

MAGGIE O'FARRELL'S *HAMNET*:
AN IMAGINATIVE CRITICAL-BIOGRAPHICAL INTERPRETATION
OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*

Patricia García Santos
University of Córdoba
172gasap@uco.es
<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0539-8771>

ABSTRACT: The aim of this essay is to contribute to the understanding of William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet* (1603) by means of a critical reconsideration of biographical episodes such as the functional gap the playwright left in his family. To this end, two texts will be examined, Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet* (2020) and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* itself, reading the former as an imaginative critical-biographical interpretation of the latter. The focus will be on Shakespeare's domestic life, particularly on the figure of his son Hamnet and the relationship he had with his father, as depicted in O'Farrell's work. Using the dramatic text as primary textual source, a thorough comparative interpretation of both literary pieces will be carried out. The analysis of key passages of the novel will lend support to the hypothesis that *Hamnet* can be considered as a critical-biographical interpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

KEYWORDS: William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, *Hamnet*, biography, interpretation

HAMNET, DE MAGGIE O'FARRELL: UN ESTUDIO CRÍTICO-BIOGRÁFICO DE
LA OBRA DE WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *HAMLET*.

RESUMEN: El objetivo de este ensayo es contribuir a la comprensión de la tragedia *Hamlet* (1603), de William Shakespeare, mediante una reconsideración crítica de episodios biográficos, como el hueco funcional que el dramaturgo dejó en su familia. Para ello, se examinarán dos textos, *Hamnet* (2020), de Maggie O'Farrell, y el propio *Hamlet*, de Shakespeare, leyendo el primero como una interpretación crítico-biográfica imaginativa del segundo. La atención se centrará en la vida familiar de Shakespeare, particularmente en su hijo Hamnet y en la relación que éste mantiene con su padre en la obra de O'Farrell. Utilizando el texto dramático como fuente textual primaria, se llevará a cabo una minuciosa interpretación comparativa de ambos textos literarios. El análisis de pasajes clave de esta novela apoyará la hipótesis de que *Hamnet* puede considerarse una interpretación crítico-biográfica del *Hamlet* de Shakespeare.

PALABRAS CLAVE: William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, *Hamnet*, biografía, interpretación

INTRODUCTION

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is one of the most extraordinary plays written by William Shakespeare. Since it was first published and performed, it has been widely acclaimed. Throughout the years, it has acquired the status of one of the most influential and representative English works in world literature. Although the play's characters and plot are well-known, as it has been profoundly studied in scholarly work all around the world, much in the play remains enigmatic and open to further investigation. For decades,

literary critics, biographers, and researchers have examined Shakespeare's personal or biographical influences and intentions when he was writing *Hamlet*. However, as there is a lack of reliable written resources or legal documents about William Shakespeare's life, it is inevitable that when writing about him, the personal opinions and intuitions of the critic spring at every turn, so that most biographers have generally relied on elusive matter.

In 2020, a novel by an Irish author, Maggie O'Farrell, appeared under the title of *Hamnet*, which is interestingly the name of Shakespeare's son. This text is indeed inspired by the only male child of the famous playwright, a boy whose life has been almost forgotten, but whose name was given as title to one of Shakespeare's most celebrated plays. The result is a dazzling and devastating novel that provides a fictional exploration of William Shakespeare's familiar life. This paper will analyse this narrative work in depth with the objective of discovering whether any parallel can be established between Shakespeare's play and the novel named after his dead eleven-year-old son published centuries later. If some connections exist between both, it could be concluded that *Hamnet* may be read as an imaginative critical-biographical interpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

To achieve this goal, critical and biographical documents will be considered as well as the interpretation of prominent Shakespearean scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt, David Bevington or Jonathan Bate, among others. By examining the biographies that have already been given the status of proper academic biographical documents of the Poet's life, I will provide myself with a criterion to determine whether *Hamnet* can be considered as one of those or not. Moreover, in order to catalogue O'Farrell's novel as a critical interpretation of *Hamlet*, I will briefly revise the literature surrounding both works as well as critically analyse passages and characters from them to see if they are indeed interconnected. In this way, revising O'Farrell's *Hamnet*, a novel on the Bard's life, will contribute to a better understanding of William Shakespeare's glorious play *Hamlet*.

ABOUT MAGGIE O'FARRELL

Maggie O'Farrell is an Irish novelist born in May 1972. She is the author of *Hamnet*, Winner of the Women's Prize for Fiction 2020, and the focus of this paper. *Hamnet* also won the fiction prize at the National Book Critics Circle Awards in 2020. Her first acclaimed novel, *After You'd Gone*, won the Betty Trask Award, and a later one, *The Hand That First Held Mine*, the 2010 Costa Novel Award. She has published one last novel in 2022, *The Marriage Portrait*, after being Sunday Times n°1 bestseller with *Hamnet*.

O'Farrell's novels have been acknowledged and awarded for good. However, she is best known for her 2020 novel *Hamnet*. *Hamnet* is a fictional account of Shakespeare's son Hamnet, who died at the age of eleven. It is a historical fiction and family-type drama that tells the background story between Will (William) Shakespeare and his wife Agnes (Anne Hathaway). The plot unveils their relationship while they deal with the grief of Hamnet's death, the consequences of Shakespeare's career in their marriage and family life, and his infidelity. The book ends with Will writing the dramatic play *Hamlet* as a farewell letter to his son, a play in which it is not the son who dies, but the father; the final lines of the father's ghost say, "Remember me". The novel is mainly focused on Agnes, Shakespeare's wife, and how the death of Hamnet, their only male child, prominently affects her life and the plot of the story as well. In this way, O'Farrell fictionally rewrites some passages of the life of the most prominent figure in the history

of English literature from a different perspective: the Bard's wife, as there are many parts of the story that are focalised through her.

It is important to discuss the reliability of O'Farrell's sources to address this topic from a historical perspective even if she fictionalises the events. At the end of her novel, in the Author's note, O'Farrell claims that her text is indeed a work of fiction. Nevertheless, right after that, there is a section of Acknowledgements in which she mentions the books that "were invaluable during the writing of the novel" (O'Farrell, 2020: 371). She admits having read Peter Ackroyd's *Shakespeare and Biography* (Vintage, 2006) to be able to write the book, a source which was also used in the writing of this paper. These acknowledgements are of utmost importance because they confirm that O'Farrell's historical fiction is indeed supported by a mixture of personal interpretation and real biographical data contrasted and commented by famous Shakespeare biographers.

HAMNET AND *HAMLET*: THE TEXTS AND WHAT CRITICS HAVE SAID ABOUT THEM

For a general characterization of both texts, *Hamnet* and *Hamlet*, it is essential to notice that the plot of each is so different that it might be an arduous challenge to spot the similarities at first sight. Not only do they differ in terms of form but also in temporal, historical and contextual aspects that shall be further explored if we wish to understand why they are so crucial. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was written in the Elizabethan times while O'Farrell writes in the contemporary age. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in very general terms, tells the story of a young man who dies after an intricate series of complicated familial conflicts, while O'Farrell's *Hamnet* tells the story of a young child who dies of an illness and who is supposed to have been Shakespeare's son.

O'Farrell's *Hamnet* is not so much a rewriting of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a biographical justification, narrated in fictional form, of the events surrounding the death of Shakespeare's son and the former's motivation to write a play under his name. There is still not much criticism available because it is a very recent novel, so it is necessary to note that this paper is guided by the available biographical criticism on Shakespeare. Additionally, some ideas discussed in newspaper reviews of the novel will be considered. Even if these reviews differ in tone with scholarly articles, there is a substratum of recurring ideas that the initial reviewers might see in the novel, which is a breeding ground for literary criticism. Therefore, it can be affirmed that this paper may be one of the first academic studies of *Hamnet* so far.

The New York Times's review by Geraldine Brooks (2020) follows the main line of argument of this paper, namely, that *Hamnet* "is at once about the transfiguration of life into art — it is O'Farrell's extended speculation on how Hamnet's death might have fueled the creation of one of his father's greatest plays". Brooks openly affirms that the novel is based on speculation about the author's life. This speculation, this paper will argue, is due to the lack of written sources available on Shakespeare's domestic life. Similarly, Ron Charles' discussion in his review of *Hamnet* for *The Huffington Post* claims that "[a]lmost nothing more is known about the boy's brief life. Four centuries later, his death is a crater on the dark side of the moon. How it impacted his twin sister, and his parents is impossible to gauge. No letters or diaries — if there were any — survive. The world's greatest poet did not immortalize his lost child in verse" (2020). So it is O'Farrell who fantasizes about Shakespeare family's grief for the death of their son in her historical fiction novel *Hamnet*.

SHAKESPEARE AND BIOGRAPHIES

Scholarly work barely addresses *Hamnet* Shakespeare. It is known that he was William Shakespeare's son and that he died when he was eleven years old. Nevertheless, ever since the first attempt of writing a biography of the greatest playwright in English literature made by Nicholas Rowe in his 1709's text *Shakespeare's Works*, references to Shakespeare's only son have been nothing but mere remarks or footnotes. It is true that some Shakespearean critics and biographers such as Katherine Duncan-Jones (2001) have argued that scholars have endlessly speculated about Shakespeare's sexuality, identity, and education. However, little trustworthy evidence is available: "[t]he surviving traces of Shakespeare's life are abundant but thin" (2004: 12), wrote Stephen Greenblatt in his biography of the poet. In fact, the most approachable evidence to be found might lay hidden in his outstanding written pieces.

The case of the relationship between Shakespeare and his son is quite particular. Apart from whatever commentaries scholars may have made on this relationship, family domestic life, and the influence it might have had in the work of the playwright, one may still wonder what it meant for a father to title a play after his dead son's name. Stephen Greenblatt stated that "to understand how Shakespeare used his imagination to transform life into art, it is important to use our own imagination" (2004: 14). In this case, one of the aims of this paper is to explore how Shakespeare transformed death into art. As pointed out above, it is of utmost importance to highlight the lack of available written records about Shakespeare, as it is the main reason why his life and works leave much room for personal interpretation. In the case of the novel *Hamnet*, it might offer a new and personal speculative vision of Shakespeare's domestic life.

Shakespeare's domestic life and marriage

David Bevington claims that Shakespeare had an "amazing gift in his plays for seeing the varying sides of an important issue like courtship and marriage" (2010:34). And, in account of the great number of texts he wrote about love, it might seem hard to understand the extended opinion that he had an unhappy marriage. William Shakespeare's marriage is always included in his biographies in the section of his early life, as he got married at the age of eighteen, when he still lived in Stratford-upon-Avon under his parent's roof in Henley Street.

According to his biographers, he married Anne Hathaway in 1582. She was much older than him, as it is said that she was twenty-six at the moment of their marriage. She has been described as an independent, idealistic, Elizabethan woman who became an orphan in her mid-twenties only with a little dowry left from his father. Stephen Greenblatt describes her as a woman "wholly at her own government" (2004: 119) and affirms that it might have attracted an unexperienced and adolescent Shakespeare, in search for sexual and personal liberation. However, when reviewing Shakespeare's biographies to find data on the history of his marital life, we find other interpretations: either the young William Shakespeare was forced to marry because Anne Hathaway was found with child, or he felt no affection for her. Maybe both things.

Shakespeare's short betrothal and rapid engagement has been of interest to many academics, from Sir Thomas Phillips in the nineteenth century – who claimed to have found a legal document in which forty pounds, which is the double of an annual income of the times, were paid to the church to speed up the marriage of William and Anne – to many others who have speculated about it. Undoubtedly, if this document is considered valid, the couple – or someone close to them – wanted the problem to be solved as soon

as possible. Stephen Greenblatt (2004: 120) recognizes that the haste of the wedding was not specified until a documented explanation came later: a baptism taking place six months after the marriage; on May the 28th 1583, to be precise. Their first daughter, Susanna, had been born.

The marriage between Anne and William seems to have occurred in a small village called Temple Grafton and as stated above, William was much younger than Anne when they got married. According to historians, at that time, the usual age for marriage in maids was eighteen, while the ideal age for men was twenty-eight years old. What this means is that the common situation was for an older man to marry a younger maid. Also, considering the life expectancy and the poor conditions in which women had to give birth to their children, it was logical for men to look for a younger woman to conceive their heirs.

Clearly, regarding the social context, getting married was of great convenience for Anne to escape from her spinsterhood, as well as from her solitude after her father's death. The age difference between the spouses has led historians, biographers, and critics to believe that she profited more from their marriage than the young William. Thus, scholars have for a long time inexplicably vilified and criticized Anne Hathaway, creating a very misogynistic version of her.¹ This point of view, regardless of any authors' good intentions for outlining Shakespeare's life in detail, must be recognized for what it is: a conjecture. Should one want recorded facts, the sources to be relied on can only be Shakespeare's will and certificate of marriage.

The clerk who married them in Temple Grafton recorded Anne's surname as "Whately de Temple Crafton" in the bishop's records. This is the document that has prompted speculation about the possibility of two marriages and the existence of two Annes: Anne Whately, the woman Shakespeare was in love with, and Anne Hathaway, the woman he was in the obligation to marry.² In any case, this is mere speculation as it is impossible to know precisely what was written in the bishop's records. In fact, according to Ackroyd, that was "unnecessary speculation" because the monk who married them "is likely to have simply misheard or misread the name" (2005: 88). It is also important to note that the level of literacy at that time was much more inferior than it is now. And if it is not possible to know the accuracy of historical records, much less is it possible to ascertain what was then inside Shakespeare's mind and heart.

Under the light of this critical trend, it is quite logical for other scholars to argue that a young Shakespeare became engaged to a free, wild, and country spirited Anne (or Agnes, the names were interchangeable) for the sake of love. Might this union have been, then, a true love match? Why, one still wonders while working one's way through different biographies, are readers constantly being invited to think that Shakespeare was unhappily married? According to Ackroyd (2005), the only hints to be found in Shakespeare's writings concerning his own situation in marriage are allusions to his handfasting engagement. Their hasty engagement might have remained in the playwright's memory as he was writing his plays, as in *Measure for Measure*, when Claudio's plea alludes to the fact that he had "a fast wife" (Act 1, scene 2, line 144), or as in Olivia's enquiry to Sebastian – "Plight me the full assurance of your faith" (Act 4, scene 3, line 27) – in *Twelfth Night*.

According to Edgar Fripp, the marriage was free from any irregularities (1929: 15-24), ruling out the validity of the aforementioned documents, as well as affirming that all their sexual encounters may have been legitimated by a pre-contract. The other

¹ For further information see Greenblatt (2004: 118-148).

² See Burgess (1964).

document in which we can entirely rely upon is William Shakespeare's will. Anne Hathaway outlived her husband and was mentioned in his will, even if she did not receive a large inheritance. The detractors of their love might argue which is the reason why Shakespeare virtually left nothing to his widowed wife. On the other hand, it might also be important to note that the English Law at Elizabethan times that transformed Anne into his widow allowed her a third part of his properties and a house to live in.³

Going back to the question of the marriage, it is important to discuss it from an economic point of view. Regardless of Shakespeare's intentions and desires, the fact is that men at that time were generally in charge of the financial situation of their households. And it seems that in the Shakespeare family, they were facing some hardships. There are no records about William's parents' thoughts as regards the marriage of their eighteen-year-old son to the pregnant twenty-six-year-old bride (Greenblatt, 2004: 121). Regardless of whether they had permission or not, the fact is they did get married. And as Duncan-Jones highlights, there is no way that Shakespeare's engagement to Anne, along with the responsibility of feeding one more child, and the ones that might be coming afterwards, "could help the Shakespeare family, already in severe financial difficulty, except in the very short term. Anne had inherited only a modest dowry of 10 marks, the equivalent of six pounds" (Duncan-Jones, 2001: 20). According to Ackroyd (2005: 87), "it was the equivalent to a blacksmith or a butcher's annual wage and enough for her dowry".

At some point after the marriage contract materialized and their first daughter Susanna was born, Shakespeare left Stratford-upon-Avon and thus, his family, to start a career as a playwright in London. Ackroyd (2005: 93) affirms that "we don't know the year of this significant transition, but he must have left Stratford by 1587 or 1588", a couple of years after the wedding. "We may give him the benefit of a little time with his bride", says the biographer. If we connect this with the hypothesis that theirs was a love match, we are led to infer that before the separation they spent time in Stratford together, in the groom's household where Anne was accommodated, which led to the second pregnancy: "[a]nd he chose to remain with his family in Stratford for the duration" (2005: 95). It was supposed that the newly married moved to a back extension of the Shakespeare house in Henley Street, where their offspring were born.

Anne Hathaway conceived two children in the second pregnancy. She gave birth to Hamnet and Judith. At that time, two years had passed since Susanna's birth, which made a thirty-year-old Anne an old mum. However, Shakespeare decided to make his own path all the way to London and to stop living with his family any longer. It is that point of rupture with his family that his biographers consider as the start of his life as a famous playwright. Of the relationship he truly maintained with Anne Hathaway, one could only draw speculative portraits. Shakespeare's wife is one of the facets of his life that will remain a mystery –and that some authors have tried to decipher, as it is the case of O'Farrell in *Hamnet*.

An insupportable and touching loss

On August 11th, 1596, Hamnet Shakespeare died in unknown circumstances as there is no exact record of the cause of his death. Many historians assume his death to have been caused by the bubonic plague spread out in England at the time. However, other biographers such as Peter Lois (2012: 204-205) add that the child's sickness might

³ For further information on the topic see *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* (Schoenbaum, 1987).

have been due to the bad harvest season the Elizabethan population had been facing the preceding years. One should not forget the intrinsic feebleness of a twin offspring in the sixteenth century, when not all mothers had the privilege to be sufficiently nourished to guarantee the birth to be safe for both mother and children. This is the reason why “it [was] not uncommon for one of a pair of twins to be markedly smaller and frailer than the other, having received less nourishment from the placenta before birth”, argues Katherine Duncan-Jones (2001:104). Hamnet’s twin sister, Judith, who apparently was born some minutes after him, strikingly lived on until the age of seventy.

The question whether William Shakespeare traveled back to Stratford or not to attend his son’s funeral has been another cause of speculation. Some authors give the straightforward argument that he, of course, attended the burial, assuming it or not even mentioning it; but some others, like Eugene J. Mahon (2009), just “suspect” that he might have attended it. The relevance of the use of verbs of suspicion should be noted here because they draw attention to the differences between actual recorded facts in the life of Shakespeare and the mere speculation of his biographers.

Before this fatal event happened, Shakespeare had already shown tenderness and gentleness in his treatment of the grief derived from a son’s death. Having written the following lines in 1594’s *King John*, it can be said that he understood and empathized with such a situation:

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.

King John (3.4.93-97)

Though Shakespeare had already set in stone what he thought of the loss of a son, there are no written records of his own personal grief when this event actually happened to him.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE AS A WRITER, AS A FATHER, AND AS A SON IN O’FARRELL’S *HAMNET*

Even if the name of William Shakespeare cannot be explicitly read in any of the pages of O’Farrell’s work, it is obvious that the novel tells a story about his life. Apart from the evocative title of the novel, on the book’s very first pages a historical note stating the following can be read: “In the 1580s, a couple living in Henley Street, Stratford, had three children: Susanna, then Hamnet and Judith, who were twins. The boy, Hamnet, died in 1596, aged eleven. Four years or so later, the father wrote a play called *Hamlet*” (O’Farrell, 2020: 1).

If the great number of allusions –biographical data regarding his profession and his early years— found all along the text are insufficient to prove that that the main male character is meant to be taken as a fictional recreation of the famous playwright William Shakespeare, the fact that a play called *Hamlet* is written by him is at the end of the novel is decisive. Among the various, creative, and inventive ways in which the author refers to the poet and the hints O’Farrell gives about his identity, we find the following: “his father, returned from London” (*Hamnet* 10), “the Latin tutor” (*Hamnet* 28), “her husband’s name and the word tragedie” (*Hamnet* 344).

From all of these allusions to the identity of Hamnet's father, I would like to highlight a very significant one. On page 14, John Shakespeare, Hamnet's grandfather, utters the following words to his grandson: "'Crying, are you? Like a little maid? You're as bad as your father' – his grandfather says, with disgust". Here, we make a discovery about the intimate relationship between the characters. There seems to be an unloving, violent father-son relationship between John and William Shakespeare. And, in this passage, it seems that John projects it onto his grandson, now that his son is far from home: "His father's rages arrived from nowhere, like a gale, then blew quickly on. There was no pattern, no warning, no rationale; it was never the same thing that tipped him over. The son learnt, at a young age, to sense the onset of these eruptions and a series of feints and dodges to avoid his father's fists" (*Hamnet* 32).

However, that does not resemble the father-filial relationship existing between Hamnet and his father. This familial bond will be scrutinized later in the paper. For now, the focus will be on the analysis of the relationship that Shakespeare has with his father, John, in O'Farrell's historical fiction. Historically, John Shakespeare was a man of business; he ran a business of glove-making with the help of which he sustained his family. This is portrayed in O'Farrell's imaginative fiction. However, not much information is given in *Hamnet* about the financial difficulties the Shakespeare family had to face, apart from the fact that William started to work early in his boyhood. His first job as a Latin tutor – name chosen by O'Farrell to call the Bard in several parts of the book – permitted him, in O'Farrell's fictional account, to be out of his house, and far from his father and his rage. It is that job which allows him to go to the Hewlands where he meets his wife-to-be, Agnes. And it is in one of their numerous encounters that Agnes gets pregnant.

John, businessman as he is, sees this as an opportunity to trade and take economic advantage of Agnes' condition: "This is the face his father wears when he is contemplating a business deal, an advantageous one" (*Hamnet* 99). As soon as the Latin tutor finds out about the condition of the girl of the Hewlands, he asks her to be his wife; the Latin tutor genuinely desires to become formally betrothed, to marry and to have a true family in which he would finally feel at home: "He feels his face curling into a smile. A child. Made by him and Agnes [...] This child, in Agnes' belly, would change everything for him [...] He and Agnes will take flight: to another house, another town, another life" (*Hamnet* 96-97). However, his father seemed to have other plans for his son, as we will discover later on in the novel.

Mary Arden, William's mother and John's wife, is bewildered by the news and completely against the events occurring in her household at the very moment Agnes arrives and announces she is with child: "Mary inhales, shutting her eyes for a moment, as if mustering the final shreds of her patience" (*Hamnet* 95). Unfortunately, for a woman in the Elizabethan times in England, it was impossible for her opinion to be respected, or even listened to.⁶ So, regardless of his son's judgement, it is John who immediately takes charge of the situation and decides without hesitation that the couple should wed: "This marriage, the son suddenly sees, with a shocking sensation of disbelief, will be beneficial to his father, to whatever dealings he has with the sheep farmer's widow" (*Hamnet* 99). Clearly, the father's intentions go beyond his son's own happiness, Agnes' well-being or even the family's welfare; he only considers his own benefit, figuratively trading with his son's life and fate, and, consequently, the future of his successors. In fact, as Lawrence Stone puts it, the Elizabethan family was characterized by "distance, manipulation and deference" (1977: 117). John's attitude towards his son is selfish: "It is settled, then. I will go out to Hewlands, to set out my terms... our terms... to seal this most... sudden... and, it must be said, blessed union between our families" (*Hamnet* 100).

Could those have been the true positions and opinions of Shakespeare's family towards the marriage of the young couple? A devastated and quietened Mary Arden? A selfish, self-centered, manipulative John Shakespeare? It is impossible to know. But what everyone does know is that they got married. And that a few years later, William Shakespeare abandoned his house in Henley Street leaving Agnes, or Anne, in charge of his three children.

In her fictional account, O'Farrell portrays a visionary Shakespeare, a daydreamer, a man living a life which he does not seem to like, which he does not seem to want to live, as it is perceived in his words on page 100: "Will he never get away? Will he never be free of this man, this house, this trade?" (*Hamnet*, 100). We find in those lines an anxious William who yearns to leave Henley Street, to leave Stratford, the glove-making business, and, most importantly, a life ruled by a high-tempered man who makes decisions in his place. To put it in simple terms, the young Shakespeare imagined by O'Farrell is depicted as a living man with a dead spirit: "He is like a picture of a man, canvas thin, with nothing behind it; he is like the picture of a person whose soul has been sucked out of him or stolen away in the night" (*Hamnet* 184).

According to O'Farrell's account, the wedding arrangement is settled by his father, the couple gets married according to his terms, Agnes moves into the Henley Street house and time passes by. Their first daughter is born, and no sign of happiness seems to materialize in the young poet's face. "Is this marriage, this child, their life together causing his malaise? Is it their home in this apartment that is draining the life out of him in this way?" (*Hamnet* 185). The omniscient narrator of the novel depicts the relationship between Agnes and Will as a true love match. Both genuinely care about each other. The wife starts to notice the melancholy and heaviness of spirit in his husband's eyes, manners, and movements. And it is precisely through the way in which Agnes realizes her husband's discomfort that O'Farrell makes us think that she truly loved him: "She thinks about this cloud of grey and rot coming off her husband" (*Hamnet* 185). "I am lost. I have lost my way" (*Hamnet* 187), the young poet confesses to his wife one night in their bedchamber. There is nothing she would long for more than his happiness; that is when she starts to arrange, with the help of her brother, Will's departure to London: "If London could save him from his misery, it is what I want" (*Hamnet* 194).

On the one hand, Will faces an unloving, violent, manipulative, selfish father from whom he wants to escape. On the other hand, he cannot forget that going to London would mean leaving a loving, caring, tender, empathetic wife behind. What could have William Shakespeare done better than he did? If we take it that way, staying at home with his wife in melancholy, though it was not caused by her, might have ruined both their lives. Finally, he left Stratford-upon-Avon behind and started a new life in London, fortunately, far from his father, and unfortunately, far from Agnes: "And now the moment has arrived. Agnes conjugates it: he is going, he will be gone, he will go" (*Hamnet* 208). In this way, the novel counteracts the conventionalized vision of William's marriage as an unhappy one, as Will utters a promise to come back for her and his children: "I shall make arrangements to come and fetch you all. And then we shall be together, in London" (*Hamnet* 211).

It is of the utmost importance to remark the fact that in the novel it is Agnes who, with her brother's help, organizes Will's departure to London. This is an aspect of Shakespeare's life that the Irish author fictionalizes, as from a strictly historical point of view there are only have vague and imprecise remarks about the reasons why Shakespeare left Stratford. Is there a possibility that his success occurred because of his wife's efforts to help him develop his career? This is something that we will never know, but it is clear

that O'Farrell's interpretation of facts is potentially logical considering all the recorded facts about the poet.

STUDY OF CHARACTERS: HAMNET AND HAMLET

The objective of this section is to outline the main features shared by the protagonists of both texts: Hamlet, in Shakespeare's play and Hamnet, in O'Farrell's novel. From Sigmund Freud to Ernest Jones, it is surprising the great number of famous psychoanalysts who have extensively speculated about the principles of individual psychology⁴ that characterize Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark.⁵ In fact, Jones claims that "extensive studies of the past half century, inspired by Freud, have taught us that psychoneurosis means a state of mind where the person (...) has an internal mental conflict" (1996:140). This is key to analyse the impact of the character Hamlet in literary traditions. It must be acknowledged that the revolutionary impact of the play in dramatic literature were –and still are– impressive, and I reckon this was due to the sharp construction of its main character along with other features.

As it is well-known, the plot line follows the story of an heir, Hamlet, whose father, the King, has recently and suddenly died. His uncle, brother to the king, married the widowed queen and proclaimed himself king in the wake of a supposed election. Logically, they keep Hamlet under surveillance, as he starts to act suspicious when he learns, in conversation with his father's ghost, that his father was murdered by the usurper. It is difficult to understand why a murder story in which the murderer is unveiled at the very beginning is so addictive. Nevertheless, the mystery in the play does not seem to be so focused on who committed the crime or why it was committed, as on how the crime affects Hamlet, and what Hamlet is actually going, or not going, to do. In other words, the character's action or inaction is what triggers the plot and thus the audience's interest. Sigmund Freud argues that the play is "built up in Hamlet's hesitations over fulfilling the task of revenge that is assigned to him; but its text offers no reasons or motives for these hesitations and an immense variety of attempts at interpreting them have failed to produce a result" (1996: 264).

As stated above, there is no mystery in knowing who committed the fatal crime, but in how it affects Hamlet, who suffers its aftermath the most, and in the actions he should take to revenge it. Shakespeare had a great fascination for action in his texts: "Even in his own previous dramas, Shakespeare was fascinated by action, a great revealer of the motives that move persons to action" (Mairet, 1979). To explain the first similarity between Shakespeare's Hamlet and O'Farrell's Hamnet, the concepts of 'action' and 'inaction' will be resorted to as they are best defined in terms of level of effort and intentionality. People define action as more intentional and effortful than inaction and consequently establish default evaluations of action as more positive than inaction" (Albarracin *et al.*, 2019).

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare "was laying bare the springs of inaction" (Mairet, 1969:72). Shakespeare creates the character of Hamlet in a highly innovative manner, giving him a deep human consciousness that will lead him to a reflective life. Instead of following a pattern of action–reaction, Hamlet contemplates futures courses of action, thinks and "puts an antic disposition on" (*Hamlet* 1.5.170). That expression conveys the idea of making a psychological effort, but definitely not of an action of direct revenge,

⁴ Individual Psychology is the principles of character analysis we owe to Alfred Adler (1965).

⁵ For further information on Hamlet's magnetic psychology see Harold Bloom 1986, 1995, and 2003.

being closely enough to the principle of inaction. It implies, in fact, more an acting than an action. Indeed, Freud describes Hamlet to be a “pathologically irresolute character” (1953: 264-265).

In the case of O’Farrell’s construction of Hamnet, it can be argued that he is also prey to inaction. When his twin sister Judith falls ill, Hamnet does not take direct action for her recovery; he sits back, thinks, and goes to look for someone in his family to do this for him: “Judith is unwell and needs someone to care for her. He is meant to be finding their mother or grandmother or anyone else who might know what to do” (*Hamnet*, 7). It is true that there are indeed intentions of helping, but the effort seems to be passive, as he hopes that someone else will embark on the actions that he could have taken for helping his sister. We cannot forget, of course, that he is only a child. However, the main link that may be established with Hamlet is the “paralysis of action” commented by Goethe and supported by Freud. Even though Hamnet puts all his efforts into looking for help since he is only a child, all the responsibility seems to fall on him because he is the only male figure present at the scene. What this means is that the cause of his inaction might well be the pressure of being the sole figure available to take action. Thus, it is fear and anxiety, in *Hamnet*, that lead to the character’s inaction. And, indeed, the same happens in *Hamlet*, where the hero, due to his fate, is assigned the mission to revenge his father. He is the only one who can do it, as it is the case of Hamnet.

However, the inaction both characters decide to endure at the beginning of their respective stories ends up leading to action: “The plot of the drama shows us, however, that Hamlet is far from being represented as a person incapable of taking any action” (Freud, 1953:264-5). In the case of Hamlet, thanks to his schemes and traps, he can prove that his uncle Claudius is the murderer of his father. Hence, he decides to exert himself with determination and intends to kill him. Contrarily, Hamnet sacrifices his life for his twin Judith: “Her daughter has been spared; she has been delivered back to them (...) but, in exchange, it seems that Hamnet may be taken” (*Hamnet*, 248). After having taken an inactive part during the plot, Hamnet puts all his efforts in his sister’s recovery. Intention and effort altogether lead to action; and those actions, in both *Hamnet* and *Hamlet*, lead to death.

After this first attempt to bring both figures together, let us proceed to the second point of the analysis, the nature of characterization in both texts, and an exploration of the confluences and interplays between the historical and fictional aspects of the characters in both literary works. According to Stacie Friend, there can be many factors to consider a character to be fictional. She claims that a growing number of philosophers define them as “abstract objects akin to novels or plot”. Moreover, she argues that the notion of fictional character is restricted to “characters introduced in a work of fiction or a literary text” (2007:141-156). According to these ideas, it can be concluded that Hamlet, prince of Denmark, is a fictional character, who exists within William Shakespeare’s play in the early seventeenth century. It should be noted that Hamlet lives in a place which does exist, the castle of Elsinore in Denmark, but the events happening there are also fictional. This character is not described in great detail in Shakespeare’s tragedy. As it is a play, there are no lengthy descriptions concerning the personality traits of the character. Instead, one gets to know him through his words, dialogues, and soliloquies, and through what other characters think of him.

In contrast with Shakespeare’s play, in O’Farrell’s *Hamnet*, we encounter Hamnet, a fictional character within her novel, that is described in detail. O’Farrell builds up a character whose nature oscillates between the fictional and historical account. Although Hamnet Shakespeare was a person who historically lived until the age of eleven, in O’Farrell’s novel he can only function as a fictional character. According to O’Farrell,

Hamnet Shakespeare's mind is "quick: he has no trouble understanding the schoolmaster's lessons. He can grasp the logic and sense of what he is being told, and he can memorise readily. (...) Hamnet learns quickly" (*Hamnet*, 5-6). The author portrays a graciously intelligent boy, who is able to learn his letters and to understand the world around him. However, as the author puts it, "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" (*Hamnet*, 6). He was not only mind-gifted but also, the author claims, he possesses a vivid imagination, which is going to help him later in the story to accomplish his goals.

Finally, let us comment on Hamlet—fictional character from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—within the plot of O'Farrell's novel. The death of Shakespeare's son Hamnet triggers a series of circumstances that leads to the appearance of Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, a character created by Shakespeare, in O'Farrell's novel. Hamnet's father, whom we can identify with William Shakespeare, announces a new play to be performed for the first time in London. The play is called *Hamlet*. When his wife Agnes learns about it by word of mouth, she goes mad due to her husband's insolence and insensitivity. Hamnet's mother, enraged by the fact that the play written by her husband shares name with her dead infant, rides to London to confront the poet: "Come on then, she thinks. Show me what you have done (...) She had expected something familiar, something about her son. What else would the play be about? (*Hamnet*, 360). When she actually sees the play on stage, she proves her thoughts wrong as she believes to be seeing her son for the first time since he died. Agnes recognises her dead son in his husband's play: "Hamlet, my son" (*Hamnet*, 354). This moment is very evocative as O'Farrell portrays Agnes's son, Hamnet, and Shakespeare's character, Hamlet, as if they were one and the same: "He is both alive and dead. Her husband has brought him back to life, in the only way he can" (*Hamnet*, 366).

There is, then, a complex interplay between *Hamnet* and *Hamlet* which is used to pursue the everlasting presence of the child, despite his physical departure and actual death. Shakespeare "has pulled off a manner of alchemy" (*Hamnet*, 365), the "sorcerer's spell" (*Hamnet*, 360) that has bewitched readers, writers, critics, academics, biographers, philosophers, and historians for centuries and that will continue to haunt and charm them. It may then be argued that *Hamnet* is an imaginative critical-biographical text which can be read as a personal speculation about the writer and the trauma left on him by the death of his son, which was to be transformed into art: the play *Hamlet*.

ANALYSING THE FAMILIAR RELATIONSHIP: FATHER AND SON IN O'FARRELL'S *HAMNET*

He is dead and gone, lady,
 He is dead and gone;
 At his head a grass-green turf,
 At his heels a stone.

Hamlet (4.5)

William Shakespeare wrote these words sometime during the first three years after the death of his eleven-year-old son Hamnet. This section will be devoted to the analysis of the relationship that the poet might have had with his only male son. As it is an impossible task to find written records on the matter, this section will entirely focus on O'Farrell's interpretation of the facts and the analysis of relevant passages in Shakespeare's play. Not only will we focus on the relationship between the poet and his

son, but also on the father-son relationship between Hamlet and his father, the late King. A parallel between both family relationships will be offered as a conclusion to this essay.

According to Peter Laslett (1965: 2), a family or a household in Elizabethan times was always ruled by a male figure, the head of the family; women had a secondary role as partners, being subordinate to that male leading figure. Altogether, both were the essential and primary elements to form a family: “At that time, the family was thought of not as one society only, but as three societies fused together: the society of man and wife, that of parents and children, and that of masters and servants” (Laslett, 1965: 2). That *World We Have Lost*, as Laslett entitled his work, “was no paradise, no golden age of equality, tolerance or of loving kindness” (Laslett, 1965: 3), and neither was the familiar nucleus. Familial relationships were not usually based on affective bonds.

There were non-written rules in society for a family to exist, as Laslett explains: “The creation of a new familial unit was brought about by the enterprise of the young couple, of both of them. But it usually also required the co-operation of each set of parents” (1965: 99). It may be argued that Shakespeare partly followed those rules as he himself started his own family, marrying Anne and having children with her. Hence, he dutifully followed the steps to create a family, even if later, by moving to London, he abandoned it, at least in physical terms. This absence may have led to detachment and may have affected Shakespeare’s relationship with his son. Natasha J. Cabrera explains that “attachment theory” (Bowlby, 1982) is the most commonly used framework to understand early parent-child relationships, where positive and adaptive patterns of parent-child interaction in the early years promote the development of secure relationships (Cabrera 2019: 1). According to that theory, father involvement opposes father absence. Whereas the former creates in the child an emotional attachment to the father, the latter leads to emotional independence from him. Involvement eventually equals residency; if two people reside in the same household and consequently live together, they are bound to form an attachment. On the contrary, if two people live apart, as separate individuals living separate lives, a blood link might not be enough for a child to establish a relationship in the future. Might this have been the case of the Shakespeares? According to the remaining written records of their biographical circumstances, Hamnet Shakespeare might not have formed any emotional bond with his father because of his lasting absence from Stratford. In the novel, they did not only live in separate houses first, but also in different towns, not having the possibility to see each other even once a week.

Besides the attachment theory, we may consider the Lacanian concept of ‘father’. From very early in his work, Jacques Lacan deals with the concept of ‘father’ (*père*), as he considers it of great importance in psychic structure. According to Evans (1996: 62), in his 1938 article on the family, Lacan “attributes the importance of the Oedipus complex to the fact that it combines in the figure of the father two almost conflicting functions: the protective function and the prohibitive function”. Lacan describes the contemporary social decline in the paternal *imago* – clearly visible in the images of absent fathers and humiliated fathers– as the cause of current psychopathological peculiarities (Lacan, 1938:73). Hereafter, the French philosopher theorised widely on the topic. This term appeared in a paper published in 1953, where Lacan stressed the importance of distinguishing three types of father: the symbolic father, the imaginary father and the real father. The symbolic father is not a person but a function, it means the so-called “paternal function”, which should impose law and order. The imaginary father is the mental picture a son makes of his father, everything pictured around the paternal figure. And the latter, the real father, is the biological father of the child. For Lacan, this is an agent of castration which plays the part of the prohibitive father. However, Lacan claims that the intervention of the father as an agent of castration does not necessarily imply physical presence in the

family, as the real father may be physically present and yet fail to intervene as agent of castration (Lacan, 1994:212, 221). Conversely, “the intervention of the real father may well be felt by the child even when the father is physically absent” (Evans, 1996: 64).

At the beginning of O'Farrell's novel, a young Hamnet is looking for a member of his family that could help him with his sister Judith, who is ill with a fever and buboes, egg-shaped bulges, under her skin. On the first two pages, it is made clear that his father does not live in the same household with the rest of the family, but that he lives far away, in London. Still, Hamnet thinks of his father when looking for a relative: “The boy opens his mouth. He calls the names, one by one, of all the people who live here, in this house (...) For a moment, it crosses his mind to call his father's name, to shout for him, but his father is miles and hours away, in London, where the boy has never been” (*Hamnet* 5). This is the very first hint at the possibility that Hamnet may be very fond of his father and that they might indeed maintain a close relationship. It is a survival instinct pattern in human beings to look for the help of the ones who are near enough to provide such help. Here, we could see the Lacanian figure of the imaginary father, the image or imaginary construct that a child makes of his father, a figure of protection and love. This imaginary relationship often bears little resemblance with reality (Lacan, 1994: 220) and that might be the case in *Hamnet*.

Moving forward in the novel, we learn that Hamnet is indeed very fond of his father and that he knows him well: “He knows it, he does. His father would respond to a repeated call, would never hide himself away in an empty house” (*Hamnet* 11). The passage reveals that even though Hamnet's father does not live there anymore, he has been definitively present during the childhood days of his infant, because if not, it would be impossible for him to recall those thoughts. Being a present parent in the early years makes a father (and/or a mother) an important and respectable figure for their children. We need to believe the child when he affirms that he knows his father would be there to assist him and her sister. On the other hand, considering Lacan's ideas on the paternal figure, it might just be a mental picture framed by a son of an absent father.

Hamnet's recollections of his father do not end in his search for help, but also in his need for advice. As already mentioned, *Hamnet* begins with the untiring search of the child for help to assist her sister, who seems to be in a bad condition. In the meantime, he seems to annoy his grandfather, who loses his temper and treats him badly. Furthermore, we can see Hamnet's recollection of his father's advice: “Stay away from your grandfather when he is in one of his black humours. Be sure to stand clear of him. Stay well back, do you hear? His father had said this to him on his last visit” (*Hamnet*, 12). The father's esteem and regard for his son is manifested here for the first time.

The passages analysed show a child in his early years who longs for the presence of his father to help him in any circumstances. It is the most natural instinct for a kid to look for his parents' assistance. However, it is also true that if an absence is repeated in time, the human necessity to call for a parental figure will fade, and it will be replaced by another person who is indeed close by. Thus, the father's absence may be eclipsed by the presence of a capable mother. As explained before, involvement usually equals residency. If we focus on the main functions Lacan considers a father should fulfil, it may be argued that Hamnet's father achieves none of them in O'Farrell's account: neither the protective function nor the prohibitive function are fulfilled when the child is in need of assistance in the case of Judith's illness or in need of a paternal figure to enforce law and order.

Looking now at Shakespeare's experience of the father-son relationship, what O'Farrell suggests is that his play *Hamlet* was an exculpatory fantasy that the poet created to mourn and process his loss. Shakespeare's biographers situate the poet in London during the early years of his children's breeding. If he was away from Stratford, it may

be assumed that the author failed his son by abandoning him and leaving a gap in the household, which made the poet feel so guilty that he wrote an alternative story, a fantasy in which the abandonment happened the other way around. In Shakespeare's play, it is Hamlet who fails his father due to his inability to carry out the ghost's commands. Hence, this would establish a parallel between the incapacity of Shakespeare to remember his son Hamnet in real life and Hamlet's to remember his father, King Hamlet, in Shakespeare's play. Accordingly, this would be the reason why the father's ghost makes prince Hamlet a solid request – "Adieu, adieu, adieu, remember me" (Hamlet, 1.5.91) – one that will torment Hamlet for the rest of his (brief) life. We could interpret Shakespeare's "Remember me" in words of the father as an "I remember you" on his part to his dead son. Similarly, the father in O'Farrell's novel shows some hints of guilt and redemption: "All he can do is inscribe strokes on a page – for weeks and weeks this was all he did (...) – and hope at least some of these arrows will hit their targets" (*Hamnet* 354). In O'Farrell's *Hamnet*, there is a symbolic inversion in which the father expresses through his dramatic creation the idea that he would give his life for his son, would die for him, if this were possible. This would entail Shakespeare's redemption as a father, seen through Agnes's eyes, and O'Farrell's: "Hamlet, my son (...) Of course he is who he is (...) She has looked for her son everywhere, ceaselessly, these past four years, and here he is (...) Her husband has pulled off a manner of alchemy" (*Hamnet* 363-364).

Some critics have defended the idea that, in Shakespeare's play, Hamlet fails his father. Thus, Strachey argues that "the play is built up on Hamlet's hesitations over fulfilling the task of revenge that is assigned to him" (1953: 264), failing to accomplish it. If such was the case, the writer might have obtained some redemption from the guilt he experienced for his inaction—abandoning his family— by creating a character whose actions are paralysed by "an excessive development of intellect" (Strachey, 1953:264-5). In this sense, we must pay attention to the passages of *Hamlet* in which the father-son relationship comes to light. The only moment in the play where Hamlet praises his father and talks about him in detail is in act 3, scene 4, during the conversation with his mother in her bedchamber:

QUEEN: Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
 HAMLET: Mother, you have my father much offended.

Hamlet (3.4.8-9)

Another moment in which Hamlet openly praises his father, the late King, is in the course of a conversation with Horatio: "He was a man, take him for all in all / I shall not look upon his like again" (*Hamlet*, 1.2.187-188). The bond between child and father we find all along the play is materialized in Hamlet's sense of duty to revenge his father's death, but duty does not necessarily imply affection.

There is an evocative moment in *Hamlet* where the protagonist recalls his childhood. From this passage, a different picture of the relationship father-son can be drawn. This is one of the few moments in Shakespeare's oeuvre where we find an evocation of the early years of the main character of the play. However, in the scene referred to, Hamlet is not in the presence of his father, but accompanied by Yorick, the King's jester, who used to play with him when he was a child: "Hamlet admires his father, and he remembers the loving attitude he had towards his mother, but he speaks fondly of Yorick who carried him" (Morriss Henry Partee, 2006: 10). It is worth noting that Hamlet never describes a happy memory of the time spent with his parents during his childhood in Shakespeare's play, and neither does Hamnet in O'Farrell's novel.

To sum up, it may be argued that they –father and son in both texts– indeed had a distant relationship due to the facts explained above. This is a conclusion that can be drawn from the previous analysis: William Shakespeare and his son had a physical distance due to the fact that their place of residence was apart; an emotional distance derived from the absence of the father, which did not permit to forge a bond of affection between them; and lastly, the functional gap existing in the memories of the child of his absent father. Thus, following Lacan's theory of the father, this relationship might be construed a case of a predominant imaginary-father-figure on the part of the child, as the latter's words in O'Farrell's text reveal his fondness of the father despite the impossibility of an emotional bond growing between them. Psychologically, such a lack shows the child's necessity to create an imaginary ideal father to be physically there for him. Moreover, considering the fictional hypothesis that it was Shakespeare's guilt which motivated him to write a fictional story in which it is the child who fails the father, it may be suggested that the relationship between the Bard and his son while the child was alive was probably unsuccessful due to the poet's lack of involvement, which he skillfully projected into his most iconic play, the tragedy of *Hamlet*.

CONCLUSIONS

Although no definite claim can be made concerning the exact relation between the fictional events depicted in the play *Hamlet* and the actual facts of Shakespeare's life, multiple conclusions can be drawn from the analysis in the preceding pages. The main claim throughout is that O'Farrell's *Hamnet* provides us with an imaginative critical-biographical perspective from which to approach William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, allowing us to read it in a different way.

After having carried out an overview of the position held by Shakespeare's critics and biographers on some of the most important aspects analysed in this paper, we can assert that it is possible to make plenty of interpretations of Shakespeare's life, as there exist only two written documents about his historical life: his marriage certificate and his will. Beyond these, we may only speculate on his marital and domestic life within the social context of Elizabethan times. In fact, even the most prominent Shakespeare biographers rely on elusive matters when writing about his early years before moving to London. It is this historical gap that O'Farrell draws upon in order to develop her fictional recreation of that period in Shakespeare's life.

This paper concludes that O'Farrell has written a fictional narration relying on a mixture of real biographical data contrasted and commented by famous Shakespeare scholars and her own imagination, which is what Greenblatt (2004:14) encourages to do: “[t]o understand how Shakespeare used his imagination to transform life into art, it is important to use our own imagination”. In the case of O'Farrell's *Hamnet*, the Irish writer suggests the transformation of death into art, providing a new personal and speculative vision of what Shakespeare's domestic and family life may have been like. Thus, *Hamnet* is not so much a rewriting of *Hamlet* as a biographical justification, narrated in fictional form, of the events surrounding Shakespeare's domestic life and the death of Shakespeare's son, which might have been his motivation to write *Hamlet*. The world's greatest Poet did not immortalise the loss of his child in verse, but he gave his name to one of his best well-known plays.

As it has been deeply discussed throughout this paper, and as regards the relationship that the Poet truly maintained with his wife Anne Hathaway, one could only draw speculative portraits. Shakespeare's wife is one of the facets of his life that will

remain a mystery, as it is also case of the relationship he maintained with his children. What O'Farrell seems to have aimed at writing *Hamnet* is to decipher both aspects.

In the light of O'Farrell's imaginative fictional account, it has been concluded that Hamnet Shakespeare could not have formed any strong emotional bond with his absent father. The relationship father-son in *Hamnet*, which has been analysed in detail in this paper, is shown to be unsuccessful due to the father's lack of involvement. This is why O'Farrell's *Hamnet* suggests that the play *Hamlet* could be considered as an exculpatory fantasy on the part of Shakespeare for his absence and detachment from his son's life and death. *Hamlet* would be the result of a father's grief for the loss of a son at a young age.

As an example of speculative fiction, *Hamnet* should be taken as what it is: a narrative fiction novel that evokes the relevance of Shakespeare's texts and life centuries after his death. This proves that Shakespeare's works still have much to say, allowing enough room to be interpreted and reinterpreted. In other words, by defamiliarising *Hamlet*, O'Farrell's *Hamnet* grants the possibility of rereading the Shakespearean play in a new light: with a focus on Shakespeare's domestic life and family, from the point of view of two marginal figures whose voice history has not allowed us to hear, that of his son and his wife.

We still do not fully know what happens in *Hamlet*, to evoke the title of John Dover Wilson's classical study, or why some actions occur and why others do not. This is why it may prove helpful for Shakespearean scholars to carefully consider O'Farrell's creative-critical interpretation of *Hamlet* as a relevant contribution to the field of studies on the playwright's life and creative motivations. Further research should be made on other creative interpretations of Shakespeare's works, such as the one carried out by O'Farrell's novel, so as to continue delving into William Shakespeare's identity and life, and into the meanings and interpretations that his works can still offer to us.

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