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# "And Who Will Write Me?": Maternalizing Networks of Remembrance in Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet*

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**ABSTRACT**
Maggie O'Farrell's award-winning novel *Hamnet* explores the tradition that the death of Shakespeare's son inaugurates the father's play. Reopening *Hamlet*'s metaphorical grave, the novel brings its reader into the play's imagined point of origin. It does so, this article argues, less out of an interest in Shakespeare himself or the primacy of father/son dyad than in acts of recovery that take the reader into a network of linked early modern lives. In addition to the extraordinary vitality the novel gives to the young boy, particular focus is placed on Agnes, its imagining of Anne Hathaway. Drawing on the fields of motherhood studies and memory studies, as well as Shakespeare adaptation, I argue that *Hamnet* creates networks of remembrance that are significantly maternalized. These include *Hamlet* and an epigraph citing Stephen Greenblatt's Hamnet essay, as well as memories and stories the *Hamlet* tradition displaces. Reading the novel through a series of interrelated themes – doubles, memories and ghosts – the article explores how O'Farrell engages with *Hamlet* as its inherited memory space and announces itself as a novel interested in maternal memories, spaces and stories. As such, the novel provides fascinating insight into how a literary text produces memory and invites us to remember a classic text like *Hamlet* differently.

**KEYWORDS**
Adaptation; *Hamlet*; memory; motherhood; Shakespeare

> She senses, too, somewhere off to the left, her own mother. She would be here with her had life taken a different turn.
>
> (O'Farrell 291)

> And who will write me?
>
> (Dead Centre loc. 506)

To the question young Hamnet poses in Dead Centre's play *Hamnet*, we already know the answer, or at least the obvious one: Shakespeare. There is a long tradition going back to at least Freud, and Joyce after him, that the death of Hamnet Shakespeare in 1596 at the age of eleven inaugurates the father's play *Hamlet*, which writes the son back to life through its preoccupation with

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uncanny returns (Greenblatt 42–47; Bray 95–115). With names regarded as interchangeable in the period, the boy becomes absorbed into the mythology of *Hamlet* and subordinate to it. Ben Kidd and Bush Moukarzel's play resurrects Hamnet from being a footnote in history to imagine the boy's encounter with his father. "I thought you were supposed to be a great man", he says to his father. "I am", says Shakespeare which the boy replies, "You just look like a man" (Dead Centre loc. 260). The gap in communication is not only generational – adult and child not quite understanding each other's worlds – but also ontological as the production provides its own take on *Hamlet*'s consideration of being and not being. It uses the medium of theatre and performance self-reflexively to explore presence and absence. Hamnet's question about future representations – "And who will write me?" – is metatheatrical, for the young actor playing him is a part of a representational process that is already underway in the production. The overall staging further interrogates the act of representation through the use of video screen technology that "holds, as 'twere, a mirror up to the stage, a live projection from the rear wall that affords us two images: the boy before us and his video apparition" (Crawley). The characters' experiences and expressions are thus heavily mediated. Who is present and who is a ghost, the play asks. One answer, the playwrights explain, is that

> We meet in the middle, in a theatre, in purgatory: youth reaching forward to a life it will never know, an audience reaching back to a life it has forgotten. Hamnet must be shielded from the secret of adulthood: that we don't know what we're doing. (Dead Centre)

The meeting of the famous playwright and his forgotten son reveals deeper truths about childhood as a form of loss and adulthood as itself a type of pretence.

Dead Centre's *Hamnet* regards theatre as a transversal space that allows us to imagine crossing the boundaries of life and death. Its theatre is, like Shakespeare's own, ghostly, in that things return as if from the grave. Hamnet becomes Hamlet. Other artists have taken up the call from the grave, for Shakespeare's son has had many literary fathers and mothers, most recently in Maggie O'Farrell's award-winning novel, *Hamnet*.[1] O'Farrell has commented in interviews that she was unaware of the Dead Centre production at the time of writing her novel (Sheehy). Yet, in its writing of the Hamnet story, O'Farrell's novel builds on the earlier text, both in terms of content and medium. O'Farrell uses the novel's long form narrative to extend Kidd and Moukarzel's interest in what it means to represent a life of a child, a life deprived of its full potential, in a work of art. She incorporates theatrical performance, bringing the reader towards and into the earliest performances of *Hamlet*. But her novel also writes Hamnet in entirely new ways, for it is interested in recovering the mother as much as it is in remembering the son.

O'Farrell begins with the premise that the plague, a recurrent threat in early modern England (Totaro 1–18), was the cause of young Hamnet's death, and that this death in turn found expression some four years later in *Hamlet*. While O'Farrell has talked about her decades long fascination with this story (Sheehy), the novel's publication in Spring 2020 meant that it coincided with the Covid-19 global pandemic. "In order to write *Hamnet*", she explains, "I had to put myself inside the skin of a 16th-century mother who realises that a terrible illness has entered her house. Two or three years ago, when I began the novel, this was purely an exercise of the imagination" but, in the spring of 2020, it is "unthinkably, the here and now. It is us, our neighbours, our children, our parents" (O'Farrell). Reading a novel about the devastating effects of plague on Shakespeare's family in the context of national lockdowns may have been a contributing factor to its rapidly acquired profile; as Tayari Jones puts it, "could there possibly be a better time to read a novel about a plague?" (Jones). This context brings its own resonances to the novel's rich interiority as it reaches into the early modern past to remember the boy and the loved ones he leaves behind.

In *Hamlet*, the appearance of the ghost alters Hamlet's own story, as what he calls the "the table of my memory" (1.5.98) is reset to make way for the father's demand for vengeance and remembrance. Hamlet becomes the father's demand and part of his journey in the play is how he can step out of the shadow of Old Hamlet. To work with such material might seem to locate *Hamnet* in a very tradition-laden space, the patriarchal primacy of the father / son dyad mapping a little too neatly on to Shakespeare biography to affirm the centrality of the man's life to the literary classic. But in *Hamnet*, O'Farrell undertakes her own resetting, working with the wax tablet that Shakespeare has Hamlet invoke to mould a story of a young boy and his family. The novel is, to borrow from Gérard Genette, a "hypertext, grafting itself on to a hypotext that it imitates or transforms" (ix); it can be read independently of what it rewrites but "always stands to gain by having its hypertextual status perceived" (398). Creatively and critically invoking its Shakespearean "father" text, but avoiding a straight line back to the author via the death of his son, the novel is also an example of what Kate Chedgzoy calls Shakespeare's "queer children" (1–7), those appropriations of Shakespeare that reconfigure Shakespeare as an "enabling and powerful resource", a process of expansion and hybridizing that "has allowed 'other' voices to make themselves heard" (2). As Chedgzoy elaborates, Shakespeare has traditionally signified "the idealised father of Western culture's collective family romance of its own past" (30) that privileges the patriarch and relegates others within the family dynamic, notably mothers and daughters, to a discursive non-space. Indeed, with exceptions that include Gertrude in *Hamlet* and Volumnia in *Coriolanus*, absence is the predominant note for the mother in the Shakespeare canon: *The Merchant of Venice*, *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, to highlight just some examples, each features

fathers, but no maternal equivalents, no Mrs Shylock, Mrs Lear or Mrs Prospero.[2]

Where such dynamics traditionally leave no or only a very limited form of agency for mothers, *Hamnet* recuperates the Shakespearean family as a site of maternal agency and announces itself as a novel interested in maternal memories, spaces and stories. Critics in motherhood studies have asked "where are the stories of mothers" (Hirsch 4) in literature. They have wondered "Why do we so rarely hear the voices of mothers in narrative form?" (Frye 187). And they have explored how women write their own experience of motherhood into their writing. O'Farrell's novel is part of a movement, both in creative works and also in motherhood studies, where the "mother's voice – in all its rhythms and ranges – has moved slowly […] from silence to speech" (Hirsch, qtd. in Podnieks and O'Reilly 16). O'Farrell has herself commented on how she delayed writing the novel until her own son had passed the age that Hamnet is in the text (Armistead), but my focus here is on the novel's representation of the mother and of memory rather than on such biographical details. Drawing on work in the fields of motherhood studies and memory studies as well as Shakespeare adaptation, I argue that *Hamnet* creates networks of remembrance that are significantly maternalized within the novel. These include *Hamlet* itself and an epigraph citing Stephen Greenblatt's Hamnet essay, a piece that succeeds in only mentioning the boy's mother once, as well as memories and stories the *Hamlet* tradition displaces. Reading the novel through a series of interrelated themes – doubles, memories, ghosts – I explore how O'Farrell engages with *Hamlet* as its inherited memory space. O'Farrell reopens *Hamlet*'s metaphorical grave, bringing her reader into that play's imagined point of origin, finding new ghosts in the process, and laying claim to an authentic memorialization of Hamnet.

## Doubles

*Hamnet* is interested less in bardolatrous biography than in acts of recovery that take the reader beyond the Shakespeare familiar from the archives and popular culture and into a network of linked early modern lives that, in addition to the extraordinary vitality the novel gives to the young boy, affords particular focus on Agnes, pronounced 'Ann-yis', the novel's imagining of Shakespeare's wife Anne Hathaway. She has, observes O'Farrell in an interview, faced "jaw-dropping vilification and downright barefaced misogyny" (Armistead), a sentiment that echoes Germaine Greer's biography of Shakespeare's wife (Greer). Where Dead Centre's play imagines Hamnet and Shakespeare as spectral entities – Shakespeare, for instance, says "You have to stop haunting me, Hamnet" (loc. 474) – and only mentions Hathaway in passing, the novel creates a strong maternal presence. The significance afforded to Agnes's story and viewpoint counterbalances those absent or "suffocating" mothers (Adelman) already

noted in much of Shakespeare's own creative oeuvre. Agnes's story highlights through fiction one aspect of women's contributions to the social, cultural and political life of the period that modern scholarship has examined in depth.[3] Agnes's story further keys O'Farrell's text into modern novelizations of Shakespeare by women writers who, as Julie Sanders argues, engage in a "parallel process of textual takeover and adaptation – the rendering apposite or appropriate […] of Shakespearean drama in a new context" (3). Reading as a double of *Hamlet*, in that *Hamnet* is both its own text and invokes Shakespeare's play, the novel contributes to ongoing understandings of adapted Shakespeare. The novel is an adaptation in Linda Hutcheon's classic description of the adapting work as "repetition with variation" (4) and exemplifies the adaptive faculty in its "ability" "to repeat without copying, to embed difference in similarity, to be at once both self and Other" (Hutcheon 174). O'Farrell's novel invokes *Hamlet* onomastically (as in the similarity of the name) and thematically (memories, ghosts) to produce an engagement with Shakespeare's play that proves transformative.

In *The Value of the Novel*, Peter Boxall reaches back to *Hamlet*, noting that it is a play "seized with a longing for the kind of interiority that belongs, perhaps, to the novel, and that was not yet available for Shakespeare in 1599" (13). Comparing one form to another helps to foreground their specific affordances and also to understand how one form might absorb, appropriate or hybridize the features of another one, a process described as remediation (Bolter and Grusin 65–69). Where Shakespeare had at his disposal the soliloquy as a major technique for delineating inwardness, O'Farrell uses the novel, in particular the third person narrative voice commonly associated with the classic realist novel, to imagine the inner lives of her characters. Indeed, the novel's own fashioning of consciousness might be said to owe a debt to soliloquizing characters on the Shakespearean stage, or to remediate this older form in a new way. O'Farrell further uses the novel form to stretch time. Hamlet complains that the "time is out of joint" (1.5.189), such is the strange news the Ghost brings, but equally the phrase is evocative of the formal constraints of the stage play, which bends inexorably towards its tragic arc and the father's demand for vengeance. Time is not so much disjointed in *Hamnet* as carefully balanced between present and past, another form of doubling in the text. Part I of the novel is structured along a sequence of present / past: for example, in the opening chapter, the reader is brought into young Hamnet's present, around 1596, and specifically his last days alive, and then back 15 years in chapter two, where Agnes is not that much older than her son.

Narrative parallelism enables O'Farrell to build her novel's worlds and through these closely interlinked temporalities to create emotional depth, as in the deft paralleling in chapters 16 and 17 of Hamnet and Judith's birth and Hamnet's death respectively. The transition from the twins coming into

the world, and then, in the following chapter, to one leaving it, gives added poignancy to this moment in the novel:

> And there, by the fire, held in the arms of his mother, in the room in which he learnt to crawl, to eat, to walk, to speak, Hamnet takes his last breath.
>
> He draws it in, he lets it out.
>
> There is silence, stillness. Nothing more. (252)

Echoing Hamlet's final words, "The rest is silence" (5.2.342), and figuring Agnes and Hamnet almost sculpturally, pietà-like in their arrangement, the novel establishes this moment as its emotional centre: every other event and timeline seems to lead toward it or flow out of it. Agnes will return to it, we learn, again and again, wondering if there was something preventive she could have done:

> Every life has its kernel, its hub, its epicentre, from which everything flows out, to which everything returns. This moment is the absent mother's: the boy, the empty house, the deserted yard, the unheard cry. Him standing here, at the back of the house, calling for the people who fed him, swaddled him, rocked him to sleep, held his hand as he took his first steps […].
>
> It will lie at her very core, for the rest of her life. (8–9)

The continuous present suggests we are in still in the present / past sequence noted earlier, but it interrupts this with a switch into a longer view – the perspective of the full story, of one life cut short and of others left in the aftermath, of looking back and recognizing this moment for what it is. So, in addition to the paralleling or balancing of present and past in the novel that instances its interest in doubles, not just in the obvious doubling of twins, but of life and death itself, entrances and exits, we also find an interest in the space that might open up between these states, a theme that, as we shall see, the novel circles back to in its final chapter set in the Globe theatre.

The novel's thematic call backs to *Hamlet* are further evident in its opening chapter that sets up the relation between the living and the dead and reveals the uncanny capacity of the novel form to imbue characters with a vitality: "A boy is coming down a flight of stairs" (1). Hamnet, alone in the house, is seeking out help for his sister Judith who, we later learn, has contracted plague. The third person narrative is structured on a series of action verbs – "He leaps" (3), he "sighs" (3), "he calls out" (4) – that make Hamlet appear in the present and alive. Micro revelations about the boy's tendency to daydream flesh out character:

> He has a tendency to slip the bounds of the real, tangible world around him and enter another place. He will sit in a room in body, but in his head he is somewhere else, someone else, in a place known only to him. (6)

O'Farrell harnesses the novel form's capacity to write into being a character's inner life, as we are brought from the third person into young Hamnet's

consciousness. Yet, for the reader, Hamnet's move through the house in search of adult help becomes spectral because we read this opening chapter through the frame of the novel's epigraphs:

> He is dead and gone, lady,
> He is dead and gone;
> At his head a grass-green turf,
> At his heels a stone.
>
> *Hamlet*, Act IV, scene v

> Hamnet and Hamlet are in fact the same name, entirely interchangeable in Stratford records in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.
>
> Stephen Greenblatt, 'The death of Hamnet and the making of *Hamlet*', *New York Review of Books*. (21 October 2004)

Such paratexts, as Gérard Genette notes, elucidate the title but also function indexically, pointing to the name of the author quoted as a "password of intellectuality" (160). Formative to the reader's navigation of the text, they are part of the "inferential walk", in Umberto Eco's classic description of how a reader is taken "outside the text" (32) in order to make meaning of its world within, that guides the reader from Shakespeare to Greenblatt. The *Hamlet* allusion grounds *Hamnet* in a relation to Shakespeare's play, a grounding that the second epigraph deepens. The epigraphs highlight what many readers of the novel will already know – that this is the story of the death of a young boy – and they invite (or remind) the reader to regard the subsequent story with that note of elegy, so that the life force the third person narrative gives to Hamnet is counterpoised with the knowledge of his passing: "He is dead and gone". The lines, which state the passing and map out the length of the newly inhabited grave, the incumbent becoming an effigy, are transposed from Ophelia's song remembering her father Polonius to here memorialize Hamnet. The second epigraph offers a simple statement of fact, the simplicity of the sentence suggesting in two inferences an empirical fact: the names are the same – Hamnet and Hamlet are interchangeable.

O'Farrell acknowledges Greenblatt's essay, where he suggests that *Hamlet* is not only deeply marked by Hamnet's death, and that of Shakespeare's father in 1601, but that the play signals a turning point in Shakespeare's own writing (11) as it becomes more personal and intense in its expression of inwardness (14). *Hamlet* is the playwright's expression of his grief and a response to wider cultural and spiritual shifts occasioned by the Reformation: with Catholic beliefs suppressed, in particular the notion of easing the passing of a soul from this world into the next, Shakespeare may, Greenblatt suggests, have found in play-making a compensatory mechanism for a gap in the culture of grieving. But Greenblatt himself is working off an association between son and play that stretches back to Freud and to James Joyce, where in *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus performs a Shakespeare hermeneutics, advancing a theory of *Hamlet*

that is curiously energized by the death of the son: "To a son he speaks, the son of his soul, the prince, young Hamlet, and to the son of his body, Hamnet Shakespeare, who has died in Stratford that his namesake may live for ever" (Joyce 267). While Stephen's theory appears *sui generis*, what we encounter is a Joycean bricolage of various critical traditions around Shakespeare that at once parodies biographical readings of the plays from an earlier century and also acknowledges them as the antecedents to psychoanalytical readings emerging at the time Joyce himself is writing. Greenblatt is, then, by no means alone in forging a connection between life and play, matter and art; for O'Farrell, he becomes a shorthand for this tradition.

Shakespeare biographers have noted the potential imprint of Hamnet's death on the plays, with varying degrees of conviction (Wells 25; Potter 224–8). Park Honan claims that Hamnet's death "deepened the artist and thinker" to provide for "the most emotionally complex and powerful dramas the English stage has ever known" (236). Similarly, for Keverne Smith, *Hamlet* is the expression of Shakespeare's grieving process (73) and writing a form of therapy. However, that *Hamlet* was named after Shakespeare's son and inspired by his death is counted among the "great myths" about Shakespeare compiled by Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith. While they concede that there is some proximity between the names (84–85), Maguire and Smith conclude this is not the same as identity. Rather, they see the similarity as a function of our desire for "Shakespeare's characters to derive from real events, perhaps because we want to get hold of their inspiration and peg it to something recognizable" (85). This desire for an identifiable connection between the work and the life is, as Graham Holderness notes, a feature of Shakespeare biography, which becomes a "quest for the life that precedes the works" (123), a quest that entails as much speculation as it does archival research. Greenblatt's own work is exemplary of this combination, relying as much on the critic's own imagination as on the known facts of Shakespeare's life. As Holderness quips, the Shakespeare biographer "needs to have the skills of novelist" (131) and while *Hamnet* is not a literary biography it does share that form's interest in how Shakespeare became Shakespeare. Indeed, for some readers – and for O'Farrell herself and perhaps her publisher too – the attraction of the Hamnet story might reside in the capacity it offers the writer to imagine Shakespeare's private life and to challenge the assumption that "*Hamlet* gets its emotional punch from late Elizabethan culture, not from the inner landscape of its author" (Smith 175). As with biography, which "allows the pleasures of the plays to be continued by other means" (Potter 401), the novel forges an imaginative connection to the playwright.

## Memories

Certainly, the novel affords the reader glimmers of Shakespeare in its characterization of stages of his life, from the young man pursuing Agnes and dealing

with an overbearing father to the married family man in search of something yet to find expression. But the novel's Shakespeare remains quite enigmatic and is never named as Shakespeare or William in the text, a decision O'Farrell has linked to her not wanting to seem "presumptuous" (Sheehy). Absent too is any hint of a queer Shakespearean sexuality familiar from the *Sonnets* (Wells 87–91). The novel's Shakespeare is also less embodied than his wife Agnes, who is characterized with a sensory depth. Her taking of another's hand, first introduced when she and the young Shakespeare meet, becomes her signature in the novel:

> She does a strange thing: she puts her hand to his, where it is resting on her forearm. She takes hold of the skin and muscle between his thumb and forefinger and presses. The grip is firm, insistent, oddly intimate, on the edge of painful. (39)

The third person narration describes Agnes's actions, which become embodied through the emphasis on touch, the gripping of Shakespeare's thenar muscle. While this conveys a sense of Shakespeare's presence, he remains nonetheless at a reach:

> When she had taken his hand that day […] she had felt – what? Something of which she had never known the like. Something she would never have been expected to find in the hand of a clean-booted grammar-school boy from town. It was far-reaching: this much she much she knew. It had layers and strata, like a landscape. There were spaces and vacancies, dense patches, underground caves, rises and descents. […] A sense, too, that something was tethering him, holding him back; there was a tie somewhere, a bond that needed to be loosened or broken, before he could fully inhabit this landscape, before he could take command. (81)

The narrative conceit is that Agnes's foresight is inevitably partial and incomplete because she does not yet know that this man will become Shakespeare. The description of the capacious mind will be familiar to readers aware of the cultural legacy of the plays and may, at first glance, invoke some traditional gender binaries in the process, the mind of the playwright contrasted with Agnes's senses, her body and her nature to his art. As Hélène Cixous reminds us, "Logocentrism subjects thought – all concepts, codes and values – to a binary system, related to 'the' couple man/ woman" (157). But in no way is Agnes's sensory reading regarded as lesser and it is worth noting how the narrative, through metaphors and analogies that are topographical – "patches, caves, rises and descents" – portrays Shakespeare's mind as like a female body. Shakespeare, through Agnes's perspective as relayed by the third person narration, becomes the kind of person and artist that resists gender dichotomies, who can create because there is in this "inventing subject an abundance of the other, of variety" (Cixous 158). Or, rather, this is the version of Shakespeare that Agnes foresees and that O'Farrell, as a contemporary woman writer, wants to advance – and to remember.

The novel's figuring of Shakespeare is, then, one of the ways that it distances itself from the Greenblatt work it acknowledges at the outset. *Hamnet* is not

concerned with reproducing Greenblatt's particular focus on the father-son dyad and the implicit patriarchal fantasies of origin that it denotes as the father begets the son, who in turn begets the father's creation, corpse becoming corpus. The first epigraph sets up some critical distance between this tradition of *Hamlet* and the novel, with the Ophelia reference drawing in a figure so often relegated to the margins of *Hamlet* or regarded as the threatening female other to Hamlet's self. The transposition of the lines from the context of a daughter grieving for her father to another – the Hamnet / Hamlet story – remembers the other losses in *Hamlet* and is, I think, suggestive of O'Farrell's method, as she uses the novel to play creatively and imaginatively with her source materials, inviting us to remember them more capaciously than the terms they themselves provide.

Beyond the quoted lines, Ophelia does not feature explicitly in *Hamnet* but, as with quotation, which has the quality of the uncanny, what Marjorie Garber calls the "return of the expressed" (xvii), she reappears in other ways in *Hamnet*. Some of Ophelia's energies are carried over into the novel. O'Farrell integrates Ophelia's association with plant life, especially herbs and flowers that she doles out at the court of Elsinore in a scene that precipitates her death, into her characterization of Agnes. Her knowledge of nature and of the curative properties of plant life – her "unusual abilities" (50) – is initially the stuff of myth and generates suspicion among the townsfolk of Stratford but later draws them to her. Susannah, her daughter, tired of the demand for Agnes' abilities, wonders if she "isn't just mother to her – and the twins, of course, – but mother to the whole town, the entire county" (64). This maternal emphasis contrasts with the motherless Ophelia of Shakespeare's play and it is as if O'Farrell has recuperated Ophelia from the "document in madness" (4.5.178) that Laertes laments, into a fully legitimate communion between nature and people, a way of being with and in the world. "There's rosemary: that's for remembrance" (4.5.175), says Ophelia. Agnes too brings herbs – thyme and marjoram – into her in-laws' house, a fragrance that "brings, to the mind of John, a recollection of his grandmother, a woman who kept a posy of herbs tied to her belt" and that makes Mary recall her own childhood (140).

Memories have a habit of accumulating as a consequence of Agnes's presence and, as with the micro-recollections the smell of the herbs trigger, the remembrances are maternal ones. For Agnes herself, her mother is recalled through nature, and the forest in particular:

> There was a hand, too, that held Agnes's, to stop her falling, and it was warm and firm. If Agnes was lifted from the forest floor to that mother's back, she could nestle under the cloak of hair. The trees appeared then, to her, through the dark skeins, like a lantern show. Look, the mother said, a squirrel, and a reddish flourish of tail disappeared up a trunk, as if she herself had conjured it from the bark. Look, a kingfisher: a jewel-backed arrow piercing the silver skin of a brook. Look, hazelnuts, the mother clambering into the boughs, shaking them with her strong arms and down came clusters of dun-jacketed pearls. (52)

The third person narrative creates a multi-sensory experience: touch, sight, sound are all invoked. The mother's voice is recovered and heard through free indirect discourse, with the successive imagined verbalizations drawing the child Agnes's eye to the point of discovery. Nature and its creatures work in harmony with mother and daughter in a tableau that seems "conjured" by the mother herself, but that the reader understands as Agnes's subjective recollection of the absent mother. The use of the definite article conveys Agnes's attempts to recall and differentiate this figure (who we later learn died when Agnes was very young) from her subsequent step-mothers. But against those that say "You won't remember your real mother – you couldn't possibly remember", Agnes "remembered everything. Everything except where she had gone, why she had left" (54). In *Hamnet*, death is never a final destination.

On the day of Agnes's wedding, she moves from merely recalling the mother to conjuring her presence among the assembled witnesses:

> She senses, too, somewhere off to the left, her own mother. She would be here with her had life taken a different turn. She would be the one holding her hand as Agnes walked to her wedding, her fingers encasing her daughter's. Her footsteps would have followed her beat. They would be walking this path together, side by side [...].
>
> So it follows, of course, that she will be here now, in whatever form she can manage. Agnes does not need to turn her head, does not want to frighten her away. It is enough to know that she is there, manifest, hovering, insubstantial. I see you, she thinks. I know you are here. (118)

Agnes's imagination has given her a memory that helps to fill the maternal absence, to cope with the trauma of losing her mother at a young age. *Hamnet* here bears comparison with adaptations of Shakespeare that focus on those plays that are curiously depopulated of mothers. For example, Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* rewrites *King Lear*, recovering maternal memory fragments out of that play's maternal absence (Sanders 197–202; Brauner 654–666). The protagonist Ginny recalls her mother's funeral, or imagines an alternate life for the mother, so that she occupies both the past and an imagined future. O'Farrell takes the tenses associated with the absent mother further: she is not past tense, but conditional perfect, and the use of anaphora, with the affirmative repetition of "She would", has the effect of bringing her gradually into the scene, into the present continuous, "she is there", and the character's phenomenological assertion, "I know you are here". Through this memory work, the novel creates a mother-daughter subplot that Marianne Hirsch associates with literary representations of motherhood. Always both a mother and a daughter, Hirsch elaborates, the mother can be locked into an object position through representational modes, motherhood before selfhood, but "her discourse, when it its voiced, moves her from object to subject" (12). *Hamnet*'s narrative strategies build Agnes's voice, and that of her own mother, in ways that unsettle the hierarchy of motherhood / selfhood to

suggest instead maternal agency. Through Agnes's act of conjuring, one that her mother has bequeathed to her, as intimated by the woodland memory noted above, we get a distinctly maternal remembrance that counterbalances *Hamlet*'s obsession with paternal demands. But the conjuring act is the third person narrator's, which functions as an objective, authoritative voice and, ultimately, O'Farrell's own skill in playing with and remembering the materials that are thought to have shaped the play.

It is already evident how extensively *Hamnet* explores memory. More precisely, the novel complements and contributes to critical appraisals of the role literature plays in not only imitating memory, which "often seems to hang by a thread, to be balanced on the cusp between recovery and dissolution" (Middleton and Brown 241) but in creating new understandings of how memories are formed and returned to. Memory studies has attended closely to literature's agential approach to memory as it is collectively and individually experienced, reconstructed and represented. Identifying this process as "fictions of memory", Brigit Neumann notes how novels in particular do not "imitate existing versions of memory, but produce, in the act of discourse, the very past which they purport to describe" (334). Astrid Erll argues that "Literature is a medium that simultaneously builds and observes memory" (391). Similarly, for Ann Rigney, literature is an active "memorial medium" (368), crucially one characterized by its flexibility. She draws on the classical idea of a text's monumentalism and the Roman poet Horace's claim that his verse will outlive monuments and the elements to suggest that "texts are portable monuments that can be carried over into new situations" (Rigney 383). The transposition of memory can occur via texts that, as Renate Lachmann argues, constitute and carve out memory spaces in their own right. These spaces can include other texts or, more precisely, intertexts. As she elaborates,

> the memory of the text is formed by the intertextuality of its references […] inasmuch as each new act of writing is a traversal of the space between existing texts. By inserting itself into the mnemonic space between texts, a text inevitably creates a transformed mnemonic space. (Lachmann 174)

O'Farrell's novel can be interpreted as a memory of *Hamlet* through its intertextual relationship to Shakespeare's play. But part of the novel's motivation is resetting and expanding this memory space. In a radio interview, O'Farrell admits to being "slightly annoyed about how underwritten the story of Hamnet" (Sheehy) is in the tradition of the play. By narrativizing the Hamnet story, and focusing on the maternal, the novel asserts an imaginative right to interrogate *Hamlet* and the kind of traditional, patrilineal modes of recollection that play values. It is in these terms that we can more readily understand *Hamnet* as an example of "fictions of memory" that, as Neumann explains, "may symbolically empower the culturally marginalized or forgotten and thus figure as an imaginative counter discourse" (341).

*Hamnet* challenges and transforms its inherited memory space through its attention to maternal memories but goes further too, situating the individual case of Agnes in terms of early modern gender roles. Working with *Hamlet*'s emergence out of Hamnet's life, the novel remembers the culture and its gendered opportunities that enable Shakespeare to write, a privilege Virginia Woolf famously addresses in her imagining of Shakespeare's sister in *A Room of One's Own* (Woolf 39). Where Agnes is associated with nature, the domestic space of the house and, until Part II of the novel, remains largely confined to them, her husband is associated with movement, either leaving the family home for London and a career in its playhouses or returning to it briefly. The narrative attention to Agnes's life further reveals the gendered division of emotional labour in the period, with Agnes as nurturer at home and to the locality, a mother to all, yet the focus on her medicinal knowledge also plugs into the archives and to those histories of how women in the period were actively involved in the business of health and healing (Harkness 52–85).

Interested in acts of recovery, the novel writes Agnes back into the story of the conditions that made *Hamlet* possible, a manoeuvre that reflects its implicitly presentist response to both the play and to memory. As a memory work about Hamnet Shakespeare, the novel memorializes the early modern period more generally for a modern readership. As Rigney notes, "Certain things are remembered not because they are actually true of the past [...] but because they are somehow meaningful in the present" (381). This raises the broader question, "How do we continue to make meaning out of reimagined historical pasts in the here and now?" (Chedgzoy, et al). *Hamnet* replies progressively, I would argue, inviting its reader to understood *Hamlet* as less the outpouring of innate genius than as a function of male cultural privilege and of family life that is distinctly gendered, a recontextualizing that fits with twenty-first century engagements with the play's canonical status.

## Ghosts

As *Hamlet* explores life and death, "the undiscovered country from whose bourn | No traveller returns" (3.1.80–81), except of course that the Ghost's appearance suggests otherwise, so *Hamnet* suggests the intersection of these fundamental states. Agnes's sense that animals "exist in some doubled state, half spirit, half bird" (131) extends to people too. The living seem like apparitions of the dead, as in her sighting of Hamnet, "He is stock still, his face white, his fingers gripping the stair rail" (108); and Mary Shakespeare's words to her grandson, "You frightened me! [...]. You look like a ghost, standing there like that'" (127). The dead seem to walk amongst the living, as in Eliza Shakespeare's recollection of her sister Anne (71, 113) and Agnes's sense later on that Anne is present:

> Agnes makes herself form the thought, Anne, we know you are there, you are not forgotten. How frail, to Agnes, is the veil between their world and hers. For her, the worlds are indistinct from each other, rubbing up against each other, allowing passage between them. (129)

At this point in the narrative, that veil must be acknowledged, honoured, and defied – "She will not let Judith cross" (129) – as Agnes summons all her energies to treat Judith for pestilence. Hamnet is already associated with that veil, as the epigraphs establish, and is marked by its fragility. There is a sense of him slipping out of life and both character and narrative desiring to create an entirely subjective temporality:

> Agnes looks at him [Shakespeare] … She wants, more than anything, to stretch this moment, to expand the time before anything, to expand the time before he knows, to shield him from what has happened for as long as she can. (272)

Of course, neither parent can be shielded from the child's death.

Where Part I of the novel is concerned with Hamnet's movement toward death, Part II is the aftermath of his passing. We find Agnes and Shakespeare responding differently to their grief, divided by it emotionally – and physically, as he makes for London. Agnes, in the immediate aftermath of her son's death, sees him, or mistakes Judith for her son (269). Or come Autumn, she grieves at what cannot be: "Here is a season Hamnet has not known or touched. Here is a world moving on without him" (291). But she continues to search for him (298), as does Judith, who feels his presence outside their house (338). As the narrative moves the reader from season to a year after, Shakespeare, now in London, "scans his audience minutely, carefully, because he cannot fathom that his son could just have gone; he must be somewhere; all he has to do is find him" (303). But marked by *Hamlet*'s concern with uncanny returns, the novel insists that Hamnet's aftermath does not have a terminal point; instead, it gives him a series of afterlives. It does so by plotting a set of memory coordinates that lead the reader to *Hamlet*, distilling the play's own distillation of early modern culture's belief in ghosts, and more specifically, the capacity of theatrical performance to imitate life. This sense that among theatre's effects was reanimating the dead finds its most exuberant expression in Thomas Nashe when, writing in his social satire *Piers Peniless* (1592), he describes seeing English history on stage:

> How would it have joyed the brave Talbot (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred years in his Tombe, hee should triumphe againe on the Stage, and have his bones newe embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at least […] who in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding? (qtd. in Rackin 113)

Nashe's preoccupation with the reanimation of a distinctly English history – imagining the vainglorious Talbot as all living, bleeding English masculine

matter – defends the theatre as a place of national moral instruction rather than the stuff of Puritan nightmares. Bearing witness to the affective intensity of performance, the account exemplifies the idea that in Shakespeare's culture, theatre is ghostly. Marvin Carlson has argued more generally that theatre performance is, by its very ephemerality, spectral: each iteration carries with it the ghosts – and memories – of prior performances and traditions (1–15). O'Farrell adapts this idea of the haunted stage, taking the reader with Agnes on her journey to London in search of Shakespeare and his new play:

> There is her husband's name, at the top, and the word 'tragedie'. And there, right in the middle, in the largest letters of all, is the name of her son, her boy, the name spoken aloud in church when he was baptised, the name on his gravestone, the name she herself gave him. (344)

In the aftermath of Hamnet's death, come the afterlives, or imitations of his matter in the father's art.

As she travels to the playhouse, becoming a fictional counterpart to women theatregoers in the period, Agnes struggles to understand how her husband could have appropriated the boy's memory and, witnessing *Hamlet* on stage, wonders

> How could he thieve this name, then strip and flense it of all it embodies, discarding the very life it once contained? How could he take up his pen and write it on a page, breaking its connection with their son? It makes no sense. It pierces her heart, it eviscerates her, it threatens to sever her from herself, from him, from everything they had, everything they were. (363)

Agnes, present for the first time in the theatre that has become her husband's world, his refuge from life in Stratford, experiences a range of sensations. The focalization of the third person narrative on her perspective has the effect of imbuing what could be a cliched moment, imagining the first audiences of *Hamlet*, with an authenticity. She is no ordinary spectator, but the mother of the boy being imagined or "new embalmed", to echo Nashe. It is Agnes who implicitly lays claim to the proper memory of Hamnet. The father's pen becomes a knife that slices through the boy to produce this impostor on stage. But, as with Nashe's sense of theatre's emotional affect on the spectator, Agnes is captivated by the stage action; she goes from shock to amazement, she sees doubles too, a motif in the novel: "It is him. It is not him. It is him. It is not him" (364). In alluding to the simultaneity of actor–son, art–matter, the novel remediates Shakespearean theatre, with Agnes's spectatorial innocence allowing for the expression of it as an extraordinary technology of representation. In a theatre where "the spectatorial energy between audience and performance" seems "ineffable and incredibly potent" (Rodgers 37), Agnes is won over by the actor's impersonation of *her* Hamnet – "her husband has pulled off a manner of alchemy" (365) – and accepts the performance as a gift, even a healing one. The act of remediation, of one form reproducing another, operates as a remedy, as

in the etymology of the word, from the Latin, *remederi*, “to heal, to restore to health” (Bolter and Grusin 59). There is a sleight of hand here, whereby the reproduction of the stage action lends the narrative voice an opaqueness that authenticates it. The novel displaces on to the original the accusation of imitation and appropriation of the life: *Hamnet*, we are asked to infer, is not flensing Hamnet. Dead Centre’s *Hamnet* performs a similar manoeuvre: “Did you write this?”, asks Hamnet. “I didn’t write this”, responds Shakespeare, “I would never use you in this way” (Dead Centre loc. 506).

And yet, in bringing Agnes and the reader with her back to *Hamlet* in performance, the novel also reads Shakespeare’s creativity as a deeply authentic response to grief and as a means to live with it:

> Hamlet, here, on this stage, is two people, the young man, alive, and the father, dead. He is both alive and dead. Her husband brought him back to life, in the only way he can. As the ghost talks, she sees her husband, in writing this, in taking the role of the ghost, has changed places with his son. He has taken his son’s death and made it his own; he has put himself in death’s clutches, resurrecting the boy in his place […].
>
> She will say all this to her husband, later, after the play has ended, after the final silence has fallen, after the dead have sprung up to take their places in the line of players at the edge of the stage. After her husband and the boy, their hands joined, bow and bow, facing into the storm of applause. After the stage is left deserted, no longer a battlement, no longer a graveyard, no longer a castle. […] After he has taken her by the hand and held her against the buckles and leather of his armour. After they have stood together in the open circle of the playhouse, until it was as empty as the sky above it. (366)

The third person narrative expresses and interprets the stage action, as the ghost, played by Shakespeare himself, and Hamlet meet. Invoking the “peculiar psychology of the theatre, where everything is and is not real” (Potter 399), the narrative elaborates on how, for Agnes, the impersonation she deciphers becomes a reparative process. Or, rather, she interprets the meeting of father figure and son as a form of transference that is, to her mind, reparative. It brings Hamnet back; it remembers him. Furthermore, where Part II of the novel is characterized by Shakespeare’s absence and his distance from Agnes, now they are united together again. The narrative also extends the imagined present of this scene through its gesture to a time beyond it – “she will say all this” – and the anaphoric “after”, “after”, “after” that implies the narrative “knows” the life, the aftermath, and the afterlives. Assuming a unique and long vantagepoint is a hallmark of third person narration and one that lends the narrative voice verisimilitude. O’Farrell puts it to brilliant effect here, implying that Agnes and Shakespeare’s memory of their son will go on and on, exceeding the novel’s own narrativizing limits. *Hamnet*, then, defers closure, prolonging this scene of the couple joined together – and symbolically with their son:

> She stretches out a hand, as if the acknowledge them, as if to feel the air between the three of them, as if wishing to pierce the boundary between audience and players, between real life and play.
>
> The ghost turns his head toward her, as he prepares to exit the scene. He is looking straight at her, meeting her gaze, as he speaks his final words:
> 'Remember me'. (367)

The final phrase loops back to and quotes from *Hamlet*, inviting the reader to take seriously the idea that its point of origin is Hamnet's death. As Hamlet seeks to inscribe his life into Denmark's memory, making Horatio his narrator and memory keeper – "in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain | To tell my story" (5.2.300–01) – so *Hamnet* remembers the young boy – through the epigraph, the pausing of the moment of his passing, the final call "Remember me". This is a repetition of *Hamlet* but with a distinctly maternal variation.

Throughout, the novel has asserted the free play of the form to imagine that origin story, finding creative potential in the play but, more significantly still, in the personal, familial and psychological elements that are understood as its catalyst. In this way, the novel adapts and challenges *Hamlet* as its inherited memory space. The novel moves towards and away from *Hamlet* in its acts of return, recovery and remembering. These different, even competing, impulses allow the novel to authenticate its iteration of Hamnet, to reach back into the "before" of *Hamlet* to name and recover the life of a young boy in ways that suggest his memory is irreducible to the play. Indeed, in reaching closure, the novel stops short of alluding to the fuller, adult character of Hamlet that Shakespeare's play delineates: no mention of the overly contemplative revenger, or his grief or his world-weariness, for these are familiar aspects of the Hamlet story that do not fit O'Farrell's story. It is, after all, Hamnet that O'Farrell's novel invites us to remember. Yet, in the final act of memorialization several voices can, in fact, be heard: the ghost of Old Hamlet, played by Shakespeare; Hamnet's too, for the ghost is the son coming back as the father; Agnes's inner voice as constructed through the third person narrative; and the third person narrative voice, which, in narratological terms, is defined by its non-presence. The layering of voices is continuous with the novel's concern with memory as a web of relations, one memory point, be it a life like or a text like *Hamlet*, generating others, including the novel itself as its own fiction of memory. In this way too, *Hamnet* challenges *Hamlet* as its inherited memory space for, in the process of return and recreation, it pinpoints what Shakespeare's play does not include – or does so only obliquely – to fill in the gaps and silences.

Crucially, *Hamnet* maternalizes memory, overlaying the word of the father with Agnes's perspective and, in turn, her own memories of her mother. But these memory worlds extend beyond the maternal to include extra-diegetic figures such as Ophelia, alluded to in the novel's paratext, and those real life

Elizabethan women that enable the representation of Agnes. These we might understand as the clamorous and ghostly voices that *Hamnet* brings forth, providing a modern, counter-memory to *Hamlet*'s predominant insistence on the father-son dyad. In attending to residual, displaced or neglected stories and texts, *Hamnet* asks us to reflect on what and how we choose to remember, to resist the traditional *Hamlet*, to find in art not a flensing of matter but a lasting yet delicate writing back into life of what was lost.

## Notes

1. The novel won the Women's Prize for Fiction (2020) and was also named Waterstone's Book of the Year in the UK.
2. The mother in Shakespearean drama is brilliantly theorized as "suffocating" and the sin of origin (Adelman). Shakespeare's own and his figurative mothers have been surveyed (Macrae Richmond), as has the maternal absence in *King Lear* (Kahn) and *The Tempest* (Orgel). There is broad study of the polysemous meanings of "the dramatised mother" in early modern plays (Dunworth) and more recently a focus on Volumnia in *Coriolanus* (Compagnoni).
3. There is extensive literature here, including on women as writers and patrons (Phillippy; Clarke); players (Brown and Parolin; McManus; Stokes); theatregoers (Levin; Manm); readers (Snook); and translators (Uman). Research projects such as RECIRC, The Reception and Circulation of Early Modern Women's Writing 1550–1700, (https://recirc.nuigalway.ie/) offer a wealth of resources on the impact made by women's writers and their work.

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