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Shakespearean Texts in Contemporary US TV Series“*

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to

my family, who encouraged me every step of the way.

my grandfather, who always dreamt of watching me graduate.

Tom, who never ceased supporting me.

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1. Introduction

“Shakespeare was the last writer who didn’t have to contend with Shakespeare.”

William Logan (343)

“He was not of an age, but for all time!”

Ben Jonson (Preface to The First Folio)

It has been 400 years since Shakespeare died and still his plays are staged all over the globe. With the dawn of new media such as film, television and the internet, the common form of entertainment in the Bard’s time has taken a backseat. According to a survey on the rise of video streaming across all age groups in America conducted by PwC and analysed by Statista (Richter), 90% of all 25 to 34-year-olds use video streaming as their preferred means of entertainment, enjoying the freedom of being able to pick and choose from a vast number of options. The taste of the masses appears to have shifted to more easily accessible entertainment than theatre.

It would still appear, though, that Shakespeare is still very much in demand, even if his famous stories may no longer necessarily unfold on stage, set in a world of kings and fools, war and magic. The language that brought forth soliloquies and sonnets may have been put aside, yet it is the stories which survive and can still be found – at times more distinctly, other times obscured by modernisation – in today’s TV series. With the rise of film, filmic versions and adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays involving stars such as Laurence Olivier found their way onto the silver screen. From 1978 until 1985, the BBC produced a series of TV adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays. The 90’s saw a rise in more loosely adapted Shakespeare’s plays for films aimed at a teen audience (Rokison 198-199). The 21st century now gave birth to a new development in the

perpetual story of Shakespeare's work: famous film actors going back to the stage to act in the Bard's plays (Crompton) and US TV series that re-tell Shakespearean tragedy in a new guise with "Shakespeare on motorcycle wheels" (Donahue) or "Richard III's House of Cards" (Crouch).

It is the latter phenomenon that will be analysed in the following, showing the ways in which the Bard's stories, characters and conflicts are invoked in the FX biker saga *Sons of Anarchy* (SoA)¹ and the Netflix original hit series *House of Cards* (HoC).² The aim is to look at this sample of series and discover the methods employed to modernise and reiterate Shakespearean tragedy or establish a link to Shakespeare via the use of intertextuality that allows the producers to profit from the cultural capital (Webb, Danaher and Schirato XI) associated with the playwright.

The questions to be answered are as follows:

- 1) In which ways is Shakespeare invoked in the US TV series *Sons of Anarchy* and *House of Cards* and which plays are used?
- 2) Are these features distinctive to the series and is there any evidence on the side of production that they were employed deliberately?

In order to find the answers to these questions this introduction will explain the considerations and factors that led to the decision of choosing Shakespearean texts and U.S. American TV series for this analysis. Furthermore, this part will also shine a light on why the following four categories were chosen as basis of the analysis which shall make up the main part of this thesis:

- 1) Plot of the series
- 2) Characters and character relationships
- 3) Themes and motifs of the series

¹ *Sons of Anarchy* shall hereafter be referred to as SoA.

² *House of Cards* shall hereafter be referred to as HoC.

4) The (Shakespearean) language employed

Over the last decade, there has been an increase in “quality television series”, that is critically acclaimed series by US premium and basic cable channels (Klarer 216) such as HBO, AMC or FX, which are not, as US network television is, under the regulative of the FCC (Klarer 216). Traditionally, a series was “fragmented into seasons and episodes, each with a fixed length designed to fit a time slot in a television channel’s weekly program” (Klarer 203), but broadcasting formats have changed and reshaped both the serial format and the narrative patterns employed (Klarer 204). Over the years, premium channels have started to make their content available for individual streaming outside of traditional timeslots, finally arriving at the core business of Netflix: on-demand streaming (Klarer 204). The formula of success for the net-streaming giant was the consideration of its viewers’ needs by making the entire first season of its first Netflix original series available at once (Klarer 204). Ever since its release in 2013, Netflix has produced many more series in a similar format and released them in the same fashion e.g. *Stranger Things* (2016-), *Orange is the New Black* (2013-), or *Black Mirror* (2011-), which originated as a Channel 4 production and was bought by Netflix in 2017.

In order for a show to survive in this new world of television, so Sloboda (91), a series must necessarily manifest “narrative complexity”, a mode of storytelling developed in the 1990s that is at once extensive and recurrent. “Narrative complexity”, as defined by Jason Mittell (32), is a shifting balance of episodic and serial forms that has no need for plot closure with every end of an episode, but rather tends towards ongoing stories that are then tracked by fans over several seasons. They are the series of the likes of *The Sopranos* or *The Wire* (Sloboda 91), where the story unfolds on many levels at once: one being the individual episode, another the specific season, and the third the

series as a whole. Sloboda explains that it is this format, which allows for an array of hints at the base material and its characters, themes and events, which is ideal for forms of adaptation: the recursive element of the format provides the opportunity of “depth and volume to the realisation of what is being appropriated” (92), though the series must be careful to retain its fluidity, so it is not restricted to a certain material and may still survive over the years onscreen. These series do not shy away from creating temporary confusion for the viewer or breaking the fourth wall by way of direct address, as is done in *HoC*, or via voice-over that “blurs the line between diegetic and nondiegetic”, as in *SoA* (Mittell 37). New series, such as *Game of Thrones* for example, do not employ explicit storytelling cues – time passes without indication and “creates moments of disorientation, asking viewers to engage more actively” and also reward those viewers who have understood the “internal conventions” of a particular series (Mittell 37). Narratively complex series, so Mittell (38), have become more and more popular, suggesting that “a mass audience can engage with and enjoy quite challenging and intricate storytelling”.

Popular series such as *Empire* (2015-), *SoA* (2008-2014) or *HoC* (2013-) which fall into the abovementioned category of narratively complex television series stand out by using aspects of Shakespeare’s work. In *Empire*, every single episode has a title that consists of a different Shakespeare quote, making use of 22 different plays during the first three Seasons e.g. “Out, Damned Spot” *Empire*’s Season 01 Episode 06, quoted from *Macbeth* (5.1.31). *SoA* makes use of the same tactic while only applying it to some of its episodes, yet the series has been marketed as “Hamlet on Harleys”, the Shakespearean tragedy being invoked in different ways. *HoC*, in the meantime, makes use of one of Shakespeare’s often employed tools: the aside. With all these different ways of evoking and invoking the Bard, it is time to ask the question: why Shakespeare?

Lanier explains in his book on Shakespeare and modern popular culture that the allusion to or adaptation of Shakespeare is everywhere (3). Shakespeare is being handled as

aesthetically refined, timeless, complex and intellectually challenging, concerned with lasting truths of the human condition and not fleeting political issues, addressed to those few willing to devote themselves to laborious study, produced by a single genius (Lanier 3)

which seems to be at odds with popular culture's idea of being the "genuine, populist, working class, democratic alternative to the 'great tradition' preserved by an educated elite and dominant cultural institutions" (Lanier 5). And yet the idea of Shakespop is not an absurd one: there could not have been any poor in Shakespeare's theatre for their lack of the entrance fee, neither would there have been any wealthy as they would enjoy private performances (Lanier 22) – what is left is the broad mass in a medium that is rather towards the bottom of the cultural spectrum, a place, much like television, that is a "gathering place for mixed crowds relatively unregulated by authorities and thus [contributing] to the erosion of social and cultural order" (Lanier 23), the exact milieu in which Shakespeare's plays were received. It was the printing of his plays that then shifted the focus onto his language and made him a commodity (Lanier 24) before he became a "spokesman for a putatively 'universal' human nature" in the 18th century (Lanier 27) and later, increasingly more read than played, a sign of "literate, civilised" bourgeoisie (Lanier 29), only to be turned into a "bourgeoise culture hero" by the time he is made national poet in the 1730s (Lanier 31). The 19th century saw an increase in parodies and burlesques of Shakespeare's works (Lanier 38-39), splitting the performances into two types. By the 20th century, Shakespeare became his own field of study while having a wide reach in mass media – the English classic that again becomes the subject and object of rebellion by contesting its ties to the elite (Lanier 39-42). Despite being claimed and re-claimed by the masses and the elites alike,

Shakespeare has become global and still symbolises upward mobility in popular culture (Lanier 47-49). Shakespeare is used, more often than not, to lend authority, depth, and respectability to situations etc. by quoting his work, taken out of context and reapplied accordingly (Lanier 52-53). While appreciating Shakespeare's language in itself requires the mastery of English that is based on a good education, appreciating his work in a functional way and looking for identification and participation – Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of "pure gaze" and "popular aesthetic" (Lanier 58) – does not. Lanier states that "for many [people,] high culture continues to symbolise cultural or economic opportunity, the very possibility of upward mobility" (18), which feeds into Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital", which is a "form of value associated with culturally authorised tastes, consumption patterns, attributes, skills and awards" (Webb, Danaher, Schirato XI). Shakespeare, whose work is still advocated and distributed via academies and the classical stage (Lanier 49), thus has and is cultural capital as well as cultural authority.

This concept does not only pertain to Shakespeare in Europe, but also with especial particularity to the US, as Fran Teague outlines in her 2012 chapter on Shakespeare and America (719-734). The first record of a copy of Shakespeare's work in the US was recorded around 1750, and the playwright was mentioned in newspapers during political discussions regarding the relationship between the US and the UK as well as in the form of parodies of certain iconic passages such as Hamlet's "to be, or not to be" soliloquy (Teague 720-721). By the 19th century, Shakespeare was so popular that his and his characters' likeness appeared on various objects, paintings, even "handsome domestic furnishings" (Teague 721). American founding fathers John Adams and Thomas Jefferson appreciated Shakespeare's writings and are said to have particularly enjoyed the overthrow of tyrants depicted there (Teague 722-724). After around 1825 it would then appear that the phenomenon of using Shakespeare

as a signpost and “model for conduct and social decorum” became as much common as the desire of all classes in America to claim Shakespeare as their own (Teague 723-724). There were those who argued that Shakespeare, in his representation of the most desirable qualities of humanity, distinguished the classes in a very British manner, while others either negated Shakespeare’s gentlemanly model and saw him as “quintessentially American (i.e. commercial)”, or accepted said gentlemanly model and promptly denied it’s worth (Teague 725). Shakespeare is here seen as distinguished in his power and genius, yet not fitting the American ideals of democracy (Teague 725). The problem the Americans thus could have with Shakespeare was his Englishness and the notion that the British not only admired Shakespeare’s artistic genius but were also fond of the way in which Shakespeare was the symbol of their social order (Teague 729).

The advent of the 20th century as dominated by US mass culture soon found Shakespeare to be a convenient brand name as he “became an efficient way of suggesting a complex of intellectual and cultural values” (Teague 730)³. American television then proved to be the medium that linked Shakespeare’s drama to education and eventually led to many forms of Shakespeare on TV from productions of the play over versions based on the characters and plots to playful twists on Shakespeare’s works in cartoons, sitcoms or other forms of American TV shows and series (Teague 731-734). Thus, bringing the conversation back to the aforementioned concept of Shakespeare as cultural capital as well as Shakespeare for the masses, “Shakespeare”, for the purpose of this thesis, shall not be limited to the exact wording of his phrases, but also seen in terms of the characters he created, the plots he let

³ Jennifer Hulbert, Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. and Robert L. York make a similar point: “‘It’s Shakespeare’ can elevate the trivial as well as sell more merchandise. Shakespeare [has become] a brand. And, like all brands, it can convey a sense of identity and of community” (4-6).

them navigate, and the topics he debated in the resulting plays. This, as mentioned above, leads to several forms of Shakespeare on American television, which almost always involve a form of adaptation and intermedialities.

For years there is now an ongoing debate on what it means to adapt Shakespeare, especially in the realm of film and TV, with L. Monique Pittman, Judith Buchanan, Diana Henderson, Elsie Walker and many others having discussed the implications, techniques and degrees of bringing Shakespeare to the big and small screen. The concept of adaptation itself is a very contested one, as it appears that every scholar has their own definition of what adaptation is and what different kinds of new works that in some way, shape or form invoke Shakespeare's work are to be called – spinoff, offshoot, transformation, appropriation or version being only a few of those terms (Fischlin & Fortier 3). This complicated debate about adaptations becomes even more interesting when the factor of “irreverence”⁴ is added to the accounts of some scholars who believe that certain adaptations treat the Bard in a disrespectful manner. Robert Stam sees filmic adaptations of written source texts as mutations which help the latter to “survive” while they feed on the source text's literary prestige (2-3). Often, filmic adaptation is seen as vulgar and catering to the “unwashed popular masses” as it does not take any “brains to sit down and watch a film”, simultaneously feeding into the seniority bias of “historical anteriority”, which automatically enhances the status of the source text (6-7) – a bias that can be observed with Shakespearean texts as well.

Adaptation, according to the OED, is “the action or process of adapting one thing to fit with another, or suit specified conditions, esp. a new or changed environment” or “an altered or amended version of a text, musical composition, etc., (now *esp.*) one adapted for filming, broadcasting, or production on the stage from a novel or similar

⁴ Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe see adaptations by Baz Luhrman, Michael Almereyda or Kristian Levring as “often irreverent, broadly allusive, and richly re-imagined takes on their source material” (1).

literary source". Shakespeare himself adapted several tales and historic accounts to create *Hamlet* as we now know the play (Bevington 7-24), and even the most frequently performed version of *Hamlet* including the famous "to be, or not to be" soliloquy is only one of a handful of versions still on record. This, in turn, makes the harsh criticism on different versions of Shakespeare's work for different purposes seem out of place: even writing down and printing Shakespeare's plays was already a form of adaptation, more so one of intermedialities. According to Werner Huber, Evelyne Keitl and Gunter Süss, "intermedialities stand for the thematic and/or formal links between individual art forms (literature, music, painting, photography, film, television, the internet, etc.)" (1). Printing Shakespeare's stage plays and making them into books to be read on one's own rather than watch them performed by a group of people is in itself a media transfer, as defined according to Irina O. Rajewsky, who defined "intermedialities" is an umbrella term for all phenomena that cross media boundaries, especially those boundaries between media that are traditionally seen as conventional and distinct (Schmerheim).

Abigail Rokison maintains that adaptations of Shakespeare "take the plots, themes and characters of Shakespeare's plays and rework them to create original pieces of work" (2), which is the exact nature of adaptation that this thesis is looking at and why plot, themes and characters are the first three criteria of analysis. Moreover, as Elsie Walker states, loosely⁶ based movies dispense with Shakespeare's language in favour of contemporary scenarios that mirror the plot and topical structures of the Bard's plays (15) – such as placing Macbeth and Richard III in US politics, or turning Hamlet into a young biker. Margaret Jane Kidnie, while discussing the BBC's *Shakespeare Retold* series, points out that

⁵ For a detailed discussion of intermedialities see Werner Huber, Evelyne Keitl and Gunter Süss *Intermedialities* or Irina O. Rajewsky *Intermedialität*.

⁶ What I dub "loosely" in reference to loose adaptation.

many viewers will come to the drama with prior knowledge of the plays [and] the way the series simultaneously enacts and disrupts expectations of 'Shakespeare' as a generic category becomes a significant, and not necessarily alienating part of the viewing experience (114).

She goes on to ask in how far Shakespeare's work is defined by his language, for some audiences may not recognise or accept the product as Shakespeare without the distinctive language (114). It is this notion that makes Shakespearean language the final of the four criteria of analysis of this thesis.

Based on the above discussion the four criteria of loose adaptation of Shakespeare's work in contemporary US TV series are as follows:

- 1) Plot Elements
- 2) Themes and motifs
- 3) Characters and relationships
- 4) Shakespearean language

These four categories will be explored for each of the two American TV Series *SoA* and *HoC*. Before diving into the analysis there will be a brief section on the background of the shows, followed by a subsequent plot overview of all the seasons produced by the time this thesis is composed during the fall and winter months of 2017/2018. The analysis will then encompass the four aforementioned criteria applied to the respective shows and Shakespearean plays.

2. House of Cards (2013-2018)

When Michael Dobbs conceived of his villainous protagonist Francis Urquhart for the novel *House of Cards*, the politician's ruthless rise was evidently informed by the author's first-hand experiences in UK politics (Astington 99). The trilogy of novels was adapted for the British TV screens by Andrew Davies in 1990, which became a great success (Astington 99). Davies added a multitude of Shakespeare quotes in phrase and line form to the script, which finds Urquhart paraphrasing Macbeth's prophecy as early as seven minutes into the first episode when he tells his loyal wife that people thought he should be prime minister instead of the newly elected Collingridge and she vehemently agrees: "Glamis and Cawdor and king hereafter" (*HoC UK S01E01* 00:05:54 – 00:06:00). It was Davies' screenplay that added a touch to the storytelling that is now frequently praised in the very successful 2013 Netflix version of the series: the breaking of the fourth wall. The direct and confidential address by BBC's Urquhart and Netflix' Underwood to the camera is kept in the tradition of theatrical asides, also frequently and effectively used by Shakespeare (Astington 100). It is a tool that pulls the audience in and makes the viewer complicit to all the things going on in Urquhart's/Underwood's head, creating a bond that finds the audience rooting for the villain despite themselves. Consequently, this distinguishing feature is one of the aspects of *HoC* that make both the UK and US series so appealing.

When trying to figure out its first ever original project, the US streaming service Netflix conducted an analysis of viewer preferences which found that productions involving director David Lynch and Oscar winning actor Kevin Spacey were in high demand (Heidböhmer, Förster). Furthermore, Netflix subscribers showed a preference for political thrillers and seemed to have taken quite a shine to BBC's *HoC* (Heidböhmer, Förster). It was the combination of these four denominators that gave birth to one of the most successful series in the US and helped Netflix to fame. *HoC* was also the first

series to ever be released as an entire season at once – not even a customary pilot episode was issued to test the waters (Heidböhmer, Förster). *HoC*, being released in such a manner, thus promoted the phenomenon of binge-watching even before viewers were able to buy the box set of the series (Adgate, Williams).

Casting Kevin Spacey in the US remake to take Brit Ian Richardson's place as master manipulator meant that both the source series' Urquhart and his American counterpart were portrayed by men experienced with playing Shakespeare's original villain-hero Richard III⁷. But that is not the only parallel between the BBC production and the Netflix series: both – in words and themes, as shall be highlighted – nod at the past and the Bard himself as well as alluding to very current issues and personalities such as Margaret Thatcher in the UK series, Putin's Russia, ISIS, Trump, and internet security in the US version. Instances of these parallels and Shakespearean influences shall be discussed in the following sections.

As for genre, *HoC* classifies as a political thriller, which is relevant not only because this guides the conventions of storytelling for the production of the series, but also lets the viewer know what is to be expected of the program (Mikos 59). A political thriller traces the intrigue and conflict of politics, providing a subgenre of Alfred Hitchcock's strong suit. According to Grob & Kiefer (527) it is the state institutions who should prevent and ward off threats and dangers that turn into the biggest threats themselves as a characteristic of the genre of political thrillers. The protagonists are drawn into the most exceptional situations, confronted with fears, thus creating tension and expectation in the viewer (Grob & Kiefer 527). The subgenre of conspiracy thrillers is a close relative of the political thriller, as Grob & Kiefer define it as a conspiracy of societal forces that strive to infiltrate and thus change the political power structures

⁷ Shakespeare only ever conceived of two murderous monarch heroes, Richard III and Macbeth (Lull 16), both of which are tangible in *House of Cards*, as the analysis will show.

(527). Unique to the storytelling of conspiracy thrillers is the revelation of the active powers' intentions and plans – Underwood does not try to hide from the viewers his every devious thought on the road to becoming leader of the free world (Grob & Kiefer 527). Furthermore, Grob & Kiefer place special emphasis on the importance of *dramatis personae* the viewers can identify with, and who then end up getting into trouble, for it is the storytelling and the viewers' identification with the characters that evokes the sympathy, consternation or irritation that is the genre's trademark (527).

Included in the following analysis are the first five seasons of the series. During the composition of this thesis the production and filming of season 06 had already started, yet was interrupted by a scandal involving lead actor Kevin Spacey, resulting in production going on hiatus.⁸ At the beginning of December 2017 Netflix announced the production of an eight episode long sixth and final season without Kevin Spacey's involvement, instead focussing the series' plot on Claire Underwood (Morgan Britton, Lee). In light of the fact that Netflix will not use most, if not any of the material already shot involving Kevin Spacey (Morgan Britton) a mirroring of the unceremonious end of Underwood's British precursor would not seem too far-fetched. The BBC series has Urquhart's wife orchestrate his death, framing one of Urquhart's previous victims (Astington 106). Elizabeth Urquhart's future is left open, but Urquhart's successor is already lined up, Elizabeth and her lover "right behind [him]" (*HoC UK S03E04* 00:52:39-00:52:43). In a fashion similar to Macbeth, Urquhart, so Astington, "goes

⁸ In late October 2017 accusations of sexual assault of younger men by Spacey arose and kept increasing in number (Bishop, Ausiello). Backlash for the actor's alleged actions has been massive, drastic and severe – director Ridley Scott has even decided to retroactively remove Spacey from a movie that has already been shot, talk has arisen around revoking Spacey's two Oscars (Seidl). All this without an indictment or final verdict.

In reaction to the accusations that seemed to be an open secret on the set of *House of Cards*, Netflix announced that they would part ways with the actor (Bishop, Ausiello). This left *House of Cards* Season 06 in production limbo, as the entire script would have to be rewritten without Francis Underwood in it in order for the show to finish its sixth and final season, which would cost Netflix and Media Rights Capital a fortune as it would constitute a breach of contract with Spacey (Stolworthy *Contract*). Netflix indeed went ahead and shot the final season without Spacey's involvement (Hedges-Stocks).

down after some desperately misdirected fighting and as his past sins are being called to account, but in the end, because ‘the angel’ he still served and who supported all his schemes has realized, he no longer has a future” (106). Elizabeth, of course, being “the angel” in this scenario, as no supernatural beings such as the Weird Sisters have prompted and supported his schemes, but his wife.

With Claire Underwood in the Oval Office at the end of the Netflix series’ season 05 and both her former bodyguard and threesome one-night-stand, Meechum, as well as former lover Tom Yates dead, it would appear that the finale might not turn out exactly the way it did in the UK production, yet the likelihood of Claire being responsible for Frank’s (most likely off-screen) death is reasonably high. Especially after the final scenes of the season 05 finale find the most recent president of the United States quite at a distance from her husband and permanently disposing of Frank has already been suggested to Claire by her Under Secretary Jane Davis (*HoC US* S05E13 00:35:32-00:36:04). Since filming of the series’ final eight episodes will only start at an unconfirmed point in 2018 (Lee), any speculations about the potentially tragic end of Frank Underwood’s story will remain unknown at this point.

The series’ plot initially introduces Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) and his wife Claire (Robin Wright) as a childless power couple – childlessness being their own choice (*HoC US* S01E06 00:37:14-00:37:21). He is the Democrat president elect’s House Majority Whip, she runs a very successful environmental NGO. He is the son of a peach farmer from Gaffney, South Carolina, she a debutant from a wealthy family in Dallas, Texas. He is passed-over for the position as Secretary of State by President Walker, she tells him to seek unapologetic revenge and strokes his ambition (*HoC US* S01E01 00:14:37-00:15:17). This galvanises the actual plot into action: the Underwoods’ murderous and underhanded ascent through the ranks of politicians that

costs a handful of people their lives, many more their jobs and leaves first Frank and eventually Claire in the position of president of the United States (POTUS).

2.1. Plot Elements

Macbeth opens with Shakespeare's celebrated Thane returning victoriously from battle, as he and his friend Banquo come across three witches, the Weird Sisters, whose prophecies galvanise the plot of the drama into action (*Macbeth* 1.3). Frank Underwood, in the meantime, is driven by the dismissive treatment he is subjected to by president-elect Garrett Walker, who can for this purpose be equated with King Duncan, both holding the highest office in the country. When Frank is passed over for the office of Secretary of State that was initially promised to him, the Chief Majority Whip and his wife start plotting a ruthless revenge (*HoC US S01E01*). Similarly, after the witches' prophecy that Macbeth shall be Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland thereafter (*Macbeth* 1.3.50-51), Macbeth writes to his wife to inform her of the events on the battlefield and his peculiar encounter (*Macbeth* 1.5). It is then, reading her husband's letter, that Lady Macbeth first conceives of the plot to kill King Duncan (*Macbeth* 1.5). Not only does she convince Macbeth of the necessity of regicide, but King Duncan also unwittingly gives the Thane incentive for the kill before he even speaks to his wife by announcing his own son as heir to the throne of Scotland⁹ (*Macbeth* 1.5.33-53). Having received the honours of being named Thane of Cawdor, which fulfils the first part of the prophecy, Macbeth may have hoped for the second part of the prophecy to fulfil itself in a similar fashion by being announced King

⁹ In Shakespeare's time, succession of the throne was already a matter of inheritance, meaning that the first-born son, or even daughter in cases where there was no male heir, would inherit the crown (Schormann 79). Not so in 11th century Scotland, when the story of *Macbeth* is set; the king could choose his own heir, regardless of kinship, which oftentimes was the cause of bloodshed (Schormann 79). Holinshed documented in his chronicles, which Shakespeare drew upon, that Scotland was only then shifting from the method of choosing the successor to succession via inheritance (Asp 158, Manning Smith 1015, Schormann 79).

Duncan's heir. Since Macbeth is Duncan's kinsman, his "cousin" (*Macbeth* 1.4.14), and the king holds Macbeth in high regard (*Macbeth* 1.4.14-20), Macbeth's being announced heir to the throne would not have been unusual in 11th century Scotland, for both reasons make him eligible to be considered in the succession (Schormann 79). Consequently, following the revelation of Duncan's decision, Macbeth can either opt to do nothing and remain Thane of Cawdor, or chose regicide as his only way to take the throne (Schormann 86); a thought that is revealed in Macbeth's aside:

[...] That is a step
On which I must fall down or else o'erleap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires,
Let not light see my black and deep desires;
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.
(*Macbeth* 1.4.48-53)

Similarly, President Walker's decision to renege on his promise of making Frank Underwood Secretary of State seals the president's fate, who is eventually forced to resign from office due to an elaborate scheme conceived by the Underwoods. While Frank's initial reaction is one of shocked disbelief and he spends nine hours simply brooding (*HoC US S01E01*) and avoiding his wife, the slight suffered at President Walker's hands is what makes him "livid" (*HoC US S01E01* 00:14:56 – 00:14:57) enough to plot the president's downfall. Linda Vasquez' announcement that Frank will remain Chief Majority Whip can thus be seen as the *HoC* equivalent to King Duncan's choice in succession. As he later reveals at his inauguration in a direct address, Frank's literal and figurative killing spree could have easily been avoided by a kept promise:

Secretary of State. That's what I wanted. That's all I wanted. That's what I was promised. And now, here I am, President of these United States. [...] And if you think it was hard getting here, you're beginning to understand what I'm willing to do to stay. (*HoC US S05E09* 00:24:57-00:25:42)

HoC further parallels *Macbeth* when Frank Underwood disposes of the ruler in office in order to reign himself and in the process of gaining and retaining power and position

feels the need to eliminate more opposition and eradicate outside threats to his rule; Macbeth feels threatened by Banquo and his son Fleance, since Banquo was foretold by the Weird Sisters that he “shalt get kings, though [he] be none” (*Macbeth* 1.3.68) and thus Banquo must die. Macduff, Thane of Fife, is not loyal to him and has fled the country, so Macbeth orders the murder of Macduff’s entire family. IN *HoC*, Congressman Peter Russo becomes a liability as he is no longer willing to do Frank’s bidding and consequently is killed (*HoC US S01E11*). Zoe Barnes, once useful to Frank in her profession as a White House correspondent for a newspaper, comes too close to discovering the truth about Peter Russo’s passing and is therefore fatally pushed in front of a subway train (*HoC US S02E01*).

In *Richard III*, the eponymous character can finally take the throne once the ruler is disposed of, but not yet as king – while the crown princes are still underage, Richard III becomes Lord Protector of England, temporarily in charge of the kingdom. This, of course, is not enough and so Richard III has anyone loyal to the late king, his sons and his wife’s family, including the heirs to the throne, killed. With the help of his right-hand man, Lord Buckingham, Richard III stages a display of modesty that eventually moves the populace to urge him to take the crown (*Richard III* 3.7). Mirroring this scenario, Frank does become president of the United States when Walker steps back, but he, too, is merely a temporary ruler, as he is instated to finish President Walker’s term only. His party does not want him to run in the upcoming election of 2016, since his approval ratings are low, and the people do not trust him (*HoC US S03E01*). Going back on his promise not to do so, Frank then, aided by loyal underling Doug Stamper, starts campaigning for a nomination as the Democratic presidential candidate for the election in 2016. Again, Frank does not literally kill, yet he manipulates and schemes, trying hard to eliminate any opposition or doubt, employing every dirty trick in the book throughout Season 03 and 04.

Furthermore, when Richard III has his nephews and wife killed to consolidate his rule and position, intending to marry his own niece, the English people and nobles alike support the challenger to the throne, Richmond, the future founder of the Tudor dynasty King Henry VII. In *HoC* Season 03, Heather Dunbar, a fellow Democrat, announces her run for the presidential nomination and is backed by a large portion of the American people, as well as Democratic politicians. Once Dunbar is forced to drop out of the race (due to a scandal surrounding a secret meeting with Lucas Goodwin, who then shoots Underwood and kills his bodyguard, Meechum) and Underwood wins the nomination, another challenger to the presidency makes his presence known: Republican presidential candidate Will Conway, who is young, handsome, thirsts for the spotlight and is adored by the public. While Richmond is the kind, fair, just and good opposite of Shakespeare's Richard III, Conway, a war veteran with a young and beautiful wife and two young children, is the very opposite of grey-haired, childless, mid-fifties Underwood, who has not fought in combat a day in his life. Furthermore, while the Underwoods are married, "together they rule an empire without heirs. Legacy is their only child" (*HoC* US S03E12 00:10:47-00:10:55). Like Richard III and Macbeth, there is no one to carry on their legacy.

Lack of heirs notwithstanding, the end of Richard III's schemes is to be king; incidentally, so is Macbeth's, and Frank finally becomes president by the end of Season 02. All three of them "subvert the natural order of succession", thus "destroying the harmony of the state" (Hart 829). Richard III murders his way right to the crown, as does Macbeth, and when the money laundering scandal becomes public and President Garrett Walker has to resign his office this makes Frank, who was neither elected to be vice president, nor president, the "unnatural" new leader of the US. This is not tolerated by the people and other leaders, and before long, causing the "uprising of a nation oppressed" (Hart 829) and a challenge by someone claiming to be the lawful

heir to the throne (Whately 9). In Richard III's case, the citizens are suspicious of him as early as the second act, when they lament "Oh, full of danger is the Duke of Gloucester" (*Richard III* 2.3.27); and what starts with journalists being suspicious of Frank Underwood as early as season one would have ended in the Underwoods' not being elected had they not manipulated the election by closing the polling stations early due to a faked terrorist attack which they then pinned on ICO¹⁰ to justify waging war on them (*HoC US* S05E03-05). When he finally does win the presidency, there are constantly people protesting outside the White House (*HoC US* S05). At last, as with Richard III and Macbeth, Frank Underwood's enemies unite against him – the journalists (Vollmer), even though they get killed or scared off one after the other, do not cease to investigate and publish against Frank throughout the entire series; Congress refuse to issue a formal declaration of war against ICO on Frank's demand (*HoC US* S05E01) and Congressman Romero eventually uses the Declaration of War Committee to officially investigate against President Underwood (*HoC US* S05).

2.2. Themes and Motifs

HoC being a political thriller, it seems only fitting that the producers should have chosen to base the tone of the series on the tragedy *Macbeth* and the history play *Richard III*. The former's theme being "the conflict between good and evil in connection with political power" (Fletcher 203) and has been categorised as political drama (Schormann 77). According to Fletcher, the overarching theme of *Richard III* is England's suffering under a single man's rule, which is in turn debating "the forces of good and evil at work in human nature and human life" (36) and while it is one of

¹⁰ ICO stands for Islamic Caliphate Organisation, the Netflix show's version of ISIS. It is a terror organisation that plays a major role in seasons 04 and 05, taking hostages in the US and executing one of them in the name of the Caliphate (Mosthof). ICO, incidentally, is not the only allusion to current events in *House of Cards*: the Russian president, Petrov, appears to have striking similarity to current Russian president Putin, tampering with the 2016 election is an uncomfortably familiar topic, as is illegal data collection via search engines.

Shakespeare's historical plays, it is also a tragedy when taking into account some of Bradley's (7-22) definitions of Shakespearean tragedy, such as the following; focus on a single hero; the conflict being "exceptional and extending far beyond the hero" (Bradley 8); the action concerning a man of high standing; the hero contributing to his own demise and the latter lying "with equal truth [...] in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action" (Bradley, 12); the hero's tragic trait is greatness as well as fatal and an error catalyses his downfall. Further specific traits of Shakespearean tragedy according to Bradley include the involvement of abnormalities of mind such as hallucinations and the appearance of the supernatural such as ghosts or witches (13-14) as well as a strong focus on a conflict within the mind of the hero (15). Bradley moreover points out that while Richard III's struggle in Shakespeare's play is outward, it is also one of the playwright's early plays, which should be taken into consideration (18) when insisting, as for example Hart (825) does, that *The Tragedy of Richard III* is not a tragedy despite its full title, since there is no inner conflict within the hero.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that both *Richard III* and *Macbeth* feature the exceptional dramatic form of a villain-hero (Lull 16-17) and their dominant themes can be found in Netflix' *HoC*. Contrarily, Peter Cochran (472-475) has argued that the US re-make of the UK original lacks the Shakespearean humour¹¹ as well as numerous direct quotes of Shakespeare's work by the main character, therefore rendering it non-Shakespearean. Quoting Shakespeare is a credible character trait for Ian Richardson's F.U.¹² as a result of the politician's education at Eton and Oxford as well as a career in

¹¹ McAlindon (5-6) states that elements of comedy in Shakespeare's as well as his contemporaries' tragedies serve to prevent inappropriate laughter during scenes of high tension as well as counterpointing the tragic narrative as such.

¹² The BBC series' protagonist goes by the name of Francis Urquhart, while Netflix adapted it to Francis Underwood, keeping the original initials. These initials prove to be rather aptonymous when taking into consideration the character's motivation and actions throughout both versions of the series.

the Guards (473), a background which Frank Underwood lacks. Furthermore, Cochran criticises the absence of BBC's Frank Urquhart's satirical edge in Netflix' Frank Underwood (473) and mourns the loss of Urquhart's "professional slimeball triumphant over all the amateur slimeballs surrounding him" (473) that is, according to him, so reminiscent of Richard III in Richardson's performance¹³. A further point raised by Cochran (473) is the fact that while Spacey's character does break the forth wall through direct addresses (Nadj 55-56), revealing his inner workings and manoeuvring the audience into the role of an accomplice in a fashion comparable to asides and soliloquies in stage plays, especially prominent in Shakespeare's titular protagonists of *Macbeth* and *Richard III* (Blank, Vollmer, Siemon 4-5, Lull 17), this feature is not used as frequently as it is in the BBC *HoC*. Cochran reached his verdict that it is a "slow and dull" version that "[fails] to keep Shakespeare – whichever Shakespeare – as its subtext" (472)¹⁴ after only one season of the American version and was thus unable to factor in the remaining four seasons that have been produced to this date, which might have changed the critic's mind.

One of the motifs apparent in *HoC* is debated in Shakespeare's plays: neither Richard III nor Macbeth, once they have gained the desired position, are "at ease on the throne" (Whately 1005) – Macbeth is haunted by his murders and continues to murder those who seem to oppose him, while Richard III does the same, and Frank Underwood is constantly under attack from the press and politicians. Furthermore, all three of them are called "tyrant" repeatedly: Richard III is most notably called thus thrice in one and the same speech by Richmond (*Richard III* 5.3.243-254), Frank is called "tyrant" by the

¹³ Overall, Spacey's performance as well as the general approach to the series and characters lacks too much humour, satire, and daring for Cochran's taste, especially compared to the BBC's bravado of featuring the funeral of Margaret Thatcher on screen twenty years before the actual event (474).

¹⁴ Cochran's criticism stands contrary to the general critical acclaim and award nominations directed at the series (Adgate, Williams).

reporters three times as well (*HoC US* S03E05, S03E08, S04E08), but Macbeth receives the unflattering title fifteen times between Act 4 Scene 1 and the end of the play¹⁵. When the tyrants are eventually brought to justice, which shall restore the natural order (Hart 829) of the state they previously robbed of its harmony, both Richard III and Macbeth are alone (Lull 18). Macbeth's wife dies off-stage only two scenes before he does in Act 5 Scene 7, and Richard III has no more allies when he perishes, his close ally Buckingham having been executed by Richard's orders at the beginning of Act 5. Frank, too, at the end of Season 05, finds himself devoid of allies in a hotel room with an outside view of the White House (*HoC US* 00:52:50). Since his wife, now president of the United States, seems to be unwilling to grant him the promised pardon, the omens are not in Frank Underwood's favour (*HoC US* 00:47:22-00:49:49).

During their short-lived reign, however, all three tyrants are visited by the ghosts of those they have murdered. Richard III is haunted in his dream by all his victims (*Richard III* 5.3.116-174), while Macbeth encounters only Banquo's ghost at the banquet (*Macbeth* 3.4). *HoC* picks up this trait as its only reference to the supernatural present in Shakespeare's plays and thus lets the ghost of both his murder victims, Zoe Barnes and Peter Russo, appear to Frank in various scenes during Season 4 Episode 5 as he is in hospital, battling liver failure after a failed assassination attempt by Zoe Barnes' former boyfriend, fellow journalist Lucas Goodwin. In the manner of Richard III, who is only briefly rattled by the ghosts directly as he wakes from his dream (*Richard III* 5.3), Frank does not seem affected by the apparition when he regains full consciousness. He does, however, take away from his near-death-experience something that neither Richard nor Macbeth realise: that he should make amends with

¹⁵ *Macbeth* 4.1.22, 4.1.25, 4.3.12, 4.3.13, 4.3.32, 4.3.36, 4.3.45, 4.3.104, 4.3.178, 4.3.185, 5.2.12, 5.4.8, 5.6.7, 5.7.10, 5.7.15, 5.7.57

his wife, for he is nothing without her (*HoC US* 00:42:24-00:43:48). What does seem to affect Frank, though, is his first murder victim right after the kill. When Claire has a nightmare, he immediately reassures her by saying “He’s not letting me sleep, either” (*HoC US* S01E13 00:13:57-00:14:00), the only admission that Frank, like the Thane of Glamis, for a little while at least, “hath murdered sleep” (*Macbeth* 2.2.45). In church, a few scenes later, Frank is mocking God and the Devil when he suddenly hears a noise. He starts, demanding, “Peter, is that you? Stop hiding in my thoughts and come out. Have the courage in death that you never had in life. Come out, look me in the eye and say what you need to say” (*HoC US* 00:22:00-00:22:12). The noise turns out to be a cleaner, but the scene is reminiscent of Macbeth’s outburst and shaken nerves upon seeing Banquo’s ghost at dinner:

Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble. Or be alive again,
And dare me to the desert with thy sword.
(*Macbeth* 3.4.104-106)

The usurper to the throne of Scotland is most troubled by the appearance of a ghost while Frank suspects the ghost to be hiding and dares it to reveal itself. So plagued are they both by their imagination that they rather their guilty conscience would manifest itself in the form of their victim and directly confront them instead of hiding in Frank’s thoughts or appearing as a ghost to Macbeth.

Overarching themes in Shakespeare’s tragedy of the Thane of Glamis are amongst others power and tyranny, order and chaos, ambition and masculinity as well as deception (Schormann 75-76). Among those it is the notion of masculinity that begs a closer look in this analysis, for the topic is not only a universal one, but also recurs in the Netflix series. Masculinity, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is “the state or fact of being masculine; the assemblage of qualities regarded as characteristic of men; maleness, manliness”, though the exact characteristics of masculinity are specific

to the time, place and society of their conceptualisation. Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, for one, is set in a society of warriors that makes violence and killing during battle socially acceptable (Asp 154). Macbeth himself is conceived as the quintessential warrior, the "representative of a society which values and honors a manliness and soldiership that maintain the cohesiveness of the tribe by extreme violence, if necessary" (Asp 154). The notion of valour is given a moral component by fighting for a just cause – such as Macbeth defending King Duncan's rule in battle at the opening of the drama (*Macbeth* 1.2-1-3). Killing in times of peace, contrarily, diminishes a warrior's heroic valour and honour, rendering the assailant inhumane (Asp 154).

HoC negotiates the topic in a different manner: unlike his Shakespearean counterpart, Frank Underwood is not a respected warrior, has never served his country in battle – an issue that arises time and again and is without exception used against him. Most notably during Frank's 2016 campaign as he runs against the Republican candidate, William Conway, who is a decorated war veteran, celebrated for the rescue of a fellow soldier. Consequently, the respect, trust and reverence that Macbeth experiences for his martial accomplishments is not bestowed upon Frank and is especially criticised in season 05 when he opts for fear-mongering and the topic of terror as his ticket to the White House. He asks Congress to declare war on ICO and augment military presence in the streets in reaction to an ICO terrorist attack, which prompts his opponent to declare that "[Frank] is a man who's never served. Wouldn't know what a real war was if it jumped up and bit him in the ass. I mean, a declaration of war? He's putting American lives in danger. War is real! You don't screw around with it. This is what happens. This is what happens when you throw around a word like 'war'" (*HoC US* S05E02 00:48:50-00:49:11). While the theme of masculinity rooted in a society of warriors that values valour and the art of the noble kill during battle is not only integral to the world of *Macbeth*, but also at the core of Macbeth's credibility as a respected

Thane as well as the centre of his masculinity, Frank Underwood's failure to have served in the military is seen as a flaw by his opponents and used to discredit him as a fit leader of state. Frank, too, is confronted with the inhumane kill off the battlefield; yet, as opposed to Macbeth, he does not fear that his deeds would make him less of a man and more of a monster or a brute. This disregard for consequence as opposed to Macbeth's "poetic imagination" that helps the latter "visualise the consequences of his acts" (Hart 828) especially concerning their negative effects, is a character trait in Frank Underwood that shows more of Shakespeare's Richard III figure than the essentially noble Thane of Cawdor. The brute aspect as well as those of Richard III shall be discussed further down.

Scotland's 11th century society was not exactly the way it is depicted in Shakespeare, though, for going against the chronicles of Holinshed (IN ASP!), wherein it is written that

"in these daies also the women of our countries were of no lesse courage than the men; for all stout maidens and wives (if they were not with child) marched as well in the field as did the men, and so soone as the armie did set forward, they slue the first living creature that they found" (188)

Shakespeare fashions the women in the play stereotypically "weak, dependent, non-political, incapable of dealing with violence except to become its victims" (Asp 158). Macduff, for instance, instead of giving Lady Macbeth a proper answer when after Duncan's murder she demands to know "what's the business" (*Macbeth* 2.3.76), replies

O gentle lady,
'Tis not for you to hear what I can speak.
The repetition in a woman's ear
Would murder as it fell.
(*Macbeth* 2.3.79-82)

Constructing masculinity against femininity in what appear to be binary concepts, Shakespeare lets Lady Macbeth draw on this understanding of sexual stereotypes

even before, upon his arrival, she talks her husband into committing the regicide he previously suggested to her. One simply must take into consideration the “unsexing” that Lady Macbeth has to wish for upon reading her husband’s letter (*Macbeth* 1.5.38-52), for she must become less of a woman in the frail sense that Shakespeare has defined for the society in his play in order to be the strong character that she must be so she can have equality in the relationship (Asp 159) and simultaneously be Macbeth’s support. While Macbeth, as a male, must show his “noble strength” (*Macbeth* 2.2.48) in deeds, Lady Macbeth’s valour, meanwhile, is “primarily rhetorical” (Asp 159) as she sets out to “chastise with the valor of [her] tongue/ All that impedes [Macbeth] from the golden round” (*Macbeth* 1.5.25-26). The lady, in more casual terms, is the brains of the operation, while her husband provides the muscle. This makes it easier for her to claim that, had she a baby, she would “have plucked [her] nipple from boneless gums/ And dashed the brains out, had [she] sworn” (*Macbeth* 1.7.57-58) to do it in such a manner as Macbeth had assured her of the regicide; no actions have to follow her claim, as, for all her “unsexing” and will power, Lady Macbeth is still a woman. And it is her womanliness that she still, mayhap unconsciously, uses in her persuasion of Macbeth (Asp 160). She lets him know that only “when [he dares] do it, then [he is] a man” (*Macbeth* 1.7.49) and should he falter she shall see his love as “green and pale” (*Macbeth* 1.7.37-38) - this is where Asp introduces the aspect of sensuality (Asp 160). In order for Lady Macbeth’s assault on Macbeth’s male potency to work, he must perceive her as “intensely female” (Asp 160) and so she must draw on the very femininity that she was invoking the spirits to rid her of only a few scenes previous to the event (*Macbeth* 1.5.38-52). Incidentally, it is this scene in which Lady Macbeth challenges her husband’s male potency along with his masculinity as such, that is portrayed with the couple having some form of sexual intercourse or sensuous

encounter.¹⁶ A parallel to *HoC* can here be drawn to a scene in Season 03 Episode 02, when Frank is desperately attempting to fund-raise his campaign for re-election and not succeeding. Having reached the end of his rope, Frank slumps down on the floor with his head in his hands, crying (*HoC US S03E02 00:23:30*). In comes Claire, lying him down gently on the floor, taking off his trousers and her own, initiating sexual intercourse that strictly has her in the active role, Frank merely “receiving” (*HoC US S03E02 00:23:30 – 00:25:16*). Similar to the scene in *Macbeth* this sexual encounter has an air of transaction: after the event, during which the female characters have the upper-hand, the male characters feel empowered and invigorated in their masculine agency, now having the power and energy to fulfil their tasks. When asked about the scene in *HoC*, creator and executive producer Beau Willimon explained that Claire was quite literally “fucking the hope back into [Frank], and the strength. We see the strength move from her to him. Sex is one way to do that” (Whitney).

The choice of words is quite interesting here, as this transfusion of strength is not only happening in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, but also in *HoC* and mirrors the observation made by a number of scholars (e.g. Clark & Mason 110, Smith 130-131, Asp 161) that in the beginning, Macbeth needs Lady Macbeth to give her strength, to pose a feminine challenge to his masculinity and help him to become the stereotypical and strong male. Her trouble now is that once Macbeth becomes this male ideal, he no longer sees her as an equal, for he has morphed into an independent agent who plots the murder of Banquo all on his own and does not see a need to share information or power with his wife (Asp 162, Clark & Mason 110). Likewise, as Frank becomes surer and more successful he involves Claire less and less in his decisions and neglects to

¹⁶ Clark and Mason (110) mention Judy Dench’s Lady Macbeth in 1976 opposite Ian McKellen’s Macbeth as being in a tight embrace during the scene. In a more recent example of a film version of *Macbeth* starring Michael Fassbender opposite Marion Cotillard the couple is shown to have sexual intercourse as Lady Macbeth instructs her husband on how the murder will transpire (“Macbeth” Justin Kurzel)

acknowledge her as an equal, which results in her leaving him in the third season's final episode following this exchange:

Claire: We used to make each other stronger. At least I thought so, but that was a lie. We were making you stronger. And now I'm just weak and small, and I can't stand that feeling any longer.
Frank: All right. What do you want? [...] All I am hearing is, it's not enough. [...] Not enough!
Claire: No. It's you that's not enough. [...]
Frank: You can hate me, you can be disgusted, you can feel whatever it is you wanna feel because frankly, I'm beyond caring. But without me, you are nothing. You're right. This office has one chair. And you have always known that from the very beginning. [...] I have to run this country and win a nomination. I'm doing my job. [...] And it's time now for you to do yours. You want me to take charge? Fine. I will take charge. (*HoC US S03E13 00:50:28 – 00:52:58*)

He then proceeds to manhandle her, something Claire had tried to provoke him to do earlier in a sexual nature, and Claire decides she's had enough. Earlier in the above exchange, Frank tells Claire that she cannot have it both ways and have "an equal partner when it suits [her]" and have a man "take charge when it suits [her]" with Frank ideally "divining" when she wants him to do either (*HoC US S03E13 00:50:06-00:50:18*). In Shakespeare's Scottish world of soldier's manliness "the soldier may avoid the danger of effeminacy only to incur the still greater danger of brutishness" (Waith 265), a notion that is closely tied to the "concept that man is between the beasts and the angels in the hierarchy of creation" (Waith 263). Macbeth and his lady touch upon the issue:

Macbeth: I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.
Lady Macbeth: What beast was't, then,
That made you break this enterprise to me?
(*Macbeth 1.7.46-48*)

Lady Macbeth's nurturing of the stereotypical hardened male within Macbeth as outlined by Shakespeare leaves her great strength weakened and makes her susceptible to the guilt that causes her death – after Banquo's ghost appears to Macbeth at the banquet, Lady Macbeth withers away (Smith 131). This withering is

likely coupled with the loss of her equal – notice how Macbeth in the beginning calls her “my dearest partner of greatness” (*Macbeth* 1.5.9-10), but later on, when he has attained the crown, they grow distant in their individual suffering; a process which Smith calls “a de-courtship, as it traces the different and divergent ways in which the Macbeths respond to their burden of guilt” (130). Furthermore, the couple deteriorate from two people who are so close they do not even have the need to spell things out (as can be seen in their first on-stage meeting) to never appearing on stage together again after the apparition of Banquo’s ghost (Smith 131). In a twist on this situation, Frank and Claire Underwood start out the same as Macbeth and his wife, a simple dialogue is sufficient:

Frank: I know what I have to do.
Claire: Good.
Frank: We'll have a lot of night like this, making plans, very little sleep.
Claire: I expected that. That doesn't worry me. (*HoC US S01E01 00:17:10 – 00:17:25*)

But as the series progresses, they drift apart, sleeping in separate rooms once they have moved into the White House, taking lovers¹⁷ – not because they are plagued by guilt over their deeds, but because Claire, too, has ambitions and looking to Frank for help does not sit well with her. Neither does his treatment of her, as has been illustrated earlier.

2.3. Characters and Relationships

“[You] are Lady Macbeth to his Richard III” was the way the main characters of *HoC* were pitched to actress Robin Wright (D’Addario). “[Frank’s] kind of power is so transparent and it’s very Shakespearean and it’s about greed” was the way the actress

¹⁷ Over the course of five seasons, the couple have thus far taken two lovers each. Francis had an affair with journalist Zoe Barnes that had more to do with power than attraction, later he slept with his personal trainer Eric Rawlings. Adam Galloway is introduced early on as Claire’s former affair whom she returns to in Season 01, later she has an affair with writer Tom Yates.

herself characterised the show's take on political power, again using Shakespeare as point of reference (D'Addario), while others have argued that "Frank and Claire are *not* Richard III and Lady Macbeth" (Auxier 267). The following shall shed some light on the discussion.

The premier episode of *HoC US* opens with F.U. suffocating a dog, more precisely the neighbours' dog who has just become the victim of a hit-and-run and is lying in the street, suffering (00:00:00 – 00:01:33). Underwood promptly asserts that the dog will not survive its injuries and sends his companion away to look for the owners. Once he is alone, Frank addresses the camera for the first time, confiding that

[there] are two kinds of pain. The sort of pain that makes you strong or useless pain, the sort of pain that's only suffering. I have no patience for useless things. Moments like this require someone who will act, who will do the unpleasant thing, the necessary thing" (00:00:48 – 00:01:11).

He proceeds to suffocate the animal while he speaks, showing little emotion at his own doing. Cochran argues that there is little point in the scene at all as it has no metaphorical value and cannot be tied to any Shakespearean subtext (473), yet it is this first direct address which sets the tone for Frank's character and can be construed as foreshadowing the events yet to come: as he has "no patience for useless things" he also has no patience for people who become a liability rather than an asset, "useless" to the furthering of his ambition the way Congressman Peter Russo and journalist Zoe Barnes do, thus, just like the dog, they are murdered (*HoC US* S01E11 and *HoC US* S02E01). Murdering liabilities to secure their own advancement is also what Richard III and Macbeth do: the English usurper disposes of the king and subsequently all opposition and contestants to the throne in a thorough way that includes his own nephews; the Scottish thane commits regicide and proceeds to order the killing of his comrade Banquo as well as the latter's young son Fleance, even

murdering Macduff's entire family in an attempt to secure his position as king of Scotland.

The US F.U. seems to be fashioned after Richard III more than he appears to be fashioned after Macbeth, as Lull (17) remarks that while Macbeth talks more to himself, Richard III talks mainly about himself. The latter character provokes the audience to "resist, interpret and share" via his asides and soliloquies, dominating in text and performance (Siemon 4-5). It is in those addresses to the audience that what has been described as Richard III's enjoyment and appreciation of his own wickedness (Clark & Mason 106) is conveyed most strikingly, lending irony to the humour and zest to the crimes. Consequently, this dramatic tool is used by Shakespeare akin to Frank's direct addresses that range "from snide remarks to contemplation on what to do when upsetting news is revealed to him" (Hestand), even professing his love for his wife. This breaking of the fourth wall in combination with the use of tragedy has been pointed out by Hestand to be an aspect that "continues to elevate the program's Shakespearean scope".

It needs to be kept in mind that when criticising the Netflix *HoC* in his book *Small-Screen Shakespeare*, Cochran was primarily comparing the frequency of Shakespearean features such as direct quotes and more general subtext between a much more condensed BBC series that consists of three seasons including four episodes of around 50 minutes each to the first season of a different type of series consisting (so far) of five seasons including ten episodes of around 50 minutes each. This illustrates that the Netflix series is based on a different concept, having been produced circa 20 years after the BBC series, allowing for much more subplot and slower pacing than in a series of less than half its range. Based on these differences and the fact that it was not known at the time how many seasons of the Netflix series there would be, it is not very surprising that Cochran felt as though the plot was

advancing too slowly, particularly the murders (475), or that the series lost the narrative models of Shakespeare's *Richard III* and *Macbeth* towards the end of the first season (474). F.U.'s first murder happens in episode eleven out of thirteen and the second follows in the season two premiere, which is not included in Cochran's comparison. Thus, Netflix' F.U. is still a "machiaavel Chief Whip who murders his way to the top" (Cochran 472), I would argue that he quite simply has the luxury of taking more time as he does so than his British predecessor as well as his Shakespearean forefathers could due to the restraints of the British TV series format and stage drama respectively. Kevin Spacey's Frank Underwood is not conceived as a humorous character, something critiqued by Cochran (473), but he is resourceful and charismatic (Vollmer), his interactions with other characters range from jovial to harsh (Oliver) and while he does mock others, he does not do so in a comical, but cynical fashion – he does not stop short of religion in order to lure people to believe him (*HoC US S01E03 00:28:35 – 00:32:41*). Siemon (9-10) writes about Shakespeare's Richard III mocking conscience and charity while not possessing any religious piety, yet using religious hypocrisy as a source of power (16). He even admits as much in a soliloquy explaining his successful shifting of the blame of murderous plots against the king unto his brother Clarence:

But then I sigh, and with a piece of scripture
Tell them that God bids us do good for evil.
And thus I clothe my naked villany
With old odd ends stol'n out of holy writ,
And seem a saint when most I play the devil.
(*Richard III* 1.4.330-334)

Frank Underwood does the same: in an impassioned eulogy, Frank fashions himself the pious man of religion, talking of his own struggle with loving God after the death of a loved one even as he reveals in direct address to the camera that he actually feels quite differently about it all (*HoC US S01E03 00:30:13 – 00:31:12*):

My father dropped dead of a heart attack at the age of 43 [...] and when he died, I looked up to God and I said those words, because my father was so young, so full of life, so full of dreams. Why would God take him from us? [directly addresses the camera] Truth be told, I never really knew him or what his dreams were. He was quiet, timid, almost invisible. My mother didn't think much of him. My mother's mother hated him. The man never scratched the surface of life. Maybe it's best he died so young. He wasn't doing much but taking up space. But that doesn't make for a very powerful eulogy, now, does it? [stops directly addressing the camera] I wept. I screamed, "Why, God? How can I not hate you when you steal from me the person I most love and admire in this world? I don't understand it, and I hate you for it.

He even quotes a "piece of scripture" moments later as Shakespeare's Richard III's account suggest (*Richard III* 1.4.330), "The Bible says in proverbs 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding'" (*HoC US* S01E03 00:31:16-00:31:28). When in fact, only moments before, he yells "I hate you, God! I hate you!" (*HoC US* S01E03 00:29:24 – 00:29:29) as he describes the despair of losing a child or parent and it almost seems as though he secretly enjoys saying those words out loud in the guise of being sympathetic. Even more so since in the final episode of Season 01 it is revealed that Frank does not believe in God at all (*HoC US* S01E13 00:22:23 – 00:22:37). His contempt towards a God goes even further as Frank talks to a bishop about the wrathful God of the Old Testament in Season 03, Episode 04: when he receives an unsatisfactory answer to his question, he waits for the bishop to leave. Alone, he faces the crucified Christ above the altar, "Love? That's what you're selling? Well, I don't buy it" (00:43:44 – 00:43:54). And with this, Frank spits in Jesus' face. As it is to Richard III, religion is merely a tool to Frank Underwood, who has little more than disdain for believers and their morals. Ironically, when Frank reaches up in a fleeting moment of remorse to clean his spit off the sculpture, it crashes down, leaving Frank mildly shocked (*HoC US* S03E04 00:44:00 – 00:44:18). And yet, as Shakespeare's Richard III does, Frank continues to mime the pious politician, using the phrases "God bless you/ all of you/ the United States of America" repeatedly

throughout the series¹⁸, though of course it is expected of an American politician in his position.

To further disprove Cochran's arguments of a lack of Shakespearean subtext in *HoC* it is necessary to look more closely at the character of Frank Underwood and draw the parallels to Shakespeare's Richard III and Macbeth. Richard III, as Siemon (4-5) maintains, embodies genius, intellect, self-love, civil violence and thus represents a "stage Machiavel"¹⁹. Frank, too, reveals himself to the viewer as a hypocrite, such as during the aforementioned eulogy, where he also "treats religion as a functional tool", but also even while he first introduces the politicians currently in the White House, e.g. the future president:

President-elect Garrett Walker. Do I like him? No. Do I believe in him? That's beside the point. Any politician that gets 70 million votes has tapped into something larger than himself, larger than even me, as much as I hate to admit it. Look at that winning smile, those trusting eyes. I latched onto him early on and made myself vital. [...] I've backed the right man. (*HoC US S01E01 00:02:07 – 00:03:19*)

Even as he is introducing other politicians, Frank is mocking them all in a similar fashion (*HoC US S01E01 00:02:07 – 00:03:19*), living up to Shakespeare's Richard III, and it is clear from the above quote that he helped to get Garrett Walker elected into office out of personal ambition alone. Moreover, during his orchestration of the president's downfall, Frank hypocritically mimes the ever-supportive friend and ally to the president, keeping upright the façade of sincerity and charming President Walker, who now must resign due to Frank's plotting, into still believing in the latter's innocence, which in turn lets Frank off scot-free and ready to take the office of POTUS (*HoC US S01E13*). Satisfying all the above mentioned criteria, F.U. can be seen as a

¹⁸ Instances can be found in *HoC US S02E05, S03E02, S03E05, S03E07, S03E09, S04E01, S04E13, S05E02*.

¹⁹ The term, derived from the Italian Renaissance philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli, became "a catch-all for any devious foe, and embodied anxieties about religious and social disorder", "a self-professed hypocrite [who] mocks authority, holds conscience in contempt, treats religion as a functional tool and delights in strategic manipulation" (Siemon 8).

Shakespearean Machiavel, a figure fashioned after the play's Richard III, who right from the start reveals his murderous plans (*Richard III* 1.1.30-40), coveting the crown. Moreover, Richard shows "a general character opposed to his actual disposition" that is always at the ready (Whately 67), meaning one character that is his public persona, the pious, well-spoken duke, and his "true" self, the conniving schemer he only reveals in asides, soliloquies and in front of his ally Buckingham. The very same can be said for Frank Underwood: as a politician, he must have a public persona, one that blesses God, is happily married to his wife and only wants what's best for the people of America; while his "actual disposition" (Whately 67) is that of the vengeful schemer who stops at nothing to gain the presidency, has no regard for God and has a much more ambiguous sexuality than strictly pious marriage would allow, which would most likely harm his career should it become public knowledge (Hestand, Blank).²⁰

A further parallel is that Richard III's victims "recognize his hostility, duplicity and artificial emotion, but suffer entrapment" (Siemon 12) all the same. Many of the politicians in the White House do not trust Frank, but still make deals with him; Zoe Barnes knows well what F.U. is capable of, yet still she entertains an affair with him to further her own career; Claire, who is privy to all of Frank plans and schemes surrounding the presidency, even the murders of Peter Russo and Zoe Barnes, stands by him, keeping his secrets, for most of the series. This is in part due to the fact that Shakespeare's Richard III's character offers a "dizzying variety" of layers such as "the hero, the lover, the statesman, the buffoon, the hypocrite, the hardened and repenting sinner" (Siemon 12-13), as this wide palate of facets adds a lot of substance to the villainous hero. Though Richard III is "determined to prove a villain / [...] subtle, false,

²⁰ It is revealed during Season 01 Episode 08 that Frank had a very close and amorous relationship with one of his fellow students during his time at the military academy The Sentinel. Furthermore, Francis and Claire engage in a *ménage-a-trois* with their loyal bodyguard and confidant to Frank, Edward Meechum (*HoC US* S02E11).

and treacherous" (*Richard III* 1.1.30-37), he remains the hero of the tragedy, and the audience finds itself "pondering its own surprisingly positive response to a ruthless tyrant" (Lull 41) when watching *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, or *HoC* all the same.

Setting aside Cochran's criticism, there are many more parallels to be found between Shakespeare's *Richard III* and Netflix' Frank Underwood. According to Siemon, *Richard III* delights in the strategic manipulation (8) of his peers such as he boastfully confides to the audience at the very beginning of the play

Plots I have laid, inductions dangerous
By drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams,
To set my brother Clarence and the King
In deadly hate the one against the other.
And if King Edward be as true and just
As I am subtle, false, and treacherous,
This day should Clarence closely be mew'd up
About a prophecy, which says that "G"
Of Edward's heirs the murderer shall be.
(*Richard III* 1.1.32-40)

He then brazenly proceeds to place the blame for Clarence's imprisonment on Queen Elizabeth when he meets the younger brother on his way to the Tower, proclaiming that they both are in danger (*Richard III* 1.1.62-70). Should one exchange the name King Edward for President Walker and Clarence for Raymond Tusk in the above quote, one would arrive at the plot of the first season of *HoC*.²¹ It is Frank's plan to drive a wedge between the president and his confidant and advisor Tusk, at the same time driving away the vice president in order to take the latter's place; which he succeeds in when he, by then vice president, takes part in a money laundering plot involving the Chinese.

In order to get his way, *Richard III* uses the power of words, and he is a true master of verbal sparring and seduction – how else would he manage to woo Lady Anne, the

²¹ Of course, Francis does not plant an initial in his schemes that may point both to him and his victim; "Clarence" actually being George, Duke of Clarence, and Richard's title being Duke of Gloucester, whereby Richard and his brother both are addressed by their titles.

widow of one of his murder victims, as she carries her husband to his early grave (*Richard III* 1.2), or convince both Clarence and King Edward that he, Richard, is innocent of all the treachery and to be trusted (*Richard III* 1.1, 2.1). Frank, too, can charm and woo with words and so it is that when he is found out for his involvement in a money laundering scandal and the president offers his advisor Tusk a presidential pardon should he name Frank Underwood at the hearing, F.U. writes a letter to the president on an Underwood typewriter, protesting his innocence (*HoC US* S02E13). As suggested by Claire, Frank pours out his heart and wins over Walker again, letting Frank get off scot-free for the time being, and paving his way to the ultimate goal: the presidency.

Meanwhile, Macbeth's ambitious wife's loyal support and singlemindedness (Bradley 366-367) are what enables him to become King of Scotland. More precisely, those qualities which are often seen as making the character "inhuman" and "invincible" in her lack of pity or conscience regarding the murder of King Duncan are what make her indispensable to Macbeth; the qualities that caused Bradley (377) to call her "a perfect wife". When she permits Macbeth only to speak of the planned murder upon his return from battle, when she taunts him and speaks harshly in that first conversation between them, calling him a "coward" (*Macbeth* 1.7.43), she does so only because she knows her husband's weakness and seeks to counteract (Bradley 366, Whately 15), for she believes him worthy of the throne (Bradley 377). Thus, she "despises what she thinks is the weakness which stands in the way of her husband's ambition; but she does not despise *him*" (Bradley 377).

Likewise, Claire Underwood's unwavering support and her own ambition are the traits paving the way for Frank's rise to the office of vice president and finally POTUS. Again, mirroring the dialogue in *Macbeth* 1.7 between the Macbeths that galvanises the action, it is an encounter very early on in Season 01 Episode 01 of *HoC* that portrays

Claire Underwood as a wife who knows very well what her husband is capable of and like Lady Macbeth is “cool and undismayed [,] afraid of nothing but a disappointment” (Whately 34) by her husband. This becomes very clear in the following exchange:

Claire: You don't usually underestimate people, Francis.
Frank: I know. [to camera] Hubris. Ambition.
Claire: You should be angry.
Frank: I'm livid.
Claire: Then where is that? I don't see it.
Frank: What do you want me to do? Scream and yell? Throw a tantrum?
Claire: I want more than I'm seeing. You're better than this, Francis.
Frank: Well, I'm sorry, Claire. I am sorry.
Claire: No. That I won't accept.
Frank: What?
Claire: Apologies. My husband doesn't apologise, even to me. (*HoC US S01E01 00:14:37-00:15:17*)

Mimicking Lady Macbeth's detection of her husband's weakness and letting him know just what is expected of him, Claire then leaves Frank by himself to find a way to retaliate Walker's slight and still advance in political hierarchy. She employs the very same strategy of unyielding demand in Season 02 Episode 13, when Frank must convince President Walker of his innocence or suffer the consequences of his illegal plotting if Raymond Tusk names Frank at a hearing as complicit to the crime:

Frank: He could [still name me]. Anything's possible.
Claire: You have to stop him.
Frank: I'm trying.
Claire: Trying's not enough, Francis.
Frank: Well, I can't sit next to him in the hearing room with a gun to his head.
Claire: That sounds like an excuse.
Frank: It's a reality.
Claire: You promised me I wasn't going to have to prepare for the worst.
Frank: And I intend to keep that promise.
Claire: Well, I want to be sure. I want both of us to be sure.
Frank: The only sure-fire way is for Walker to call him off personally.
Claire: Then make it happen.
Frank: I cannot force a man who thinks I'm his enemy to suddenly call me his friend.
Claire: I've done what I had to do. Now you do what you have to do. Seduce him. Give him your heart. Cut it out and put it in his fucking hands. (*HoC US 00:21:33-00:22:14*)

Again, Claire's tactic works and her husband is not named after pouring his heart out in a personal letter to the president.

Lady Macbeth's great strength shows in her "impressive [staunchness]" as she is "unwavering, putting her own needs after those of her husband, uncomplaining" (Smith 154). If she wants to attain greatness with him, she must work through her husband (Asp 195) and she does so without a "word of complaint, scarcely a word of her own suffering [;] she helps him, but never asks his help [;] she leans on nothing but herself [and] her will never fails her" (Bradley 368). This is especially true when she proves that she can switch from having her doubts to being a pillar of strength to her husband at the banquet. Before the event, she says to herself that

Naught's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content.
'Tis safe to be that which we destroy
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.
(*Macbeth* 3.2.4-7)

Yet as soon as her husband enters, she is all strength and bravado, instructing him to be less conspicuous and showing the resolve that he does not have. At the banquet, as Macbeth is plagued by the ghost of Banquo, the lady's iron will makes Macbeth think that she is much braver than he is:

You make me strange
Even to the disposition that I owe.
When now I think you can behold such sights
And keep the natural ruby of your cheeks
When mine is blanched with fear.
(*Macbeth* 3.4.114-118)

Similarly, Claire time and again shows immense self-control; when she is faced with the man who raped her at college, she only reveals his identity and his role in her life after Frank insists she tell him what is going on (*HoC US* S02E02 00:20:43 – 00:21:01). Frank is furious, for he is supposed to award a medal to the culprit only a few minutes later, but Claire, who has been crying in a very rare display of deep emotion, holds him

back. Frank yields, but cannot shake the thought and so they find themselves in their bedroom, where Claire tells him how she handles the memory:

You think I don't want to smash things? [...] Every time I think of her, pinned down like that, I strangle her, Francis. So she doesn't strangle me. I have to. We have to. The alternative is...it's unlivable. [...] You'll still feel the hate in the morning. You'll use that. But not on him. (*HoC US* 00:30:03 – 00:32:04)

Not only does Claire use the pain that was inflicted upon her to fuel her own strength, she also pushes her husband to do the same. Thus it holds true what Bradley maintains for Lady Macbeth: “scarcely a word of her own suffering” and “she never asks his help” (368). The latter is illustrated only two episodes later, when Claire publicly reveals the story of her rape during a live interview – without asking Frank for help she succeeds in exacting her own revenge on the US General (*HoC US* S02E04 00:34:37-00:36:25). When other women in the armed forces step forward, having been raped by one and the same man, Claire gets one of them, Megan, to speak on her behalf for the implication of an anti-rape bill in the armed forces. However, the bill has to be withdrawn for political reasons to do with Frank, leaving Megan caught in the cross-fire and mercilessly attacked for speaking up and revealing abuses in the military. Claire goes to see her in her home and, upon being told that she is still a good person, breaks down crying when she is on her own (*HoC US* S02E13 00:15:50-00:16:29). This and the moment two episodes before, when Frank walks in on her dabbing her eyes after she is confronted with the man who raped her, are the only instances of Claire's strength crumbling completely. In fact, her independence, her not needing any help goes so far as making her sick to her stomach when she actually does have to ask her husband for help in receiving the position as UN ambassador (*HoC US* S03E02 00:50:50-00:51:29).

Though she sometimes asks whether they brought misfortune upon themselves and whether it is really all worth the deeds they do, she, like Lady Macbeth, pursues her

goals single-mindedly (Bradley 367) and only reveals her inner turmoil when she is on her own, or, also akin to Lady Macbeth, in her sleep (Manning Smith 1012): after Frank kills Peter Russo, Claire wakes from a nightmare in which she saw one of Russo's children ripped apart by her own doing (*HoC US S01E13 00:14:06-00:14:27*). It is quite telling that Claire should be troubled by a bad dream about the children left behind, but not about the father her husband killed. Consequently, this leads to another parallel between Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth and Claire Underwood: the fact that neither woman has children. The Shakespearean text reveals that Lady Macbeth has born one or more children (*Macbeth* 1.7.54-55), and there have been debates about how many children Lady Macbeth had (Smith 145-156), yet only the fact remains that in the play itself, there are none alive that were born to the couple. While it is most likely that they perished due to the general conditions of the time, this is not the case for Claire and Frank.

The relationship between Claire and the topic of children is a complex one; on one hand, Claire explains quite early on that she chose Frank for a husband because he promised her "freedom" from "[giving her] a couple of kids and [counting] the days until retirement" (*HoC US S01E06 00:37:14-00:37:18*). In the same interview that reveals her as a survivor of rape, Claire is asked whether not having children was a personal sacrifice that she made in favour of her husband's political career. She answers that when it came to the choice between being "the parents [they] wanted to be" and "[devoting their] lives to public service", they simply chose the latter and did what was right for them (*HoC US S02E04 30:29-00:30:44*). Claire denies having had any maternal instinct over the years, but confirms that she has been pregnant before; off-camera she then confides to her assistant that she had two abortions as a teenager and one at sixteen weeks because the couple was "focussed on the campaign" at the time (*HoC US S02E04 00:32:22-00:34:18*). This may paint Claire and Frank as very

cold-hearted, especially since having an abortion sixteen weeks into the pregnancy is even more frowned upon than at an earlier date. Furthermore, Claire cancels her former employee's, Gillian Cole's, insurance and thus cuts her off from the health care she needs for the remainder of her pregnancy, by forging the employee's signature (*HoC US S02E01 00:30:10-00:00:30:57*). All this because Gillian is trying to sue Claire and her NGO on grounds of firing her for being pregnant, which is a lie. In a chilling display of unscrupulousness Claire states to Gillian, "I'm willing to let your child wither and die inside you if that's what's required. But neither of us wants that. Now tell me, am I really the sort of enemy you want to make" (*HoC US S02E01 00:31:20-00:31:32*). Here, Claire is gambling with the life of a baby, knowing that the mother would never allow it, thus making it the perfect blackmail, since all Claire really wants is to make Gillian the new head of the NGO so she can focus on Frank's advancement.

On the other hand, there are two incidents that show that Claire may still have a soft spot for babies and children. Firstly, there is the dream that has already been discussed; secondly, again Claire's lawsuit with her pregnant former employee Gillian Cole. When the environmentalist claims that her employment was terminated due to her pregnancy, Claire is understandably furious, but still tries to talk to Gillian in order to reach an out-of-court settlement (*HoC US S01E13 00:23:41-00:25:02*). Unfortunately, Gillian refuses, grabbing Claire's hand and placing it on her belly to prove a point, upon which Claire seems shocked and reluctant to feel the baby kicking (*HoC US S01E13 00:23:41-00:25:02*). The next scene involving Claire is at their home when Frank arrives and the following exchange takes place:

Frank:	You can tell me or I can keep guessing.
Claire:	You'll roll your eyes.
Frank:	Not at you.
Claire:	I was thinking about when one of us dies. [...] What will we leave behind? [And] for whom?
Frank:	For each other.
Claire:	But if we're not – ah, I'm being silly. (<i>HoC US S01E13</i>)

The scene, Claire's hesitation, in combination with a visit at a fertility clinic only two scenes later, would suggest that there is a part of Claire that actually does want children. When season two opens, though, it is revealed that Claire only went to the clinic to gather medical information that she could use against Gillian. The relationship between Claire and children is thus not very clearly defined, yet with the onset of her menopause and no further attempts at having children, it is fairly clear that the couple shall not have any heirs, just as the Macbeths remained childless in the end.

Claire, like Lady Macbeth, is privy to her husband's bloody deeds and even encourages him. The extent of her knowledge is only explicitly revealed in Season 05 (*HoC US* S05E10 00:40:58-00:41:04) when Claire confesses to Tom that Frank killed Zoe Barnes and Peter Russo. Before she confides in her lover, the viewer is not quite sure of Claire's involvement or connivance. Yet, Lady Macbeth is not only aware of Macbeth's plan to murder King Duncan, she also urges him on, as previously discussed, and while there is urging on Claire's side for Frank to do his part and be the man she knows he can be, she is then not necessarily talking about murder, while Lady Macbeth explicitly is, even instructing her husband as to how exactly the murder shall be executed (*Macbeth* 1.7.61-72). However, while it would make sense for Claire to be aware that Frank – in order to scare Peter into complying with his plans – provides the Congressman with a razorblade after running him a bath in the Underwoods' home, telling the alcoholic to either end his own life or run for Governor of Pennsylvania (*HoC US* S01E05 00:47:50-00:48:06). Her involvement becomes less clear when Peter dies of gas poisoning in his own car while Claire is in New York City with her affair Adam Galloway after a marital fight, seemingly unaware of Peter having fallen off the wagon again at Frank's hands. Frank finds Peter in a drunken stupor and leaves him to die of gas poisoning in his own car. The next day, Claire receives the news of Peter's death and promptly returns to her husband's side. Furthermore, as mentioned above when

comparing Lady Macbeth's unravelling in her sleep to Claire's bad dream and solitary shows of emotion, there is the matter of Claire's nightmare. This nightmare is related to Russo's death:

Frank: Tell me what you were dreaming.
Claire: Oh, it was awful, Francis.
Frank: He's not letting me sleep, either.
Claire: Yeah. It's not him. It's the kids. I was playing with them in the backyard, and the girl was climbing on the vines, and I kept telling her to stop and get down, and the vines just took hold of her, and they wouldn't let go. And she was screaming so loud, and I just kept pulling harder and harder, and she just ripped in half. (*HoC US S01E13 00:13:50-00:14:27*)

One might construe this short dialogue as Claire simply being haunted by the death of Russo and Frank acting in front of her as though he were feeling the same shock in order to conceal his true involvement in the act, yet in a previous episode, when Claire pays Zoe Barnes a visit, she tells the reporter that not only has she always known about their affair, but that Claire and Frank really tell each other everything, right down to the smallest detail (*HoC US S01E10 00:11:36-00:12:09*); a claim she can then truly back up with detailed knowledge of Barnes' fears. The aspect of complete disclosure between the couple would further feed into the initial dynamic of the Shakespearean Macbeths, as Macbeth tells his wife right away about his curious encounter with the witches and his being announced Thane of Cawdor (*Macbeth* 1.5.1-12), he discloses his doubts and qualms about the murder of King Duncan before and after the deed (*Macbeth* 1.5, 1.7, 2.2). While Macbeth does not explicitly discuss his intent of murdering Banquo as explicitly as he does the murder of King Duncan, 3.2 finds them in a short exchange that implies no great surprise on Lady Macbeth's part at his half-obscured suggestion – nor at her own reply (Bradley 378):

MACBETH. Oh, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!
Thou know'st that Banquo and his Fleance lives.
LADY MACBETH. But in them nature's copy's not eterne.
MACBETH. There's comfort yet; they are assailable.

Then be thou jocund. [...] there shall be done
A deed of dreadful note.

LADY MACBETH.

What's to be done?

MACBETH. Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,
Till thou applaud the deed.

(*Macbeth* 3.2.35-45)

Bradley sees her line “but in them nature’s copy’s not eterne” (*Macbeth* 3.2.37) not as purely pertaining to them dying at some point, and does not believe that there is any surprise in her husband’s reply; to him, the murder of Banquo was agreed upon in silence, for “she thought his death, and his son’s death, might ease her husband’s mind, and she suggested the murders indifferently and without remorse” (Bradley 378). Similarly, the second murder committed by Frank Underwood happens to be embedded into two mirroring bedroom scenes involving Claire that would suggest that she has always been perfectly aware of her husband’s plans and the executions of the murders (Chaney). In the first one, Claire washes her face in the adjoining bathroom before entering the bedroom, where the following vague conversation between the married couple takes place:

Claire: You haven’t said a word.

Frank: No.

Claire: Where does that leave us?

Frank: I’m fully prepared. And I have been for some time.

Claire: I know you’ll do whatever you think is best. (*HoC US S02E01 00:26:48-00:27:14*)

The morning after Zoe is pushed in front of a moving train by Frank, Claire is seen exiting the bathroom dressed for the day. She walks into the bedroom, shortly stopping to look at the TV, where a report on Zoe’s supposed suicide is being broadcast. Without any noticeable reaction to the news, Claire sits down and puts on her make-up for the day, seemingly lost in thought. Zoe is never mentioned again by her until she tells Tom Yates of all the evil Frank and her have done. These scenes would, as mentioned before, suggest a connivance, if not a complicity of Claire when it comes to the murders Frank has committed, as there is between Lady Macbeth and her husband.

An aspect in Claire Underwood that may be less of a characteristic of Lady Macbeth's and more of her husband's, the King of Scotland, is her motivation in killing her own lover, Thomas Yates. It has been argued by Whately in his comparison of Shakespeare's Richard III and Macbeth as characters, that Macbeth's murders are chiefly for his security, not for his advancement as are Richard's (47-48), since Macbeth is already king by the time he arranges most murders. Claire, too, is already vice president and her husband president by the time she sees herself forced to kill (*HoC US S05E12*). Again, the aforementioned rift is tangible as Claire keeps her plans of murder to herself in contrast to the couple's sharing the knowledge of the murders that were committed before (*HoC US S05E12*) in a mirroring of the distance between Macbeth and his wife as the play progresses (Smith 131).

Thomas Yates, who was accepted, even recommended by her husband as Claire's lover, commits the grave error of having sex with someone that is not Claire Underwood. Frank confronts Yates about it (*HoC US S05E09 00:47:09-00:47:14*), then proceeds to tell Claire that he sees no merit in keeping Yates, who had resigned his job before, around. Dutifully honouring her marriage and Frank's say in the matter, Claire breaks up with Tom. In what the couple perceive as an act of blackmail, Tom leaves behind the manuscript of a book on the Underwoods' marriage that includes all the "terrible things" (*HoC US S05E10 00:40:49-00:40:51*) they've done. Not heeding Frank, who tells Claire to stay "a million miles away" (*HoC US S05E12 00:26:18-00:26:21*) from the issue, she meets with Yates in secret. Claire then watches Yates consume a drink spiked with a medicinal overdose, and has sex with Tom, the toxin taking effect during the act (*HoC US S05E13 00:31:00-00:35:19*). This murder, then, is a *Macbeth*-ian murder to the purpose of securing their positions as president and vice president of the United States. Thus, it may be inferred that there is not only a lot of Lady Macbeth, but also of Macbeth himself in Claire's character.

This also feeds back into the aforementioned issue of violent masculinity as portrayed in Shakespeare's play and how this causes Lady Macbeth to strive for the spirits to unsex her in order to attain the masculine state of mind that allows her to kill without a conscience (*Macbeth* 1.5.38-52), as well as feeding into the rift between the couple. The explanation is as follows: For one, both Macbeth and Frank Underwood recognise a change in their wives after they have been involved in their first murder – granted, Lady Macbeth does not kill, but she sees the fresh body and plants the knives at the scene (*Macbeth* 2.2) while Claire poisons her victim and then has sex with him as he dies (*HoC US* S05E12 00:31:00-00:35:19), but both of them are directly confronted with what they have done, and it changes them. Macbeth, at the banquet, sees that in comparison to him, Lady Macbeth is now the brave one, for she can “behold such sights/ And keep the natural ruby of [her] cheeks / When [his] is blanched with fear” (*Macbeth* 3.4.116-118). Similarly, in the season finale of *HoC*, long after she's told him about killing Yates, Frank suddenly notices a difference in Claire:

Frank: Something in your eye. A look. It's changed.
Claire: We're the same now, you and I.
Frank: How so?
Claire: You know how. It's been a long time since I surprised myself.
Frank: You'll recover. You're the most powerful woman in the world. Comfort pales by comparison. (*HoC US* S05E13 00:42:28-00:42:56)

In both cases, the sense of masculine valour that allows killing as described above is apparent in the female character, something of a playing of a role that cannot be sustained in *Macbeth*, for the lady remains female and thus the mask of manliness eventually crumbles and leaves her open to a remorse that splits her psychically and bursts forth in her sleep-walking scenes (Asp 162, 166). Claire's new callousness after having murdered can be seen when she is sat in the Situation Room with fifteen other people, watching the assassination of ICO leader Ahmed al Ahmadi with shock-widened eyes and involuntary flinches – Claire Underwood is the only person not

showing any reaction as the bullets fatally hit their target (*HoC US E05S13 00:44:32-00:44:52*). Since it took five seasons for Claire to be directly involved in a murder – as stated above, she merely had knowledge of her husband’s kills, yet was nowhere near physical involvement – it may be that her Lady Macbeth-ian unravelling will come during the final season.

Another aspect of the murderous Macbeths can be found in the Underwoods: their common ambition. Smith talks of a “reciprocal encouragement”, even a “*folie a deux*, or shared delusion” (130) as well as a “mature relationship between husband and wife” (130) in the Shakespearean drama. Bradley sees the couple as having “one and the same passion of ambition” (350) and going through all of the emotions of the play together (350), even though they are separated in their guilt. In the meantime, Claire and Frank Underwood start out just the same: they are in it together, plotting and scheming, and are portrayed as having a strong bond – Frank professes his love for her to the camera right in the beginning “I love that woman. I love her more than sharks love blood” (*HoC US S01E01 00:17:48-00:17:51*) and feels pride and terror when Claire wants to exact revenge on someone who harms them in their advancement (*HoC US S02E09 00:45:08-00:45:27*).

Extending this trait of their relationship, Lady Macbeth and Macbeth need each other in order to advance, but they would not be able to do what they do without each other, and not merely because they love each other deeply (Smith 130). Macbeth needs Lady Macbeth and her reversal of gender stereotypes in order to find the strength to commit the regicide he had intended. Initially, this holds true for Claire and Frank as well, as she pushes him to aspire to the presidency. Clark and Mason identify a streak of “wifely ambition for her husband’s success” (109) in portrayals of the couple, which allows for actions of selfless support on Lady Macbeth’s part as well as a permeating sense of her own “high, proud, commanding disposition” that makes her “born to rule, if not to

reign” (Bradley 350). Claire Underwood, very supportive of her husband’s ambition, can be seen repeatedly asking Frank how she can support him: “What can I do?”²²

The latter characteristic, found in Lady Macbeth as well as in her *HoC* counterpart, can be seen responsible for what Asp describes as an “obvious [attraction to] the prospect of wielding power in her own right, but there is no evidence to indicate that she wants royal status for herself alone” (159). Pursuing this line of thought leads to another parallel between the Scottish lady and the American “ice queen” (Tolentino); for the longest time they see themselves and their husbands as a team, which is only later jeopardised by their husbands’ new taste of power (as part of the brutish masculinity discussed above). Lady Macbeth becomes listless and almost indifferent in her sleepwalking when her strength starts failing her after the murder (Bradley 378, Smith 130-131), but Claire, not yet under the effect of her first murder at the time, points out to her husband that they only work well together as a team in the very beginning (*HoC US S01E01 00:14:18-00:14:26*). Later on, when Frank is already POTUS, they talk about a fight they had in which Claire spat that “[she] never should have made [him] president” (*HoC US S03E06*), she retracts that claim, telling him: “I think we’re a team, actually”, to which Frank bitterly retorts “Well, we’re not a team at the moment” (*HoC US S03E07 00:21:22-00:21:27*), explicitly stating the rift that has begun to form between them.

As discerned in the beginning, President Garrett Walker’s position at the top of the political hierarchy, as well as his power to slight Frank and galvanise the plot into action, are all character traits that make him the obvious counterpart to *Macbeth*’s King Duncan. Now one might argue that President Walker is not, as Duncan is in *Macbeth*, the first murder victim, for in fact he is not murdered at all. Yet, he is the man in the

²² Instances can be found in *HoC US S01E06 00:31:13-00:31:15*; *S01E13 00:13:47-00:13:47*; *S02E10 00:38:39-00:38:40*.

highest office, the first person Frank intends to permanently remove, and, even though it might take much longer than in Shakespeare's tragedy, he is finally disposed of by a figurative kill: the POTUS' career is dismantled so thoroughly that Frank, once in office, must issue a presidential pardon to keep Walker from imprisonment – his only show of mercy (*HoC US S03E01*).

Banquo, Macbeth's second murder victim, is the one that haunts the Scottish usurper the most. As discussed before, there are merely two moments that can be construed as a semblance of guilty conscience regarding the murder, and both the remark that "he's not letting [Frank] sleep" (*HoC US S01E13 00:13:57-00:14:00*) and his outburst in the church later during the same episode have to do with Peter Russo. While both Macbeth and Frank do not physically murder Banquo and Russo, respectively, in a fashion comparable to either the bloody stabbing of King Duncan or the violent push that sends Zoe Barnes stumbling in front of an incoming underground train, they are still setting their victims up to die. Macbeth sends assassins after Banquo and his young son Fleance (*Macbeth* 3.1), while Frank leaves Russo asleep in the latter's car with the engine running and a window down, parked in the garage (*HoC US S01E11 00:37:43-00:43:17*). Thus, the crimes resulting in death that Macbeth and Underwood set up is what haunts them the most. Yet this is not the only reason for seeing Peter Russo as "valiant" and "true, worthy" Banquo (*Macbeth* 1.4.54): Banquo is an innocent man, bold and ambitious (Bradley 379), but he does not fear the Weird Sisters or give them too much thought (*Macbeth* 1.2.61-62). Similarly, Peter Russo is a simple Congressman and would not have run for Governor of Pennsylvania if Frank Underwood had not pushed him to do so. While Russo lets Frank bully him into getting sober (he is a substance abuser) and running for governor, he is also not afraid to confront Underwood after the latter repeatedly forced him to make political decisions that harmed the community he was trying to represent and nurture (*HoC US S01E10*).

Russo then threatens Underwood to go public with some of Underwood's dirty secrets if he does not right the wrong he forced Russo to commit (*HoC US S01E10 00:08:41-00:08:54*). Like Macbeth, who does not respond well when he feels that he is not shown the proper respect (Whately 31), Frank reminds Russo to measure his tone and later decides to dispose of the loose cannon with the aid of his right-hand man, Doug Stamper (Vollmer).

Manning Smith remarks that neither Richard III nor Macbeth refrain from killing women and children on their bloody way to the top (1003), and albeit Frank does not stoop so low as to murder a child, he does kill a woman that might be likened to Lady Macduff: Zoe gives Frank incentive to murder her by investigating Russo's death, and Lady Macduff and her children do nothing to warrant their death apart from being related to the Thane of Fife, who is not loyal to King Macbeth and thus flees the country (*Macbeth* 4.2.140-141). And yet one might construe the team of journalists investigating Frank Underwood as something of a family, united by profession and purpose; Zoe Barnes, Lucas Goodwin, Janine Skorsky and, eventually, Tom Hammerschmidt. The latter may even be likened to Macduff, for he is the one who, after Zoe and Lucas have been killed and Janine has gone into hiding, takes it upon him to avenge his fellow reporters by following up on and deepening the research already done by them (*HoC US S05*). Eventually, Frank Underwood must resign his office due to several allegations brought forth by Hammerschmidt and others, based on leaks from the White House, which also mirrors Macduff's character arch: his family having been killed on Macbeth's orders, Macduff seeks revenge on the man he calls a tyrant (*Macbeth* 4.3, 5.7). Most notably, Macduff is not "of woman born" (*Macbeth* 5.7.43) and thus the only one who, according to the Weird Sisters' apparitions (*Macbeth* 4.1.78), can harm Macbeth. Incidentally, what sets Hammerschmidt apart, is that he, as a reporter, is not a part of Frank's world of politics and does not fear him. In the fashion of Macduff, who flees to England,

Hammerschmidt spends the better part of the series away from journalism as he is fired from his paper for misconduct against Zoe Barnes in Season 01.

It has also been argued by Vollmer that the trio of Zoe Barnes, Janine Skorsky and Lucas Goodwin have a function akin to the Weird Sisters during the first season of *HoC* for three reasons: firstly, there are three of them, secondly, they “are a powerful entity who are on the outside of the situation” who “update Frank on where he stands in the political sphere”, and thirdly, they, too, continuously lose their power as the plot progresses. This holds true as there is no need to separate the roles, characteristics and functions of the Weird Sisters from Macduff and his family in a loose adaptation of the source material.

2.4. Shakespearean Language

There is only a single instance in five seasons of *HoC* during which Shakespeare’s words are used on-camera. The scene makes use of a quotation that has become a popular proverb for expressing suspicion: “Something’s rotten in the State of Denmark” (*HoC US S04E01*), originating from Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. The line is uttered on a news programme to express lack of confidence in Frank Underwood’s political dealings.

3. Sons of Anarchy (2008-2014)

So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and for no cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on t'inventors' heads.
(*Hamlet* 5.2.358-363)

I 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 colour. (SoA S01E09 00:28:45-00:29:02)

The above quotes taken from *Hamlet* and *SoA* shall serve as indication of their resemblance in themes and plot²³. While producer Kurt Sutter may not want to be pinned to one interpretation of the series based on Shakespeare's version of *Hamlet*, which, in itself, is an adaptation of older texts²⁴, the following shall show that *SoA* can be viewed as a loose adaptation.

Season 01 of *SoA* introduces the MC²⁵ in the South Californian town Charming as a diverse group of bikers of all ages, presided over by Clarence "Clay" Morrow (Ron Pearlman), a founding member. His vice president, Jackson "Jax" Teller (Charlie Hunnam), is also his stepson, as Clay is married to the widow of former president and fellow founding member JT, Gemma Teller-Morrow (Katey Sagal). The latter, as the president's Old Lady, enjoys the status of the respected matriarch. Jax's infant son Abel is born in the very first episode to his ex-wife and drug-addict Wendy Case (Drea de Matteo) with a congenital heart defect that killed Jax's baby brother Thomas at the

²³ In a 2012 interview led by Russell Brand that includes all members of the series' main cast, Sutter does point out that he "harkens back a little bit to the magical component of Shakespeare" with the character of a mysterious lady beggar that seems to appear out of nowhere and at random throughout all seven seasons of the series, always present at turning points, even if there was "no big plan" to it at the time (Brand, Sons of Anarchy Live Chat 00:22:29-00:).

²⁴ For a detailed account see Bevington's chapter on the prehistory of *Hamlet* in *Murder Most Foul* (7-24).

²⁵ Motorcycle Club shall henceforth be referred to as MC.

tender age of six, while Gemma, Jax, and eventually Abel live a normal life despite the “family flaw” (SoA S01E01 00:16:25-00:16:26). Performing the life-saving operation on Abel is Jax’s high school sweetheart Tara Knowles (Maggie Siff), who skipped town after graduation and has not seen Jax for years. Also returning to Charming, albeit from a prison sentence, is Harry “Opie” Winston (Ryan Hurst), Jax’s best friend and likewise born into the MC with his father Piermont “Piney” Winston (William Lucking) still an active founding member. When looking for usable baby care products in the Teller’s storage unit, Jax comes across an old manuscript written by his late father after the death of Thomas, in which he relays his initial vision for SAMCRO – Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club Redwood Original – and how they spiralled down into dealing guns and doing other dangerous and illegal business. Jax takes the manuscript with him and continues to read it in secret as he tries to negotiate newfound fatherhood, the return of the love of his life, the MC’s illegal dealings and his father’s vision. As the series continues, conflicts arise within the club regarding their off-the-grid business, Gemma and Clay become suspicious of Jax as they find out about the manuscript, violence ensues among SAMCRO and rival MCs. Not to forget the ever-looming threat of police, RICO²⁶ and ATF²⁷ investigations, whose leaders as well as the Aryan Brotherhood and other gangs serve as antagonists throughout the series’ seven seasons. Eventually, Jax finds out about Gemma and Clay having sabotaged JT’s bike, which caused the latter to die of the injuries from an ensuing accident resulting in Clay’s murder in retaliation. Gemma, suspecting Tara, who is by then married to Jax, of taking away her and Jax’ sons and turning Jax in to the police, kills Tara in a rage and,

²⁶ RICO, or RICO Act, is short for Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organisations Act that refers to the “prosecution and defense of individuals who engage in organised crime” (HG).

²⁷ ATF is the short form of Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, a “law enforcement agency of the United States’ Department of Justice that protects [...] communities from violent criminals, criminal organisations, the illegal use and trafficking of firearms, the illegal use and storage of explosives, acts of arson and bombings, acts of terrorism, and the illegal diversion of alcohol and tobacco products” (ATF).

realising her mistake, pins it on a rivalling gang. When Jax eventually finds out what Gemma did, he kills his own mother, gets his affairs in order, sends his two sons away with his ex-wife to allow them a life away from the violence, and purposely, as well as fatally drives his father's old Harley into an oncoming truck, mirroring JT's death.

3.1. Plot Elements

In 2007, Kurt Sutter received the commission of writing a series about individuals outside the law for producers Art and John Linson (Bennett 14-15). He then delved deep into research on the origins of Motorcycle Clubs in America and found that they originated in the late forties and early fifties, consisting of war veterans (Bennett 16). It was the idea of "the first guy who said, 'Let's put on these vests and have a few beers and call ourselves the Hells Angels'" and how this man would react to the change that took place within fifteen years and turned the MCs into "classified [...] organized crime syndicate" (Bennett 16-17). It was then that the character of John Teller²⁸ was born; the war veteran who founded the fictional SAMCRO (Bennett 16-17). Since Sutter was not partial to the idea of filming a period piece or having a seventy-something-year-old in the lead role, JT "ultimately became a ghost, and that's frankly when the *Hamlet* archetype fell on top of it and suddenly made sense to me," Sutter explains in Bennett's book *Sons of Anarchy: The Ultimate Collector's Edition* (16). The ghost of old Hamlet, the "royal Dane" (*Hamlet* 1.4.45), became the first piece of the puzzle in the form of a manuscript written by the late JT: *The Life and Death of Sam Crow: How the Sons of Anarchy Lost their Way*, around which Sutter then built the remainder of *Hamlet*'s family: Jax, only living son to JT and heir apparent to his father's club, became prince Hamlet's counterpart; Gemma, his mother, in the place of Gertrude; Clay, also one of the First Nine, the founding members of the MC, who then married his brother in arms'

²⁸ John Teller shall henceforth be referred to as JT.

widow Gemma, took JT's place, and "like *Hamlet*, the story would also reveal that John's death came at the hands of Clay and Gemma" (Bennett 16)²⁹. This way, Sutter would be able to play off Clay's guilt and have the tension of such a stepfather-and-son dynamic, for the producer wanted such a "love/hate relationship that ultimately would throw Gemma into the middle" (Bennett 17).

Kurt Sutter has never made a big secret out of this initial idea for the seven seasons of his hit series, which caused multiple articles on the series to call it "Shakespeare on Motorcycle Wheels" (Donahue), "Hamlet in Black Leather" (Sheffield), or "Hamlet on Harleys" (Carpenter) from the very beginning, and led some journalists to attempt a prediction of the series' outcome using the most famous of Shakespeare's tragedies as a template (Rowles). Yet, a year after the series' first season had aired, Sutter tried to qualify his statements about the Bard's revenge play's impact on the American biker saga: "I don't want to overplay it, but [the Shakespearean influence] is there. [...] It's not a version of *Hamlet*, but it's definitely influenced by it" (Metro). In the midst of shooting Season 04, Sutter maintained that *SoA* was "not a modern retelling of *Hamlet*, meaning that the story arc does not inform the show as a whole. [...] But] there are definitely Shakespearean overtones throughout the piece, and I really try to infuse the show with those [...] and will continue [to do so]" (Sloboda 92). He further explained that there was going to be a "classic Shakespearean arc, from *Hamlet*" developing during Season 04, as well as planning on "staying true to – or being informed by the archetype a little bit more" towards the end of the series (Sloboda 92-93). During an interview with *vulture.com*, Sutter then revealed that many of the tragic turns in *SoA* felt "Shakespearean to [him], and at times [the show veers] a little bit more toward

²⁹ The question of Gertrude's complicity in the late King Hamlet's demise according to the version of the story as reiterated by William Shakespeare shall be further discussed in the part of the analysis focussing on the characteristics of Gemma Teller-Morrow and Queen Gertrude.

Macbeth” (Zoller Seitz). And finally, when there was still one season to go, Sutter explained at the 2013 Comic Con that “the archetypes of *Hamlet* are there, in terms of the characters and sometimes there’s scenes or episodes that thematically will feel that [influence] – but lately to me it’s felt more *King Lear* than *Hamlet*” (Jeffery).

Thus, despite distancing himself slightly from the initial set-up of the Danish tragedy, Sutter maintained a distinctly Shakespearean feel and view of the series throughout its production. The hesitation and contradictions exposed in these different interviews at different times of the series’ narrative and production, as Sloboda (93) points out, speak of “an anxiety of being pinned down” and having the series viewed solely as a version of *Hamlet* so Sutter could keep a large variety of options open on where to take the plot and not be criticised for not complying to that of Shakespeare’s play. Sutter being invested in the series as executive producer, writer, director and actor, as well as having cast his wife Katey Sagal as the female lead, would quite naturally be interested in keeping the series something of his own instead of being overshadowed by Shakespeare (Sloboda 93). Simultaneously, it is rather difficult not to see the parallels between Shakespeare’s characters, plot and themes as relayed in *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* and Kurt Sutter’s FX crime drama *SoA*, particularly when considering the initial set-up of characters and relationships.

Firstly, in Shakespeare’s play, King Hamlet’s ghost reappears whenever he feels the need to whet his son’s “almost blunted purpose” (*Hamlet* 3.4.109-110), even if others may not be able to see the ghost at all times (*Hamlet* 3.4). In a mirroring of these events, the writings of JT return to Jax, even when he turns away from them throughout the first four seasons of the series. During Season 01, Jax becomes frustrated with the seemingly impossible task of steering the Sons away from violence and crime, throwing the manuscript into a fire (*SoA* S01E09 00:43:40-00:44:20) only to retrieve the semi-burnt paper seconds later. However, in the subsequent season finale, Gemma

happens upon the remains of the manuscript and first reads, then destroys them, telling Jax much later that she threw out a box of old clothes, feigning ignorance (SoA S01E13 00:20:40-00:21:24; 00:34:10-00:34:25; S02E05 00:02:06-00:02:49). She does, however, have another conversation with Clay about it, telling him that John “wrote it all down. All his pathetic hopes and dreams. This is a book of failures and fixes. John is speaking to him from the goddamn grave. [...] I know my son. [...] This shit is going to send him on a destiny run” (SoA S01E13 00:41:07-00:41:44). Again, it is pointed out that John’s ghost is meddling with his son’s life. By the end of the season finale, Piney Winston, John’s “oldest and dearest friend” gives his own copy of the manuscript to Jax (SoA S01E13 00:59:30-01:00:13), who hands it to both Tara and Opie for them to read it during Season 02, thereby sharing the knowledge of the ghost’s existence with his counterparts to Ophelia and Horatio. The latter is also the only friend of Shakespeare’s Hamlet’s who has seen the ghost with his own eyes (*Hamlet* 1.1; 1.4; 1.5) and Jax wants and needs Opie’s support in taking down Clay and returning the MC to its original purpose (SoA S02E10 00:32:57-00:34:45), just as Horatio is always beside Hamlet as his true friend.

Once the manuscript has served its purpose, the ghost of JT returns in the form of letters written by JT to his lover Maureen Ashby, Old Lady to the president of the Sons of Anarchy Belfast charter, SAMBEL, and mother to JT’s lovechild Trinity (SoA S03E10). Maureen leaves the letters in Jax’s backpack upon the club’s departure from Belfast in Season 03 Episode 11 (00:42:20-00:42:50), but they only reach Jax at the end of Season 04. In the letters, JT tells Maureen about seeing his best friend and wife growing closer, suspecting them of plotting against him as well as relaying an attempted assassination he is sure was orchestrated by Clay (SoA S03E11 00:37:12-00:37:52). After Clay becomes a true tyrant and events spiral out of control during Season 04, Gemma requests the letters from Tara, who initially found them, and hands

them to Jax after removing those that would incriminate herself (SoA S04E13 00:31:00-00:40:00). Knowing that Clay sabotaged his father's bike, so JT would die in an ensuing accident, as well as now being privy to the fact that Clay hired a handful of men to kidnap and kill Tara in order to keep her from passing on the knowledge she gained from the letters, Jax now has the incentive to avenge his father by killing Clay (SoA S04E13 00:31:00-00:40:00). Thus, though it may be in a much more roundabout way than in Shakespeare's play, it is still the ghost of the father that delivers the information to the son that he needs to galvanise him into action and eventually kill the father's murderer in retaliation.

3.2. Themes and Motifs

The male characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* seem to be preoccupied with the female gender as well as the female sex. Despite the fact that Gertrude never actually "gives or receives the wanton pinches or 'reechy kisses' (III.IV.183-84) that so obsess, enrage and disgust the imagination of Hamlet and the ghost" (Smith 201), both characters continue to point out the queen's "incestuous" (Hamlet 1.2.157) relationship with Claudius. According to the *OED*, incestuous once had the "loosely or more vaguely" meaning of "adulterous", which in turn is described in the *OED* as erstwhile having pertained to "any illicit sexual intercourse or activity; lust, debauchery, fornication". Taking into consideration that English law only permitted Englishmen to marry their brother's wives in 1927, it becomes clear why Shakespeare's prince is so enraged (Walch 162). In the same vein, Gemma has committed adultery by Elizabethan as well as modern standards, and is guilty of an incestuous relationship with Clay, her deceased husband's MC brother.

Yet it is not this aspect of the play that most permeates the SoA: it is the transfer of the misogynistic world of *Hamlet*, in which a woman can either be a virgin or a whore

(Welch 162) into the equally misogynistic world of the outlaw MC, where a woman can either be an Old Lady or passed around within the club for sexual favours (Withers). Hamlet's shock at his mother's incestuous behaviour makes him lash out at Ophelia, putting her in the same category (*Hamlet* 3.1). He thus repeatedly tells her to get herself to a "nunnery", which in Shakespeare's time could mean both "a convent" or "a brothel" (*OED*). Incidentally, the world of female characters in SAMCRO is inhabited by a binary crowd of "Crow Eaters", also called "Sweet Butts", and their opposite: Old Ladies. Crow Eater Cherry explains to a young woman not versed in the ways of the MC world that "I take care of them and they take care of me. It's a family. And when I finally hook up, I'll belong to that guy and that guy only. See, good Old Ladies, they can make or break a club" (*SoA* S01E04 00:32:35-00:32:49). Thus, Crow Eaters are females "who [hang] around a Sons of Anarchy club house, [attend] parties and [sleep] with members of the MC", while an Old Lady is a member's steady girlfriend or wife (SAMCROpedia). While Old Ladies are respected and adored by the club members, as can be seen in the MCs treatment of Gemma or Tara, they are still expected to "do what [they're] told" by their MC husbands or boyfriends (*SoA* S03E04 00:22:41-00:22:46). Furthermore, apart from being Crow Eaters, the women in *SoA* may be porn stars, who occasionally moonlight as prostitutes. One of them is Ima Tite (Kristen Renton), who is part of the "talent" at Cara Cara, the porn studio owned by the Sons (*SoA* S02E02). She is the woman treated worst by Jax: while he is not interested in her, she immediately takes a shine to him and spends most of Season 02 trying to break him up with Tara. In an attempt to break Tara's heart and push her away, he then sleeps with Ima repeatedly, treating the porn actress like a Crow Eater. During Season 04, when Ima sleeps with Opie, who is by then married to a former co-worker of Ima's, Lyla, Jax breaks Ima's nose and spits in her face, threatening to kill her should she not stay away from his club and family, calling her a whore (*SoA* S04E06 00:40:00-

00:40:26). The likelihood of an Old Lady being treated in such a manner without retaliation is very low, as can be seen in the example of Clay beating Gemma during Season 04 and the massive backlash that ensues.

In Shakespeare's revenge tragedy "the subjection of a kingdom [...] to the insidious power of evil [...] brings about the deaths of a number of Denmark's leading figures" (Fletcher 145-146). Similarly, SAMCRO's leaders are corrupted by the power of the gavel, which continuously depletes the number of club members alive. Thus, the eventual transfer of presidency to Chibs, who is deliberate and cautious, is the club's only chance at survival.

A further motif in both series and play is the delay of revenge: while Hamlet struggles to find the place and time as well as frame of mind to exact the revenge entrusted to him and insisted on by the ghost of his late father, which is a conscious action, since the ghost keeps reminding Hamlet, Jax is continuously confronted with his father's vision of a legitimate MC and struggles to guide the club towards such an end, leaving, as Hamlet does, destruction in his wake.

The aspect of (pretended) madness in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been likened to Jax's becoming drunk with power as the series progresses and his taking the gavel (Rowles; Schremph). Sutter maintains that "one of the recurring themes of Shakespeare is the idea that power doesn't just corrupt, but that the corruption continuously repeats itself" (Zoller Seitz). One can confirm that many of Shakespeare's protagonists such as Richard III, Macbeth, or Claudius suffer from a hunger for power that makes them do horrendous deeds such as murder, which does not cease once they have claimed the throne, but rather intensifies: the crimes of Shakespeare's Richard III as well as Macbeth have been discussed in detail above, yet Claudius' readiness to first kill his own brother and then, once he finds out the truth, even his own nephew and adopted son are not to be ignored. In *SoA* this motif of corrupting

power can be seen in Jax: once he is at the head of the table as SAMCRO's president, he starts leaving destruction in his wake despite all his good intentions³⁰ – much like the young Dane when he first gets his childhood friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern executed in an act of self-preservation (*Hamlet* 5.2.12-61), and later accidentally, yet fatally wounds Laertes before he can at last exact his revenge by killing the king, tragically dying thereafter from his own wounds (*Hamlet* 5.2.276-3336). Uncle Jury, one of JT's best friends, lets Jax know in the final season of the series that he "had the chance to be something good for [the] club. Something [his] old man always wanted. But [he] turned into everything [his father] hated. [Jax] became the poison, the reason [JT] checked out" (*SoA* 00:39:57-00:40:14), for the first time insinuating that JT rode his bike into oncoming traffic, knowing it had been tampered with, and confronting Jax with the uncomfortable truth of having become worse than Clay. While in *Hamlet* the "sweet prince" (*Hamlet* 5.2.337) tragically dies after executing revenge, Jax willingly takes his own life, mirroring his father's death in hopes of breaking the cycle of violence for his own children (Bennett 199).

3.3. Characters and Relationships

Günter Walch explains the role of the "royal Dane's" (*Hamlet* 1.4.45) ghost as invaluable exposition tool with specific and most particular knowledge that is "structurally and atmospherically" formative to the entire first act of the play (45). What comes to mind is the specific knowledge Jax Teller draws from his father's manuscript, and which sets the course for more than one of the seven seasons of *SoA*.

Right away, there are a few rather obvious parallels between the beginning of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Sutter's *SoA*, such as that both JT and King Hamlet are

³⁰ This is reflected in the fact that the death toll of Seasons 05, 06 and 07, when Jax is president of SAMCRO, is higher than it was under Clay's reign, coming up to a peak of 104 deaths in Season 07 (Bennett 208).

deceased by the time the play and series begin, and that both Danes share the same name, that is to say “Hamlet”, while in SoA father and son bear the same initials; “JT” for John Teller and Jackson Teller. Furthermore, the fathers of the protagonists return to speak to them in similar ways. While old Hamlet quite literally speaks to his son in the form of a ghost that can be seen by everyone, in the beginning at least, but will only speak to Hamlet (*Hamlet* 1.4-1.5), the manuscript of JT could be read by anyone yet is kept a secret by Jax for a long time during Season 01. Though he promptly asks his mother about his father’s initial vision for the club (SoA S01E01 00:30:01-00:31:03) he soon realises that he should keep the existence of the manuscript to himself as he does mention journals to his mother, but nothing more particular (SoA S01E02 00:40:08-00:40:19). From then on, the biker can always be seen reading alone, often on the Club House’s rooftop, overlooking the premises of his family’s automobile and bike repair shop, concealing the manuscript in a folder that once contained the manual of a “46 Knucklehead” (SoA S01E02 00:38:00-00:38:34). He is right to do so, for Gemma mentions Jax’s discovery of old belongings to Clay, talking about her late husband as a ghost and mirroring Gertrude in her fear for her son’s mental health:

Gemma: He was asking me about [John’s] original vision for the club. Did he want to get into running guns.
 Clay: Tonight he said that maybe we shouldn’t rebuild the factory.
 Gemma: Shit. He’s getting chewed up by that guilt. Remorse is a dangerous thing. Look what Tommy’s death did to John. Changed him. Made him soft. You’ve gotta nail Jax down. You have to nail him down hard, Clay. Whatever it takes. I don’t want the ghost of John Teller poisoning him, ruining everything we’ve built. [...] I just want my son to follow in the right father’s footsteps.” (SoA S01E01 00:32:55-00:34:03)

Though the voice-over of JT does not speak to the audience of vengeance, the ghost does cause considerable turmoil within his son, as the latter is already battling the great change in his life that comes with fatherhood. He then starts doubting the decisions his stepfather Clay makes as the president of the MC i.e. violent retaliations and the

dangerous business of gun-running, thereby causing turbulence within the entire club (SoA S01). As Walch points out, the ghost makes Hamlet doubt a great many things (50), even more so because Hamlet is grieving the loss of his beloved father and thus in an emotionally vulnerable situation; in a similar vein does JT's manuscript add fuel to the already troubled mind of Jax Teller, who is not sure, especially throughout the first episode, whether his prematurely born son will survive the operation that is supposed to fix both the baby's congenital heart defect and the hole in his stomach inflicted by his mother's drug use during pregnancy (SoA S01E01).

Another brief word about the surname "Teller": according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a teller is "a person who or thing which tells, in various senses [;] a person who relates, communicates, or announces something", for example in the form of a manuscript as JT does. At the end of Season 01, when Jax is given the second manuscript by Piney, standing at his father's grave, the song "John the Revelator" by Curtis Stigers and The Forest Rangers is playing in the background (SoA S01E13 00:53:43-01:01:10). The chorus of the song repeats the words "who's that writin'? John the Revelator" and while the lyrics make it very clear that the topic is Scripture's own John, author of the Revelations, the music fits JT's surname and his purpose as the *Hamlet*-ian ghost: he is John, the one who wrote the manuscript, the one who wrote the letters, the one who reveals to his son the truths of the past; he is a revelator, "a person who or thing which discloses or reveals something; the maker of a revelation; a revealer" (*OED*).

In the first episode of the series, Jax states to his stepfather that "it ain't easy being king" (SoA S01E01 00:05:34-00:05:37), making Jax, the vice president to Clay's president, the prince of the MC. Jax's claim as prince to the place at the gavel, the MC version of a throne, is further consolidated by the fact that he is the only remaining son of founding member and first president of SAMCRO, JT, and his mother, like Queen

Gertrude in *Hamlet*, married Clay after her first husband, JT, died in a motorcycle accident. As announced by Uncle Jury in an early episode, Jax is “MC royalty” (SoA S01E04 00:15:08-00:15:10), he is dubbed “the prince” by various characters throughout the series³¹, referred to as “heir apparent” (SoA S02E07 00:33:12-00:33:16), as well as reminded by his best friend Opie that he should cease “pushing to be king. It’s not your time yet” (SoA S02E06 00:10:31-00:20:34). But that alone does not make Jax a modern-day Hamlet: the biker struggles, as mentioned before, with his new duty and identity as a father, feeling the urge, aided by his own dead father’s manuscript, to “go legit” and fulfil his father’s wish (SoA S04E05 00:26:02-00:26:05), just as Hamlet struggles throughout the play to fulfil his own father’s wish and “revenge his foul and most unnatural murder” (*Hamlet* 1.5.25). Sloboda (86) points out that while pondering life and death, “accidental judgements” and “casual slaughters” (*Hamlet* 5.2.360), as he reads his father’s manuscript or writes his own thoughts down for his sons to read one day, Jax spends quite some time at the graves of his loved ones, as Hamlet debates life and death when he accidentally comes across his beloved Ophelia’s (*Hamlet* 5.1). Yet, when the time comes and Jax must avenge JT’s murder, he does not, like Hamlet, hesitate, for he has no incentive to keep the man who murdered his father and tried to kill his wife alive any longer than he must so as to be able to sell big guns to the real IRA and get out of a RICO case against SAMCRO (SoA S05E03 00:25:01-00:25:53). Returning to a mirroring of *Hamlet*, it is still the son who

³¹ Jax is mostly dubbed “prince” mockingly, for the first time by Clay, who orders the club to shut down the porn business that was Jax’s responsibility: “Close it down. I’ll handle the little prince” (SoA S02E09 00:17:01-00:07:06). Agent June Stahl of the ATF, antagonist in Seasons 01, 02 and 03, calls Jax “prince” three times (SoA S02E10 00:10:25-00:10:27; S03E05 00:42:52-00:43:00; S03E13 00:46:06-00:46:10). While in Northern Ireland, Jax is referred to as “Prince Charming” by another biker (SoA S03E08 00:41:04-00:41:05). Most notably, his then-girlfriend Tara Knowles, when Jax tries to tell her that breaking up is for her own good, lets him know that “this is just about you needing a reason to feel good about bailing. Well, guess what, the prince doesn’t always get his way” (SoA S03E08 00:28:51-00:28:59).

avenges his biological father by killing the treacherous stepfather in the end (*Hamlet* 5.2.300-304; *SoA* S06E11 00:35:25-00:39:02).

A further parallel is Jax's loyalty and bond with his mother that, as it does Hamlet, keeps Jax in the same place as his family; when tensions between Clay and Jax rise high during Season 02 Episode 09, Jax pledges to "go Nomad"³² (00:41:16-00:41:33). Knowing that both her son and her husband are extremely loyal to her, Gemma reveals the secret she has been keeping for the entire season – she was raped by members of the Aryan Brotherhood, one of the MC's adversaries (*SoA* S02E10 00:49:26-00:53:41). She is right in her prediction that this information will reunite the quarrelling stepfather and stepson in their need for retaliation and their love for Gemma, as Jax decides to stay with SAMCRO at the end of the episode. Likewise, Hamlet is willing to stay at Elsinore only upon his mother's request:

QUEEN: Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet:
I pray thee stay with us; go not to Wittenberg
HAMLET: I shall in all my best obey you, madam.
(*Hamlet* 1.2.118-119)

Furthermore, just as Hamlet's mother in Shakespeare's version of the revenge tale, Gemma would rather that Jax not "seek for [his] noble father in the dust" (*Hamlet* 1.2.71) and look to Clay for guidance instead, as she fears that Jax might be "poisoned" by JT's ideas (*SoA* S01E01 00:33:27-00:33:29).

The relationship with the only other woman in Hamlet's life, "fair Ophelia" (*Hamlet* 3.1.88), is a turbulent one. Within the course of the play, Shakespeare's young Dane goes from importuning her "with love/ In honourable fashion" and giving "countenance to his speech/ [...] with almost all the holy vows of heaven" (*Hamlet* 1.3.109-110, 112-113) to telling her that he has "more offenses at [his] beck than to give them shape, or

³² In the MC world of SAMCRO, Nomads are members of the club who "don't align with any one charter" but help any charter out when the presidents of any charter reach out to them (Bennett 67).

time to act them in. What should such fellows as [he] do crawling between earth and heaven? [They] are arrant knaves” (*Hamlet* 3.1.123-126), and thus effectively rejecting her, bidding her repeatedly to go “to a nunnery” (*Hamlet* 3.1.119,127,136,145), only to profess as he is standing at her grave:

I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not with all their quantity of love
Make up my sum.
(*Hamlet* 5.1.248-250)

Jax Teller’s relationship with his first and only love, Tara Knowles, is of equal tempestuous nature. In Season 01, Tara and Jax cautiously rekindle their relationship even though Tara is wary of Jax’s mother and his life as a member of SAMCRO. What ultimately brings them back together is the murder of Tara’s stalker, her former boyfriend and ATF agent, Josh Kohn, in self-defence (SoA S01E08 00:39:33-00:40:50). Anxious and confused after they seem to get away with murder, Tara confronts Jax about their relationship status and Jax answers that when they were young it

was crazy, Tara. That ‘I gotta be with you every minute or I’m gonna kill myself’ type of crazy. [...] The way I feel about you hasn’t changed. I could still go there. But this can’t be that, so we gotta figure out what’s right. But I’m not trying to avoid this – what we have. (SoA S01E12 00:10:00-00:10:42)

When Ophelia rejects Hamlet, as she is instructed to by her father Polonius, Hamlet becomes ever more distraught, as is reflected in Ophelia’s reiteration of her encounter with Hamlet in her private chamber (*Hamlet* 2.1.71-116). Similarly, Jax reacts quite forcefully to Tara’s suggestion that she go back to Chicago, as she cannot cope with the moral aftermath of having committed murder, he accuses her of having used him to do her dirty work (SoA S01E13 00:18:00-00:18:46). As Hamlet’s love for Ophelia, Jax’s love for Tara should be his anchor in his time of turmoil, but similar to Shakespeare’s Danes, circumstance keeps them from realising their love (Kirsch 35). In fact, even though they then get together, circumstance intervenes once more at the

end of Season 02, when Tara is forced at gunpoint to hand over Jax's infant son Abel to an IRA member as retaliation for the killing of his own son (SoA S02E13 00:51:30-00:55:00). The Irishman kidnaps the baby and Jax tries to drown his grief in alcohol, rejecting Tara and telling her, as Hamlet does, to go away, for she is not safe around men like him (SoA S03E01 00:10:52-00:12:16). Once Abel is returned to his family later in the season and it is revealed that Tara is pregnant, they reunite and happily stay together until Season 05, when club business and a struggle for power over the family with Gemma cause massive problems in their relationship again and Tara is eventually killed in a crime of passion.

As Robin Headlam Wells points out, several Romantic critics have painted Shakespeare's Hamlet as "a philosopher-prince trapped in a violent world that is alien to his true nature" (75) and, likewise, Tara sees Jax as "a good man with a big heart [, who tries to] do as much good" (SoA S01E13 00:17:00-00:17:14) as he can in the violent world that he lives in. Jax is more than once crushed, as Hamlet is, under the weight of "a burden which [he] can neither bear nor throw off; every duty is holy to him" (Wells 81). And just like Hamlet, as Wells maintains, "is not cut out for politics" (81), neither is Jax, if his time as SAMCRO president is any indication. Both Jax and Hamlet are beloved by "the general gender" (*Hamlet* 4.4.18), yet they lack Claudius' and Clay's skills for negotiation and their devious cunning (Wells 82). One could therefore argue that in Jax's becoming president of the MC, we see how Hamlet might have fared had he lived to take the throne: Hamlet describes himself to Ophelia as "proud, revengeful, ambitious" (*Hamlet* 3.1.122), all things that can be said of Jax as well. He takes pride in who he is, he is quick to retaliate and avenge those close to him that have been hurt³³, and he has an ambition for being king in order to fulfil his father's legacy and

³³ Over the course of the series, Jax bloodily avenges the death of his best friend Opie, his wife Tara, his mother's rape, his father's murder, his son's kidnapping, just to name a few.

get the MC out of dealing guns and drugs. The trouble, Wells continues, is that Hamlet “swings from a passionate desire for personal vengeance to a passive fatalism and back again, with apparently no thought of how his actions might affect his country’s future” (82). Jax, in the meantime, certainly has a difficult time separating his personal need for vengeance from “club business”, as it is mostly said business that gets his loved ones hurt or killed. He does, however, show regard for the good of the club, as he, in his final days at the end of Season 07, makes sure not to repeat his father’s mistakes of leaving behind a legacy for his sons or his club to continue (Bennett 199) by burning all that is left of his life (e.g. his own journals, JT’s manuscript, all the pictures of the First Nine that manifest everything SAMCRO romanticised) and handing the gavel over to his erstwhile vice president Chibs, who “picked up the mantle of being Jax’s big brother and protector” after Opie passed (Bennett 51; SoA S07E13).

Walch quotes Karl Jaspers, who asserts that the entire tragedy of *Hamlet* is the eponymous hero’s quest for the truth (52), which can be translated to SoA in the sense that Jax, throughout the series, is looking for the answer to the question of how to be “a good father and a good outlaw”, and finally coming to the painful realisation that the two aspirations “can’t settle inside the same man” (SoA S07E13 01:06:26-01:06:33). Furthermore, Kirsch maintains that Ophelia’s funeral is the point at which Hamlet slowly finds “his own preparedness for death” (36), and, finally, after finding an end to his grief and reaching “the liberation of his self” he finds the readiness to die:

If it be, ‘tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come; the readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows, what is’t to leave betimes? Let be. (*Hamlet* 5.2.192-195)

Hamlet, who has “looked at the face of death in his father’s ghost, [...] has endured death and loss in all the human being he has loved, and he now accepts those losses as an inevitable part of his condition” (Kirsch 39). In a similar fashion, Jax Teller has lost his beloved wife, Tara, to his own mother’s violent instinct to defend her family,

has seen his best friend die for something Jax did, has lost so many people he holds dear that when he finds out the truth about Tara's death, Jax knows he must kill Gemma and put an end to the cycle of violence. With Tara gone, Charlie Hunnam explains, Jax lost his anchor, "he doesn't have that moral compass anymore, or that ethical barometer" (Bennett 193), but there is also, as in *Hamlet*, a sense of liberation, as he is no longer torn between the club and his family – "losing Tara allows him to go forward without having to question every move" (Bennett 193). Out of this liberation comes the knowledge that he will die, "Jax knew that going into the last two days of his life" (Bennett 195).

As the resident matriarch of SAMCRO, Gemma Teller-Morrow is the "beautiful queen of bikers" (SoA S01E03 00:21:02-00:21:05), as she is referred to at various points throughout the series.³⁴ Her status as wife to the current president of the MC and erstwhile wife of SAMCRO's former president, as well as mother to vice president Jax make her the equivalent to Shakespeare's Gertrude. As he did with Clay as his biker Claudius, so Kurt Sutter chose a name for his Gertrude character that starts with the same letters: Gemma. Like Gertrude, Gemma is protective of her family and seeking to keep them close, as discussed above, when she gets Jax to stay in Charming for her sake. Furthermore, the ghost tries to exonerate Gertrude of guilt, telling Hamlet to "taint not [his] mind, nor let [his] soul contrive / Against [his] mother ought" (*Hamlet* 1.5.85-86). In a similar way, JT's letters reveal that the biker watched his "best friend and [his] wife growing closer and closer", telling Maureen, "I have no jealousy, truly. I feel nothing, not even fear. And I know I should be afraid. [...] You can be certain that

³⁴ Again, ATF Agent Stahl is quick to dub the Tellers royalty: "What was she doing, asking for the queen's advice?" (SoA S01E10 00:20:06.00:20:09). Clay Morrow also speaks of Gemma as "my queen" (SoA S02E12 00:04:22-00:04:24). Police Chief and good friend of Gemma's, Wayne Unser, also refers to her as "the queen" (SoA S06E05 00:22:42-00:22:45), as does District Attorney Tyne Patterson (SoA S06E07 00:08:40-00:08:44).

my death will come at the hands of my wife and best friend” (SoA S03E11 00:37:37-00:37:52; S03E13 01:00:11-01:00:17). Shakespeare, however, leaves Gertrude’s complicity unclear even though in his sources, Gertrude is as guilty of adultery as Gemma is (Smith 195). *Hamlet* paints a picture of the queen that is informed mainly by other characters and their “extreme descriptions of her” (Smith 196), but Gertrude herself is through her actions and words revealed to be “a quiet, biddable, careful mother and wife” (Smith 201) who believes that “quiet women best please men” (Smith 205). However, the dominant depiction of Gertrude has become that of a “sensual, deceitful woman” (Rebecca Smith 194), not least because she is part of a “hasty marriage” (*Hamlet* 2.2.57), which she herself admits, as well as the admission that there are “such black and grievèd spots” (*Hamlet* 3.4.90) inside her soul. It is this interpretation of Shakespeare’s Gertrude, combined with the notion that the “combatants in the play [...] see her literally and in quite heightened terms as sexual *object*” (Smith 207), which Gemma Teller-Morrow seems to be based on. The character of Gemma is in a way a sexualised one, for she is referred to as “MILF” on three different occasions throughout the series³⁵ and it becomes clear that many a man in Charming is attracted to her, including Chief Unser and White Supremacist Darby. Furthermore, Gertrude is often torn between her loyalty to her husband and her son (Rebecca Smith 194), while Gemma can be seen enduring the same struggle at different points in the series. However, when push comes to shove, Gertrude defends her son to her husband (*Hamlet* 3.4.219-245), as does Gemma, believing her son

³⁵ First by Prospect Half-Sack, who admits that “Clay’s Old Lady gives [him] a serious MILF chubby” (SoA 01E04 00:06:54-00:06:58), later by Nero, her new conquest, who replies to her “I did a spic pimp” with a dry “and I did a drunken cracker MILF” (SoA S05E01 00:12:02-00:12:07). Finally, a corrupt guard at Stockton Prison forces Gemma and Clay to have sex in front of him: “We watch while you tap that MILF ass, or I watch while [fellow guard] Crane does it” (SoA 00:46:24-00:46:30).

betrayed the club to the ATF at the end of Season 03 (SoA S03E13 00:45:49-00:45:52).

Based on her strong will that is not even bent by a gang rape at the beginning of Season 02 (SoA S02E01), a fierce loyalty to her family that makes her kill her daughter-in-law in affect (SoA S06E13), and an unyielding drive to keep everyone together, Gemma has been likened to another Shakespearean character discussed above: Lady Macbeth (Withers, Bennett 38). A parallel that cannot be denied, especially since both Lady Macbeth and Gemma Teller-Morrow are part of and supporting a community of toxic masculinity (Donahue). However, it is her extreme love for and fierce loyalty to her son that really defines Gemma and thus pulls her more towards Gertrude than Lady Macbeth, for “The Queen his mother/ Lives almost by his looks” (*Hamlet* 4.4.11-12).

Clay Morrow shares more than the first three letters of his name with Shakespeare’s ambitious King of Denmark, guilty of fratricide: the founding member of SAMCRO is the slowly revealed villain in the club’s own ranks for the better part of the series. Claudius and Clay both appear to be oxymoron personified: they are presented as “competent ruler, [...] loving husband, [...] would-be father” to Hamlet and Jax, and yet it becomes clear that they are both “murderer and usurper” (States 98). Clay, as Claudius did, murdered Jax’s father and erstwhile president of SAMCRO and is now sitting on the throne, married to the dead “brother’s” wife, ruling the MC.

Once their true character is revealed, both usurpers attempt murder for fear of their secret fratricide becoming public knowledge, Claudius plotting Hamlet’s death, while Clay sends a gang of killers after Tara. Clay here becomes even more of a villain than Claudius, for the latter is no physically violent man as demonstrated by the ways in which he attempts murder: in both instances he makes use of poison, first pouring it in

his brother's ear (*Hamlet* 1.5.59-79), later putting a poisoned pearl into Hamlet's drink (*Hamlet* 5.2.58). Clay, prone to physical violence in an equally violent community, resorts to beating his own wife when she finds money missing from the safe and consequently confronts him, revealing that she knows about the attempt on Tara's life (SoA S04E10). He also kills Piney, whom he suspects of being in possession of the incriminating evidence really owned and hidden by Tara, and who threatens to divulge the secret (SoA S04E08 00:40:44-00:45:44). Before attacking Gemma and beating her severely, an act that heralds the end of Gemma's loyalty to Clay, the latter reminisces that Gemma "played [him] for a chump, and [he] was. [He] was no match for that tight pussy and that broken, angry heart" (SoA S04E10 00:29:31-00:29:39). The hold Gemma's person has on Clay is similar to that which Gertrude has on Claudius:

My virtue or my plague, be it either which-
She is so conjunct to my life and soul
That as the star moves not but in his sphere
I could not but by her.
(*Hamlet* 4.4.13-16)

The revelation of Clay's true character is much slower than in *Hamlet*, for Clay has an advantage that Claudius never has: his stepson sees him as a father figure, as he was raised by Clay and Gemma, shown in the way Jax does not object to being called "son" (Sloboda 86) by Clay³⁶, whereas Hamlet refuses to accept Claudius as his new father (*Hamlet* 3.6.47-49). In the end, JT's letters as well as Clay's killing of SAMCRO founding member Piney Winston in order to keep the man from divulging the secret around JT's death, Clay's attack on Gemma and the attempt on Tara's life are all part of the incentive for Jax's finally confronting Clay. Since he cannot kill the biker, as he needs him alive for a deal with the CIA, Jax resorts to taking the presidency from him,

³⁶ Both Clay and Jax refer to each other in the familial terms of "father" and "son" throughout the first four seasons of the series. Jax only starts refusing the familial address once he finds out Clay killed his father and tried to kill Tara (SoA S04E14 00:23:13-00:23:17).

stripping him of all his power (SoA S04E14 00:21:51-00:25:26). Clay stays alive and plotting to get his power back until Season 06, when the entire club learns the truth and votes for Clay to “meet Mr. Mayhem”³⁷ (SoA S06E11).

The contested part of Ophelia in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* may be shared by more than one character in SoA. On one hand, it would be easy to bestow the role to Tara Knowles, seeing as she is female, Jax’s main love interest in the series, birthmother to his second son and stepmother to his firstborn and, as discussed above, their tumultuous relationship shows parallels to that of Hamlet and Ophelia. When Tara is eventually killed by Gemma, it is because the matriarch is sure that Tara gave up Jax in order to flee with the children. So Gemma buries a carving fork in her daughter-in-law’s head as she holds her down in the full kitchen sink, only to be informed mere seconds later that the deal with the District Attorney for Jax’s custody was his own idea and Tara did not “rat” anyone out (SoA S06E13 01:09:10-01:10:58). Sutter has said of Tara’s death that he wanted it to “feel like straight-up Shakespearean tragedy. And the device of mistaken information, it’s right from *Romeo and Juliet*. I knew I wanted it to be visceral and just f-ing heartbreaking” (Ford). He also admits that having Tara’s head dunked into the sink at her death was a “fun wink at [Ophelia] as well” (Ford), who drowned in Shakespeare’s play, though it is not completely clear whether Ophelia accidentally drowned or intentionally took her own life (*Hamlet* 4.4.163-182). Once Tara is dead, as mentioned before, this leaves Jax unhinged and starts the carnage that will inevitably lead to his own death at the end of the series.

On the other hand, there is Harry “Opie” Winston, Jax’s best friend, whose nickname evokes Ophelia’s given name. Arrow and others have tried to uncover the secret of

³⁷ This vote must be unanimous in order for the club to decide to kill a member.

Opie's nickname, yet the most likely reason, considering Kurt Sutter's acknowledgement of the influence *Hamlet* had on *SoA*, is that he paid homage to the Bard. Further parallels supporting the Shakespearean roots of Harry Winston's character are the three facts that, firstly, Opie's father Piney is part of the MC, much like Ophelia's father Polonius is part of the court at Elsinore; secondly, both Opie and Ophelia have a great devotion and deep bond with the conflicted protagonist, and thirdly their deaths are connected to the loss of their parent as well as their love for Hamlet and Jax respectively (Rowles, Schremph). Furthermore, if one opts to believe that Ophelia took her own life when she drowned, Opie's final sacrifice fits; Opie, in a rage much like Laertes' when he first hears of his father's death and threatens the king's life, storms into the clubhouse and intends to kill president Clay, in retaliation for his father's and his wife's death³⁸ (*SoA* S04E12 00:44:20-00:46:30). Jax, because of the RICO deal with an undercover CIA Agent, cannot let Opie do the deed, and explains in prison during Season 05 Episode 03, what Clay has done and why Jax needed him alive. When a corrupt prison guard orders the Sons to pick one of their own to die at the orders of a rivalling gang, Opie makes sure he is chosen against Jax's will, effectively sacrificing his life (*SoA* S05E03 00:34:30-00:37:04). Thus, like Ophelia, Opie takes his own life. A third theory has Jax's ex-wife Wendy Case doubling the role of Ophelia alongside Tara, as both Tara and Wendy seem to suffer under their love for Jax (Sloboda 90-91). Tara states at the beginning that as much as she cares for Jax, she will never truly understand the life he lives (*SoA* S01E13 00:17:09-00:17:14) and for the first time suffers a nervous breakdown in hospital after she is attacked and has her hand broken due to her affiliation with Jax and the club (*SoA* S04E10). There,

³⁸ Believing that Opie had turned on the club during Season 01 on Agent Stahl's watch, Clay ordered a hit on Opie. Unfortunately, the car did not contain Opie, but his wife Donna, who was consequently killed in his stead (*SoA* S01E12). Clay kept his involvement a secret and the truth is only revealed later.

Wendy pays Tara a visit, announcing that she wants to be in her son Abel's life, bringing flowers that, to Sloboda (91) are reminiscent of "Ophelia's wild pansies, daisies, and columbines". Tara flies into a rage and smashes not only the vase, strewn all the flowers about, but also her already broken hand – Sloboda infers that while it is never revealed whether Jax was the reason for Wendy's drug abuse,

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 health. (91)

However, neither Tara nor Wendy have familial ties to the club, in fact neither of them have family in Charming at all, for Wendy's family lives "on the East Coast" (SoA S07E13 00:35:04-00:35:07) and Tara comes back to Charming to her deceased father's empty family home (SoA S01E04). Despite all this, there is a reasonable case to be made for all of the above theories, and since SoA is not an exact version of the Shakespearean play, there is enough room for the characteristics to be scattered across more than one character.

Following the argument that Opie is Ophelia's counterpart, putting his father Piney in the role of Polonius would be the natural conclusion. They are father and son; the father is a close advisor to the king and queen (especially during JT's time at the gavel), while the son maintains a close relationship with the prince. Furthermore, the death of the close adviser is at the hands of a member of the royal family – Polonius is accidentally killed by an upset Hamlet (*Hamlet* 3.4), while Piney – again, the two characters share the same initial – is killed in cold blood by Claudius (SoA S04E08 00:40:44-00:45:44).

After the death of Piney, Robert "Bobby Elvis" Munson (Mark Boone Junior) is left alone in the role of the reasonable old man at the SAMCRO table. Like Piney, Bobby is never

afraid to stand up to his fellow members, voicing doubt and trying to mediate between club members. It is Bobby who prevents Clay Morrow from “meeting Mr. Mayhem” (SoA S05E12 00:06:35-00:07:32) the first time the vote is brought to the table, resulting in Clay’s being stripped of his badge and having to remove his SAMCRO tattoos. Like Polonius, Bobby gives good council and sees violence as a last resort.

Cantor argues that Laertes “serves a similar thematic function as a foil to Hamlet, with his straight-forwardness and singlemindedness as an avenger highlighting the complexity of Hamlet’s response” as well as mirroring Hamlet’s situation as a son who has lost his father” (67). Once Laertes barges into Elsinore to attack the king, Claudius turns Laertes against Hamlet (Cantor 67). Again, Opie fits these characteristics of “good Laertes” (*Hamlet* 4.4.127), as he angrily sets out to avenge his father’s death and mirrors Jax’s fate of losing both father and wife at the hands of the royal family: both Piney and Donna’s deaths are orchestrated by Clay, even if Donna’s murder was an accident; Tara and JT are both killed by Gemma. Neither Jax nor Opie cope well with these losses and consciously orchestrate their own deaths. Thus, in Cantor’s argument, Opie serves as a foil to Jax, making the character of Opie Winston quite a collage of different *Hamlet* characters.

Horatio, Hamlet’s one true friend in Shakespeare’s tragedy, is held in highest esteem by the prince (*Hamlet* 1.2.159-163) and can be found in more than one character of the SAMCRO universe. He is *Hamlet*’s voice of reason and shows utmost loyalty: he advises the young Dane not to follow the ghost alone and follows both Hamlet and the ghost to safeguard the prince (*Hamlet* 1.4, 1.5); he swears to keep the secret of the ghost (1.5); it is Horatio whom Hamlet confides in, when he narrowly escapes death on his voyage to England and returns to Denmark (*Hamlet* 4.3); it is Horatio, who

advises Hamlet to patience and against rashness more than once (*Hamlet* 5.2.244; 5.2.189-190); and finally, when Hamlet lies dying, Horatio's loyalty and love for the "sweet prince" (*Hamlet* 5.2.337) cause him to attempt to drink leftover poison rather than stay behind and tell Hamlet's story, yet he does survive to tell the tale of Denmark's royals (5.2.315-373).

Shakespeare's Horatio is an outsider to the court, he is a student friend of Hamlet's, thus, if one were to go looking for an outsider at SAMCRO, Nero Padilla (Jimmy Smits), comes to mind. Introduced in Season 05, Nero is an erstwhile gangbanger who established the legitimate escort service "Diosa" after serving a prison sentence. Through his relationship with Gemma, Nero is introduced to the MC and grows close to Jax, who starts to trust Nero and rely on him, asking for advice and help in various situations over Seasons 05, 06 and 07. As Nero runs a legitimate business but has an outlaw background, Jax respects him and his advice, going so far as entrusting Wendy, Abel and Thomas to Nero's care at the end of the series, relying on Nero to tell his children the truth about their criminal father and keeping them from turning into Jax (SoA S07E13 00:34:19-00:42:36). Nero thus fulfils the criteria of being an outsider, having the prince's respect and ear, and eventually surviving and telling his story.

Filip "Chibs" Telford, a member of SAMCRO, who becomes vice president to Jax and later inherits the throne, also shows Horatio-like characteristics. He, too is respected by Jax and has been labelled as "the Horatio of the story" by creator Kurt Sutter (Bennett 207). Furthermore, the Scotsman is not a SAMCRO original, but transferred from SAMBEL, making him something of an outsider to the American mother charter and thus meeting the criterion of not (originally) being part of the SAMCRO royal household. Chibs is known to be considerate, advising the MC that "We can't allow our hearts to be louder than our reason" (SoA S07E13 00:51:51-00:51:58), and from the beginning of the series is by Jax's side, physically preventing Jax from beating a man

to death who sold crank to Wendy while she was pregnant (SoA S01E01 00:17:59-00:18:18). For another, Chibs and Jax have a very familiar relationship, taking over the role of advisor and “big brother” to Jax once Opie is dead (Bennett 51) and mostly referring to Jax as “Jacky boy” (SoA S01E01 00:16:13-00:16:15 – SoA S07E07 00:13:06-00:13:08). The fact that Chibs is one of the few SAMCRO members remaining alive at the end of the series, inheriting the gavel from Jax and continuing the legacy of the club makes Chibs an eligible contestant for Horatio.

Ron Pearlman has pointed to Opie as Jax’s Horatio (Bennett 36), while others have argued that Tara must be Horatio (Rowles), yet the fact remains that neither Tara, nor Opie survive the series and thus cannot fulfil the role of orator, of telling the prince’s cautionary tale. The options of Nero and Chibs thus provide more likely options.

Shakespeare’s Hamlet’s childhood friends, who answer to Claudius and Gertrude, sent to find out what is behind Hamlet’s strange behaviour, commit an even worse betrayal of friendship and loyalty by accompanying the prince to England, where he is to be executed, paying for their betrayal with their lives (*Hamlet* 2.2; 3.1; 5.2.4-56). In a similar vein, Juan Carlos “Juice” Ortiz (Theo Rossi) confesses that he “betrayed [the] king” (SoA 00:52:52-00:52:54), meaning Jax, and accepts that he must pay for it with his life. Over the course of Season 07, Juice, who saw a father figure in the late Clay (Bennett 56) commits the worst act of betrayal in an outlaw MC – he turns rat, and therefore, just like Shakespeare’s prince, Jax has no sympathy as he sentences the traitor to death (*Hamlet* 5.2.57-58). The same goes for fellow bikers Frankie Diamonds and two Nomads: in Season 05 they are Clay’s pawns and spies within SAMCRO after Clay loses his patch; they orchestrate home invasions as a ploy to weaken Jax’s power, but the plan goes awry, and all three traitors are killed (SoA S05).

3.4. Shakespearean Language

Whereas there are no direct quotes of Shakespeare's play in the dialogues of *SoA*, Kurt Sutter made effective use of Hamlet's famous poem to Ophelia, superimposing the profession of love after the Reaper logo announces the end of an episode for the final time, and right before the credits roll, tying Jax's final decisions to the loyalty and love for his father out of which Hamlet committed the murder of Claudius:

Doubt thou the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move,
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love.
(*Hamlet* 2.2.115-118)

Furthermore, six out of the 92 episodes of the series bear titles that are short quotes from Shakespeare's work, each of them from *Hamlet*: "Burnt and Purged Away" (*Hamlet* 1.5.13) is the title of Season 04 Episode 12, when Opie finds out about Clay's hand in the murder of his father, Piney, and revenge is the only thing on Opie's mind, much as the ghost's in *Hamlet* from whose lines the quote is taken.

"To Be, Act I" and "To Be, Act II" (*Hamlet* 3.1.55) are the penultimate and final episode of Season 04. In "Act I", Jax learns the truth behind his father's death and the attack on Tara, which is used by Gemma to pull him deeper into the club and persuade him to take his place at the head of the table, while Tara does everything she can to make sure she can leave Charming with Jax and the boys. It is yet undecided whether Jax's presidency in SAMCRO is "to be, or not to be". The season finale "Act II" seals Jax's fate as president of the MC as it is revealed that he cannot exact his revenge and is forced to stay in SAMCRO and Charming as part of the RICO deal.³⁹

"To Thine Own Self" (*Hamlet* 1.3.77), the advice Polonius gives to his son upon the latter's departure, is in full "This above all: to thine own self be true/ And it must follow

³⁹ Sutter explained that "Season four, for me in my pretentious three-act Shakespearean structure, this is like the end of Act II" (Sloboda 96).

as the night the day/ Thou canst not then be false to any man” (*Hamlet* 1.3.77-79), which fits the plot of the episode (S05E11), since Jax is finally in a position to get the Sons out of the drug business, which is what he has been attempting to do for most of the series.

“What a piece of work is man” (*Hamlet* 2.2.264-265) is the title of Season 07 Episode 09, in which Bobby is killed in retaliation for Jax’s disobedience to August Marks, head of a drug organisation.

The “Suits of Woe” (*Hamlet* 1.2.86) that Hamlet wears and are invoked in Season 07 Episode 11’s title can finally be cast aside by Jax as he finds out that it was his own mother who killed his wife, realising that Gemma was the cause for many of his woes.

4. Conclusion

Having taken into consideration the many ways in which Shakespeare's work i.e. his characters, plots, themes and motives, as well as his language, are invoked and made use of in contemporary US TV series, it becomes clear that Shakespeare really is "of all time" (Jonson). Not only do his versions of old stories and history still constitute cultural capital, but they are still relatable and through Shakespeare's craftsmanship seen as "originals" on which other renditions of the stories are based (Cardwell 18). As the thorough analysis in the main part of this thesis illustrates, Gertrude's sensualised maternity can be interpreted to be bleeding through contemporary characterisations of biker queens. Hamlet's struggle between revenge for his father's death and the need to let go of the same can be translated into the character of a young biker at war with what appears to be his father's legacy, and the very different life he could lead away from it. Claudius' ruthless ambition, leading to fratricide and regicide, and ultimately his own downfall, can be traced in a power-hungry outlaw, killing his close friends to gain and retain rule over his MC. Traces of Ophelia's devotion and consequent madness, or Horatio's loyal friendship can be found at the core of characters surrounding those mentioned above, vastly different from the contexts in which Shakespeare's renditions of old tales or history are set, yet not forfeiting any of their impact. Shakespeare's cautionary tales of smooth-talking, ambitious murderers taking the throne are re-imagined as thrilling tales of corrupt politicians in 21st century America ruling a nation. Lady Macbeth's aspirations for her husband and her single-minded enterprise to realise what she believes is their shared objective, leaving her drained of her own zeal, is mirrored in a politician's wife, mapping the struggle for success in contemporary politics.

It is the recent category of "loose adaptation" that thus provides TV series such as *House of Cards* and *Sons of Anarchy* with an opportunity to shed the skin of

Shakespeare's language and focus on character, relationships and plot instead, putting the Bard's tales in a popular and current context (Lanier 83). The reproduction and reimagining of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* keeps these important Shakespearean "motifs in cultural circulation" (Lanier 88) and the commercial success of *House of Cards* and *Sons of Anarchy*, both series that boast fan bases that are both strong in numbers and very dedicated, indicates that modern political or MC culture narratives can provide just as accurate and recognisable a backdrop for Shakespeare's "long-popular characters, plots, and themes in new guises" (Lanier 95) as the Bard's Globe did 400 years ago.

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6. Appendix

Abstract

While Shakespeare has been dead for over 400 years, his stories live on all over the world. For decades, different media and cultures have claimed Shakespeare's work as their own, adapting plot elements, themes and motifs, characters and relationships, as well as Shakespeare's language into new works. With American quality TV series and streaming services on the rise, these distinct characteristics of Shakespeare's work have found their way into popular US TV series. Though they have tried to keep their direct mentions of Shakespeare's work to a minimum, Netflix's *House of Cards* and FX's *Sons of Anarchy* are used in this diploma thesis to demonstrate that Shakespeare's influence and cultural capital is still prevalent in popular series. To this effect, drawing on a number of academics who concern themselves with (Shakespearean) adaptations, a catalogue of four criteria for loose adaptation was devised and consequently used to analyse both series. The results of this thesis demonstrate that the new sub-genre of loose adaptation of Shakespeare's work can be found in popular US TV series, even where it might not be suspected, factoring into their popularity.

Shakespeare; loose adaptation; Netflix; *House of Cards*; *Sons of Anarchy*; quality TV series; *Hamlet*; *Macbeth*; *Richard III*; adaptation

Kurzfassung

William Shakespeares Tod mag über 400 Jahre zurück liegen, doch seine Geschichten sind auch heutzutage in aller Welt bekannt. Über Jahrzehnte hinweg haben sich diverse Kulturkreise und Medien an Shakespeare und seinem „cultural capital“ bedient, welches so manchem Produkt schon zum Erfolg verholfen hat. Elemente der Handlung, Themen und Motive, Charaktere und Beziehungen, und nicht zuletzt Shakespeares Sprache werden immer wieder in neue Werke eingebaut. Durch die wachsende Beliebtheit amerikanischer Qualitätsfernsehserien und Streaming Service feiert auch Shakespeare Einzug in diese Domäne. Die vorliegende Arbeit behandelt die Serien *House of Cards* und *Sons of Anarchy* unter dem Aspekt von Shakespeares Einfluss auf beliebte TV Serien und handelt diese als loose adaptations. Basierend auf einigen Werken zum Thema Adaption wurde ein Katalog an vier Kriterien zusammengestellt, welcher die oben genannten Gesichtspunkte beinhaltet. Die Resultate können als Beleg für das Vorhandensein von Shakespeares Werk in zeitgenössischen amerikanischen Fernsehserien gehandelt werden, obgleich die Produzenten der Serien sich in Bezug auf diese Einflüsse sehr bedeckt hielten.

Shakespeare; loose adaptation; Netflix; *House of Cards*; *Sons of Anarchy*; quality TV series; *Hamlet*; *Macbeth*; *Richard III*; adaptation