**Tony Soprano**

**Creator: David Chase**

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In a *Los Angeles Times* article published in the wake of James Gandolfini's death, Chris Lee described Tony Soprano, Gandolfini's most famous incarnation, as 'a cultural sensation', 'one of TV's most indelible icons' and 'the unlikeliest of all sex symbols' (Lee 2013). Lee was not alone in his summation of the character; Tony Soprano is widely recognized as one of popular culture's most challenging, impactful and compelling figures. But what is it about this calculating, vicious and narcissistic sociopath that audiences find so appealing?

By his own admission, Tony Soprano is 'a fat fucking crook from New Jersey' ('Calling All Cars' 2002); a mob boss with an unnerving knack for sudden and devastating violence. He is also a middle-aged, obese family man, prone to panic attacks and undergoing therapy. Hardly the stuff of dreams, yet the character retains his stranglehold on the cultural imaginary and continues to top 'best TV antihero' polls more than seven years after the final episode aired. The key to Tony's popularity, it seems, is the fact that despite the singularity of his chosen profession, he is surprisingly relatable. His efforts to balance work and home-life are certainly familiar, and parents around the globe will recognize his struggle to control his unruly, ungrateful children. When, in a discussion about their wayward teenage daughter, Tony admits to Carmela, 'if she finds out we're powerless, we're fucked' ('Toodle-Fucking-Oo' 2000), he voices the fears of parents everywhere. Indeed, when held up against mob life, there's no contest: 'being a parent, that's the hardest job. It's harder than this other thing we do' ('Employee of the Month' 2001). It is instructive, then, that the panic attacks that cause

Tony's fainting episodes and put him into therapy are related to his familial relationships. As the series develops, it becomes increasingly clear that Tony's masculinity is in crisis; torn between the competing demands of 'Family' and family, he captures perfectly the post-feminist, *fin-de-siècle* zeitgeist, his vulnerability offering a humanizing and beguiling counterpoint to his brutality.

Tony's angst reflects the representational crisis that masculinity underwent in the 1990s and early 2000s, a period where, as Donna Peberdy notes, 'the instability of the male *image* [was] evident in the overwhelming permeation of a discourse of masculinity crisis' (Peberdy 2011: 7, original emphasis). Peberdy's emphasis on the instability of the male *image*, rather than on the male psyche, recognizes that it is only possible to access and adjudge the *representation* and rhetoric of masculine crisis, as masculinity itself is necessarily performative and contingent, rather than natural and instinctive. Tony Soprano's masculine performance is based on that of his gangster father, Johnny Boy Soprano, who ran a moderately successful crew of 'wise guys' in the 1950s. Tony looks back with nostalgia on the mob heyday of the 1950s as a simpler, less conflicted time, where gender roles were clearly defined and traditional values of loyalty and *omerta* were upheld. As E. Anthony Rotundo notes, '[a]lthough [Tony is] aware of his father's shortcomings, he admires his father's certainty and his fidelity to principle – and he contrasts that with his own doubts and failures' (Rotundo 2002: 68). Tony's romanticization of the past creates an intolerable version of masculinity which is incompatible with the demands of modern life. His performance of 1950s gangster masculinity does not correspond with the sensitive, emotionally literate and demonstrative version of masculinity required within the late-twentieth-century home, and this creates tension between his public and private selves.

In the latter decades of the twentieth century, representations of successful masculinity increasingly focused on family relationships and, as Hannah Hamad has argued,

‘the naturalization of involved fatherhood as the paradigmatic template for ideal masculinity […] [took] place through paternally inflected negotiations of all manner of variations and iterations of cinematic postfeminist masculinities’ (Hamad 2013: 103). This focus was not confined to film, but also informed ‘cinematic television’, of the type pioneered by HBO which used the techniques and production values of film-making when creating *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999–2007). At first glance, paternity may seem ill-suited to hyper-masculine genres such as action or gangster narratives, but its representation encourages audience identification with, and acceptance of, transgressive or otherwise problematic characters. In her discussion of the work done by critics such as Karen Schneider and Yvonne Tasker, Hamad explains that the ‘paternalization’ of masculinist genres enables

> the reification of patriarchal family values alongside an apparent accommodation of changing mores regarding ideal masculinity. This [takes] place through their paternally signified, and therefore ‘sensitive’, leading men, thus offsetting what would otherwise be the problem of negotiating the troublingly recidivist masculinities on show. (Hamad 2013: 105)

Accordingly, scenes depicting Tony playing *Mario Kart* with AJ as the rest of the family sleeps (‘Meadowlands’ 1999) or gently carrying a drunken Meadow to bed (‘College’ 1999), allow the viewer to focus on Tony’s tenderness rather than his ruthless brutality. Tony’s psychotherapy sessions with Dr Jennifer Melfi also have an important identificatory function, in that they allow the viewer to glimpse the insecurities and vulnerabilities that make the character more recognizably human. Sociopathy aside, Tony has an endearing neediness which betrays his secret status as a man-child still desperate for the love and validation of his uncaring, castrating mother. His wife and children function as necessary signifiers of

successful, hegemonic, adult masculinity, but whilst Tony genuinely loves them, he also finds it necessary to disavow the castrating nature of the marriage contract and signal his virility by taking a string of young and beautiful lovers. Tony's attitude towards his marriage – and his wife's forbearance of it – may represent a form of wish-fulfilment for conforming male audiences; it also constitutes a simultaneous incorporation and repudiation of post-feminist dictates, and signifies the tension between Tony's 1950s- and 1990s-inflected masculine performances.

Negotiating the public and private spheres is a source of continual anxiety to Tony Soprano; his failure to maintain a successful equilibrium reveals the impossibility of reconciling his anachronistic and conflicting selves, and also recalls Judith Butler's conception of heterosexuality as doomed to a compulsive Freudian cycle of repetition and failure:

> heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself – *and failing*. Precisely because it is bound to fail, and yet endeavours to succeed, the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself. (Butler 1997: 307, original emphasis)

The ceaseless repetition of failed and traumatic self-making situates Tony Soprano in a tradition of dysfunctional masculinity that has a broader historical reach than the close focus of 1990s critical discourse would suggest. Within the diegesis it is revealed that Tony's father suffered from the debilitating, emasculating panic attacks that Tony himself struggles with, as did an ancestor back in 'the old country'; extra-diegetically, Tony's filmic gangster forebears and heroes, including Tom Powers in his favourite film *The Public Enemy* (William A.

Wellman, 1931) and Michael Corleone in *The Godfather* (Francis Coppola, 1972), also perform flawed and defective versions of embattled masculinity which predate Tony's crisis by several decades. Beyond the screen, social historian Michael Kimmel has charted masculine crises across a variety of historical and geographical locations, including Restoration England and America in the late nineteenth century (cited in Peberdy 2011: 5).[1] Tony Soprano may make no cognitive link between himself and seventeenth-century Englishmen, but he certainly feels the weight of history; unable to escape the pervasive feeling that the best has already happened, he feels that life is an endless, unedifying struggle. In this, Tony is Everyman; his melancholy yearnings for recognition and meaning aligning him, as Ingrid Walker Fields observes, 'with other baby boomers who feel cheated by the unfulfilled promises of their youth' (Fields 2004: 615). By offering audiences multiple points of identification with Tony, the show's creator, David Chase, increases the character's empathetic appeal and allows the audience to focus on those elements of Tony's character that are socially acceptable.

Tony's approval rating is also boosted by favourable comparisons with certain other characters in the show, who are shown to be his moral inferiors. Tony places extreme value on loyalty and despite his tortured relationship with his mother, Livia, he strives to be a good son.[2] Livia's version of parenthood stands in stark contrast to Tony's loving and demonstrative paternity; flashbacks to the 1950s reveal her as a modern-day Medea, at one point telling a young Tony 'I should stick this fork in your eye!' ('Down Neck' 1999) and later in the same episode warning her husband that she would rather smother their children with a pillow than allow him to move them to Nevada. With the same absence of emotion, Livia vindictively orders the adult Tony's execution (by his uncle Junior!) as punishment for placing her in a luxurious 'retirement community', which she views as a dereliction of his filial duties. Likewise, mobsters such as Richie Aprile, Ralphie Cifaretto and even loyal

Paulie Walnuts are shown to be ruthless, amoral psychopaths: Richie, with encouragement from Tony's sister Janice, plots to kill Tony ('The Knight in White Satin Armour' 2000); Ralphie beats to death a dancer from 'Bada Bing!' who is pregnant with his child ('University' 2001); Paulie murders and robs his mother's friend, Minn, in order to boost his weekly payment to Tony ('Eloise' 2002). Even seemingly straight-laced and innocuous characters, such as the attorney from whom Tony almost buys a holiday home ('Whitecaps' 2002), are shown to be unethical and dishonest, and this raises the question of who is worse – the white-collar criminals running America, or guys like Tony who at least are upfront about what they do. The Feds, although honest and uncorrupted, are shown to be morally suspect; their single-minded, unfeeling manipulation of informants such as Big Pussy Bonpensiero and Adriana La Cerva leading directly to the murders of those characters.[3]

However, despite concerted efforts to portray Tony in a more favourable light than many of his contemporaries, the viewer of *The Sopranos* is also repeatedly reminded of Tony's capacity for untrammelled aggression. At times this is mediated by the scenario's context, such as when he beats Ralphie to death ('Whoever Did This' 2002) in response to Ralph's suspected arson attack on the stables which killed the horse shared by Tony and Ralph; and also Ralph's murder of Tracee, the pregnant dancer from 'Bada Bing!' Although the kill scene is disturbing and difficult to watch, the viewer feels vindicated as there is a sense that Tony is meting out well-deserved justice to an intransigent character. On other occasions, such as when Tony launches a vicious, unprovoked attack on his bodyguard and driver ('Mr and Mrs John Sacramoni Request' 2006), or sabotages Janice's attempts at anger management ('Cold Cuts' 2004), his behaviour is gratuitous and ugly. This presents a severe threat to viewer empathy, yet it also reveals Tony's psychological depth and complexity, and this glimpse into what Martha P. Nochimson has termed his 'intricately marbled guilt and innocence' (Nochimson 2005: 190) is strangely compelling. The knowledge that the attack on

the muscular young bodyguard was predicated on Tony's urge to reassert his masculine primacy in the wake of his shooting, and that his behaviour towards Janice is rooted in his feelings of inadequacy and despair at having inherited 'the Soprano curse' of panic attacks and a volatile temper, enables the viewer to understand and excuse Tony's actions. By contrast, when Tony beats Davey Scatino ('The Happy Wanderer' 2000) over an unpaid gambling debt there is no psychological excuse; as Tony tells Davey: 'This is what I do'. The viewer is reminded that Tony isn't sensitive and misunderstood; he is a ruthless thug. Scatino is an old high school buddy and the father of one of Meadow's friends, a regular, law-abiding guy whose embattled masculinity sees him selling jock-straps for a living and seeking thrills in high-stakes poker games. When a low camera angle shows Tony looming over Davey and filling two-thirds of the screen, the menace that the camera conveys is also a warning to the viewer: this is what happens when you fuck with Tony Soprano; this is what happens when you get involved with a mobster. Forced to confront the nature of his or her empathetic engagement with the screen villain, the viewer must soberly acknowledge the moral and ethical complexities of the transaction. When Tony tells Meadow 'Everything this family has comes from the work that I do' ('The Happy Wanderer' 2000), she must accept her own complicity. The same is true of the viewer. However, *The Sopranos* does not advocate a particular moral standpoint. Rather, its focus on moral relativity encourages the viewer to consider the psychic manoeuvres that empathetic engagement relies upon. As Dana Polan explains,

> the moral questioning in *The Sopranos* manifests itself in strategies of irony by which the spectator is encouraged to glide in and out of a series of ethical positions and to see, perhaps, the facility by which shifts of moral attitude can be constructed and deconstructed. (Polan 2009: 123)

As Tony struggles to negotiate and reconcile his conflicting versions of masculinity, the viewer struggles with him; torn between identification, admiration, disapprobation and horror.

Chase's playful manipulation of the viewer means that s/he is never on solid ground; the narrative situation and the terms of the viewer's relationship with the character are as mercurial as Tony's temper. Seemingly straightforward scenes are complicated when glimpses of Tony's pathology threaten viewer empathy, such as when Carmela, struggling to connect with their teenage daughter, complains to Tony that Meadow never talks to her ('Down Neck' 1999). Tony smirks as he remembers the heart-to-heart conversation that he shared with Meadow as he drove her to visit universities ('College' 1999), when they spoke frankly about Tony's involvement with the Mafia and Meadow's recreational drug use. The scene has potential to illustrate a loving moment of connection between father and daughter, husband and wife; instead Tony's nasty smirk betrays his narcissism and need for control. Significantly, the narrative elements that make Tony appealing to the viewer are often the ones that later repel. For instance, the pilot episode ('The Sopranos' 1999) depicts Tony's relationship with a family of ducks that has made a home of his pool. Tony forms a strong attachment to the ducks and although his family is bemused by his emotional investment in the birds, the viewer is charmed by his careful ministrations. The look of utter joy on Tony's face as he watches the ducklings learning to fly is particularly endearing and it appears to reveal a level of kindness and sensitivity missing in modern society.[4] Coming so early in the series, this episode plays a foundational role in the viewer's acceptance of Tony, positing him as a man of essential goodness battling alone in a hostile and uncaring world. All the more affecting then, that the next time the viewer sees such joy on Tony's face is when he is chasing a debtor, Mahaffey, in Christopher's Lexus. Tony runs the man down then proceeds

to administer a severe beating, yet significantly the overriding emotion for the viewer is pleasure rather than disgust. The jaunty doo-wop soundtrack ('I Wonder Why' by Dion and the Belmonts, 1958) that accompanies the scene highlights the dissonance between the abjection of the visual image and the viewer's consumption of it as entertainment. Significantly, this does not signal the viewer's getting-off point, but rather a thrilling promise of the kind of treats that the rest of the season has in store.

The first episode neatly encapsulates the Kristevan 'vortex of summons and repulsion' (Kristeva 1982: 1) which will typify the viewer's relationship with the troubling yet charismatic Tony Soprano as the series unfolds. It also introduces the character who will function as the moral touchstone in *The Sopranos*: Dr Jennifer Melfi, Tony's psychotherapist. According to Polan, 'the target viewer for *The Sopranos* is probably more like Jennifer Melfi than Tony Soprano' (Polan 2009: 53) – a view borne out by the findings of the ethnographic research of Joanne Lacey ('One for the Boys? *The Sopranos* and its Male British Audience' [2002]) – and Melfi quickly becomes a key point of audience identification. Tony's therapy sessions are integral to the series in that they offer the viewer unique insight into Tony's psychological make-up. Significantly, the sessions not only provide Tony's own inner perspective, which is necessarily subjective and sometimes skewed: they also deliver Melfi's outside perspective. Her psychoanalytical insights are of course instructive, but the true value of these sessions lies in the impact they have on the viewer's relationship with, and acceptance of, Tony. Bruce Plourde explains:

> Whereas our more omniscient position actually limits our ability to judge Tony's behavior, Melfi's more limited but more insightful reading of Tony stems from her better ability to see through his deceptive language and to read his malevolence, serving as a corrective to our more accommodating perspective. (Plourde 2006: 74)

Melfi reminds the viewer that it is dangerous to take Tony at face value; that he is a dangerous sociopath and that often his 'insight' is simply a lie he tells himself in justification of his actions. Responses to the character remain complex and (at times) counter-intuitive, however. When Melfi informs Tony that she will bill him for a missed session ('The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti' 1999), he becomes enraged. Shouting and swearing, he throws money at her before storming out of the office. Tony's powerful physical presence, emphasized as he looms menacingly over the comparatively diminutive doctor, leaves Melfi feeling 'frightened and revolted', yet, interestingly, the viewer's reaction does not mirror Melfi's in this instance. Rather than condemning Tony and withdrawing approval of him, the viewer observes the scene with intrigue and empathy – intrigue as to how Tony's outburst will affect the narrative, and empathy with regards to Tony's devastation at feeling as though Melfi is interested in his money, rather than his wellbeing. The incident reveals Tony's emotional vulnerability; having opened up to Melfi, he felt that their relationship was meaningful and personal, rather than transactional. Within the therapeutic environment, Melfi provides the acceptance and compassion that is missing from Tony's relationship with his mother. The audience responds to Tony's pain with a desire to offer the nurturance and understanding that he needs and desires, simultaneously assuming the role previously held by Melfi and disavowing her interdictions regarding Tony's unacceptable social behaviours. Such a response is rooted in what Suzanne Keen has described as '[d]eliberate perspective taking' (Keen 2015: 131), a kind of empathy whereby the empath retains a separation between him or herself and the other, rather than temporarily 'merging' in a moment of emotional connection. As Keen notes, 'the empath who engages in perspective taking employs observation of the other and knowledge of that person […] [in what is] a more cognitive operation that depends on having a theory of (another's) mind' (2015: 131). This

separation remains a crucial element of the viewer's mental and emotional relationship with Tony Soprano and it is a separation which references and recognizes the complex negotiations upon which the relationship is predicated.

Melfi is similarly aware of the moral complexities of engaging with a man like Tony Soprano. Her professionalism ensures than she retains her clinical focus and treats Tony the same as any other patient. Yet, like Tony's wife and family – and the viewer – she is also complicit in his crimes. In treating Tony, Melfi becomes an enabler, as the coping mechanisms she teaches him help him to become a better mob boss. When she offers Tony what Chris Messenger has termed 'balm, understanding, and […] acceptance of the sorrow that underlies Tony's rage and depression' (Messenger 2002: 277), Melfi validates the viewer's instinct to forgive Tony his transgressions on the basis of her or his knowledge of the mob boss's drives and motivations.

Significantly, Melfi is not impervious to Tony's considerable charms; as their professional relationship develops, she finds herself increasingly drawn to him. During a discussion with her own therapist, Dr Elliot Kupferberg, Melfi sums up the attraction of repulsion when she admits: 'It's like watching a train wreck. I'm repulsed by what he might tell me but somehow I can't stop myself from wanting to hear it' ('House Arrest' 2000). As Plourde notes, it is Melfi's 'proximity to the audience's own fascination with this bad guy' that informs her understanding of Tony; she 'experiences the same morbid fascination we do, curious about a lifestyle that both disturbs and entices' (2006: 75). As the series progresses, Melfi's professional interest in treating such a complex case develops into a sublimated sexual attraction which manifests in erotic dreams, an increasingly sexy image and her subtle encouragement of the psychotherapeutic transference that allows Tony to develop romantic feelings for her. Melfi's attraction reveals that, like the audience, she is compromised and conflicted, seduced by Tony's beguiling amorality. Significantly, however, Melfi's personal

feelings are not allowed to cloud her professional and moral judgement. When her rapist is released on a technicality following a procedural error committed by the police, Melfi has the option of informing Tony of the rape and allowing him to deliver justice on her behalf. She demurs, her emphatic 'No' recalling her pleas to her attacker and voicing her empowering refusal to allow the rape to engender further acts of violence ('Employee of the Month' 2001). Eager to see justice served, however, the viewer is left frustrated by Melfi's decision. As Messenger observes, 'Melfi […] hold[s] Tony's moral balance (and that of the audience) in [her] hands' (2002: 276); the juxtaposition of Melfi's rationality and the viewer's own bloodlust forcing an uncomfortable moment of self-reckoning. When Melfi's subconscious works through her emotions as she sleeps, the dream work is significant, as Jessica Baldanzi demonstrates:

> When Melfi dreams of a rottweiler mauling her attacker, Jesus Rossi, she later explains to her therapist that her subconscious must have chosen that breed of dog not only because of its viciousness, but because of its 'Italian' history as a Roman guard dog. The choice is, however, even more appropriate than we realize. Melfi remarks that in the dream she's afraid at first that the dogs will attack her, yet rottweilers today are rarely unleashed; police dogs, impeccably trained, their violence is always in control, as we want to believe Tony's violence will be. (Baldanzi 2006: 82)

Melfi's subconscious need to keep Tony's violence controlled and contained mirrors that of the viewer, who is willing to sanction 'appropriate' outbursts but takes comfort in the fact that Tony appears to be more pragmatic and restrained than his volatile colleagues.

Despite the viewer's desire to compartmentalize the various elements of Tony's personality, in order to better navigate the moral complexities of engaging and empathizing

with such a character, *The Sopranos* refuses to reduce the character to a convenient set of interchangeable behaviours. David Chase's commitment to psychological complexity and hyperrealism ensures that Tony is as capricious and impulsive as any 'real' person, and his character is subject to psychological change and development. However, whereas in a more conventional, mainstream narrative this would ultimately lead to Tony's betterment and redemption, Chase actually sends his character arc in the opposite direction. Rather than becoming more socially acceptable and relatable, Tony Soprano becomes progressively more spiteful, unpredictable and unsympathetic as the series develops. Melfi's enthrallment with him is displaced by feelings of revulsion, as she explains to her therapist: 'You know at first, I did find him a little sexy – the dangerous alpha male – but as year followed year, the ugliness I saw, that I heard…' ('Two Tonys' 2004). As the series approaches its end point in Season 6, Tony is shown struggling with his sociopathic urges to murder Paulie ('Remember When' 2007) and mistreating his old friend, Hesh ('Chasing It' 2007) in scenes that are puzzling and alienating to the viewer. It becomes clear that Tony's relationships are all about power and as he struggles to reassert himself in the wake of the life-threatening gunshot wound that Junior inflicted upon him, he threatens not just the cohesion of his crew but also the support of the audience. When a drug-addled Christopher crashes the car that he and Tony are travelling in, Tony murders Christopher whilst glaring hatefully at the mangled baby seat in the back of the vehicle ('Kennedy and Heidi' 2007).[5] Tony's justification for the crime – that Christopher's baby daughter would have been killed if she'd been in the car – sounds hollow and ridiculous and the viewer must question all of the other times that s/he glibly accepted Tony's version of events. The scene is so shocking and visceral that empathy for Tony is immediately lost and the viewer is forced to acknowledge what Nochimson has termed 'the insufficiency of Tony's charm in the face of murder and other forms of social devastation' (Nochimson 2005: 192). Despite the refocusing of audience responses to the

character, from summons to repulsion, empathy is restored (to a degree) in the final episode of the series, when the Soprano family gathers in a diner for a family meal and the viewer begins to fear Tony's assassination. In part, this is because Tony is restored to the patriarchal role that endeared him to the viewer in the earliest episodes of the series, and the viewer is reminded of his love for his children. However, this awareness is tempered by the knowledge that Tony Soprano is a murderous sociopath whose loyalty to family and Family are contingent at best. The viewer's empathetic and emotional response to the situation, then, appears to reveal more about his or her own humanity than it does about Tony Soprano's.

Over the course of six seasons and eight years, Tony Soprano proved to be one of television's most complex and beguiling antiheroes. The character has acquired an extraordinary amount of cultural capital, with a reach far beyond what can usually be expected of a cable television series. Commentators have been effusive in their praise (although, of course, the series also had its fair share of vociferous detractors), with critics such as Maureen Ryan, in her blog for the *Chicago Tribune*, describing *The Sopranos* as 'the most influential television drama ever' (Ryan 2007). It quickly transcended its cult status and, according to Sam Delaney,

> [a]t its peak the show attracted 18 million viewers and was syndicated to channels across the world. It won numerous Emmy and Golden Globe awards and was declared by many critics as the greatest drama series of all time. (Delaney 2009)

Perhaps most importantly, *The Sopranos* set a new precedent for television, characterized by cinematic techniques and high production values, and a heavy focus on charismatic but morally ambiguous antiheroes. Tony Soprano made possible many of the twenty-first

century's most enigmatic characters, including Vic Mackey from *The Shield* (FX, 2002–08), a show which 'marks the point at which the cops can no longer be assumed to be the "good guys"' (Spiegel 2015). This renegotiation of conventional morality confounds viewer expectations of the cop show genre and, as Glyn White observes, '*The Shield* self-consciously belongs to the type of quality television that intentionally troubles its audience's sense of right and wrong' (White 2012: 90). This lack of moral sanction is at once titillating and thought-provoking and television has increasingly sought to capitalize on the curious appeal of the characters ushered in by Tony Soprano. His legacy continues to be felt, in shows such as *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–08), *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006–13) and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–13).[6] The antihero has become an essential part of popular culture and the interest in beguiling malefactors and moral complexity shows no sign of abating – proof indeed of the attraction of repulsion.

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## Notes

[1] Although Donna Peberdy challenges the validity of Kimmel's argument, which she says 'locate[s] crises of masculinity historically, quantifying them schematically according to dominant social positions' such as 'profeminist, antifeminist, and promale' and therefore overlooks or precludes 'those readings that occupy or

cross a number of social positions' (2011: 5), Kimmel's account of the existence of these historical stress-points nevertheless points to the cyclical and enduring nature of masculine crisis.

[2] Significantly, Tony's two sisters, Janice and Barbara, have long since severed contact with their mother. Unwilling and unable to endure her toxic personality any longer, they have moved away to focus on building their own lives. Although they both rejoin the family as Livia's life draws to a close, they do not strive to win her love in the way that Tony does.

[3] It's interesting to note, however, that the show's nuanced treatment of the Feds sees the viewer shifting from scorn, such as when the agents pettily crow about the fact that their surveillance equipment has revealed that Tony's boiler is about to burst, to breathless enjoyment of the *Mission Impossible*-style operation to infiltrate and reconnoitre the Soprano home, and grudging admiration at the skill of the experts at Quantico who create an exact replica of a lamp in Tony's basement which they install as a bugging device ('Mr Ruggiero's Neighborhood' 2001). Such episodes recognize the complexity of human emotion; the power of the narrative apparatus; and the shifting, malleable identification of the viewer.

[4] This point is emphasized by the scornful reaction of his teenage daughter, Meadow.

[5] It's important to note here that Tony and Paulie goaded Christopher into renouncing his sobriety, after feeling jealous and rejected by his decision to distance himself from the temptation of 'Bada Bing!' and other mob hangouts. After his masculinity is impugned by the pair, Christopher joins them for a drink and quickly descends back into addiction.

[6] Bryan Cranston who played Walter White in *Breaking Bad* acknowledged this debt when James Gandolfini died in 2013. He tweeted 'I'm saddened by James Gandolfini's passing. He was a great talent & I owe him. Quite simply, without Tony Soprano there is no Walter White' (@BryanCranston, 20 June 2013, https://twitter.com/bryancranston/status/347735374602321921. Accessed 17 June 2015).