

Narco-Capitalist Macbeths in TV Series: Shakespeare's Archive in *The Wire* (David Simon, 2002–2008) and *Breaking Bad* (Vince Gilligan, 2008–2013)

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I will tackle serial appropriations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in *The Wire* (David Simon, 2002–2008) and *Breaking Bad* (Vince Gilligan, 2008–2013). Both complex TV series recast *Macbeth* in the context of narco-capitalism. Rather than constituting an alternative to mainstream capitalism, narco-capitalism maintains the American and global socioeconomic orders as depicted in both series. Paying attention to what will be defined as Shakespeare's archive, it will be shown that traces from *Macbeth* are reactivated in *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*. Shakespeare's archive is formed by traces of Shakespeare's dramatic and narrative sources, quartos, folios, later editions and adaptations. This corpus displays verbal and non-verbal features of Shakespeare's oeuvre. Taken together, traces and reenactments of Shakespeare highlight the multifarious and competing ways in which Shakespearean appropriations sail through the depth and length of complex TV. To illustrate this, I will use archive theory, transmedia theory and narco-capitalism as lenses of analysis. This framework helps explain archival strategies employed for Shakespearean appropriation within the social context of both series. The results reveal that Shakespeare's archive in both works leads to an ambivalent ethical assessment of the potentialities of narco-capitalism.

Keywords: narco-capitalism; archive; transmedia; *Macbeth*; reenactment; trace; sources; source text; adaptation

1. Introduction

This article tackles the interplays between Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and two complex TV series: *The Wire*, written by David Simon—first aired on HBO June 2, 2002, last aired on March 9, 2008—, and *Breaking Bad*, written by Vince Gilligan—first aired on AMC March 20, 2008, last aired on September 29, 2013. While these series are not the first screen works that recast *Macbeth* in the war on drugs, I argue that they use Shakespeare's archive as a lens to explore narco-capitalism. Shakespeare's archive is formed by Shakespeare's authoritative texts, their narrative and dramatic sources, afterlives, adaptations, performances and all documents connected to Shakespeare's oeuvre. Shakespeare's archive is used to explain Shakespearean critical and performance edition histories. It is also evolving as intermedial reenactment of past performances. My understanding of Shakespeare's archive combines these two models. Meanwhile, narco-capitalism is not represented here as counter to mainstream capitalism but as a part of the US's socioeconomic order, founded upon—and funded by—the drug business.

Shakespeare's oeuvre adds dramatic density to serial dramaturgies. Appreciation of these two series' interconnections with *Macbeth* increases if Shakespeare's authoritative text is not regarded as the only nor as the main point of reference for comparative analysis. As suggested, Shakespeare in these and other series is not just an authoritative corpus but a set of "traces"—i.e. "linguistic, cultural or thematic residues" (Iyengar, 2023, 184)—and "reenactments"—i.e. a "revised, revisited, reconceived, reconstituted" performance of the plays, "a discursive and performative space and condition of awareness [...] of the performances" (Cartelli 2019, 11, 13)—. Shakespeare's archive agglutinates parts and sums of texts and performance histories, either for their collection or for their reactivation. Therefore, it provides an angle to combine logics of trace and reenactment that allows us to discern patterns of appropriation in series.

Shakespearean scholars interested in *The Wire* have centered on its indebtedness to Shakespeare's histories (Bronfen 2020; Pittman 2020). However, Roger Downey described Stringer Bell as someone who, "doggedly pursuing his version of the American Dream to its bitter end, [was a] brother beneath the skin to Macbeth" (2007, n.p.). Tom French regarded Bell as the series' equivalent to the Scottish warrior (2012, n.p.). The character's name, "Bell," replicates that of the object used in *Macbeth* to summon the Scottish thane for "regicidal action" (Kinney, 2006, 81). Analyzing D'Angelo Barksdale's explanation of the rules of chess, Elisabeth Bronfen affirms that "[t]he moves that individual players can make are highly codified and ritually predetermined, based on a shared memory of what schemes are possible" (2020, 61). Such rules explain Shakespeare's grafting onto *The Wire* by suggesting an archive of mechanisms of transmedia storytelling

that evoke theatrical memories. When D'Angelo reveals the Queen—i.e. Stringer Bell—as the player with the greatest flexibility for moving across the chessboard, Avon Barksdale's right-hand man is suggested as his usurper. From season one to three we follow Bell taking his friend and rival Barksdale's seat as kingpin on West Baltimore. This move towards usurpation narratively expands what happens in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, similarly, over the course of almost three acts.

The elusiveness of the connection of Shakespeare's authoritative texts with these series encourages viewers to look for performative interplays between them. D'Angelo's toying with the chess pieces suggests a microcosm that transposes the limited stock of moves allowed to characters who know themselves to be actors in a stage to the TV screen. Pawns and Queens are actor-characters who, in this small-scale play—a sort of *Table Top Shakespeare*—, may, like Macbeth, aspire to replace the piece which stands as monarch. However, *The Wire*'s interconnections with *Macbeth* also find explicit home in the play's screen history. Near the end of season one, Omar Little, Bell's Nemesis, returns to the streets of Baltimore to stir up future strife with Barksdale. This arrival playfully mimics the manner in which *Macbeth* often ends on screen: an usurper arrives in Scotland to threaten the recently crowned Malcom.

More explicitly than *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad* employed *Macbeth* as a guidebook for fans. Paul Cantor (2019) and Jeffrey Chisum (2019) pointed out the transpositions of the conventions of Shakespeare's tragedy to the narrative structure and generic context of Gilligan's series. More intensely than in *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad* used *Macbeth*'s katabatic sources. In "Crawl Space," Walter White, who has by this time amassed a fortune by selling his own brand of 99.1% pure meta-amphetamines, goes into his basement to put together \$500,000 to pay for relocating his family to escape Gustavo Fring. Finding out that his wife Skyler has given part of the money to her lover, Walter laughs maniacally and lies crying on the floor of the basement. Anguish and laughter, mixing the tragic with the grotesque, renders this space theatrical. The combination brings *Breaking Bad* close to the Shakespearean stage, in which a trap door symbolically intercommunicated the earth and the Avernus. The Whites' basement dovetails TV drama's domesticity, reenactments of Shakespearean playacting and, by implication, traces of the Medieval plays which reproduced hell as a physical space that were sources to *Macbeth*. In Shakespeare, Macbeth descends to a non-defined space to find out from the Witches what the future has in store. Oftentimes, the world of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is shown on screen as one in which the lines between earth and hell are porous.

Shakespeare's archive in *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* dramatically explores the narco-capitalist zeitgeist of the two series. In the pages that follow, I will define archive as a lens to explore Shakespearean traces in both works. I will support

this concept semiotically with terminology from transmedia theory. I will define narco-capitalism as a context wherein Shakespeare's archive may be understood in *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*. Finally, I will explore archival reactivations of Shakespeare's sources, source text and adaptations of *Macbeth* in *The Wire* and in *Breaking Bad*.

2. Archive, transmedia and narco-capitalism

Research on Shakespeare's archive has focused on its uses for printed and digital editions (Galey 2014) and performance (Hodgdon 2016; Gutneratne 2016; Buchanan 2020). The fragmentary logic of the archive helps understand the increase of "fleeting citations of Shakespeare or [that] draw intermittently on character types and narratives from the plays" on TV (Greenhalgh, 2022, 257). These have contributed to disseminate the view that Shakespeare's playwriting was a template for contemporary screen fiction (Balló and Pérez, 2015, 12). But due to complex TV's "subtle and debatable" relationship with Shakespeare (Wald, 2020, 2), Shakespeare's works often resurface in series as "cross-mappings" (Bronfen 2020), as "slingshots" (Wilson 2021), or as "returns" (Wald 2020), i.e. as traces. A Shakespearean deposit is suggested to be underneath serial substrata. In fact, fandom practices such as "drilling" (Mittell [2009] 2015, 289) are recurrent strategies used to appeal to viewers. Following Sarah Clarke Stuart, literary works "help to expand the meaning of the show, which is sometimes a great relief when meaning within the text seems a little thin" (2011: 3).

Michael Foucault describes discursive traces which, all collected, are arranged serially.¹ The philosopher privileges documents rather than narratives, and advocates for the identification of "series" of documents, which are "juxtaposed to one another, [following] one another, overlap[ping] and intersect[ing]" each other, irreducible as they are, "to a linear schema" ([1969] 2002: 9). We should, he suggests, identify "discursive events," which allows us to discern principles regulating relations between the afore-mentioned series (Ibid: 30). This does not mean tracing past discursive events in a restorative fashion, but to discover which modes of existence characterize such statements "independently of their enunciation [...], in which they [were] reactivated, and used" (Ibid: 139). The archive is not merely cumulative, but productive.

1 Uses of Foucault's theory for the purposes of extracting Shakespearean remains in series is precedented in Víctor Huertas-Martín, 2022, "Hamlet Goes Legit: Archaeology, Archive and Transformative Adaptation in *Sons of Anarchy* (FX 2008–2014)," *International Journal of English Studies*, 22(1), 41–61.

Foucault's archive interrelates well with transmedia theory, which helps explain serial Shakespeares. Lars Elleström describes transmedia storytelling as "narratives in different media types working together to form a larger whole" (2019, 6). As the previous theatrical examples show, this means that "media characteristics" are recognizable in other media (Ibid.). Integrating narratives in communicative processes means that verbal language is not the only means of communication (Ibid., 11). Narratives do not autonomously exist except as communicative processes through media products between communicative minds (Ibid., 21–22).

Parallels between Foucault's and Elleström's ideas are easy to discern by establishing equivalences between "mediation" and "representation" and the above-defined "trace" and "reenactment." "Mediation" is, following Elleström, the "display of sensory configurations that are perceived by human sense receptors." Such configurations are "presemiotic" and understood as "the physical realization of entities (with material, sensorial, and spatiotemporal qualities, and semiotic potential)" (Ibid., 23). The latter, "representation," is a "semiotic phenomenon," understood "as the heart of signification" when "a human agent makes sense of the mediated sensory configurations, [and] sign functions are activated and representation is at work" (23). Mediations share with traces their residual features. Shakespeare exists in series as traces, remains or mediations, not always explicitly expressed as Shakespearean. Reenactments are activated sign functions that the perceiver may more easily identify as Shakespearean. These two poles signification are neither mutually exclusive nor absolute.

Shakespeare's archive in these series develops within the context of narco-capitalism. Following Laurence de Sutter, narco-capitalism designates a psychopolitical system sustained by the production of stimulants. Gaining strength beyond World War Two, narco-capitalism made progress as governments legalized and marketed addictive products. The politics of excitement which drives consumption confirm, as De Sutter suggests, the fact that contemporary modernity is "unimaginable without drugs" (2018: 45). He argues that the survival of banks during the subprime crisis of 2008 was possible only thanks to narco-capitalism. While traditional investors withdrew cash from banks, drug dealers pumped "liquidity into the system—which they needed to give their cash a legal appearance" (46). In the US post-industrial context, as Jamie J. Fader shows, whenever drug workers managed to keep "a foothold in the legal and illegal economies" (2019: 66), their quality of life increased due to the reduced risks of detection, the increase in clientele and the possibility of justifying increasing sums of money. Such is "the game" in which contemporary global TV series have been setting their dramaturgies—see *Narcos* (José Padilha, Chris Brancato, Eric Newman, 2015–2017), *El Chapo* (Daniel Posada, 2017–2018), *Hache* (Verónica

Fernández, 2019), *El Immortal* (José Manuel Lorenzo, Rafa Montesinos, David Ulloa, 2022), etc.—, many of them inspired in *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*.

Cocaine exists, as De Sutter says, “in an economic system appropriate to its volatility, its illegality, its addictiveness [...] an abstract nervous system that has become the perfect excitation” (50). This excitation is explained in terms of “efficiency.” Such efficiency consists of consuming narcotics for the sole purpose of continuing to consume narcotics, an activity by way of which, arguably, the greyness of everyday life is subverted. For De Sutter, grey moments take place at times “with high levels of nervousness, within which accidents occur suggesting that things could be different” (94). This excitation enables the subject to cross material and conceptual borders which otherwise cannot be crossed. But these crossings produce increases of energy accompanied by the risk of losing control (104). Crossing borders defines the journeys of the likes of Stringer Bell or Walter White as Macbeth analogues. Likewise, it defines the spontaneous moves that subaltern characters in *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* often individually or collectively make.

3. Reactivating *Macbeth* in *The Wire*

According to Monique L. Pittman, Shakespeare and David Simon bring into play “the shards” of unofficial history to disrupt “the uniformity of a narrated past” (379). This is achieved, she continues, by telling an alternative American history centered on the urban classes (Ibid.). Honing in on Baltimore’s institutional corruption, apathy and sclerosis, Simon used his previous work, *Homicide: A Year on the Streets of Baltimore* (1991), as the basis for *The Wire*. Similarly, when writing *Macbeth*, Shakespeare handled historical material while keeping an eye on the political situation of his own time. It has been argued that to write *Macbeth* Shakespeare conflated chronicle sources to pay homage to the Scottish King James. For Geoffrey Bullough, “the play could be truly said to present a composite picture of the darkest side of Scottish medieval history as viewed from the happy present in James’s benign reign of unity and concord” (1973, 448). Though Shakespeare’s departures from Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Ireland* (1587), Hector Boece’s *Historia Gentis Scotorum* (1527) and George Buchanan’s *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* (1582) support this view, the complexity of the play’s sources—including witch trial reports, the official account of the Gowrie Conspiracy, official discourses on the Gunpowder Plot—challenge one-dimensional readings of *Macbeth* as Stuart propaganda.

Simon, as Shakespeare before him, conflated documents that the creatives gathered for their scripts. It is tempting to think that Simon’s sententiae, from his eye-witnessing of court cases, mediate lines from *Macbeth*. His conclusions, summarized as ten rules, shed light on the machinery of Baltimore’s legal

system. Rule number one read: "A good man is hard to find, but twelve of them, gathered together in one place, is a miracle" (1,164). This skepticism on human morals might be described as a mediation of Young Macduff's words, for whom "there are liars and swearers enough to beat the honest men and hang up them" (4.3.55-57). Rule number two—"The victim is killed once, but a crime scene can be murdered a thousand times" (145)—resembles detective Bunk's address to a corpse: "Don't think about coming back a murder. Don't even think" (1, 2). In translating this sententia to the TV screen, Bunk's words might mediate Macbeth's address to Banquo's Ghost—"never shake / Thy gory locks at me" (3.4.57)—, indicating a human desire to not confront the haunting ghost of a victim. Bunk's directive comprises the terror produced by the Ghost in Shakespeare's text, and represents and reenacts Shakespearean performance memories.

Elusive as Shakespearean references seem, the series' pathos is intensified through them. Nightmare and war images turn Baltimore's streets into a sinister landscape. As Bubs asserts, there is a "thin line 'tween heaven and here" ("Old Cases"). Challenges—"You're gonna see me in your sleep" ("Duck and Cover"), "Y'all can tell Barksdale and them know who owns these towers" ("The Detail")—echo Scotland's intermediate state between a heavenly and a hellish space, how terrifying it is when ghosts visit Macbeth while he sleeps or his boasts when faced with the Anglo-Scottish approaching army. Cinematic mediations replace traditional TV naturalism with spine-chilling spectacle when The Towers' neighbors drop objects on Prezswelzsky's car ("The Detail"), a scene that approximates the frightening arrival of trees to Dunsinane. Inanimate objects, anonymously handled by animate beings, advance against an oppressor which they judge to be tyrannical. Cockeyed youngsters and ghost-like mangled warriors step, as Bubs puts it, "on dead soldiers" ("The Buys"). A theatrical enthusiasm drives those who enter this war zone. This qualifies the likes of Bubs to dismiss Sergeant Sydnor's inability to pass as one of Baltimore's "soldiers." The appropriateness of clothes, an issue also tackled in *Macbeth*, points in *The Wire* at characters' suitability for specific roles and at the mechanisms by which individuals put on the robes of others in cycles of emulation. By accepting to wear D'Angelo's clothes—as Macbeth accepts "borrowed robes" (1.3.110)—, Bell accepts to replace him as Donette's partner. Prophecy suggests routes to predict future breaches in loyalty. Brianna's declaration of loyalty to D'Angelo—"As long as those Towers stand to, I am Dee's mother" ("Stray Rounds")—predicts the collapse of The Towers and D'Angelo's downfall. This prediction is strengthened by association with the Third Apparition's prediction—"Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him" (4.1.91-93)—. The association of these two conditionals help viewers perceive mediations from *Macbeth*. As we guess, those Towers will not stand.

For Paul Dean, Macbeth's imagery points "to an underlying pattern, an order waiting to emerge [...] at once fragmented and discontinuous, and lucidly controlled" (1999, 220). Simon's series achieves this effect as reactivations of *Macbeth* grow more visible. This increases with selections and alterations on traces of *Macbeth*'s chronicles and adaptations. Wallace's exile from and return to Baltimore exemplifies this. As William C. Carroll says, in film and theatre productions of *Macbeth*, "in his return Fleance represents the revenging son of a murdered father, a Hamlet—or, rather, a Fortinbras—figure who has somehow entered the wrong play" (2013, 274). Wallace's return to "The Pits" is untimely since his persecutor Stringer Bell still rules, contrary to what occurs in *Macbeth*. Fleance's return, as told in Holinshed, is not part of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. *Chronicles*—in which Fleance is killed by the King of Wales—and the archive of Fleance's stage returns reconnect Shakespeare's play with his sources and expands on Shakespeare's performance practice. Meanwhile, Bell's engaging in developing mirrors Macbeth's eagerness to build up Dunsinane Castle, a venture narrated in Holinshed and Buchanan. While, for Russell M. Hiller, the building episode in *Chronicles* accentuates Macbeth's growing despotism and greed, Buchanan "underscores that the fortress symbolizes [Macbeth's] growing isolation, vulnerability, and despair" (2021, 107). Rather than conflating sources, as Shakespeare did, *The Wire* stresses something akin to Buchanan's view as Bell's alienation increases while his developing delusion grows.

Despite Macbeth's actions, spectators and readers continue to be sympathetic towards the character's suffering. This may be explained by Macbeth's capacity to split himself into two characters: an actor and a character inside a story. Macbeth "simultaneously [stages] the fictional character and the existentially present performer, and [undermines] illusion in order to heighten the affective response of the audience" (Fox, 2013, 208). This duplicity in *Macbeth* seems evident, as Fox's essay shows, in Macbeth's "Tomorrow" soliloquy. In *The Wire*, during one of their confrontations, Lester Freamon, believing that Jimmy McNulty's motives for his dedication to work are self-serving, diagnoses his "sick" colleague: "A life, Jimmy, you know what that is? It's the shit that happens when you're waiting for the things that never come" ("Slapstick"). Freamon's words attempt to calm down the narco-capitalist excitement of the workaholic and unstable McNulty and mediate Macbeth's realization of the futility of creeping "in [a] petty pace from day to day / To the last syllable of recorded time" (5.5.19-20). This *pharmakon* proves more effective with drug dealers who get to acquire a Macbeth-like distant, quiet, view of themselves. As Dennis Cutty Wise says in an interview with a priest, "I've just had this feelin' for a long time and it's like I'm standing outside myself, watching me do things I don't wanna do, you know? Jus' seein' me like I'm somebody else but never ever being able to stop the show. I'm tired"

("Back Burners"). Unlike Macbeth, Dennis chooses to end the performance by leaving "the game." While confessing, D'Angelo's dramatic reenactment of his intervention in the killing of Deirdre is punctuated by his memory of the tapping sounds against the victim's window, a representation of the knocking on hell's gate invoked by the Porter in *Macbeth*. On receiving congratulations for his confession, seeing Rhonda Pearlman's reaction to the photos of Deirdre's corpse, he sympathetically realizes this brutality's impact on the attorney. This permits him to summarize his history: "Y'all don't understand, man. You don't get it. I grew up in this shit [...] It's just what we do. You just live with this shit until *you can't breathe no more*. I swear to God, I was courtside for eight months and I was freer in jail than I was at home" ("Sentencing"; italics added). Echoing Macbeth's sleepless suffering—"Sleep *no more*" (2.2.36), "Sleep *no more*" (2.2.42; emphases mine), "'Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep *no more*. Macbeth shall sleep *no more*" (2.2.43-44; italics added)—and Macbeth's anticipation of his certain downfall—"... struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard *no more*" (5.5.24-25; emphasis mine), D'Angelo's words mediate Shakespeare's repetitions. By asking to "start over [...] to go somewhere where [he] can breathe like regular folk" ("Sentencing"), D'Angelo mediates Macbeth's exposed desires to "... wash [that] blood / Clean from [his] hand" (2.2.61-62)—. *The Wire* evokes *Macbeth*'s archive by reenacting meditative journeys present in an American Shakespearean legacy developed in recent popular adaptations (see Albanese 2010). Such adaptations often present convicts who, as films like *Shakespeare Behind Bars* (Dir. Hank Rogerson, 2006) show, find through Shakespeare the way to unleash and alleviate what De Sutter describes as the "irritability and [...] irrationality" that was born of the urbanization that accompanied the development of western capitalism (99). *Macbeth*'s archive in *The Wire* capitalizes on oscillations within politics of excitement. Rather than turning them into a politics of anesthetization—described by De Sutter as forms to control politics of excitement (19–20)—, they are turned into an emancipatory subjectivity. Nonetheless, the year *The Wire* ended, AMC started another serial *Macbeth* that pushed narco-capitalist politics of excitement to the limit.

4. Reactivating *Macbeth* in *Breaking Bad*

Following Van Der Werff, the Shakespearean skeleton of *Breaking Bad* permitted writers not to worry "about the big picture to sweat the small stuff" and enjoy "some of the most memorable TV moments ever" (2018). The afterlives of *Breaking Bad*, including Netflix's *El Camino: A Breaking Bad Movie* (dir. Vince Gilligan, 2020) and media adaptations including memes, Greg Mandel's faux Elizabethan poem *Macmeth: The Most Excellent Dark Comedie and Tragical*

Historie of Sir Walter Whyte (2013) and several amateur YouTube *Macbeth* films developed a cultural aftermath to *Breaking Bad* using narco-capitalist culture as a catalyst. This adaptation setting corresponds to Howard Marchitello's view on *Macbeth* in the contemporary global culture, in "a precarious, social, and cultural moment made increasingly—and with increasing rapidity—unstable by what might be called the globalization bubble" (Marchitello, 2013, 425).

Recurrently invoked in *Macbeth*, bubbles aestheticize Walter's obsession with increasing production and distribution of his crystal. Excited by the business, he becomes, like Macbeth, a demonized other, Heisenberg, for those inside the US and those across the Mexican border. Not only his person but his abandoned house becomes a hellish place in series five. When analyzing early performances of *Macbeth*, Jonathan Gil Harris points at the sulphureous brimstone, the coal, the saltpeter and other materials whose odors produced "a palimpsesting of diverse moments in time, as a result of which past and present coincided with each other" (2007, 467). Such smells "were by no means confined to recent political events [but] may have pointed further back in time, to earlier theatrical experiences" (Ibid.), such as medieval plays for the Corpus Christi.

Glynne Wickham regarded *The Harrowing of Hell* as a source for Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. As the story goes, before resurrecting, Christ descended into Hell to demand the release of the souls of the patriarchs and the prophets. The setting for these performances consisted, Wickham says, of the interior of a "gate-house" or the castle courtyard (1966, 68). Christ's arrival was indicated by a knocking at the gates and by a blast of trumpets. Hell's gates crumbled to give Christ passage to release the imprisoned souls. For Wickham, Macduff in *Macbeth* is the Christ-like figure breaking into Macbeth's castle twice as "savior-avenger accompanied by armed archangels" (74). But, as said, the lines dividing hell and heaven are blurred in *Macbeth*. *Breaking Bad* depicts a similar blurring of these divides in the series—home/outside, civilization/wilderness, legal/illegal, success/failure, upright/criminal, etc. Thus, *Breaking Bad* re-activates reenactments and representations of *Macbeth* which could be picked up by part of the Jacobean audiences. *Breaking Bad*'s spaces, such as the home, are stages to katabatic experiences formalized with *Macbeth*'s archive. Earl H. Rovit defines the values the American home as "those that motivate and profoundly inform the particular configuration of social and ideological patterns to which the group mind subscribes," fundamental "to the group's collective attempt to achieve a cohesive image of itself" (1960: 521-522). In *Macbeth*, one of the hero's arguments against the regicide is that, as Duncan's host, he "should against his murderer shut the door [of his house], / Not bear the knife [himself]" (1.7.15-16). Lady Macbeth's exclamation after hearing the news of Duncan's dead—"What, in our house?" (2.3.89)—indicates that the cruelty of the assassination is aggravated by having been carried out in

contravention of the rules of hospitality. Shakespeare's turning the home into a space for transgression of standard ideals is reactivated in *Breaking Bad*. This is evident, for instance, during Walter's descent into Jesse Pinkman's basement, where he confronts an Absolute Other: Krazy-8. His hesitation, his rehearsals with the kitchen knife and his procrastination reenact, as Roger Colby suggests (2012), Macbeth's delays in killing Duncan as well as his dagger vision.

As Wickham says, the medieval hell is shaped like a castle equipped with walls and gates (68–70). Viewed from outside, hell resembles a castle; viewed from inside, it is a sequence of dark dungeons and torture chambers (71). In *Breaking Bad*, individuals like Pinkman are expelled from their own homes. Hank Schroeder suffers at home the effects of his traumatic experience in El Paso. The Whites undergo alienation and deception within the walls of their houses, too. These tensions escalate, culminating in a split which manifests itself during Walter and Skyler's knife-fight near the end of season five.

If the exterior features of the house hint at a transformation of the hell-as-castle metaphor into a hell-as-house metaphor, Shakespeare's traces surface when the house is tainted with the stench of crime. During Walter's last visit to Hank in the Schroeders' garage, understatement and question patterns exchanged by the in-laws paraphrase the tense dialogues between Banquo and Macbeth in the scenes around Duncan's murder. After being crowned, Macbeth announces to Banquo that his presence is requested at "a solemn supper" (3.1.13). Similarly, Walter announces that Skyler would like to have a meal with the Schroeders to celebrate the DEA's recovery. Rather than having Hank keep his suspicions to himself—as Shakespeare does with Banquo—, the writers have Hank accuse Walter ("Blood Money"). After exchanging threats, the in-laws' separation is marked by the garage door's falling down like a castle's portcullis, a point-of-no-return signaling the division between the Schroeders and Walter and, by extension, Walter's upcoming alienation from law-abiding citizens.

The Whites' swimming-pool also evokes katabasis. Following Wickham, the "hell-castle" has a dungeon or a cesspit that provides access to hell-fires (68). In the Pilot, after finding out about his terminal disease, Walter throws burnt matches into the pool, a visual mediation or trace of Macbeth's address to an expiring "brief candle" (5.5.22). Signs, such as the nightmarish vision of the pink teddy bear floating in the pool or the lily of the valley revealed in close-up and confirming Walter's involvement in Brock's poisoning, suggest that the pool is a metaphor for the doom suffered by Walter's associates. Nonetheless, the pool achieves more ambivalent meanings when Skyler attempts suicide by drowning herself ("Fifty-One"), a dramatic turn of events whose outcome deviates from Shakespeare's dramatization of Lady Macbeth's suicide. Rachel Falconer similarly deviates from conceptualizing hell as a site of punishment and

proposes a dialogical approach to hell which suspends punitive judgement. For Falconer, the katabatic experience implies a return to the underworld granting the traveler new wisdom, love or power (2007, 4). While for Lady Macbeth, “hell is murky” (5.1.36), Skyler’s immersion leads to an enlightening experience, an indicator of her future emancipation from Walter.

Breaking Bad’s re-activations of Shakespeare’s sources provide alternatives to Shakespeare’s dramatic decisions. Knockings and trespasses into other people’s castles, as occur during Skyler and Jesse’s encounter (“Cat’s in the Bag...”), or the Salamanca Brothers’ tap-tapping on their axes waiting for Walter to come out of the shower room (“I.F.T.”) reenact, mediate and represent the Porter’s remembrance of Christ’s knocking on hell’s gates. But an orthodox reading of *Harrowing* presupposes the intervention of holy forces. Hardly anyone, including the Schroeders—who intend to “harrow” the Whites’ home to rescue their nephews—is a saint in *Breaking Bad*. While Shakespeare permits Macduff to be “savior-avenger,” the Schroeders’ moral relativism is stressed. According to Kurt Schreyer, allusions to *Harrowing* in *Macbeth* were “a potentially subversive bit of stage business.” By erasing affinities with Christ’s battle with Satan—in the Porter’s scene—, Shakespeare exposed the inadequacy of the Jacobean theology and invited audiences “to link commercial drama with its Catholic antecedents” (2010, 26). As Susanne Greenhalgh argues, works like *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* “have been deemed ‘Shakespearean’ not for any overt references but rather as a signifier of their complex, powerful (predominantly white male) characters and intensive psychological exploration of actions, motives and moral choices” (2022, 258). While Walter’s acts are punished, *Breaking Bad* critiques the white middle classes who, pretending to fight “the good fight,” are morally flawed insofar as offenses like Hank’s racial prejudice and brutality are overlooked. More generally, society’s injustice is evident in *Breaking Bad* since the only way to prosper seems to be narco-capitalism. The cartels, the police, and corporations in one way or another depend on it.

Katabases and allusions to *Macbeth* shed light on the characters’ learning experiences.

Hank’s katabatic experience in El Paso exposes his vulnerability and racial prejudice while collaborating with his Mexican fellows. Hank’s ethnic joke—“Are we just on *mañana* time?” (“Negro y Azul”), a mediation or a trace of Macbeth’s “Tomorrow...”—precedes a reenactment or representation of *Macbeth*’s iconography. Tortuga’s head on a tortoise’s carapace—the severed head being an icon recurrent in *Macbeth*—horrifies him while one of his colleagues—called Vanco (an echo of Banquo)—teases him: “What’s the matter, sweetheart. Looks like you’ve never seen a turtle with a severed head before this!” (Ibid.)—. This paraphrases Banquo’s teasing of Macbeth as he hears the Witches’ prophecies—

“Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear...” (1.3.51)–. Hank’s journey reaffirms his Manichean convictions regarding his siding with “the good fight.” Jesse’s learning experience, a less straightforward one, needed a sequel, *El Camino*, to completely develop the character’s journey. Yet this shift is also based on reenactments of *Macbeth* during Pinkman’s encounter with the red-headed child in Pampas Street (“Peekabo”). Absorbed in binge-watching, partly illuminated by the light coming from a screen filled with knives–distinctive Macbethian icons–, the child’s quietness in his miserable environment furnishes him with the otherworldly air of the two child apparitions Macbeth meets (4.1.75-102). These two children, like *Breaking Bad*’s child, are embedded in unsettling and otherworldly liminality. But the chord struck by the child in Jesse is explained by what Falconer calls the “*via negativa*,” i.e. the katabatic traveler achieves a calm, meditative and transcendental state which sets in motion an inner process of enlightenment (21), not by Macbeth’s horror when knowing about his future. The ambivalence with which children are treated in contemporary *Macbeths* serves to depict “a future where the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are being irreversibly erased” (Tehrani, 2021, 51). *Breaking Bad*’s take on childhood, as a force for spiritual change, adds up to the predominantly bleak visions of childhood presented in Tehrani’s corpus.² Playing peak-a-boo with the silent child, the outcast Pinkman begins acquiring the moral stature which he carries on developing beyond *Breaking Bad*.

For Falconer, katabasis involves the crossing of thresholds, encounters with the unknown as well as educational, visionary and trial experiences (69–76). Though Walter admits that his reasons for getting into “the game” were self-serving, his journey is the reason for his popularity. He does business with, competes with and defeats the greatest kingpins, including members of the cartel. Before his first murder, Walter converses with Crazy-8, learns his real name, is open to the possibility of forgiving him before his discovery makes him decide otherwise (“... And the Bag’s in the River”). His upward journey is meditative. There are moments of harsh self-judgement which acquire tragic pathos. Walter’s Macbeth-like reflections after attempting to kill the fly (“Fly”) zoom into the character’s deep Macbethian psychology:

Now [Walter’s] conscience seems to finally have caught up with him, and his sleepless attempt to destroy the fly is akin to the insomnia brought about by the individual plagued by conscience. [...] The fly—as a symbolic manifestation of guilt—may function as the equivalent of Banquo’s ghost, but the episode itself

² Tehrani analyzes Justin Kurzel’s film adaptation of *Macbeth* (2015) as well as the three stage productions directed by Michael Boyd in 1985, 1993 and 2011.

is (figuratively speaking) a Shakespearean soliloquy. It is a chance to step away from the plot and show us the inner workings of our tragic hero's mind. It reminds us that when we are unchained from our solipsistic experience and given an insight into the personal subjectivity of another [...], even the most emotionally reserved characters like Walter White are shown to be plagued by mental torments which we cannot call anything but tragic, and cannot help but pity them for this. (u/FaerieStories)

Also, Walter's comical fall takes us back to the satirical medieval Chester play *The Fall of Lucifer*. In this play Lucifer "leapfrogs" trying to reach heaven (Schreyer 36). The interconnection of two sources—Shakespeare and an ancient comical predecessor—suggests archival oscillations in the episode.

Falconer compares katabasis with a "sea voyage," an experience pushing us to the furthest limits of our being (91), testing human adaptability, cunning, curiosity, capacity to enter the unknown, engage in collaboration with others and spread the knowledge acquired. As Salomon Kroonenberg asserts, "that underground world contains so much that is beautiful: sparkling ores and metals, magnificent yellow sulfur crusts, blue sapphires, red cinnabar, green malachite, razor-sharp, meters-long gypsum crystals, dripstone caves, subterranean rivers, fragile shells from the dawn of evolution, and the giant bones of extinct monsters" ([2011] 2013, 7–8). What Macbeth perceives with horror is perceived by Walter with scientific curiosity. His fascination with the transformative possibilities of chemistry invokes an impetus found, as Ewan Fernie proposes, in most of Shakespeare's characters: these figures struggle for freedom to be different, freedom to be what they might be, freedom to cast off what they have been (2017, 4). Macbeth himself prefers to move forward into his unhappy destiny than retreating and, Walter-like, chooses to explore in person what kind of man he has become. Elements from the periodic table, like carbon, are for Walter made of the same "stuff" as the woman bearing it ("Breakage"). If, following Prospero in *The Tempest*, "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on" (4.1.156-157), Walter accepts the dream logic of narco-capitalism, which makes a world without the narcotic experience of Coca-Cola, as he suggests, unimaginable. Following De Sautter, "cocaine"—a component of Coca-Cola—"is always to be found where modern capitalism is most susceptible to suspicions of corruption" (45). However, Sautter evokes Freudian descriptions of cocaine as "the brain's fuel [...] a principle of subjective efficacy" (47-48). In this ambivalent world, Walter reaches efficiency by understanding of the potencies of drugs in modern capitalism and, in understanding them, gains boundless power. Unlike his Shakespearean counterpart, the condemned Walter ensures that his family is left well-provided for. Likewise, his skill and imagination to

turn his car into a machine gun allows him to “harrow” the warehouse where his putative son Jesse is in chains, enslaved, waiting to be free. This finale, a reenactment from *Harrowing* gives us reasons to keep our sympathies on Macbeth-like Walter's side.

5. Conclusions

Narco-capitalism provides a context to frame Shakespeare's archive in *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*. In contemporary America, Shakespeare operates by resurfacing amidst the serial appropriations. Archival traces do not merely emerge as text but as reenactments—as evocations of performance—, mediations or representations. These point at Shakespeare's performance and screen history, or, more abstractedly, to Shakespeare's theatrical features. Traces, reenactments, mediations and representations are not isolated from each other. In TV seriality, traces are reactivated meta-theatrically or by pointing at suggestions of standard source or its preceding sources, thus capitalizing on Shakespeare as a transmedia corpus and creatively juggling with archival documents on Shakespeare.

In *Adapting Macbeth: A Cultural History*, Carroll enumerates features that make *Macbeth* attractive for modern creatives. These include the play's political nature, its handling of the supernatural, the dangers of ambition, its domestic focus and its language and characterization (2021, 4). Though he does not mention *The Wire* or *Breaking Bad*, their narco-capitalism is a magnet capable of attracting these themes, and more, underlying Shakespeare's tragedy, which may agglutinate around the narco-capitalist culture. As Carroll adds, “each of these features has also, at one time or another, been construed as a flaw or a mistake that requires correction and, often, re-writing” (Ibid.). In these series, segments of *Macbeth*'s archive are used for such emendations, a task for which a large transmedia corpus of *Macbeth* offers a repertoire of already-tested alternatives and suggestions of new possibilities.

This logic situates Serial Shakespeares in the politically redemptive context of contemporary America. Examples of recent performance history shows “a real and constructive act that is both real and performative, addressing real situations through the use of the creative and the theatrical, in an attempt to establish a field of play for an ongoing effort to make Shakespeare relevant and useful to the causes and contexts of social justice” (Ruiter, 2020, 2). These two-series' engagement with Shakespeare's reparative features is ambivalent, and it is the play of *Macbeth*—an intensely violent and nihilistic text—that perhaps most naturally leads to the series' harboring of narco-capitalist excess, particularly in male characters. Following Jorge Carrión, such characters are turned themselves into drugs which we, as tele-addicts, want to last long due to the sympathy that

they raise (2011, 15). This male-centered emphasis in complex series preceding #MeToo explain explains the predominance of traces of Shakespeare's tragedies and histories during the first decade of TV seriality, with examples such as *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Deadwood* (2004-2006), *Rome* (2005-2007), *Sons of Anarchy* (Kurt Sutter, 2008-2013), etc. Before Shakespeare-laden daring and shrewd characters like Gemma Teller, Cersei Lannister, Claire Underwood, Shioban or Kate Ashby came to share the complex TV screens with difficult men, Serial Shakespeares were a playground for the stamina, ambition and non-tractability of the likes of Stringer Bell, Jimmy McNulty, Lucius Vorenus, Walter White, Seth Bullock, Al Swearngern, Jax Teller, all of them, as Concepción Cascajosa-Virino says, being middle-aged men in crisis (2016, 172).³ The choice of play accommodates the impetus of male protagonists, ready, as Shakespeare's Macbeth, to tread bloody paths to move beyond the very realms of the real. But TV's traditional feminine ethos encourages revisions of gender politics in the appropriated plays. Thus, women like Skyler White manage to outmaneuver violent male control and have a fresh start. *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* examine possibilities for Shakespeare to be restorative, and, surprisingly, he often is so amidst hyperreal havoc, ruled by the politics of excitement of narco-capitalism, that goes hand in hand with what, at heart, still is TV family melodrama and police procedural.

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³ See Brett Marin, *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad*, Penguin Books, 2014.

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