

Elsinore in the Savanna: Shakespeare's Hamlet and the Moral Architecture of Jon Favreau's The Lion King

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Abstract—Four centuries have passed since Shakespeare's Hamlet was first staged at the Globe Theatre, yet the ethical dilemmas, psychological tensions, and moral architecture that define that play continue to resurface often in places where audiences least expect them. Jon Favreau's photorealistic remake of The Lion King (2019) is one such space. While Walt Disney's original animated feature from 1994 already acknowledged a Shakespearean debt, the 2019 version, with its expanded dialogue, richer emotional register, and more deliberate character development, intensifies these parallels in ways that demand sustained scholarly attention. This paper undertakes a comparative reading of Hamlet and The Lion King (2019), examining how the later text transplants Shakespearean themes of usurpation, filial duty, moral paralysis, and spiritual reckoning into popular cinematic imagination. Drawing on intertextual theory, psychoanalytic criticism, and adaptation studies, the paper argues that Favreau's film doesn't merely echo Shakespeare it reanimates him, embedding his moral grammar into a visual narrative that reaches global audiences across age groups and cultural backgrounds.

Index Terms—Hamlet, The Lion King (2019), adaptation studies, intertextuality, usurpation, moral paralysis, Shakespearean influence, Jon Favreau

I. Introduction

There's a certain irony in the fact that Shakespeare a playwright who drew freely from Plutarch, Holinshed, and Boccaccio has himself become the most borrowed-from author in Western literature. His plays don't sit quietly in the academic canon; they spill over into novels, operas, graphic novels, television serials, and now, with increasing sophistication, into mainstream commercial cinema. Among all these acts of cultural migration, perhaps none is more instructive than the journey of Hamlet into the African savanna.

When Disney released The Lion King in 1994, critics and scholars were quick to note the Hamlet parallel—a prince, a murdered father, a usurping uncle. The connection seemed almost self-evident. But it was also, in many ways, treated as a convenient metaphor rather than a rigorous structural debt. The 2019 photorealistic remake, directed by Jon Favreau, changes that equation. With its dramatically expanded runtime, more psychologically detailed characterization, and a tone that openly courts adult sensibility alongside childhood wonder, this version invites a more serious conversation about what it means to carry Shakespeare's architecture into contemporary visual storytelling.

This paper reads The Lion King (2019) not as a loose Hamlet parallel but as a genuine act of Shakespearean rethinking—one that takes the original play's central concerns and relocates them with careful intelligence. The murdered king, the fraudulent usurper, the haunted prince unable to act on his own convictions, the corrupted kingdom mirroring the corrupted court—all of these move from Elsinore to Pride Rock with a coherence that's worth examining in detail.

The value of such an examination extends beyond literary curiosity. If Shakespeare's moral architecture survives this kind of cultural transplantation, it tells us something important about the universality of the questions he was asking not just about power and revenge, but about the nature of identity, duty, grief, and the cost of inaction. These aren't Renaissance questions. They are, as *The Lion King* (2019) demonstrates, permanently human ones.

II. Review of Literature

Scholarship on Shakespearean adaptation is now a robust and well-contested field. Linda Hutcheon's foundational work on adaptation theory argues that a successful adaptation isn't a pale copy but a work that carries its own legitimate identity while sustaining a recognizable dialogue with its source. In this framework, *The Lion King* (2019) qualifies as an adaptation of considerable sophistication rather than a children's retelling with borrowed plot points.

Harold Bloom's concept of the anxiety of influence is equally relevant here, though it needs some adjustment to the cinematic context. Bloom argued that strong poets feel the weight of great precursors and must wrestle with that inheritance to establish their own authority. Directors working in commercial cinema rarely acknowledge such anxiety directly, but the structural evidence of that wrestling is visible in the choices Favreau makes particularly in how he deepens Simba's psychological stasis and extends the ghost-father encounter in ways that go beyond what the 1994 original required for its narrative purposes.

Specific comparative studies of *Hamlet* and *The Lion King* have been undertaken by scholars including Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan in *Deconstructing Disney* (1999), where they observe how the animated film negotiates Shakespearean tragedy through the Disney ideological lens. However, their analysis predates the 2019 remake and doesn't engage with the significantly altered register that Favreau brings to the material.

More recent scholarship by Sarah Hatchuel on Shakespeare and digital cinema offers useful tools for thinking about how photorealistic animation changes the emotional and ethical weight of borrowed narrative. When the savanna looks indistinguishable from a nature documentary, the moral seriousness of the story shifts accordingly. The 2019 film's near-documentary visual grammar asks its audience to take its ethical questions more seriously than any animated version could.

Psychoanalytic readings of *Hamlet* from Ernest Jones's classic Freudian study to Janet Adelman's work on maternal authority in the play are also relevant, particularly when examining how Simba's relationship with Mufasa's memory mirrors Hamlet's paralysis in the face of his father's ghost. The ghost, in both texts, isn't simply a narrative device; it's a psychological burden that the son must process before he can act.

III. Research Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, text-based methodology grounded in close reading and comparative literary analysis. The primary texts under examination are Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (the Second Quarto and First Folio variants, referenced through the Arden edition) and the screenplay and final cut of Jon Favreau's *The Lion King* (2019, Walt Disney Pictures). Both texts are treated as literary artifacts available for structural and thematic analysis, with the film read through its dialogue, visual language, and narrative architecture rather than solely through its technical production.

The theoretical framework draws from three converging methodologies. First, intertextual analysis as theorized by Julia Kristeva and later extended by Gérard Genette offers the conceptual vocabulary for tracing how one text absorbs, transforms, and reassembles elements from another. Genette's concept of hypertextuality the relationship between a hypertext (the film) and its hypo text (the play) is particularly useful for organizing the comparative observations in this paper.

Second, psychoanalytic criticism informs the reading of both Hamlet's and Simba's inner conflict. The paper doesn't apply psychoanalysis mechanically, but it does draw on the tradition that reads Hamlet's delay as a symptom of psychological over determination a condition visibly inherited by Simba in the 2019 version, whose extended scenes in the wilderness give Favreau space to dramatize this paralysis more explicitly than the 1994 film allowed.

Third, adaptation studies drawing primarily on Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* and Robert Stam's work on literary and filmic intertextuality provides the critical framework for evaluating the film as something more than a derivative. The question this methodology insists on asking isn't whether the film matches the play but what the film does with what it takes how it recontextualizes, revalues, or complicates the Shakespearean inheritance.

The paper proceeds through thematic rather than chronological comparison. Each section identifies a specific dimension of the Shakespearean original and traces how the film takes it up, modifies it, or enriches it with new cultural and visual meaning. This approach avoids the reductiveness of a scene-by-scene mapping and allows for a more genuinely analytical reading of both texts.

IV. Thematic Analysis

4.1 The Murdered King and the Demand of the Ghost At the structural heart of both *Hamlet* and *The Lion King* (2019) lies the same moral premise: a son must reckon with the circumstances of his father's death before he can take his rightful place in the world. In Shakespeare, this reckoning is mediated through the ghost of King Hamlet, who appears on the battlements of Elsinore in an atmosphere dense with cold, darkness, and spiritual unease. The ghost is simultaneously a political demand and a psychological wound. He wants justice, but his very presence destabilizes the prince who must deliver it.

Favreau's handling of the equivalent scene Simba's vision of Mufasa in the sky is one of the most significant expansions in the 2019 remake. Where the 1994 film renders this encounter with relatively gentle visual warmth, the 2019 version gives it a grander, more turbulent atmosphere. Mufasa's voice carries an authority that echoes the Shakespearean ghost's combination of paternal love and royal command. "Remember who you are," he says a line that functions, in its context, with precisely the weight that "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" carries in the play.

Both directives are, at their core, demands for identity restoration. The ghost of King Hamlet isn't merely asking his son to punish Claudius; he's asking him to reassemble a self that has been shattered by grief, displacement, and the terrifying knowledge of what his world actually is. Mufasa makes the same demand of Simba return, remember, restore. The parallel isn't accidental. It reflects a deeply Shakespearean understanding of how moral action requires, first, a stable sense of who one is and what one owes to the dead.

4.2 Usurpation and the Logic of the Fraudulent Throne If Shakespeare hadn't given us Claudius, Scar would still feel Shakespearean. The usurping villain who murders a king through deception, seizes the throne, and maintains power through fear and manipulation is one of the most enduring archetypes in Western drama, and Shakespeare's version of it in *Hamlet* is arguably its definitive expression.

Scar, in the 2019 version, is a more psychologically elaborate villain than his animated predecessor. Chiwetel Ejiofor's voice performance gives him a quality of wounded resentment a bitterness about being overlooked that mirrors, quite precisely, the Claudius who knows himself guilty even as he prays in the chapel. Both villains are undone not by strength but by the weight of what they've done. Claudius can't repent because his "offence is rank" and the things he gained by it remain in his possession. Scar can't rule well because the condition of his rule is a lie that the kingdom itself both natural and political refuses to sustain.

This is one of the most philosophically rich areas of comparison. In Shakespeare, the corruption of the court at Elsinore is expressed through a series of sickness and disease metaphors the state as a body infected at its head. In *The Lion King* (2019), this metaphor is literalized with extraordinary visual clarity. Under Scar's reign, the Pride Lands wither. The grass dies, the water retreats, the herds disappear. The land itself registers the moral bankruptcy of the ruler. What Shakespeare renders in language "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" Favreau renders in parched earth and empty skies.

The parallel between Claudius's fraudulent kingship and Scar's usurped rule also illuminates a shared philosophical conviction in both texts: that power obtained through betrayal carries the seed of its own destruction. Neither villain has the psychological resources to be a genuine ruler. Both are held in place by the terror they generate in others, and both ultimately collapse when confronted by the son they displaced.

4.3 The Paralyzed Prince: Delay, Guilt, and the Cost of Inaction The most psychologically complex inheritance the film takes from *Hamlet* is the figure of the irresolute prince the young man who knows what must be done and yet cannot do it. Hamlet's delay is the engine of the play's tragedy and has generated more critical commentary than almost any other feature of the Shakespearean canon. Is it cowardice? Oedipal confusion? Philosophical over-scrupulousness? The play resists a single answer, which is precisely what makes the delay so powerful.

Simba's years in the wilderness, in the 2019 film, are given a psychological texture that the animated version barely had room to develop. His refusal to return to the Pride Lands isn't presented as simple fear; it's presented as a complex tangle of guilt, grief, and identity loss. He believes because Scar has made him believe that he killed his father. This false guilt mirrors the authentic moral paralysis of Hamlet, who is delayed not by cowardice but by the enormity of what he's being asked to do and the impossibility of cleanly aligning his grief, his anger, his love, and his duty into a single coherent act.

Both princes, significantly, require an external prompt to move them toward action. For Hamlet it's the play-within-a-play the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, which he stages to catch the conscience of the king. For Simba it's the vision of Mufasa, reinforced by Rafiki's pointed intervention and Nala's arrival. Neither prince can self-generate the resolve to act; both need the external world to create a context in which delay is no longer possible. This isn't a structural weakness in either text; it's a deliberately constructed psychological portrait of what prolonged guilt does to moral agency.

4.4 The Kingdom as Moral Mirror One of Shakespeare's most sophisticated narrative techniques in *Hamlet* is his insistence that the condition of the state reflects the condition of its ruler. Elsinore under Claudius is a court of performance and concealment everyone wears a face that doesn't match their interior. Polonius is an adviser who delivers wisdom as if it were calculation. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are friends performing friendship in the service of surveillance. Ophelia is a daughter performing obedience at the cost of her sanity. The court is a theatre of deception, and it poisons everyone who inhabits it.

The Lion King (2019) translates this into the visual language of ecological collapse. Favreau uses the deterioration of the Pride Lands as a sustained metaphor for what happens when a kingdom is governed by someone who has no genuine right to govern it. The landscape carries the moral argument of the film in its very appearance scorched, barren, haunted by the hyenas who serve Scar's appetite rather than the land's natural order.

This is a genuinely Shakespearean move. The idea that the natural world responds to human moral failure is embedded across the canon in the storms of *King Lear*, in the unnatural signs before Julius Caesar's assassination, in the murky weather of *Macbeth*. Nature, in Shakespeare, isn't neutral. It participates in the moral drama of the human world. By literalizing this in the scorched Pride Lands, Favreau makes the same claim in the grammar of contemporary cinema: that unjust power damages not only the people subject to it but the very world they inhabit.

4.5 Female Presence: Limitation, Agency, and the Unacknowledged Parallel One of the most instructive contrasts between *Hamlet* and *The Lion King* (2019) lies in how each text handles its female figures and what that handling reveals about the ideological differences between a sixteenth-century stage play and a twenty-first-century family film.

Gertrude in *Hamlet* occupies a space of profound ambiguity. Her complicity in her husband's death remains genuinely unclear in the text, but her remarriage to Claudius is treated by both *Hamlet* and the play's moral economy as a kind of betrayal. She's denied the space to be either straightforwardly guilty or straightforwardly innocent, and her death drinking from the poisoned cup is so swift and underwritten as to feel almost incidental.

Sarabi, in the 2019 film, is given more visible dignity than Gertrude, but less interior complexity. She resists Scar, refuses to capitulate to his demands, and maintains her loyalty to Mufasa's legacy with visible courage. But she remains a peripheral figure in a narrative that belongs, structurally, to the male figures of the father and son. Nala, by contrast, is granted genuine moral agency in the 2019 version her journey to find help, her confrontation with Simba, and her refusal to accept his passivity are among the film's most dramatically forceful sequences.

The comparison here isn't simply one of feminist critique but of structural observation: both texts use their female characters to mark the moral stakes of the central male conflict without fully centering those characters' own perspectives. This is a limitation shared across the Shakespearean inheritance, and the 2019 film, despite its progressive impulses, doesn't fully escape it.

V. Dialogic and Rhetorical Echoes

Beyond the thematic parallels, *The Lion King* (2019) inherits something of Shakespeare's rhetorical intelligence in its treatment of dialogue particularly in the scenes that carry the film's heaviest moral weight. Mufasa's speeches to Simba about kingship, responsibility, and the interconnectedness of all living things carry an ethical seriousness that sits quite comfortably alongside the political wisdom of Shakespeare's better kings. The "circle of life" is, in its deepest articulation, not far from the Shakespearean idea of natural order the idea that there's a proper relationship between the living and the dead, the ruler and the ruled, the strong and the vulnerable.

Scar's rhetoric, too, has a Shakespearean quality particularly his ability to manipulate Simba's grief and guilt in the immediate aftermath of Mufasa's death. The scene in which he engineers Simba's departure, persuading the young lion that he's responsible for his father's death, carries the cold psychological precision of a Claudius or an Iago. It's a speech act designed not to inform but to destroy to replace the young prince's sense of self with a guilt-ridden identity that will keep him safely absent.

Significantly, the 2019 film restores and expands a song "Be Prepared" that was significantly reduced in the 1994 animated version. In the remake, it becomes a genuine villainous manifesto: a declaration of Scar's ambition, resentment, and contempt for the order he's about to overturn. As a rhetorical performance, it sits naturally in the tradition of the Shakespearean villain's soliloquy that space in which the audience is taken into the confidence of a calculating mind that the other characters cannot see.

VI. Psychoanalytic Dimensions

Ernest Jones's famous Freudian reading of *Hamlet* argued that the prince's inability to kill Claudius stems from an unconscious identification with the man who has done what *Hamlet* himself secretly desired to do kill the father and take the mother. Whether one finds this reading persuasive as a complete account of the play or not, it draws attention to the psychoanalytic depth of *Hamlet*'s paralysis in a way that has genuine relevance to the film.

In *The Lion King* (2019), the Oedipal dimensions are carefully neutralized this is, after all, a film with a PG audience but the underlying structure of a son haunted by a powerful father and unable to occupy that father's place survives in a thoroughly recognizable form. Simba's guilt is a displaced form of the same psychological burden that pins Hamlet in place: the impossibility of becoming what the father was, and the terror of trying.

Rafiki, in this reading, functions as something between a therapist and a prophet a figure who can see Simba's paralysis for what it actually is and intervene in a way that bypasses the psychological defences the young lion has constructed. His famous tap on Simba's head "the past can hurt, but the way I see it you can either run from it or learn from it" is a remarkably clear-eyed formulation of what psychoanalytic criticism has been saying about Hamlet for a century: that the prince can only act when he stops running from the meaning of his own history.

VII. Discussion

What does it mean that one of the most commercially successful films of 2019a production designed primarily for family audiences and earning over one and a half billion dollars at the global box office is structured around the moral architecture of a four-hundred-year-old revenge tragedy? Several conclusions suggest themselves.

First, it confirms what the best Shakespearean scholarship has always maintained: that the questions Shakespeare was dramatizing aren't historically bounded. The drama of the displaced son, the usurping uncle, the corrupted kingdom, and the haunting father isn't a medieval or Renaissance story. It's a story about the structure of human moral experience about what it costs to refuse duty, what power does to those who obtain it illegitimately, and what the dead continue to demand from the living. These concerns don't require a particular cultural setting. They require only a storyteller skilled enough to locate them in whatever world their audience inhabits.

Second, the success of this translation raises interesting questions about the nature of popular storytelling. The audiences of *The Lion King* (2019) aren't, for the most part, reading it as a Shakespeare film. They're watching a story about lions. And yet the moral intensity they respond to, the weight of the central conflict, the satisfaction of the eventual resolution all of this is rooted in a dramatic architecture that Shakespeare devised for the Globe Theatre in approximately 1600. The emotional grammar, in other words, is older than anyone in the cinema knows.

Third, and perhaps most importantly for literary scholars, the film demonstrates the continuing vitality of adaptation as a critical practice. Favreau doesn't simply retell Hamlet. He subjects its central concerns to a new set of conditions ecological, geographical, familial that reveal dimensions of those concerns that a purely textual reading might not expose. The literalization of the corrupted kingdom as a corrupted landscape, for instance, isn't something that Shakespeare could do on the stage of the Globe. But it is something that the Shakespearean moral imagination clearly contains, and it takes the medium of photorealistic cinema to make it visible.

VIII. Conclusion

Jon Favreau's *The Lion King* (2019) is a more Shakespearean film than it's typically given credit for being. While critics and educators routinely acknowledge the Hamlet connection, that acknowledgement tends to stop at the level of plot the dead king, the usurping uncle, the displaced prince. This paper has argued that the debt goes considerably deeper.

The film inherits from Hamlet a fully developed moral architecture: the conviction that fraudulent power corrupts the world it governs; that grief and guilt, when unprocessed, immobilize the very people most

needed to restore justice; that the dead speak to the living not as mere plot devices but as embodiments of the identity and duty that survivors must either claim or abandon; and that action, when it finally comes, is only possible through a prior reckoning with the truth of one's own history.

Shakespeare never left. He simply changed his medium moved from the stage of the Globe to the photorealistic savannas of contemporary blockbuster cinema. What Favreau's film demonstrates, perhaps more clearly than any other adaptation of recent years, is that the migration hasn't diminished him. If anything, it has confirmed what the endurance of Hamlet has always suggested: that certain ways of asking questions about human life don't become obsolete. They simply find new forms, new landscapes, and new audiences who receive them often without knowing it as truths they have somehow always known.

This, finally, is the most interesting thing about reading *The Lion King* through Hamlet's lens. It doesn't make the film smaller by reducing it to a Shakespearean source text. It makes both works larger by demonstrating that the moral imagination they share belongs to no single period, culture, or medium, but to the permanently contested, permanently necessary project of understanding what it means to be human.

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