

***Hamlet in (and off) Stages:
Television, Serialization, and
Shakespeare in *Sons of Anarchy****

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“The crow flies straight, a perfect line /
On the Devil’s back until you die.”
—*Sons of Anarchy* main theme

Although Shakespeare has inspired hundreds of films during the past 113 years, he has had a far less conspicuous impact on the slightly younger medium of television, particularly in the United States.¹ However, the most popular show on the basic cable network FX (Fox eXtended), *Sons of Anarchy*, owes a significant debt to Shakespeare.² Since it first aired in 2008, the series has been dubbed “Hamlet on Harleys” by the popular press.³ And although scholar and motorcycle enthusiast John M. Withers hears a variety of other Shakespearean echoes in *Sons of Anarchy*, ranging from *Titus Andronicus* to *Macbeth*, it is Shakespeare’s greatest Elizabethan tragedy that not only reverberates throughout the first four seasons, but also promises to do so during upcoming years, as the series develops an approach to realizing *Hamlet* tailored for cable television.⁴

From the very beginning of *Sons of Anarchy*, its creative team has invoked Shakespeare as a muse, and it has subsequently found this inspiring but imposing figure impossible to exorcise from the show’s mythology. As in the playwright’s *Hamlet*, the series focuses on a promising young man who is confronted by a surrogate father with dubious intentions. Set in present-day California, in the seedy world of outlaw motorcycle clubs and organized crime, the central narrative revolves around Jackson (Jax) Teller, played by Charlie Hunnam, and his stepfather Clay Morrow, played by Ron Perlman.

The two reside in the small town of Charming, where Jax serves as vice president of the “Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club, Redwood Originals” (or SAMCRO). This group was founded by Jax’s deceased father, John Thomas Teller, along with eight other men (“the original nine”), including Clay, who now serves as club president.⁵ Because of Jax’s lineage, he is commonly referred to as “the prince” and “MC royalty.” But he grapples with the legacy of John, whose spirit speaks to him through a journal: *The Life and Death of Sam Crow: How the Sons of Anarchy Lost Their Way*. From this manuscript—which the audience hears John (Nicholas Guest) read in voiceover, thereby acting as another kind of “teller”—Jax learns how his father became disillusioned with the increasingly sordid qualities of SAMCRO. Although the group started out honoring independence and brotherhood, following the tenets of modern political activist Emma Goldman, it quickly swerved in another direction. As the club became involved in crime, primarily running guns, it was tainted by acts of violence, often self-interested ones. John complains that he “never made a conscious decision to have the club become one thing or another. It just happened before my eyes. Each savage event was a catalyst for the next. And by the time the violence reached epic proportion, I couldn’t see it. Blood was every color.”⁶ While mulling over his father’s revelations about “accidental judgments” and “casual slaughters,” Jax hangs around in graveyards and scribbles in a commonplace book, much like Shakespeare’s melancholy Dane (5.2.326).⁷ Soon, Jax begins to think that there is indeed “something rotten” (1.5.67) about SAMCRO, and he starts to suspect, as early as season one, that what is wrong with the organization has to do with Clay.

Referred to not only throughout the series, but also on DVD commentary tracks as “the king” of SAMCRO, Clay shares far more in common with Shakespeare’s Claudius than a title and the first three letters of his name. In the fourth season, after numerous hints and innuendoes, it is revealed that Clay murdered John. He partnered with John’s widow (Jax’s mother) Gemma, a Gertrude proxy played by Katy Segal, to make this crime appear a biking accident. And then he married Gemma. Together, the new couple repeatedly attempt, during the first three seasons, to prevent Jax (whom Clay addresses as his “son”) from prying into what really happened to his father and from influencing the course

of the club. Only after Clay physically abuses Gemma and she abandons him do his former sins come out, leading to a dramatic confrontation between him and Jax. The fundamental structure of *Sons of Anarchy* thus resembles Shakespeare's best known tale of revenge, premised on the expectation that Jax will right past injustices, participate in an Oedipal *agon* in which he overcomes a failing patriarch, and set his people (or at least his motorcycle club) on a path toward redemption. Asked about the series back in 2008, Perlman confirmed that the many points of congruence were deliberate. Although the actor stated that he only read one script ahead during shooting, he was "sure they [the writers] are going to stick to the structure of *Hamlet* all the way to the end."⁸

Whatever the long-term commitment to the architecture of the play upheld by the creative team behind *Sons of Anarchy*, they did regularly layer allusions to *Hamlet* into the first four seasons, appropriating memorable language as well as images from the play. Early in season four, while colluding to keep Jax in the dark about their perfidious history, Clay and Gemma appear in a small greenhouse abutting their home, studying tulip bulbs that have died from, in Gemma's words, "too much sun."⁹ The line recalls Hamlet's complaint that he is "too much i'th'sun" (1.2.67), laying the way for Jax to tend an "unweeded garden / That grows to seed" (1.2.135-36). The reference casts Charming (overseen by "a [c]lay man," or a man like Adam) as a fallen place, comparable both to Elsinore and to the postlapsarian Eden to which Hamlet likens Denmark following his father's death. In a similar vein, during season one, the writers intimate that John's "fall from grace" resulted from internecine murder by giving Jax's son the name "Abel." In *Hamlet*, Claudius discusses his fratricide in terms of this Biblical figure and "the primal eldest curse" (3.3.38). Hamlet again brings up Cain and Abel in the graveyard scene, when he marks the indifference of the First Clown toward human remains: "That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once: how the knave jowls it to the ground, as if it were Cain's jaw-bone, that did the first murder!" (5.1.70-73). In the context of the play, the allusion recalls the murder of Hamlet Senior by his brother, which, in turn, prefigures what Clay did to his brother-in-arms, John.¹⁰

Once again in the development of the Abel storyline, *Sons of Anarchy* hearkens back to *Hamlet* with a recurring metaphor from

the play: the wounded heart. Shakespeare's prince obsesses about his cardiovascular health, complaining after his first soliloquy, "But break, my heart; for I must hold my tongue" (1.2.158-15). Later he reflects on the "heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to" (3.1.64-65); and later still, he reveals that "in my heart there was a kind of fighting, / That would not let me sleep" (5.2.4-5). Finally, Hamlet's death rattle is followed by Horatio's pronouncement, "Now cracks a noble heart" (5.2.302). During the first season of *Sons of Anarchy*, Abel is diagnosed with a congenital heart defect of the sort that years before killed Jax's brother, Thomas "Tommy" Teller (who is never seen on the show). It was immediately following Tommy's death, with a heightened sense of obligation to his family and his own mortality, that John began to question the direction of the club—to have a change of heart of his own—and to pen his journal. Decades later, thanks to twenty-first-century medicine, Abel's heart can be surgically repaired, giving him a chance that Tommy never had and, more significantly, hinting that—if Jax acts at the right time, in the right way—he might be able to free his son (and maybe himself) from his potentially deadly Teller inheritance. His principal love interest, Tara Knowles, at one point tells Jax that despite his career as a criminal, "I think you're a good man with a big heart."¹¹ A visual sign affirms the point: Jax bears a tattoo of his son's name over his heart, on his left pectoral, foregrounding not only his vulnerability as a family man, but also the power of the borrowed Shakespearean figure.

These elements from *Hamlet* flavor *Sons of Anarchy* without defining it. Yet the connections between the play and the series extend beyond textual analogues, symbolic correspondences, and parallel revenge plots. Like Shakespeare's text—itself a remake of several sources including both the legend of Amleth and the now lost *Ur-Hamlet*—the show is a self-aware composite, partially but not entirely dependent upon earlier material that it simultaneously builds upon and interrogates.¹² At the same time, because of its medium, *Sons of Anarchy* is a fresh vehicle for bringing forth an interpretation of *Hamlet*, a circumstance not lost on Kurt Sutter, the creator and head writer of the series. But while Sutter acknowledges initially modeling Jax upon the prince of Denmark, he is quick to declare his protagonist unique. He

posits an idiosyncratic dynamic between *Sons of Anarchy* and its Shakespearean precursor that makes his lead difficult to evaluate using classical paradigms for understanding adaptation, which prioritize questions of fidelity:

Yes, I definitely was informed by the Hamlet archetype in this show, but the trap in Hamlet is he's the most passive of Shakespeare's characters. He's not a Richard III, not out there taking a lot of action. It's a lot of asides and soliloquies where he's wrapped in angst, and that's not a very interesting character. The trick is keeping Jax a really proactive character in the midst of him making that decision. Week after week, I throw him into circumstances where he's forced to make a decision.¹³

Even as Sutter confirms Shakespeare's ability to bridge ages and continents, he dwells on the unique possibilities and challenges of bringing a seventeenth-century tragedy to life in a twenty-first-century cable television drama. This format runs not as "two hours traffic" on a single stage,¹⁴ but "week after week," at forty-four minute intervals, on screens across the world, sprawling over more than a combined nine hours each season. And in the case of *Sons of Anarchy*, now entering its fifth season with over thirty-eight hours of history and momentum behind it, the medium leads to a *Hamlet* unlike not just the play, but also every earlier rendition of it.¹⁵

The final two episodes of season four pointedly comment on the process of reworking a Shakespeare script for cable television. The penultimate episode of the season, which ends with Jax finally facing off against Clay and throwing his crimes in his face, is titled, "To Be, Act I." It is followed by, not the expected Shakespearean antithesis, "not to be," but by "To Be, Act II" (3.1.5). Instead of negation, the emphasis of the last episode falls upon continuation and repetition (ironically given that it is a season finale), but with controlled variation. Even the notation of an "Act" suggests that another linked movement, not an opposing alternative, will follow. The major events of the episode make similar gestures. Rather than kill Clay for his misdeeds, Jax takes "the throne" of SAMCRO from him, assuming the role of club president. In this way, he becomes his father, John. And in the final frames, a still image followed by a dissolve offers a picture of Jax as SAMCRO

president with his wife standing behind him, which then bleeds into an old photograph of his father similarly posed with Gemma behind him. As the show readies itself for another iteration in season five, the revenge drama is thus primed to run again, to repeat a familiar sequence of events and presentation of themes, albeit in a new manner. Jax has been drawn into the cycle of violence about which his father warned, the same cycle that led to his eventual murder at the hands of Clay. Still at liberty, still a prominent member of SAMCRO, Clay may attempt to assassinate Jax, as he did John. But if this is the case, Jax will live through the tale of rivalry and revenge in his own fashion.

During its first four seasons, *Sons of Anarchy* operated in terms of “To Be,” followed by more “To Be” on a large scale, repeatedly pulling close to *Hamlet* before swerving away from it, only to return to Shakespeare’s text in order to draw fresh inspiration and to add new layers of meaning to the show. That is, it worked in a series of loops and recurrences, such as the aforementioned one in which Jax became John. Another notable redaction appears in the arc followed by supporting character Piermont “Piney” Winston. One of the first nine members of SAMCRO, Piney, like John, grew cynical about the organization after losing family to club-related violence. Throughout the first three seasons, Piney acted as another replacement parent for Jax, sharing memories of John and pointing out similarities between the dead man and his surviving son, even supplying a new copy of John’s journal after Jax lost his, thereby providing a conduit to his Teller heritage. In season four, however, Clay kills Piney in an attempt to keep the past buried (to silence another senior “[t]eller”), reenacting the earlier murder of John, adding urgency to Jax’s mission as an avenger, and amplifying the significance of the Hamlet intertext.

Then too are multiple evocations of Ophelia on *Sons of Anarchy*, female characters driven into crises by relationships with Jax. He takes on several lovers and inevitably leaves them traumatized and diminished. However, Ophelia appears most strikingly in two intertwined characters. From the beginning of the show, Tara has confessed that while she cares for Jax, “you live a life I don’t think I’ll ever really understand.”¹⁶ Eventually, the ongoing anxiety and very real dangers of being part of the outlaw biker scene wear on Tara, and after being physically assaulted

because of her association with SAMCRO, she suffers a nervous breakdown. While she is in the hospital recovering, a character from season one visits and heightens her mania to such a degree that she must be placed under psychiatric observation: Jax's first wife, Wendy, who was a drug abuser—and consequently out of her mind—when carrying Abel. Wendy brings Tara flowers, conjuring Ophelia's wild pansies, daisies, and columbines. After declaring that she wants again to become a part of her son's life, Wendy leaves Tara, who flies into a violent rage and breaks the vase holding the flowers, scattering them across the floor of her room much as Ophelia strews blossoms throughout the Danish court. Although it is never explicitly stated that Jax was responsible for Wendy's earlier, unhealthy condition, the fact that Tara begins to resemble her as she draws closer to Jax, coupled with the recovery Wendy makes once away from him, suggests that being romantically involved with the prince of SAMCRO—much like being romantically involved with the prince of Denmark—is dangerous for a woman's sanity.

Such recurring characters, motifs, and happenings must be understood not just as ways in which *Sons of Anarchy* relates to *Hamlet*, but also as necessities of working in cable television. To succeed in this arena, the show has had to manifest what Jason Mittell characterizes as “narrative complexity”—a kind of expansive and recursive storytelling that emerged on TV during the 1990s and that eventually came to define the style of most cable dramas.¹⁷ “Narrative complexity” is at once loose and inconclusive, at the same time dense in its dependence on internal history and interconnected layers. As Mittell explains, “narrative complexity” functions differently from storytelling in earlier television by “rejecting the need for plot closure with every episode that typifies conventional episodic form.”¹⁸ Instead, it constructs “ongoing stories” of the sort viewers faithfully track over several seasons in popular shows like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and the one on which Sutter began his career as a screenwriter, *The Shield*.¹⁹ Such long-term narratives invariably unfold on several levels at once: that of an individual episode, that of a particular season, and that of a series as a whole. In an adaptation, however loose, this sort of multi-layered design provides opportunities for numerous passes at source material, through recurring characters,

themes, and events. Subsequent repetitions can add depth and volume to the realization of what is being appropriated, though they must necessarily resist playing out to decisive conclusions in order to maintain the fluidity of a project that can span a number of years. Ultimately, such an adaptation approaches an antecedent like *Hamlet* as a heuristic more than as a standard, or, in musical terms, as a collection of cues for newly improvised riffs rather than as a classical score to be performed.

In this spirit, Sutter has, not surprisingly, been reluctant to commit to resolving his *Hamlet*—to entertain a definitive “Not to Be” scenario. He has recently, in 2012, offered season seven as a possible termination point, yet he always preserves a measure of indeterminacy in such projections, talking in terms of “if” rather than “when.” Similarly, even while maintaining his love of classical literature, he has insisted that he does not want *Sons of Anarchy* to be viewed through the lens of *Hamlet*, backpedaling from comparisons to Shakespeare even when he has initiated them.²⁰ As the fourth season of the series was still shooting, in summer 2011, Sutter urged that the two texts not be tracked alongside one another:

It's [*Sons of Anarchy* is] not really a modern retelling of *Hamlet*, meaning that that arc does not inform the show as a whole. When I was coming up with the idea for the pilot, the dynamic of that trilogy—of mother, son, and stepfather—with the idea of some sort of betrayal that had happened to the father so that the ghost of Hamlet, or the ghost of Hamlet's father, in the pilot, would be that manuscript that Jackson found that informs him of, you know, his father's dreams and fears and visions. So that became a layer, you know, to the narrative, and it's not something that we necessarily write to. But, you know, there are definitely Shakespearean overtones throughout the piece, and I really try to infuse the show with those, whether it's the idea of a king and queen, whether it's the idea of the sort of epic battle of father and son, it definitely has those Shakespearean overtones and will continue. Season four has—you know, I don't want to give it away—but there is a classic Shakespearean arc, from *Hamlet*, that actually starts to develop throughout the season. You know, and then we veer off, and we sort veer away from it,

without necessarily following it all the way through. And then as we get—you know, if I'm lucky enough to go six or seven seasons—as we get to the end of it, you know, I think we'll sort of come full circle and hopefully land in a similar place towards the end in terms of staying true to—or being informed by the archetype a little bit more.²¹

These contradictions expose an anxiety about being pinned down, a reluctance to have *Sons of Anarchy* construed only as a version of *Hamlet*. Sutter in this way effectively dodges criticisms of textual purists who might complain about radical changes to the play, not limited to the elimination of its poetic language. His remarks also attest to a commercial savviness: it is bad for ratings to forecast the outcomes of conflicts on a cable television show—even if Sutter and his team do in fact plan to make *Sons of Anarchy* conform to the shape of *Hamlet*.²²

To some degree, Sutter's rhetoric represents the performance of a self-enabling artist locked in an *agon* with a potentially overpowering precursor. As William Logan observes, "Shakespeare was the last writer who didn't have to contend with Shakespeare."²³ Sutter's interest in keeping *Sons of Anarchy* his own—in not being overshadowed by Shakespeare—might be heightened by the personal investment he has in the show. He is married to Segal—his queen—and in this light might be likened to Claudius: a usurper aware, on some level, that he does not deserve his crown. Yet Sutter has projected another identity for himself within the world of *Sons of Anarchy*, one that supports his independence as a writer. He sometimes appears on screen as the character Otto Delaney, another of the founding club members, who from the outset of the series is serving a life sentence in prison. In DVD commentary tracks, Sutter conflates this character with the whole of SAMCRO, explaining that attacks Otto suffers in jail relate to beatings the club takes to its morale during various crises.²⁴ The writer thereby positions the group, and by implication *Sons of Anarchy*, as an extension of himself, as something he literally embodies—not as a reconstruction of someone else's ideas.

Sutter's attempts at self-invention reflect concern for his artistic autonomy and awareness of the exigencies of the cable television format, which calls for balancing multiple storylines across seasons and the entire run of a series. However, in refusing

to be defined by the past while tapping it to fuel and to sharpen his creative vision, Sutter shares more with Shakespeare than he may know, certainly more than he acknowledges. The playwright never worked in an episodic mode, but his output for the early modern stage consisted almost exclusively of scripts built upon the stories of others, some rather old, some relatively recent, none of them credited as sources.²⁵ Moreover, as John J. Joughin discerns, *Hamlet* includes a meditation on adaptation, marking the pitfalls and potentials of drawing upon work from the past while asserting originality in the present.²⁶ Featuring a favorite device of Shakespeare's, found in both *The Taming of the Shrew* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet* presents a play within a play, when the prince resolves to have a traveling troupe put on "something like the murder of my father / Before mine uncle [Claudius]," (2.2.571-3). The master-text, the Italian *The Murder of Gonzago*, has little aesthetic merit, arguably less intrinsic interest. It does not readily lend itself to the kind of organic theatre that Hamlet prizes when counseling the players to "hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature" (3.1.20). *The Murder of Gonzago* is rife with abstraction and grandiloquence, all contorted into patently artificial couplets. In the dumb show, it indulges in redundancy; it is further weakened by long stretches of exposition. But Hamlet enlivens the drama by giving it a new name (*The Mousetrap*) and additional material. More importantly, he selects it for performance in Elsinore knowing its relevance for the audience. His artistic choices make *The Murder of Gonzago* effective for exploring situations, ideas, and values that matter to the prince—and to the court—regardless of the intentions (and implied limitations) of the playwright from the past.

Shakespeare in this way unpacks a view of literary adaptation that licenses not just borrowing from earlier works, but also remaking them, distinguishing his own *Hamlet* from the one that appeared on the London stage just a few years before. He intimates that literary precedents need have relatively little power over the present. It is the sensibility of the artist in the now that is prime—a notion that Sutter would almost certainly embrace. There is little for the contemporary writer to worry about, though, since his own claim to originality, even in tangling with Shakespeare, is bolstered by his medium. If we dispense with artificial questions of high

and low related to the reception of television, it is undeniable that the design of a cable drama affords Sutter at least three levels of engagement with Shakespeare—and as such, three levels on which to relate to—or, as the case may be, not relate to—*Hamlet*. As a consequence, even when *Sons of Anarchy* appears to be turning away from the tragedy, it is often angling toward it.

In this context, as an adaptation, *Sons of Anarchy* might be seen as a kind of palimpsest, as episodes are written upon episodes, seasons upon seasons, all adding to the richness of the whole. This figure jibes with the model of adaptation outlined by Linda Hutcheon.²⁷ If pressed to adopt this critical construct, however, I would stress the importance of looking not at one overwritten sheet, but many, compiled in a volume with ink bleeding between layers, sometimes making pages stick together. Perhaps more fruitful might be an alternative metaphor for how Sutter's process works, one that envisions *Sons of Anarchy* as a multi-threaded braid in which *Hamlet* represents several strands—sometimes repeating movements, often entwined atop one another. These strands are woven in and out of others not dependent on Shakespeare, those focused on the iconography and culture of outlaw bikers. And this spiraling, complex form means that sometimes an individual thread might become occluded even as it presses against and gives shape to others.

For those in search of Shakespeare in *Sons of Anarchy*, watching the show—and unraveling segments of this multi-threaded braid—involves constant critical activity. Viewers cannot tune in to the latest episode with copies of Shakespeare's script in their laps. There is not, despite what the show's theme song suggests, "a perfect line" to follow—or a way to see this as a direct translation of *Hamlet*.²⁸ Instead, viewers must become detectives and pick up clues, looking both forwards and backwards, cobbling together meaning—much as Jax and Hamlet do in trying to unravel the mysteries their fathers have left behind. Indeed, Linda Charnes argues that *Hamlet* unfolds as a kind of *noir*, in which the prince serves as a prototype for the modern gumshoe, navigating the perilous plots of the Danish court, seeking the truth about crimes alleged by the Ghost.²⁹ And much as Hamlet's path toward closing his case is not linear, neither will be that of Jax or that of *Sons of Anarchy*.

Near the close of season four, Sutter again repeated that he is not prepared to conclude the SAMCRO story in the immediate future, while once more displaying an affinity for the Bard: “Season four, for me in my pretentious three-act Shakespearean structure, this is like the end of Act II.”³⁰ Perhaps, then, audiences can look ahead to the introduction of pirates and gravediggers in the season being aired in fall 2012. But if this is the case, then it seems probable that the series will again turn backwards, enacting the formula of “narrative complexity” by recreating earlier figures, narrative movements, and symbolic patterns, all while extending and joining Shakespearean strands that run through its already dense fabric. Intergenerational power struggles about the direction of the club will once more lead to violence and betrayal. There will be additional perilous situations that drive Tara—or comparable women in Jax’s life—toward self-destructive hysteria. The once prince, now king of SAMCRO will continue to struggle with the ways in which families shape their offspring, especially in cases of fathers and sons. A preview for season five finds Jax composing a journal for his two boys, on the same road as John Thomas Teller, ensuring that his (and Hamlet’s) lines will carry forward, even as Jax, like Sutter, attempts to assert control over his own story.³¹ It seems unlikely that he will be able simply to “Carve for himself” (1.3.20)—any more than Sutter will be able to leave Shakespeare entirely behind while steering *Sons of Anarchy* toward an eventual conclusion. But whatever happens in upcoming episodes, the expansive and generatively repetitive *Sons of Anarchy* will continue to produce a dynamic and distinctive kind of *Hamlet*.

Notes

1. The first Shakespearean film was a scene from *King John* (1899). Since it appeared, hundreds of other Shakespearean adaptations have been created for cinema. Even when television, decades later, became an alternative medium for those working in celluloid, it proved far less attractive for those aspiring to bring the plays to life. For the most part, such presence as Shakespeare has had on television has been on British programming. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) brought all of Shakespeare’s plays to television in the 1970s and 1980s, and there have been several BBC features of stage productions based upon the plays. As several scholars have argued, television is closer in some respects to the stage than film, as it depends upon words as much as images, whereas film tends to be predominantly visual. See, for example, H.R. Coursen, *Watching Shakespeare on Television* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses,

1993), and Samuel Crowl, *Shakespeare on Film: A Norton Critical Guide* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008). However, television has not actively brought serial formulae to bear on adaptation. Regardless of their country of origin, previous televised interpretations of Shakespeare have been linear, self-contained versions of the plays, usually spanning between one and three hours, aired for consumption in one or two sittings. One possible exception—and potential analogue for *Sons of Anarchy*—is the Canadian series, *Slings and Arrows* (2003-6). But the scope of this eighteen-episode, three-season series is much less ambitious than that of *Sons of Anarchy*. Conversely, each season centers on different plays by Shakespeare, whereas in *Sons of Anarchy* one play alone serves as a constant Shakespearean touchstone.

2. Lesley Goldberg, “*Sons of Anarchy* Sets Ratings Record for FX,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, last modified September 26, 2011, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/sons-anarchy-sets-ratings-record-240244>. According to Goldberg, “The first-run telecast of the Sept. 6 [sic] season premiere drew 6.5 million total viewers and 4.3 million in the advertiser-coveted adults 18-49 demographic, collecting 2.5 million in men 18-49. The numbers rank as basic cable’s top drama series telecast between the two adult demos of the year.”

3. See, for instance, Susan Carpenter, “Think *Hamlet* on Harleys,” *Los Angeles Times*, last modified October 26, 2008, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/oct/26/entertainment/ca-sonsofanarchy26>. See also Kevin McDonough, “Hamlet Rides a Harley in *Sons of Anarchy*,” *South Coast TODAY*, last modified October 3, 2008, <http://www.southcoasttoday.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080903/LIFE/809030301>.

4. John M. Withers, “Lady Macbeth as Hamlet’s Mother: *Sons of Anarchy*, Season One,” *International Journal of Motorcycle Studies*, 6, no. 1 (2010) http://ijms.nova.edu/Fall2010/IJMS_Rvw.Withers.html.

5. *Sons of Anarchy: Season One* (2008, Beverly Hills, CA. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2009), DVD, Episode 1.

6. *Ibid.*, Episode 9.

7. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al., 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008). All future citations from the play are from this edition.

8. Ron Perlman, quoted in Ryan McKee, “*Sons Of Anarchy*: 5 Things You Didn’t Know,” Ask Men, n.d. http://www.askmen.com/entertainment/special_feature_400/406_sons-of-anarchy-5-things-you-didnt-know.html.

9. *Sons of Anarchy: Season Four* (2011, Beverly Hills, CA. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2012), DVD, Episode 4.

10. Furthermore, *memento mori* in both the television series and the play visually underscore the high stakes for protagonists confronting men capable of murdering family members: skulls figure prominently in the colors of the gang, which Jax has tattooed across his back. Hamlet, in a sense, deals with death at his back when contemplating the remains of Yorick.

11. *Sons of Anarchy: Season One*, Episode 13.

12. Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), dates the appearance of the precursor British text to 1589 and identifies its author as “probably Thomas Kyd,” 294. On intersections between the Danish legend of Amleth and *Hamlet* see Ed Bergdal, “Hamlet’s Name,” *Scandinavian Studies and Notes* 1, no. 10 (1929): 159-175.

13. Kurt Sutter, interview by Alan Sepinwall, “*Sons of Anarchy*: Kurt Sutter Q&A,” NJ.COM, last modified November 26, 2008, http://www.nj.com/entertainment/tv/index.ssf/2008/11/sons_of_anarchy_kurt_sutter_qa.html.

14. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al., 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 1.1.12.

15. The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) lists seventy-five films with the title *Hamlet*, along with more than ninety titles with “Partial Matches,” n.d., <http://www.imdb.com/find?q=hamlet&s=all>.

16. *Sons of Anarchy: Season One*, Episode 13.

17. Jason Mittell, “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (Fall 2006): 32; http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/the_velvet_light_trap/v058/58.1mittell.pdf, 32.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Sutter asserts a strong interest in the classics when defining his aesthetic priorities in an interview conducted by Mike Flaherty, “The Showrunner Transcript: *Sons of Anarchy*’s Kurt Sutter,” *New York Magazine*, last modified May 20, 2011, http://www.vulture.com/2011/05/kurt_sutter_showrunner_transcr.html. When asked what he would change about network television, Sutter replied, “Stop making decisions based on research data, and hire development executives with degrees in art, literature, and theater instead of marketing, business, and law.”

21. These comments were offered in response to a question from a Shakespeare-obsessed fan of *Sons of Anarchy*: “Dear Kurt, Love the shows. My question is at what point in the first episodes did you decide it would be a modern retelling of *Hamlet*?” From Kurt Sutter, “WTF Sutter #4,” *Sutterink/SOA*, last modified May 27, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCLZDv3Wtp8&feature=plcp>.

22. In his interview with Sepinwall, Sutter claims that avoiding predictability is essential to his vision: “One of the things I lead my writers with is, ‘What’s the obvious and linear narrative choice in any circumstance?’ And then, ‘Let’s never do that.’”

23. William Logan, *The Undiscovered Country: Poetry in the Age of Tin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 343.

24. *Sons of Anarchy: Season Two*, (2009, Beverly Hills, CA: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2010), DVD, Episode 5.

25. The history cycles might be regarded as exceptions, reflecting a collection of works assembled much as interlinked television episodes are. But the fact that Shakespeare penned his *Henriads* while producing a variety of other kinds of plays, along with the fact that when composing them he did not follow a clear chronology, limits the claim that the playwright thought in serial terms comparable to those imposed upon cable television scribes.

26. John J. Joughin, “Shakespeare’s Genius: *Hamlet*, Adaptation, and the Work of Following,” in *The New Aestheticism*, ed. John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 131-150.

27. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

28. The song by Curtis Stigers and The Forest Rangers, “This Life,” can be

heard at the start and at the close of every episode of *Sons of Anarchy*.

29. Linda Charnes, "Dismember Me: Shakespeare, Paranoia, and the Logic of Mass Culture," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48, no.1 (1997): 1-16.

30. With this tripartite formulation, Sutter invokes Aristotle's model of tragedy. It would be interesting to hear how he envisions his work in relation to a five part structure like the one employed by Shakespeare.

31. "Sons of Anarchy: Season 5 Promo #5-Jax," *Television Promos*, last modified August 19, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_TKt8tQMqk.