



The Mane Event:

A Comparison of
William Shakespeare's
Hamlet
And Walt Disney's
The Lion King



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Ever since its premier, William Shakespeare's masterpiece, *Hamlet*, has been referred to hundreds of times all over the world. Almost four hundred years later, on June 24, 1994, Disney's 32nd full-length animated feature, *The Lion King*, was released in 2,550 movie theaters across the United States (Daly 20). One might never think to compare these two stories, with one being about a Danish prince during the eleventh century, and the other about a young lion living in the Pride Lands of Africa and his rites of passage. But the similarities are striking, including the death of the king, the use of henchmen as a way to get rid of the prince, the evil uncle becoming king unfairly, the numerous references to nature, and—perhaps the most obvious—the appearance of the prince's father in ghost form. Because of these reasons and others, Disney's musical comedy, *The Lion King* is a successful children's version of Shakespeare's tragedy, *Hamlet*.

In the grand tradition of Shakespearean plays, *Hamlet* has a large cast of at least twenty-four important characters, with several "minor" characters as well. During the initial brainstorming sessions of *The Lion King*, story supervisor Brenda Chapman, along with sixteen others whose names appear in the credits, knew that having more than fifteen characters might confuse a child and lose his interest (Daly 25). (*101 Dalmatians* didn't have 101 "important" characters.) The number of cast members (with names) in *The Lion King* was cut off at fourteen, with several of the characters playing a sort of double role. For example, Nala plays Simba's best friend and love, combining Horatio and Ophelia into one character. While Zazu, the king's majordomo (Disney's version of Polonius), is taking Simba and Nala to the waterhole one day, he observes their "little seeds of romance blossoming in the savannah. Your parents will be thrilled...what with you being betrothed and all." Simba responds, "I can't marry her. She's my

friend.” After he grows up and sees Nala again for the first time since that day near the waterhole, he realizes his love for her during the song “Can You Feel the Love Tonight.” Other characters from *Hamlet*, such as Laertes, are not included because there is no need for them in *The Lion King*. Nala having a brother would in no way advance the story, and so such a character is not created.

The death of the king is the driving factor in both *Hamlet* and *The Lion King*. *The Lion King* starts with the Presentation of Simba, and foreshadows the death of Mufasa, the king, by his jealous brother, Scar. Scar’s jealousy and hatred are obvious from the first time the audience meets him, with him saying (as the first spoken words of the movie) “Life’s not fair, is it? You see I—well, I...shall never be King.” This is because Mufasa’s child, Simba has just been born, making Scar the last in the royal line. Zazu remarks that “as the king’s brother, you should have been first in line [at the Presentation]!” Scar snaps back, “Well, I was first in line...until the little hairball was born,” and warns, “Oh, no, Mufasa. Perhaps YOU shouldn’t turn YOUR back on me.” It is obvious Scar has plans and for the others to be prepared:

So prepare for the coup of the century
Be prepared for the murkiest scam
Meticulous planning
Tenacity spanning
Decades of denial
Is simply why I’ll
Be king undisputed
Respected, saluted
And seen for the wonder I am
Yes, my teeth and ambitions are bared
Be prepared!

The actual death of Mufasa is similar to the death of King Hamlet in many ways. The death of King Hamlet is not witnessed by the audience, but they are told by Hamlet’s ghost what happened and how. The others in the cast think of the death in both instances as tragic, but they

do not suspect any foul play. When the stampede first starts in *The Lion King*, Zazu, who is with Mufasa, remarks, “Oh look, sire; the herd is on the move.” Mufasa replies, “Odd...” Mufasa is the only one to suspect anything out of the ordinary, but must save his son, who is trapped in the gorge where the wildebeests are stampeding. After saving Simba, Mufasa is swept away with the wildebeests, before leaping out of the herd and climb, with great difficulty, up the sheer rock slope. He sees his brother on the ledge up above and desperately cries out, “Scar! Broth— Brother! Help me!” Scar latches onto Mufasa’s forepaws with claws extended, and slowly and evilly whispers, “Long live the king” before throwing Mufasa backwards to his death. When Scar, as the only witness, tells the others of Mufasa’s death, he describes it as “a terrible tragedy.” The other characters never question the death of King Hamlet, and his ghost must tell Hamlet how he really died and who was responsible:

‘Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,
A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forgèd process of my death
Rankly abused. But know, thou noble youth,
The serpent that did sting thy father’s life
Now wears his crown. (I.v.36-41)

With the father out of the way, the uncle could now move on with his plans.

Both Claudius and Scar, playing the role of the evil uncle, must have some help in executing their plans to get rid of Hamlet and Simba. Claudius, fearing that Hamlet knows the truth about King Hamlet’s death, has him sent away to England in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s care to be killed. Claudius explains to Hamlet that it is for his own safety, in the wake of Polonius’s death:

Hamlet, this deed, for thine especial safety—
Which we do tender, as we dearly grieve
For that which thou hast done—must send thee hence
With fiery quickness. Therefore prepare thyself.
The bark is ready, and the wind at help,

Th' associates tend, and everything is bent
For England. (IV.iii.41-47)

Hamlet escapes and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are beheaded instead by order of a false letter from the king of Denmark. Similarly, Scar, fearing that Simba knows the truth about Mufasa's death, sends his hyenas, Shenzi, Banzai, and Ed, after Simba to kill him. After the death of the king, Scar surveys the gorge, to make sure his plan worked, and discovers Simba is still alive and silently crying under his father's lifeless paw. Scar immediately makes Simba feel responsible for everything that has just happened—including Mufasa's death:

Scar: Simba...What have you done?

Simba: There were wildebeests and he tried to save me... it was an accident, I didn't mean for it to happen.

Scar: Of course, of course you didn't. No one...ever means for these things to happen. ...But the king IS dead. And if it weren't for you, he'd still be alive... Oh! What will your mother think?

Simba: What am I gonna do?

Scar: Run away, Simba. Run...Run away and never return.

As soon as the young cub is out of earshot, Scar says to the three hyenas that have just appeared out of the smoke, "Kill him." The hyenas chase after Simba, up the gully, over the lip of the gorge and down the steep hill on the other side, before stopping in front of a briar patch. Seeing Simba go out the other side, Banzai says, "We gotta finish the job." Shenzi replies, "He's as good as dead out there anyway. And IF he comes back, we'll kill him."

After the deaths of King Hamlet and Mufasa, the second guy in line cuts and becomes king. In the case of *Hamlet*, Claudius marries Gertrude, and also becomes the king of Denmark, a title that is rightly Hamlet's. Hamlet, at first, is bitter towards his mother for remarrying so soon after her husband's death:

...Within a month,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes,

She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not, nor it cannot come to good.
But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue. (I.ii.153-159)

There is never a marriage between Scar and Mufasa's widow, Sarabi in *The Lion King*, for the simple reason that traditionally, in children's stories—especially as told by Walt Disney—the mother is never to blame for any wrong-doing—especially infidelity. (Remember that it was Cinderella's stepmother who was so mean and wicked.) A child does not want to be told horrible things his mother or father did, because the parent is supposed to be the one character in any children's story that is supportive. It gives the child faith in his parents. Scar does, however, believe his hyenas (finally) kill Simba, after two previous and failed attempts on Simba's life. Scar tells the rest of the pride of his "deep personal loss." His voice rises, "So it is with a heavy heart that I assume the throne." Neither prince is out of the story yet. They will come back to avenge their fathers' deaths, after learning that it was the uncle's doing.

Nature plays an enormous role both in *Hamlet* and *The Lion King*. In the former, it is more figurative than literal. In the latter, besides taking place in a natural world never touched by humans, it has several references to nature literally as well as figuratively. *Hamlet* is littered with references to the stars, Heaven and Hell, and disruption in the cosmos. The following selection is from a speech Hamlet makes right before seeing King Hamlet's Ghost for the first time. It is also a great example of the use of nature in the play:

So, oft it chances in particular men,
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As in their birth—wherein they are not guilty,
Since nature cannot choose his origin—
By their o'ergrowth of some complexion,
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,
Or by some habit that too much o'erleavens
The form of plausible manners, that these men,
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,

Being nature's livery or fortune's star,
His virtues else, by they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo,
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault. The dram of evil
Doth all the noble substance often dout
To his own scandal. (I.ii.23-38)

The Lion King is always making references to nature and the significance of certain aspects of nature. Mufasa does a very effective job of explaining how the Circle of Life works to young Simba:

Mufasa: Look, Simba. Everything the light touches is our kingdom.
Simba: Wow.
Mufasa: A king's time as ruler rises and falls like the sun. One day, Simba, the sun will set on my time here, and will rise with you as the new king. ...Everything you see exists together, in a delicate balance. As king you need understand that balance, and respect all the creatures—from the crawling ant to the leaping antelope.
Simba: But, Dad, don't we eat the antelope?
Mufasa: Yes, Simba, but let me explain. When we die, our bodies become the grass. And the antelope eat the grass. And so we are connected in the great Circle of Life.

Later that night when Simba asks if he and Mufasa will always be together, Mufasa tells Simba the importance of the stars:

Mufasa: Simba...Let me tell you something my father told me...Look at the stars. The great kings of the past look down on us from those stars...So whenever you feel alone, just remember that those kings will always be there to guide you...And so will I.

Nature is very important and in both cases reflects the feelings of the characters; nature also plays an effective role in showing how well the king is ruling. For example, under Mufasa, the Pride Lands are bright and thriving. As soon as Scar takes over, the colors turn gray and everything is destroyed. Timon refers to the Pride Lands as a "fixer-upper" when he, Pumbaa,

Nala and Simba return to take back the throne that is rightfully Simba's. After defeating Scar, the Pride Lands are bright and healthy again for the ending and the completion of the Circle of Life. In *Hamlet* the story takes place over five months, beginning in November. Being a tragedy, the scenes are dark and dreary and reflect the emotions of the characters.

The most important event in both stories is the appearance of the prince's deceased father in ghost form. Hamlet's father comes to tell him of his wrongful death, that Claudius is responsible, and Hamlet must avenge his death, "If thou didst ever thy dear father love...Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (I.v.24-25). Right before leaving Hamlet, his father's ghost ends with "Remember me" (I.v.92). In the children's version, Mufasa's ghost comes to Simba after Simba refuses to go back to Pride Rock to challenge his uncle to take his place as king:

Mufasa: Simba...

Simba: Father?

Mufasa: Simba, you have forgotten me.

Simba: No. How could I?

Mufasa: You have forgotten who you are and so have forgotten me. Look inside yourself, Simba. You are more than what you have become. You must take your place in the Circle of Life.

Simba: How can I go back? I'm not who I used to be.

Mufasa: Remember who you are. You are my son and the one true king. Remember who you are...Remember...

The gist of both speeches is the same and they both end with the important word, "remember."

The endings in *The Lion King* and *Hamlet* are very different. In Shakespeare's telling, all major characters die or are killed except for Horatio and Fortinbras. In the children's version, the only character who dies in the end is the one who deserves it: Scar. As far as children's stories go, *The Lion King* is heavy enough for children to handle without having every major character die. As far as Walt Disney animated features go, the death of Mufasa is one of only

three parents that die unfairly and during the movie—the other two being Bambi’s mother in 1942’s *Bambi*, and Tod’s mother in 1981’s *The Fox and the Hound*. (Ever wonder where Ariel, Belle, Aladdin, and Pocahontas’ mothers are?)

The Lion King does a very effective job of retelling the story of *Hamlet* so children can understand its essence.

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