



Hamlet Goes Legit: Archaeology, Archive and Transformative Adaptation in *Sons of Anarchy* (FX 2008-2014)

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ABSTRACT

Using Shakespeare's criticism and archival theory as lenses, this article enlarges understandings of the interconnections between a complex television series and Shakespeare. Forming a Shakespearean archive, *Sons of Anarchy* (SOA), based on *Hamlet* and other plays by Shakespeare, is packed with Shakespearean allusions, rather than citations, whose impact in the overall work is yet to be explored. Shakespearean formations, identifiable in the series' para-texts, episodes, and transmedia materials, add political weight to SOA. This intertextuality invites us to regard Shakespeare's influence in complex television as transformative.

KEYWORDS: Series; Allusions; Paratexts; Sources; Adaptations; Tragedies; Histories; Archive; Transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Early twenty-first century presentist criticism on *Hamlet* seemed to lean towards timely issues: firstly, the Gravediggers scene was used as a prompt to reflect on the legacy that the twentieth century had left; secondly, the scene was also used as a cue to discuss what attitudes and commitments were needed to successfully cope with such legacy. The Gravedigger reminded Hamlet that "no matter how much we cover[ed] our earthy origins we must all undergo the 'fine revolution' that [would return] us to the 'base uses' of a 'sexton spade'" (Kearney 2005: 183). Jacques Derrida's and Stephen Greenblatt's ghost-centered readings of *Hamlet* at the *fin de siècle* met with a presentist response.¹ Derrida and Greenblatt had mostly

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centered on the reckonings that mankind had to make with the Ghost, a fatherly figure from the past, rather than focusing on courses of action to take in the present. Presentist readers, in contrast, pointed at the revolutionary potentialities of the Gravedigger scene. One of their conclusions was that “it [was] necessary to put off [Derrida’s] princely fastidiousness [...] and delve in the sometimes unpleasant muck of real history” (Halpern, 2000: 51). Kearney saw the scene as an anteroom to “a future forgiveness” (183). The revelations in the scene prompted Hamlet’s decision “to act in favor of the absolute event as a compromised agent in a compromised world” (Ferne, 2005: 203). *Sons of Anarchy (SOA)*, a television serial appropriation of *Hamlet* that aired between 2008 to 2014,ⁱⁱ presents a relevant case study for these questions.

In *SOA*, the members of a bikers’ club—Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club Redwood Original (SAMCRO)—located in the fictional Californian town of Charming, do spend seven seasons delving in the “unpleasant muck of real history.” As Sylvaine Bataille asserts, “[t]he series wallows in scenes of exhumation, in which bikers become gravediggers and do their job with a nonchalance and even a blitheness that brings to mind the gravedigger in *Hamlet*” (2011: 338). The bikers dig to recover bodies and remains from the past, and reckonings ensue. Such gravedigging is metaphorically extended to the protagonist Jax Teller’s search and examination of documents. These documents include journals, letters, and reports, containing secrets about SAMCRO’s history. Audiences become detectives who need to collect clues “looking both forwards and backwards, cobbling together meaning—much as Jax and Hamlet do in trying to unravel the mysteries their fathers [left] behind” (Sloboda, 2012: 95). Much of this detective work, according to some reviews, included identifying traces of Shakespeare in the series.

But in *SOA*, mourning for the past is surpassed by the protagonist’s determination to change. In the pilot episode, on the day he finds his father’s narrative on how SAMCRO lost its sense of meaning, Jax Teller (Charlie Hunnam) interprets the survival of his son Abel after a heart operation as “a chance” to “free his son (and maybe himself) from his potentially deadly Teller inheritance” (Sloboda 88). Unlike his princely counterpart, Jax does not initially seek revenge but redemption from his and his family’s crimes. Watching “‘Hamlet’ on Harleys” (Carpenter 2008), audiences found in *SOA* an amusement that encouraged them to find a degree of bliss and perspective. Considering the potentialities of Shakespearean appropriation to foster “positive social transformation” (García-Periago, 2020: 116), it is my intention to look into the means through which Shakespearean allusions add nuance to the transformative features of *SOA*. *SOA*’s archive fractures and reassembles Shakespeare. This occurs, as Maurizio Calbi asserts, in contemporary Shakespearean adaptations which explicitly treat the plays as a “textual corpus that refuses to stay put” (2013: 100). Indeed, Shakespeare’s works were themselves adaptations of different literary, dramatic, and narrative sources. They were

posthumously edited, collected, and printed, then appropriated and rewritten across the centuries. *SOA* is part of this Shakespearean adaptive tradition. Its length and depth, as will be shown, allow us to identify the interplay of traces of such a tradition, not only taking into account Shakespeare's *Hamlet* but also sources and adaptations of the play, as well as what appears to be an unfathomable Shakespearean substratum in the series. We may assume that addressing Shakespeare in *SOA* involves addressing Shakespeare's ever-increasing archive. This archive encompasses play-texts, adaptations, sources, and a wealth of related documents. Crucially, Shakespeare's archive brings transformative effects to *SOA*.

2. SERIAL SHAKESPEARES: SHAKESPEARE AND *SONS OF ANARCHY*

Initially seen as “pixelated” in complex television (Carrión, 2011: 58), Shakespeare in television series demonstrably runs, as Stephen O'Neill says, “deeper than one might first realise” (2021: 3). Elisabeth Bronfen's and Christina Wald's insightful monographs on Serial Shakespeares, both published in 2020, were preceded by criticism that tackled Shakespearean spectrality (Bataille 2008; Bataille 2009), transferences of Shakespearean dramatic techniques to audiovisual scriptwriting (Balló & Pérez, 2015), and transferences of Shakespearean aesthetic metaphors to series (Winckler 2017). Critics identified patterns of Shakespearean adaptation such as character “porosity” and “assemblage”.ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, it was suggested that Serial Shakespeares recurrently entered into dialogue with other Shakespearean adaptations. This last serial phenomenon called for “cross-media analyses” (Huertas-Martín, 2019: 46) and for using series to look into “a transmedial transformation of Shakespeare's oeuvre” (Wald 4). Overall, analyses have shown that finding Shakespeare in series involves a “self-consciously operative” effort (Bronfen 9).

Seminal essays on *Hamlet* and *SOA* reviewed cultural transferences between the play and the series (Bataille, 2011; Burzynska, 2017) as well as *SOA*'s Shakespearean character porosity (Walker 2017). One *prima fascie* view on *SOA* shared by many (Bataille, 2011: 341; Sloboda 90; Wilson, 2020: 30) is that Shakespeare dissolves and resurfaces as seasons proceed. This notion is enriched if we observe *SOA*'s relationship to other Shakespearean texts apart from the source text of *Hamlet*. In Douglas Lanier's view, we may think of whichever Shakespeare's text considering its “fundamentally adaptational nature—as a version of prior narratives, as a script necessarily imbricated in performance processes” (2014: 29). At least in part, these processes are observable in *SOA*. On the political value of the series, María-Consuelo Forés-Rosel perceives the *SOA*'s underlying “sense of abandonment experienced by a large part of American society” (2020: 100) as an activist use of Shakespeare. But, if activism is synonymous with contributing to socio-political change, one remaining task would be to identify the politically transformative role played specifically by Shakespeare in *SOA*.

3. ARCHIVE AS METHODOLOGY

For Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, it is the “variety of devices and modes of production and viewing that has transformed Shakespeare on screen into a digital forest” (2021: 9). This forest intersects with the greater domain of Shakespeare’s archive. For Alan Gailey, such archive includes Shakespeare-related texts, technologies and new media. It provides metaphors “for thinking about the transmission and preservation of literary texts [...] given that an archive is at once a physical thing [...] and an imaginary thing, a symbol for cultural investments in memory, preservation, and an available past” (2014: 1). Being richly cinematic, artistically dense, and substantially bookish works, complex TV series may be said, borrowing Martin Pogačar’s observations on contemporary media, to consist of “a storing or curating process, through which storytelling is essentially denoted as the result of both media archaeology and micro-archiving” (2016: 8). Shakespearean archaeological remains, archives and micro-archives are endowed with a particularly rich significance. The “affective register” produced by Shakespearean “remains” identified by Courtney Lehmann in film (2002: 2) is equally appreciated in archives of Shakespearean performance. These remains may become “sites of re-performances” (Hodgdon, 2016: 6) and might have helped early filmmakers liberate Shakespeare on screen (Guneratne, 2020: 393). They are also the bases of what Judith Buchanan has described as the “creative trans-temporal engagement[s]” (2020: 323) of productions such as the Wooster Group’s *Hamlet* (dir. Elizabeth LeCompte, 2007) and *Silents Now* (2013), a practice-led project led by Buchanan herself. These two initiatives made past performances become a means of creating new performances. Contrary to Reto Winckler’s assertion that any Shakespearean adaptation is “a version” which will be “superseded by the next one in due time” (2020: 12-13), the archive’s logic is that adaptations display interrelated layers and remains of previous adaptations and performances.

The creative uses of Shakespeare’s archive in *SOA* may be explained through the lens of Michel Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). In this work, Foucault proposed rethinking the discipline of History by focusing on processes, not on unified views of the past (4–6). According to the French philosopher, historical documents also needed to acquire the prominence that they held in the field of Archaeology. They deserved interrogation and evaluation; they had to be grouped so that the historian could formulate the laws that determined their relations (7–9). To determine such relations between documents became a leading research goal. Potentially, the results of these enquiries would enrich and nuance established views on specific “themes, beliefs, and representations” (70) of history. Thus, following Foucault’s archaeological metaphor, historical documents were seen forming superimpositions in given domains. After identifying such superimpositions, the next step was to examine vectors which indicated transformations, shifts, continuities, and re-distributions of documents (187). The archive as a metaphor was introduced to make sense of such

interplays, whether they eventually resulted in the legitimation of or the resistance to established discourses. Archives would reveal the existence of multiple subjectivities within identified fields (138). Crucially, for Foucault, archives would help “discover what mode of existence [might] characterize statements, independently of their enunciation” (139), a logic which, doubtless, explains the interest of archive-based performances, such as the ones mentioned above or, as the pages that follow will show, the interrelations we may establish between Shakespearean allusions in *SOA*.

4. SHAKESPEAREAN FORMATIONS IN PARATEXTS

According to Lanier, the project of resituating Shakespeare on film “contributed to the general sense that Shakespeare [...] might circulate freely—or at least more freely—across cultural borders” (2011: 150). *SOA*’s paratexts confirm this logic. The skull, a recurrent symbol in *SOA*, is for Bataille a feature pointing the general viewer “to the remote time of the series Shakespeare source” (2011: 340). Hamlet-like, holding a ball with an A or Anarchy printed on it, the Reaper imagery combines tragic and comic moods, stressing the playful interplay between the imagery of death and the branding of Jax’s body. This ambiguity constitutes an example of the agonistic contention between high and low culture which Lanier identifies in adaptations of Shakespeare (2002: 16), a contention which does not necessarily reduce Shakespearean iconography to parody. At least in *SOA*, the skull suggests a repertoire of statements ranging from the irreverent to the tragic. For Bataille, “The repeated images of the logo, visible both on Hunnam’s back and on the leather jacket, and of the actor’s body [...] intensify the feeling that no escape is possible” (2011: 332). But the skull, a document found by Hamlet in Yorick’s grave, can also be read as a politically productive token. As Christian Smith says, Hamlet is a “revolutionary subject, whose solid flesh dissolves in the torrent of capitalist progress [which] then erupts into action” (2021: 74). In fact, Jax’s body is an unstoppable force capable of changing the reality around him. His tough features fit the aesthetics of westerns and road movies; the latter, addressing a biker subculture standing “in opposition to the larger American culture,” also representing “some of the founding principles of [America] such as rebellion, sovereignty, and individual liberty” (Brandt & Clare, 2018: 209), factors which explain *SOA*’s success in producing communities of fans. The skull, a signifier of bodily decay, becomes, in Jax’s body, a sign of Jax’s, the club’s and, implicitly, the viewers’ power to transform reality.

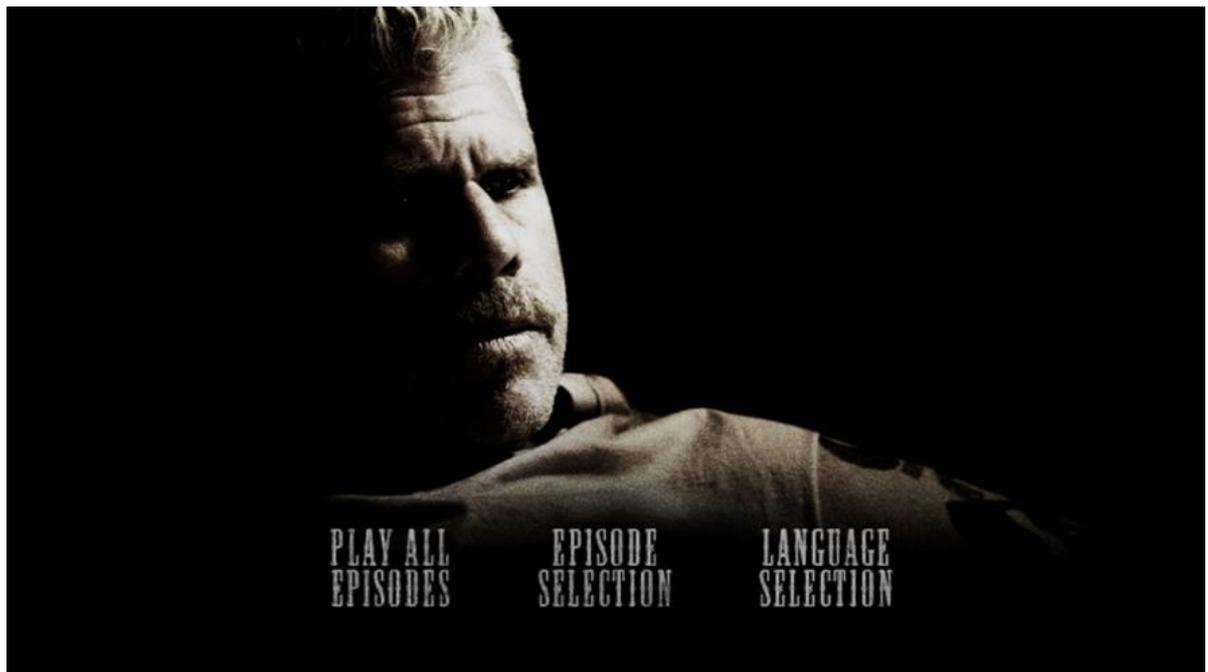


Figure 1

Extracted from Menu in DVD 1, Series One. Standard Edition, DVD Box Set.

Cumulatively, paratexts conform schemata which continuously formalize the characters' eagerness for spiritual redemption. This is largely on display on the DVD menus where pictures of characters such as Clay Morrow (Ron Pearlman)—*SOA*'s Claudius—, Gemma Teller Morrow (Katey Sagal)—*SOA*'s Gertrude—, Alexander Trager (Kim Coates)—aka "Tig"—, and others are depicted brooding. This pattern corresponds with the many instances of soul-searching characters across the seven seasons. In the menu for DVD 1, Clay's earnest gaze (Figure 1) possibly resonates with Claudius' momentary contriteness in the third act of *Hamlet*, which, in Clay's case, is extended and explored in greater depth, especially in season five during the character's exclusion from the club and later imprisonment. As documents amidst archaeological fragments, possible allusions to Shakespeare of this kind recur in *SOA*'s songs. As Bronfen says, Shakespeare in series is "a ghostly presence... the announcement of something still to arrive, still to be realized" (13). The summons in the song "This Life"—"The King is dead / But life goes on..."—chime with Gertrude and Claudius' advice to Hamlet to abandon mourning (1.2.68-120); "John the Revelator" and "Hey, Hey, My, My" chime with Jax's (and Hamlet's) commitment not to forget the promise to the Ghost, a theme repeated in the series recaps. A highly recurrent recap is that of Jax's entrance into the garage (Sutter, 2008). It frequently stresses the camera's change of focus from the garage's trash (Figure 2) to John Teller's journal in close-up (Figure 3). But the recaps also show that *SOA*'s Shakespearean archive is not reduced to *Hamlet*. Rather, the series follows most complex television series, which as a rule, according to Wald (11), appropriate more than one Shakespearean text. Recaps include fragments from plotting scenes, murder scenes, failed attempts to avenge parents, and dethroning scenes, all of which invite us to "drill", using Jason

Mittel's term, for "something that is already there, buried beneath the surface" (2015: 289) in *SOA*'s deep agglutination of sections from *Hamlet* and residues from other Shakespearean tragedies.



Figure 2

Extracted from Sutter (2008).

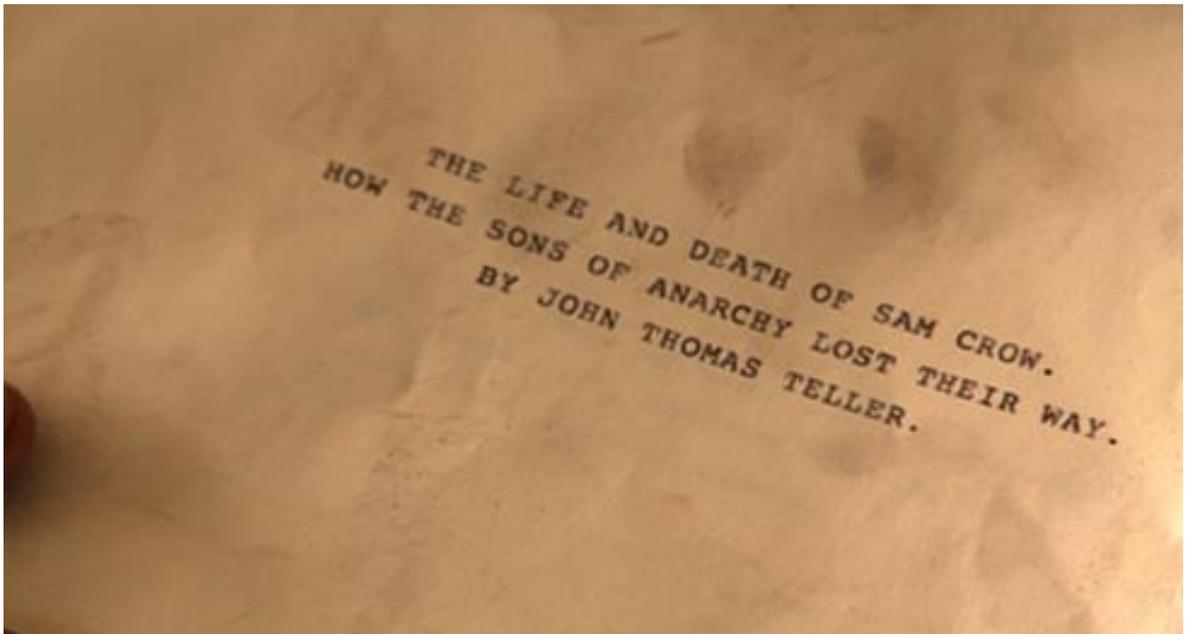


Figure 3

Extracted from Sutter (2008).

5. FORMATIONS IN SOURCES AND ADAPTATIONS

In *SOA*, we can identify clusters formed by traces of sources and adaptations of *Hamlet*. Superimposed upon one another, they complicate *SOA*'s Shakespearean formations.

Knowledge of Saxo Grammaticus' *Historiae Danicae*, Françoise Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* (1572), and the Anonymous' *Historye of Hamlet* (English translation published in 1608) invites associations with *SOA*. In both cases, the protagonist becomes leader after displacing the usurper; his delay to take action is justified by tactics, not by indecision; his troubles with foreign leaders—previous allies of the usurper—begin once he takes leadership. Violence in *SOA* and the sources is graphic and extreme, particularly towards the usurper, whose body is mercilessly damaged in both, while the protagonists in the sources and *SOA* are treated like Messianic figures who capitalize on their charisma to justify their acts of violence.

Grammaticus and Belleforest found, in the uncouth life led by Scandinavian warriors, the grounds to justify the misogyny in the sagas. Addressed, like FX television series of the period, to a male viewership (Raya-Bravo and Vasallo-Acedo, 2017: 32), *SOA* establishes an “operational allegiance” (Mittell, 163) between audiences and SAMCRO's male world, whose hierarchy excludes women. Nonetheless, as noted by Inmaculada Gordillo and Virginia Guarinos (2017), as “old ladies,” women in SAMCRO hold power. Such power, I argue, finds precedents in the sources too. In Belleforest, Gerutha declares herself innocent of Horwendil's death and allies herself with Amleth against Fengon. In *Historye of Hamlet*, Geruthe is ambiguous about her knowledge of the crime, but shows herself as the “meanes to hinder and impeach the shortning of [Amleth's] life” (99). In Shakespeare's *Q1*, Gertrude agrees to support Hamlet in the closet scene: “I will conceale, consent, and doe my best, / What stratagem soe're thou shalt devise.”^{iv} Later in *Q1*, during a secret meeting with Horatio, the Queen agrees to deceive her husband to facilitate Hamlet's return to Denmark. These moves by the Queen resemble a number of decisions made by Gemma, who, always knowledgeable of Clay's crime, ultimately supports—even instigates—Jax's *coup d'état*. The impact of Gemma's death on Jax also finds precedent in the sources. In Albert Kranz's *Chronica Regnorum Aquilonarium* (1545), the Queen poisons the protagonist's father. Following the Ghost's demand, the hero forces her to drink the poison draught she had prepared for him and, after her death, the young king rides away never to be seen again (Bullough, 1973: 10), an outcome to match Jax's self-exile after retaliating against Gemma for Tara's death.

As producer Paris Barclay says, *SOA*'s team created “a tragedy in the Shakespearean or Greek sense” (Adrienne Tyler, 2021). Thus, Jax's matricide is plausibly indebted to the Aeschylean and/or Euripidean assassination of Clitemenestra by Orestes. Classic sources also explain the function of Tara (Maggie Stiff), who spurs Jax to transformation. Louise Schleiner sees Horatio in the graveyard scene as equivalent to Pylades in Aeschylus, whose Latin translations may, as the scholar suggests, have been read by Shakespeare (1990). In *The Choephoroi* (450 BC), Pylades prompts Orestes to take revenge for the assassination of his father. Tara, like Hamlet's “fellow student” (1.2.176), an outsider and an ally to the club—like Horatio and Pylades—leads Jax at the end of season one to John Teller's grave so that Jax accepts to effect his father's will to change the club, a decision amongst whose incalculable consequences comes revenge against Clay, later against Gemma.

Some of the gender-oriented ethical problems in the series are given response by interplay with Shakespearean sources and adaptations. According to Sloboda, “female characters [are] driven into crises by relationships with Jax. He takes on several lovers and inevitably leaves them traumatized and diminished” (90). This is the case with Wendy Case (Drea de Matteo), branded, amongst other insults, as Jax’s “crazy ex-wife” (Sutter, 2008) or as a “stupid junkie bitch” (ibid). She is depicted in a similar vein to the portrayals of Ophelia that depict her as subjected. In this case, as occurs with Ophelia in Alexander Fodor’s *Hamlet* (2007), she is subjected to “[g]ender oppression [...] synonymous with bodily addiction” (Calbi 101). *SOA*’s intertextual clusters, nonetheless, contest such a reading through Wendy’s eventual recovery and exile with her family and through the character of Tara, who shares traces with the Ophelia in Lisa Klein’s novel (2006). Both Tara and Klein’s Ophelia are endowed with powers and skills to heal, develop an intimate but conflictive relationship with the Queen, have children with their Hamlets, pose a direct threat to the usurper—which almost costs them their lives—and, importantly, both leave their Hamlets behind to raise their children in safety. Tara’s nuanced role may be also indebted to Queen Hemmertude, Amleth’s second wife in the sources, who ultimately turns against her husband. But rather than leaving her betrayal unexplained—as occurs in the sources—*SOA* presents a sympathetic portrayal of Tara, who sees herself obliged to run away from Jax for the sake of the children.

A look into British University Film and Video Council’s database shows that no fewer than 40 US *Hamlet* films, made between 1990 and 2020, are registered. These included cartoons, musicals, education films, thrillers, high school films, surveillance films, westerns, zombie films, vampire films, gangster films and comedies, often blending genres. Despite their generic disparity, several vectors of relation may be identified between them. Some of them parodied Shakespeare’s authority, embedding *Hamlet* as mirror story within primary narratives. Other parodic Hollywoodian gestures at *Hamlet*, such as *The last Action Hero* (dir. John McTiernan, 1993), clashed with experimental re-visionings like *Yorick* (dir. Johnny Stranger) and avant-garde experimental films. Films like *Shakespeare Behind Bars* (dir. Hank Rogerson, 2006), *The Hobart Shakespearians* (dir. Mel Stuart, 2006) or *Renaissance Man* (dir. Penny Marshall, 1994) explored the reparative potential of Shakespearean performance. Others, like *Hamlet* (dir. Scott Campbell, 2001) used Shakespeare’s tragedy to problematize post-civil war America. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the increase of reparative Shakespeares and of *Hamlet* films used for historical critique had been such that these two forms of appropriation were parodied, for instance, in *Hamlet 2* (dir. Andrew Fleming, 2008) and *Zombie Hamlet* (dir. John Murlowski, 2012) respectively. Thus, one implicit challenge for *SOA* would be to re-invigorate historical critique and reparativeness, the latter of which is particularly at risk of being labelled as cliché.

One way to salvage the value of historical criticism in *SOA* could be to think of its relations with the examination of legacy found in *Hamlet* films like *Undiscovered Country* (dir. Cameron Langdon, 2011) and *JFK* (dir. Oliver Stone, 1990). The latter tackles Shakespeare as an archive more explicitly than the former. Significantly, *JFK* concludes with the quote from *The Tempest*, “What is past is prologue” (2.1.249). Such quote is, inscribed in Robert Aitken’s monument *Future*, located near the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C. These archives hold truth-revealing documents on Kennedy’s case. But *JFK*’s references to Shakespeare mostly established plots that parallel *Hamlet*: Jim Garrison does not trust the official story on the death of Kennedy, whom he calls “our dead king,” and starts a systematic search for the truth which leads him to confirm suspicions that the assassination was a political coup by members of the US government. Similarly, Hamlet hears from the Ghost confirmation of what was, for his “prophetic soul” (1.5.40), the truth. Though *JFK* uses reference to other Shakespearean plays—*Julius Caesar*, *The Tempest*—quotes come predominantly from *Hamlet*, whose narrative the spectator is expected to see reflected in Stone’s work. Less inclined to quoting, and more to Shakespearean allusions, *SOA*’s team picked up, nonetheless, elements from *JFK* to rewrite *Hamlet* for complex TV. Both protagonists examine a vast archive of letters, photos and documents, whose contents do not match the official narrative on the assassination of “the king.” In both cases, it is known that both “kings” were betrayed by their respective peers due to their reformist desires. In both cases, the protagonists’ relationships with their families are deteriorate rapidly as more truths come to light. What radically situates *JFK* and *SOA* in the Shakespearean Aftermath, identified by Thomas Cartelli as the space wherein “all things Shakespearean are present and available for redoing and reenactment *differently*” (2019: 13), is in their attention to the type of legacy which both protagonists, justly regarded as contemporary Hamlets, intend to leave to their respective sons. Garrison expects to regain his son’s posthumous sympathy when the files on Kennedy’s case are accessible to the public, although by that time, Garrison will have, as he says, “shuffled off [his] mortal coil”. Similarly, Jax expects Abel and Thomas to read his memoir as soon as they grow up, by which time Jax suspects that he will be long gone.

The theme of *Hamlet* as a father, a departure from Shakespeare developed in *SOA*, intersects with recent critical and creative concerns with the possible parallels between Shakespeare’s biography and *Hamlet*. For that matter, it is hard to ignore coincidences in the names and traits of John Teller and John Shakespeare. Both seem to have had an amount of charisma and authority which progressively declined, leaving their sons to whitewash their reputations. In 1757, what some considered to be John Shakespeare’s spiritual testament was found between the tiling and the rafters of Shakespeare’s birthplace. Similarly, Jax finds John Teller’s journal amongst the trash in the family’s garage. The documents written by both John Shakespeare and John Teller are, as the story goes, intended to provide guidance to ensure their families’ welfare. Jax’s transformation and sacrifice parallels what, according to Greenblatt (2013: 248), was Shakespeare’s attempt, in writing *Hamlet*, to address his pain after

Hamnet's and his father's deaths. For John Drakakis, similarities between Hamlet and Hamnet "may have prompted [Shakespeare] to fantasise" (2018: 74) to this end. This idea is creatively tested in Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet* (2020), in which Hamnet voluntarily surrenders his life in exchange for Judith's. Seeing a performance of the play, Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare's wife, realizes that Shakespeare, "in taking the role of the ghost [...] has changed places with his son" (366). Fearing his sons' knowledge of the life he has lived, Jax takes a more radical decision than O'Farrell's Shakespeare by erasing himself and his legacy to allow his sons a fresh start. In writing *Hamlet*, As Peter Bray argues, "Shakespeare's experience of loss trigger[ed] a significant crisis of consciousness which guide[d] him towards a state of engagement with the collective unconscious, enabling a spiritual transformation to occur which [led] to his personality rebirth and healing" (2008: 95–96). Jax's violent sacrifice is meant to save his sons and to lead the club to healing and rebirth, a move which, at least in part, overlaps with O'Farrell's later decision in her novel.

6. ARCHIVE EXPANDED: OTHER SHAKESPEAREAN FORMATIONS

Shakespeare's archive productively moves beyond *Hamlet*. During their first meeting, Nero (Jimmy Smits) explains to Jax his transformation from drug dealer to pimp: "I spent my thirties in chino. Gave up the needle, picked up some books, saw the bigger picture" (05, 02). Nero's words might have been uttered by an inmate from *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, which immediately preceded *SOA*. A purgatorial prison iconography—convicts working out to be physically fit as well as emotionally balanced; some literary activity in jail; crows perched upon fences; the road on the side, etc.—feeds *SOA*'s imagery as well as Rogerson's film. For Niels Herold, US Prison Shakespeares depict communities engaging "certain rituals of repentance and renewal" (2014: 19). We may find similar rituals in *SOA*.

Macbeth lends weight to *SOA*'s transformative journeys. Sharing traits with the Scottish king, capable of killing with her own hands, Gemma holds conversations with her dead victim Tara's ghost at the dinner table. While Gertrude's chats with Tara may seem parodic, the male characters' struggles for redemption are inter-textually relatable to *Macbeth* too. Juice (Theo Rossi) echoes Macbeth's soliloquizing before killing Duncan. Accepting to carry out an errand for them, his obsessive speech seems mixed up with Shakespearean paraphrases: "*I do this and everybody is okay with me. I do this and everybody forgives. This gets done. Gotta push something together here. Get through the time. I just gotta finish it. This gets done. This gets done*" (07, 11; my emphasis). Tig's words of repentance for the killing of Dona suggest parallels with Macbeth's words during the dagger scene: "Opie, he... he saved me from getting my head blown. *And then I had a clear shot at him... and I couldn't take it. No. Shooting from the back of that window, the truth... I was afraid. I was afraid if I saw his face... I couldn't pull the trigger, I didn't know, Clay, that it was Donna... until it was done*" (01, 13; my emphasis). Fracturing and iterating Macbeth's ruminations not only approximates

Shakespeare's speech to TV's register,^v but echoes Macbeth's time-based anxiety. Juice expects to get "through *the time*", understood as "doing *time*" in prison, though more symbolically, *time* is associated with Macbeth's wish "upon this bank and soal of time" to "jump the life to come" (1.7.6–7). The script re-invigorates these echoes as Clay assures to Tig: "We'll get to the other side, brother" (01, 13), a simplification of Shakespeare's "life to come," i.e. waiting at the other side.

History plays provide lenses to examine *SOA*'s gender politics too. Jax's transformation parallels the arc of Prince Hal on his way to becoming King Henry. Referred to several times as "The Prince," Jax acquires experience as a leader, is acknowledged for his political astuteness, learns about realpolitik, and increases gravitas. As his rival Raymond Pope says, Jax's moves are of the kind that "turn players into kings" (05, 03). An additional parallel between Jax and Henry V is seen in both characters' attempts at correcting what they perceive as their shameful history. King Henry V's confessed desire to make amends for Bolingbroke's rebellion (4.1.263–279) finds recurrent equivalences in Jax's intention to steer the club's boat, to correct the wrongs made by his putative father Clay.

SOA's transmedia materials prove that what I perceive as the series' association with *Second Henriad* is not unprecedented. The comic books *Sons of Anarchy: The Legacy* (2019) fills in gaps, expanding and supplementing *SOA* with Shakespearean traces, including features from revenge tragedies, such as parents avenging daughters and sons, sons avenging fathers, etc. (Sutter, K., Golden, C., Brisson, E., 2019; Sutter, K., Brisson, E., Ferrier, R., 2019). The club's quarrel with Dillon, Bobby's nephew, a youngster refusing to fall in line with SAMCRO's discipline and ultimately at war with them, echoes the wars between Hotspur and Henry IV (Sutter, K., Brisson, E., Ferrier, R., 2019). One last story focuses on Jax's period as a prospect and his transformation from dissolute boy, dashing Clay's hopes for him to be his successor, into a man after re-gaining Clay's confidence. The last panel frames (Figure 4) reveal Jax getting ready to enter the club's "chapel," transformed from head to foot, every inch a "Prince," leaving adolescence behind (Sutter, K., Masters, O., 2019).



Figure 4

Extracted from Sutter, K., Masters, O. (2019).

Unlike Prince Hal's, Jax's loyalty to his "brothers" is not compromised by *realpolitik*. This is nowhere clearer than in Jax's relation to Bobby (Mark Boone Junior). A Falstaffian character and Jax's advisor, Bobby shows the courage lacking in Falstaff, though his repudiation of war approximates him to Shakespeare's fat knight. Bobby's funeral grants to the character some dignity denied by Shakespeare. Beyond this, it anticipates the treatment of Falstaff in David Michôd's *The King* (2019). Michôd and his co-scriptwriter Joel Edgerton upgraded Falstaff to become Henry V's advisor, both characters sharing a dislike for violence and trying to minimize war casualties. Falstaff dies leading a heroic advance against the French cavalry, a victim of Chief of Justice William Gascoigne's manipulation, a political maneuvering that led to war in the first place. Similarly, Bobby dies due to August Marks' false dealings with the club and is, like Falstaff, mourned, his end seemingly anticipating the end of SAMCRO.

Despite this, *SOA* falls short of Michôd and Edgerton’s feminist politics. In *The King*, Queen Katherine “becomes an agent of potential political change, a beacon of hope for the future, and a fully contemporary woman, the product of current debates on gender politics” (Deleyto, 2021: 73). Though #*MeToo* debates started in 2006, the politics of SAMCRO remained stuck in the Regime of the Brother.^{vi} Examining this Regime in contemporary Shakespeare films, Lehmann defines it as a continuation to patriarchy, “a regime change headed by a real ‘brother’” regarded as “far preferable [to those supporting it] to that of the woman” (2011: 326). A “brotherly” rhetoric is, in *SOA*, echoing Henry V’s Agincourt at the expense of women—an elegy to the importance of white males seeing their hegemony crumble in the Millenium.

SOA may, nonetheless, be read as a ritual farewell to the regime. The Homeless Woman (Olivia Burnette), likely based on to the Witches of *Macbeth*, does not explicitly prophesize Jax’s monarchy but passes a blanket to him to elevate him to a kingly figure. He gains this symbolic royal status after allying himself with the poor against Marks. Jax’s ultimate renunciation to power and siding with the dispossessed—an alliance suggested by the lyrics of “Come Join the Murder” (The White Buffalo & The Forest Rangers)—grants him divine height. These last moments ritually prelude Jax’s suicide after he makes amends, an event blessed by an obscure unidentified divinity, a divinity aided by The Homeless Woman, similar to the one embraced by Hamlet, according to Fernie (2005: 199-200), in Act Five, one who transfigures his former self into “pure historical agency” (Ibid: 199). Analyzing *SOA*, Jordi Balló and Xavier Pérez affirm that “[Jax’s] hesitations don’t aggrandize him as a character above the rest” (2015: 69), as occurs with Shakespeare’s Prince. In fact, it is in Jax’s rash action where his greatness lies, finding the best possible ground on the road, a stage for his final act, with no better partner to crash against than Milo, played by none else than Michael Chiklis. Viewers, very likely, recognized in Chiklis the irresistible and brutal Vick Mackey from *The Shield* (2002–2008), an FX success which preceded *SOA*. This crash marks the end of a cycle of masculine hegemony that the two actors embody. Hamlet’s love verses to Ophelia, displayed in *SOA*’s closing shot, may, thus, be read ironically:

Doubt that the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move,
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love. (2.2.114–117)

Functioning as Shakespeare’s apologetic epilogues, this formulaic, self-derogatory, yet somewhat self-reaffirming epitaph, is not unlike Jax’s recurrent self-justifications and promises to “fix” any and all problems. This apology chimes, blending parody and seriousness, with that uttered by Shakespeare-learned prisoners and with Shakespeare’s apologetical persona in epilogues.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Shakespeare's archive in *SOA* does not merely consist of a series of quotes and references from Shakespeare to raise the cachet of the series. The creatives took the meanings derived from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* seriously, if not reverently. Such meanings were explored in depth, tested and tried within the aesthetic conventions of contemporary television storytelling. Consciously or not, the writers who recurrently resorted to *Hamlet* collectively exhumed a great deal of remainders from the *Hamlet* myth. The fragments, shards, scraps and remnants from Euripides, Grammaticus, Belleforest, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the tragedies and the histories, and from contemporary appropriations of these groups of works are resuscitated; sometimes not merely restored, but rejuvenated and, especially, knitted into contemporary webworks. Adaptations made in ancient versions of *Hamlet* resurface, are retrieved, and fuel the archive's vitality, even if such moves were at some point or other discarded while Shakespeare appropriated narrative and dramatic works. *SOA*'s inclusiveness is perceived in its capacity to take vantage point from Shakespeare's text to produce a transtemporal conjunction of past (pre-Shakespearean *Hamlets* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*), present (Sutter and crew's *Hamlet*), and contemporary *Hamlets*, and even *Hamlets* to come. Traces of all these *Hamlets* and other Shakespearean sources operate in ways similar to Foucault's Archaeology, "an internal dynamic; not a system, but the hard work of freedom; not form, but the unceasing effort of a consciousness turned upon itself, trying to grasp itself in its deepest conditions" (15). All these *Hamlets* coexists with Shakespeare's authorized text, not employed to serve the authority of such text, but to undertake the mutually health-giving self-examination of the *Hamlet* myth at large in order to propel it forward.

The series' transformative politics are embedded in a contemporary conception of Shakespeare "as part of a public culture in the US" (Albanese, 2010: 5), the reception of the plays signifying "the momentary glimpse of a utopian horizon" (ibid, 5-6) in a country where, as James Shapiro says, "there are nearly 150 summer Shakespeare festivals [...] spanning all fifty states, quietly acclimating many Americans to greater diversity" (2020: 202). That Serial Shakespeares contribute to make of Shakespeare a public good with a certain reparative power is, in part, proved by the spectators themselves. We are, as Huertas-Martín's article suggests, indebted to contributions by fans, bloggers, and users who did not just use Shakespeare to produce "imaginative and convincing predictions" of the outcomes of many series, *SOA* included. They were also aware of "the redemptive features" of complex, Shakespeare-inflected television series (2019: 33). Eagerness for change in Jax and other *SOA* characters is aesthetically formalized as we perceive the different Shakespearean reformulations deployed across the episodes. As Fernie argues, Shakespeare's characters (sometimes unsuccessfully and unhappily) struggle to become what they might be, casting off what they have been (2017: 4). This Shakespearean energy subverts the tendency of complex television, identified by Mittell,

to make characters “stable and consistent rather than changeable identities” (133). Likewise, the *Hamlet* archive renews its repositories, reproductions, accruals, embedded images, fonds, finding aids, and item-levels in *SOA*.

Some commentary is due on the convergence of Shakespearean tragedies and histories in the series. For Jeffrey K. Wilson, history plays are “the one clear case of successful television Shakespeares” (2020: 26). For Foucault, concomitance “includes statements that concern quite different domains of objects [...] but which are active among the statements studied [...] either because they serve as analogical confirmation, or because they serve as models that can be transferred to other contents” (64). *Hamlet* is, according to Margreta de Grazia, as much a history play as a tragedy (2007: 45). Shakespeare’s history plays are already identified as recurrent templates for complex television series (see Susan C. Ronnenberg, 2018; Monique L. Pittman, 2020; Bronfen, 2020). Indeed, some interplays between history plays and tragedies in these television works have been already pointed out (Huertas-Martín 2019a). What other systems of arrangement may exist between Shakespearean genres, such as the romance, the tragedy, the comedy, or the Roman play, are fertile research questions worth asking.

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END-NOTES

ⁱ Greenblatt, S. (2013); Derrida, J. (2006). *Specters of Marx (The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International)* (Peggy Kamuf. Trans.). New York & London, Routledge Classics (Original work published 1993).

ⁱⁱ *Sons of Anarchy* (FX 2008-2014) was written and produced by Kurt Sutter, first broadcast by FX, then purchased by Netflix. Sutter admitted to having based the “bigger arcs” of *SOA* on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (Brown, 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ Porosity involves several serial characters corresponding to one Shakespearean figure; assemblage involves several Shakespearean characters converging into a non-Shakespearean one. See Wald (230).

^{iv} See Shakespeare, W. (1603).

v The speech, like Shakespeare's, depicts the people at the crime scene—"There's one did laugh in 'sleep". Both use coordinating conjunctions as links—"And one cried, 'Murder,'...". Both use the gerund form—"Listening their fear" (2.2.29)—as an adjunct to larger formulations of the speaker's inability to act—"could not say 'Amen'" (2.2.29). In *SOA*'s case, the participle "done", recurrently echoed in *Macbeth*, is deployed.

vi Read MacCannell, J. F. (1991). *The Regime of the Brother: After the Patriarchy*, Routledge.

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