

From Shakespeare's Kings to Scorsese's Kingpins: Contemporary Mob Movies and the Genre of Tragedy

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Abstract: Following a path established in Robert Warshow's chapter on "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," this article attempts to look at connections between the ancient genre of tragedy and contemporary mob movies. On the one hand, there are structural parallels when it comes to plot, which adheres to the formula of decline, brought about by erroneous judgments. On the other hand, mobsters are often portrayed as powerful, ruthless tyrants who retain a kind of Shakespearean grandeur. Using examples from films by Michael Mann, Martin Scorsese, and Ridley Scott, my argument links contemporary American crime drama to the origins of tragedy (as laid out by Aristotle in *Poetics*) and some canonical examples of the genre, like *The Merchant of Venice*. Having established this theoretical framework, I shall offer a detailed discussion of Martin Scorsese's *The Departed*, one of the most successful mob movies in recent years. In this film, Scorsese toys with the tragic genre both on the level of plot and with regard to his flawed characters, who struggle to overcome guilt and tragic *hubris*, yet cannot escape their inevitable tragic downfall.

Recent publications have been leveling harsh criticism against the depiction of criminals in popular media, prominent targets including the über-Godfather Vito Corleone, who is portrayed benevolently as a caring paterfamilias, or Tony Montana (*Scarface*), whose gun fetishism has turned him into a pop-cultural icon. There can be no doubt that our understanding of mob structures relies heavily on the consumption of movies,¹ and even a laudable and meticulous study such as John

1 It is certainly true that the American film industry "claimed the mafia its own," removing it from its historical context, which led to an inflationary use of the term 'mafia,' turning it into a synonym for Italian American crime. In his recent examination of the history of the Sicilian mob, John Dickie points out that Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* films paint a rather bleak picture of Sicily at a time when "typhus was a bigger danger to the population than mafia crime" (331).

Dickie's history of the Cosa Nostra demonstrates that it is nigh impossible to abandon the realm of myth altogether. By segmenting historical facts into chapters featuring headings like "Genesis," "War and Rebirth," or "Bombs and Submersion," Dickie's book illustrates Hayden White's model of narrative discourse: The history of crime proves just as much susceptible to the influence of generic schemes as any other form of historiography, since the presence of narrative capacity indicates the presence of meaning itself (White 2). Consequently, Dickie's narrative resorts to the same patterns of rise and fall which are characteristic of mob movies and which, by extension, evoke the genre of tragedy.

As far as tragedy's influence on the construction of gangster myths (and, by implication, their narrativization in films) is concerned, I mainly distinguish two aspects and I shall try to support both cases with examples from contemporary films: one, the plot structure of mob movies, which often resembles the structure of tragedy; two, the intertextual connections between powerful mobsters and the Shakespearean tyrants they are modeled on. Subsequently, I shall offer an in-depth discussion of Martin Scorsese's *The Departed* to show in how far the movie combines both of these aspects, i.e. the patterns of the tragic plot as well as tragically flawed characters who share a number of features with Shakespearean figures.

"I AM NEVER GOING BACK": TRAGEDY AND THE PLOT STRUCTURES OF MOB MOVIES

In depicting the romanticized versions of mobsters, contemporary crime drama often corresponds to the structure of tragedy as laid out by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. The rise of the protagonist is followed by a reversal of fate, from happiness to the opposite, and, eventually, "from ignorance to knowledge, bringing the characters into either a close bond, or enmity, with one another, and concerning matters which bear on their prosperity or affliction." Inevitably, the ending brings about suffering in the shape of "a destructive and painful action, such as visible deaths, torments, woundings, and other things of the same kind" (Aristotle 43). Critics soon recognized the patterns of tragedy within the genre.² Most of these readings focus on *The Godfather* and its depiction of the Corleone family as a metaphor of America's state of corruption, both in spirit and commerce. Director Francis Ford Coppola fueled these readings by adding his view of the tragedy of Michael Corleone as "the tragedy of America" (qtd.

2 One of the earliest interpretations in that vein is given by William Simon, who identifies a four-act structure in *The Godfather* consisting of exposition, disruption, transition, and restoration.

From Shakespeare's Kings to Scorsese's Kingpins: Contemporary Mob Movies and the Genre of Tragedy

in Poon 69). Michael was identified with the doomed ruler figure that President Richard Nixon had come to personify in the traumatized America of the early 1970s (O'Hagan qtd. in Poon 68), before Coppola shifted the focus towards the more personal tragedy of Michael in *The Godfather: Part III*, which related "primarily the tragic fate not of the social but of the individual" (Poon 68).

Discussions of the tragic genre usually suffer from the implication that a uniform notion of tragedy exists, whereas there actually can be no such thing. Often, there remains but a vague notion of what Aristotelian drama is about. Although Aristotle is usually associated with having prescribed a pattern that had to be adhered to by the playwrights of centuries to come, a historical examination shows how his authority was challenged rather soon: Roman playwrights, for instance, preferred to model their texts on Seneca rather than on Greek tradition (Snyder 84-86). In a more straightforward definition, a comedy will end happily, whereas a tragedy usually requires "the downfall of figures of great power and prosperity (heroes, in a more basic sense, and kings)" (Halliwell 127).³ Yet a more profound analysis will show the situation to be far more complicated. The difference boils down not so much to "serious perils but [to] the operation of a kind of 'evitability' principle" (Snyder 85) which is missing in tragedy. To quote Aristotle, tragic events "occur contrary to expectation yet still on account of one another"; the result usually "follows by either necessity or probability" (42). When applying these principles to mob movies, we can avoid an oversimplified take on the problem, which would result in nearly every film being classified as a tragedy. After all, only few mob movies have the effect to arouse "pity and fear effecting the *katharsis*" of the viewer's emotions (Aristotle 37). De Palma's *Scarface* may adhere to the structure of rise and fall, depicting the downfall of a flawed protagonist who, in the end, has to pay for his crimes. Yet *Scarface* does not allow for the complete emotional involvement of the viewer, since Al Pacino gives an intense performance as the eponymous antihero without inviting sympathies. His Tony Montana is of a godless nature, which merely shows that the presence of a moral frame of reference is a requirement of tragedy. *The Godfather* is greatly influenced by Catholic motifs and rituals and, as we shall see later on, so is *The Departed*.

To some extent, providing the audience with emotional involvement used to be a bare necessity of the genre, which is already evident in the first groundbreaking reading of the American gangster as a tragic hero. In 1948, American critic Robert Warshow offered a reading of the movie criminal as a challenging force to the public display of optimism in America. According to Warshow, films like Howard Hawks's

3 Deborah Roberts discusses in detail to what extent this really applies to tragedies in general. She shows that there is "a considerable variety of modes of ending and of beginning" (136).

1932 original *Scarface* usually invite the audience to participate in the protagonist's "steady upward progress followed by a very precipitate fall" (102). The outcome is determined by ancient genre conventions and still manages to involve the viewer despite its rejection of cheerfulness and the 'sacred' American Dream. Even back in Warshaw's days, there were plenty of sources to choose from because of the strict moral code as applied by the Hays office in 1930s Hollywood (Harris 181-82). It guaranteed not only that the plot had to end in the demise of the criminal, but also that the audience left theaters feeling safe "because it is *his* [the gangster's] death, not ours. We are safe; for the moment, we can acquiesce in our failure, we can choose to fail" (Warshaw 103). The mythologies surrounding the deaths of Bonnie and Clyde, Pretty Boy Floyd, or John Dillinger lent themselves naturally to this pattern. However, it had ceased to be a precondition by the time Arthur Penn directed *Bonnie and Clyde*, borrowing heavily from the French New Wave and reshaping the moral code in American cinema.⁴

Generally, the tragic pattern becomes more evident when two characters on opposite sides of the law are depicted in their battle against each other. Films like Michael Mann's *Heat*, Scorsese's *The Departed*, or Ridley Scott's *American Gangster* focus on the development of emotional bonds between the protagonists and their counterparts. Usually, such bonds lead to blurred distinctions between heroes and villains, which are also characteristic of the tragic figures and their ambiguous nature. *Heat*, for example, is solely devoted to that problem. In the pivotal coffee shop scene that shows bank robber Neil Macaulay (Robert De Niro) sharing a cup of coffee with Detective Vincent Hanna (Al Pacino), the man who is out to catch him with fervent energy, the conversation between the two characters is not so much a foreshadowing of the ending as a way of spelling it out:

HANNA. You looking to go back [to prison]? You know, I chased down some crews. Guys just looking to fuck up, get busted back. That you? [...]

MACAULAY. I am never going back.

HANNA. Then don't take down scores.

MACAULAY. I do what I do best: I take scores. You do what you do best: Try to stop guys like me. [...] A guy told me one time: "Don't let yourself get attached to anything you are not willing to walk out on in thirty seconds flat if you feel the heat around the corner." [...]

It is what it is. It's that or we both better go do something else, pal.

HANNA. I don't know how to do anything else.

MACAULAY. Neither do I.

4 For a detailed discussion of the impact *Bonnie and Clyde* had on America's cinematic landscape, cf. Harris 391-93.

From Shakespeare's Kings to Scorsese's Kingpins: Contemporary Mob Movies and the Genre of Tragedy

HANNA. I don't much want to either.

MACAULAY. Neither do I.

HANNA. [...] You know, we're sitting here, you and I, like a couple of regular fellas. You do what you do, I do what I gotta do. And now that we've been face to face, if I'm there and I gotta put you away, I won't like it. But I'll tell you, if it's between you and some poor bastard whose wife you're gonna turn into a widow: brother, you are going down. (1:25:18)

Macauley and Hanna view their lives as unchangeable and acknowledge the presence of the other as part of their destiny. Warshow was the first to point out that the genre usually does not permit the reader “to ask whether at some point he [the criminal] could have chosen to be something else than what he is” (101), and neither Macauley nor Hanna would be able to answer that question for themselves. In the end, it is Hanna who shoots Macauley. The final gesture between them—the policeman holds the criminal's hand as he passes away—hints at their mutual agreement. Evidently, Mann does not shy away from the kind of *pathos* that occurs in ancient tragedies (Möller, “Heat” 349).⁵ Concerning its plot, *Heat* is not structured like a classic mob movie, since it does not pursue the Shakespearean topics of power and dynasty in the same vigorous manner. However, *Heat* shows its tragic quality in the obsession with two basic requirements of the genre: “the animal existence of the human being and the inevitability of death” (Dunton-Downer and Riding 290). Macauley opts for his own demise by returning to the crime scene in order to get back at the man who betrayed his comrades,⁶ well knowing that either death or arrest will await him—as his conversation with Hanna has foreshadowed, both he and the audience know that the latter is no option. By breaking his own rule not to get emotionally involved, Macauley becomes the tragic victim of *hamartia*, as outlined by Halliwell, both as a character attribute, i.e. weakness, and as “a causal factor in the sequence of action” (128). The protagonist's faulty judgment in the first act (to accept Waingro as a member of his gang) must lead to the catastrophe that typically occurs after one final moment of suspense during which the outcome still seems uncertain. Macauley enjoys one last LA

5 The reversal of that ending seemed all the more out of place in De Niro's and Pacino's next collaboration, the flawed *Righteous Kill* (dir. Jon Avnet), which received mostly negative reviews. In this movie, it is De Niro's character who shoots Pacino's and holds the hand of the dying friend/foe. However, in the context of this film, the momentum of the scene borders on the ridiculous: Pacino plays a detective who turns into a serial killer out of disappointment with the legal system; the serious implications of the topic are, however, ridiculed in the narrative of the film, as the *mise-en-scène* seems rather obsessed with old-fashioned images of masculinity. *Pathos* requires the tragic context to be effective.

6 The traitor, Waingro, is a caricature of a villain: ugly, despicable, scruffy appearance, loose temper, and without morality. Mann's screenplay accentuates this by turning him into a serial killer who goes after underage prostitutes, a subplot never fully explored.

sunrise with his girlfriend and considers his escape plan—a scene used time and again by Mann.⁷ Even without inclination towards *pathos* and the archaic values that characterize *Heat*, the dramatic structure often remains the same, as the *peripeteia* is usually brought about by a slight, and often banal, error in judgment that will haunt the criminal until the end. Similarly, Frank Lucas, the drug lord played by Denzel Washington in Scott's *American Gangster*, leads a perfect organization and is never bothered by the authorities until he gives in to the temptations of luxury and decides to wear a ridiculously gaudy fur coat to a boxing match, which promptly arouses suspicion. Lucas burns the coat on his wedding night (1:21:55), but he can neither erase the damage it has done nor the memory of his *hubris*.

In his discussion of modern drama, Friedrich Dürrenmatt states that a key difference between comedy and tragedy is the tendency of the latter to rely on historical subjects, whereas the subjects of comedy derive from the author's imagination (45). Evidently, the myths surrounding real gangsters like Bonnie and Clyde, Benjamin 'Bugsy' Siegel (*Bugsy*, dir. Barry Levinson), Al Capone (*The Untouchables*, dir. Brian De Palma), John Dillinger (*Public Enemies*, dir. Michael Mann), or Frank Lucas turned out to be rather attractive for the artistic imagination and became stories with tragic scope, even though their fictionalized version are always, as Warshow emphasizes, "creature[s] of the imagination" inhabiting "the imaginary city" (101). Mob films in contemporary settings can similarly be traced back to accounts of real-life criminals: *GoodFellas* is based on Nicholas Pileggi's nonfiction book *Wiseguy*, Sam Rothstein (*Casino*) is modeled on the career of mobster Frank Rosenthal (Seeßlen 334), and the DVD of *The Departed* features no less than two documentaries tracing the influence of real crime on Scorsese's film. The fictionalized story usually moves towards its inescapable conclusion, which enacts "the cadential rhythm of every human existence, even while it protests against that inevitable end in its countermovement of expanding heroic self-realization" (Snyder 85)—the inevitable usually being the protagonist's brutal death.⁸ The downfall of such larger-than-life figures like John Dillinger evokes the second major aspect of tragedy in mob movies: the powerful characters who are at the center of the action and are brought down when "personal failings and external circumstances operate in a mysterious conjunction" (Snyder 86), which similarly applies to Shakespearean characters.

7 In *Miami Vice*, the lovers share an idyllic sunrise before the police will come after the woman (here, however, there are no tragic circumstances involved). In *Public Enemies*, John Dillinger and Billie Freshette meet one last time before Dillinger's impending assassination.

8 Most of the aforementioned real-life criminals, such as Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, 'Bugsy' Siegel, and John Dillinger, were eventually assassinated.

From Shakespeare's Kings to Scorsese's Kingpins: Contemporary Mob Movies and the Genre of Tragedy

SHYLOCK IN LAS VEGAS: THE MOVIE MOBSTER AS A TRAGIC PROTAGONIST

Mob movies offer a multitude of intertextual references, many of which hint at their roots in Shakespearean drama. Both the bosses and the newcomers find themselves in the place of Shakespeare characters like Richard III or Macbeth, whose ascent to the throne is usually accompanied by moral corruption and brutality. They are responsible for their situations and, simultaneously, become victims of circumstances to some extent. The tragic gangster is thus established as a contemporary equivalent to the monarch in tragedy, and, similarly, the topics dealt with in mob movies correspond to the ones in the plays: the problem of succession to the throne, the struggle for power, hidden conspiracies against the ruler, and sudden eruptions of violence. Additionally, the theme of the ruler's downfall must rather be seen in the tradition of the Shakespearean genre, since Aristotle himself does not put special emphasis "on figures who in themselves represent the personal locus of tragedy" and is "uninterested in any such concept of the tragic hero" (Halliwell 127).

Naturally, the association of the criminal with the tragic figure provides at least one basic problem according to Aristotle's distinction that tragedy is "mimesis of ethically serious subjects" (36), generally defining heroes as "men better than ourselves" (48). Still, the notion of the gangster as a tragic figure should not be dismissed simply because the category of virtue hardly seems to fit characters like Michael Corleone, who has his own brother killed in order to protect his power. On closer inspection, most of the fictional gangsters will indeed turn out to fit Aristotle's description of the tragic figure as "one who is not preeminent in virtue and justice, and one who falls into affliction not because of evil and wickedness, but because of a certain fallibility (*hamartia*)" (44). The Aristotelian terminology emphasizes the importance of dynastic clans: For example, Oedipus and Electra are seen as superior, not by virtue of their actions, but because they are of noble birth and "belong to the class of those who enjoy great esteem and prosperity" (44). The contemporary understanding of monarchy has, at least in the Western world, erased any feeling of inferiority. Evidently, kings and queens have lost their tragic potential, while parts of the concept are still preserved in crime drama's *kingpins*—a fusion of kings and mafia bosses. Mervyn LeRoy's 1931 gangster movie *Little Caesar* is one of the earliest examples of this connection and the genre has been referencing this link ever since, be it in the shape of the powerful (Shakespearean) mob bosses, cunningly pulling the strings in the background,⁹ or by adhering to the kind of archaic code of honor visible in Mann's *Heat*, for instance.

9 Consider, for example, the famous poster image of the *Godfather* trilogy depicting the hand of a puppeteer.

The link between the figures of the king and the gangster is often established through mere casting decisions. Sometimes, we notice the relation by seeing actors associated with mob movies in Shakespeare adaptations: Marlon Brando, the original Don Vito Corleone of *The Godfather*, appeared as Mark Antony in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's adaptation of *Julius Caesar*. Most notably, however, this applies to Al Pacino, who has regularly been playing gangsters for the better part of his career and who has also starred in adaptations of *Richard III* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Special emphasis should be put on the experimental *Looking for Richard* (directed by Pacino himself), a kind of meta-adaptation that mixes scenes from the play with an examination of Shakespeare's impact today. Matthew Wagner points out the metaperformative quality involved in Pacino's appearance, as his portrayal of the soldier figure—and by extension of the monarch—carries the star persona of the actor and inevitably makes him “a Pacino-Richard” (54). The performance simultaneously creates a “war body” which traverses genre borders and which is constructed by “corporeal attributes of other bodies from across historical divides” (Wagner 55) with Pacino's image of the potent, short-tempered warrior influencing our reading of the films. Thus, no matter if he is playing Michael Corleone, Tony Montana, Vincent Hanna, or Shakespeare's characters, he will be seen as ‘Shouty Al’ who regularly delivers “abusive tirade[s]” and shows “majesty in his rage” (Robey 96), which, interestingly, resembles the kind of acting style Aristotle deemed characteristic of tragedies. In *Poetics*, Aristotle stresses the fact that tragic mimesis is of a far more vulgar kind than epic mimesis, because the performer “use[s] a great deal of physical action” and “excessive gestures” (63-64), both of which are characteristic of Pacino's tendency to “over-act,” i.e. “unpredictable emphases, sudden surges of volume and a general *Sturm und Drang* exhibitionism” (Robey 96).

More examples of Shakespearean mobsters can be found in films that revolve around powerful rulers like Don Michael Corleone, whose fate is thoroughly discussed by Poon, or Sam ‘Ace’ Rothstein (Robert De Niro), the gambling handicapper in Martin Scorsese's *Casino*. Olaf Möller points out the link between the characters in *Casino* and Shakespearean protagonists, as they both enjoy an unmatched height of power just before they experience downfall (Möller, “Casino” 321), although I do not share Möller's view of *Casino* as an overall tragedy. Still, the character of Rothstein clearly owes a huge debt to Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice*, as both of them struggle with anti-Semitic stereotypes. Sam Rothstein is a Jew of dubious reputation who excels in accumulating money and, just like Shakespeare's controversial play, Scorsese's movie remains ambiguous about whether gambling is just in Rothstein's nature or whether the process of Othering has forced him to turn into the

From Shakespeare's Kings to Scorsese's Kingpins: Contemporary Mob Movies and the Genre of Tragedy

stereotypical creation he personifies. Like Shylock, he is tolerated by his corrupt environment as long as he makes a profit for his employers:

NICKY. [*voice-over*] To them [the bosses], he was a cash register. All they had to do was ring the bell and take the money. Especially Remo, who was a fucking degenerate gambler who always lost. I mean, unless Ace made his bets. Ace made more money for them on a weekend than I could do heisting joints for a month. [...] Keeping Remo happy with money was the greatest insurance policy in the world. [...]

REMO. See that guy? Keep a good eye on him. He's making a lot of money for us. And he's going to continue making a lot of money for us, so keep a good eye on him. [...]

NICKY. [*voice-over*] So now, on top of everything else, I gotta make sure nobody fucks around with the Golden Jew. (0:12:55)

The bosses force him into the stereotype of the Jewish usurer and, at the same time, exploit his instincts as a gambler, thus mirroring Shylock's Venetian milieu "that would buy him off and then mock him for accepting" (Robey 97). As the tragic circumstances would have it, Rothstein's *hubris* leads him to make a number of ill-advised decisions (Seeßlen 330-31), the most banal, yet consequential of which is his argument with the state authorities over a mere negligible incident (*Casino* 1:17:45). He learns a lesson about the limits of control, and the argument will eventually lead to his demise. The Jew remains an outsider in the system which he believed himself to be an established part of: "Anywhere else in the country, I was a bookie, a gambler, always looking over my shoulder, hassled by cops, day and night. But here, I'm Mr. Rothstein. I'm not only legitimate, but running a casino" (0:05:02).¹⁰ The locals turn out to be hypocrites like Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, who boasts that "I neither lend nor borrow, / By taking, nor by giving of excess," yet who accepts Shylock's conditions (*Merchant* 1.3.385-86) while refusing the friendship of the Jew "as like to call thee so [a dog] again, / To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too" (*Merchant* 1.3.456-57). Ironically, the disdain for the Jew is what saves Rothstein's life in the end. He is the only non-Italian kept alive when the bosses have everyone killed, as he explains himself: "I could still make money for all kinds of people back home, and why mess up a good thing?" (*Casino* 2:44:50).

In addition, Sam Rothstein grows into the role of a tyrant who has to reassert his authority by arbitrarily harassing his staff. The reader may go so far as to doubt his accountability when he tries to control every aspect of the casino empire, asking his chef to put the exact same amount of blueberries into all muffins sold in the casino:

10 Cf. Warshaw's observation that within the genre, "the successful man is an outlaw" (103).

“There is not one single thing I will not catch” (1:08:02). Nonetheless, like Shylock who loses his rebellious daughter to Lorenzo, Rothstein is unable to completely control the body of the woman he tries to possess (in Rothstein’s case, his wife Ginger). Both Shakespeare’s play and Scorsese’s film feature scenes where the Jew leaves Jessica/Ginger behind at home, forbidding her to leave or to let “the sound of shallow foppery enter / My sober house” (*Merchant* 2.5.883-84), yet both escape and follow the call of their seducer. Rothstein’s marriage with Ginger is arranged like a feudal business deal, with Ginger having to produce an heir first (*Casino* 0:40:30), though unlike Henry VIII, he shows no disappointment in her giving birth to a daughter instead of a son.¹¹ The topic of filial succession lends itself naturally to tragedy, as the war between mafia families often causes quarrels within the blood family as well, despite the two kinds of families being “distinct entities” (Dickie xi). The representation of the mob in film requires the two to be fused together again, which is where the topics of patricide and fratricide come in. That leads me to the second half of my paper, a detailed examination of Martin Scorsese’s *The Departed*, which elaborates on the theme of succession.

THE SYMMETRY OF RISE AND FALL: MARTIN SCORSESE’S *THE DEPARTED*

With *The Departed*, a film loosely based on the 2002 Hong Kong thriller *Infernal Affairs* (dir. Andrew Lau and Alan Mak), Martin Scorsese returned to the genre of mob movies, which had made him a household name, more than ten years after *Casino*. Even given the film’s star-studded cast and the quality of Scorsese’s collaborators behind the camera, the movie’s overwhelming success came as a surprise, resulting in the highest box office of any of his movies. The film earned Scorsese an Academy Award for Best Director in 2007 and was also the first mob movie to win Best Picture since *The Godfather: Part II* in 1975. Many critics were quick to connect *The Departed* with Scorsese’s best-known contributions to the genre, such as *GoodFellas*, a comparison which is inevitable, yet misses the point. On the one hand, *The Departed* is set in a different milieu (the Irish American south of Boston) and, on the other hand, it opts for a much grittier style which is closer to Scorsese’s earlier movie *Mean Streets*. Hence, it allows the director “to make a form of cinematic love to noir films generally, and classic gangster films specifically” (Goldman).

11 Regarding the myths surrounding Henry VIII’s marriages and his attempts to father a son, cf. Ridley.

From Shakespeare's Kings to Scorsese's Kingpins: Contemporary Mob Movies and the Genre of Tragedy

The plot focuses on the search for father figures and on rites of passage involved in the “transition of the young male to adulthood,” which is, according to Peter Burian, a fundamental pattern of tragic myth (191). While it could be argued that *GoodFellas* or *Casino* correspond to the tragic pattern in a similar way,¹² a closer look at the genre components reveals that *The Departed* is a more fitting example than either of these films, as it offers at least one protagonist to identify with (Billy Costigan, played by Leonardo DiCaprio). His actions allow for a cathartic viewing experience, i.e. feelings of terror and pity, as they exhibit “the nature of an ethical choice” (Aristotle 47). In Aristotelian terms, this constellation is typically realized in the decline of bonded relations, “when brother kills brother” or “son kills father” (46), with Scorsese’s film offering examples of either case. Formally speaking, *GoodFellas* and *Casino* rather seem to negate Aristotle’s theater concept and to favor an epic approach in the vein of Bertolt Brecht. They exhibit a multitude of devices, showcasing the craftsmanship involved, resulting in the distancing of the audience from the viewing experience. In *GoodFellas*, cinematographer Michael Ballhaus’s famous three-minute Steadicam shot follows Henry Hill’s (Ray Liotta) smooth entering of a nightclub, which adds to the awareness of watching a movie (0:30:15). Additionally, in the closing monologue, the actor even breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience directly (2:13:21). *Casino*, too, makes extensive use of voice-over narration and Steadicam shots which serve to accentuate the epic qualities of the film and which often put the aesthetic component before the characters. For *The Departed*, on the other hand, the director made a conscious decision to have “it all stripped down, for characters to come to the forefront” (Scorsese qtd. in Goldman). Again, there is clearly a link between the director’s approach and the specifics of tragedy, as Aristotle “believes in a reciprocal relation between character and action – character motivating action, and action cumulatively helping to shape character” (Halliwell 94).

Following the stripped-down approach which never indulges in showing off technical mastery, the opening remarks by Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson) present the only instance of voice-over narration in *The Departed*.¹³ Since it is separated from the rest of the movie, Costello’s monologue serves the function of a prologue, which is a typical feature in Greek tragedy, where it is usually delivered by the chorus, “acquaint[ing] the audience with at least some of the events that have led up to this beginning” (Roberts 140). His speech also establishes him as an omniscient, godlike

12 As a matter of fact, Scorsese himself envisioned *Casino* as a take on the tragic genre, albeit with a different emphasis on its classic components: “Even though you may not like the people and what they did, they’re still human beings and it’s a tragedy as far as I’m concerned” (qtd. in Lippe 227).

13 The opening line of the movie is “I don’t want to be a product of my environment, I want my environment to be a product of me” (0:00:36).

father figure who narrates his early encounter with young Colin Sullivan (Matt Damon); tellingly, some prologues in Greek tragedies are spoken by the gods (Roberts 141-42).

On several occasions, Costello quarrels with the influence of the Church, which, given the setting of the film, comes close to blasphemy. Ever since James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in 1916, typical representations of the Irish Catholic community in twentieth-century literature and film portrayed them as God-fearing people haunted by eternal feelings of guilt who accept the divine order as an unchangeable force of destiny. While young Colin is shown to have served as an altar boy (0:03:30), Costello tries to brainwash the child into accepting him as a kind of ersatz deity, albeit in vain. Unlike the Italian American padre in mafia movies, he does not respect the institution of the Church, as it challenges the order established by him ("Church wants you in your place," 0:03:40). To Costello, having the Church is "only a way of saying we had each other" (0:00:48). Costello makes his own law and puts himself in place of a deity, going so far as to challenge a priest: "May I remind you: in this archdiocese, God don't run the bingo" (0:45:03). The air of self-proclaimed divinity is highlighted in several other scenes as well. Costello introduces himself to Billy with the rather rhetorical question, "Do you know who I am?" (0:31:30), and at one point, he excuses himself from the scenery for the reason that he has "[g]ot a date with some angels" (1:11:50). Costello's order is based on the community members paying him tributes. While they have to show themselves obedient, Costello's own moral—reflected in the upbringing of his protégé, Colin Sullivan—favors greed and ruthlessness. Colin's ambition is symbolized by Boston's State House, situated in Beacon Hill (the city's most desirable living area), which looms in the background of various shots in the movie, e.g. early on while Colin is still attending police training (0:05:53) and later, when he enjoys the same view from his apartment (0:15:30). In the bar scene, Costello makes a drawing of the State House surrounded by rats, reflecting the state of corruption and the erosion of ideals that used to be associated with it (1:26:42),¹⁴ and the final shot of the film, moving from Colin's dead body to the balcony of his apartment with a rat crossing the balustrade, is the final, bitter punch line of the theme of decay (2:18:25).

Costello's enormous power provides him with constant protection from the police force, simultaneously making him the center all the action revolves around. Unsurprisingly, a great number of scenes is devoted to both Billy and Colin trying to win his approval, their status being measured by whether they fall from his grace or

14 Originally, the State House was erected on land which had once been in the hands of John Hancock, one of the founding fathers of the United States (cf. Whitehill and Kennedy, esp. 240-72).

From Shakespeare's Kings to Scorsese's Kingpins: Contemporary Mob Movies and the Genre of Tragedy

not. Often, the scenes culminate in fatherly gestures granted by the boss: e.g. a pad on Colin's shoulder, supporting a patriarchal message ("I know you'll take care of business" [1:23:37]); Costello's presence at Colin's graduation from the police academy (0:07:01); his advice to Billy to put emphasis on education (0:44:28); or in encoded messages over their tapped phones: "Hi Dad [...] I'm not gonna be home for supper" (0:58:22). Even in his dying words, Costello fails to acknowledge the limits of his influence when Colin, who has turned into a rebellious son, dethrones him: "I never gave up anybody who wasn't going down anyway" (1:58:58). For similar reasons, Billy enjoys his only genuine moment of triumph over his opponent when it turns out that Costello has, in the end, put more faith in him than in Colin: "Costello trusted me more than anyone" (2:09:58).

As the story focuses more and more on Costello's ruthless and determined search for the traitor, he comes to resemble a modern Richard III, his ascension to the throne having made him unable to put faith in people. In spite of having accumulated wealth and power like a monarch (in one of the numerous sexual follies he engages in, his lover even addresses him as "your highness" [0:58:59]), he seems to get more paranoid by the minute. His state of mind is reflected in his lengthiest conversation with Billy, which is again reminiscent of Shakespeare and which hints to the characters being aware of their tragic dispositions:

COSTELLO. Stupid. *That's what brings you down in this business.* [...] You know, past days, situations like this: I kill everybody. Everybody who works for me.

BILLY. Right. You know, Frank. I look around at your other guys, I mean, they're all murderers, right? Right? And I think, "Could I do murder?" And all I can answer myself is: "What's the difference?"

COSTELLO. Give them up to the Almighty. [...]

BILLY. Look, you're seventy years old, Frank. I'm just saying, okay? One of your guys is gonna pop you. [...] Frank, how many of these guys have been with you long enough to be disgruntled? Think about it. You don't pay much, you know? *It's almost a fucking feudal enterprise.* The question is, and this is the only question, who thinks that they can do what you do better than you?

COSTELLO. The only one who could do what I do is me. Lot of people had to die for me to be me. You wanna be me? [...] "*Heavy lies the crown*" sort of thing, (1:27:48; my emphasis)

Evidently, Costello knows his Shakespeare (as he quotes from *Henry IV, Part 2*),¹⁵ and the intertextual connection with the history plays is stressed even more when Costello

15 The actual wording in Shakespeare is: "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" (*Henry IV.2* 3.1.1735).

sets the trap for Billy, giving him false information about a drug delivery on “a boat coming up Gloucester” (1:32:00), evoking Richard III’s status as Duke of Gloucester before his ascent to the throne. Yet despite the feeling that he cannot know “if it’s beyond some fucking cop prick like Queenan to pull you out of the Staties and send you after me” (0:34:18), he makes the fatal decision to rely on Billy, which proves to be the kind of erroneous judgment that so often brings down the tragic figure. Since he arranges for all his assets to be mailed to Billy after his death, it becomes obvious that Costello puts his faith in the only one of his associates he should not have trusted. At the same time, his dynasty proves infertile despite its exhibition of virility. Like Richard III, he has failed to provide the continuity of his empire beyond his own realm and, like King Lear, he has put his faith into the wrong successor: His gang is wiped out in the shoot-out with the police near the end, and both of his protégés turn out to be traitors. Thus, “the future of the royal house,” which is one of the major plot vehicles in Burian’s outline of tragic plots (182), is not assured, as a successor of Costello’s own flesh and blood is not in sight, either. Costello’s downfall makes him the target of Colin’s mockery, just before he is shot by him:

COSTELLO. You know I’d never give you up. You’re like a—
COLIN. What? Like a son? To you? Is that what this is about? All that murdering and fucking, and no sons. (1:59:12)

Costello may try to remind Colin of their former ties, yet these efforts are in vain. This scene shows the most evident connections to Shakespeare, as it recalls the futile pleading of the former king with his disobedient daughters, Regan and Goneril, in *King Lear*:

LEAR. [T]hou better know’st
The offices of nature, bond of childhood,
Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude;
Thy half o’ the kingdom hast thou not forgot,
Wherein I thee endow’d. (2.4.1463-67)

Like Lear, who recognizes that he has nurtured “a boil, / A plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle, / In my corrupted blood” (*King Lear* 2.4.1519-21), Costello is brought down by those whom he has considered his closest allies. In addition to *Richard III* and *King Lear*, we can observe traces of Macbeth’s aura around Costello, his paranoia causing him to deteriorate towards madness. Billy remarks that “[h]e’s getting spooky” (*Departed* 1:40:18), as Costello causes pointless bloodshed (1:36:11) that would not be out of place in Shakespeare’s most violent plays like *Macbeth* or *Titus Andronicus*.

Despite this portrait of the gangster’s fall from power through *hubris*, the main tragic story arc is devoted to the figures of the sons, Colin Sullivan and Billy Costigan.

From Shakespeare's Kings to Scorsese's Kingpins: Contemporary Mob Movies and the Genre of Tragedy

Within the very tight plotting of the film, the rise and fall structure of the tragic genre is translated into a symmetrical structure, depicting two protagonists who are rooted in different ends of the moral spectrum, rising fast on opposite sides of the law and mirroring each other's fate. Colin, who is brought up by the gangster Costello, joins the police force and soon becomes the right hand of Captain Ellerby. Billy, on the other hand, despite some loose family ties with Costello's organization, has a safe upbringing as a "kind of a double kid" (0:12:40), living with his mother in Boston's middle-class north. Having spent his weekends with his father in the southern projects, Billy develops a split personality early on, even switching accents when the occasion requires him to do so (0:12:56). As an adult, he takes side with the law, yet he has to act amorally in order to complete his mission: infiltrate the mob and become Costello's associate. The family constellation will prove to be an inescapable trap for Billy, as he is chosen for the undercover assignment on the sole basis of his descending from a family of Irish American criminals "[a]nd one priest" (0:12:22). Interestingly, the one common feature that Susan Snyder postulates for all of Shakespeare's tragic plots is the hero's move "from his sphere of established mastery into a situation demanding another, perhaps diametrically opposed, kind of effectiveness" (87).

During his job interview with the Massachusetts State Police, where his family background comes under scrutiny, Billy quotes Nathaniel Hawthorne: "Families are always rising or falling in America" (0:13:15),¹⁶ which is, in this context, also a comment on the plot structure, not to mention the genre as a whole.¹⁷ The mirroring effect is reflected in the editing on numerous occasions, too. There are several montages contrasting the different steps both characters take in order to get ahead in their individual spheres. The scene where Colin takes Madolyn to a fancy restaurant is contrasted with the loner Billy having his damaged hand examined by a nurse in the hospital (0:29:30); a scene where Colin, after having been promoted, gives instructions to his unit, is intercut with Billy taking instructions from Costello (0:42:10). Later, images of Billy committing his first murder on behalf of Costello alternate with shots of Colin enjoying breakfast with Madolyn after their first night together (0:48:30). The parallel between acts of violence and sexual intercourse is accentuated in different scenes throughout the movie.

16 Billy attributes the quote to Hawthorne, though the exact reference is not given. The passage in Hawthorne that comes closest to the quote is a line in *The House of Seven Gables* (another Massachusetts-set story) where the narrator recounts that the downright plunge which the Maule family takes is, sooner or later, "the destiny of all families, whether princely or plebeian" (36).

17 Even more so given Sergeant Dignam's response, which adds another layer to the intertextual reference game: "What's the matter, smart-ass? Don't you know any fucking Shakespeare?" (0:13:26).

When it comes to the kind of inescapable guilt characteristic of the tragic genre, it is Billy more than anyone else who is haunted by his demons, which also makes his story arc the most likely one for the audience to identify with. In order to pursue his assignment, he has to act against his moral conviction and commit crimes. However, by committing crimes, he gets involved deeper and deeper with Costello's organization and struggles to regain his identity: "I can't be someone else every fucking day" (0:52:49). As a consequence, he suffers from panic attacks and constant insomnia. The decoration of Billy's and Colin's respective living environments hints to their different ways of handling the past: Billy is surrounded by photographs of his late family members (0:50:22), which serve as reminders that he used to be at peace with himself. He carries the name of his late father like an inscription of the past, and, ironically, his name even grants him protection on one occasion, serving as a password in the computer files that Colin searches in order to detect Costello's rat (2:03:10). Colin, on the other hand, insists on keeping reminders of the past out of his apartment ("You don't see any pictures of where I come from" [1:07:18]). As both of them are intimidated by Costello's overarching presence, Billy and Colin try to turn to replacement fathers, though these bonds provide no solace, being doomed despite signs of hope. Captain Queenan shows fatherly gestures towards Billy, and tellingly, when Costello's gang confronts him about the traitor, they ask, "Where's *your boy*?" (1:42:25; my emphasis). However, Billy remains in competition with Sergeant Dignam for Queenan's attention, with the latter one often having to settle their heated arguments.¹⁸ Billy can barely enter the captain's house at night, being bid to sit beneath the gallery of family photographs, which accentuates the distance between him and Queenan's blood relations (1:13:05). Furthermore, Queenan does not have sufficient power to free Billy from Costello's grip, driving him even further into his paradoxical mission.¹⁹ Eventually, Billy has to accept part of the guilt in the captain's assassination (1:42:50). Captain Ellerby, in turn, takes Colin under his wing, providing a conservative role model and advocating the kind of ultramasculine virility Colin lacks: "Marriage is an important part of getting ahead. Lets people know you're not a homo. [...] Ladies see the ring, they know immediately you must have some cash and your cock must work" (1:19:58). In another scene, Ellerby holds on to his testicles to add momentum to what he says (0:58:01). Yet in spite of his disposition as an apt pupil who establishes himself quickly, Colin is assigned with a task impossible to fulfill. As the head of a

18 The connection is also shown visually: When Billy tries to talk to Queenan on the phone and is dismissed by Dignam, a father and his child walk by (1:05:45).

19 At least one scene hints at Colin arousing Queenan's suspicion, yet the Captain's weakness hinders him from acting (0:58:40).

From Shakespeare's Kings to Scorsese's Kingpins: Contemporary Mob Movies and the Genre of Tragedy

special investigations unit out to find the rat, Colin turns into an Oedipal figure, unable to solve the crime without being identified as the culprit himself (1:19:32).

In addition to these parallels in the protagonists' struggles for fatherly acceptance, the symmetrical structure is accentuated in Scorsese's direction: He employs a subtle yet efficient symbolism throughout the film, which is intertextually linked with Howard Hawks's 1932 genre classic *Scarface*. Not only is an X hidden somewhere in the mise-en-scène every time a character dies (Goldman),²⁰ but X truly marks the spot in Scorsese's overall direction. The film emphasizes the cross in numerous aspects, both technically and metaphorically: First, the characters are literally crossed out (which can be read as the X's hidden in the shots); second, it is linked to Catholic symbolism and iconography by means of the cross; third, there is a metaphorical implication involved in the act of betrayal (to 'cross' someone); and finally, there is the structural implication for the film, i.e. the way Colin's and Billy's paths cross in the course of the narrative.

This structural disposition results in a blurring of the fine line between good and evil, and later even develops into a kind of reversal figure. When the pressure increases on Costello's gang, it is, paradoxically, Colin who makes the decision to take the mob boss down (though for the low motif of wanting to pursue his own career with the police force). At the same time, it is Billy who tries to warn Costello of the imminent danger (1:56:35), though his actual mission is to arrest him. The symmetry of the cross structure also plays a role in the final shoot-out, where Scorsese undermines genre expectations and has the main characters not killing each other, as would be the conventional result. Instead, they both die at the hands of the other one's brother figure: Billy is shot by Barrigan, another mole in the police unit, and Colin is killed by Sergeant Dignam. There is a final quantum of dramatic irony in the fact that neither Colin nor Billy was even aware of the respective ally. In a final twist on the traitor motif, the tragic plot then moves from the level of patricide to fratricide in Burian's typology: Although Colin owes Barrigan his life and learns that "[i]t's you and me now, you understand? We gotta take care of each other," Colin does not hesitate to shoot him in order to protect himself (2:14:30).

Here, *The Departed* offers a unique blend of genre components by fusing the structure of tragedy with an essentially Catholic discussion of conscience and guilt. In his review, Roger Ebert sums up the film as the work of "a Catholic director," and Robert Fischer even goes so far as to read *Casino* as the confession of a Catholic who, like his characters, works for the entertainment industry making outrageous profits

20 The X's can be spotted, for instance, in the elevator behind Billy, or on the carpet in front of Colin's apartment, just before they are shot (2:13:20; 2:17:40).

(Seeßlen 337), a problematic argument since Scorsese's films have rarely been as profitable as regular blockbusters. Catholic tradition is reflected most evidently in the inclusion of its iconography, such as in the scene where Billy seeks solace with Madolyn (which is reminiscent of the Eucharist, 1:47:20), or in a church scene from John Ford's *The Informer* which is on television while Billy makes an assault (*Departed* 1:11:50).²¹ One may also note the fact that Costello's dead body evokes the motif of the crucifixion (2:00:00).

Eventually, *The Departed* shows the downfall of each protagonist's individual failure: Costello's claim for power and invincibility; Billy's struggle to regain his identity;²² and Colin's attempts to escape the determinism of his upbringing, depicting him as a true Catholic who has "moved outside the church's laws," yet "nevertheless not freed [himself] of a sense of guilt" (Ebert). He is not even able to end his bad relationship with Madolyn:

COLIN. I want you to know, you don't gotta stay. If we're not gonna make it, it's gotta be you that gets out, cause I'm not capable. I'm fucking Irish. I'll deal with something being wrong for the rest of my life. (1:34:40)

In *The Departed*, Catholicism offers the kind of God-fearing view of the world which is an essential precondition of the tragic genre, be it in the shape of the gods in Greek mythology or of the steadfast order which provided the basis for Elizabethan theater. These belief systems are rooted in rites that are often depicted on stage, evoking "natural or cultural markers of closure in human lives: departure, reunion or reconciliation, solution or fulfillment, death, and ritual," (143) as Deborah Roberts paraphrases Barbara Herrnstein Smith. The most common of these rites is mourning, and, indeed, funerals provide a frame for the film: At the beginning, Billy buries his mother; the penultimate scene depicts his own funeral and assigns him a place among the "faithful departed" who have been sacrificed (2:15:43). Furthermore, a sense of inescapable fate is evident throughout the film; one needs to consider the former altar

21 There is a strong intertextual link between the two films, since *The Informer* is set in Ireland and deals with the topic of betrayal. Furthermore, *The Departed* also features a scene stressing its connections with other classic mob movies, as Costello's visit to the opera serves a traditional topos of the genre (cf. the finale of *The Godfather: Part III*, or Al Capone attending a performance of *Pagliacci* in *The Untouchables*). In *The Departed*, it is Donizetti's opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* which represents another take on a mob-related topic, as it tells the story of a feud between two families and their subsequent downfall. Costello seems absorbed in the performance, the red spotlights stressing his demonic iconography (*Departed* 1:14:15).

22 The phrases Billy increasingly uses towards the end of the film include, "I want my identity back" (2:02:10), and his repeated claim during the showdown, "You know who I am" (2:12:40). Naturally, the former wish cannot simply be granted by restoring his computer file, as Billy has lost his self over the course of a long period of time.

From Shakespeare's Kings to Scorsese's Kingpins: Contemporary Mob Movies and the Genre of Tragedy

boy Colin's resignation and his final utterance of acceptance ("Okay") before Dignam shoots him in the last scene (2:18:06).

Finally, Scorsese's film even pays homage to the man who offered the most influential reading of Greek tragedy in the twentieth century: Sigmund Freud. Colin's fiancée, Madolyn, is a psychotherapist who is repeatedly referred to by Costello as "little Miss Freud" (1:09:55). Furthermore, the movie ironically accentuates its own tragic subtext by attributing the statement that the Irish are "the only people impervious to psychoanalysis" (0:30:12) to Freud.²³

With Madolyn, the movie closes on an ambiguous note. Her pregnancy may provide the glimpse of hope which often follows the extinction of a doomed family in tragic plots, yet the matter of filial succession remains a complex one. There is no certainty as to who fathered the boy, since Madolyn has also slept with Billy and since there are hints that Colin is impotent (0:48:48). The latter adds to the impression of the overarching father figure, for the implication of Colin struggling with his virility immediately follows a scene where he has failed in the eyes of Costello. It is interesting to note how Costello, on one occasion, mocks Colin for his eagerness to please him: "Colin, calm down, or you'll shoot in your pants" (1:09:40). After the denouement that Colin is, in fact, a traitor, Madolyn also leaves him (and by extension us, the viewers) in doubt about whether or not she is going to have the child. Scorsese beautifully illustrates her complete breakup with Colin in a shot that quotes Carol Reed's *The Third Man*, showing Madolyn walking away from his eager attempts to inquire about the child (*Departed* 2:16:53).²⁴ What remains of the tragic hero in Scorsese's depiction is but the insecure son of a king, stripped bare of his power, be it political or sexual.

CONCLUSION: WHERE DOES THE BLOODLINE END?

Like *GoodFellas* and *Casino*, *The Departed* is amongst Scorsese's most brutal films, graphically depicting scenes of torture and having most of the important characters killed. Such bleak outcomes seem to run in the family, both of the mobster genre and of tragedy. Naturally, not all on-screen violence is of tragic proportions, yet many acts of vengeance, which are carried out mercilessly by the mobsters, certainly exhibit a tragic quality. In Aristotle's theory, the pain the protagonist has to endure will be "most clearly embodied in scenes of direct physical suffering" (Halliwell 119), which can then

²³ As a matter of fact, there is no documentation that Freud can be linked to this statement.

²⁴ Madolyn walks past Colin just like Anna (Alida Valli) ignores Holly Martins (Joseph Cotton) after the funeral of Harry Lime (Orson Welles) in *The Third Man*'s famous final shot, which lasts over a minute (1:42:35).

provide the basis for redemption. Evidently, there is a fine line between ancient rites (like the famous baptism in the finale of *The Godfather* that is intercut with the killings of Michael Corleone's enemies) and a mere bloodbath (like the climactic shoot-out in De Palma's *Scarface*). *The Departed* can claim a legitimate place among the tragic heavyweights, not only because the climactic killings evoke beheadings: Both the lead characters and a number of their associates (Mr. French, Barrigan, and Brown) suffer fatal head shots.

One should refrain from accepting violent endings as straightforward indicators of tragedy, just as many of the pseudomythological depictions of mobsters in media reports should invite critical readings. Clearly, not every cheeky upstart who wreaks havoc amongst his family is a modern Hamlet, and not every warrior who feels the need to defend his honor by shedding blood will turn out to be Titus Andronicus. Our instinct to narrativize proves problematic "when[ever] we wish to give real events the form of story" (White 4). In this article, I have stressed the importance of careful readings of plot structures, characters, and intertextual connections in mob movies so as to apply the seal of tragedy only where it is really appropriate.²⁵ When it comes to the special case of Martin Scorsese's *The Departed*, the reading of the film as a tragedy reveals a rather unique take on the genre on a number of different levels. Evidently, there are still some fascinating aspects to be discovered in the filmic depiction of criminals,²⁶ and as the genre shows no signs of fatigue, more bloodlines are going to be established, more empires built, and more battles fought for the succession to the throne. The American gangster will keep adding new chapters to the old book of tragedy: an offer which the audience will hardly be able to refuse.

25 Naturally, there is no uniform model of tragedy that can be related to all of the examples presented. Even the comparison of two Shakespearean tragedies will turn out to be problematic, as the structures of *King Lear* and *Othello* show, for example: The former places the decisive tragic act much earlier than the latter (Snyder 87).

26 One might, for example, extend the discussion to another element of Greek tragedy which has been rather neglected in modern drama: the chorus. In some mob movies, the aged bosses—who meet regularly in back rooms, commenting on the action and holding court over their subordinates, and who are incapable of enjoying their achievements (Seeßlen 335)—somewhat seem to fill this gap, at the same time functioning as the gods who are looking down on their subjects. In *Casino*, for instance, they decide on the execution of most of the culprits, providing the cathartic (divine) thunder that Rothstein sought in Las Vegas, albeit in a different sense: "For guys like me, Las Vegas washes away your sins. It's like a morality car wash. It does for us what Lourdes does for humpbacks and cripples" (0:05:26).

From Shakespeare's Kings to Scorsese's Kingpins: Contemporary Mob Movies and the Genre of Tragedy

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