

[Season 1 Episode 1]

What is a COVID *Hamlet*?

With Shannon Murray and Jessica Riddell

Lisa Dickson: You're listening to W.Y.R.D., radio free Elsinore. I'm Lisa Dickson and these are some Wyrd Words about literature and learning in higher education.

Today, I have my two Wyrd sisters, my favorite collaborators, Shannon Murray from the University of Prince Edward Island and Jessica Riddell from Bishop's University, all are 3M National Teaching Fellows, and we are working on a book together on Shakespeare and critical hope in the classroom.

Today we're going to be asking this question: why are we studying Hamlet now? And what can Hamlet tell us about our current situation? So in other words, what's a COVID Hamlet? I've been telling my students that Hamlet is the play for our time, if only because it's about a student who is forbidden to go back to school and is trapped at home with his weird family.

So I'm going to turn it over to my Wyrdos here and see what we can make of this question: what is it about Hamlet that makes it timely for us now? So Shannon, can I start with you?

Shannon Murray: Sure. We've talked about this a bit before, the three of us. Hamlet more than any of Shakespeare's other plays and even his other tragedies, seems to me to be about disappointment and that's powerful for me and for my students at any time, because as you say, this is somebody who wants to go back to university and his parents, both his live one and his dead one don't want him to do that. So he is, he is essentially disappointed.

He's kept from what he thinks is his appointed purpose. Um, and right now, during the pandemic, we have so much disappointment that, that we have to deal with. And certainly our students have to, we have to, people who have trip plans or new jobs or new homes or weddings, or anniversaries, all the plans that we had now have to be put on hold and, and Hamlet is very much about how certainly Hamlet deals with that, but all kinds of other characters too. This is not the life that Laertes planned for himself. He wants to be off in Paris and he has to come home from Paris. And this is not the life either that the traveling theater company wanted for themselves, but they were forced to go on the road.

So, so many characters in there find themselves disappointed, not able to keep to their appointed plans for themselves, the future that they had in mind for themselves. So I think that's a powerful thing for us to think about.

So that would be my first thing, but I, I do say about Hamlet that it is, it's always timely because it's so accommodating, right? So it accommodates so many different actors, so many different readers. And you know, in the 1950s and the 1820s people, might've been able to say the same thing because Hamlet can accommodate all of these issues. Right now, I'm focusing on the disappointment idea, but you know, during a world war or during another time, then we might find Hamlet speaking to us in different ways.

So yeah, just about every character you can look at, except maybe for Claudius, um, is essentially disappointed, someone else has affected the future that they have planned for themselves.

Jessica Riddell: So maybe I'll take that personal disappointment and move it to, sort of, the larger movements at stake, which I think is a complimentary thread to what Shannon has introduced. Um, and this notion of "there's something rotten in the state of Denmark," which we, you know, hear, again, and again and again, in our cultural imaginary and, and sort of COVID exposing that there is something rotten in the state of Denmark. It's not the personal failings of one person in this play, but there is something deeply, deeply systemically wrong about the society within which people are operating.

And so, um, you know, for, for me to think about tragedy and tragedy really happening at three major times in our Western history and that these times all share something very similar in common, which is, that tragedy seems to be popular at periods of intense intellectual upheaval. And so we see sort of a big boom in the dramatic tragedy in Athens, in the fifth century, BCE in Rome, in the century after the birth of Christ and then in England and Europe during the early modern period.

And so you see these sort of three moments in time where you've got these two big frameworks about understanding the world. So if you think about Athenian tragedies coming out of a period, which also saw the groundwork of Western philosophy being laid against the older polytheistic, Greek understanding of being, you see in Shakespeare's tragedies, written in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation and set this move from Catholicism, Reformation into Protestantism, and of course all of the experiences of discovering the new world and reshaping one's understanding of the world through the lens of humanism.

I see this moment in COVID as crossing through a portal where what we understood in late capitalism, in our notions of self and individualism and our relationship to society, becoming really, jarringly visible that there are, there are some deep inequalities and inequities and these two systems are two possible frameworks for understanding the world are becoming visible.

And, and so, I think that Hamlet as a tragedy, and genre of tragedy, is pretty compelling for us right now, for those big intellectual and social upheavals that this global pandemic has inspired. So how we navigate that is intensely personal as, as Shannon has pointed out, but how we understand our worlds and the ways in which we understand the frameworks of our role are also rapidly changing. And I think that Hamlet's a perfect person for us to see ourselves in navigating the complexity and the confusion and the disorientation, um, and also offers us a roadmap of what not to do, maybe, you know, try not to get into this mired space of analysis paralysis, and then action, which ends in destruction rather than renewal.

So I hope that we would take this as a path and crossing that portal of renewal rather than of tragedy. So I think we're at a really interesting historical moment and Hamlet, um, sort of casts this really interesting light on how we grapple with that.

Shannon Murray: I love that idea that it connects so nicely to that idea of disappointment, um, too, because I remember one of my professors years ago saying that the real, the core of tragedy, the reason that a tragedy gets you is not because something bad happens. It's because the characters and you have an awareness of lost happiness, both the happiness lost from the past, but the prospect of happiness that's lost.

And I think that's, that's probably what we're going through as a larger culture in globally, as well as, personally. Yeah. And I, I love that sense that we could be, we can be coming, get to a great new period of artistic tragedies, personal tragedies at the same time.

Lisa Dickson: Hamlet's actually a good character because he, as a Prince, he's situated right at that nexus between the personal and the political. Because he is Hamlet the guy, but he's also Hamlet the play and he's Hamlet the Prince, right, the Prince of Denmark, and so he's, against his will in a lot of ways, a political figure because his own choices have political ramifications.

Um, and I think that's one of the things that we're witnessing now, in the various upheavals and the protest movements and all of those kinds of things, that the choices that we make, because we have this sense that there's this other future that we could be living in and how do we act to move into that other future, right? So do we just let the world continue on as it is, or do we make ourselves part of that political movement? And so Hamlet kind of is this interesting, sort of consolidation of the individual, but the individual in this larger conceptual and political context, whether he wants to be there or not, I mean, he definitely doesn't want to be there, which I think is really interesting.

So I always think of tragedy... We imagine it as a space of darkness, but for me, tragedy always has this light inside of it and it's this light that, that is a reflection of what could be, or what could have been, or what we might become if we can just get through this moment of chaos.

So as you say, Jessica, we can come through this in a lot of different ways. We can survive it and tell the story like Horatio or we can, you know, just litter the stage with, with bodies, but we'd rather not litter the stage with bodies. So how do we act in these moments, I think, in order to capture that sense of what is lost or our vision of what could be if we could just work our way through, in a positive sense, which I think is interesting in that regard.

Shannon Murray: He's so, he's so powerful for me though, too, because he's presented with the kind of choice that a lot of us are presented with right now, which is alternatives where there is actually no good choice, right? I'm thinking about the very practical thing of parents who have to decide whether to send their kids back to school or not. In that moment, there is no good choice, right? They're all alternative bad choices and that's a really difficult position to be in. And that's what I see Hamlet being. And even, even if you're worried about whether he's acting too rashly or not acting rashly enough, really he's in a position where he's being asked to kill his uncle or, and, and, so have his soul damned or not kill his uncle and so disappoint his father, but also let a murderer free. But he's so he's, he's presented with that difficulty of knowing, um, what the right thing to do is when there's no really good right thing to do.

And Shakespeare gives that to us so often that I think it's a helpful thing for us to recognize that, sometimes, no matter how smart we are, because Hamlet's really smart, we won't be able to think our way through to the perfect answer. We'll just be able to think of the least bad answer under the circumstances. I think we have a lot of those coming up this year.

Jessica Riddell: Yeah. Can I even just like qualify that there's no, there's no right answer, but there's also in this play a kind of radical unknowing. Like, we don't have enough pieces of information to create a clear reading of this situation. And I think about the interpretive quandary of the ghost, right? Is the ghost sent from hell? Is the ghost in purgatory? Is the ghost... what system do we use to interpret the ghost? Do we go back to this sort of older understanding of Catholicism? Do we use, um, you know, what kind of supernatural? Do we use the new Protestant understanding of, of where souls go? And we're in this moment, of we don't have all of the pieces coherently in one framework or one structure; we have pieces from very different kinds of conceptual backgrounds. And so in some ways there's a radical unknowing.

Um, and I feel like that in, in COVID and these times of COVID, we, we can make the decisions that we have with the information that we have in front of us, but that information is always missing. We don't have the full picture and we're only going to have that full picture looking back in retrospect on the decisions we made. And so I'm watching Hamilton almost obsessively, but "history has its eyes on us" right now. And we don't have all the information and so there is a kind of radical unknowingness that makes whatever decision we make, as you say, Shannon, almost impossible.

Shannon Murray: Yeah. And for, for planners. And I, you know, I want to extrapolate that Hamlet is a planner like me. I live my life by plans, right, and I think them very, very carefully. Um, right now, planning just doesn't work. I can't plan for this next year, I can make tentative sorts of plans. And I think that's what's happening in Hamlet as well, he tries to make a plan, but every time he does it gets thwarted by something or other that's in the way. So yeah, I think hell, it's a great play for all times, but boy, is it good for this one?

Lisa Dickson: That's, I think, that comes down to nimbleness. One of the things that distinguishes Hamlet is his nimbleness. So, he responds to what comes at him. I think about, you know, Act Two, that giant long act where he's on the stage and just people are coming at them from every direction and he has to respond to them all and that notion of not being able to plan, but also having a kind of nimbleness, to be able to see what's going on and to make a decision in that moment that's the best that we, that we can and just kind of wait and to see things unfold, and then to make another decision.

So one of the things that's interesting, Jessica, when you say that, um, you know, history has her eyes on us, history has her eyes on us, but we can't see it. We're in it. So we can't see it. And that's one of the beautiful things about drama and the way that it unfolds in time. So I have a very hard time looking at *Hamlet* the way Hamlet is experiencing *Hamlet*, which is as it unfolds in front of him as he goes. Whereas, you know, as a scholar who, you know, I can't even watch *Hamlet* really anymore, because I'm just watching it inside my head, but we have this picture of how the consequences are going to unfold. We have the story, he

doesn't have the story. He only has the narrative. He only has what's happening next and next and next.

And so he's situated in his experience very much the way that we are situated in our experience waiting for things to unfold, seeing how our choices are going to play out, but not having that overarching sense of where the narrative is, which is what makes Horatio so important to the text, "tell my story." He's the person who's going to be able to stand above and back from this and put it all together. So there's two different ways of thinking about, um, the historical moment operating there as well.

And so I always get very cranky when people say that Hamlet's such a procrastinator because I don't think he's a procrastinator. I think he's responding because he's embedded in a time. So it's very easy for us to critique him because we are outside of that time, which I think is a really interesting way of thinking about how we are in these moments. And maybe we should feel a little less guilty about making bad choices right now, too, I think, uh, in that regard, right? So if we could stand outside of history and look at how it's going to play out, we would make different choices.

Jessica Riddell: I love that. Feeling less guilty, but also being attentive to the kinds of stories we're telling about ourselves right now. And being really attentive to how we deploy narratives to make sense of a radically disrupted world.

And you just have to think about, you know, Shakespeare's characters and how they tell stories about themselves, which shape their own realities or others' perceptions of realities, right? You think about King Lear saying "I'm more sinned against and sinning," or you think about we've, you know, we've talked about Hamlet at the very end, still being able to say, you know, "and in this harsh world, draw thy breath in pain to tell my story." To see how, how much Shakespeare really uses words, or allows us, his characters to use words to make meaning from chaos. And that storytelling is an act of creation and an act of creating our reality.

And so, being attentive to the stories we tell in the words that we use, um, and, and where we want our narrative trajectory to go, I think is really important. And that's something I'm, I'm increasingly mindful of. And I started to ban some words from my vocabulary, like "pivot" and "unprecedented" and even "rigor," um, and start to include much more mindful uses of words that are much more critically Hopeful as we navigate this, because we have to shape in some way, shape our own, our own relationship to our reality as we, and I think that's correct, less guilty and more gentle with ourselves and with others.

Shannon Murray: And we could go back to Hamilton again, "who lives, who dies, who tells your story?"

Jessica Riddell: That's right.

Shannon Murray: You're starting, you're starting to see how I could have an entire seminar just on Hamlet and Hamilton, right?

Jessica Riddell: Great class.

Shannon Murray: But yeah. And how lucky we would be if we had Horatios around us to tell our stories lovingly, right, because that's what, that's what Horatio does. But I like your point too. We have to tell, we have to choose the language to tell our own stories so that we have happier endings than, than we might anticipate right now. That's right.

Jessica Riddell: Yeah. Without erasing the difference, right? Without erasing the complexity and discomfort. I think that that, you know, that that's the difference between our critically hopeful story, one that says I'm in the act of transforming, we're in the act of transforming, and it's mixed, messy and complex and difficult, um, versus the sort of toxic positivity, which says we're fine! Everybody's fine! Business as usual! Back to normal! You know, everything's gonna be fine! Which erases the discomfort and, um, denies the transformation that we're all going through. So making space for that loving, as you say, Shannon, I love that, a loving story, a gentle story, but also one that, that doesn't erase the discomfort.

Shannon Murray: It hadn't occurred to me, Jessica, just when you were saying that. The, uh, that's exactly what Hamlet's mother and uncle say to him at the beginning, right? But tell him tell a cheerier story, your, your father has been dead for two months, why aren't you over it yet? Cheer up. That's toxic positivity.

Jessica Riddell: He's surrounded by toxic positivity and nobody's giving him the space for that critical hope. And so he's, you know, he's being gaslit by a bunch of the people who are the closest to him, who should be giving him space for transformation, and instead erase that.

Lisa Dickson: Poor Hamlet. Yes. So that, I think, is probably a good place for us to end with this idea of how are we going to tell our stories, how are we going to create space for us to understand ourselves and how can we use the art that has been bequeathed to us from the past, these beautiful works, think of Hamlet listening to the story of Hecuba and finding something so powerful in that for him in his moment, how can we use the art that we have before us to help us to tell those stories and to think about what might be, how can we think about our future or deal with our disappointments or grapple with the contention of different ways of seeing and understanding the world. So that opens up Hamlet to a lot of big questions that hopefully we will be able to come back and talk about again.

So I would like to thank our Wyrdo guests for today, Shannon Murray from the University of Prince Edward Island and Jessica Riddell from Bishop's University. I'm Lisa Dickson. Our technical producer and our Wyrd apprentice for Wyrd Words is Cecilia Alain. Our intro song "Doubt" is by William Shakespeare, set to music and performed by Kevin Hutchings.