



Oregon
Shakespeare
Festival

2025 Study Guide



Fat Ham

by James Ijames

Consider the Source: Hamlet

Fat Ham is based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, likely written around 1600. The story of a young man grappling with his father's death and mother's quick remarriage, *Hamlet* remains one of Shakespeare's most enduring works. Let's learn more about this source text!

A Ghostly Visit

The play begins with Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, and Horatio, his friend, being visited by a ghost resembling Hamlet's recently deceased father, the former king. The ghost tells Hamlet his father was murdered by his uncle, Claudius. Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, has recently married Claudius! The ghost implores Hamlet to avenge the king's death by killing Claudius. Dealing with the grief of his father's sudden loss and the uncertainty of whether or not to follow a ghost's commands, Hamlet struggles to take immediate action.

Hamlet's Heart

Ophelia has been in love with Hamlet but their relationship suffers under the weight of Hamlet's grief. Heartbroken over this, and her father, Polonius's murder at Hamlet's hands, Ophelia eventually dies by suicide.

The Play's the Thing

A group of traveling actors arrive and Hamlet employs them in a test for his uncle. Claudius responds to the play by storming out and Hamlet takes this as an admission of guilt. Given a chance to avenge his father, Hamlet finds his uncle praying and waits to kill him.

A Tragic End

Fearing for his life, Claudius sends Hamlet to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with orders that they kill his nephew. Hamlet escapes. When he returns home, Polonius' son Laertes is back from France intending to avenge his father. Eventually, both Hamlet and Laertes are wounded and Laertes dies. Gertrude accidentally drinks from a poisoned cup and Hamlet stabs Claudius. In Hamlet's final moments, having gotten his revenge, he stops Horatio from dying by suicide, begging him to stay alive and tell his tale.



Playwright James Ijames

About the Author: James Ijames

James Ijames (pronounced "Imes") was born and raised in North Carolina. He received his B.A. in Drama from Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, and earned his MFA in Acting from Temple University in Philadelphia, where he is now based. In 2015,

he was one of the founding members of Philadelphia's first playwright producing collective.

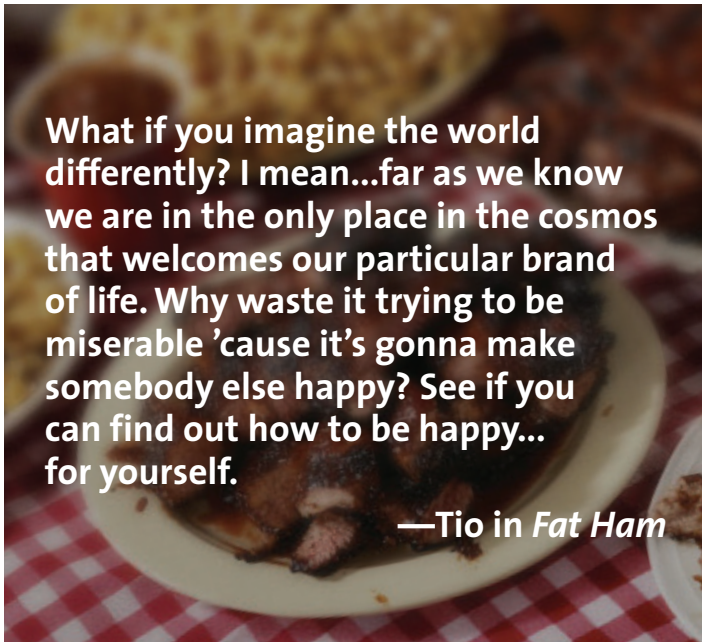
A celebrated actor, director, and playwright, Ijames has received many awards including the F. Otto Haas Award for an Emerging Artist, two Barrymore Awards for Outstanding Supporting Actor in a Play, two Barrymore Awards for Outstanding Direction of a Play, a Pew Fellowship for Playwriting, the Terrance McNally New Play Award, Kesselring Honorable Mention Prize, the Whiting Award, a 2019 Kesselring Prize for *Kill Move Paradise*, a 2020 and 2022 Steinberg Prize, and the 2022 Pulitzer Prize in Drama for *Fat Ham*.



Photo by Amy C. Evans, Southern Foodways Alliance, 2008

Straight Up Shakespeare

In *Fat Ham*, two of Shakespeare's speeches appear mostly unedited from *Hamlet*. In an interview for the Folger Shakespeare Library's podcast "Shakespeare Unlimited" (Episode 207) Ijames speaks of these additions like an artist samples a piece of music: "They're taking it out of its original context and putting it into something utterly new to make something new."



One such sampling, the infamous "The Play's the Thing" speech from *Hamlet* Act 2, Scene 2, appears not before a play in *Fat Ham* but before a spirited game of charades designed to uncover truths in the same way Hamlet worked to learn more about his uncle's intentions in Shakespeare's tale. The other text, also from Act 2, Scene 2, "What a Piece of Work Is Man," however, finds itself recontextualized and utterly new.

Of this Ijames says:

"It's not really about romance at all [Hamlet's monologue]...and yet it comes on the heels of this scene in *Fat Ham* that is all about that...I haven't changed any of the language there — but it all takes on a different meaning because of the context that I've placed it."

There are other lines in *Fat Ham* taken, as James Ijames says "whole hog...pun intended" from *Hamlet*. Though centuries, cultures, and contexts separate these two pieces, Shakespeare's enduring language and Ijames' deft storytelling connect Juicy and Hamlet by shared speech and similar circumstances.

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Both *Hamlet* and *Fat Ham* feature revenge as central to the plot. Is revenge ever justified? Why or why not? Does revenge lead to resolution?
2. Research Black Queer history in America. What are some of the unique challenges that Black Queer folks have faced? Who are some prominent figures in Black Queer history? These and other websites provide information:
https://glaad.org/black-queer-history-is-america-history/?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiA-ty8BhA_EiwAkyoa3xB-nl5oUHix8wXbNnCd_55pFTW4RzbqDFvVAI5AhB49WM4VxzzoNDxoCClwQAvD_BwE
<https://time.com/6263354/black-lgbtq-history-representation/>
<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/blog/against-the-erasure-of-black-queer-history/>
<https://queerkentucky.com/bell-hooks-and-my-black-queer-southern-politics/>
<https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/afam-timeline/timeline>
3. Research mass incarceration and its effects on families. What is mass incarceration? What are some ways it affects children? These and other websites provide information:
<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/08/11/parental-incarceration/>
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4501034/>
<https://scholars.indianastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1041&context=honorsp>
4. *Hamlet* is considered a tragedy while many consider *Fat Ham* a comedy. In what ways could comedy and tragedy overlap? What is the relationship of comedy and tragedy?
5. Research masculinity and toxic masculinity. What are some ways it shows up in society? These and other websites provide information:
<https://adaa.org/learn-from-us/from-the-experts/blog-posts/consumer/what-toxic-masculinity-and-how-it-impacts-mental>
<https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/what-we-mean-when-we-say-toxic-masculinity>
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/opinion/toxic-masculinity.html>
<https://www.webmd.com/sex-relationships/what-is-toxic-masculinity>
<https://queerkentucky.com/in-pursuit-of-soft-masculinity-a-he-they-s-tell-all/>

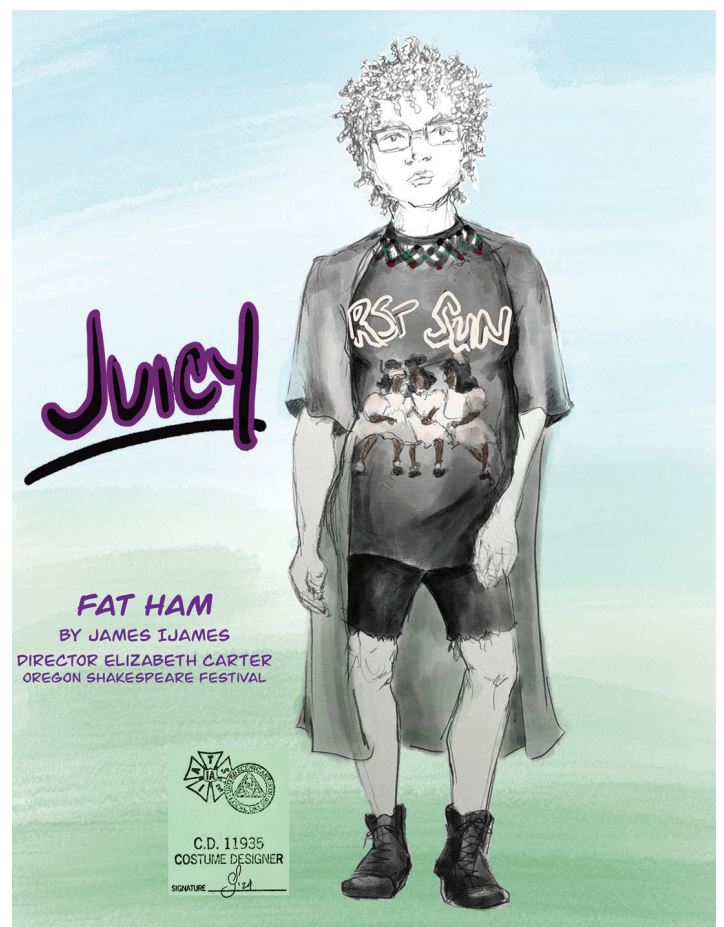


Hamlet. Biggarstaff Brothers, 1894.



Set model by Collette Pollard

6. How do societal expectations and family traditions shape the way individuals perceive their obligations to family members?
7. How do mentor figures affect a person's confidence in expressing their true self in the face of external judgment? How do peers influence expressions of true self?
8. Juicy is studying to work in human resources. His family isn't as dedicated to him finishing school. What are some of the challenges first-generation college students like Juicy face? These and other websites provide more information:
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/07/19/first-generation-students-describe-paths-college-success>
<https://medicat.com/why-first-gen-college-students-need-extra-support/>
9. Larry, Rabby's son, is a Marine returning from service. He is experiencing PTSD. What challenges do members of the US military face when coming home? These and other websites provide more information:
https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common_veterans.asp
<https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/mental-wellness/veteran-ptsd-treatment-support-resources>
<https://www.mcleanhospital.org/essential/military-trauma>
10. Conversations about who is "allowed" to serve in the military have continued throughout history. What are your thoughts about gender and military service?
11. What is the role of barbecue in Southern food traditions? How does barbecue fit within your ideas about Black Southern food?
12. What makes a good barbecue? Why?
13. How are cooking roles managed in our culture? What role does gender play in our assumptions about cooking? Are those roles different in barbecue? What kind of mythology and tradition is wrapped around the role of the pitmaster?



Juicy costume rendering by Samantha C. Jones

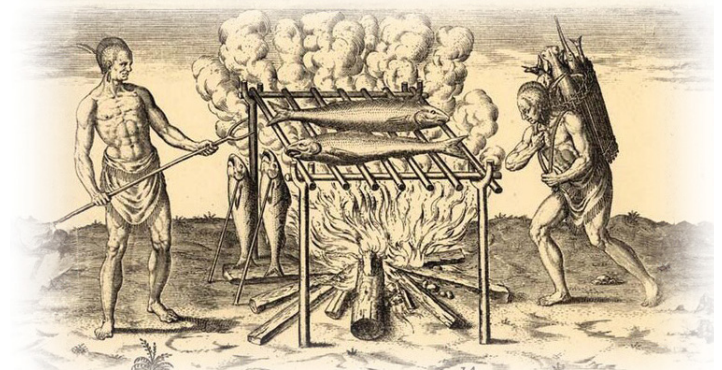
After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to the “Straight Up Shakespeare” section on the previous page, and the speeches from Act 2 Scene 2 of *Hamlet*. How do James I/James and Shakespeare “play together”? What context do these speeches play in *Hamlet* and how are they recontextualized in *Fat Ham*? Where do their meanings intersect? Where do they diverge?
2. In which ways are Hamlet and Juicy alike? In which ways are they different? What other characters from *Hamlet* are adapted into *Fat Ham* characters? In which ways are they similar to their Shakespearean counterparts?
3. Refer to your research on mass incarceration and its effects. How does Pap’s incarceration affect his family?
4. What item of Pap’s was Juicy given as a keepsake? How does he feel about it?

How do you define the concept of “traditional gender roles”? How might these roles affect the ways men relate to one another?

5. Juicy wants to go to college but his family would like him to take over the BBQ restaurant. Which path seems best for Juicy? Does he have a responsibility to his family’s legacy?
6. What role does Pap play in the production? How do these appearances affect the characters who see and/or interact with him?
7. There are moments in the play when Juicy speaks directly to the audience. What impact do these moments have on the story? Why do you think the playwright chose to include these asides?
8. Tedra and Juicy address the audience directly at one point, to talk about Pap’s violence. How does your perception of the characters change after that moment?
9. Juicy and Tedra have a conversation about why she’s married Rev. She tells him she’s not meant to be alone. Describe their reactions to being alone.
10. Many comments are made about how Juicy and Opal dress. How do the two characters express themselves and their identities through their clothing?
11. How is the parent/child relationship explored between characters in the show? Juicy and Pap? Juicy and Tedra? Rabby and Opal? Rabby and Larry?
12. During the party, Juicy sings the song “Creep” by Radiohead. Which lyrics from the song best reflect Juicy’s identity and the way he views himself?

13. What role does being a preacher play in Rev’s life? Why do you think the playwright chose to make him a reverend?
14. Rabby tells Juicy that being weird “ain’t Christian.” What does she mean? How do Juicy, Larry, and Opal struggle to fit their assigned roles?
15. In Tio’s monologue, he says he considered what life would be like “if you chose pleasure over harm.” In what ways do we see these characters choose pleasure over harm? How do they choose harm over pleasure?
16. References to pigs come up throughout the play including in the title. Why? How do generalizations about pigs tie into this play and its characters?
17. *Fat Ham*, *Jitney*, and *Shane* center stories about the relationship between fathers and sons. How are fathers and sons portrayed in each of the shows? What similarities and differences can you find?
18. In *Fat Ham*, Larry is a Marine home from war. In *Jitney*, Youngblood is recently returned from Vietnam. What about the experience of returning home is similar for each of these characters? How is it different?
19. There is an interesting parallel theme in *Fat Ham* and *As You Like It* portraying characters who struggle to feel confident in their sense of self, particularly under the gaze of their families. How do you see this theme arising in each of the plays? Which characters experience these issues most?
20. In *Julius Caesar*, as part of Mark Antony’s eulogy for Caesar he says: “The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft interred with their bones.” In what ways is this true for Caesar? How might the same be said of Pap in *Fat Ham*?
21. Many of this season’s plays show characters who make deliberate choices to behave differently than their parents. How do you see younger generations working to avoid what they perceive to be the mistakes of their elders in *Fat Ham*, *As You Like It*, *Into the Woods*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Shane*, and *Jitney*? Are there moments when younger generations choose to carry on the values, practices, or behaviors of their elders?



Barbacoa Barbecue, Theodor de Bry (1528-1598)

Sittin' High on the Hog

Barbecue plays a central role in *Fat Ham*. The food style's origins and evolution are as varied and distinct as the food itself — each region has its own style of cooking, its own primary meat, its own sauce, or a strong stance against sauce altogether — and its unique history of how these things came to be.

Most simply, barbeque is a style of cooking wherein meat is cooked over an indirect flame. Introduced to American colonizers and enslaved Africans by Native folks, the word barbeque comes from the Spanish word “barbacoa,” the word that Columbus and his contemporaries used to describe the food they encountered in what they named Hispaniola. Combining these traditions with foodways from the African continent, Black Americans soon became the country's leading “Pit Masters,” defining a cuisine and building a culinary culture.

According to James Beard Award Winning chef Adrian Miller: “By the 1700s, African Americans were southern, or pit, barbecue's “go-to” cooks. This type of barbecue fused African, European, and Indigenous meat cooking and seasoning techniques. Enslaved African Americans perfected it over a couple of centuries. After Emancipation, African Americans were recruited and sent to every part of the country to make authentic Southern barbecue at all kinds of special events.”

In a tradition that endures to this day, the Black Southern barbeque — or cookout, depending on who you ask — became an artform and for some a pathway to freedom. Pitmaster Marie Jean, an enslaved woman in Arkansas, was so popular a cook that she was able to buy her freedom and open a restaurant in the 1840s.

James (James) is a native of North Carolina, where barbeque sauce is a point of high contention. Eastern Carolinians make a vinegar-based sauce while Western Carolinians make a tomato-based sauce. Study Guide writer Kamilah Bush shares her base recipe for each version below.

Eastern North Carolina BBQ Sauce
2 c. Apple Cider Vinegar
1 tsp. Red Pepper Flakes
1/4 tsp. Cayenne Pepper
1 tbsp. Hot Sauce
1 tsp. Brown Sugar
1/2 tsp. Black Pepper

Combine ingredients in a medium size sauce pan. Cook on medium heat stirring occasionally until brown sugar dissolves and spices open. Adjust to taste.

Western North Carolina BBQ Sauce
3/4 c. Ketchup
2 c. Apple Cider Vinegar
1/3 c. Dark Brown Sugar
1 tbsp. Hot Sauce
1 tbsp. Worcestershire Sauce
1 tsp. Mustard Powder
1/2 tsp. Kosher Salt
1/2 tsp. Black Pepper

Combine ingredients in a medium size sauce pan. Cook on low heat, stirring frequently, until sugar and salt dissolve and spices open. Adjust to taste.

Members of Oregon Shakespeare Festival Education created the “2025 Study Guide for *Fat Ham*.” These suggestions were designed for students and teachers but may be enjoyed by audiences of all ages. They may be used without restriction for educational purposes. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival is not responsible for the content of any website listed above.

© Oregon Shakespeare Festival. No part of the “2025 Study Guide for *Fat Ham*” may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying or recording, or by an information storage and retrieval system, for professional or commercial purposes without permission in writing from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival Education.