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Hamlet and The Lion King: Shakespearean Influences on Modern Entertainment

There is no doubt that today's entertainment has lost most of its touch with the more classical influences of its predecessors. However, in mid-1994, Walt Disney Pictures released what could arguably be the best animated feature of all time in *The Lion King*. With a moral base unlike most of the movies released at the time, TLK placed a children's facade on a very serious story of responsibility and revenge. However, this theme is one of the oldest in history, and it is not the least apparent in one of the oldest works of literature by The Bard himself, William Shakespeare. The work that Disney's TLK parallels is none other than *Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*, and the film shadows this work so closely, that parallels between the main characters themselves are wildly apparent. This very close comparison has led critics "to compare the movie to *Hamlet* in the importance of its themes" (Schwalm 1). But with a closer inspection of the characters themselves do we see just how apparent these similarities are.

In *The Lion King*, the role of the young prince whose father is murdered is played by a cub named Simba, whose naivete procures him more than his fair share of hardships and troubles. By the acts in the story alone, one can see that Simba is a direct representation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet Jr.*, but not only that, each of them shares similar actions in the play. Interpretations of Simba's actions are as profound as Hamlet's, particularly of why Hamlet delayed in exacting vengeance for his father's death (Harrison 236). Both Simba and Hamlet Jr. "delay" their action of retribution for their respective father's deaths. The loss of their paternal companion leaves Hamlet incredibly melancholy, and Simba without a royal teacher and father during his tender years. Each of them runs from their responsibility, although inside themselves they know what must be done: Hamlet attempts to validate his suspicions while Simba hides from his past. However, some have attempted to theorize that Hamlet's delay is due to his mental instability, his madness over the death of his father. Eliot refutes this, calling the characterization "a simple ruse, and to the end, we may assume, understood as a ruse to the audience" (62). Simba exhibits this same behavior, venting his feelings in mournful retaliation against responsibility, most notably when his childhood friend Nala attempts to persuade him to return to the Pride Lands. This delay between our characters adds a more haunting effect between the two works. It's surprising that today's audiences can be so moved by themes that were first implemented in literature almost four hundred years before.

Similarly, the characters of Hamlet Sr. and Mufasa bear a striking resemblance to one another, not only in their actions, but their meanings as well. Hamlet Sr., the once king of Denmark,

ruled his kingdom in peace and prosperity, evident in the conversations in Act I, Scene I between Marcellus and Horatio about the creations of implements of war in Denmark under the new king, Claudius. Mufasa, too, ruled peacefully over the Pride Lands, only worrying about his son and his responsibilities. But, after their deaths, they each become more than the kings they once were. They become the heralds for their sons, compelling them to avenge their deaths and take responsibility for what their uncles have done. Each deceased king approaches his son in the same way: via an apparition that gives a direct, if not opaque, monologue driving their princes to action, and each ghost leaves the interpretation of their messages open to their sons. Neither Hamlet Sr. or Mufasa tell their respective sons directly to destroy their murderers, although Hamlet Sr. does name the perpetrator directly, it is Hamlet that decides that action must be taken. It is this direct allusion of one major character with an integral part in advancing the work to another that helps solidify Shakespeare's influence as a writer of great literature.

But it isn't just the protagonists that allude to one another; the villains in both *The Lion King* and *Hamlet* can be directly and similarly compared to one another. Both Scar, from *TLK* and Claudius, from *Hamlet*, are brothers of the king, murder their sibling to usurp the throne, and take their brother's wife as their queen (There is no direct proof of this conjecture for Scar, but since Scar calls upon Sarabi, the former mate of King Mufasa, in *The Lion King* to report on the status of the Pride Lands, it stands to reason that she is Queen of Pride Rock.). It is not so much the characterizations of the characters in this instance than the actions that provide proof of how Shakespearean literature invokes writers today. Claudius, at first, appears satisfied by his deeds, enjoying the life of a king, parading around to view his belongings, wedding his own brother's wife, and holding banquets in his own honor, all the while preparing for war with a neighboring Scandinavian country. Scar revels in his ill-gotten spoils as well, allowing his hyannic henchmen to hunt the Pride Lands to practical defoliation while he reclines in the pride's cave, tormenting his majordomo Zazu and eating more than his fair share of the kills. Scar, like Claudius, grossly exploits his new-found power and drives his kingdom into war. But here is where the similarity begins to diverge. In *Hamlet*, we see Claudius repenting for his sins against his brother, repelling the fact that he committed that heinous deed and begging forgiveness from his Lord. Scar, on the other hand, never once doubts his actions, and goes with them to their final conclusion. Scar even goes as far as to taunt the prince, Simba, as he hangs off the precipice of Pride Rock: "And now here's my little secret. I killed Mufasa!" One could argue that the act of confessing to the crimes is an additional parallel between the characters, but their motives for doing so are not alike. Claudius is making an attempt to repent for the sin cast upon his soul, while Scar is bawdily declaring his cleverness over his kind-hearted yet naive brother.

With the major characters in both works aside, the similarities between secondary characters in *The Lion King* and *Hamlet* are still quite striking. The insight of one work in another is so deep that *The Lion King* goes as far to allude Hamlet's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with Timon and Pumbaa. A comparison here, if not the greatest comparison, is the fact that both

pairs of characters in both works are provided as relief from the main focus of the stories. Timon and Pumbaa provide a welcome resort from his responsibilities and hauntings of his past by introducing him to the carefree life of "Hakuna Matata", while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern allow the audience to know that Prince Hamlet does enjoy a life outside of the royal house, mingling with fellow scholars-to-be and friends. However, Hamlet's friends are charged by his nemesis, Claudius, to bring Hamlet before the King on numerous occasions. There is no direct evidence that Timon and Pumbaa are in the employment of Scar, nevertheless, the sidekick pair in TLK provide a very similar function, whether they realize it or not. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are a constant reminder to Hamlet about the revenge that must be exacted upon Claudius by being messengers to the mournful prince whenever Claudius needs them to be. By locating Hamlet and announcing that the king wishes to have court with him, they play an important role in the forward progress of the play, and the downward spiral of Hamlet's sadness. Timon and Pumbaa, similarly, at one time attempt to procure their leonine friend's past from his memory. Simba falters, at first, his carefree life shattered by the memories of what brought him to the jungle in the first place. But when he finally gives in and tells them when his own father entrusted him too, Timon and Pumbaa laugh uproariously, disbelieving what they hear. But it is this jogging of Simba's memory at the prodding of Timon and Pumbaa that moves the story onward, and brings Simba's melancholy back to him. And when the past finally becomes fully clear to Timon and Pumbaa with the arrival of the lioness Nala, they not only attempt to bring Simba to his senses in their own blunt, of not comical, way, they attempt to confront him and make him face his past. They fail in this, but they still bring to Simba's mind the events in his childhood, and the pain that it brought to him. Although Timon and Pumbaa had no intention of doing so, they performed the same act of reminding the main character of their responsibility to their father, and to their kingdoms that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern did to Hamlet Jr.

Another secondary character to the protagonist and antagonist are the respective queens of each work, Sarabi from The Lion King and Gertrude from Hamlet: Prince of Denmark. Each of them are nearly complete mirror images of one another, each having the same place in the social hierarchy, equal amounts of power over their kingdoms, and emotional ties to the main protagonists of the stories. Sarabi is the Queen of Pride Rock, leader of the lionesses since the reign of King Mufasa. Although she is not the reason Scar usurped the throne from his brother, it is a near certainty that she has stayed on as Queen because she is quite adept at her duties. Gertrude, likewise, is adept at her duties as well, although they take on a quite different task than Sarabi. She is mainly for show, for Claudius to own and adorn with his newly gotten wealth. Both Sarabi and Gertrude are Queens, but both show little or no power over their subjects. Sarabi is nearly killed by Scar when she dares to question one of his decisions, which shows the place of the lionesses in the pride: pawns in Scar's quest for power. Any deviation from being simple huntresses results in pain, and perhaps death at the paws of Scar and his multitude of hyenas. Gertrude, too, never appears to order anyone, although she certainly has the capacity to do so. She, instead plays the weakened queen, doing as her husband bids her and plaintively bending to Claudius's will. But even though these

similarities are surprisingly close for non-primary characters, it is their emotional connection to their sons that spurs the stories along. Gertrude's marriage to Claudius enrages Hamlet to no end, driving him more and more out of his delay to act upon his father's death. It is her willing forgetfulness of her former husband that pushes Hamlet to the brink, their emotional bond that pains them both to ends that he must act on, and she tries deeply to hide. Sarabi, too, has such an effect on her son Simba. When Nala finds Simba, and realizes that he is not dead, as Scar had said, she is enthralled and wonders aloud about the feelings of his mother. This has a noticeable affect on Simba. He recoils, the responsibility that he believes is his is once again thrust upon him, and the thought of his mother's feelings towards his past deeds sends him further into sadness, furthering the story. And when Simba does return to Pride Rock, he is enraged when he sees how Scar is treating his mother, just as Hamlet is enraged at how Claudius treats his mother as well. In a way, it is the queen in each work that adds to the deep melancholy of the main characters and drives them to action.

Although much of modern entertainment may look like new entertainment on the surface, if we probe deeply enough, we can find connections to some of the greatest literature of all time. Shakespeare is probably one of the most influential writers of all time, if not all time, and his greatest works, not limited to Hamlet: Prince of Denmark, are the basis of many stories written today. His plays are continuously redone and reperformed, his sonnets quoted in many a song and story, his histories the basis of many school lessons, and his influences are more than profound in many cases, and in the case of The Lion King, those influences are the basis of the story, not only of the main protagonist and antagonist, but of secondary characters as well. Modern entertainment may have lost much of its roots, but comparisons such as these may well prove the old axiom: "There is no new literature being written, only old literature, redone."

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