

HAMLETTE

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT BY
Allison Williams



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

Hamlette is a spoof adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in which Hamlet is played by a girl.

Playwright Bio

Allison Williams trained in mask and movement theatre and playwriting, and holds an MFA from Western Michigan University. She spent 15 years as the Artistic Director of the circus company Aerial Angels, and has led the creation of *FALLEN* (Bible women + circus), *SLEEPWALKERS* (Grand Guignol + circus) and *STAND UP 8* (reality circus). Allison still coaches in the school residency program Starfish Circus, which trains 2000 K-12 students every year in circus arts and 21st century skills. Her plays include a musical of *THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME* (Jenny Wiley Music Theatre, KY), *THE TALE OF TSURU* (adapted from the Japanese, Western Michigan University and the University of South Florida), and commedia dell'arte scripts. Her short play, *MISS KENTUCKY*, was a Heideman award finalist, and *HAMLETTE* won a Mark Twain Humor Award. Her radio trilogy, *DEAD MEN DON'T CARRY HANDBAGS*, *DEAD MEN DON'T JAYWALK*, and *DEAD MEN DON'T CATCH BOUQUETS* aired on National Public Radio. Her solo show, *TRUE STORY*, won Best of Show at the London Fringe and is a popular source for female monologues. Allison's most recent play is *THE NEXT HORSEMAN*, a comedy for Zoom (Coriander Press).

Synopsis

Hamlette imagines a world where Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is played by a girl instead of a guy, among other variations. This comedic romp follows the original story: Hamlette's mother has married her uncle and she's not happy about it. But when Hamlette gets a visit from her dead dad, during which he reveals that he was poisoned by said uncle, Hamlette is charged with revenge. Hamlette tries several tactics to exact the truth from her uncle, from pretending to be mad to having a troupe of players enact the poisoning, but in the end, after hitting the highlights of the story, everyone ends up dead. The play looks at not just gender identity, but one's own identity.

Characters

As written, five actors take on all the characters by playing multiple roles.

Actor 1: [Any gender] HOST, QUEEN/KING, FRANCISCO, REFEREE

Actor 2: [Any gender] HORATIO, 2nd PLAYER

Actor 3: [M] GHOST, POLONIUS

Actor 4: [Any gender] BERNARDO, LAERTES, OPHELIA, PLAYER

Actor 5: [W] HAMLETTE

Themes

Identity, self-image, death, love, family, revenge

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ Have you heard of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? What do you know of the story?
- ★ Do you like Shakespeare? Why or why not?
- ★ Do you think there's a way to make Shakespeare's language easier to understand?
- ★ How do you see yourself?
- ★ How do you think others see you?
- ★ What makes up a person's identity?
- ★ How do you identify yourself? Do you have more than one identity?
- ★ Does anyone see you as different than how you identify yourself? How do you deal with that?

Pre-Read Activities

Opinion Poll

- ★ One aspect of identity is the choices we make. Ask students to share their opinion by standing to indicate that they agree with a specific choice. State the choices and then repeat them so students can stand. Each choice will have three options: the first choice, the second choice, or neither.
- ★ For example, if the choices are Summer or Winter, you would say: Summer, Winter, or Neither. Then repeat slowly: Summer (give students a chance to stand and then sit), Winter (give students a chance to stand and then sit), or Neither (give students a chance to stand and then sit).
- ★ Possible Options:
 - » Summer or winter?
 - » Meat or vegetables?
 - » Music or reading?
 - » Music or movies?
 - » YouTube or Instagram?
 - » Travel or home?
 - » Family or friends?
 - » Sweet or salty?

Identity Reflection

- ★ Students will reflect on their identity and write a paragraph. How do they see themselves? How would they answer the question “Who am I?” Is there anyone in their life who questions how they present their identity?

Identity Scene

- ★ In small groups, students will create a one-minute scene on the theme of identity. How will you visualize “Who am I?” “How do I see myself?”
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse, and present.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward. What are the similarities and differences?

Research Project

- ★ In groups students will research Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. What is the story? Who is the character *Hamlet*? What happens to him? When did Shakespeare write this play? What are people’s opinions about the play?
- ★ After completing their research, students will create a presentation in which everyone in the group must take part. It can be:
 - » A live oral presentation with a visual component such as a slide deck
 - » An original scene theatricalizing their findings
 - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)

Parody Exercise

- ★ Divide students into groups.
- ★ Each group is to choose a story as their source material. It should be short and something that everyone knows. The point is to have students work quickly. It also should be serious. They’ll be making a comedic version of the story.
- ★ Discuss the definition of parody and parodies that students may know.
 - » Parody: to copy or imitate the style of something or someone specifically for comic effect
- ★ The goal of the exercise is to have students parody the original source material. They are to stay close to the original style but use comedic techniques to create a parody of the original text.

- ★ Their parody should be less than one minute.
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse and present.
- ★ Afterward, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

Adaptation Exercise: Tragedy to Comedy

- ★ As a class, discuss a well-known story that ends in tragedy.
 - » E.g., Grimm’s original fairy tales or Hans Christian Andersen
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
 - » Adaptation: to make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ Divide students into groups in which they will create a one-minute adaptation of the story.
- ★ The goal of the exercise is to turn the tragic story into a comedy. This is not about repeating the story and adding a wacky tone to the acting. Remind students that they are making something suitable for a new purpose. That means they must write comedic elements into the new version of the story.
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse and present.
- ★ Afterward, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

Hamlet Adaptation Exercise

- ★ As a class, read a section from the original play, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. It is suggested that you read the moment between the Ghost (Hamlet Sr) and Hamlet.
- ★ Go through the moment and identify any words students don’t understand.

- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
 - » Adaptation: to make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will have a copy of the original section.
- ★ Next, groups are to discuss and rehearse a one-minute adaptation of the original text. This is an exploration, rather than an assessed assignment. How do you adapt? What are the challenges? How would students modernize the text? How would you change the story to have it take place in the 21st century?
- ★ After groups have presented, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

Shakespeare's Language Activity

- ★ Divide students into groups. They will each create a one-minute scene that includes at least three of the following lines:
 - » No, you tell me.
 - » Quiet!
 - » Pay attention!
 - » Let's tell him what we saw.
 - » Please.
 - » Stop being so depressed.
 - » You can trust me, I guarantee it.
 - » What did you do?

- ★ Have them rehearse their scenes. When they are ready to present, tell them that they are to replace their chosen sentences with the Shakespeare versions:
 - » Nay, answer me.
 - » Peace, break thee off!
 - » Mark it!
 - » Let us impart what we have seen tonight.
 - » We beseech you.
 - » Cast thy nighted colour off.
 - » I'll warrant you, fear me not.
 - » O me, what hast thou done?
- ★ Discuss afterward: What was it like to combine the two versions of English? How did it affect the pace of the scene? How did it change the characters to change the way they speak?

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Hamlette* individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. What is the response when Hamlette asserts the name of the play is Hamlette, rather than Hamlet?
3. What country does the play take place in?
4. Who is the ghost?
5. In the conversation between the Queen and Hamlette, what do little girls do?
6. Who plays the King?
7. Why won't Horatio say "Hamlette"?
8. What does the ghost tell Hamlette?
9. What does Hamlette do to deceive her uncle?
10. Who plays Ophelia?
11. What does Hamlette do with the Players?
12. Who stabs Polonius?
13. Who does Hamlette duel with?
14. Why does the Queen die?
15. Do you have any questions about the play?
16. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. The set is described as a bare stage. How would you design a set for this play? Describe what the set would look like.
2. What is the storytelling style in this adaptation?
3. In your opinion, how will this story told from a female perspective impact an audience?
4. How does the playwright use Shakespeare's language in their adaptation?
5. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a serious drama. *Hamlette* is a comedy. How does the story change with the change in genre?
6. How does Hamlette's language differ from that of the other characters?
7. If you were directing this play, how would you direct Hamlette to act as opposed to the other characters? Is she more or less realistic than the other characters?
8. Based on Hamlette's language, behaviour, and personality, how would you costume this character?
9. In the original production, all the characters were played by five actors, with only Hamlette playing just one part. In your opinion, how would that impact the staging?
10. Based on the Queen's language, what can you infer about her personality?
11. Are there any words you don't understand? Identify and define them.
12. What is the main conflict in the play?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *Hamlette*?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about identity? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. What is the playwright trying to say about gender roles? Cite the text to support your answer.

4. Why do you think the playwright has chosen to adapt Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into a comedy?
5. Has the playwright made it easier to understand Shakespeare's language? Why or why not?
6. Compare and contrast your experience with standing up for your own identity to what happens in the play.
7. How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ Which moment stood out to you the most? Why?
- ★ In your opinion, does *Hamlet* work as a comedy? Why or why not?

Post-Read Activities

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Set Design

- ★ Students, individually or in groups, will discuss and decide how they would design the set for this play. Based on the themes in the play, what colours and textures would they choose?

- ★ Draw a colour set rendering or write a two-paragraph description of the set.

Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize it in a single image that would attract an audience? What font would you use for the title? What information other than the title would you include?

Identity Original Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will discuss the concept of identity in connection to what they read in the play.
- ★ Based on their discussion and what they read in the play, have each group create their own theatrical moment on the concept of identity.
- ★ How does this moment differ from what students presented in the pre-read activities?

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward:
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
 - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Playwright Process

Playwright Allison Williams talks about her process writing and adapting Hamlette. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

1. Why did you write this play?

I first wrote *Hamlette* for a cast of apprentice performers at the Bay Area Renaissance Festival. I needed something short that an audience would find funny enough to sit and watch for 30 minutes in the hot sun. And for the same reasons it's a great play for student performers: it's easy to rehearse in a class period. Plus, *Hamlette's* concerns are so identifiable: I'm not happy about my parents remarrying, I'm sad someone died, I think my significant other is insincere, I'm worried my best friend is going to betray me, I keep getting advice from adults who don't know me very well. Totally the student experience.

2. What changes happened during the writing process?

I originally did not set out to write a play with Hamlet as a girl. I set out to write a short, funny *Hamlet*. And what happened was, of the actors who auditioned for the play, a girl named Lila was the best actor so I made her Hamlet. And it was like, "Well, she's Hamlet. We should do something with that!" All of a sudden the whole play became about Hamlet being a girl. And that became the crux of the play. It was really just an accident because I wrote to the actors that I had. But I love it. I love that Hamlet's a girl because why shouldn't women play the greatest roles in the history of literature?

3. What's the most important visual for you in this play?

I just love the Laertes/Ophelia switch, and what a fun moment that is for the actor to whip around and do a completely different characterization.

4. What's the most challenging part of writing a play?

Handing it over to my editor for her to savage :) No, seriously, I love working with Lindsay Price, my editor here at Theatrefolk. I get her notes, I sulk, and then I get over it and make the play better. It's a real gift to be able to edit, and an incredibly useful part of the process. I'd also say 'getting started.' At the beginning of the process, one tiny little thing can throw me off — I have a play about online interaction that I'm 15 pages in, and I mentioned the idea to someone who said, "Oh, well, that may not be timely in a year, because technology changes so much." It was like they stepped on my little flower sprout. I don't know why I'm so dainty at the beginning, but at that stage of the process, all I want is reinforcement. Maybe it will suck, but let me write it and find out.