

Abandoning Tragedy in James Ijames's *Fat Ham*

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ABSTRACT ♦ REFERENCES

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The story of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is adapted and revised by James Ijames in his play *Fat Ham*, which ran from 12 May to 31 July 2022 at The Public Theater, coproduced by the National Black Theatre. Ijames's play, which won the 2022 Pulitzer Prize for drama, plays with and departs from the plot of *Hamlet* to explore Black manhood, the family, and cycles of violence that are broken by love. Rejecting generic constraints demanded by tragedy—male violence and misogyny, and compliant and sacrificial women—the play stages a celebration of love, friendship, forgiveness, compassion, and queer pride.¹



In “Traversing the Temporal Borderlands of Shakespeare,” Ruben Espinosa writes in response to scholars of Shakespeare who claim that the study of race in premodern literature is anachronistic. He embraces a way of reading that works in dialogue with Gloria Anzaldúa and attends to the space of the borderland to disrupt the putative “temporal distance” between Shakespeare and premodern critical race studies. “In ways both temporal and epistemological,” he writes, “this borderland dynamic creates a space for me not to speak to the dead—as I am, in many ways, expected to do—but rather to understand how the early modern, how Shakespeare, is not the incontestable focal point, but rather an element to which we, on the temporal and physical borderlands, can add nuance and layer with manifold meanings” (Espinosa, 606). Espinosa’s work joins many voices, not least among them Kim F. Hall, Margot Hendricks, Ian Smith, and Ambereen Dadabhoy, interrogating the notion of Shakespearean universality.² As Espinosa argues, “The framing of Shakespeare [as universal] sustains

1 I want to thank Samuel Yates, Emily Lathrop, and Barbara Webb for assistance with details of *Fat Ham*.

2 Dadabhoy, Ambereen. “The Moor of America: Approaching the Crisis of Race and Religion in the Renaissance and the Twenty-First Century,” in *Teaching Medieval and Early Modern Cross-Cultural Encounters* (The New Middle Ages), ed. Karina F. Attar and Lynn Shuttles (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 123–40; Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY:

a belief in a transcendent power behind his works—persisting over time and crossing temporal and cultural borders” (609).³

Hamlet is a play loved and reviled by scholars of Shakespeare. It is overdone, overestimated, and overtaught. Part of its attraction and repulsion are due to its overdetermined place as the greatest tragedy ever written. Hamlet has become the quintessential tragic hero, exemplifying a cerebral ideal of masculinity as he grapples with his father's murder by his uncle, newly married to his mother. While scholars have acknowledged the aspects of the play as a revenge tragedy and feminists have written on Ophelia and Gertrude, these analyses have done little to dislodge the primacy of the play on stage, in scholarship, or in the classroom. Nor have they dislodged Hamlet from an ideal of dramatic manhood.

Ian Smith calls for an interrogation of the wide scholarly identification with the Danish prince in “We are Othello”:

pressure must be applied to the “we” in Hazlitt’s “It is *we* who are Hamlet” to explore what is at stake in the identification so habitually assumed among critics even today. Who are the subjects of this collective “we,” and what is its institutional power? One obvious but too often underappreciated answer is that this claim of identification has been nurtured by an academic industry in which white, male interests were historically epitomized, reflected, and affirmed in this much celebrated, cerebral prince. (106)

Smith brings attention to Othello who also asks to be remembered, to have his story told, but whose difference, Smith argues, from Hamlet resides in his Blackness, for, “blackness often functions too easily as the mark of unassailable difference” (108). The two characters, Hamlet and Othello, epitomize the White/Black binary that Kim F. Hall traces in her landmark book, *Things of Darkness*, that is rooted in white supremacy.

Hamlet's story remains central to many scholars and the students they teach, to theaters, and to audiences who flock to attend productions despite the hollowness of its hero. Consumed by discontent at his mother's marriage and his uncle's ascension to the throne, Hamlet cannot see Ophelia clearly because love does not and cannot have a place in a play in which violence must answer violence. *Hamlet* is thus a story of resentment, revenge, and relentless misogyny in which Claudius is a villain, and Gertrude and Ophelia become one—fused in Hamlet's mind as temptresses, betrayers of men, the female archetypal “pernicious woman” (1.5.105). The

Cornell University Press, 1995); Margo Hendricks, “Surveying ‘Race’ in Shakespeare,” in *Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–22; Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, eds., *Women, “Race” and Writing in the Early Modern Period* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Ian Smith, *Race and Rhetoric in the Renaissance: Barbarian Errors*, Early Modern Cultural Studies (New York: Palgrave, 2009). <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230102064>. See also David Sterling Brown, Patricia Akhimie, and Arthur L. Little Jr., “Seeking the (In)Visible: Whiteness and Shakespeare Studies,” *Shakespeare Studies* 50 (January 2022): 17–23; Peter Erickson, and Kim F. Hall, “‘A New Scholarly Song’: Rereading Early Modern Race,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67 (1) (2016): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1353/shq.2016.0002>. See also David Sterling Brown, “Code Black: Whiteness and Unmanliness in Hamlet,” in *Hamlet: The State of Play* (The Arden Shakespeare State of Play Series), ed. Sonia Massai and Lucy Munro (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 101–28. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350117754.ch-004>.

3 See also Espinosa, “End Game,” *Shakespeare Studies* 50 (2022): 92–98.

play demands the deaths of all these characters as tragedy, but it also denies its putative hero the pathos given to Othello, whose awareness of his part in the wrongful death of his wife, makes his tragedy more than a bloodbath. Hamlet fails to see his own part in the tragedy.

The story of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is adapted and revised by James Ijames in his play *Fat Ham*, which ran from 12 May to 31 July 2022 at The Public Theater, coproduced by the National Black Theatre. Ijames's play, which won the 2022 Pulitzer Prize for drama, plays with and departs from the plot of *Hamlet* to explore Black manhood, the family, and cycles of violence that are broken by love. Rejecting generic constraints demanded by tragedy—male violence and misogyny, and compliant and sacrificial women—the play stages a celebration of love, friendship, forgiveness, compassion, and queer pride.

In *Fat Ham*, the weakness of which Hamlet chastises himself as he hesitates to act on his father's command for vengeance becomes Juicy's (the play's Hamlet) strength. By rejecting violent forms of manhood at work in so many of Shakespeare's plays from *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Romeo and Juliet* to *The Winter's Tale* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (the last play coauthored with John Fletcher), *Fat Ham* gives its hero space to become his own man, independent from and undefined by his father or his uncle. Here that violence is complicated by race and sexuality, but also by love, the desire to give and receive it. A Black and queer young man facing his father's contempt for his "soft" son, Juicy, a brilliant Marcel Spears, must choose between vengeance and desire, between violence and love. The play clearly posits and embraces a manhood that celebrates softness over cruelty.

Determined to help his mother, Tedra, played by Nikki Crawford, celebrate her new marriage despite a tense relationship with his uncle Rev, played by Billy Eugene Jones who also plays the ghost of Pap, Juicy decorates the family's yard with balloons and paper ribbons Tedra favors prior to a barbeque party. When the ghost of Pap arrives in a white suit and reveals that he was murdered in prison on the order of his own brother, Rev, and demands that Juicy kill Rev in revenge, Juicy must decide whether to "man up" or to live his truth.

Fat Ham works self-reflexively with Shakespeare's play, so that Juicy, whose knowledge of the similarity of his situation to that of Hamlet, works with winking, wry humor both to determine the audience's and Juicy's expectations of an inevitable outcome and to allow for a constant elimination of choices made by Hamlet, Laertes, Ophelia, and Polonius, now Larry, Opal, and Rabby, their mother, played by Benja Kay Thomas. At the same time, *Hamlet*, as a play, haunts *Fat Ham* making demands on Juicy that he does not wish to meet, so that *Fat Ham* openly disavows tragedy.

Through skillful moments of contemplation, including passages from *Hamlet*, quick witted comedy, surreal moments of dance and song, inventive moments of direct contact between audience and characters, a breaking of the fourth wall that implicates the audience in racism and sexism, and the emergence of family resentments and revelations, *Fat Ham* allows Juicy to be Hamlet and not-Hamlet. Helping him on his journey is Opal (played on the day I saw it by a luminous Brittany Bellizeare, stepping in, we learned from the director, Saheem

Ali, for the production's understudy just in time to avoid the performance's cancellation) and Larry, the perfect Calvin Leon Smith. Adaptations and revisions of Ophelia and Laertes, Opal and Larry are there to listen, support, and rouse Juicy's spirit and his sexual awakening.

In *Fat Ham*, Larry becomes Juicy's love interest. A marine who rejects the violent masculinity of the military and who wishes to be a performer, Larry looks at Juicy with desire, reframing Pap's accusation against Juicy of being "soft," and making it luxurious, arousing, silky, something to touch with deliberate, slow, erotic enjoyment of everything about skin and body. This softness contrasts with the ugly hardness of combat which Larry abhors. Juicy unfolds under Larry's blazon to his softness and allows Larry to kiss him.

The moment is beautiful in a way no moment between Hamlet and Ophelia can be because love, erotic desire, and being soft are not allowed in a tragedy whose relentless violence is not only physical but verbal. Indeed, Hamlet makes clear that "man delights not me: no, nor woman neither," (2.2.306-7). Hamlet's distaste for both men and women prompted Aley O'Mara to argue that Hamlet explicitly rejected sexuality of any kind in "'No mo' marriage': Asexual Apocalypse in *Hamlet*" at the 2022 Shakespeare Association Conference. O'Mara's argument complicated and enriched an understanding of Hamlet's revulsion regarding bodies, perhaps especially women's, but also men's. In fact, Hamlet can only love Ophelia's when she is dead and the grave digger has declared her no longer a woman.

Ijames adapts *Hamlet's* story of revenge, violence, and misogyny into one of self-actualization and love. Ijames brings Juicy to a moment of potential violence only to have nature take care of Rev without any assistance from his nephew. In fact, Juicy wants to save Rev's life, but he is prevented by Rev himself. This death shocks all the characters, who look at one another in horror only to have Juicy announce that now they all must die. While there is at first a kind of comic moment of wariness as characters eye one another and pick up useless weapons taken from the dinner table (set with plastic utensils), Tedra's ultimate reaction is one of total rejection of such an idea. Her son's insistence that they are inside *Hamlet* is similarly preposterous to her. "You watch too much PBS" she tells him earlier in the play.

Slowly everyone begins to clean up while also seeming to abandon their characters, as if the actors begin to clear the stage. But then everyone realizes that Larry, whose queer identity was painfully revealed to Rabby and Opal by Juicy, is missing. Larry's return to the stage allows the play to end in an unanticipated and joyous music and dance, just as an early modern play ought to end, but better. The fear felt by the audience and by Juicy that Larry might harm himself, is abandoned in favor of joy. It is not only Juicy whose queerness is finally celebrated, but also that of Larry, who delights everyone with a spectacular, delightful, and perfect musical performance. To say that the audience celebrated with Larry is to vastly weaken the fervor of our reaction.

The play's treatment of its women, from Tedra to Opal and its addition of Rabby, is a welcome rejection of the opacity with which Gertrude and Ophelia are drawn. Tedra openly claims her right to happiness and sexual fulfillment, taking part in the play's frequent breaking of the fourth wall to tell her son that she knows what

“they,” that is the audience, think of her and that they have judged her already. She judges them right back. Opal, resentful of the dress her mother made her wear and not in the least interested in Juicy as more than a friend, plays his main interlocutor. She is a kind of devil’s advocate, assisting her friend to know himself. The casually held script in Bellizeare’s hands, hardly consulted and completely unnoticed by the person I attended the play with, attested to her confidence in the role and the perfection of her casting. Opal’s queer identity, which she announces as soon as Larry is outed by Juicy, is the ultimate refusal of *Hamlet’s* and Hamlet’s relentless objectification of Ophelia. Rather than being the tragic ingénue, she becomes the play’s primary social critic and rebel.

To see *Hamlet’s* adaptation and revision in *Fat Ham* was a joyous experience. It was my first return to the theater since summer of 2019 when I saw another adaptation/revision, this one of *Othello*: Keith Hamilton Cobb’s *American Moor*. These two adaptations of Shakespeare not only revise how we must see *Hamlet* and *Othello*, but also reject the lie of universality by attending to the particularity of Black experience. As Judith Butler has argued, “When a universal precept cannot, for social reasons, be appropriated or when—indeed, for social reasons—it must be refused, the universal precept itself becomes a site of contest, a theme and an object of democratic debate” (6). And as Sara Ahmed has argued, “Black: not universal. Not universal: particular. Not white: particular. To be particular can be to inherit a requirement to tell your particular story” (134). Ijames refuses the white supremacist universal of white male humanity and makes it into a site of contest and democratic debate. He installs instead, the particularity of Black experience in Juicy’s own struggle with grief and being a man who is soft, discovering that he can be loved for his softness. Ijames’s revision of Shakespeare enriches us while rejecting the violent compulsions of tragedy to stage the hope and beauty of a Black family’s love and a celebration of queer desire.

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