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Shakespeare On Television

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House of Cards



The current *House of Cards* show, which began airing on Netflix in 2013, is based on an original British show by the same name from the 1990’s, which was based on a novel by Michael Dobbs. Through this process, the ideas have been distilled into becoming more Shakespearean with the currant version having Kevin Spacey playing Frank (our Richard III). Costarring the show is Frank’s wife, Claire, who has Lady Macbeth-like undertones and has said in a past interview, “the way it was displayed to us, long before Episode 1 was ever written in Season 1, was you are Lady Macbeth to his Richard III” (D’Addario). This mash-up of Shakespeare’s characters proves to be an engaging show for a modern audience because it has the best aspects of each combined. Similarly, it creates a dynamic where two of Shakespeare’s most evil villains can feed off each other to attain their goals. For the cultural imaginary in 21st century America, it is important to have a strong lead female role because it not only engages more viewers, but it creates a better plot trajectory. By having Claire be an accomplice, she supports Frank with all his shortcomings as a villain and pushes him to be the best, or worst, he can be. In episode 19, Frank says to the camera about his wife, “I’m not sure if I should be proud, or terrified, or maybe both.” We can imagine Frank responding as a terrified Macbeth, or perhaps a proud Richard III, but regardless of which character he is, we see that Clare is not to be underestimated. She is as ruthless as Lady Macbeth, and if someone as evil as Frank is scared of her, the audience knows she will continue to be a dominate force.



Sons of Anarchy

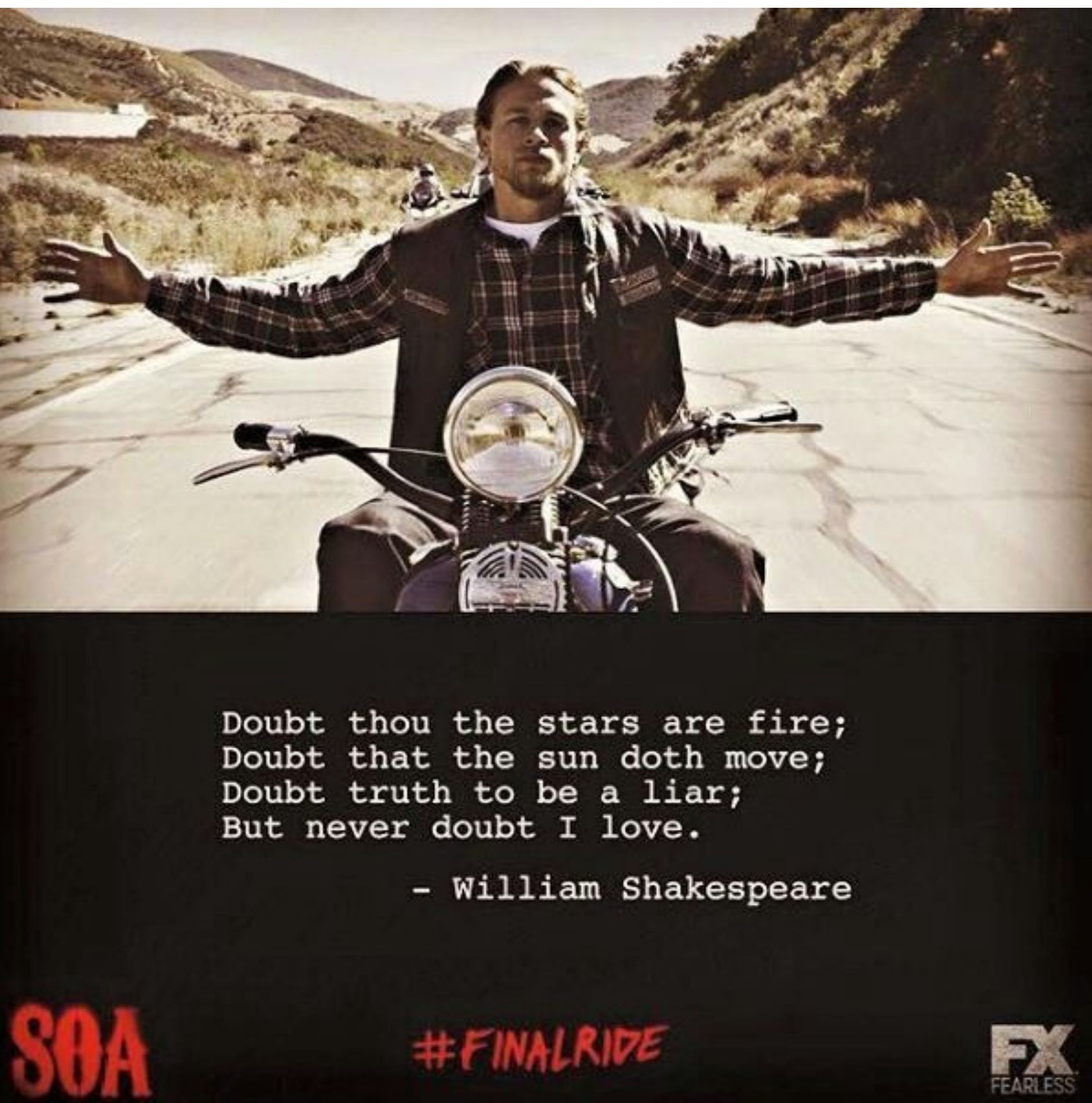
Season 1

From the very beginning of *Sons of Anarchy*, Kurt Sutter introduces his characters with a significant yet subtle homage to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The series takes place in Charming, California where the “Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club, Redwood Originals” holds a reign over the small town. The main character and vice president of the club, Jax Teller, represents Hamlet while his stepfather, Clay Morrow, serves as SAMCRO’s president, a definite parallel to Claudius. Jax’s father, John Teller, founded the biker gang with Clay and seven others to rediscover a camaraderie that they had experienced in Vietnam. However, before his unexpected and unresolved death, John wrote a manuscript titled “The Life and Death of Sam Crow: How the Sons of Anarchy Lost Their Way,” in which he chronicles the gang’s gradual descent into the realm of gun-running. John Teller acts as King Hamlet while his letters serve as the voice of his ghost. Jax’s mother, Gemma, closely resembles Gertrude as she marries Clay Morrow after the death of her husband. Nonetheless, while Gertrude was not *decidedly* complicit in the murder of King Hamlet, Gemma is liable, alongside Clay, for the murder of John Teller. This first episode establishes Jax’s struggle to reconcile his father’s vision for SAMCRO and sets forth his plans for revenge, a pronounced allusion to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.



Sons of Anarchy has been widely referred to as an essential “Hamlet on Harleys,” a kind of Shakespearean recycling that many directors find difficult to accomplish (Sloboda). With a contemporary twist, Sutter has modified the context of the renowned *Hamlet* to satiate the modern fascination and gravitation toward gang violence and bloodshed. For those who are familiar with *Hamlet*, Sutter’s characters are decidedly akin to Shakespeare’s; however, this parallel isn’t exactly transparent throughout the series. The plot of *Sons of Anarchy*, which sustains 92 episodes, is most certainly not tantamount to that of Hamlet, as it takes place in an entirely different cultural imaginary; instead, the series echoes Shakespeare’s storyline in a manner that is fresh and unconventional.

Season 7



This past December, Hamlet on a Harley took his final ride as FX’s breakout hit *Sons of Anarchy* drew to a close. After seven vicious seasons focused around multiple backstabbing and subsequent recent plots, the last episode follows Jax Teller, the show’s Hamlet counterpart, as he finally takes drastic action to end the cycle of violence he was born into. The show’s closure echoes how “Shakespeare... allows the fuzzier internal momentum of character dynamics to overwhelm the clearer forces of play design in bringing the play to resolution” (Magnus 181). In *Sons Of Anarchy*, Jax and his internal struggle become the catalyst for resolution. Throughout the entirety of the show, Jax struggles with the motorcycle club’s dependence on criminal activity. His father, one of the club’s founders, wrote a journal that explores the club’s descent into illegality and expressed his disappointment. The journal act as the ghost of Hamlet, forcing Jax to question the club’s activity and ultimately to restore the club to its former, violence-free purpose. The final episode follows Jax as he completes the necessary steps to insure that the club do so. After tying up all the club’s loose ends, he takes off on his motorcycle only to remove his hands from the handlebars and drive straight into a semi-truck. Ultimately, Jax sacrifices himself for the good of the club (“Papa’s Goods”). Similarly, Hamlet’s death and the actions leading up to it in Act V, scene ii cleanse Denmark of the evils that have plagued it throughout the play. In this light, both *Hamlet* and *Sons Of Anarchy* end with the restoration of the state. Closure in both productions relies on the protagonist’s switch from passive to active resistance.

While the strategy used to close the show echoes that used in *Hamlet*, the more definitive link to the play comes in the form of an inter-title. The final scene of the entire show is a black screen with four lines from Act II, scene ii of *Hamlet*. The lines, taken from Hamlet’s love letter to Ophelia, cement both Jax’s suicide as an act of love for the club and creator Kurt Sutter’s project as an homage to Shakespeare.

The Black Adder

The Black Adder is the first season of a British television sitcom from 1983 created by John Lloyd, Richard Curtis, and Rowan Atkinson. The series begins as a retelling of William Shakespeare’s history *The Tragedy of King Richard the Third* but combines elements of *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to depict an incompetent buffoon who is dead set on becoming King of England after King Richard III’s death.

Richard III

The show depicts Richard III as the polar opposite of the deformed maniac in Shakespeare’s play. Instead, Richard III is a strong, beloved king who enjoys playing with the children of his kingdom. The reversal goes all the way down to his opening soliloquy: In Shakespeare’s play, Richard proclaims, “Now is the winter of our discontent,” while in *The Black Adder* the line reads “Now is the summer of our sweet content.”

Additional Shakespeare References:

In the first episode of *The Black Adder*, we encounter three witches who prophesy that Edmund the Black Adder will become king, echoing the witches sentiments from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Edmund then proceeds, like Macbeth, to murder his way to the top (although comically unsuccessful). However, the witches do not reappear and the Black Adder only seems mildly concerned with the witches prophesy. Also, Edmund is completely inept as a conniving, backstabbing murderer. His incompetence resembles that of the rude mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The comedic retelling of Shakespearean tragedy transgresses the almost sacred regard with which Shakespeare is held in British society. In this way, *The Black Adder* is subversive as it deconstructs and transgresses the sanctimonious poetic integrity of Shakespeare’s tragedy. The first season ends in a mockery of a common trope in Shakespeare’s plays: with everyone poisoned dead. While in Shakespeare’s plays these moments are tragic, the slapstick character of the show sheds



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