

Hamnet, Hamlet and the demanding effort “to show the very age and body of the time”

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“There is a history in all men’s lives,
Figuring the nature of the times deceas’d;
The which observ’d, a man may prophesy,
With a near aim, of the main chance of things
As yet not come to life.” – Shakespeare, *King Henry IV, Part 2*

In the first years of the 20th century, literary scholar A. C. Bradley suggested that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as a character “has been the subject of more discussion...than any other in the whole literature of the world.” That may well still be the case a century and more later. Interest in and examinations of *Hamlet* the tragedy and Prince Hamlet the character remain intense.

Hamnet is a film directed by Chinese-born Chloé Zhao (*Songs My Brothers Taught Me, The Rider, Nomadland, The Eternals*) and co-written by Irish writer Maggie O’Farrell, based on the latter’s 2020 novel of the same title.

The film is built around the family life of playwright William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway (referred to sometimes and in this film as Agnes) in Stratford-upon-Avon in the 1590s and the death of their 11-year-old son Hamnet. The work proposes that Shakespeare wrote his tragedy *Hamlet* in large measure as a loving tribute to his deceased son.

Shakespeare married Hathaway, eight years older, in 1582, when he was 18. They had a daughter Susanna in 1583 and twins, Judith and Hamnet, two years later. Shakespeare subsequently spent much of his time away from Stratford, making his way in the London theater as actor and eventually playwright. The journey from the capital to the smaller city took three days at this time. Shakespeare’s initial history plays were being performed by the early 1590s, and he had made a sufficient name for himself by 1592 to be referred to by a rival as that “upstart crow.” Shakespeare also had lengthy narrative poems published in this decade.

The first section of *Hamnet* sets about painting Anne or Agnes (Jessie Buckley) as “a woman with supernatural abilities, who craves the embrace of nature and spends her time in the woods practicing falconry,” in the words of one commentator. Shakespeare’s mother (Emily Watson) suggests it is “even said the girl is the child of a forest witch.”

Will (Paul Mescal) meets Agnes and becomes entranced by her beauty and earth-mother qualities. “The women in my family see things that others don’t.” Will has his pressures at home, the son of a demanding glove-maker (David Wilmot), who considers him a good-for-nothing. Quite early on, Agnes asks Shakespeare to tell her a story and he recounts the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

They consummate their relationship and Agnes becomes pregnant. The Shakespeares are firmly opposed to the marriage (“I’d rather you went to sea than marry this wench”), but the couple persist. Agnes is asked, “But why marry a pasty-faced scholar? What use is he?” “He’s got more inside of him,” she replies, “than any man I’ve ever met.”

Agnes has Susanna, and they set up house together. After Shakespeare

expresses frustration with his writing (“I’ve lost my way”), she suggests he go to London to pursue a theatrical career, leaving her and her daughter in Stratford (“He needs more”). Sometime later, Agnes delivers the twins, one of whom is first thought to be stillborn.

A decade passes, and Shakespeare is back and forth between London and Stratford. In the former, he walks the street as an outbreak of the plague afflicts the city. At home, Judith (Olivia Lynes) contracts the dread disease, but Hamnet (Jacobi Jupe) lies beside her and “tricks death” into taking him instead of his sister. Shakespeare arrives too late. Agnes upbraids him three times, “You weren’t here.” The death strains their relations. He must return to London, “The world does simply not stand still, Agnes. There are people waiting for me ... The season is about to begin.” She is bitter about this.

In London, Will is guilt-stricken and recites his “To be or not to be ...” soliloquy looking forlornly out at the Thames River. Agnes and her brother (Joe Alwyn) travel to London to attend a production of *Hamlet*. She is deeply offended at first that Shakespeare has used her son’s name (or a version of it) and even heckles the actors. In the end, she recognizes the plays as an homage to her son and embraces it.

Hamnet has been nominated for numerous academy awards and has done well with audiences in various parts of the world. The success is understandable, for both good and bad reasons.

As noted above, widespread interest in Shakespeare’s life, including his intimate family relations, persists, even among those who are not very familiar or familiar at all with his work. His is one of the most famous names in history. Curiosity about how this remarkable individual came to create *Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello* and the other prominent plays is a natural or at any rate inevitable human response. About figures of the classical world next to no information exists, about modern personalities too much is known. Shakespeare lived on the cusp of the modern world, indeed was part of that “cusp,” and there are enough established facts to tantalize and intrigue, and leave the door open for speculations of one sort or another.

There are moving sequences in *Hamnet*, especially those involving the Shakespeare children. Jacobi Jupe (whose brother Noah Jupe plays Hamlet in the film’s staging of the play) is endearing. The filmmakers convey the almost unbearable agony of losing a son or daughter. This is not a small thing at a time when various governments and militaries consider it no important matter to slaughter children by the thousands. Likewise, the scenes of the “Black Death” are affecting and remind us of the consequences of epidemics, in the 16th century of course before medical science could prevent them.

The other performers put their heart into the film, but at times the adults’ emotions seem *forced*. We are being told too often what emotions to feel and when, more than being allowed to feel anything for ourselves.

Agnes-Anne Hathaway as a pre-Christian, semi-pagan wanderer of the fields and woods is not based on any known facts and doesn’t take the drama anywhere. Even within the film’s own terms, it really has nothing to do with her eventual anger about Shakespeare’s absence during

Hamnet's death agony or her excursion to London, where she is portrayed as a country bumpkin who hardly knows what a play is (despite being married to a writer for well over a decade). Her sullenly evoked "You weren't here" speaks to one of the damaging trends in contemporary literature and film making, the "modernizing" of thoughts and sentiments.

Artists like Zhao and O'Farrell simplify matters for themselves by projecting into history their own middle class attitudes. To understand the present "all one has to do is to attribute the thoughts, feelings and motives of present-day men to the past." (Lukacs) Everywhere one looks one finds the same reactions and emotions – 'Mine and those of people like me!' And that error in this case almost inevitably blends into a kind of self-involvement and self-pity on Agnes's part, which hardly seem appropriate or likely.

There are more significant questions, which can only be touched on here.

Various commentators have taken note of the fact that there is no indication that Hamnet died of the plague. On the contrary, Shakespeare scholar Jonathan Bate, interviewed by the WSWS in 2022, writing in the *Times* observes,

there was no recurrence of mass burials in Stratford in the summer of 1596, when Shakespeare's 11-year-old son died. No evidence of an outbreak of the pestilence. Youth mortality was widespread in the age, with many possible causes. It is almost certain that Hamnet did not die of the plague.

The notion that *Hamlet* was written as a tribute to the dead Hamnet is fanciful from various vantage points. More than a few critics have pointed to the "uncomfortable fact" that Shakespeare was reworking a narrative that, in its contours, was well known.

Bate also points out:

For anyone interested in historical fact, the movie is frustrating. Not only for the reason I have mentioned above, but also because a version of *Hamlet*, perhaps by Thomas Kyd and perhaps by Shakespeare himself, was on stage long before Hamnet died, destroying the whole premise. Because we were never told that Hamnet and Judith were named after their godparents, a Stratford baker and his wife. (They were good friends of Shakespeare and Hamnet would be a witness to his will: it's perfectly possible that the choice of the twins' names had nothing to do with the play, which was ultimately based on the story of Amleth, Prince of Denmark.)

More generally, the notion that Hamlet or any significant literary or dramatic work is the product of personal grief or one tragedy alone is reductive and false, again revealing a contemporary, frankly philistine conception of artistic production as the result of purely private, personal joys and griefs.

As renowned actor Ian McKellen told the *Times*: "I don't quite get it. I'm not very interested in trying to work out where Shakespeare's imagination came from, but it certainly didn't just come from family life."

O'Farrell's conjecture, in any case, is not a new one. Shakespeare scholar James Shapiro (also interviewed by the WSWS) explained in a 2018 article "The Question of Hamlet" that Irish writer Edmond Malone (1741-1812)

discovered that Shakespeare's son Hamnet (the spelling was interchangeable with Hamlet) had died at the age of eleven in 1596. ... Biographers eventually proposed that Shakespeare's expression of grief for his son's untimely death was suspended for four years until it at last found a proper outlet in the aptly named *Hamlet*. As long as you overlooked that *Hamlet* is about a son mourning a father (not the other way around), that Shakespeare was rewriting an old play called *Hamlet*, and that he may not have seen his child more than a few times after leaving his family behind when he moved to London in the late 1580s, this proved to be a much better story. Moreover, critics now felt licensed to conflate the experiences of Hamlet and Shakespeare.

It is a terrible injustice to Shakespeare and *Hamlet*, and contrary to several hundred years of criticism and commentary, to view the drama in the O'Farrell-Zhao fashion. It ignores, first of all, what Hamlet himself says about "the purpose of playing," whose aim, he suggests, is "both at the first and now ... to show ... the very age and body of the time his form and pressure."

Hamlet is a play, first and foremost, about Elizabethan England. Shapiro, in *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*, places the tragedy firmly in the unsettling final decade of the 16th century. In a chapter, "Things Dying, Things Newborn," he writes that Shakespeare "found himself drawn to the epochal, to moments of profound shifts, of endings that were also beginnings." Concretely, there was rebellion in Ireland and the English expedition headed by the Earl of Essex to crush it, there were threats of a new Armada from Spain, speculation was rife about who would succeed the childless queen. "The political uncertainty that autumn [1599] was the stuff of Shakespearean drama ... *Hamlet*, composed during these months, feels indelibly stamped by the deeply unsettling mood of the time. The play offered no temporary respite..."

More generally, we are speaking of the birth of the modern bourgeois world emerging forcefully in conflict with the decaying feudal one. Shapiro writes about Prince Hamlet "straddling worlds and struggling to reconcile past and present." Bertolt Brecht suggested that Hamlet's dilemma stemmed from making "ineffective use of the new approach to Reason which he has picked up [at university] ... In the feudal business to which he returns it simply hampers him. Faced with irrational practices, his reason is utterly impractical."

As he explains on numerous occasions, Hamlet is disgusted with the existing, "rotten" condition of the world ("'Tis an unweeded garden / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely")—without seeing any possible alternative. The Soviet writer A. Smirnov argued that Hamlet views the murder of his father and infidelity of his mother "only as an indication of the general corruption of the age, of universal and irreparable evil. ... It is possible to interpret this attitude of Shakespeare's in terms of the decay of absolutism around 1600. The degeneracy of the English court stood out in sharp relief. Shakespeare depicted it with unusual depth, transferring the scene of action to Denmark."

For Anatoly Lunacharsky, Hamlet's "acute mind penetrates all the imperfections of the world. But to understand the imperfections of the world implies the possession of high ideals of some sort with which to contrast them. And indeed, Hamlet dreams of a world which has been somehow made straight, a world of honest people, honest relationships, but he does not believe that such a world will ever in fact become reality."

The play may be explained in different ways, but no *serious* interpretation will leave out its great, disturbing themes, even at times its profound disillusionment with society and other human beings. The sorrow or anger here is never merely a purely *personal* one, but, as Hamlet enumerates concretely, a reckoning with the slings and arrows of

outrageous fortune, the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely [scorn], the legal system's delays, the insolence of people in high office and the blows that the patient and enduring receive from the unworthy. He paints a largely *social* picture of what he finds intolerable. After all, it is not his *family* or even the *court* but "the *time*" that "is out of joint."

The death of a child is a terrible, devastating event. It may very well deepen an artist's sense of the tragic side of life, its finitude, its enormous emotional demands and hardships. But it is not the *source* of a major artist's work, it only strengthens its more humane and sympathetic qualities or sides. Great artists have a great cause. Shakespeare was engaged in revealing the likeness and complexion of his epoch and society, in remorselessly removing its veils.

Various harmful processes find expression in *Hamnet*: the "privatization" and "trivialization" of human behavior past and present; a subjective, "anything goes" attitude toward historical facts; the imposition on people of the past current motives and attitudes; and the more general retreat of affluent layers of the middle class into the family fortress-cocoon.

In regard to the latter, for some middle class layers the world is too much, too frightening, overwhelming. What do we have control (or apparent control) over? The family unit. That's a would-be sanctuary for those who feel the earth moving beneath their feet. Zhao's film is false because it attempts to foist this state of mind and emotion on the life and work of one of the most fearless writers of all time, someone who consistently took on the grandest and most towering questions of existence.



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