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“Caught in a web of absence”: Risk, death and survival in Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet*

Abstract. Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet* (2020) is a reimagining of the death of Shakespeare’s only son, and the existential havoc that the event causes in the protagonists’ life. However, the title is slightly misleading because the novel’s central character is Hamnet’s enigmatic mother, Agnes Hathaway, better known as Anne. The narrative oscillates between two timelines: the present begins on the day the plague first afflicts Hamnet’s twin sister Judith and soon after takes away the boy himself, a trauma that risks breaking both the family bonds and fragmenting the individual psyche. The past swings back to Agnes’s meeting her future husband about 15 years earlier. Though Hamnet died of unknown causes, O’Farrell attributes it to the bubonic plague that raged throughout the country at the time with devastating consequences, an aspect of the story that is highly topical due to the Covid-19 pandemic. *Hamnet* is a text crossed by a number of deaths, both in the family of the dramatist and of his wife. As such, it is argued, the novel explores various forms of risk: physical, psychological and emotional. At the same time, it examines the different strategies that the human psyche activates to heal its wounds.
Keywords: plague, risk, death, trauma, survival, safety.

Introduction

> “The words exist, if you know how to listen”
> Maggie O’Farrell, *Hamnet*

Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet* (2020) is a reimagining of the death of Hamnet, William Shakespeare’s eleven-year-old only son. The tragic event ripples through the calm surface of the protagonists’ daily lives, tips over into psychological devastation, and has far-reaching emotional, domestic and artistic reverberations.

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The title, however, belies its real subject because, though the text is permeated with Hamnet's presence, even as an eerily, ghostly creature long after his death, both in the family and in the pages of his father's theatrical production, the protagonist and pulsating heart is the boy's mysterious mother, Anne Hathaway, in the novel called Agnes which, as O'Farrell explains, is the name that appeared in her father's will. Actually, the two names, "Agnes and Ann were simply treated as versions of the same name" (2008: 10), Germaine Greer maintains in *Shakespeare's Wife* (2008), adding that scholars found dozens of examples "where Agnes, pronounced 'Annis', gradually becomes 'Ann'" (Greer 2008: 10). So, "the child born Agnes Hathaway grew up to be Ann Shakespeare" (2008: 11)[2].

At the same time, the famous playwright is somehow relegated to a secondary role, never named directly but only variously referred to, in relation to the other characters, as "the son", "the Latin tutor", "her husband", "the father". Actually, he is one of the many ghosts that haunt the text, moved to the periphery of the novel's geographic world. He is seldom at home in Stratford-upon-Avon, where the story takes place, and his life in distant London is little known even to his family; he mostly exists in the memories that his wife and children cherish of him, a presence kept alive by his letters to them.

Hamnet is a text crossed, and punctuated, by a number of risks to face and deaths, both in the family of the dramatist and of his wife, shadows that loom large in their lives and make their presence felt throughout the book.

As such, the article argues, the novel explores various forms of risk: physical, psychological and emotional, the latter ones triggered by the trauma of loss and grief. At the same time, it examines the different strategies that the human psyche activates to overcome and survive a traumatic event and re-emerge on relatively safe existential ground. In addition to this, at its core, *Hamnet* is also a tender study of motherhood and family life; an exploration of marriage, as well as an insightful look into the creative process itself.

A restless boy, a witchy forest girl and a kestrel

Hamnet is a third-person present tense narrative, for the most part focalized through Agnes's female eyes, but inhabiting different minds. The novel moves to centre stage the almost obscure figure of Shakespeare's wife, as well as Hamnet, so overlooked and forgotten by scholars, giving both of them a personality and a voice, and giving voice to their silenced story.

O'Farrell's is an important shift of perspective because, as the writer herself asserts in an interview with Sarah Hughes for *The Guardian*, Anne Hathaway is usually given no agency, and "there's so much hostility and misogyny towards her. The narrative is that she was illiterate, that she was a peasant, that he hated her, that she forced him into

2 The article will refer to Anne Hathaway as Agnes in discussing Maggie O'Farrell's novel. Germaine Greer uses the form 'Ann', a spelling that is retained when quoting from her text.

marriage" (Hughes 2020). A malicious view of her finds space even in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920), voiced by Stephen Dedalus. In the 'Scylla and Charybdis' episode, he refers to her as "the ugliest doxy in all Warwickshire, [...] a boldfaced Stratford wench who tumbles in a cornfield a lover younger than herself" (2011: 244). Then Stephen goes on to add that as soon as the dramatist realized he had made a mistake, he "got out of it as quickly and as best he could" (2011: 243), leaving her behind to escape to London, thus becoming a ghost for his family.

Scholars have frequently used "the distorting lens of what he expressed through his characters or the speaker of his sonnets" (Shapiro 2006: xvi) as 'sources' to have access to the dramatist's feelings and fill the silences and opacities of his life. To argue their point and support the narrative that Shakespeare's was an unhappy marriage, critics also invoke the famous will, in which he left only his "second-best bed" to his wife, as also Stephen Dedalus does, defining it "the swansong [...] wherein he has commended her to posterity" (2011: 260). However, they tend to ignore that in Elizabethan times the 'best bed' was usually kept on view downstairs for visitors to admire. William left the marital (second best) bed to his wife. That bed surely had more emotional value than the showpiece bed. On this critical tendency, James Shapiro aptly observes that "the plays are not two-way mirrors" which can offer a window into the dramatist's feelings where he left no other documents, such as letters or diaries, to refer to, a critical methodology that is characterized by "circularity and arbitrariness" (Shapiro 2006: xiv).

In her recent *The Private Life of William Shakespeare* (2021), Lena Cowen Orlin acknowledges that "the nature of Shakespeare's emotional relationship with Anne [...] is a privacy that will remain intractable" (49); however, she asserts that there was purpose in the union and that it suited him, even though "the very idea that Shakespeare could himself have made a positive life choice flies in the face of settled opinion" (49). In fact, she concludes, marriage freed him from a planned indenture and an unwanted life in trade, and set him free to become a poet and playwright. As for the long debated issue of the bed left to his wife, Cowen Orlin claims that "all Shakespeare's bequests hint at the possibility that there was a sentimental significance in the second-best bed as well" (194).

Peter Ackroyd is also very critical of the speculations that Anne Hathaway had coaxed an inexperienced young man into bed and trapped him into "a *mésalliance* or forced marriage" which, instead, he considered "an eminently sensible arrangement" (2006: 83). The whole narrative of their unhappy married life, he argues, is "an insult to Anne Hathaway who, like many of the silent wives of famous men, has endured much obloquy" (2006: 84).

In the novel, a disparaging view of Agnes is voiced by Shakespeare's mother, Mary. Being somehow both puzzled by, and even afraid of, her ability "to look at you, right into you, right through you" (O'Farrell 2020: 206)[3], Mary considers her daughter-in-law a

"sorceress [who] bewitched and ensnared her boy, lured him into a union. This, Mary can never forgive" (207).

However, O'Farrell maintains, "there's not a single shred of evidence for any of that" (Allardice 2021) and, as a counter-argument, she adds, "when he retired, he could have lived anywhere. He was incredibly wealthy but he chose to go back and spend his retirement with her in Stratford. This doesn't suggest to me a man who hated his wife or regretted his marriage" (Allardice 2021).

Actually, in her meticulously researched *Shakespeare's Wife*, Germaine Greer, sifting through the archives, wills and birth records of people whose lives ran parallel to the young Shakespeares, traces, and exposes, the evolution of the fantasy narrative concerning them. She offers a corrective to all the male biographers who manipulated the meagre facts known about Shakespeare to construct misogynistic narratives about Anne Hathaway. Greer pointedly observes: "By doing the right thing, by remaining silent and invisible, Ann Shakespeare left a wife-shaped void in the biography of William Shakespeare, which later bardolaters filled up with their own speculations, most of which do neither them nor their hero any credit" (2009: 4). This tendency resulted in biographies mostly built on fanciful hypotheses: "All biographies of Shakespeare are houses built of straw, but there is good straw and rotten straw" (Greer 2009: 8). She goes on to add that Anne was "like so many young women of her age in being unmarried" (34), and that "it is her husband who is the exception to the rule, being himself a minor" (88).

O'Farrell acknowledges Germaine Greer's book as one of the many influences on her portrayal of Agnes, along with a series of additional sources that she researched in preparation for the book and to inscribe her 'other' narrative. O'Farrell retrieves Anne Hathaway from obscurity and the disparaging obfuscating sexism of scholars and scriptwriters of Oscar-winning films, and brings to life a fascinating female portrait of an unconventional, free-spirited creature who seems to be endowed with special, mysterious gifts.

Hamnet is divided into two parts, the caesura between the sections being represented by Hamnet's death. The novel oscillates back and forth between two timelines and the opposite poles of 'risk' and 'safety' that punctuate both trajectories. The present narrative, which actually opens the novel, begins in 1596, on the day the plague stealthily enters the safe world of the playwright's household, bringing death and devastation. The past narrative swings back first to Agnes's recollection of her childhood, then the meeting with her future husband while he is tutoring her stepsiblings, William's courtship and their marriage, followed by the birth of their three children.

Though risk, loss and death are introduced at the very beginning of the novel, on the day the plague appears in the Shakespeares' lives unexpectedly, they also accompany

3 Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text.

the protagonists' past. So, first the article will focus on the past time axis- which is gradually presented through a series of flashbacks that alternate with the present narrative thread- both to take readers back into the youthful stage of Agnes's and Will's life, their respective problematic family relationships, and their encounter, and, above all, because old traumas shed light on the protagonists' psychology in their adulthood.

Agnes's past story starts almost as a fairy tale: "There used to be a story in these parts about a girl who lived at the edge of a forest" (45), the narrator recalls. It is a tale that suggests a deep connection between humans and the natural world and that, repeated from teller to listener, appears to conceal "a promise, [...] a hint that something is about to happen" (45). The story recounts "the myth of Agnes's childhood" (51), and the special, fond relationship she had with her mother, who profoundly doted on her baby girl. Agnes's safe idyllic life is abruptly interrupted by the death of her beloved mother while giving birth to her third stillborn child, one of the many deaths punctuating the text. She vividly recollects the appalling sight of her mother's bed soaked in blood, "a room of carnage, of violence, of appalling crimson" (55), in her arms the dead baby child with a waxy, wizened face wrapped in a bundle, a priest muttering strange words over both mother and baby. It is an event that seriously jeopardizes Agnes's psychological integrity and almost threatens to fragment her self, as "reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists" (Freud 1917: 244).

The child Agnes feels that "the world has cracked open, [and] the sky above her could, at any moment, split and rain down fire and ash upon them all" (56). She retreats into the forest to give free vent to her suffering, piercing her skin with thorny brambles, as if the self-inflicted physical pain might help attenuate the emotional wound left open by her loss. Alone with the trees, she cries out her anger at the God of the church they go to every Sunday: "She calls on him, she bawls his name. You, she says, you, do you hear me, I am finished with you" (56). This wound disrupts her safe childhood world and affects her so deeply that she no longer believes in God; it is a trauma that she will relive with even more excruciating pain when Hamnet dies.

Agnes is left alone to cherish the tender, vivid memories of her mother, missing her hand "that held Agnes's, to stop her from falling, and it was warm and firm" (51). She does not find the same source of safety and emotional support in her stepmother, "the woman in the house" (56) that her father marries after some time, Joan, a name "that made Agnes think of a howling dog" (52). Joan has no patience with the children, and shows no affection for her and her younger brother Bartholomew, who Agnes loves profoundly. She hits Agnes with a shoe when she is angry with her, "leaving purple blotches on her skin" (53), a pain that is "so surprising, so unfamiliar" (53) to the child, who learns the art of invisibility so as not to draw her stepmother's notice to her and thus avoid being beaten. At this stage the girl's existential trajectory abruptly swings from the warm safety of family affection to deprivation and risk. There follows "a time

of confusion, of the seasons following hard upon each other" (53) for Agnes, whose personal and emotional world has been emptied, leaving only a void, an absence. However, she forces herself never to cry, but simply keeps asking everyone when her own mother would come back, unable to accept the idea that she is lost forever. Except for the old apothecary's widow, everyone denies that she had another mother; she can't understand why they tell lies, because she remembers everything about her and does everything not to erase her presence from the family and keep her memory alive at least in Bartholomew.

Deprived of the security of maternal affection, Agnes grows up yearning for an *other* to fill the void that threatens to engulf her, counteract the death drive that pushes her towards the brink of the abyss, and save her. So, when she first meets eighteen-year-old William at Hewlands, the Hathaways' residence, where he is Latin tutor to her half-brothers, she recognizes a kindred soul: both abused by one of their parents- Agnes by her stepmother, William by his bossy father; both misfits, with something special inside they want to share with the other. She finds emotional safety in him, viewing in him the ideal signifier that can help her reconstitute the texture of the self on safer grounds.

Will glimpses Agnes from the window of the schoolroom at Hewlands, unaware that she is the farmer's eldest daughter; he mistakes her for a young man as she emerges from the forest "with a brand of masculine insouciance or entitlement, covering the ground with booted strides" (33), holding a kestrel on her outstretched fist. The themes of mistaken identities, gender-blurring and affinity between girl and boy twins are some of the Shakespearean themes blended in O'Farrell's novel, and that at one point will have a pivotal role with momentous consequences.

In the neighbourhood Agnes has a reputation for being a free-spirited young woman, by many considered to be "strange, touched, peculiar, perhaps mad" (37). She is often seen talking to bees or wandering by herself through the forest to collect plants that she uses "to make dubious potions" (37), so a sort of witchy, quasi-mythical creature. Even at home they look upon her with suspicion as they believe that, being a gifted herbalist, she is very good with potions and curses. Indeed, her stepmother feels at risk, and "lives in terror of the girl putting hexes on her" (37), especially after her husband, the girl's father, dies. He bequeaths his daughter a substantial dowry in his will, an endowment that, giving Agnes a degree of social safety and financial independence, makes her a more attractive party than many women of her time, who had to rely on paternal permission when choosing their future husband. Yet, she is generally thought "to be too wild for any man" (37), so probably difficult to marry.

However, when the restless young William begins to talk to her, he is strangely intrigued by the fanciful tales circulating about her, and confused by her combination of contrasting attributes: dressed like a servant but speaking like a lady, boldly meeting his

eyes like a man would and yet distinctly feminine in her figure and form. There is an immediate palpable chemistry between the two, which they do not hide from each other; almost bewitched by her, he touches her arm and feels her shiver. She finds his hand and "her fingers grip the flesh between his thumb and forefinger" (43), holding it as if she wanted to decipher something in the complex text of his mind. When he asks her name, he mishears her saying "Anne" (42), which reminds him of his dead sister by the same name, an echo of the 'ghost' of the dead haunting the life of the living. Soon after, however, she corrects him, saying that her name is "Agnes" (44), but pronounced differently, "Ann-yis. Agn-yez" (44), a linguistic slipperiness that appears to hint at the deceptively mysterious nature of her identity. Then, unexpectedly, she kisses his mouth, leaving him dizzyingly stupefied, and after turns to go away. When the reader meets Agnes and Will next, they are in an apple storage room on the farm, the same place where they had exchanged their first kiss. It is a marvellous scene of the couple's first breathtaking lovemaking, a passionate scene of youthful sex and one of the most original lovemaking scenes in literature.

O'Farrell revises the traditional misogynistic narrative of the canny older woman trapping the inexperienced young boy into an unwanted marriage. In the novel, Will, with his disgraced father and his uncertain prospects, is no catch for Agnes, who is socially respectable and financially independent. In this perspective, it is *she* who takes a risk by making the poorer match with a boy considered to be "penniless and tradeless, not to mention rather young to be courting a woman who is of age" (73), both by the local community and by Agnes's stepmother, who speaks openly and contemptuously against the possibility of their marriage.

A significant difference with the predominant traditional narrative of their life-story is that in the novel there is an indisputable attraction between the two; they are passionately in love with each other and want to spend the rest of their life together. It is a certainty that both of them have from their first meeting, each one feeling safe in the other and trusting the other unconditionally. Somehow, the reader perceives that it is the meeting of two special individuals who confront and complete each other.

Visible absences and invisible enemies

The present time axis in the novel, as mentioned before, begins on the day the plague reaches the village and creeps into the Shakespeares' life, putting the safety of the family, and of entire communities, at risk. O'Farrell attributes Hamnet's death at the age of eleven, whose real causes are unknown, to the bubonic plague, which is plausible as the Black Death actually raged through the country at the time. It first makes its presence manifest with the ominous marks it leaves on Hamnet's twin sister Judith. Soon after, however, while Judith gradually recovers and is safe, it is Hamnet who falls into its baneful grip and dies, an event that has momentous emotional and psychological

consequences, and threatens to break all family bonds, leaving them traumatized and overcome with grief.

The novel closely follows the spread and devastating consequences of the virulent pestilence in a section in which O'Farrell charts how the plague reached Agnes's children, reconstructing "the chain of random events and haphazard encounters that could have led the fatal bacterium *Yersinia pestis* to the Shakespeare house" (Greenblatt 2021: 2). The description of the progression of the plague is an astounding narrative sequence, "a tour de force of contact-tracing" (Greenblatt 2021: 2), of the kind we have become familiar with out of necessity.

O'Farrell follows two separate sources of the plague – a glassmaker in Murano and a cabin boy on a merchant ship – that at one point will meet. The pestilence makes its way from Alexandria, Egypt, via fleas, a monkey, cats, rats, and a cabin boy to infected rags wrapped around a glass necklace from Murano, Italy, that will reach a seamstress in Ely street where Judith gets infected unwrapping the box containing the *millefiori* beads. It is a narrative that, in this historical moment, resonates with tragic topicality; as we still live in the ghastly shadow of the global Covid 19 pandemic and its succession of risky variants, despite scientists' constant efforts and progress to track the contagion and prevent its riskier mutations, we are gripped by a growing sense of precariousness and insecurity, deprived of the certainty of a safe future to look forward to. However, the topicality of the novel should not mislead readers into thinking that it was O'Farrell's deliberate attempt to capitalize on the surge of interest in books dealing with epidemics. It is pure coincidence that *Hamnet* was published when the world was in the grip of Covid-19; actually, the novelist had begun researching for the novel three years before, and would never have imagined that "a fatal disease could at any moment be sweeping towards you, from far off continents" (O'Farrell 2020), and change people's daily life.

O'Farrell also traces to the cataclysm of Hamnet's death and its traumatic aftermath the source of inspiration for Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), a tragedy written four years later in which the playwright, looking for his dead son everywhere and fathoming the depth of his grief, at last finds him in the alchemy of his most famous play. If Shakespeare's loss of his son is behind the composition of his most famous play, it is not to be easily ascertained. Some critics feel confident that, unlike Ben Johnson, who left poems on the death of his children, Shakespeare's failure "to memorialize Hamnet betrays a much deeper grief; others, a comparative callousness". Maybe his silence is simply evidence that "he did not write autobiographically" (Cowen Orlin 2021: 6).

However, the correlation established by O'Farrell between *Hamlet* and the child's death as the source of inspiration for the composition of his play is persuasive. First of all, it rests on the similarity between the two names, Hamnet and Hamlet; they were "in fact the same name, entirely interchangeable in Stratford records in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries" (Greenblatt 2004: 3), according to both Steven

Greenblatt and Germaine Greer, scholars who are also quoted by O'Farrell in the novel's foreword. Furthermore, it is implausible to think that the playwright was unaffected by the boy's death, which, according to Greenblatt, "could have caused a psychic disturbance that helps to explain the explosive power and inwardness of *Hamlet"* (2004: 17). In 'The Death of Hamnet: An Essay on Grief and Creativity' (2009) Eugene Mahon goes beyond the similarity between the dead child's name and the play's title, focusing instead on the language of *Hamlet*. He observes the presence of frequent linguistic twinning and variations on the theme of doubling which, he contends, are unconscious references to the dead twin, whose loss is even accentuated by the presence of the living sibling. Surely, the child's loss "was a brutal, existential assault on the playwright's psyche" (2009: 426); language, then, is "a supreme act of sublimation" (2009: 425) used "as an attempt to repair the broken heart through the dual ministry of mourning and art" (2009: 435).

Greenblatt openly traces the composition of *Hamlet* back to the playwright's experience of grief for the loss of his only son, a traumatic event that seems also to be reflected in Shakespeare's other works of the period, specifically among them *King John* (1596). In this play there is the portrayal of a mother, Constance, who is so frantic after her son's death that she tears her hair and even contemplates committing suicide:

> "Pand. You hold too heinous a respect of grief.
> Const. He talks to me that never had a son.
> K. Phi. You are as fond of grief as of your child.
> Const. Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
> Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
> Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
> Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
> Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form". (III.4.90-97)

Peter Ackroyd observes that, even though it is impossible to gauge the effect that Hamnet's death had upon the dramatist, in the period immediately following the loss of his child Shakespeare rewrote *King John,* and Constance's lament on the untimely death of her young son was one of the additions to the play. In such cases, Ackroyd maintains, "it may not be appropriate to draw strong lines between the art and the life, but [...] it defies common sense to pretend that Constance's lament has nothing whatever to do with Shakespeare's loss of Hamnet" (2006: 271).

The idea that there is a connection between Shakespeare's tragic hero, Hamlet, and his dead child is also at the heart of a contemporary avant-garde play, *Hamnet* (2017), co-written and co-directed by two Irish dramatists and directors, Bush Moukarzel and Ben

Kidd, staged by the Irish theatre troupe Dead Centre, in Dublin, to rave reviews. In the play, Hamnet actually hopes to meet his father and, in an effort to impress him and gain his approval, he is "learning the most famous speech in the world" (Moukarzel & Kidd 2017: 12), the soliloquy from *Hamlet.* Then, when the dramatist finally shows up via a video apparition, symbolically crossing the threshold separating life and death, he asks his son to stop haunting him, a request to which Hamnet retorts: "But *you're* haunting *me*" (44) (emphasis in the original). The boy also reproaches his father for having neglected him and never been with him, so actually being a ghost in his life.

O'Farrell's novel opens with the image of the adolescent Hamnet, who "is coming down a flight of stairs" (3); he moves through his family's empty apartment, then on to the street and into his grandparents' neighbouring house, puzzled by the unusual silence and absence of life in all the rooms. At first, the reader is unaware of what the boy is searching for; after a few pages, there are textual traces that gradually tilt the apparent tranquility of the scene into an atmosphere of tension, hinting at something that is amiss: "If this were a normal day" (10), the narrator remarks, implicitly suggesting the opposite. Other dark forebodings of risk are sown in a short paragraph standing by itself, where a third person external narrator observes events and comments on them: "Every life has its kernel, its hub, its epicentre, from which everything flows, to which everything returns. This moment is the absent mother's: the boy, the empty house, the deserted yard, the unheard cry" (8). It is a cluster of words pointing to some impending crisis. After a few pages the reader discovers that Hamnet is in a frantic search for help because his beloved twin sister, Judith, is unwell, and he is utterly confounded to be so alone in a house that is usually teeming with life and activity. He keeps calling out the names of all the family members, especially his mother, but nobody answers, so he runs back to his house, where Judith lies on the pallet, sick and feverish, with a pair of buboes showing at the base of her neck and her shoulder.

The narrator's eyes linger on the description of the girl, almost a copy of Hamnet: "They are as alike as if they had been born in the same caul" (15). There is a constant insistence on the similarity and deep affinity between the two, of oneness, so much so that they like tricking people, "exchang[ing] places and clothes, leading people to believe that each was the other" (200). This will reach a tragic climax when Hamnet himself is seized with the plague, and the last membrane of separation between the two seems to be lacerated to tragic effect.

Seeing his beloved sister's swollen neck and shoulder, he decides to go and look for the physician; he is somewhere else with another patient, and Hamnet walks back home in very low spirits, hoping that, in the meantime, his mother has come back. "But there is nothing: only silence" (27).

Hamnet's thought of his mother shifts the narrative onto Agnes, who is, "in fact, more than a mile away" (16), intent on her routine activities in the fields, tending to her bees.

Yet, small, almost imperceptible, signals appear to intrude upon and disturb the peaceful atmosphere of the place: "There is a sensation of change, an agitation of air" (17). The agitation turns into "an incoming storm" (18), and sends the reader's attention back to "the unheard cry" (8) that Agnes has not heeded and that will haunt her for the rest of her life because of what would happen shortly thereafter.

Swapping places to trick death

When Agnes comes back home at last, she sees that Judith has a high fever. Hamnet, shaking, his face stricken and wet, reproaches her angrily for her long absence, and looks at her with an inquisitive expression to find confirmation of what he is dreading, aware that his twin sister's life is at risk. However, though Agnes can see into people's mind and read their future, at this critical moment she fails to notice that Hamnet himself is not well, so she sends him out to call his sister Susanna and his grandmother Mary for help.

When Hamnet enters his grandmother's cookhouse he is overwhelmed by the unbearable heat, which conjures up in his mind the "fumes from the gates of Hell", and he has a weird vision: "He sees, or seems to see, just for a moment, a thousand candles in the dark, [...] goblin candles" (126), though they soon disappear once he blinks his eyes. Susanna, on seeing him, frowns as she vaguely senses that there is something wrong with him; she is puzzled by his appearance, "white-faced, shocked, quite unlike himself" , so she tries to attract her grandmother's attention. Mary herself is caught by surprise and is frightened by the boy because he "look[s] like a ghost" to her (127).

While attending to her sick granddaughter, Mary remembers her own psychological devastation at the loss of three of her children, other ghostly presences in the novel. The view of Judith in bed, full of buboes, inevitably brings back to her mind her own dead daughter, Anne, who also died of the pestilence when she was only eight, "covered with swellings and hot with fever, her fingers black and odorous and rotting off her hands" (128). She fears that Judith will be added to the other losses in the family, as she knows all too well that "cruelty and devastation wait for you around corners", and "the trick is never to let down your guard. Never think you are safe" (195-96), because nothing is given to us to possess forever. On seeing that Judith's condition is very serious and convinced that the girl will die, she decides to send a message to her son in London, urging him to come back home before it is too late.

For her part, being acutely aware that the layer separating the world of the dead and of the living is frail, almost "indistinct from each other, rubbing up against each other" (129), Agnes seems to perceive the presence of the dead Anne in the room. She even addresses the child in her mind and has a silent conversation with her, repeating to herself that "she will not let Judith cross over" (129) into the other world, to convince herself that things are not as bad as they appear to be.

Ghosts have a central role in the text: they are powerful signifiers of the ever-present risks in human life, metaphors of lost futures, as well as a way of representing the turmoil of dramatic, psychological conflicts. Above all, their presence in the novel can be decoded in light of Jacques Derrida's notion of hauntology formulated in *Spectres of Marx* (1994) which, interestingly, begins with a reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Derrida considers the ghost as a metaphor that pushes at the boundaries of thought, flouts established certainties, and challenges basic binary oppositions. So it is a deconstructive figure hovering between life and death, presence and absence, "always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*" (Derrida 1994: 11). The ghosts in the novel pervade and disrupt every aspect of the protagonists' life; they are a 'presence' in their unconscious that cannot be silenced or ignored, and that testifies to the weight of an unacceptable, unprocessed loss. Attending to these ghosts becomes a sort of ethical injunction, an otherness that the protagonists are responsible for preserving.

When the physician arrives at last, he refuses to enter and remains on the doorstep to avoid contagion; to Hamnet, he is "a terrifying sight, a creature from a nightmare, from Hell, from the devil" (146). Cloaked all in black, to protect himself against the risk of the pestilence the physician wears on his face "a hideous, featureless mask, pointed like the beak of a gigantic bird" (146), a sight that makes Hamnet scream. The mask is a precautionary measure we have come to know all too well, used both by people at large and by nurses and doctors in hospitals against risks of infections, and nowadays part of our daily attire when going out.

None of the family members, concerned about, and focused on, Judith's conditions, observe Hamnet closely. At one point, unnoticed by the rest, the boy decides to lie down; he is not well and his head is filled with a strange, confusing kind of pain that makes his head "enormous, significant, bigger than him" (198). After some time, with a tremendous effort, he crawls from his bed and makes his way down the stairs to be with his mother and Judith, who has been moved close to the fire. Unable even to speak, he crouches next to the little girl. Seeing that she is worse, he begins to cry because he feels death's presence in the room, ready to snatch his twin sister away and leave him fractured by his unbearable loss. When Judith tries to comfort him, murmuring "You shall be well", he grips her fingers in anger: "I shall not. [...] I'll come with you. We'll go together" (199). It is at this point, in his feverish last hours, that "the idea strikes him" (200) and the novel reaches the eerie climax of the first part.

Thinking of their playful ability to swap places, Hamnet imagines he can hoodwink death into believing that he is Judith, and take her risk on himself to save her. He slides into Judith's place and pulls the sheet over their bodies, so that "it will be easy for Death to make a mistake, to take him in her place" (201). He breathes his own life and strength into Judith's ear, whispering to her "you will stay, [...] and I will go. [...] I want you to take

my life. It shall be yours. I give it to you" (201). And that is exactly what happens: by an extraordinary, mysterious act of will, and an extreme gesture of love, he saves Judith's life and he himself dies.

Hamnet's is a form of love in which, as Kristeva observes, "the individual is no longer indivisible and allows himself to become lost in the other, for the other" and, she adds, in such psychological conditions, "a risk that might otherwise be tragic is accepted, normalized" (Kristeva 1987: 4).

Facing the loss

The pages recounting the family's gradual awareness of Hamnet's true condition foreground with great emotional impact one of the central themes of the novel: how, by ignoring or failing to see an imminent risk at the edge of a person's vision, devastation and tragedy can unfold against the banal everyday routine, and lay bare the fragility and precariousness of the edifice on which human life rests. The section is dominated by the same hushed atmosphere that opened the book, a tone of "great soundlessness [that] falls over the room" (251), to signify the silence of death into which Hamnet has fallen.

In this section, O'Farrell's narrative perspective resembles "the way a film might use a camera, stealing up on scenes from unexpected angles" (Allfree 2020), shifting in and out of the different characters' minds, both to allow us to closely follow their thought processes and give a direct insight into their fears, and to draw the reader into the emotional and psychological turmoil provoked by the tragedy that befalls the family. This is also rendered visually, adopting a perspective that resembles the technique of some painters; Agnes wakes up abruptly, when "it is the deepest part of the night, the most lethal hour" (244), a darkness which is the objective correlative of her state of mind. She has dreamt of being whipped by the great, invisible force of the wind, a symbol of her subconscious fear for Judith's condition. She lights a candle and its flame slowly pushes back the darkness in the room and illuminates the scene, an image that has an almost Caravaggesque touch, and mirrors the process by which the truth gradually surfaces in the individual consciousness.

Agnes approaches Judith's pallet and at first is befuddled by the image confronting her: she sees a strange intertwining of feet and clasping of hands that she cannot understand, "two Judiths, curled up together, in front of the dying fire" (245). Then she realizes that it is Hamnet and his twin sister, fused into each other, their body parts switched and mixed up. When she uncovers them, she understands that Judith has been spared but, in exchange, Hamnet's life is at risk and "a strange, dementing confusion starts up inside her" (246). She reproaches herself for having been such "a fool, a blind idiot, the worst kind of simpleton" (248), falling into the cruel trap that fate had set for her; she feels irrationally responsible for her child's present state, having failed as a mother to protect him. None of the potions she keeps giving him seems to pull him back and

restore him to life because, unbeknownst to her, her son has tricked death into taking him in place of his twin. The image of the reversal of the twins' conditions- the one slowly returning back to life, the other slipping away into the clutches of eternal darkness- poignantly renders how vital it is to be constantly aware that risk, devastation and death are just one step away from safety and life, and closely interknit.

Holding Hamnet in her arms, Agnes's mind reflects on how vicious the plague is and how it manifests itself on the child's body: "It has wreathed and tightened its tendrils about her son, and is refusing to surrender him. It has a musky, dank, salty smell. [...] it feeds on pain and unhappiness and grief. It is insatiable, unstoppable, the worst, blackest kind of evil" (249). It is another narrative segment that, at this historical moment, has gained accidental pertinence and reverberates with great emotional impact on readers who still have in their eyes the sight of the many lives that have been, and still are, snatched away by Covid 19.

Agnes realizes that her son is actually beyond the precipice upon which human life teeters: "Her son's body is in a place of torture, of hell" (249), and there is nothing more she can do for him, if not comfort him. Hamnet's final moments see him struggle between opposite pulls: on the one hand, his need "to lie, to surrender himself", covered by the white blanket of the "snow [...] falling, softly, irrevocably, on and on" (250) and rest "in his place of snow and ice" (251). This section, with its cluster of images and range of lexical choices, echoes the final paragraphs of James Joyce's short story "The Dead", from *Dubliners* (1914). On the other hand, the pull of life is still strong: "He is not going to sleep, he is not. He will carry on" (251); yet, he is too weak to struggle, "he needs to rest, for a moment" (251), and at last "he takes his last breath" (252).

The first part of the novel ends with the moving image of Hamnet cradled in his mother's arms, as when he was a baby: "In the room in which he learnt to crawl, to eat, to walk, to speak, Hamnet takes his last breath. [...] Then there is silence, stillness. Nothing more" (252), words that clearly echo the last words from *Hamlet*: "The rest is silence".

A 'new' Hamnet

The second, shorter, part of the book is dominated by the central theme of grief, of how different family members try to cope with the trauma of loss, its terrible costs, its enduring emotional wounds and psychological damage. It opens with the scene of all the family gathered to mourn Hamnet, the only exception being William who is still on his way to Stratford. As disease and death haunt the country, Bartholomew urges the motionless Agnes to wash and lay out the body of her dead son who must be buried quickly, as decreed by the town authorities, for fear that the plague might spread with enormous risks for the whole population of the village. It is a devastating scene that sees Agnes losing touch with both herself and the people around her; actually, the narrator introduces her as "a woman" curved over "the body of a child" (257-58) lying on a

wooden surface, a condition of existential and psychological alienation that takes hold of her and plunges her into utter anguish and grief.

Hamnet's death opens a void that puts a serious strain on the bond between husband and wife, because Agnes's despair is mixed with anger at her husband for not being there to support her. The whole family seems to fall apart, no longer held together by the boy's presence, all of them fragmented, shattered, each one trying to retrieve a semblance of life.

Agnes, tormented by guilt, "is a woman broken into pieces, crumbled and scattered around" (277). So, she falls prey to depression and melancholia, a psychological condition that lasts for years and that can be analyzed in light of what Kristeva writes in *Black Sun*: "Those who are racked by melancholia, [try] to address an abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief that at times [...] lays claim upon [them] to the extent of having [them] lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself" (1989: 3). The 'black sun' of melancholia pins her down "to her bed, for the first time in her life" (345) and deprives her of any will to live. In fact, Agnes's is a "devitalized existence that [...] is ready at any moment for a plunge into death" (Kristeva 1989: 4); she faces the emptiness of psychic space and the failure of language to voice, and compensate for, the loss. She searches for her son for weeks and months, goes outside in the yard and calls his name aloud, but her call is lost in silence.

Susanna, instead, finds it hard to be in a house that has become a living memorial to Hamnet's presence, and with her mother who is "adrift in her life, [...] unmoored, at a loss" (299), disconsolate and aphasic, who weeps even for the most irrelevant reason. So, in order to save herself, Susanna spends her time helping her grandmother.

Judith, like her mother on the one hand, looks for and *feels* Hamnet's ghostly presence around her; on the other hand, she finds her own way of continuing to be together with her twin by taking refuge in a "gap" (295) between two walls, a place that was always theirs when they were children. Then, when the family moves to the new house that her father has bought for them, the midwife tells her that at night, along Henley Street, she has seen a figure "running like the wind" (337), between the old and the new house, hinting that it was Hamnet. From that moment on, without telling anyone else in the family, at night Judith slips out of the house and waits for him, all by herself, begging him to come and let her see him "even if only for the last time", because she is "only half a person without [him]" (337). To all the family, Hamnet is a "non-present present, [a] being-there of an absent or departed one" (Derrida 1994: 5); his absence is actually a presence at least as powerful as when he was alive, and each one seems to be waiting for his materialization. Each one, then, has her own strategy to survive and keep the self safe.

As for the father, he continues to feel his son's presence everywhere he turns; every object, gesture reminds him of his dead son. Feeling "caught in a web of absence" (281), which he finds intolerable, shortly after Hamnet's burial he decides to return to London,

leaving his wife furious to wonder how he can even think of departing from his family at such a moment, when they need him most. During the first year, in distant London, he fears he may run mad, and keeps wondering where his child is, bent on looking for him everywhere, "to find him, or a version of him" (315), and bring him back to life. And, four years later, he does it in a way that shocks his wife at first. At home in Stratford, Agnes sees the London playbill of a tragedy written by her husband that bears the name of her dead son. She cannot understand how this is possible and is so upset that she takes to her bed, refusing to get up and eat, or look after herself. She manifests the distinguishing psychological features that Sigmund Freud discusses in 'Mourning and Melancholia', where he argues that "a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, [...] inhibition of all activity" (1917: 244) are the reactions to the loss of the loved object, whose existence is psychically prolonged in memories. According to Freud, in normal mourning one *introjects* the dead, that is, one's mind takes the dead into itself and assimilates them, a process that involves the idealization of the deceased person.

What Judith Butler observes on mourning sheds further light on Agnes's long-prolonged psychological dejection and vulnerability after Hamnet's death. Butler maintains that when we lose "some of the ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do" (2004: 22) because these ties compose us and we are transformed forever by such severances. So, she adds, we do not simply lose someone, but we go missing as well. In fact, this is what happens to Agnes, who is so splintered and even diminished by her loss as to be *other* both to herself and to the rest of the family. At last, she decides to leave for London, to see the tragedy for herself and confront her husband who, to her, is proving to be callous in his exploitation of their intimate family tragedy for mass entertainment.

Once in London, she goes to the playhouse, where O'Farrell sets the climactic and cathartic scene of the second part of the novel. During the performance, Agnes only begins to concentrate when a ghost appears on the stage, actually her husband in disguise, and an actor calls the dead man "Hamlet" (362). Disgusted, she decides to leave the theatre but is transfixed when a boy, actually a young man, arrives on stage, and "the King addresses him as 'Hamlet, my son'" (364). To her great shock, she realizes that, though her own son is dead, "yet this is him, grown into a near-man, as he would be now, had he lived, [...] talking in her son's voice, speaking words written for him by her son's father" (364-65), a revenant that has taken on human form in her son's body. Her husband has 'resurrected' their child in Hamlet, even schooling the boy actor to move like him and speak in his voice. The Hamlet she sees on the stage "is two people, the young man, alive, and the father, dead. He is both alive and dead" (366).

As she watches, Agnes realizes that her husband "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" (366). It is, she thinks, "what any father would wish to

do, to exchange his child's suffering for his own, to take his place, to offer himself up in his child's stead so that the boy might live" (366).

So, at last Agnes realizes the emotional toll their child's death has taken on her husband, and that the boy may be gone, but he is not forgotten. By writing the play, using the miraculous power of his art, her husband has pulled off the very feat that is impossible in ordinary life and redeemed himself; he has brought back the dead child in the only possible way he could, offering both of them a safe outlet for psychic survival, and also saving their marriage. Hamnet's memory lives on in the play and, through the ghost, speaks his final words in the novel, looking straight at Agnes and meeting her gaze: "Remember me" (367). At this point, the family can gradually leave behind a season of grief and mourning, and move forward to a safer season of change.

Conclusion

"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, sc. v

The article has offered an in-depth analysis of O'Farrell's novel and identified various forms of physical, psychological and emotional risks. All of them, it has been argued, are connected to a loss that traumatizes the protagonists, takes time to be healed, and confronts them with a double terrible existential truth: the rapidity with which life can be extinguished when least expected, and the awareness that the selfsame act of loving another also demands an inevitable confrontation with death. At the same time, the discussion has also identified the various forms that resilience can take, and has examined the individual strategies that different characters activate to face and overcome the ensuing trauma in order to resume their life and re-emerge on relatively safe existential ground. The most notable, and enduring, form of working-through mourning in the novel is the artistic process that in the end leads Shakespeare to the composition of *Hamlet*, a terrifying psychic and creative journey that enables the dramatist "to reinforce his inner representation of the deceased son and to nourish their ongoing relationship" (Bray 2008: 107). It is a cathartic act of creation through which he delves deep into his psychological and existential crisis and emerges from it. This critical hypothesis is corroborated by what Freud writes about *Hamlet* in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), where he observes: "It can, of course, be the poet's own psychology with which we are confronted in Hamlet", remarking that he is trying "to interpret only the deepest stratum of impulses in the mind of the creative poet" (51). Freud also infers a

connection between Hamlet and Hamnet as, he adds, "it is known, too, that Shakespeare's son, who died in childhood, bore the name of Hamnet (identical with Hamlet)" (160), and suggests that the creation of the play was a therapeutic process for the dramatist.

Kristeva's observations on the process of creation will help draw the conclusion of the article: in *Black Sun*, talking about the mood of sadness connected to separation, she observes: "Literary creation is that adventure of the body and signs that bears witness to the affect", in the case of "sadness as imprint of separation and beginning of the symbol's sway". She goes on to add: "But that testimony is produced by literary creation in a material that is totally different from what constitutes mood. It transposes affect into rhythms, signs, forms" (1989: 22), imprints of an affective reality.

In O'Farrell's *Hamnet*, that is what Shakespeare does when composing *Hamlet*, succeeding in transmuting grief into richly evocative rhythms and signs, and transforming loss into artistic creation of the highest form. And that is what O'Farrell's text also does, the paper maintains, by using the power of language and imagination to extol the salvific power of love even while speaking of risk, loss and grief.

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