictable nature of aesthetic agency, defying simplistic ethical categorizations. In conclusion, recognizing negative empathy's central role in aesthetics encourages a more comprehensive understanding of art's emotional and ethical complexity. By emphasizing the unsettling yet compelling nature of empathetic engagement with negativity, this approach preserves the subversive potential of art, confronting audiences with morally charged dilemmas that demand nuanced reflection. Such experiences remind us of art's power not merely to console or educate but also to disturb, provoke, and challenge ethical certainties, reaffirming empathy's indispensable yet ambivalent role in the humanities.

The history of literature is full of characters capable of evoking empathetic suffering of the kind we feel for Humbert, in particular starting from early modern and modern literature, when the psychology of the evildoing character begins to be defined with greater care and to assume a certain complexity, starting with the villain *par excellence*, Satan, and how he is presented in Torquato Tasso's *The Liberation of Jerusalem*, Giambattista Marino's *The Massacre of the Innocents*, and, especially, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The *psychological depth* and *full characterization* of the negative character, in fact, seems to be a key element, equal to inner torment, for sparking the

aesthetic experience of negative empathy in literature². If we consider the character of Iago in William Shakespeare's *Othello*, we see immediately how, in the first scene of the tragedy, he describes to Rodrigo one of the motives for his hatred of the Moor: the fact that he, Othello, preferred the charming Florentine Michael Cassio over him for the position of lieutenant (*Othello*, I.i.8-33). Further on, at the close of the third scene of Act I, Iago adds another reason: the suspicion that Othello may have seduced his wife, Emilia (I.iii.383-401). On this occasion, Iago thinks for the first time about Cassio and his jealousy toward him as ideal instruments for reaching the double goal of occupying the place of lieutenant and spoiling Othello's conjugal happiness. Last, in the finale of the first scene of Act II, Iago speaks of two further causes of his resentment: his love, half-way between lust and revenge, for Othello's wife, Desdemona, and his aversion to Cassio, not only because he was promoted instead of him, but also because, in the future (and entirely hypothetically) he could go on to seduce his wife (II.i.284-310). On the basis of these motives, with the complicity of the dimwitted Roderigo and the ambivalently unconscious complicity of Emilia, Iago orders the deceitful act that will cause Cassio's destitution and the destruction of Othello and Desdemona's marriage and, finally, their death. The reasons that push Iago to action seem to be clearly defined, and yet, his suspicion that the Moor pursued his wife is just that, a suspicion, whereas the hypothesis that Cassio could do the same is not just remote but downright unfounded. Furthermore, Iago's desire for Desdemona is not credible; it is a desire that never transpires – if not for some sign of appreciation for her beauty, expressed in bad faith³– and that, if anything, could be merely latent in the vivid, treacherous scenes evoked by Iago of her passionate lovemak-

2 This seems to have already struck Wayne Booth (1983) when, in *A Rhetoric of Fiction*, he wrote: "If an author wants intense sympathy for characters who do not have strong virtues to recommend them, then the psychic vividness of prolonged and deep inside views will help him" (377-78; emphasis in the original).

3 Alluding to Othello and Desdemona's wedding night, Iago tries to spark Cassio's erotic imagination: "she is sport for Jove. / [...] And, I'll warrant her, full of game. / [...] What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation. / [...] And when she speaks, is it not an alarum of love? / [...] Well, happiness to their sheets! [...]" (II.iii.16-28).

ing, first with Othello, then Cassio, as a way to provoke Venetian senator Brabantio, father to Desdemona, against the Moor⁴, and, in the end, to turn Othello against his wife⁵. Among all the motives for Iago's hatred, the only one that seems to have some measure of concreteness and plausibility in directing his actions is the missed nomination to lieutenant, which is a petty excuse for the vast destruction he scatters around him and to which he himself is a victim, once uncovered.

Iago reluctantly sobs his way through a reconstruction of his motives over the course of three scenes between the start of the first act and the start of the second. The "peculiar end" (I.i.60) he speaks of to Roderigo in the first scene of Act I and the reason why he does not immediately leave the Moor's service after the offense of not being promoted are not clear from the start, but they gradually grow clearer, when Iago will merge in a unique, diabolical machination his revenge against Othello, Cassio, and, in a collateral way – for reasons on which one can only speculate – Desdemona. In the last act, asked why he plotted his cruel deception, Iago explains nothing: "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know: / From this time forth I never will speak a word" (V.ii.303-04). Afterwards, awaiting his judgment in the hands of Cassio – who, in the meantime, has been rehabilitated and named governor of Cyprus – Iago wraps himself in the most complete silence.

The mystery of Iago's minds is one of the most fascinating elements of *Othello* – "I am not what I am", Iago says in a famous verse (I.i.65) – which we will not attempt to decipher here. One thing, how-

4 Iago to Brabantio: "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram [Othello] / Is tugging your white ewe [Desdemona]" (I.i.88-89); "[...] Because we come to / do you service and you think we are ruffians, you'll / have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse, / you'll have your nephews neigh to you, you'll have / coursers for cousins and jennets for germans" (I.i.109-13); "I am one, sir, that comes to tell you, your daughter / and the Moor are [now] making the beast with two backs" (I.i.115-17).

5 This is what Iago says to Othello, to poison his mind with the suspicion that Desdemona and Cassio might be lovers: "And may; but, how? how satisfied, my lord? / Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on; / Behold her tupp'd?" (III.iii.394-6); "It is impossible you should see this, / Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, / As salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross / As ignorance made drunk [...]" (III.iii.401-04).

ever, can be said with a good measure of certainty regarding Iago's psychology: on *no* occasion does he seem to suffer from the evil that he is causing. This inevitably conditions the empathetic response of the reader and/or spectator in his regards. Perverse admiration for his cleverness and his capacity to manipulate, and the fact that he has motives (even if they are not fully decipherable) to enact vengeance against Othello, are not elements sufficient to put into place a true empathetic relation between Iago and the reader/spectator. To this end, it is necessary for the evildoing character to suffer tangibly for his actions, his thoughts, or the condition in which he finds himself, and it is equally necessary that he should also possess a psychological complexity that is in principle *legible*. In *Othello*, Iago appears, instead, to be an inscrutable force of destruction. Speaking with Desdemona, he defines himself as a critic: "[...] I am nothing if not critical" (II.i.120). This is doubtlessly one of the reasons that he seems so intriguing. To be fascinated with a character who commits evil and to feel negative empathy are, however, two different things. Iago is a Machiavellian villain incapable of involving us from an empathetic point of view, especially because he is not defined in a psychologically detailed way; it is a bit as though he were a captivating, impenetrable personification of Vice from the morality plays⁶ – something Richard (another memorably negative Shakespearean character) explicitly says about himself in *Richard III*.⁷

Even if one can be assimilated to the other, Richard's case is somewhat different from that of Iago, who does not suffer because of the crimes he commits and who is not capable of triggering negative empathy. The first scene of the chronicle play finds Richard involved in a monologue in which he affirms that he has devoted his life to evil because, due to his physical deformity, he was excluded from the pleasures and joys to which others normally have access. Here are Richard's vibrant words⁸:

6 See Spivack 1958.

7 "Thus, like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralize two meanings in one word" (*Richard III*, III.i.82-83).

8 "And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover, / To entertain these fair well-spoken days, / I am determined to prove a villain / And hate the idle pleasures of these days" (*Richard III*, I.i.28-31).

I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
 Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
 Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
 Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
 And that so lamely and unfashionable
 That dogs bark at me as I halt by them –
 Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
 Have no delight to pass away the time,
 Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
 And descant on mine own deformity.
 (*Richard III*, I.i.18-27)

Establishing a fatal connection between physical deformity and moral aberration, Richard manages at first to build an empathetic bond with the reader/spectator, a bond that, however, will never cement itself, due essentially to his cold perfidy and his almost total absence of any inner conflict regarding the murders for which he is responsible. “Almost total” because, in at least one case, Richard displays anguish toward his actions. In the third scene of Act V, the night before the crucial battle of Bosworth Field, Richard is visited by the ghosts of all those he has killed, ghosts that wish death upon him the next day. Richard reacts with terror at the nocturnal visions and appears, for the first time, to be tormented by his misdeeds, claiming that he hates himself for his crimes, recognizes himself to be guilty of them, and now discovers himself to be alone⁹. However bright, this is a solitary lightning strike, an early attempt on Shakespeare’s part to confer psychological depth onto an evildoing character, an attempt that is neither fully nor uniformly developed in *Richard III* and, which, as we will see in the next section, will come to fruition only later, in *Macbeth*. Thus, Richard, like Iago, albeit for different reasons, is a villain, a type of negative character who is rarely capable of evoking

9 “O, no! alas, I rather hate myself. / For hateful deeds committed by myself! / [...] My conscience hath a thousand several tongues, / And every tongue brings in a several tale, / And every tale condemns me for a villain. / Perjury, perjury, in the highest degree; / Murder, stern murder, in the direst degree; / All several sins, all used in each degree, / Throng to the bar, crying all, Guilty, guilty! / I shall despair. There is no creature loves me; / And if I die no soul will pity me: / Nay, wherefore should they, since that I myself / Find in myself no pity to myself?” (*Richard III*, V.iii.190-204).

the empathy of the reader/spectator in a profound way and who, in different guises, has been a popular type across time: in the eighteenth century, for example, with the Marquise of Merteuil in Pierre Chardelos de Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons* and with Don Giovanni in the eponymous opera by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Lorenzo da Ponte; in the nineteenth century, with Uriah Heep in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* and, in the twentieth, with Judge Holden in Cormac MacCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.

A Broken, Expressionistic Song: Giuseppe Verdi's Macbeth

Across the long history of tragedy, one that has been marked by constant oscillations and transformations, Shakespeare deserves special credit for having reflected profoundly on negative empathy. His tragedies, in fact, represent a culmination in the history of this aesthetic experience; leaving aside the degree of latent identification they evoke, his negative characters are among the most extraordinary in the entire global imaginary, embodying the concept of evil par excellence (specifically, a form of evil that is subtly and inexplicably attractive), as embodied in characters such as Iago, Richard III, Lady Macbeth, and others.

Macbeth is a striking example of a tragedy centered on negative characters (the positive figures play a relatively marginal role). These characters, however, are never one-dimensional, but always complex and multifaceted¹⁰. This makes of the play a radical act, one that finds its best analogue in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Demons*, a choral novel with almost exclusively negative characters, one which evokes latent empathy toward an entire community that is shot through with evil and madness. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, though, negative empathy comes to intersect with a series of connected themes: dreams, the supernatural, the hallucinatory, the nocturnal unconscious. As Jan Kott (1974, 85-98) claimed, the idea of history as nightmare underlies this collection of themes. A form of latent identification, mediated by aesthetic distance, is in operation toward the protagonist in particular: the pressure exerted by the witches and their predictions for the future, his fragility, his inner conflict, and his dependence on his wife are

10 On the co-presence of good and evil see Lombardo 2010, 57-60.

all factors that serve to activate a disturbing negative empathy. This is especially true in the first phase, before the transformation into a tyrant has taken place. Lady Macbeth is a different example, since she appears as a kind of androgynous demon, a characterization that is distant from the all-too-human depiction of her husband, and she takes on empathetic depth only in the final scene of sleepwalking. This is the case even if, as is always true in theater, there have been great actresses, such as Adelaide Ristori and Sarah Bernhardt, who rooted their performances in empathy and humanity. This is a turn that occurred around 1830, before which the dominant interpretation was that of the superhuman monster embodied by Hannah Pritchard in her performance (Clausen 2005).

The reception of Shakespeare in musical theater has been and continues to be quite rich, almost as much as the reception of his work in film. The first, substantially neoclassical phase of these adaptations is shaped by French translations and re-elaborations, which tend to normalize the Shakespearian text (Vittorini 2000, ch. 5). From this point of view, Verdi's *Macbeth* marks an epochal shift: it is in fact the first lyric opera entirely and exclusively based on Shakespeare's text (in Italian translation, of course)¹¹. At the same time, it is, as Massimo Mila (1980) put it, "the keystone of Verdi's youthful output" (28), one that was understood and valued by critics for its disruptive power only relatively late. It is almost as if the encounter with one of the most disturbing tragedies by Shakespeare (with whom, as is well known, Verdi would have a profound and intense relationship over the course of his entire artistic career) had in some way forged his expressive and expressionistic power, and his abilities as a great playwright as well as a great musician.

Macbeth is an anomalous work, primarily because it is not an opera about love (at least not explicitly). This was highly unusual within the context of Romantic melodrama. Additionally, it does not follow the typical love dynamic between a male protagonist (usually a tenor) and a female protagonist (usually a soprano), with a charac-

11 In this case, the translations were the hendecasyllabic version by Michele Leone (dated 1819-1822) and the version in prose by Carlo Rusconi (1838). See Goldin (1985, 232-45), in an exhaustive chapter devoted to the genesis of the libretto and to Verdi's creative role.

ter taking on the role of the antagonist (generally a baritone). It was precisely the absence of a conventional structure, together with the direct work carried out on a text as full of expressive shades as Shakespeare's, that allowed Verdi to develop a new way of intertwining recitative and singing. This feature would still be crucial in his last two masterpieces, both of which were drawn from Shakespeare, namely *Othello* and *Falstaff*. Thanks to this intertwining, the smoothness of *bel canto* is deconstructed in favor of a continuous and irregular alternation of vocal registers, from *sottovoce* to *canto spiegato*, the choice of which is dictated by the dramatic setting (Petrobelli 2008, 46). And it is precisely this thick intertwining between word and music that allows us to enter the mind of the protagonist, to make us feel empathy.

As always, Verdi worked intensely and in direct contact with his librettists (in this case, Francesco Maria Piave, and then after a certain point Andrea Maffei), whom he requests to and sometimes imposes on specific expressive solutions. Even if, unlike Richard Wagner, Verdi never penned his own libretto, the self-consciousness that he displays in his rich correspondence could lead us to define him, with an intentional, whimsical paradox, the greatest Italian playwright of the nineteenth century. Indeed, his overall poetics centers around this interaction between verbal and musical text, leading to a performative potentiality encapsulated by the quite effective formulation "stage word [*parola scenica*]" that would come to be theorized, a century later, by semioticians of the theater. In *Macbeth*, all of this takes place through a gradual stripping away of the dramatic text, which is followed faithfully, for the most part. "Few words, few but significant", Verdi asked of Piave various times, as Paolo Gallarati has observed in an essay that brings into relief the continuity of the opera's tension, one that is powered by violent contrasts throughout¹².

Negative empathy toward the protagonist develops especially in the first two acts, starting from the first appearance of the witches and their disturbing prophecy. The witches represent an anthropological theme with a long tradition that is pregnant with symbolism: while in Shakespeare they suggest a demonic and supernatural perversion of motherhood and the natural and political order, and while to our

12 See Gallarati (2011, 91-103), an essay included in the program note on the occasion of a performance conducted by Riccardo Muti and directed by Peter Stein.

eyes today they represent a sort of underground resistance to the patriarchal world, in the nineteenth century, they had just begun to be an object of study. One need only consider the 1862 Jules Michelet text *The Sorceress*, which connects them to ancient fertility rites. Verdi himself appears to echo the interpretation of August Schlegel, for whom witches embody the inexplicable, the uncontrollable, and the disquieting¹³. Musically, a further grotesque component is added to this: the Romantic aesthetic of ugliness that Verdi knew quite well how to deploy. Verdi's *Macbeth* thus opens with a disturbing and anomalous frame for an Italian opera (which is usually not enamored with the fantastic), that is, with the image of the negative energy that will completely dominate the protagonist. Empathy in his regards is activated immediately thanks to the first aria Macbeth sings: an emotional reaction to the prophecy, in which he expresses his anguish at the murderous desire that is beginning to form (he repeats several times: "Blood-soaked thought, where did you come from?")¹⁴. Inner conflict characterizes various other moments in this first phase: the crucial decision to kill King Duncan and the duet with Lady Macbeth after the murder; and then, after the second murder, the *concertato* in which the protagonist hallucinates the ghost of Banquo during a banquet. These are all moments in which the continuity of singing is broken into fragments to follow all the moments of Macbeth's crisis, his oscillating between annihilating anguish and nostalgia for innocence lost. This oscillation, which allows us to enter his crushed psyche, is made even more concrete in monologue arias, a technique of subjectification that serves in theater as the principal vehicle of empathy. Here, for example, is the one pronounced before the hallucination of the dagger:

Is this a dagger I see, turned toward me?
 If you aren't a dream, then let me grasp you.
 You evade me...yet I see you! You run ahead
 of me along the unclear path that in my mind
 I set out to follow! What a horrible sight!
 The blade is stained with blood!
 But nothing is there. Only my bloodied

13 Clausen (2005) offers an interesting reading that puts Shakespeare and Verdi scholarship into dialogue.

14 For the Italian text, see Piave 2009, I.iii.

mind gives it form, and as reality
 presents illusion before my eyes.
 Across half of the world
 nature is now dead: now the murderer,
 like a ghost, creeps in the shadows.
 The witches now realize their mysteries.
 Unmoving earth! Hush beneath my steps...
 (*The sound of a ringing bell.*)
 It is decided...that bronze beckons!
 Hear it not, Duncan! It is an eternal knell
 Calling you toward heaven, or toward hell.
 (Piave, *Macbeth*, I.xi)

In order to represent the different modalities of Macbeth's inner conflict, the music coagulates around certain sentences and words, such as the obsession with impurity ("Oh this hand! / Not even the ocean could / wash these hands for me" [Piave, *Macbeth*, I. xiv]). In the second part (that is, in the last two acts), when the protagonist has transformed completely into a tyrant, the dramaturgical arc is ever more concentrated on the sequence of murders committed to preserve power and on Macbeth's inevitable decline. Of course, there is the decisive aria that gives expression to the remorse for the general cursedness in which the protagonist has fallen and for the pure evil toward which he has directed his life (*Pietà, rispetto, amore* [*Compassion, respect, love*]) and so also to moments of inner conflict that activate negative empathy, which returns again in the brief, famous monologue after the queen's death. It is a form of empathy that is even more pronounced in the first version, which came to the stage at Florence's Teatro della Pergola in 1847, which included an aria after the second appearance of the witches, and most importantly, the death of the protagonist on-stage, thus preserving focus on him. This differs from the second version of 1865 (the one that has continued to be staged in theater since), where a chorus in the conclusion celebrates, with a sustained rhythm, the liberation from the oppressor (this is functionally similar to the finale Mozart added to his *Don Giovanni*).

Through *Macbeth*, Verdi appears to engage in a Shakespearean experiment with music to enter systematically into the wavering mind of a negative character. However, things seem a little different when it comes to the other protagonist, Lady Macbeth, often considered to be almost a double, a specular part of her husband. In analyzing the

poetics of the stageword in relation to Shakespeare, Guido Paduano has shown how Verdi, through a series of small deviations from his dramatic source, tends to depict Lady Macbeth all the more as a demonic force, capable even of sarcasm whenever she controls her husband (Paduano 1992, 115-32). The most stunning example comes in the duet in Act I, in which Macbeth is seized by terror, whereas Lady Macbeth responds with minimal emotion and issues directions with cold pragmatism. Here is how in Shakespeare's play she reacts to her husband's pronouncements, as he obsesses over the screams that he believes himself to hear, prophesying for him a life without sleep:

Who was it that thus cried? Why, worthy thane,
 You do unbend your noble strength to think
 So brainsickly of things. Go get some water
 And wash this filthy witness from your hand.
 Why did you bring these daggers from the place?
 They must lie there. Go, carry them and smear
 The sleepy grooms with blood.
 (*Macbeth*, II.ii.58-64)

In the Piave-Verdi version, Lady Macbeth does not react to the terrible, tragic remark on the murder of sleep with these practical instructions (summarized slightly later in the opera), which partly relieve the gravity of the situation, but with an equally potent reply, which sarcastically takes up the three titles of the protagonist present in the prophecy of the witches, in order to taunt her husband's fragility:

Tell me, did you not hear another voice?
 Macbeth, you are bold, but without daring;
 Glamis, you tremble halfway and stop;
 Cawdor, you are a conceited child.
 (Piave, *Macbeth*, I.xiii)

This addition to Shakespeare's text, which actually consists of a bricolage of other passages from the tragedy, represents the culmination of a subtle and complete manipulation, a form of rewriting that amplifies the protagonist's subalternity. And it is the music itself that grounds this meaning: Lady Macbeth's lines take up the melody of Macbeth's, but in a major tonality, with the sinuous musical figure assigned to the cello and clarinet, accompanied by the strings' *pizz-*

*zicato*¹⁵. The terrified, remorseful voice coming from Macbeth's self (with which we as spectators empathize), is juxtaposed to the voice representing the woman-demon's dominion, staging a relationship in-between doubling and mirroring.

Within the expressive strategy of amplification of Lady Macbeth's dominion, one also finds the aria composed for the 1865 edition, *La luce langue* [*Light is dying away*], which is focused on the principal lever of Shakespeare's tragedy, the libidinous desire for power, the "desire for the throne" exalted in the cabaletta-like finale. It is exalted with a nearly physical euphoria that is altogether foreign to Shakespeare's tragedy, even if the first part of the aria, quite free in its musical tenor (more an *arioso* than a proper aria) and suspended in a nocturnal melancholy, could be understood as a moment of uncertainty on Lady Macbeth's part, if not one of regret. (This is an attempt at humanization that was also pursued in the theatrical interpretations of Adelaide Ristori)¹⁶. The dramatic choice to make the female character participate in the planning of the third great murder, the massacre of the Macduff family, surely falls within the overall valorization of the negative and of Lady Macbeth's dominant role, which symmetrically amplifies our empathy toward Macbeth as the victim.

In Shakespeare as in Verdi, the role of the female protagonist culminates in the famous sleepwalking scene, which overturns all the traits of the first part, in a dense series of internal references, presenting Lady Macbeth as overcome with anguish. Given the amplification of her negativity in Verdi's opera, the reversal results even more pronounced, powered by the *bel canto* tradition of madness, lending to this character an absolute alterity and a disturbing spectrality. In the version of the opera directed by Mario Martone in 2015 for Paris's Théâtre du Châtelet (tending toward the abstraction of a boundless night), empathy toward Lady Macbeth is intensified by a video by the choreographer Raffaella Giordano, evoking forms of archaic possessions and rituality that could be straight out of Ernesto De Martino's anthropology. In the version directed by Emma Dante in 2017, staged in Turin, Palermo, and Macerata, and then presented

15 For a musical commentary of this passage and Verdi's *Macbeth* in general, see Budden 2001, 269-312.

16 See Baldini 2001, 129; and Clausen 2005.

at the Edinburgh Festival, we find Lady Macbeth surrounded by a set of hospital beds, a clear allusion to madness, which begins with a dance: a moment of surreal grace, enveloped in a poetic blue, as if to dilute the tragic madness of Verdi's music.

As in Euripides's *Medea*, in *Macbeth* the author seems to push the mechanism of negative empathy to the extreme; he allows the spectators to enter the mind of the character and allows them to experience all the doubts, conflicts, and motivations that push toward the negative act of murder. After this initial phase of preparation is over and the character has been transformed into an embodiment of pure evil, identification seems no longer to be very sustainable. For this reason, Shakespeare in his ending celebrates the installation of the new order and of a positive kingship. But it is no accident that the contemporary reception of the play has tended to compress or cut this part, amplifying instead the tragedy's nihilistic dimension, as we see in the filmic adaptations by Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa, Roman Polanski, and Justin Kurzel. At the same time, Verdi's final chorus, which, with its kind of ringing rhythm, celebrates the definitive triumph of the new king and of good over evil, is muffled under Dante's direction. As a result of a choice made by the conductors (Gabriele Ferro in Palermo, Gianandrea Noseda in Turin) the endings are mounted together, a fascinating solution, especially because the direction makes them homogeneous by focusing totally on the protagonist. After the actors dressed in black have laid down their swords on the corpse, everyone leaves the stage, and they sing the finale from the proscenium stage or even offstage, while on the body of the king there rains from above the metal-grill rose window that throughout the show was meant to display regality with a kind of Baroque gesture. The image of Macbeth's corpse alone on the stage, devastated by his thirst for power, by his "desire for the throne" (the grills) imagined by Emma Dante for the finale, perfectly expresses the nihilistic vision condensed in the most famous passage of Shakespeare's play, that life is "[...] a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (*Macbeth*, V.v. 29-31).

After having been rediscovered and reevaluated, Verdi's *Macbeth* is now a stable work in the opera repertoire, one that has enjoyed legendary performances by great conductors (Thomas Schippers, Claudio Abbado, Riccardo Muti, and Giuseppe Sinopoli), and which continues to inspire the most creative directors, such as Damiano Michieletto.

It is not, however, the only musical version of Shakespeare's darkest tragedy: in 1910, working with a libretto by Edmond Fleg (the same librettist as George Enescu's *Cedipe*), Ernest Bloch created an oneiric and symbolist version, in which negative empathy is produced not at Verdi's burning rhythm, but on the contrary through a hypnotic flux and rarefaction. A form of stripping away also underlies *Macbeth: Tre atti senza nome* [*Macbeth: Three Acts without a Name*] (2002) by Salvatore Sciarrino, who authored the libretto as well: an opera based on the permutation of an obsessive cell ("Come, night / dressed in the blackest black" [Sciarrino 2002, I.ii, and later taken up in III.iii]) and on the text's re-elaboration through the theme of the mask. Once again, negative empathy is tied here to the destabilization of identity, the night, obsession, and a catharsis reached through music and performance.

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