Shakespeare in the Pride Lands

The Lion King is an animated film that was released by Walt Disney Pictures in the summer of 1994. The film was considered an instant success, with many outstanding reviews. As of November 2007, the film is the highest grossing traditionally animated film ever. The success of The Lion King led to a television series, two additional films, numerous amounts of merchandise and even a Tony-winning Broadway musical. However, it is impossible to look at the success of the film without looking at where the creative team drew some of their inspiration. Many aspects and themes used within The Lion King are similar to those used within William Shakespeare’s play Hamlet.

Of course, with any adaptation, there are comparisons and contrasts. The Lion King could be considered Hamlet but with a happy ending. There are only two characters killed within the world of The Lion King, while in Hamlet, the majority of the characters are killed. The creative team for The Lion King took aspects from the well-known play and spun it on its head, having to adapt it in such a way that it would appeal to their target audience, which is children. They could not have hints about an adulterous relationship between Simba’s mother and his Uncle; they could not have a character commit suicide, and they certainly couldn’t have their main character responsible for the deaths of two his former friends. These aspects would have put the film at risk, maybe not having it created at all. But, with that in mind, a viewer can look at the film and try to pinpoint the hints of Shakespearean elements.

In Hamlet, the plot of the play begins a month after the death of old Hamlet, who
was the King of Denmark. *The Lion King* decides to open with the polar opposite, the birth of the royal Prince Simba. Prince Simba is the character in *The Lion King* that most resembles Prince Hamlet. Just like Hamlet, Simba is the only known son of Mufasa and Sarabi, the King and Queen of the kingdom known as the Pride Lands. When he is born, he is presented to the entire animal kingdom as the future King of the Pride Lands.

It isn’t until later within the film that the resemblance to Hamlet’s personality becomes more evident. After having disobeyed his father, Simba feels incredibly guilty for his actions, so spends the day out with his Uncle Scar. He is unaware of it, but Scar, who is jealous of the young cub’s place in the succession of the throne, has plotted to murder both Simba and King Mufasa. Simba is told by his Uncle that he needs to stay in this gorge because King Mufasa has a surprise for the boy and is going to meet him there. Shortly after Scar leaves the area, Simba notices the ground shaking beneath his paws and glances up, seeing a herd of Wildebeest stampeding down into the gorge. He attempts to run from the oncoming herd, but they are immensely bigger than him, so the animals are soon all around him.

King Mufasa does come to Simba’s rescue, grabbing his son and putting him out of harm’s way, but no one comes to the King’s rescue. After saving his son, the King tries to climb up the rock side, up towards his brother who told him of his son’s danger. He begs his brother to pull him to safety, but Scar grabs hold of the lion and instead throws him down into the stampede, where he is trampled to death. After the King’s death, Scar manages to implant it into Simba’s mind that he is responsible for his father’s death. He instructs Simba to run away and never return. Once Simba has begun to run
from the kingdom, Scar sends his loyal servants (a trio of hyenas) after the cub to kill him. They are unsuccessful and Simba is able to escape into a life of banishment.

Like Hamlet, Simba has his throne stolen from him by his jealous uncle, who takes the place of King in the Prince’s absence. Simba is also banished from his own Kingdom, sent off to his death. Prince Hamlet is placed into the same situation later in the play, when King Claudius sends him off to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with instructions for the King of England to kill Hamlet. Simba and Hamlet are both able to escape imminent death through a bit of luck and cunning. Hamlet decides to betray his former friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, by changing the king’s letter so the orders say to murder the pair instead. Simba is able to escape his death by outrunning the treacherous hyenas, crawling through a briar patch that they are too afraid to follow him into, then running as far as he can before exhaustion claims him.

In Hamlet, Prince Hamlet’s most loyal friend actually turns out to be Horatio, a fellow student from Wittenberg. His former friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, turn out to be helping the King and Queen to spy on the Prince. Even his lover, Ophelia, betrays him in a way by reporting to her father about everything that Hamlet has been doing as of late that was out of ordinary. He only seems to have one person through out the entire play that he can relay upon. Simba, however, is the opposite of Hamlet, for he has an entire cast of characters that believe in him. His character flaw is that he does not believe in himself and continues to feel guilty for the death of his father, even years later when he is a full grown lion. He is found in banishment by the lioness he was betrothed to as a child, Nala, and he refuses to return to the Pride Lands and take his throne, even though she begs him.
His own self-doubt comes to an end when he meets the ghost of his father, Mufasa. Though the confrontation between the ghost and the son does not take place at the beginning of the narrative, as it does in *Hamlet*, the two scenes are strikingly similar. Simba is guided to a pond by the counterpart of Horatio, a mandrill named Rafiki, just as Hamlet was told to go on watch outside the castle by Horatio at the beginning of the play. It is at the pond that Simba sees the ghost of his father and it is outside the castle where Hamlet sees the ghost of his father. The ghost of old Hamlet seeks for his son to avenge his death and to remember him. Mufasa’s requests are not much different, for Mufasa accuses his son of forgetting him, much like Old Hamlet does to Prince Hamlet. This adds to Simba’s emotional turmoil that his own father is inadvertently saying that he is disappointed in the Prince for his actions. The ghost of Mufasa states that Simba had forgotten who he was, thus he had forgotten Mufasa. Then he gives the Prince instructions to take back the throne, which would require Simba avenging Mufasa, and to remember. The two scenes are strikingly similar, though they take place at different points in the separate narratives.

Both Hamlet and Simba return from banishment, returning to their respective kingdoms. Hamlet is able to fulfill his father’s wishes, though it takes him considerably longer time to do so. Hamlet spent a long time thinking about his actions and how to go about them, trying to plot out every possible consequence. It isn’t until after his return from England that he seems to have the amount of determination to kill the King. Unlike Hamlet, it does not take Simba much thought to return to his Kingdom and take back what is rightfully his. Hamlet encounters the ghost of his Father in the fourth scene of the first act; Simba encounters the ghost of his father in the 19th chapter of the film, which is
near the climax of the film. Hamlet finally kills King Claudius in the second scene of the final act, while Simba battles his Uncle only three chapters after encountering the ghost.

Hamlet was responsible for the death of King Claudius, but had he not procrastinated the way that he had, many more lives would have been saved. Hamlet is a tragedy, the majority of the characters dead at the end of the narrative. *The Lion King* does not have this element. When the film ends, the only character to die other than King Mufasa is Scar, who isn’t even killed by the protagonist. Simba is not the same as Hamlet as he is able to attempt to feel compassion. He gives his Uncle a chance to go into banishment, the way he had done, giving him a chance at life, which was by far more than the lion deserved. But Scar rejects banishment and after fighting with Simba, is thrown off a cliff, and then met by the hyenas that had been meant to kill Simba earlier in the film. Scar’s death is another allusion to *Hamlet*, where he is killed instead of Simba, much like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the case of *Hamlet*.

While Simba is the most like the character of Hamlet, it is Scar who is the most like the character of Claudius. He is immediately jealous of his nephew from the moment he is born, because it is very unlikely that Scar will be able to be King with Simba ahead of him in the line of succession for the throne. So, he comes up with two plans to take over the throne. The first just involves the murder of Simba, by having the trio of hyenas kill him and the young cub, Nala. This proves to be a failure, because Mufasa comes to the children’s aid. His second murder attempt is much crueler and meant to take both the lives of the King and the Prince. He constructs the plan to have the herd of wildebeests stampede the gorge, where Simba and Mufasa were both meant to be trampled. The death
of Mufasa is accomplished, as the lion throws the King off the rock slide into the stampede.

One noticeable difference between Scar and Claudius are their managerial aspects. Claudius is portrayed as an efficient King who is able to take the rule of Denmark with ease, while Scar is quite the opposite. Under Scar’s rule, the Pride Lands become over-hunted, because he allows the hyena population into the kingdom, and eventually suffers an apparent drought. Scar also does not attempt to take Sarabi, Simba’s mother and his sister-in-law, as a mate the way that Claudius does with Gertrude. It is possible that Disney would not have approved of a marriage between the antagonist and the mother of the protagonist, as it might be considered a bit too mature for younger audiences to understand.

Other characters have aspects of characters from *Hamlet* as well. Timon and Pumba could be compared to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, though they are more like the pair that are portrayed in the play and film *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. They are a pair of characters that are hardly distinguishable in personality at first glance and are placed into the film for comedic effect. Unlike the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of *Hamlet*, they are completely loyal to Simba and serve as caregivers to the Prince when he is banished from the Pride Lands. It is also interesting to note that Timon is the name of the main character in *Timon of Athens*, another Shakespeare play. It was possible that the writers named the character after another Shakespearean character to make the viewer think of the Shakespearean aspects within the film.

Zazu is a hornbill that was the majordomo of King Mufasa and a sort of babysitter for young Simba. Zazu can’t be connected to one specific character from Hamlet, though
he seems to have aspects of several. Like Polonius, he works with the royal family, but Zazu is not as easily steered from loyalty as Polonius. Polonius often tries to impress King Claudius, while Zazu is shown to be generally aggravated by Scar. Zazu is often the character shown with Nala, who is the closest character in *The Lion King* to Ophelia, and is the one who takes care of her when Mufasa takes Simba away for a discussion. Zazu only serves Scar because he has been confined in a cell made from a ribcage. He also has aspects of the Players, for he is forced to entertain Scar. Though no play takes place within *The Lion King*, when Zazu mutters under his breath that he would never be forced to do entertain the king when Mufasa was around, Scar lashes out angrily about how they are not supposed to bring up his brother’s name. This scene is vaguely similar to the play *Hamlet*, for it shows the antagonist worried that people are going to discover the truth.

Nala, as stated earlier, is the closest character in *The Lion King* to Ophelia, though their similarities are not as great as their contrasts. Nala could be looked upon by the viewers as Ophelia without the influences of Polonius and Laertes. She is shown to be a dominating young girl at the beginning of the film and later a strong woman. She is betrothed to Simba from birth, something both her mother, Simba’s parents and Zazu are supportive of. The royal court’s desire for Nala to marry Simba could be an allusion to Gertrude’s statement in Hamlet, “I hop’d thou shouldst have been my Hamlet’s wife” (*Hamlet* 5.1).

An interesting scene is when Nala and Simba are reunited in the jungle. Prior to reuniting with Simba, Nala had thought he had been killed the same day as King Mufasa. The two seem to reconcile instantly and run off into the jungle together. Simba jumps into the water and she rushes to the edge of the pool, looking in it for him with a worried
expression. He jumps out and pulls her into the water. It takes her a moment, but she eventually bursts through the surface, gasping for air. It is a scene that shows how Nala isn’t Ophelia, whether placed into the film for that reason or not. She was yanked down into the water, but didn’t let it claim her, she fought for her life. The film implies that Ophelia was unable to do the same, since Ophelia ends up drowning. Nala is also a character within the narrative without a father, while in Hamlet Ophelia did not have a mother. The character of Nala could be looked at as an exploration of how Ophelia would have turned out had she had a mother instead of a father and had Hamlet not been there to play his mind games upon. Nala is able to show the potential that Ophelia could have had.

In an interview on the Special Edition DVD of The Lion King, one of the directors for the film, Roger Allers, mentioned how they didn’t begin to see the Hamlet aspects of the film until they made the decision to make Scar the brother of Mufasa. After that the parallels became more apparent to the film makers to the point where they began to even insert things on purpose. Allers says “There were days when we went more down the Hamlet path then other days. There were moments when we had lines of Shakespeare into the movie.” An example Allers gives is having Scar say “Goodnight Sweet Prince,” as the last words to Mufasa before he tosses him off the ridge. He then proceeded to mention how it became a little self conscious of the Hamlet elements, so they toned it down, leaving the film with only echoes of the play.

Though The Lion King has aspects of Hamlet in its narrative, such as the similarity between the characters and themes, it is a film that is able to stand on its own. The comparisons to the Shakespearean play are compelling to the viewer that knows of
their existence, while the contrasts could lead the viewer to think ‘What if’ questions that pertain to the Hamlet narrative. The formula proved to be successful, for the film is one of the highest grossing of all time, and the Disney Corporation decided to use the formula for the continuing films in The Lion King series. The immediate sequel takes aspects from another popular Shakespeare play, Romeo and Juliet. The third film, which takes place in between scenes of the original film, takes aspects from the Hamlet based play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. The Lion King is the perfect example of how Shakespeare continues to be prevalent in modern day culture and cinema.
Works Cited


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