

Rethinking Serial Shakespeare in the Culture of Traumatic Redemption: Shakespearean Intertexts in *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO 2010-14)

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Abstract

Shakespearean intertexts serve narrative and ideological functions in contemporary complex TV series. While scholars and press reviewers have pointed at this fact, few steps have been taken to explore the narrative implications of the Shakespearean intertexts in complex TV series. This article contextualizes complex TV series within a social, political and economic context of 'traumatic redemption.' With regards to this, Hannah Wolfe Eisner develops the chronotope of traumatic redemption. Moving away from previous accounts of trauma which stress healing and recovery too precipitately, Eisner develops the aforementioned chronotope via exploration of dialectics of trauma and redemption in contemporary narratives. If such dialectics taking place between affirmative narrative strands and strands which engage with in-depth exploration of suffering and trauma can be used to analyze complex TV series, it is instructive to observe which function(s) the Shakespearean references and intertexts fulfill within these popular TV works using the lenses provided by this chronotope. Taking Eisner's ideas into account, the article contextualizes the ideological and political spaces where complex TV series are developed. It explains, taking into account few previous scholarly works on serial Shakespeares, the theoretical tenets of traumatic redemption to lay down the foundations of analysis of serial Shakespeares as proposed. Finally, it explores the Shakespearean intertexts of *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO 2010-2014) and analyzes some examples of the serial's Shakespearean influences. The conclusions reveal that Shakespeare's intertexts might be powerful indicators of the dialectics of trauma and redemption, for their intertextual interweaving with the serial's script, narrative structure and characters situate such Shakespearean intertexts to ambivalently fulfill functions that strengthen redemption strands as well as traumatic strands in this complex TV narrative.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Intertext, Complex TV Series, Chronotype, Trauma, Redemption

Introduction

Shakespearean intertexts serve narrative and ideological functions in complex TV series. This paper argues that these Shakespearean intertexts conform narrative strands which strengthen or/and disrupt redemption narratives in these cable TV works.¹ I argue that Shakespearean intertextuality, alongside that of other literary works, engages the dialectics of trauma and redemption which characterizes a selected corpus of complex TV series produced after 2000. Along this line it can be argued that the Shakespearean intertexts reinforce traumatic experience and/or redemptive teleology. Being able to identify such moves depends, in part, on the reader's literary competence and, crucially, on the reader's skill to recognize the Shakespearean intertext, which sometimes might be presented in more obvious ways than others. To prove my point, taking Víctor Huertas-Martín's cue presented in "Traumatic Redemption Chronotope as Theoretical Model to Study Serial Shakespeares" (2019), published in *Revista Española de Estudios Norteamericanos*, I will explain the theoretical tenets of the chronotope of traumatic redemption – as developed by Hannah Wolfe Eisner in "Into the Middle of Things: Traumatic Redemption and the Politics of Form" (2017) – and show an example of how Shakespearean intertexts operate in *Boardwalk Empire*, written by Terrence Winter and broadcast by HBO between 2010 and 2014.

Shakespearean criticism has taken steps to study the author's references in contemporary cable TV series.² Xavier Pérez and Jordi Balló's dissemination monograph—originally written in Catalan, later translated to Castilian Spanish—cover a wide range of examples—especially useful for scriptwriters—proving how Shakespearean writing influences or may influence contemporary audiovisual scriptwriting. The monograph focuses particularly on complex TV series such as *Sons of Anarchy*, *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad*, etc. Susan C. Ronnenberg's monograph on *Henry IV* and *Deadwood* constitutes the first sustained study of a single serial read alongside a Shakespearean play. Sylvaine Bataille's essays on *Rome* and *Sons of Anarchy* for the Shakespeare on Screen collection—edited by Sarah Hatchuel, Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin and Victoria Bladen—, have contributed to reveal the ways in which HBO and Fox appropriate Shakespeare's works, though her chapters appear as special sections in larger monographs tackling Shakespeare on film, TV and screen. Random articles tackling, for instance, the cultural transference of Elizabethan cultural, ideological and political tenets or Shakespearean meta-theatricality in series have been published by Katarzyna Burzynska and Reto Winckler. Huertas-Martín explains how fans, bloggers and reviewers' observations on Shakespearean intertexts in series could

support the idea that such intertexts reinforce or negotiate redemption. Likewise, Huertas-Martín shows that the theoretical tools afforded by Eisner could permit the comparative study of Shakespearean intertexts in complex TV series—or just ‘Serial Shakespeares’—and other contemporary popular adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare’s plays. Following Huertas-Martín’s cue, this article pays more attention to ideological and cultural context of trauma and redemption and the relations between these two variables to complex TV series. It offers additional examples on how to methodologically approach Shakespearean texts in complex TV series inasmuch as they strengthen the features of the chronotope of traumatic redemption.

1. Context: Complex TV Series and Culture of Redemption

Jason Mittell’s seminal work theorized the poetics of complex television storytelling. According to Mittell, complex TV:

redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration – not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance. Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form, narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres. Complex television employs a range of serial techniques, with the underlying assumption that a series is a cumulative narrative that builds over time, rather than resetting back to a steady-state equilibrium at the end of every episode. (2015, 18)

Doubtless, the narrative structure of the series themselves facilitates that the lack of equilibrium found at the end of each episode and the means to keep the audience engaged across episodes and seasons presents parallels with the lack of closure and the inconclusive character of traumatic redemption narratives. Additionally, such narrative flexibility and openness allows showrunners to freely experiment with genres, styles and moods that, for sure, admit the series’ intertextual engagement with literary works and embedding of such works in order to capture the reader’s attention. In relation to this, as Huertas-Martín says, “Thematically, many series engage in dialectics of trauma and redemption. The lack of redemptive closure and the conflicting narrative strands in series—which delay resolution for years—are enmeshed with Shakespearean inter-texts deployed through them” (2019, 29).

Arguably, as Huertas-Martín continues suggesting, the series’ flexibility may have contributed to create a *habitus* of consumption of cable TV that has paralleled viewing – and even binge-watching – with a prestigious form of art consumerism (ibid). As Concepción Cascajosa says in *La Cultura de Las Series* (2015), series have occupied a distinctive cultural space in Western societies via several processes of legitimation consequent from the combination of institutional, socio-economic and technological factors. Thus,

it is not that more series are being made at present, but that they generate more critical discourse and more relevant cultural practices have been consolidated around them, so much so that they constitute a *marcador social* (12). In English, this refers to a social score, i.e. a number expressing accomplishment and/or excellence in points gained or by comparison to standards. Thus, complex TV series provide entertainment, distinction – following Pierre Bourdieu’s concept in *Distinction* (1979) – and critique on the current global, political and socio-economic context.

As series such as *Lost* toy with the idea of articulating alternate social models, they implicitly or/and explicitly dig into the contradictions and failures of global capitalism and other current political systems, for they often depict characters’ ideological worldviews and attempts to test them across small communities. Thus, the micro-political level reveals the extent of global macro-political debate. For instance, *Lost* constitutes a social-political experiment which forces survivors to organize themselves in a new political micro-system. Sawyer has been signaled as the embodiment of capitalism, though many of the means he employed to acquire goods would be regarded as illegal. On the other hand, Jack Shephard’s model of leadership, resembling the socialist model, produces a number of concerns regarding authority, for Shephard’s rule strikes survivors as too centralized, rigid and hierarchic.³

However, the series’ politics also tackle socio-economics and politics from a realistic perspective. Huertas-Martín argues that:

The geopolitical context of the series, immerse in global conflict, terrorism, a lack of faith in the institutions – particularly the Presidency of the US – and, importantly, the risk of socio-economic exclusion affecting the US and the world’s working classes should, in principle, make us think of complex TV works as politically concerned and progressive in their criticism of leading institutions, surveillance, financial capitalism and sustained irresponsible economic growth reliant on predatory practices such as gentrification and the state’s involvement in public scandals. (2019, 37)

Such skepticism is reflected in several serials. *Sons of Anarchy* depicts an alternate hierarchic society – the SAMCRO (Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Redwood Original) club – in the Californian town of Charming. Their illegal activities provoke disorder and make the urban expansion of the town difficult. Yet, in the same town, the club protects, gives jobs and takes care of many underdogs, classless and marginal individuals belonging to this small community, whom both the law and the state neglect. *The Wire* reveals that the criminal underworld, marginalization and inequalities in the city of Baltimore are consequence of the institutional state and economic corruption of the establishment itself. Thus, the series shows that threats to the socio-economic and political order are in the socio-economic structures themselves. While scholars such as Cascajosa have suggested that TV series consolidate cultural hierarchies no longer desirable – e.g. via foregrounding, for instance,

the white heterosexual male protagonists (2015, 174-175)—, the truth is that such hierarchies are constantly undermined, for these white males' excesses often lead to their own demise and, oftentimes, their redemptive journeys are, at best, inconclusive and, at worst, impossible.

Taking the wider picture into account, as Dominique Moïsi argues in his long collection of essays, *La Géopolitique des Séries* (2017), complex TV series are testimony to the crises which overall challenge the US reading role in an age in which balances of power seem to be shifting. Also, as Moïsi's essays show, the more the US doubts itself—especially after the attacks of 11 September 2001—, the more popular the series become (24). Paradoxically, as Moïsi continues, the US recovers through *soft power* (fiction) what is losing in terms of *hard power* (36). With the US's trying to universalize their own internal crises, this type of fiction permits the nation to remain a worldwide indicator—in Moïsi's words—(40) of the world's *zeitgeist*. Thus, complex TV series allows the US to continue working as geopolitical worldwide barometer and compass. At least, this is true in relation to the US's dominant role in the entertainment industry. Yet, such role stands—at least in part—at the expense of discrediting the US' own role as leading hegemony.

Moïsi's geopolitical model to explore series shows how American cable TV series engage with world affairs and, consequently, European TV series, such as *Börger* (DR Fiktion, 2010), produce similar works which contend with their US's counterparts for hegemony. This and other factors evince that, because of the plurality of complex TV series' narrative threads and their richness of geographical setting, they are by no means reducible to a set of generic features.

However, it is possible to think of many of them as narratives of traumatic redemption as recently theorized by Hannah Wolfe Eisner in her seminal work "Into the Middle of Things: Traumatic Redemption and the Politics of Form" (2017). In these works, individual characters and collectivities are shaken, hit or affected by an external blow, threat and deep damage. A sense of shared externally inflicted or/and self-inflicted injustice, injury, pain and deep suffering, which recurrently returns to haunt their psyches and souls, marks characters. These characters' journeys, as we may see in *Deadwood* (2004-2006), *Rome* (2005-2007), *Justified* (Fox, 2010-2015) or *The Leftovers* (2014-2017), can be described as zig-zagging roads, rather than as straightforward redemption stories. Such journeys involve searching for ways out of suffering into salvation and they also involve processes to become whole and healed as individuals and as collectivities.

Characters belong to the ample social map of the United States, which includes presidents, first ladies, members of motorcycle clubs, veteran soldiers, outlaws, agents of the law, qualified professionals, working-class men and women, marginalized racial individuals and other characters which, in the *fin-de-siècle*, as orthodox leftist pamphlet writers, such as Jack Barnes and Steve Clark, have argued, suffered the excesses and troubles of post-

industrialism and the Clinton's administration,⁴ and found themselves potentially in need of economic emancipation and, also, of spiritual individual and collective redemption.

J. D. Vance's description of 'hillbillies' in *Hillbilly Elegy*—soon to be released as a film directed by Ron Howard and distributed by Netflix—might work as provisional summary of who these marginalized peoples are in his own autobiographical redemption narrative:

I may be white, but I do not identify with the WASP of the Northeast. Instead, I identify with the millions of working-class white Americans of Scots-Irish descent who have no college degree. To these folks, poverty is the family tradition—their ancestors were day laborers in the Southern slave economy, sharecroppers after that, coal miners after that, and machinists and millworkers during more recent times. Americans call them hillbillies, rednecks, or white trash. I call them neighbors, friends, and family. (2016, 3)

Critical with white conservatives and with the bigotry which has provoked reactionary outbursts of anger against immigration and against forward policies in the US, Vance, a conservative himself, offers a nuanced view of the injustices suffered by "hillbillies" and, equally, of their share of responsibility for their own plight. Crucially, Vance's analyses of the "hillbilly" society seems to have captured a *zeitgeist* defining the feelings of part of the HBO spectatorship. As Vance says,

In her old age, Mamaw loved to watch TV. She preferred raunchy humor and epic dramas, so she had a lot of options. But her favorite show by far was the HBO mob story *The Sopranos*. Looking back, it's hardly surprising that a show about fiercely loyal, sometimes violent outsiders resonated with Mamaw. Change the names and dates, and the Italian Mafia starts to look a lot like the Hatfield-McCoy dispute back in Appalachia. The show's main character, Tony Soprano, was a violent killer, an objectively terrible person by almost any standard. But Mamaw respected his loyalty and the fact that he would go to any length to protect the honor of his family (134)

At a time of economic crisis, in which many of these so-called "white trash" – but also non-white population—felt largely excluded, it seems hardly surprising that such values as "honor" and "loyalty," frequently glorified in complex TV series even if in their antiheroic, rather than heroic, forms—from predominantly masculine perspectives—, appealed to various groups of male and female spectators and that such attachments to identity became widespread at a time in which family values, loyalty and honor seemed to be disintegrating or to have disintegrated. Seemingly, the anti-heroes of the series—e.g. Tony Soprano, Frank Underwood, Jax Teller, Walter White, Seth Bullock, Jax Teller or Kevin Garvey—have attracted a wide sector of the population. The poetic justice exuded by the masculine acts of rage and violence, often taking place against the establishment, must have worked as

balm—no matter how misguided such balm may be—to many citizens who, justified or not, felt entitled to an amount of resentment.

But, whereas some of these “white trash,” these “deplorables,” and “irredeemable”—as Hillary Clinton labelled them during a fund-raising event on 9 September 2016 – ruminated their despair in front of the TV screen and others joined President Trump’s ranks, a minority of those worked extremely hard to move beyond the dysfunctional lives they lived. After 2000, when most of Vance’s relatives and friends were unemployed due to the transformation of the local industry in Middletown, a great many found themselves in personal and economic crisis. As Vance says, “I needed reassurance of some deeper justice, some cadence or rhythm that lurked beneath the heartache and chaos” (87). In other words, he needed to find meaning and purpose in his own suffering. The autobiography develops retrospectively to inform the reader of the fact that the past continues haunting the narrator. He cannot altogether leave behind the traumatic experience of his childhood living as an underdog in a dysfunctional low-class family:

I want people to understand what happens in the lives of the poor and the psychological impact that spiritual and material poverty has on their children... that for those of us lucky enough to live the American Dream, the demons of the life we left behind continue to chase us (2)

As we can see, Vance’s narrative shows a story of social mobility, forward thinking and attachment to education and spiritual comfort. But Vance’s narrative opens up with a clear warning: demons of the past are bound to return sooner or later in the form of traumatic memory. Similarly to this lifetime of back-and-forth emotional and psychological redemption tale, the complex storytelling techniques of serials affords that zigzagging narratives extend themselves up to six or seven seasons covering at least part of the characters’ lives. Due to the needs to keep audiences engaged with plot twists and unexpected action, redemption processes in the series are naturally non-linear and, often, lacking in closure. Trauma in its various forms disrupts redemption processes and, thus, these never reach the ends purported. In *House of Cards*, the ex-alcoholic Peter Russo’s campaign to be Governor of Pennsylvania is presented as a redemption story (season 1, episode 5) to seduce the voters. Frank Underwood’s assistant Doug Stamper’s reluctance to support Russo’s candidacy shows a note of skepticism regarding the average loser’s or underdog’s skill to rise like a Phoenix. Yes, he is a man of the streets and, thus, he wants the victory but, can he actually get it? Will not his nature – or public rejection – bring him back again to the life of debauchery he was leading? The metafictional reference to redemption tales in *HOC* informs the reader that such tales run the risk of sounding, for many, infantile.

2. Shakespeare and Complex TV Series

In all forms of media and artistic languages, Shakespeare's texts and Shakespeare's symbolic value are deployed with varied purposes, including legitimizing new media. Shakespeare's ample presence in contemporary culture, its intertexts and, importantly, the audiences' Shakespearean horizons of expectations, play a part in the interpretation of these works.⁵ Complex television series have not been an exception to this. As Huertas-Martín shows, press reviewers, critics, private users, bloggers and other professional and non-professional critics of the global village detect Shakespearean traces in complex television series (2019, 31-37). Via allusion, embedding, reformulation, citation and other types of inter-textual references as well as through the borrowing of narrative structures and themes from Shakespearean plays, HBO, Netflix and Fox find in Shakespeare a public repository for ideas, texts and cultural references to strengthen their scripts and TV works. To name just a few examples, *Rome* (HBO 2005-2007), *Deadwood* (HBO 2006-2008), *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2008-2019), *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-2014), *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-2014), *House of Cards* (Netflix 2013-2018), *Empire* (Fox 2015-), *Succession* (HBO 2018-) and *Westworld* (2016-) have been identified as works which may well be read alongside Shakespeare plays, as influenced by or based on Shakespearean plays and as Shakespeare-inflected. But the numbers of Shakespeare-inflected series increase. Recently, Netflix started broadcasting *The I-Land* (2019-), which, judging from the Shakespearean quotes used for each episode title, invites a reading through the lens of *The Tempest*.

The field of Shakespeare and popular culture has richly developed during the last decades and has succeeded in legitimizing adaptations and appropriations of Shakespearean texts. Nowadays, it is out of question that faithfulness to Shakespeare's original texts is not mandatory for adaptation and appropriation critics. As Stephen O'Neill says, in the new media ecology Shakespeare "is disseminated, dispersed or cast abroad through a complexity of networks in which, as humans, we are situated" (2018, 5). This principle indeed requires that we take into account the specificities of the medium, as critics Pascale Aebischer, Susan Greenhalgh, Laurie Osborne, Douglas Lanier, Maurizio Calbi and others have recently suggested.⁶ Furthermore, as Lanier, Keith Harrison, Sarah Olive, Huertas-Martín, Kinga Földváy and others have shown, there is much insight to be gained from looking into the generic conventions of fiction formats wherein Shakespeare is translated, embedded or/and reformulated.⁷

3. Shakespeare and Redemption in the US Culture

Shakespeare's reception in the USA has gone alongside stories of redemption, such as Captain Morris' 1764 account of his return home from Indian captivity while reading *Antony and Cleopatra*.⁸ Yet, during the

nineteenth century, such stories have proved being ambivalent. Shakespearean performance was deployed as travelers, workers and members of companies went westward to exploit the produce of mines. As Helen Wickham Koon says, those entertainments were “substance for the spirit” (1989, 4). Shakespeare, for those miners who often were literate, this was a way to find comfort, instruction, and, arguably, ways out of suicide. Simultaneously, for Ralph Waldo Emerson, a “poet-priest, a reconciler... shall see, speak, and act, with equal inspiration [to Shakespeare’s]. For knowledge will brighten the sunshine; right is more beautiful than private affection; and love is compatible with universal wisdom” ([1850] 2013, 122).

Nonetheless, while naturalist philosophers and hard-working engineers and travelers needed Shakespeare for their spiritual joy, other Shakespearean readings and public appropriations of Shakespeare could take place alongside experiences of trauma. During the nineteenth-century, the embedding of Shakespeare’s texts in foundational narratives helped configuring the political outlook of the USA. These narratives sometimes perpetuated conservative misogynistic stereotypes such as the popular associations of the First Ladies in the US government and Lady Macbeth.⁹ Huertas-Martín, in agreement with interpretations of scholars such as Katherine Rowe, interprets the critical reception and performance tradition of Lady Macbeth in the US as the portrait of ‘a powerful female who, nonetheless, shows too many signs of instability to leave government in her hands. Needless to say,’ as he continues, ‘such myth has been used in order to disqualify the potential as leaders of First Ladies such as Hillary Clinton and previous US female political leaders’ (2019, 46). However, Shakespeare was also often employed in the US’ political history as loudspeaker for significant progressive or pseudo-progressive struggles and coups claiming to advocate for freedom against tyranny. John Wilkes Wood, Abraham Lincoln’s assassin, alluded to the words uttered by the conspirators who killed Julius Caesar and, in his letter of justification to the *National Intelligencer*, he used Brutus’ words in Shakespeare’s plays to justify Lincoln’s assassination.¹⁰ Years earlier, Shakespeare had been used as a political weapon by the factions supporting the British nation and the American identity during the Astor Riots of 1849, over which rioters supporting the America star Edmund Forrest sabotaged a performance by British actor William Charles Macready.¹¹ American collections of Shakespearean quotes, such as the McGuffey editions, were used for enlightening and didactic purposes and disseminated during the nineteenth century. Surely the original idea that contact with Shakespeare modifies and enlightens human beings was disseminated to promote the Stuart Blackton Vitagraph’s silent Shakespeare film which, in the early twentieth-century, contributed to make anglophone culture—with Shakespeare as head-spear-dominant.

Scholars, such as Denise Albanese, have been quick to detect that redemptive forms of adaptation and appropriation of Shakespeare—such as,

for instance, ‘prison Shakespeares,’ which includes the *Shakespeare Behind Bars* project—were in part forms of inoculation of dominant ideologies. For example, films such as *Looking for Richard* (dir. Al Pacino 1996) were critiqued mainly for the use of the Shakespearean myth without responsible handling of the representation of race, sex and class in the US culture. More crucially, as has been recently pointed out, Pacino’s documentary, in its insistence that the US public does not know its Shakespeare, departs from false dilemma, for, as Albanese confirms, the film ignores the rich tradition of Shakespearean performances in America as well as its rich reception history. Particularly problematic were the film’s representations of racialized individuals—such as James Earl Jones and a homeless passerby—as fascinated and quasi-religious readers of Shakespeare in contrast with a series of testimonies by white Anglo-Saxon speakers seemingly well beyond bardolatry and appearing more acquainted with the technicalities of the text and the craft of acting rather than with the Bard’s divine magic. Nonetheless, Albanese’s work and Lanier’s current work on reparative Shakespeares, while still critical with the ethical implications and possible covert acts of discrimination implicit in using Shakespeare as a reparative force, do not give up in exploring Shakespeare’s true transformative and reformatory capacities.¹²

4. Trauma and Redemption

It is significant that complex TV serials have been developed in coincidence and in correlation with a culture of trauma derived from the painful sufferance produced by the terrorist attacks of the eleventh of September. These attacks at once challenged the US role as world leader and arose a number of ethical questions related to the origins of terrorism and the responsibilities attributable to the East and the West in what seemed to be heralding a series of large-scale global conflicts. The US economic crisis which, at least in part, seems to have been initiated by the Clinton administration and, subsequently, by George W. Bush’s deregulation of subprime credits widened divisions between poor and rich. Unsurprisingly, complex TV series have been concerned with members of the wasted middle class, a decaying working-class and, often, with living dead searching for retribution. An increasing distrust toward institutions—the Oval Office in particular—has been depicted in serials. Following *Mo’isi*, *West Wing* and *House of Cards* could be read as serial works marking a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ in the US public’s conception of their rulers. As *Mo’isi* says, the latter seems to have been written as counterpart of the former (131-132).

Hannah Wolfe Eisner proposes a view of trauma and redemption which, without occluding a forward gaze, takes time to analyse pain seriously, no matter how hard to conceptualize may be the repetitive patterns of trauma. To achieve this, she analyses life as a porous network of time-bound and space-bound strands called “meshwork” (2017, 6). This meshwork of conflicting and unpredictable combinations and expectations challenges

religious and Marxist narratives of redemption and emancipation. Where trauma theory has failed, as Eisner suggests, is in its construction of hierarchies of order without actually reflecting the mechanisms of trauma (8). Complex TV series, such as *The Leftovers*, display bodies in pain as well as troubled minds haunted by past deeds and memories seemingly beyond redemption. As Eisner says, concretizing trauma and exploring the impact of broken bodies, troubled affect, scarred psyches and disturbed minds may illustrate and make narratives potentially more transformative (9).

To study such narratives, Eisner borrows Michael Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope. For Eisner, chronotopes combine the variables of time and space. In this way, we may distinguish "time-space" and "space-time" narratives. According to Huertas-Martín's reformulation of Eisner's ideas:

The former denotes the material in which one's body and the rest of the universe exist. The latter denotes a world system in which narrative comes into play. The former applies to material reality, the latter to epistemology and ideology—or even teleology. These two inform about the range of nuanced interpretive possibilities within traumatic redemption (2019, 39).

Importantly, following Eisner, time-spaces are mutually inclusive and may be interwoven, may contradict each other or reinforce one another (9-10). Such inclusivity allows, as Huertas-Martín suggests, the coexistence of multiple experiences and receptions of trauma. And, given that individuals are not born within an equal system, teleological narratives, such as the American Dream and Biblical progressive narratives contained in Genesis, New Testament and St. Paul's Letters, may prove to be delusional if they refuse to deeply engage with material reality (12-14). Traumatic experience disrupts linear structures through mechanisms such as reformulations and repetitions. Such disruptions occlude individual's redemptions in backwards-and-forwards movements. An ethical advantage of looking into redemption stories as traumatic redemption narratives is that the latter do not obscure differences, do not reduce the multiplicity of voices and do not ignore the realities of unfreedom affecting a great many (18). As Eisner states, redemption narratives fail when they do not engage with trauma:

The possibility of moving forward fails because there is only one path presented here that structurally can never work. The logic would be equivalent to claim that Christian progressive teleology is the only way to move forward, so its failure means that we are irrevocably stuck. (23)

But are we irrevocably stuck? If movements forward are afforded in narratives, no matter the setbacks characters suffer, they can be expanded via serious engagement with non-linearity, for "trauma... cannot simply go away or fade into the past" (Ibid.). On occasions, the religious and conservative establishments as well as the liberal left have neglected the

imperative to respond to traumatic suffering via their insistence on economic progress and social mobility disregarding the many educational, ideological, political, gender-based and racial issues which make such movement forward only possible for a small sector of the population. Paying attention to trauma does not mean rejecting progress nor to disregard a socialist—neither a teleological religious agenda, for all that—nor embracing pessimism but to understand the trauma void and identify the meshwork underlying it, identifying those very issues that we intend to solve. The meshwork's functionings indeed require that attention.

For Huertas-Martín, “Hannah Wolfe Eisner traumatic redemption [is] a narrative experience which, fundamentally, does not dodge the ethical question of analysing the nature of pain” (2019, 39). However, there is a fair question and a challenge, whose responses we should not avoid. If, we just revolve around this meshwork of traumatic experiences, are we not then, as Eisner poses, bound to give up hope for redemption? (50) Some thinkers, such as Leo Bersani, Robert Meister, Frank Wilderson and Lee Edelman altogether argue that we should do so as art, seemingly, is insufficient to redeem human beings. Democracy, apparently, is insufficient too for this purpose. Additionally, as these critical voices assert, the very condition of discrimination for marginal individuals precludes their emancipation and, additionally, forms of redemption reinforce heteronormative hierarchies.¹³

It is suggested that ways out of this are found differently. For instance, redemption is suggested via rethinking these narratives focusing on the representation of space-time, i.e. privileging reality rather than ideologically-bound time-space perspectives. Storytelling devices, reflexivity and creative engagement with metaphors, symbols and linguistic forms may help too. Thus, as Eisner says, thickening the present, multiple time perspectives may be included in narratives (74). Relations between individuals and languages metaphorically and physically emerge in these interactions. Thus, within—not outside—trauma, positioning our perspective in the middle of events, we may identify illusions of resolution and points of inquiry (78) to challenge grand narratives. An additional line of work is to develop pro-active strategies of engagement, such as paying homage to collective memory or planning forward-looking decision-making (82-83). In other words, traumatic redemption examines ways to construct alternatives as much as trauma. If trauma fulfils the function of disrupting teleological narratives, traumatic memories give way to other narrative forms (84). Crucially, these narratives do not reach an end (85) but keep the reader/interpreter constantly in the middle of events for more capacious analyses taking different points of inquiry into account.

5. Case Study: *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO 2010-2014)

As Huertas-Martín says, “Literature, enlightenment and emancipation forces in (sic) Westworld [and, arguably, in other serials] wave Shakespearean

flags" (2019, 37). His critical review of Shakespearean engagement with complex TV series proves that there is a public critical expectation on the redemptive roles of Shakespearean intertexts in this type of entertainment (2019, 31-37). This idea provides a fertile ground to explore plenty of HBO, Netflix and Fox Shakespeare-inflected serials. *Boardwalk Empire*, the case under examination does not, at first sight, work as an example of an adaptation of Shakespeare's plays. However, it deploys citations, quotes and, arguably, it presents various references to Shakespeare's work worth tackling markers of the dialectics of trauma and redemption.

Bootlegger Nucky Thompson, main character in *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO 2010-2014), before executing his *protegeé* James Darmody, claims: "You don't know me, James. You never did. I am not seeking forgiveness" (season 2, episode 12). Implicitly, this shows the character's self-conscious acknowledgement of being part of a redemption narrative which he tries to resist and it warns audiences—particularly, I think, those nostalgic of Michael Corleone's desire to recover his family and to redeem himself—that they should not expect amelioration. Nonetheless, across five seasons, Thompson *does* intend to redeem himself for a lifetime of criminal activity via taking charge of his lover—later wife—Margaret Schroeder's offspring. The last season is one in which he recalls his past trying to trace trauma and search for the origins of his deviations. In the early stages of the series, we discern Thompson's inclination to use books and literacy to mark the distinction between those who are worthy and those who are not. When his associate Mieczyslaw Kuzik changes his name to Mickey Doyle, Thompson compares Doyle's renaming as that of "A rose by any other name." When Doyle asks Thompson what he means, Thompson responds: "Read a fucking book!" (season 1, episode 1). We do not know for sure that Thompson has actually read *Romeo and Juliet*. For all we know, he might have become familiar with the story after seeing one of the Vitagraph cinematic adaptations in the early 1900s. He may also have read Shakespeare's isolated quote in one of the many books collecting Shakespearean passages and quotes chosen to instruct students, businessmen and learned men in the arts of rhetoric as well as to use Shakespeare for enlightening and for edifying purposes.

Nevertheless, when Thompson gazes at Margaret Schroeder appearing at the ballroom's balcony in his own nightclub, it is easy to imagine the middle-aged Thompson fancying himself a Romeo seeking for Juliet at her balcony. Literary and Shakespearean intertextualities in *Boardwalk Empire* vertebrate through the series and altogether conform competing narratives running counter to the creator's alleged intentions—expressed in an interview with Martha P. Nochimson—not to be wanting to tell a story of redemption (2012, 25-26). Such literary disruptions occur unexpectedly in the middle of episodes revealing apparent inconsistencies and precluding closure in what otherwise might seem a conventional gangster narrative. Reading the literary works which several characters read in *Boardwalk Empire*, it is possible to

discern how characters rely on books and literacy as means of redemption, social mobility and as forms to search for paths of hope. Indeed, Shakespeare occupies an important place in these bookshelves of *Boardwalk Empire*.¹⁴

Another example reveals the ways in which literary competence in Shakespeare suggests a road to enlightenment and redemption whereas an insufficient knowledge of the works leads to obscurity. Elias, Thompson's brother, sheriff of Atlantic City, shows himself to be the muscle for Thompson's operations. His utter incompetence as anything else than his elder brother's henchmen is seen when he tries to improvise a speech via appealing to the audience's erudite knowledge of Shakespeare's words: "Friends, Romans, countrymen. *Give me your beers*" (season 1, episode 5). By appropriating Mark Antony's words, the script does more, I argue, than ridiculing Shakespeare's cultural capital and distinguishing correct and incorrect Shakespearean citation to mark differences between illiterate and well-read characters. It comments on the impact of Shakespeare's circulating cultural capital during the 1920s across the US, the emerging super-power. Subsequent references to *Julius Caesar* serve the function of unmasking Elias' pretense of erudition, for when Thompson reproaches him for his betrayal, he quotes the play and the younger brother does not understand where the quote comes from:

THOMPSON. ...And my brother tried to have me killed. Et tu, Eli?
 ELI. What?
 THOMPSON. Shakespeare. Julius Caesar. ELI. There's a character named Eli? (2, 12)

As payment for his betrayal, Elias accepts to take the blame for Thompson's crimes at the end of season two. Thus, Thompson wins the war against Darmody and Commodore, beats all the charges laid in court against him and re-starts his reign as treasurer of Atlantic City. When Elijah returns home after serving his prison sentence, he addresses his son saying that he has learned his Shakespeare in prison in order to impress his eldest, who is now thinking of leaving school to work (season 3, episode 3). In this way, a *before* and an *after* are emphasized with regards to Elias' journey. His allusion to reading Shakespeare in prison suggests that the prison experience has changed him for the better and that Shakespeare has played a part in such change.

Crucially, Shakespeare's presence in *BE* implicitly comments on the ubiquitous presence of Shakespeare in other HBO serials preceding it such as *Rome* and/or *Deadwood*. *Rome*, being HBO's first prime time series and clearly indebted to Shakespeare, may have been remembered by those who viewed this BBC-HBO collaboration expecting to catch Shakespearean references while hearing Elias' quotes in *BE*. As for *Deadwood*, it is significant that, as Ronnenberg's analysis demonstrates, Shakespeare's *Second Henriad* conforms the narrative bases and that structural, theme-based and character

connections and historical parallels have been established between *Deadwood* and Shakespeare's work. Poignantly, *BE*, in its borrowing of narrative references to *Henry IV*, follows a structure similar to that of *Deadwood* during the first three seasons, for it structures the main conflicts as a series of dynastic successions. Thompson, a leading figure in Atlantic City, managed to gain supremacy by rigging elections and using strategic means that displaced the previous ruler: Commodore Louis Kaestner. The Commodore's bastard son, Darmody, wants to follow Thompson's steps but, because he abandons university to sign up for the army, he loses all chances to become Thompson's second-in-command. Ambiguously, characters in the series refer to Darmody as the 'Prince'. This title may be read as a reference to (a) to Hamlet—as Darmody's conflict with Thompson and momentary affiliation with his father resemble the feud between the father-son coalition versus the putative father (even though in Shakespeare's source the father is a Ghost) – or (b) to Prince Hal from *Henry IV Part 1* and *Henry IV Part 2*, a talented youngster who, after undertaking his own experiences, embraces responsibility as his character develops. While Darmody spends time in Chicago, he learns the craft and the strategies with the best masters: John Torrio and Al Capone. This prepares Darmody to apply his soldierly skills to the complex and intricate business of political cut-and-thrust against Thompson. Equally similar to Hal is Capone, who, despite his masculine figure, is firstly depicted as a boyish irascible and unpredictable hoodlum. Both Darmody and Capone, together with Luciano, need to learn to acquire the *gravitas* necessary for business and, though Darmody's betrayal of Nucky is punished, later on, Capone will come to Thompson's rescue similarly to what Hal does in the battle scene in *HIV Part 1*. When armed cars and vans arrive in Atlantic City to support Thompson against Gyp Rossetti, Capone triumphantly closes the episode: "We been on the road for 18 hours. I need a bath, some chow. And then you and me sit down, and we talk about who dies" (season 3, episode 11). Capone's triumphing entrance, agreeably or disagreeably, surprises viewers who may have been cultivating sympathy with this character who, following lines quite similar to those of Prince Hal's journey towards becoming King Henry V, starting as Torrio's boyish and unpredictable henchman, grows to become the Napoleon of Crime. Rosetti does not only cut supplies between Atlantic City and the cities Thompson provides but starts a massacre operation in Atlantic City. Rosetti's temper and irrational outbursts, while turning him into an extremely dangerous and ruthless enemy, are also the cause of his own death. Thus, Rosetti seems to be as a character undertaking Harry Hotspur's narrative functions, for both are two warriors with great capacities for leadership but, due to their rashness and unrestrained tempers, succumb.

Allusions, citations and more vague references, systematically arranged, inform about the different ways in which Shakespeare inflects the serial. Firstly, Shakespearean allusions and citations of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius*

Caesar stand for Shakespeare's texts' value as repository for enlightenment, redemption and edification. Lack of knowledge and awareness of these texts proves fatal for careless characters who have not brushed up their Shakespeare. Secondly, reading *BE* through the lens of the Second Henriad—or, for all that, through the lens of Shakespeare's histories—seems to lead us to perceive the series through the endless and ongoing struggles for succession which take place in Atlantic City. But, more deeply than that, the series invites an interpretation of *BE* through a Shakespearean lens with various layers involving character analysis, plot and structure. The references to Shakespeare, as it has been shown, situate Shakespearean texts within dramatic contexts which provide clues to interpret the character's feelings and to predict the way in which the narratives will develop. Thompson's interest in *Romeo and Juliet* moves beyond his citational interests. He develops an interest for Margaret, whose husband he murders.

Thus, as in Shakespeare's play, their love story commences with the assassination of a family member. Elias' and Nucky's citations of *Julius Caesar* serve to stress on the one hand, Elias' weakness and communicative inability—in which case, his citation of Mark Antony's speech works as irony to reveal Elias' lack of public speaking abilities—. Likewise, Nucky's citation of Caesar's last words stress Elias' treachery. Finally, Elijah's redemption is marked through education in jail, whether or not such redemption has actually occurred.

Nonetheless, trauma lies hidden within the larger and less discernible Shakespearean intertexts in the series. Hal's, Hamlet's or Oedipus' desires or inclination to replace their fathers bring about the invitation to read the Shakespearean specters wandering around the series' wings. In themselves, these latter references do not directly lead to Shakespearean specific texts. And yet, these Shakespearean-classic references, seen in connection with citations, inter-illuminate one another. As a rule-of-thumb, whether or not such a rule was consciously applied, seemingly, fragments and pieces of Shakespeare's texts, even if only temptingly, reinforce a popular idea that Shakespearean readings improve our spirit and enlighten us. Potentially, they lead us out of darkness and obscurity. On the other hand, less clear and more diffused allusions and reformulations—as well as transformations, for, indeed, Darmody's destiny is totally unlike Hal's—lead us to the darkest and traumatic corners of Shakespearean tragedy and history. As a final note, a Shakespearean compass displays its points which seem to be describing random circles. Yet, they appear pretty well organized eventually and, depending on where and how the tips of the Shakespearean compass are positioned, zigzagging dialectics of trauma and redemption point at different narrative paths and at potentially different outcomes.

Conclusion

Shakespearean intertexts in complex TV series, abundant as they are, are lately receiving academic attention. Considering that, as has been suggested,

complex TV series work, as Cascajosa suggests, as barometers or indicators of a mainstream popular ideological, political, cultural and sociological *zeitgeist*, given the impact of series in cultural life, I find it instructive to develop insights on the way in which Shakespearean intertexts inflect and affect the series' narrative strands. Shakespeare's texts and cultural signification operate as potentially curative elements. At the same time, the Shakespearean intertext—particularly, through references to tragedy and history play—disrupts affirmative narrative strands in the larger intertextual meshwork of *Boardwalk Empire*. Arguably, such an effect is to be found in other complex TV works and, thus, more sustained attention to the Shakespearean intertext from the lens of traumatic redemption is due.

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Notes

1. This article is part of an ongoing research project entitled "Serial Shakespeares: A Shakespearean Compass to Study Shakespeare in a Culture of Traumatic Redemption." Acknowledgements are owed to Carlos Herrero Martínez, Ana Serra Alcega and Francisco Manuel Sáez de Adana Herrero (Instituto Franklin-Universidad de Alcalá de Henares), Xavier Pérez Torrio (Universitat Pompeu Fabra), Alexander Sampson (London University College) and Michelle Devereaux and Karin Brown (Birmingham University-Shakespeare Institute) for allowing me to use their universities' libraries resources to carry out research stays and/or to provide help with regards to other aspects of the stays. Acknowledgements are also owed to the English Philology Department of the Universidad de Extremadura for allowing me to take the license of studies to continue developing this project. Additionally, acknowledgements are owed to Richard O'Brien (Birmingham University/Shakespeare Institute), Flora Jordán Ortiz (IES León Felipe), Asunción López Varela (English Studies Department of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid), Fernando Cuesta (IES Avenida de Los Toreros), Marta Mesalles (IES Ciutat de Balaguer), Javier Trabadelo Robles (Faculty of Sciences of Documentation and Communication of the Universidad de Extremadura), Pablo Ruano San Segundo (Department of English Studies of the Universidad de Extremadura) and Xavier Pérez Torrio (Universidad Pompeu Fabra) for inviting me to carry out public dissemination and outreach lectures and to take part in seminars and classes which are helping find the means to improve and develop the research project.

2. Balló, Jordi and Xavier Pérez. (2015) *El Mundo, Un Escenario: Shakespeare, el Guionista Invisible*, trans. Carlos Losilla, Barcelona, Spain: Anagrama; Bataille, Sylvaine, "Haunted by Shakespeare: HBO's Rome," in Hatchuel, S. and N. Vienne-Guerrin. (2008) *Television Shakespeare: Essays in Honour of Michèle Willems* (pp. 219-249), Mont-Saint-Aignan Cedex, France: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre; "How Many Times Shall Caesar Bleed in Sport": Recent "Roman" TV Productions and the Shakespeare Legacy" in Hatchuel, Sarah and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin (2009) *Shakespeare on Screen: The Roman Plays* (pp. 225-237), Mont-Saint-Aignan Cedex, France: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre; "'Hamlet on Harleys': Sons of Anarchy's Appropriation of Hamlet" in Hatchuel, Sarah and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin (2011) *Shakespeare on Screen: Hamlet* (329-344), Mont-Saint-Aignan Cedex, Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre; Burzynska, Katarzyna (2017) "Bad Boys Meet the Swan of Avon: A Re-Visioning of Hamlet in Sons of Anarchy", *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 52(2), 2017; Földvály, Kinga (2016) "Serial Shakespeare: The Case of Star-Crossed (2014)" in A. Bernadelli, E. Federici, G. Rossini, *Forme, Strategie e Mutazioni del Racconto Seriale, Between*, VI. 11. Recovered from <http://www.betweenjournal.it>; Winckler, Reto (2017) "This great stage of androids: Westworld, Shakespeare and the World as Stage" in *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* 10(2): 169-188.
3. See <https://lostpedia.fandom.com/wiki/Economics>.
4. See Jack Barnes (ed) *The Clintons' Anti-Working-Class Record (Why Washington Fears Working People)*, New York, Pathfinder, 2016. The book presents Barnes' and Clark's collection of essays against the Clinton administration.
5. My article in REDEN (under review) accounts for the ways in which social media users use Shakespearean lenses to interpret complex TV series.
6. For most recent work on the subject, see Aebischer, Pascale, Susanne Greenhalgh and Laurie Osborne (eds) (2018) *Shakespeare and the 'Live' Theatre Broadcast Experience*, London and New York, Bloomsbury Publishings; Lanier, Douglas (2010). "Recent Shakespearean Adaptation and the Mutations of Cultural Capital," *Shakespeare Studies* 38, 104-13; Calbi, Maurizio (2013), *Spectral Shakespeares* (Media Adaptations in the Twenty-First Century), Palgrave Macmillan; O'Neill, Stephen (ed) (2018), *Broadcast Your Shakespeare (Continuity and Change Across Media)*, London, New York, Bloomsbury Publishings Plc.
7. See Lanier, Douglas (2014), "Shakespearean Rhizomatics: Adaptation, Ethics, Value." In *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*. Ed. Alexander Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin. New York: Palgrave, 21-40; Harrison, Keith (2017), *Shakespeare, Bakhtin, and Film (A Dialogic Lens)*, Palgrave Macmillan; Olive, Sarah (2018), "'Certainty o'er uncertainty': Troilus and Cressida, Ambiguity and the Lewis Episode 'Generation of Vipers'." In Stephen O'Neill. 161-184; Huertas-Martín, Víctor (2018), "Katabasis in Rupert Goold's *Macbeth* (BBC, 2010): Threshold-Crossing, Education, Shipwreck, Visionary and Trial Katabatic Experiences," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 46.3; Földvály, Kinga (2013), "'Brush Up Your Shakespeare': Genre-Shift from Shakespeare to the Screen." In *Reinventing the Renaissance (Shakespeare and His Contemporaries in Adaptation and Performance)*. Eds. Sarah Annes Brown, Robert I. Lublin, Lynsey McCulloch, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 47-62, etc.
8. See Journal of Captain Thomas Morris, of His Majesty's XVII regiment of infantry; Detroit, September 25, 1764. Accessible in: https://www.loc.gov/resource/lhbthn.th001_0292/?sb=.

9. See Katherine Rowe [2004] 2007, "The Politics of Sleepwalking: American Lady Macbeths," *Shakespeare Survey*, 126-136.
10. See John Wilkes Booth, "Letter to the National Intelligencer" (4 April 1865).
11. See Anonymous, "Account of the Terrific and Fatal Riot at the New-York Astor Place Opera House". In *Shakespeare in America (An Anthology from the Revolution to Now)*. Ed. James Shapiro. New York, Library of the United States, 2013, 62-104; Cliff, Nigel, *The Shakespeare Riots (Revenge, Drama and Death in Nineteenth-Century America)*, New York, Random House, 2007.
12. Lanier is currently engaged with his research project on reparative Shakespeare, which he developed over a fellowship at Folger Shakespeare Library in 2019. The work is unpublished. Thus, acknowledgements are owed to Douglas M. Lanier for letting me read his conference paper "Shakespeare and the Reparative Turn."
13. See Bersani, Leo, *The Culture of Redemption*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990; Meister, Robert, *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights*, Columbia University Press, 2010; Wilderson, Frank B., III, "Afro-Pessimism and the Ruse of Analogy," Lecture, Middletown, CT, October 16, 2017; "Afro-pessimism and the End of Redemption," *The Occupied Time*, March 30, 2016. Accessed November 6, 2016. <https://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=14236>; Edelman, Lee, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
14. The New York Public Library blog presents an inventory of the books cited in *Boardwalk Empire*. Accessible in: <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2012/06/01/bookshelves-boardwalk-empire>.

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