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**Biker Knights:  
Identity and Posthuman Medievalism in *Sons of Anarchy***  
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The medievalism of the FX television series *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-2014) is not inherently obvious. Set in Northern California, the series follows a fictional outlaw motorcycle club (MC) modeled on real gangs including the Hells Angels. Critics, fans, and creators alike discuss the series as an extended adaptation of *Hamlet*, and the broad narrative of the series is indeed a family tragedy. However, *Sons of Anarchy* establishes deeper connections to the past by delineating clear connections to medieval chivalry and knighthood through the relationships the biker cultivates, as the knight did, with key technologies and objects that create and visually mark him as a member of this ideologically-driven and far-flung brotherhood.<sup>1</sup> This essay will argue that posthumanism offers an opportunity to connect *Sons of Anarchy* to medievalism through the exception-oriented ideology and practice of medieval chivalry.

A benefit of this connection for audiences is one of intellectually-justified enjoyment of stories which occur in the liminal zones characterized by a cultural state of exception. The bikers often speak of the spiritual experience of arming themselves, mounting their steeds, and seeking out whatever fate will bring them on the open road in the spaces between towns; the parallels to a medieval knight on adventure, whose travels are primarily within the wooded spaces of adventure, are established through a common feeling of freedom from the petty constraints of society while adhering to an (often violent) ideology shared by other men who engage in similar acts of wandering. The series offers an opportunity to experience narrative pleasure through the bikers' attempts to experience what they define as freedom even as they paradoxically tie their bodies and their identities to external objects like their motorcycles, leather jackets, and guns, much as the medieval knight established deep relationships with horse, armor, and sword.<sup>2</sup> "Posthumanism is a praxis," as Francesca Ferrando notes, because the "ways the futures are being conceived and imagined are not disconnected from their actual enactments: in the posthuman post-dualistic approach, the 'what' is the 'how'."<sup>3</sup> Consequently, this essay will first outline the "what" of the Sons of Anarchy—a brotherhood created and guided by a cultural system with exceptionally strong ties to both the practice and ideologies of medieval chivalry—through the concept of interconnected chivalric systems outlined by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in "The Inhuman Circuit."<sup>4</sup>

Cohen's term "inhuman" here signals the inclusion of entities and technologies within the net of the self, and so this essay will focus on three categories of relationships that enact this inclusion: codes of behavior; visual signals of group identity via body adornment; and the transformative role of the "trustworthy steed," whether horse (medieval knight) or motorcycle (modern biker). Through these categories I will demonstrate that the "what" of Jax Teller and his biker brothers also provides the "how" of their brotherhood. As a collective, the Sons of Anarchy pursue what they consider a pure, autonomous, and free human experience that is achieved through adherence to their common ideological system. However, this experience is a very American interpretation of the social and geographic mobility of the historic knight through the lens of the fictional knight: the state the bikers often call freedom is similar to the relative autonomy that a fictional knight such as Lancelot or Gawain experienced while adventuring, where men must choose again and again to adhere not to arbitrary laws but to a deeper code that continually adapts to circumstance.

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<sup>1</sup> Garret L. Castleberry has argued that the visual vocabulary of *Sons of Anarchy* is characteristic of the Western film genre. See "Revising the Western: Connecting Genre Rituals and American Western Revisionism in TV's *Sons of Anarchy*," *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies* 14.3 (2014): 269-78. The connections between the Western and medievalism are long established, as Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) makes clear. Jennifer Moskowitz argues that American conviction that the cowboy is a uniquely American contribution stems from identical ideologies shared by the (historical) medieval knight and the cowboy; see "The Cultural Myth of the Cowboy, or, How the West was Won," *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900-Present)* 5.1 (2006). [http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring\\_2006/moskowitz.htm](http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2006/moskowitz.htm).

<sup>2</sup> For detailed discussions of the philosopher Giorgio Agamben's theoretical examinations of identity and bio-politics, see *Homo Sacer: A Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998) and *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Francesca Ferrando, "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations," *Existenz* 8.2 (2013): 29.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "The Inhuman Circuit," in *Thinking the Limits of the Body*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Gail Weiss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 167-86.

Ultimately, the bikers do not want to be governed by any rules but those they have chosen and codified; this system of rules governs behavior and honor and encourages violence, in turn guiding each man's selection and use of arms, armor, tattoos, and motorcycles. However, none of the bikers share the "real world" rank and privilege of the fictional knights of the Round Table: Lancelot and Gawain, of course, are hereditary leaders, and thus have social privilege to wander, in addition to their armed might. The bikers, by contrast, create their right to rule and to wander through their (heavily armed) might: they shoot, beat up, sabotage, and terrorize any individual who attempts to restrict their movement. Though they shroud their pursuit of this power in anarchic rhetoric emphasizing terms like "freedom" and "liberty" (especially from government), in practice this is only achieved through their mobility. That mobility is due to the motorcycle: like the knight's horse, the bike is the primary tool and dominant symbol of this new "class" of men. The bikers, moreover, perceive their highly artificial and ritualized culture as "pure," or at least purer, because it carries the inherent potential of mobility with it at all times. But ultimately this pure human experience is only possible because of a hierarchy of relationships stemming from the machine: even the very name "biker," one who rides a bike (much like a "chevalier" is one who rides a "cheval," horse), prioritizes the role of the motorcycle and combines machine and person into one unit. Consequently, though the Sons seek to return to what they consider a pure human state, their achievement and means are as posthuman as the medieval knight's because, like that knight with his horse, their very identities are created within and by non-human objects.

Cohen's explanation of the deep connections between the posthuman and the medieval is fundamentally an exploration of the deep and lasting connections inhuman components (whether objects or ideas) have to the human body and how these components (inhuman and human) join to create the medieval knight. Cohen sees chivalry as the system that connects a (male) human body to training, armor, and horse: together, he argues, all these components create the medieval knight, who is the inhuman circuit because the knight is more than the individual components alone. The series, I argue, presents Jax Teller as a biker-knight to highlight the impact of specific components upon Teller's personal inhuman circuit. As a result, Teller can become more than human through his connection to inhuman portions of himself (such as his bike, or his code of conduct), a posthuman experience that parallels the practice of medieval knighthood. These connections to knighthood are part of what allow viewers to continually forgive Teller for his various crimes, particularly his struggle to live by a code of conduct that seems a modernization of medieval chivalry.

*Sons of Anarchy* follows Teller as he attempts to reconcile the seductive ideology posthumously expressed by his father (a club founder) in an unpublished book first with Teller's own experiences as a new parent within this brotherhood and then, over the course of the series, as the leader of the club. The series portrays a broad range of positive and negative behaviors: though the characters emphasize the transformative emotional value of homosocial bonds, they are also fundamentally aware that many of their acts as a club and as individuals are criminal and deeply destructive. Jason Eberl, reading *Sons of Anarchy* through the lens of Aristotelian definitions of virtue and vice, notes that "[v]irtues and vices are not things a person is born with, nor can they be merely bestowed upon you by another person. Rather, they are *cultivated* through habituation, practicing the behaviors modeled by others" and thus linking action and ideology.<sup>5</sup> However, what characters in *Sons of Anarchy* consider "bad" traits are not always what audiences consider bad, since many of these traits build the homosocial community they cherish: characters endorse extremely rigid patriarchal family structures, and exhibit situational awareness of the impact of casual racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism upon their community as distinct from the impact on other communities.<sup>6</sup>

The unifying factor here is a diffused ideological understanding of proper behavior, and the origins of that behavior are through shared identities. Like medieval knights with horses, armor, and swords, these modern bikers reflexively create their identities through technologies and objects. Though a motorcycle is the key element in this process, the

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<sup>5</sup> Jason T. Eberl, "Virtue and Vice in the SAMCROpolis: Aristotle Views Sons of Anarchy," in *Sons of Anarchy and Philosophy: Brains Before Bullets*, ed. George A. Dunn and Jason T. Eberl, Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series 6 (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 6.

<sup>6</sup> The bikers' shortsighted focus is thus normative and typical of the America in which they exist. Eberl argues the show's appeal is in "the mixture of virtue and vice found in every human being's moral development" (5). Cf. the less universalizing and more culturally-nuanced approach taken by Michael L. Wayne in "Mitigating Colorblind Racism in the Postnetwork Era: Class-Inflected Masculinities in *The Shield*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and *Justified*," *The Communication Review* 17.3 (2014): 183-201. DOI: 10.1080/10714421.2014.930271.

overall ideology of the brotherhood guides the establishment of that foundational relationship between man and machine: not just any bike, or any man, will suffice. Jax Teller, for example, is the son of John Teller: John was a founding member of the Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club, Redwood Original charter (the acronym SAMCRO is pronounced “Sam Crow”) and was club President at the time of his death (pre-series). Jax is thus presented as a man with worthy lineage, already a part of the community and thus deeply invested in its activities. Like Hamlet, Jax struggles to reconcile his responsibilities to his “kingdom” with his own desires and the obligations of honor. As Jax tells his girlfriend (later wife), “Since I was five, Tara, all I’ve ever wanted was a Harley and a kutte,” setting both the depth of his devotion and showing two specific identity markers with a single sentence.<sup>7</sup> These markers, like the horse and arms of the knight, set him permanently apart from the rest of normative society. Jax’s loyalty to the club is a long habit, and only at the end of the series does he realize the full cost of this devotion.<sup>8</sup>

*The Life and Death of Sam Crow*, the book Jax finds at the start of the series, is John Teller’s articulation of how the pure ideology of the club went wrong; it can easily be figured as a reflective and retrospective *Knight’s Own Book of Chivalry*. Portions of the book are read in voice-over throughout the course of the series, and John becomes a ghostly voice whispering in his son’s ear, narrating the slow corruption of a code that its practitioners see as modeled upon chivalric ideals. Jax’s new fatherhood makes him receptive to this ideological guidance: he tries to move the club’s finances away from gunrunning to pornography (a legal business), and struggles against the opposition of his club’s President, who is also his step-father, to this plan. Jax also finds that living within the letter and ideals of the code forces a split in his loyalty between his mother, wife, children, and membership in an intensely devoted and affectionate outlaw brotherhood. This brotherhood takes violence and chaos as core values: brothers box against each other at parties, all members are armed, and unity is often achieved by targeting (and beating) an outside enemy. Over the course of seven seasons, the bikers’ code is explored and teased out, allowing viewers to watch the consequences of adherence and defiance.

This code is practical chivalry: rules to control and direct the actions of heavily armed and over-trained warriors who operate, by virtue of their arms, training, and preference, outside the bounds of normative civil law.<sup>9</sup> Richard Kaeuper’s concise description of chivalry is worth considering at length in this context:

Chivalry came into being as a powerful, mutually reinforcing fusion of several major functions, roles, and rights. Above all, the chivalrous defended honour through the violence of personal prowess; to this fusion they added a formal and rather independent piety, asserting God’s blessing on their demanding and violent lives; they claimed an elite, usually noble, status and established their nobility by the practice of a chivalric way of life; they sought to regulate relationships between males and females on their own terms, exclusively linking love, too, with prowess and honour.<sup>10</sup>

The Sons of Anarchy apply all these factors to their lives as outlaw bikers: honor and prowess mingle in the crucible of violence, whether informal boxing matches at parties or fighting rival gangs; this new combat-oriented sense of self is then augmented by piety in the form of regular attendance at “church” (club meetings), wearing of club symbols (particularly the “kutte,” the leather vest of membership), and adherence to unspoken rules of community support, whether helping with home repairs, financial aid, or simply publically standing in solidarity. For all the components of loyalty to the brotherhood that go unspoken but practiced, there are also many that are clearly articulated by word and deed. The club members set themselves apart through membership in the club – a long process of initiation, involving years as a “prospect,” financial buy-in, verbal affirmations of loyalty and love, and ongoing proof of devotion through participation in the club’s fiscal activities, such as smuggling drugs and

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<sup>7</sup> “Potlatch,” season 2, episode 8.

<sup>8</sup> Eberl reminds us that all the characters in the series are concerned that they, and their heirs, will repeat mistakes made in the past, a concern which he links to the skillsets Jax and other MC members cultivate. See “Virtue and Vice in the SAMCROpolis,” in *Sons of Anarchy and Philosophy*, 3. Cf. James Edwin Mahon, who notes that “loyalty is only a motive or reason, not a way of acting,” which contrasts with how the Sons see loyalty: it is a motive or a reason, but it is also an action. See “Tig Needs an Escort Home: Is Loyalty a Virtue?” in *Sons of Anarchy and Philosophy*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> The narrative appeal of the historical knight might have been similar to the appeal of police officers, because the audience can watch (or listen or read) about heavily armed persons whose actions are, by the cause of this armament, licensed (officially or culturally) to perform actions beyond the bounds of the normal or regular. I view the practice of chivalry as demanding the mandatory components of action which philosophies of loyalty reject, allowing knights and bikers to participate in what Josiah Royce identifies as “The willing and practical and thoroughgoing devotion of a person to a cause” (quoted in Mahon, 30).

<sup>10</sup> Richard W. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 302.

weapons—and provide visual proofs through their gang colors and tattoos, so that they visibly live their membership, daily. Romantic relationships are also regulated, so club standards control every moment of life for all members of the community: women cannot be club members and can either be a sexual object or groupie (a “sweet butt” or “Crow Eater”) or a steady girlfriend / wife (“Old Lady”). Old Ladies create an alternative female social network whose duty is to provide support to the male brotherhood through a traditional gender-based division of domestic labor: they keep house, raise children, run charities, manage the finances of legitimate business ventures, throw club parties, and often serve as advisers to their husbands. None of the women affiliated with the club rides her own motorcycle – a woman’s place on a motorcycle is seated behind her man—and none are permitted inside the “church,” the meeting room, during official business.<sup>11</sup>

Kaeuper reminds us that chivalry “can only be interpreted [...] as a mixture of ideals and practices constantly critiqued by those who wanted to change both.”<sup>12</sup> The problem with *The Life and Death of Sam Crow* is not that it critiques or challenges the club, nor that it helps shape the perspective of his son Jax, who is the audience’s point of entry into the charged world of MC politics, honor, and violence. The problem is that the book is static, and the club is not. Initially the book seems a conduit, an external expression of Jax’s own thinking and reasoning, but it can also be seen as an analog to Old Hamlet’s ghost, whispering advice and goading Jax into action. Fundamentally, it is a document nearly two decades old exerting control over the present. Interpreting *The Life and Death of Sam Crow* as functioning with equivalent force to a book of chivalry, for example *A Knight’s Own Book of Chivalry*, allows the audience to perceive how written (or otherwise codified) chivalric codes are active participants in the extended cognition of bikers or knights.<sup>13</sup> Fundamentally, the experience of these books are as an embodied means to perceive, understand, and work through an encounter in which the knight must act as a knight – or a biker as a biker. Chivalry is the ideological and practical concept that pulls together many separate factors to unify the response by the knight (or biker). This is why Cohen terms chivalry “a medieval technology of the self,” because chivalry functions as an ideological umbrella providing reflexive purpose and justification and thus collecting “human, animal, objects, and intensities into what might be called an inhuman body”: the chivalric knight.<sup>14</sup> In business terms, chivalry becomes the franchise or corporate control that governs individual representatives of the brand.

The inhuman circuit Cohen describes is the posthuman subject – for Cohen’s medieval knight, this circuit is the human man, his horse, his sword, his armor, his training, and his chivalric code. There are direct and easy parallels for the modern outlaw biker: the horse becomes a motorcycle, and the sword a gun; armor is represented in a bullet-proof vest and motorcycle helmet. But chivalric literatures remind us that a knight is a knight off his horse, and while his inner nobility is visually signaled in many ways it can be obscured by accident or design. The biker seeks to eliminate this potential confusion over his status through two means: his leather “kutte,” his gang vest or “colors,” and his tattoos.

In *Sons of Anarchy*, the vest is treated as a holy object, and as members die or are inducted into the club, their old or new kutties are laid out like vestments; when Harry (“Opie”) Winston gives his life in prison to protect Jax, he is buried in his kutte. The kutte evokes strong feelings that sometimes override the bonds of family for Jax, and he often fails in his obligations as a father and husband in favor of service to the club. Like a chivalric knight, Jax is also willing to die for the symbols of his brotherhood: when Jax is captured by a rival gang and ordered to surrender his kutte at gun-point, he refuses, saying angrily, “Pull the trigger, man. That’s the only way this leather’s coming off my back.”<sup>15</sup> A few seasons later, Jax and his brothers are released from prison, and the first thing they do as they exit

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<sup>11</sup> Thus, Gemma and Tara are Gertrude and Ophelia, but they are also both Lady MacBeth – deeply powerful, fiercely intelligent, and emotionally resilient, yet forced to step aside for men like Clay and Jax. Both women challenge these restrictions differently throughout the series.

<sup>12</sup> Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> This is part of what the philosophers Andy Clark and David Chambers term a coupled system of cognition, in which external entities like lists are used to think. See “The Extended Mind,” <http://consc.net/papers/extended.html>; first published in *Analysis* 58 (1998): 10-23. Storytelling or codes of conduct also function in this manner. Chivalry, a term Kaeuper notes could signal meaning ranging from deeds of prowess, a group of knights (physical or social), to a code of behavior, works because it allows for extended cognition and extended social connections. See *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Cohen, “The Inhuman Circuit,” 173.

<sup>15</sup> Ron Perlman, Charlie Hunnam, and Katey Sagal, “Potlach,” season 2, episode 8, directed by Paul Maibaum, aired 27 October 2009 (Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2010), DVD.

prison is to put on their kutties; when they are ordered not to wear gang colors, symbols, or insignia as part of their probation, they defy the orders and only rarely cover the kutte with a jacket.

The kutte can be obscured or taken away, by enemies, the government (also an enemy but less personalized), or mishap. Thus, many bikers duplicate the insignia the kutte bears with tattoos: Jax wears a full back-piece rendition of the same insignia his kutte bears, and his best friend and strong right arm Opie has the same design in the same location. Other members of the club bear their insignia in different places, with variations.—Jax's step-father and president, Clay Morrow, for example, only has the picture of the club symbol on his arm, while Jax and Opie include the words from the kutte: "Sons of Anarchy" above the Reaper, and "California" beneath it. In this way, the value of the kutte, as an outward object that can be modified (with rank patches, commendations for bravery, signals that the brother has killed for the club) remains vital, yet the tattoo, as a permanent mark, symbolizes full commitment. The tattoo of the club's Reaper symbol onto the body makes membership a part of the body; likewise, Jax and Opie's full back-pieces make the kutte part of the body. The brotherhood stabilizes through this permanence within and upon the body of every member. I argue this too is posthumanism, because the tattoo is not only signaling identity (preexisting membership) but also *making* identity through body modification. The ink becomes part of the self; the foreign is taken into the body. Tattooing is an identity technology: it comes from outside the body, revealing modification *of* the body that is an addition *to* the body.<sup>16</sup>

The modification of (and the act of adding to) the body in order to make the bearer part of an ideologically-driven brotherhood that is larger than its individual members is precisely how chivalry works in Cohen's inhuman circuit. Cohen specifically addresses weaponry, armor, and horses, but heraldic symbols or badges of membership (such as those marking membership in the Order of the Garter) are also shared identity markers. However, like the biker's kutte, these symbols can be removed. By contrast, tattoos can only be hidden because they are genuinely part of the body, a fully posthuman addition that is permanent and integrated into the flesh. Like the body a tattoo modifies, the Sons of Anarchy's tattoos are visible even in their removal. The club requires insignia tattoos to be blacked out or filled in completely; laser removal is not an option. In the episode "Una Venta," Jax encounters Reggie, a former member of the Tuscon, AZ charter of the club (SAMTAZ) who, upon officially leaving the MC, had a back-piece similar to Jax's own filled in.<sup>17</sup> Reggie's act is considered honorable: the filled tattoo signals past brotherhood and obligations to never betray the club. Brotherhood is always present under the skin or another layer of ink; though the identity component may be overwritten, it is still acknowledged.

However, those who have betrayed the club by failing to acknowledge this ongoing relationship are treated harshly. For example, in the first season a brother who was expelled from the club (Kyle Hobart, whose betrayal and cowardice led to Opie's imprisonment for five years) is discovered to have failed to cancel his tattoos. The club offers him the choice between removing the tattoos (a full back-piece like Jax and Opie's) using either fire or knife. Kyle chooses fire, and the tattoos are seared off his back using a blowtorch. This is the only way the posthuman identity technology can be separated from the flesh of the man, and the cancellation shows that Kyle has forfeited the benefits that his past service would offer. Moreover, it shows that Kyle is a cancer to the brotherhood: like a tumor, his connection to them is brutally excised. Kyle is not permitted to participate in the inhuman circuit that binds all the brothers together, and burning off his tattoos show that his individual circuit is utterly blocked and removed from the larger circuit, or system, that is the MC and its many charters. The show does not need tell us Kyle's ultimate fate—he is dumped in front of a hospital, wrapped in a blanket—because the message is clear: this circuit has been utterly destroyed.

Tattoos are important technologies of the bikers' inhuman circuit, but their motorcycles are a significant part of their identities as well. The comparison between motorcycle and horse is not a simple parallel, though it is the most important relationship for biker and knight alike. The difference is biological: Cohen argues that the medieval knight is more than the sum of his parts—though man and horse are separate bodies, "It is not as if the horse is a passive vehicle and the knight its all-controlling driver."<sup>18</sup> Rather, two bodies, horse and man, work in synchronous movement and purpose, adapting to each other in the process of becoming a new entity with two bodies rather than

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Charlene Elsby, "My Skin, My Self: SAMCRO's Ink and Personal Identity," in *Sons of Anarchy and Philosophy*, 107-16.

<sup>17</sup> "Potlatch," season 2, episode 8.

<sup>18</sup> Cohen, "The Inhuman Circuit," 173.

two separate entities.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, the motorcycle *functions* for the biker the same way the horse does for a knight: the bike is so central to the biker's identity that it is present even when it is absent. Unlike the horse, however, the motorcycle is not alive in the biological sense, and thus the biker could be seen as the "all-controlling driver" that Cohen's knight is not. Posthumanism is a useful tool that allows us to understand how the motorcycle, indeed most technology, possesses an agency as well, even if it cannot reason or react the same way that animals and humans react: the biker is thus not an "all-controlling driver," either. The motorcycle is a complex system that may have no bare, or biological, life of its own, but its very inorganic existence permits it to be a technology that unifies as well as acts.

Heidegger argued that "technology is a way of revealing,"<sup>20</sup> and Ferrando builds upon this by describing posthumanism as an approach that "investigates technology precisely as a mode of revealing, thus re-accessing its ontological significance in a contemporary setting where technology has been mostly reduced to its technical endeavors."<sup>21</sup> The motorcycle isn't only a remarkable machine: for the outlaw biker it is a vehicle for freedom, a lifestyle, a common point of interest and connection, but also an inhuman entity that changes the rider even as the rider changes the bike. This is precisely the relationship that exists in Cohen's inhuman circuit between man and horse,<sup>22</sup> and this is why I emphasize that the motorcycle *functions* for Jax and his brothers much as a horse does for a medieval knight, both practically and socially. Without a horse and accessories, a knight is not fully a knight; without a bike and accessories, a biker is not a biker. Like the horses, the bikes require skill, training, maintenance; remounts are sometimes necessary, but inherently disruptive and uneasy. Jax's bike is not the same as John's bike: they are parts of different identity circuits.

A fascinating part of Cohen's argument about the inhuman circuit is that by joining into a circuit, the components (animals, men, armor, arms) are "objects [that] lose their materiality to become conduits and agents" of ideologies.<sup>23</sup> The Sons of Anarchy offer analogs to knighthood that unify kutte, tattoos, and motorcycles under the blanket of what they call brotherhood—mixture of loyalty, violence, ideology, and cult-like dedication that drive all their training, actions, and thinking. A bike and kutte bring ideology, a code of conduct, into the circuit of an individual identity; this is what makes Jax a brother. Yet a brotherhood is a collective of individuals who share an agreement to be part of that larger group; individuals comprise their own identity circuits – though they may hold components in common. When an individual circuit is broken because part of it dies, the parts of that now-broken circuit become conduits for the dead individual's ideology. Because it is now fragmented, however, it doesn't work well: while John Teller's book and motorcycle and boots were once part of the John-circuit, his death fragments them from his identity (since all must be part of the circuit, though the human element dominates). The objects have become conduits feeding into the existing Jax-circuit; this should be positive, but Jax only integrates John into himself and not into the collective brotherhood—and as an individual, he cannot support this burden of two circuits within himself. It's too much for his singular identity.

The Sons, as a collective, have a way to cope with such situations: since they style themselves "Men of Mayhem" and their symbol is the Reaper, they know that some identities and burdens are too powerful for one man, such as the emotional load associated with killing. Mr. Mayhem, the Reaper, is one such example of coping with murder: when a brother kills for the club he gains a patch representing his status as one of the group, announcing him as one of the Men of Mayhem (so, Mayhem's servant). Similarly, medieval knights and modern soldiers are offered a collective easing of conscience when they kill for honor (knights) or under orders (soldiers): group membership and action under the authorized banner of the group allow the individual's acts, as well as his trauma, to be distributed and diluted through the collective identity circuit.

However, the outlaw biker faces an additional burden not often encountered by the honorable knight: sometimes, a brother must kill another brother for the sake of the club. The example of Kyle Hobart is one way to address the problem: the member is expelled first and then killed, and thus no brother kills another. But not all cases are so clear-cut, and brotherhood has a system in place. The chosen killer is not one of the Men of Mayhem, but rather

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Ferrando, "Posthumanism," 29.

<sup>21</sup> Ferrando, "Posthumanism," 29.

<sup>22</sup> Cohen, "The Inhuman Circuit," 173-77.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 179.

becomes Mr. Mayhem himself. The club must unanimously agree and vote that the victim will “meet” Mr. Mayhem, much as a jury must collectively agree to sentence a criminal to death. Bringing death to a fellow brother is a state of exception, evoked at extreme need, and it is a sacrifice and trauma for the man upon whom the duty falls. To offset this, the collective brotherhood holds the responsibility to evoke and thus take on the burden. The final episode of the series sees Jax giving up his leadership and directing his successor, Filip “Chibs” Telford, to call for the Mayhem vote, and shows them how they must vote; but because Jax has taken this burden from them, the club reciprocally allows him the opportunity and dignity to choose his own end. This is their final act of unity, and Jax does not abuse the chance—in this moment, the chivalric brotherhood is fully functional and independent of their founders.

The forms and protocols must be met, however, before Jax can meet Mr. Mayhem in himself. In the final episode of the series, Jax destroys all the loose ends, ensuring that his sins, and those of his fathers (plural), will not return to haunt his sons or the club. By killing his mother, his opponents, and burning his own journals along with John Teller’s haunting book, Jax becomes the Reaper, a transformation he finalizes by mounting his father’s bike and putting on his father’s boots (Jax has worn bright white sneakers for seven years). This imagery of haunting and death is echoed powerfully in the visual vocabulary of the episode when Jax sits on the steps of a courthouse, waiting for a victim: disguised as a homeless man, Jax is draped in a heavy blanket that shadows his face, arranged like the robes of a grim reaper on a funereal monument. Notably, however, Jax becomes the Reaper but he does not become Mr. Mayhem: his actions are not yet collectively authorized, though they do benefit the group. Instead, Jax turns himself into the singular personification of death, in full awareness that for the Sons of Anarchy these individual actions are criminal *because* Jax acted alone. Jax’s appropriation of the artifacts of his father’s life is theft: those objects aren’t just his possessions, or part of his identity circuit. Rather, they are part of the club because John was part of the club. The crime is its own punishment: the individual will be overwhelmed by a burden the collective supported.

Thus, the brotherhood’s endorsement of the Mayhem vote and their granting of a choice in the encounter are key for Jax: with their approval, he gains the strength to kill the lingering remains of his father’s identity circuit, which means—due to their integration—that he must kill himself. This is the moment in which Jax transforms from the Reaper to Mr. Mayhem, and the collective component is key. The collectivity also includes objects, since the inhuman circuit is comprised of objects, human flesh, and ideology. So while John Teller died on the bike, the bike survived, and that circuit must be closed because it has lingered past its natural life, flooding Jax with another man’s identity. Jax becomes the man whose death is not murder but sacrifice by giving up his fight for individuality; he achieves this by killing himself as part of the collective.<sup>24</sup> He throws away his signature shoes, and puts on his father’s boots; he burns John’s book and his own journals to stop the transmission of their corrupted and too powerful code of conduct. He gets permission to die, and they, John and Jax, will die as Sons of Anarchy should: on two wheels, at speed, and they will not linger.<sup>25</sup> Jax drives John’s bike directly under the wheels of a big rig, destroying both himself and the bike. The death of Jax on John’s machine is the death of a cross-generation inhuman circuit.

Posthumanism helps separate these layered meanings in a show where the primary characters insist they desire anarchy and freedom to be purely human above all else, while paradoxically imposing upon themselves harsher laws than normative society as they weld motorcycles to the core of their identities. But it is medievalism that provides the key to understanding the appeal of the series. The Sons are awful people, and Jax tells us his death means that the bad guys have lost since “a good father and a good outlaw can’t settle inside the same man.”<sup>26</sup> The show should not be appealing: the violence is relentless; the life is chaotic, uncertain, painful, and emotional. *Sons of Anarchy* offers the modern viewer fictional insight into a world that appeals to us precisely because of its medieval echoes: by seeing this

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<sup>24</sup> This point of suicide in the final episode has important resonance with the series overall: in season 4, Jax, when asked if he thought a brother terrified of returning to prison would kill himself, says dismissively “Sons don’t kill themselves.” Consequently, many fans angrily questioned Jax’s choice in the final moments of the series. Reading Jax’s death as a purposeful destruction of the poisonous John-circuit, and Jax’s own death as a sacrifice to achieve this goal, resolves this apparent conflict. See “Kiss,” season 4, episode 9, directed by Billy Gierhart, aired 1 November 2011 (Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2012), DVD.

<sup>25</sup> Gemma, speaking to Tara in “Kiss” (season 4, episode 9), says that “John went out the way they should all go out – on two wheels, at speed.”

<sup>26</sup> “Papa’s Goods,” season 7, episode 13, directed by Kurt Sutter, aired 9 December 2014 (Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2015), DVD.



as medieval we can find pleasure in it, because we recognize the sense of adventure, loyal companionship, adherence to an internal code, and a life of violence as a (suitably “gritty”) variation on the medieval chivalric romance. We can read the bikers as knights, and find in them anti-heroes, rogues, and renegades;<sup>27</sup> we can find in the bikers an echo of knighthood before chivalric romance overwrote popular memory of knights.

The loyalty and brotherhood of the Sons mirrors the chivalric brotherhood of the medieval knight (both historical and literary); there are parallels of equipment between these fictional bikers and medieval knights. More importantly, the identity circuits of each group functions, collectively and individually, along identical pathways. The appeal of *Sons of Anarchy* depends on the same fundamental underlying narrative structures of identity that drive the appeal of an Arthurian romance, like *Yvain, the Knight with the Lion*. This is why we should read *Sons of Anarchy* through the lens of medievalism: if the bikers are knights, they become an inhuman circuit that allows us to see their interior humanity through their externalized characteristics. The value of the collective is recognized as vital to the individual; the identity cycle is lauded and visible. The difference is in how the stories end, and *Sons of Anarchy* has always been a tragedy.

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<sup>27</sup> Jax’s deepening moral culpability is discussed in terms of an outsider verging on being genuinely Other by Ashley M. Donnelly in *Renegade Hero or Faux Rogue: The Secret Traditionalism of Television Bad Boys* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014).