Defining *Breaking Bad* as a Shakespearian Tragedy

Breaking Bad[1] presents a series of complex and moral dilemmas that invite the reader to consider their meaning in the larger context of the world. From questioning the ethics of producing meth to the ethics of crime as a whole, a TV show that started off as being a look into the life of a high-school chemistry teacher recently diagnosed with cancer has transformed into a highly engaging ethical thought experiment. One can note a similar vein of ethical ponderings and larger, existential questioning in one of William Shakespeare's well-renowned tragedies: *Macbeth*. While *Breaking Bad* as a whole can be viewed as a Shakespearian tragedy, seasons one through three of *Breaking Bad* in particular can be viewed as an abbreviated version of the Shakespearian tragedy in the ways that they highlight one character as a tragic hero with a tragic flaw while exploring similar existential questioning as in *Macbeth* in order to emphasize the fragile mortality of the human race.

At the center of any Shakespearian tragedy there always lies a tragic hero. In *Breaking Bad's* case, this is Walter (Walt) White. While he more often than not shares the spotlight with Jesse, Walt remains at the center of the viewing experience. We are introduced to Walt in season one as a timid high-school chemistry teacher who is desperate to leave money for his family when his newly diagnosed cancer kills him ("Pilot"). Meanwhile, Macbeth is, self-evidently, the tragic hero of *Macbeth*, although he too also shares the spotlight with his wife, Lady Macbeth. Comparatively, Macbeth is introduced as a war hero who has just brought home a courageous win, intercepted by three witches who are repeatedly saying, "all hail Macbeth!" (*Macbeth*, 1.3. 36-52). In both of these cases, Macbeth and Walt appear as typical heroes and protagonists. However, it is over the course of the development of the show and play that the audience is able

[1] Throughout this paper, I will be referring to *Breaking Bad* as a textual reading rather than a viewing, and therefore referring to the reader rather than the viewer.

to witness Walt and Macbeth become antiheroes, demonstrating atypical qualities from those of a golden protagonist. One can see this in Walt as soon as the second episode of Breaking Bad, in which Walt deals with the repercussions of a botched drug deal that has resulted in a death by Walt's hands ("The Cat's in the Bag"). This is one of the first true instances one sees Walt fall into the role of the antihero, only to increasingly fulfill it as the series goes on. Meanwhile, Macbeth's shift from hero to antihero occurs when he commits murder for the first time as well, only he has killed the king and subsequently the three chambermaids serving as witnesses to the event. He notes that he had to kill them because they were witnesses, saying, "O, yet I do repent me of my fury, that I did kill them. […] Who can be wise, amazed, temp'rate, and furious, loyal, and neutral, in a moment? No man. Th' expedition of my violent love outrun the pauser, reason" (*Macbeth*, 2.2. 16-19, 2.3. 124-130). Macbeth's attempts to justify his actions serve simultaneously as an aid to him, as reasoning that his passion is what drove him to kill the maids makes others involved in the scene overlook Macbeth as the possible killer. And, similarly to Walt in *Breaking Bad*, Macbeth's violence and aggression only increases as the play goes on. While society is seeing more antiheroes in popular narratives as the years progress perhaps due to the shifting of moral alignments and increased "gray areas," Walt and Macbeth serve as significantly stark antiheroes in that they are committing heinous crimes, specifically murder, in order to conquer their own ambitions. A common question comes up when interacting with either of these texts: who is the audience supposed to root for? In some ways, a reader can find themselves sympathetic to Walt in his desire to provide for his family, even though he may go to extreme lengths. In a similar vein, a reader can find themselves sympathetic to Macbeth in that he was manipulated into murder by his wife, which then lead to all of his most heinous actions (*Macbeth*, 1.6.71-86, 1.7. 33-96). In these cases, it is possible for one to still consider Walt and

Macbeth as traditional heroes. All this being said, there comes a point in each narrative where the character does something the reader deems as having crossed a line, something unforgivable, which shifts the character into the position of the antihero. One may not want to cheer on Walt or Macbeth in their bloodthirsty conquests, but one will continue following the character in the text at hand as their individual fulfillments of the tragic antihero role inevitably lead to disaster.

One particularly important quality of any tragic hero is their unavoidable tragic flaw. Looking at both Walt and Macbeth in comparison, the reader can identify similar tragic flaws that link both narratives together. Greed, inflated ego, lust for power, and pride are all traits that get in the way during Walt and Macbeth's daily lives, which only heightens their impact in times of high stakes. We can see greed, inflated ego, lust for power, and pride grow in Walt during the first three seasons, which is perhaps most evident when comparing his attitude towards the methamphetamine business from the beginning of season one to the end of season three. For example, the first truly notable instance of Walt's greed is towards the end of the first season. When Walt and Jesse's initial batch of meth does not yield as much money as Walt needs to pay for his medical expenses, he yells at Jesse, saying, "This is unacceptable. I am breaking the law here. This return is too little for the risk" and demands they find a new distributor ("Crazy Handful of Nothin"). While this may be an easily understandable and warranted desire for more money, it is the first instance in which we see Walt start to demand more to meet his high expectations. Later, in season three, perhaps all of Walt's aforementioned tragic flaws are evident in the season finale in which Walt decides they will kill Gale to ensure that he will not be replaced and will remain at the top of the hierarchy within the drug trade. Walt devises this plan with Jesse, insisting that "The cook can't stop. That's the one thing I'm certain of, production cannot stop. Gus can't afford to. So if I'm the only chemist that he's got, then I've got leverage"

("Full Measure"). While the other option is Walt's death, it is ultimately his greed and lust for power that drive this decision. Outside of the *Breaking Bad* universe, Macbeth's tragic flaws start to appear after the murder of the king and when power has been acquired. This can be noted specifically when thinking about how Macbeth started off as reluctant to even think about killing the king and ends up killing one of his most trusted advisors, Banquo, and attempts to kill his child in order to protect his own power (*Macbeth*, 3.3. 1-30). This is a stark change from the Macbeth who was horrified to even think about the possibility of killing the king. Ultimately, however, all of Macbeth's tragic flaws begin to build on one another until he is reckless and desperate to keep his power. In the end, all of Macbeth's tragic flaws culminate in his death, when he is slain after boasting about how untouchable he is, when he yells "I will not yield to kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet and to be baited with the rabble's curse. Though Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane and thou opposed, being of no woman born, yet I will try the last. Before my body I throw my warlike shield" (*Macbeth*, 5.8. 32-39). Even though Macbeth knows that this could be the fulfillment of the three witches' prophecy, he throws himself into the battle anyway due to his pride and his refusal to bow to another king, now that he has known power. While the tragic flaws in both of these narratives may not initially define the antiheroes, they become to consume them to such severity that the end of the narrative can only be disastrous.

If one were to set the structural elements of the Shakespearian tragedy aside, similarities still remain between *Breaking Bad* and *Macbeth*, specifically in the way both texts highlight the ever-present struggle of morality for their contained characters. Throughout both of these texts, nearly identical questions come up, such as: what does it mean to live and die in this world? What does it mean to take another's life? What does it mean to take one's own life? To what

extent do our actions effect other people? This line of existential moral questioning asks the reader to reflect on oneself and one's own life while consuming entertainment in the form of literature or television. Looking first at *Breaking Bad*, questions about what it means to take one's own life arise in the first episode when Walt attempts to commit suicide, only to discover the gun does not contain any bullets ("Pilot"). It is especially important to recognize that although the suicide attempt was prompted mostly by the assumption that he was going to get caught with meth and dead bodies, it is also accompanied by his recent terminal cancer diagnosis. And, it is crucial to note that this may be the first attempted suicide by Walt, but it is not the last and in fact remains a reoccurring thought throughout the first three seasons. As Walt questions what it means to live a life under someone else's thumb, or with terminal cancer, or lying to one's family, the reader is implicitly prompted to conduct their own ethical thought experiments in regards to what they would do in this same situation. If one is to turn to a different text and look within Shakespeare's *Macbeth,* they can find similar threads of contemplating mortality, particularly after Macbeth orders the murderers to kill Banquo. When Banquo has been killed, Macbeth begins to see Banquo's ghost haunt his dining room while he is hosting a dinner in which Banquo was supposed to be at prior to Macbeth's orders to have him killed (*Macbeth*, 3.4. 42-54). While *Breaking Bad* explores the idea of taking one's own life, *Macbeth* explores the idea of taking another. Banquo's ordered death and Macbeth's consequent guilt ask the reader to consider what it means to grieve and feel guilt over an action that you carried out in order to attain personal gain.

One particularly interesting similarity between *Breaking Bad* and *Macbeth* is the cases in which one sees one character urge another character to kill a third party. Within *Macbeth*, this is evident at the very beginning of the narrative, in which Lady Macbeth is urging Macbeth to kill

the king. In order to persuade him, Lady Macbeth insults Macbeth's masculinity when she says, "What beast was't, then, that made you break this enterprise to me? When you durst do it, then you were a man" (*Macbeth*, 1.7. 53-56). By insisting that Macbeth will not fulfill his role of a man if he does not kill the king, Lady Macbeth pressures Macbeth into a decision he arguably did not want to make. Similarly, in the season three finale of *Breaking Bad*, Walt pressures Jesse to kill Gale, even though he initially was going to do it himself and Jesse had already blatantly expressed to Walt that he couldn't kill Gale himself. That being said, when the time comes around, Walt, over the phone to Jesse, says, "It's gonna have to be you. Listen to me, you're closer than we are. You'll have about a twenty minute lead. They've got me at the laundry and they're going to kill me" followed by "Jesse do it now! Do it! Do it Jesse, do it!" which is then followed by Jesse killing Gale ("Full Measure"). By ordering Jesse to kill Gale even though he had already told Walt he wasn't capable of killing anyone, Walt prioritizes his desire to be at the top of the drug business over Jesse's well-being. By pressuring others into murder, Walt and Lady Macbeth are projecting their own tragic flaws of desire for power onto those who do not seem to have a true choice in the matter.

While seasons one through three of *Breaking Bad* can be outlined as a Shakespearian tragedy, there is one exception: typically, at the end of a Shakespearian tragedy, the tragic hero must die, usually as a consequence of their tragic flaw disserving them. This does not occur at the end of season three for Walt. That being said, given the show's trajectory and the fact that the initial premise of *Breaking Bad* revolved around Walt's imminent death, the reader can infer that the series may very well end with that imminent death coming to fruition. This would then call a larger reading of the show as a whole into question as to whether or not it fits the model of the Shakespearian tragedy as a full narrative, as well.

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