

Shakespeare for Revolution: From Canon to Activism in *V for Vendetta* and *Sons of Anarchy*

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Abstract

Shakespeare's works have long been a place of cultural and political struggles, and continues to be so. Twenty-first century non-canonical fiction is appropriating Shakespeare for activist purposes. The present article will analyze this phenomenon, applying the concept of cultural capital, the theories of cultural materialism, intertextuality, and appropriation in relation to popular culture, in order to study how Shakespeare's plays are being appropriated from more radically progressive positions, and resituated in alternative contexts. Among the plethora of Shakespearean adaptations of the last decades, non-canonical appropriations in particular offer brand new interpretations of previously assumed ideas about Shakespeare's works, popularizing the playwright in unprecedented ambits and culturally diverse social spaces, while giving voice to the marginalized. Thus, through entertainment, non-canonical fiction products such as *V for Vendetta* and *Sons of Anarchy* recycle the Shakespearean legacy from a critical point of view, while using it as a political weapon for cultural activism, helping to make people aware of social inequalities and to inspire them to adopt a critical stance towards them, as free and equal citizens.

Keywords: cultural activism; appropriation; cultural capital; non-canonical; Shakespeare

1. Introduction

Shakespeare's works have long been adopted as the canonical reference of the dominant social elites, but the cultural capital he represents has been under dispute since, at least, the emergence of the countercultural movements of the 1960s. As such, it is necessary to rethink the role Shakespeare plays in activism in current society, as he may help to fight against the menaces that threaten democratic principles, with emerging sociopolitical movements who foster irrational discourses of hate and violence, manipulating information, and repressing cultural expressions. This article will provide evidence of how popular products of non-canonical fiction, mass broadcast through TV and global digital platforms, may appropriate Shakespeare's works from a critical point of view and recycle Shakespeare's cultural capital, applying it as a useful political weapon of cultural activism in order to demonstrate inequalities and contribute to the widespread raising of social awareness.

Some recent projects have revised Shakespeare's legacy from very different perspectives, but they all recognize Shakespeare's revolutionary power for cultural activism. Here, the concept of cultural activism is understood as the creation of cultural products which challenge dominant interpretations of the world, as well as established conventions related to literature, art, and politics, while presenting alternative socio-political proposals to promote social justice or provoke socio-political changes in a society. In this sense, the concept of cultural activism may be applied at different levels, ranging from radical intellectual revisionism on canonical works, to the diffusion of popular products with a political message, and even the promotion of acts of protest.

We also understand Shakespeare as cultural capital in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu, who coined the term in his work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), that is, as a cultural marker of economic, social and political status which is used to perpetuate that status, but is at the same time fought for by emerging social forces who want to appropriate it, materially or symbolically, in order to legitimate themselves (Bourdieu 1996, 228). The idea of Shakespeare as cultural capital connects directly with the theories of cultural materialism explained by Dollimore and Sinfield in *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1994), which define Shakespeare as a cultural battlefield where opposing social and political forces try to appropriate the playwright's authority to legitimate their own identities and ideologies.

Furthermore, as Lanier argues in his work *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, "Shakespeare is valuable cultural capital, but it also models how potentially to challenge hierarchies of taste" (2002, 108). Shakespeare's cultural

capital is thus constantly disputed between those who consider the playwright a sacred representative of the highest culture, and those who attack the place conferred to him as being a symbol of inequality. The backdrop to this cultural dichotomy is the existence of opposing political tendencies, either towards the conservative reproduction of Shakespeare's works or towards the production of radical interventions. In *Broadcast your Shakespeare: Continuity and Change Across Media* (2018), Stephen O'Neill considers Shakespeare an ongoing cultural and ideological project since his cultural capital is transformed through popular culture adaptations which contribute to blurring the boundaries between the terms of high- and popular culture, and to redefining the idea of Shakespeare based on openness and difference. This idea fits well with current changing circumstances, taking into account that each time and each context brings their own social struggle to their (different) interpretations of Shakespearean works and uses them as a political weapon, to voice a concrete ideology or make visible a specific vindictive cause.

In this appropriation process, Shakespeare's texts extend beyond their original time period and circumstances while transforming themselves into new cultural products, which range from faithful plays to other creations apparently far-removed from the original, such as *V for Vendetta* and *Sons of Anarchy*. It is precisely these creations that contribute to revising the tenets of Shakespearean representation in the contemporary world in order that they serve the purposes of cultural activism in its quest to raise the social awareness of the audience. Hence, Shakespeare was "deployed as a tool of empire, taught in schools across the world as a means of promoting the English language and the British imperial agenda" (Sanders 2015, 52), although from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, new authors have systematically used popular media, such as TV and cinema, to create more radical versions of the Bard's plays while searching for new audiences.

These new ways of approaching Shakespeare's works not only privilege certain popular media along with some alternative genres, better understood as subcultural, but they also redefine the concept of the Shakespearean, seeing it as something malleable which can be adapted to all kind of settings, thereby increasing its cultural power and also its appeal for activism. The systematic trend of adapting and popularizing Shakespeare's plays by using different formats and points of view, disseminating them through different media and addressing new publics, has been accelerating since the second part of the last century. The critical approach of cultural materialism pays attention to popular cultural forms like television and fiction, considering them just as important as high culture manifestations. It also widens the scope of research to incorporate cultural products often despised or relegated by scholars, but which deserve to be analyzed in depth as they are increasingly influential in contemporary society.

As Dollimore and Sinfield affirm, “culture is made continuously and Shakespeare’s text is reconstructed, reappraised, reassigned all the time through diverse institutions in specific contexts” (1994, viii). Consequently, it is necessary to take into account Denise Albanese’s considerations in *Extramural Shakespeare* (2010) about the need to reframe the materialist concept of Shakespeare, as the present moment is quite different from the times in which the Bard became synonymous with highbrow culture, and in turn a recalibration of the sociopolitical environment is vital. It currently seems more necessary than ever to apply cultural materialism theories in order to analyze the increasing amount of popular and critical creations which display social or political topics, and that denounce inequality in all its forms.

This article will focus on some recent Hollywood and TV products to analyse successful examples of adapting Shakespeare for the mass public, through reinterpreting his works in a twenty-first-century key in line with current/contemporary problems and circumstances in order to provide a critical vision from an updated Shakespearean perspective. In these cases, the Shakespearean references are used for activism in that they may help to shape identities and ideologies, both individually and collectively, while adopting more critical positions. The aim of this article is to describe how non-canonical Shakespearean appropriations may help shape ideology while fostering critical thinking and activism in order to readdress inequalities. To this end, this article will analyze how certain elements in Shakespeare’s plays have been retaken and reused for political activism in non-canonical versions of Shakespeare’s works, using as case studies: Alan Moore’s graphic novel *V for Vendetta* and its later film version by The Wachowskis as well as Kurt Sutter’s TV series *Sons of Anarchy*.

This conceptual reinterpretation of Shakespeare connects Albanese’s claims relating to the elusive and pervasive presence of the playwright in contemporary products with Maurizio Calbi’s theories in *Spectral Shakespeares: Media Adaptations in the Twenty-first Century* (2013). This conceptualization of Shakespeare may help to understand the increasingly heterogeneous and fragmentary presence of the Shakespearean legacy in cultural products in the digital media and the global world of the start of the new millennium. Through these new peripheral means of cultural appropriation, Shakespeare can become a political weapon on behalf of those projects which are able to transform his works into texts for activism, applying his dramatic resources to make inequalities visible and help to raise consciousness about them on a wider scale.

In this sense, “[t]o cite a term made popular by the Occupy movement, Shakespeare whether produced or read or cited is a kind of human microphone repeated and repeating, voiced and revoiced, always rippling out to new audiences both global and local” (Garber 2017, 126). Thus, the use of the Shakespearean

legacy in diverse current contexts serves to dignify and amplify any cause which dares to reclaim it. Shakespeare continues to be a constant source of reference and inspiration, able to move the audience and even to mobilize the masses. Garber herself recognizes that “Shakespeare the institution, the idea, the brand, the author and the works can take the lead in trying to bring about much needed changes” (2017, 126), an extremely interesting idea in these confusing times, with the increasing manipulation of information, when it is crucial to have clear ideas and be guided by one’s own critical criteria.

Shakespeare’s work is constantly modified and his message may be used to reinforce individual ideas or minority groups’ identities which fight to gain visibility, and to establish their own rights against their historical social marginalization. In this way, Shakespeare as cultural icon can be considered a political weapon, a resource to facilitate activism for freedom and equality, and he may be appropriated by diverse ideological causes seeking to activate his revolutionary potential. Ryan talks about the “revolutionary universalism” of Shakespeare’s plays to articulate “the potential of all human beings to live according to principles of freedom, equality and justice,” but that many aspects of this potential are still not being fulfilled today (2015, 9). Albanese, in *Extramural Shakespeare*, agrees that Shakespeare’s plays and what he represents still imply a utopian possibility for social improvement and the prospect for a better world.

Furthermore, Ewan Fernie argues that “Shakespeare means freedom and that is why his plays matter, and not just aesthetically but also in terms of the impact they historically have had and can continue to have on personal and political life in the world” (2017, 1). Moreover, he claims that freedom is a supreme Shakespearean value “which has played an important part in the history of culture and which we need to reclaim now” (2). Thus, we might consider that perhaps the true essence of the witty playwright is exactly this revolutionary potential which is latent in all his work and which can be revived for twenty-first-century activism. As Fernie states, Shakespeare entails a struggle for freedom that is “played out time and again in the life and lives, and progressive political movements, which Shakespeare has stimulated or inspired” (7); which suggests that Shakespeare may extend his influence not only in terms of fictional works but also, through them, to people’s consciousness, thus inspiring them to act as agents of social change.

2. The Canon and Non-canonical Shakespearean Versions

According to cultural capital theory, the canon is a reflection of the structures of power in force at a given moment. Consequently, non-canonical genres pose a growing alternative way to represent ideas and stories that is different to the accepted standards of representation established by those who define the canon

as a restrictive and elitist vision of cultural elements. For Krupat “the canon [...] performs in the sphere of culture the work of legitimating the prevailing social order” (2005, 157), meaning that the socially dominant class imposes its own world view, which monopolizes the most powerful cultural elements. Shakespeare is a perfect example here, as he is one of the most canonical writers to have ever existed. From the beginning of the twenty-first century, non-canonical genres have offered new possibilities for interpreting Shakespeare while challenging the canon, a trend related to the transformation of how cultural products are produced and received through new digital media and global platforms. Even the most radical of those appropriations are in debt to Shakespeare’s legacy, and it is precisely those which most seek to set themselves apart from the original which contribute most to expanding his influence, opening up that legacy to new cultural fields and media. In this sense, as a kind of phantasmagorical pervading presence, the Bard is one of the main inspiring elements in the creation of several recent well-known films and TV series, where other cultural influences rebalance the Shakespearean component, as in case studies used here: *V for Vendetta* and *Sons of Anarchy*.

These non-canonical approaches use appropriation and intertextual references as the creative means to transform Shakespeare into a political tool for activism. In this sense, Kristeva’s intertextuality, where texts are a permutation of other texts (1984, 36), is a recurring element, and Hutcheon’s ideas about the multi-laminated nature of adaptation (2013, 6) apply well to non-canonical fiction products, which also appropriate multiple influences and cultural references of diverse origin. Furthermore, Julia Sanders affirms that “it is usually at the point of infidelity that the most creative acts of adaptation and appropriation take place” (2015, 20); which reinforces the important role of non-canonical Shakespearean versions that take Shakespeare’s plays as a peripheral or non-central reference, then mix them with many others and, thus, contribute to give them new meanings.

For Sanders, adaptations tend to make a canonical work more accessible to wider audiences through the use of proximation and updating, with the aim of bringing it closer to new or younger audiences (Sanders 2015, 21). One such case is *Manga Shakespeare* by the independent British publisher SelfMadeHero which, since 2007, has produced a series of *manga* versions that adapt Shakespeare’s plays to the conventions of this cool Japanese genre, making it closer to youth tastes. Compared to adaptation, appropriation “adopts a posture of critique, even assault” (Sanders 2015, 4), and it is more radical and more political, not only in its methods of approaching the source, but also in its purpose of revise it. A good example is Neil Gaiman’s graphic novel *The Sandman* (1990-1996), which appropriates not only several Shakespeare plays such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Tempest* and *Hamlet*, but also the figure of the playwright as a character, one who appears throughout the saga alongside the main character

Morpheus. If the value of Shakespeare as cultural capital has been growing over time through the multiple adaptations and appropriations of his works, this is in no small part thanks to his mutability. As new less conventional versions have proved, the interpretation of Shakespeare's works is subject to constant revisions which fuel the intellectual debate and enrich their understanding. At the same time, it is obviously true that he is also a symbol of cultural prestige, and represents powerful cultural capital which is used by governments and authorities as much as it is attacked by radical revisionists and iconoclastic authors with a more revolutionary perspective on his work. This is the case of recent non-canonical cultural products from politically more radical approaches that contribute to the reinterpretation of canonical Shakespeare's plays, which also expand them to new and unknown adaptational territories that definitely contribute to their updating from critical criteria.

In her theories about adaptation, Hutcheon affirms that "adaptation, like evolution, is a transgenerational phenomenon" (2013, 32), which seems especially true in Shakespeare's case as his "[s]tories do get retold in different ways in new material and cultural environments" (2013, 32). Although we might consider both adaptations and appropriations as "offspring" or mutations of the original which have morphed to accommodate themselves to new times and new media, we should also take into consideration Calbi's theories about the elusive nature of Shakespeare's texts, which make more diffuse the borders between original and adaptations, while contributing to redefining the concept of Shakespeare as an object of cultural consumption, which is constantly being recycled and reused.

Moreover, with the arrival of the new millennium, the forces related to Shakespeare and his growing mass-market have been affected by the interconnected phenomena of globalization and digitalization, as Richard Burt and Lynda E. Boose have recognized (2006, 1-6). Burt introduces the term "glo-cali-zation" to explain the collapsing of the local and the global through film adaptations of Shakespeare which blur or erase distinctions between categories such as high- and low culture, original and copy, pure and hybrid, English and foreign (2006, 15-16). To this end, old cultural symbols related to high culture mix with new symbols that come from popular culture, and both reach almost every part of the planet through digital platforms. Furthermore, the blurring effects of "glo-cali-zation" on assumed cultural dichotomies may enhance its sociopolitical impact on global audiences, as Calbi also recognizes, and consequently the political impact of non-canonical fiction products may be exponential.

Through their digital and global mass media broadcast, Shakespeare contents expand and, thus, "Shakespeare cannot rightly be placed squarely on the side of hegemonic, dominant culture or counter-hegemonic, resistant subculture" (Burt 2006, 16). In other words, currently Shakespeare is being appropriated by

people for their own purposes, beyond his instrumentalization by a specific social class. This offers new possibilities for the reinterpretation and understanding of Shakespeare's plays, especially in terms of the audiovisual formats exhibited on the screens of cinemas, televisions or, and particularly, through new technologies, such as computers, tablets and smartphones connected to the Internet, which transform the broadcast into a global experience shared by millions of people around the world.

In this way, Shakespeare has actually become the object of global poaching and cultural raids, to use terms close to Michel de Certeau's concepts (1984, 165-176), for different purposes and is mixed with other intertextual references. Thus, Shakespeare has turned into a kind of global visual icon and an incredible source of cultural experimentation, which seems to have increased his influence since the final decades of the twentieth century, to judge by the volume of cultural products recently created that are more or less indebted to the dramatist's work. Moreover, popular culture is full of Shakespearian references, probably because adapting Shakespeare's language to the taste of modern audiences can attract a wider public. In this process, Hollywood has been the main mass producer of Shakespearian versions especially from the 1960s onwards, and exemplifies "the cultural osmosis" Sanders refers to in that, very often, adaptations adapt other adaptations (2015, 13). This happened following the success of Wise's *West Side Story* (1961) and Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), which have become canonical representations that have themselves also been appropriated by new non-canonical transpositions.

In the long tradition of adapting Shakespeare's repertoire to audiovisual format for wider audiences, there are quite canonical attempts such as Branagh's film adaptations such as *Henry V* (1989) and *Hamlet* (1996), which seem to seek continuity with the tenets developed over decades about Shakespeare's representation. Even in more commercial products such as *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), Branagh's versions seem to rely as much on the cultural capital Shakespeare represents, as on the "specific cultural associations" the Bard has acquired over time, which "include his identification with culture, quality, Britishness, tradition and wisdom" (Shellard & Keenan 2016, 5). Hence, Branagh's revisions, in general, are faithful to the canonical representation of Shakespeare's plays, deploying the most traditional values associated with Shakespeare as key to his adaptations. Branagh's versions, therefore, benefit from the association of his name with Shakespeare's brand, becoming a synonym for traditional high-quality adaptations.

On the other hand, there are more radical creations which may be considered interesting precedents that paved the way for the alternative productions that will be analyzed in depth later as case studies. In the case of *V for Vendetta*, it is interesting to recall Wilcox's *Forbidden Planet* (1956), the sci-fi film version

of *The Tempest* that foresees the threats of technology, as well as the cold technological vision of Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000), which resituates the play in a global corporation, with a profusion of surveillance cameras monitoring everyone's movements. Among the multiple modern Shakespearean versions, some resituate Shakespeare's works in America, as is the case with *Sons of Anarchy*, which has important precursors in the shape of Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996), a successful postmodern film framed in MTV style and set in a fictional seaside city which resembles Miami, where the Capulets and Montagues are rival drug mafia families, and Gus Van Sant's risky personal appropriation of *Henry IV* in *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), which transposes the Shakespearean plot to the genre of the American road movie, telling the adventures of a couple of gay hustlers.

Thanks to projects like these, which defied the dominant view of the Bard's legacy, Shakespeare's plays have been adapted to so many different settings and periods that it has caused their plots and characters to evolve and update, almost constantly, to every new relevant social situation which demands a new Shakespearean perspective. These adaptations and appropriations act as cultural activism that changes the way we see and understand Shakespeare, while transforming him as cultural capital. In the introduction to *Shakespeare/Not Shakespeare*, Desmet, Loper and Casey (2017) argue for a rhizomatic concept of artistic relations, where the Shakespearean binaries are realigned on a continuum which defies the hierarchies of origin and influence that usually affect adaptations and appropriations. Although they recognize that Shakespeare expands both through reproduction and variation; interestingly, those works which use Shakespeare as a point of departure for new intertextual connections, can relate the Shakespearean corpus to almost anything, including power structures and social struggles.

Far from being delimited by his canonical representation, the Bard expands beyond these boundaries through the variation that non-canonical fiction entails, interconnecting Shakespearean references with other equally spectral intertextual meanings. Through such intertextual references, non-canonical Shakespearean appropriations put Shakespeare in contact with other unexpected popular cultural references and apply the Shakespearean legacy to unusual, and often unprecedented, social and political contexts. Thus, non-canonical Shakespearean fiction widens the scope of both the representation and the critical interpretation of Shakespeare's works, while at the same time using them to make visible specific social and political realities with the ultimate aim of raising consciousness among the audience. Once aware, the audience could then help to readdress those situations, or at least adopt a critical stance in order to fight against inequalities.

Non-canonical Shakespearean versions often use Shakespeare's works as peripheral references in conjunction with other alternative cultural resources.

In doing so, the Shakespearean legacy is redefined through the balance that is established with other popular references. Obviously, entertainment products such as Hollywood films or TV series aim at maximizing economical income from box office or advertising earnings, but some also have a political content that they want to be considered. As some popular and successful non-canonical fiction works, such as *V for Vendetta* and *Sons of Anarchy*, have demonstrated, the fact of reaching mass audiences, amplified by global digital platforms, has made it possible to provide viewers with a critical vision on current sociopolitical topics. Wide audiences, in this way, are able to access entertainment products which also give them a political message reinforced by Shakespeare's cultural authority.

In adapting Shakespearean plays for a wider and, particularly, younger audiences, the language is tailored to suit contemporary style and therefore make them more accessible, while maintaining the use of key quotations. For Lanier, this poses some interesting questions of cultural authority, such as, "[I]s the Shakespearean language being preserved so that it can mythologize pop icons, genres, and attitudes? Or is the pop imagery and style designed to lend Shakespearean poetry a hip currency?" (2002, 87). Maybe the answer to both questions is affirmative, as the process of adaptation, or appropriation, affects both sides of the operation. Through these two processes, Shakespeare acquires currency and also renews his cultural capital, while versions which apply Shakespearean mythology to their characters and genres also increase their cultural impact through their appropriation of the cultural authority the playwright represents.

Revisions that update and transform Shakespeare's plays may, for these reasons, be fostered for political motives which appropriate Shakespeare's discourse through quotations and visual references to reinforce critical positions and promote more progressive ideologies. Although Shakespeare's commitment with more progressive politics depends on the aim of the project's creator, and the approach he or she gives to the appropriated contents, Shakespeare's legacy as cultural capital is currently being recycled and reused as a political weapon by non-canonical fiction.

3. Activism Through Non-canonical Shakespearean Fiction: *V for Vendetta* and *Sons of Anarchy*

As a consequence of the expansion of digitalization and globalization, there are some formats which are being privileged, especially young adult popular audiovisual formats and genres, but which also may appeal to adult audiences, such as dystopian film and TV series, which have contributed to opening the way for Shakespeare's narratives to be applied in new contexts. We should, however, take into account that youth culture is both a mediated and a consumptive culture

(Hulbert et al. 2006, 6). Furthermore, as “18 to 34 is the key demographic for almost every media” (Hulbert et al. 2006, 7), in many ways young audiences make a huge contribution to shaping the products and trends launched within the cultural market. In this sense, *V for Vendetta* and *Sons of Anarchy* exemplify how Shakespeare’s works may be appropriated for cultural activism. Of all Shakespeare’s works, *Hamlet* is possibly one of his most political plays, dealing as it does with a young intellectual prince coping not only with feelings of revenge but also with endemic corruption, facts which lead him to commit regicide in a bid to fix a world “out of joint”. Consequently, it can provide sound cultural references to be used for activism, as will be illustrated by the two case studies chosen here. It cannot be forgotten that Hamlet’s commitment is double: he pursues vengeance at the same time as freeing the kingdom of Denmark by killing its illegitimate king. In this sense, the mere planning of the murder of the monarch in a play entailed revolutionary ideology in the Elizabethan age. This revolutionary potential has strong connections with recent popular cultural products such as *Sons of Anarchy* and *V for Vendetta*, which retake the topics of revenge, justice, and freedom with a strong violent component.

In *‘Hamlet’ and World Cinema* (2019), Mark Thornton Burnett studies how adaptations of *Hamlet* from the 1960s to the 1980s focused on the working class and the changing industrial landscape, echoing the social changes and the political struggles of the period. Furthermore, Burnett points to the “generational urgencies, as expressed in the worldwide impact of youth movements, which in turn took energy from, and served to further, experimentation in the arts and broader debate about political organization and social moves” (2019, 33). Since then, audiovisual versions of *Hamlet* have voiced generational troubles, together with sociopolitical demands, thanks to the identification of new younger audiences with the various updated reincarnations of the contradictory figure of the Prince of Denmark. According to Fernie, “Shakespeare’s plays crystallize a number of different kinds of freedom dramatically” (2017, 2). One of the most important in the Western tradition is the freedom to be oneself, but also the freedom to do what one likes, the freedom to be different, and also the freedom to enter evil (Fernie 4). All these types of freedom are present in Shakespearean plays such as *Hamlet*, and are inherited by the characters it inspires as his modern reincarnations, such as Jax in *Sons of Anarchy* and V in *V for Vendetta*.

V for Vendetta and *Sons of Anarchy* are appropriations of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The Shakespearean text is as spectral as the ghost of King Hamlet: it appears only at some specific moments, but its presence is made felt all the time. Notwithstanding his peripheral or spectral presence, thanks to Shakespeare’s cultural authority, a masked terrorist and an outlaw biker are transformed into tragic though complex avengers who perform the alter ego of a modern Hamlet

in quite different contexts. Through non-canonical genres, such as dystopian fiction and outlaw bikers subgenre, the Shakespearean background achieves new meanings while reinforcing the discourse of the modern avengers. Both heroes live in a wild, chaotic world, where violence seems to be the only efficient resource to readdress the situation and accomplish the revenge they deem necessary, even if this brings about the fatal end of the doomed avengers.

Alan Moore, writer of the script, and illustrator David Lloyd created *V for Vendetta*, which was first published during the 1980's as a serial comic by the British magazine *Warrior* and then continued by American comic publisher DC, which finally edited it as a complete graphic novel in 2008. The main character, known as V, fights against the fascist authority in a future Britain while symbolically wearing a mask and disguised as Guy Fawkes, the Catholic activist who took part in the Gunpowder Plot to blow up the English Parliament on November 5, 1605. V revives the revolutionary spirit of Fawkes and carries out his failed plans against the corrupt government who have abolished democracy and seek to find and detain him as a terrorist. This radical message was taken further in the film version, with the same title as the graphic novel, by the Wachowski brothers (2005), who are the true creators of the project as they wrote the script and produced the film with the help of a member of their crew, McTeigue. Their masked hero mobilizes citizens to act against the unfair government, marching through the streets with them and thus becoming their accomplice in bringing about an effective revolutionary change, while they become his audience when he finally blows up the Parliament building at the end of the film.

Both the *V for Vendetta* graphic novel and its later film version change the context of reference of Shakespearean works in order to reuse them with new political intentions. The original graphic novel was conceived as a fierce critique of Thatcher's government of the 1980s, represented as a future British authoritarian regime in a post-nuclear London. Shakespearean references are intermingled with diverse cultural quotations, all of them pervaded by an anarchist discourse, later also taken up in the film adaptation. In both cases, through the framework of dystopian fiction, Shakespeare's cites are critically re-contextualized as a dark vision of a society in the near future ruled by a totalitarian government that uses repressive tactics of control against the population, such as the manipulation of news and the extensive use of surveillance camera systems. But in the case of the Wachowskis' film version, despite keeping the setting of London, the new contextualization of Shakespeare is redirected to a projection of America under Bush's Administration at the beginning of the new millennium, showing its abuses of civil rights. Interestingly, the rise to power of the dictator in the Wachowskis' version is due to a pandemic which causes chaos and it is used as an excuse to persuade people to give up their freedoms for their supposed security.

In the graphic novel, V's quotations from *Macbeth* that he uses against the Gunpowder Plot are reinterpreted with a new meaning in a new political context, thus reversing the message to support V. In the film's initial fight scene, instead of the *Macbeth* lines which were in Moore's original comic, the Wachowskis insert a quotation from *Hamlet* (3.1.52-55) in V's speech: "We are oft to blame in this: 'Tis too much prov'd, that with devotion's visage, and pious action we do sugar o'er the devil himself", to attack the hypocrisy of government and the abuse of citizens. In widening the scope of their quotations beyond those of Moore's graphic novel, the Wachowskis also include interesting additions such as *Sonnet 55*, but addressing it to Guy Fawkes as a promise to preserve his legacy (Friedman 124). With this change of addressee, Shakespeare and Guy Fawkes are aligned in the same cause as V's. These variations imply a large conceptual change that affects the narrative structure of the film, which becomes a modern revenge tragedy, and also transforms the configuration of the main character, masked V, into a classic tragic avenger. In his dramatic appearances, but especially when addressing the bust of Shakespeare in the film version, or the statue of Justice in the original comic, V's soliloquies remind us of those of Hamlet himself. Furthermore, V's eloquence and strange behavior may be easily misunderstood, as too are those of the Prince of Denmark, leading to him being taken for a mad person that gives vent to insane thoughts.

In *V for Vendetta*, both Moore's comic and later the Wachowskis' film appropriate the cultural capital Shakespeare represents, positioning the Bard on the left and consequently making him the ideological and aesthetical supporter of revolution. As a spectral dystopian projection of Hamlet, V defends anarchism as a true ideology which can combine destruction and creation, thus justifying extreme violence as a necessary means through which to improve the current situation. Thus, Moore uses the quotation from *Henry VIII* (1.4. 75), "O Beauty, 'til now I never knew thee", to show how V refuses Justice as an unfaithful companion, in favor of Anarchy. V's commitment resembles Hamlet's determination to achieve not only personal revenge but also a political change at the highest level. Both purposes are strongly connected because the avengers only can take their complete revenge through the death of their offender, who is also the unfair ruler of the country. In this way, the completion of their premeditated vengeance brings about the liberation of the nation. Hamlet and *V for Vendetta* pose the need to resort to direct action and even violence, as the only possible way to change the status quo. Both main characters plan cautiously their acts to achieve their objectives, and also both of them know that the accomplishment of their master plan will imply their own destruction.

Ott argues that the film of *V for Vendetta* "mobilizes viewers at a visceral level to reject political apathy and to enact a democratic politics of resistance and revolt against any state that would seek to silence dissent" (2010, 40). In this sense, the

film is able to make people think and react by showing their discontent against unfair current situations. Thus, the creation of a masked avenger inspired by the image of Guy Fawkes during Thatcher's mandate was really subversive, but limited in scale to the world of comic, where *V for Vendetta* became a cult graphic novel with an evident political taint. Some decades later, The Wachowskis' film version reached global diffusion thanks to digital platforms. In consequence, their message has become inspiring for many people who have taken part in social movements and political protests around the world, wearing the same Guy Fawkes mask of V.

V's mask has become a revolutionary symbol of the struggle for freedom, and masked demonstrators appeared in the Arab Spring which started in Tunisia and Algeria in 2010 and was followed by uprisings in many other Muslim countries in the following years, as well as in both the Spanish 15-M movement and in the American Occupy Wall Street movement, which began in 2011. In fact, the hacker activist organization Anonymous was the first organized protest group to use V's mask as a corporate image during its actions against the Church of Scientology in 2008. Indeed, Anonymous' appropriation of V's image along with his speech style has transformed him into a pervading presence in its own social media campaigns, including the annual global mobilization known as the Million Mask March which they have been celebrating on the November 5 since 2011, replicating the final scenes of the film version in the real world.

In having Shakespeare and Fawkes as allies, *V for Vendetta* seeks to empower people, compelling them to act and demand their rights. The film version by the Wachowskis and McTeigue is particularly successful in this respect, placing a mirror in front of people and showing them on the screen who they are and what they can do: as citizens they are the true origin of real power, meaning they have the authority to put people into government and also to remove them, and, in particular, to demand changes and even resort to direct action when authorities abuse their conferred power in any sense.

This same mirroring effect of hidden or unperceived realities is also achieved by the recent Fox TV series *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-2014), currently available globally on the streaming service Netflix. It was created by Kurt Sutter, who was scriptwriter, director and producer of the series, and is an American transposition of *Hamlet* to the non-canonical subgenre of outlaw bikers. In this context, Shakespeare's play is set in a violent Californian motorcycle club inspired by the Hell's Angels, that traffics firearms and drugs. The series gives a critical portrait of pre-Trump American society as a contemporary reflection of the corrupted Elsinore. The spectral presence of *Hamlet*'s plot and characters in the series gives dramatic strength and political depth to the adventures of the bikers, which depict the true reality of a society strongly divided and stratified. This society is transforming as a result of economic crisis and technological changes, which

have increased social differences and given rise to irrational sociopolitical forces tainted with racial prejudice.

As in classic revenge tragedies, in this series revenge is the fuel for action and violence pervades everything. Characters are strong and have violent impulses, female characters as much as the males, a novelty with respect to the original Shakespearean play. All have dangerous secrets to keep, and must confront conspiracies, regrets and struggles for power. The main character is Jax Teller (modern Hamlet), whose father was killed by Clay (Claudius), the club's president, who then married his accomplice in the murder, the widow, and Jax's mother,⁷ Gemma (Gertrude). Jax discovers the truth through a secret manuscript his father had written before dying in a mysterious accident, and on the basis of this he wants revenge and to take back the presidency of the bike club, with the help of some loyal friends such as Opie (Horatio), and the support of his old high school sweetheart, Tara (Ophelia).

For those aware of the connection between the original Shakespearean play and the TV series, Sutter makes it more evident through the titles of several episodes, which are short quotes from *Hamlet*, such as "*Burnt and Purged Away*", "*To Be-Act I*", "*To Be-Act II*", "*To Thine Own Self*" and "*What a Piece of Work is Man.*" Jorge Carrión affirms that intertextuality is a modern obsession, as on many occasions we find in the same titles the very interpretative key to the episodes, and also a reminder that they are the updating of a tradition which is reincarnated in new historical contexts (57). This is the case with *Sons of Anarchy*, where some titles explicitly refer to the fate of Jax, as Hamlet's reincarnation, in his taking on of the corrupt world that surrounds him in the club. The last episode of the series, "*Papa's Goods*", reinforces the Hamletian connection as it ends with the last quotation taken from a letter Hamlet writes to Ophelia in Act II, scene 2, as a kind of farewell:

Doubt thou the stars are fire;
Doubt that the sun doth move;
Doubt truth to be a liar;
But never doubt I love. (Shakespeare 115)

The court of Elsinore and its transposition to a wild Californian motorcycle club in the fictional town of Charming, both serve the same purpose of exemplifying the rotten rule of the 'kingdom'. This provides the opportunity to transfer the idea of systemic corruption and violence related to power to the very concept of the American society. In this context, all the relationships depicted in this series are basically ruled by corruption, affecting not only bikers, but also the rest of the cast, which includes policemen, politicians, and businessmen. In a quickly decomposing society, many individuals use violence in a hostile social environment when they

feel menaced, not protected, or even not represented by authorities. *Sons of Anarchy* pays attention to those who form part of a subterranean America, a varied group of minorities who fight for their survival and the maintenance of their own life style. The series uncovers the hidden social and ideological forces which were interacting in American society for a long time, which were waiting to emerge and take up their most radical positions when political circumstances were favorable.

In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, the sense of abandonment experienced by a large part of American society played a part in the rise of Trump. Many American citizens felt that the previous administrations had not protected them in difficult times. They showed their negative feelings and acted “against a technologically advanced and economically changing America in which they felt they’d been counted out and left behind” (McWilliams, 2016), and Trump capitalized on that discontent, acting in an aggressive way and giving voice to their irritation towards the elites. *Sons of Anarchy* foresees, in this sense, the upcoming advent of right-wing politics in the US, while also denouncing systemic corruption and social marginalization as the basic causes of that radical advent.

The original key elements in *Hamlet* as a revenge tragedy are, in this series, reproduced in the context of a decaying American society. They fit well with the characteristic features of a society habituated to the use of firearms and violence, with emerging supremacist groups encouraged by Trump’s discourse and growing racial abuses committed by police officers. The corrupt kingdom of Denmark thus finds its updated replica across the ocean in a society equally corrupted and lost, one which resorts to guns and violence as the only means to support its ideas. *Sons of Anarchy* presents an interesting portrait of US society, giving voice to the silent minorities and giving a platform to the marginalized who are hardly ever taken into consideration in historical, political, and cultural terms. In fact, the American way of life traditionally supported on the ideas of an equal society with equal opportunities, ruled by a fair democratic government, is completely demolished in *Sons of Anarchy*. These same ideals have traditionally formed part of all/most Western democracies, but they are equally threatened in these times by similar emerging radical phenomena. As such, Sutter’s series may also contribute to enhancing social awareness as a means of fighting against these menaces.

4. Conclusion

Adaptations and appropriations are concepts taken from intertextuality which pervade all narratives and help to give sense to new creations that nourish popular culture. They usually rely on canonical works such as Shakespeare to take advantage of the cultural capital they represent. In recent decades, canonical versions of the playwright have contributed to reinforcing the canon, while non-

canonical Shakespearean appropriations have assaulted it, opening his works to new political interpretations and placing them in unprecedented contexts. Therefore, although Shakespeare's cultural capital has been monopolized for a long time by the highbrow factions of society, we are now also witnessing increasing examples of its appropriation by popular culture.

This inherent struggle between popular culture creators and highbrow representatives is precisely what gives Shakespeare its true value nowadays. In this sense, Shakespeare's cultural capital is a currency which never depreciates, indeed it will only become increasingly more valuable. The non-canonical trend is transforming the way we understand Shakespeare and is benefiting from the global diffusion provided by digital platforms which broadcast its message to massive audiences, while also breaking down the boundaries between high- and lowbrow. It can therefore be seen that, through entertainment products with a political message such as *V for Vendetta* and *Sons of Anarchy*, non-canonical versions are recycling Shakespeare's legacy as a pervading peripheral or spectral reference for cultural activism.

From the point of view of cultural materialism, we could appraise Shakespeare as a political weapon, given that he could serve the ideological purposes of a variety of quite different causes, depending on the interpretation each one assigns to his works. The two case studies presented here defy the established canon appropriating Shakespeare's cultural authority to empower people as free and equal human beings, exploiting Shakespeare's revolutionary potential to reinforce the adoption of critical positions towards present society. Thus, non-canonical Shakespearean appropriations are not only helping to change the concept of Shakespeare but also making people conscious of current inequalities, giving voice to the marginalized from cultural representations and showing the possibilities to transform our society with cultural activism.

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