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“Remember me”: Significant Absences and the Fragility of Family in Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet*

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In *Fragments d’un discours amoreux*, Roland Barthes presents “absence / absence” as integral to lovers’ discourse, defining it as such: “[a]ny episode of language which stages the absence of the loved object—whatever its cause and its duration—and which tends to transform this absence into an ordeal of abandonment” (Barthes 13). Staging the absence of loved ones is a central theme in the work of Maggie O’Farrell, whose novels frequently contemplate loss and bereavement, processes of remembering and forgetting, the dynamics and role allocations within the family, and the preciousness and fragility of life itself. Despite various accolades and prizes, there is a surprising absence of scholarly criticism on O’Farrell’s writings as of yet, though recent articles such as Stephen O’Neill’s and Anindita Kar’s indicate increasing academic interest. This article contributes to filling this gap, reading O’Farrell’s use of significant absences in her novel *Hamnet* (2020) as narrative strategies which both suggest a feminist revision of history and illuminate complex personal processes and outcomes of grief by drawing on the work of Roland Barthes and phenomenologist-psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs.

Absence as a leitmotif features prominently in several titles and plots of the author’s eight novels, among them *After You’d Gone* (2000), *The Distance Between Us* (2004), and *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox* (2007). O’Farrell has also published a memoir*, I Am, I Am, I Am* (2017), the title of which not only invokes Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* and its concern with female identity, mental health, and the proximity of death, but also imitates the pulsing human heartbeat in a strong iambic, anaphoric quality as if reasserting life and warding off death. As its subtitle, *Seventeen Brushes With Death*, reveals, the memoir is “a literary exercise in normalising the near-death experience” (Aitkenhead n.p). Illuminating the impact

of life-threatening conditions such as encephalitis and an immune disorder which may cause anaphylaxis at any time, *I Am, I Am, I Am* is an exploration of O'Farrell's encounters with the fragility of life, which also include being aboard a plummeting plane, nearly drowning or being threatened with a machete.

Well-versed in experiencing the fragile threshold between life and death herself, O'Farrell envisions the life of the Shakespeare family amid the loss of their son in 1596 in *Hamnet*. In the Author's Note to the novel, O'Farrell explains how she birthed *Hamnet* from a state of absence:

> [...] it is not known why Hamnet Shakespeare died: his burial is listed but not the cause of his death. The Black Death or 'pestilence', as it would have been known in the late sixteenth century, is not mentioned once by Shakespeare, in any of his plays or poetry. I have always wondered about this absence and its possible significance; this novel is the result of my idle speculation (370).

It is this historical gap—the enigma of the loss of their son—that O'Farrell centralises in her fictional family history. Doing so, she gives shape and voice to those that have often been considered only in relation to Shakespeare himself. The novel's main protagonist and focaliser is Agnes (Anne Hathaway), imagined by O'Farrell as a strong, perceptive woman knowledgeable in the healing powers of medicinal herbs, alongside her three children: Susanna and the twins, Judith and Hamnet. The children's wider paternal and maternal families, including grandparents, aunts, and uncles, feature as secondary characters, as does their father: the world-famous playwright is largely absent from the novel, in various ways. Significantly, he is never named, but referred to in his respective social roles as "the Latin tutor," "the son," "the husband," and "the father." Thus, the author side-steps Shakespeare as cultural-icon, instead shifting the focus to the intricacies of the relationships within the Shakespeare family itself. Moreover, she reverses the common role allocation of Agnes/Anne Hathaway as "Shakespeare's wife" both by depicting her husband as a not-yet-famous playwright and by referring to him in his social functions only.

In the novel, O'Farrell uses an image which mirrors her endeavour with Hamnet: the miniature house of the young Shakespeare family is built into "a gap, a vacancy" (27) and formed like the letter A, as in Agnes, "sloping together at the top, with a floor across its middle. Agnes takes this as her sign" (134). Occupying a formerly empty space, the miniature house is an image of how literature is able to fill blanks creatively and give a voice to the silenced. Thus, the novel effectively offers a feminist revision of the historical record by inverting Shakespeare's omnipresence and the absence of information about his family: while Shakespeare himself is largely absent in the novel, Agnes, Susanna, Hamnet, and Judith are given a voice of their own.

To tell her version of how Hamnet's death has shaken the entire family, O'Farrell uses an omniscient narrator and parallel plots which ultimately align in the climactic moment of

Hamnet's death at the end of Part I. The opening plotline is set in the narrative present of 1596 when Hamnet detects "buboes" on his sister Judith's neck and runs to look for help. The account of the twins' infection with the bubonic plague is interspersed with the story of how Agnes and her future husband first met a few years earlier, were married, and had their three children. Part II then narrates the aftermath of Hamnet's death by dissecting both the different ways in which each family member grieves the loss of their son or brother and the ensuing estrangement and opportunity for reconciliation between wife and husband.

Agnes and Shakespeare's marriage is a sensually imagined relationship between equally strong-willed minds who embrace each other's difference from the rest of the world. Agnes, who is highly intuitive, senses right away that the mind of her husband-to-be is a complex landscape consisting of "spaces and vacancies, dense patches, underground caves, rises and descents," yet she also realises "that something was tethering him, holding him back; there was a tie somewhere, a bond, that needed to be loosened or broken, before he could fully inhabit this landscape, before he could take command" (81). When married to him, she learns that the young Shakespeare is suffocated by his family situation, particularly the expectations and unpredictable temper of his father John, "this leviathan, this monster of his childhood" (33). He tellingly instructs his Latin pupils to conjugate the verb 'incarcerare', the recitation of which sounds to him "as if the very words themselves are seeking escape" (29). Struggling to accommodate his own and his family's needs, he is confronted with taking responsibility for his wife and children, while both refuting his parents' implicit allegations of immaturity and laziness and trying to express himself artistically. Agnes worriedly observes how her husband becomes ever more absent as:

> [h]e stares out of the window, and yet doesn't. He seems not to see anything before him. [...] He is like the picture of a man, canvas thin, with nothing behind it; he is like a person whose soul has been sucked out of him or stolen away in the night (184).

Similarly, Shakespeare's mother Mary notes his spectral presence in the house: "You look like a ghost, standing there like that" (127). Although Agnes "feels exposed, chill, peeled like an onion" (214) at the thought of letting her husband go, she knows the only resolution is sending him away to London, where he is free to pursue his writing career. So it is decided: the husband and father becomes a sporadic visitor to his own family and his physical absence is painfully present in the everyday lives of his wife and children.

Mary's vision of her eldest son as a ghost not only foreshadows his actual impersonation of the ghost of old Hamlet on the London stage at the end of the novel, but also draws the readers' attention to the depiction of many absent presences of loved ones. There is, for instance, Mary and John's deceased daughter Anne, who died of the pestilence when she was eight and is dearly missed by her sister Eliza, who still listens for her footsteps, her voice, and her breathing at night (109). Her presence is invoked by Agnes when she treats Judith's buboes: "Anne, we know you are there, you are not forgotten" (129). Agnes feels an even stronger connection to her late mother. She senses her presence at her wedding, knowing

“she is there, manifest, hovering, insubstantial. I see you, she thinks. I know you are here” (118). The bond with her mother is reinforced when a spray of rowan berries miraculously drops on Agnes from a tree above before she enters the church (120). That her mother’s name was Rowan is revealed later, when Agnes gives birth to Susanna under a rowan tree in her beloved forest, the presence of which imbues her with the necessary strength to accomplish the task: “People say the first woman was made from its branches” (156). Agnes’s connection to the otherworldly and her skills of perception enable her to listen to what others would call the silence of death. She perceives the veil between life and death as frail: “For her, the worlds are indistinct from each other, rubbing against each other, allowing passage between them” (129).

This permeability of the boundaries between life and death becomes a particular challenge for Agnes when she has to come to terms with Hamnet’s death. In the beginning of the novel, Hamnet’s fate seems entirely unlikely: he is introduced as a bright, resilient child with a vibrant presence, as opposed to his weakly twin sister Judith, whose “hold on life will remain tenuous, frail, indefinite” (241). Judith dying is a constant possibility and, unsurprisingly, she contracts the pestilence first. As she lies dying, the intimacy of their bond as twins becomes painfully clear to her brother:

> He feels again the sensation he has had all his life: that she is the other side to him, that they fit together, him and her, like two halves of a walnut. That without her he is incomplete, lost. He will carry an open wound, down his side, for the rest of his life, where she had been ripped from him. How can he live without her? He cannot. [...] They are one and the same. (199)

O’Farrell here implies a “shared *intercorporeality*” between Judith and Hamnet, which clinical psychologists ascribe to particularly strong forms of attachment to loved ones, even beyond death (Fuchs 46, emphasis in original). Judith’s impending absence is entirely unimaginable to Hamnet, which is why he, in a mocking attempt to avert death’s attention from his sister, swaps places with her: “You will stay, is what he whispers, and I will go. He sends these words into her: I want you to take my life. It shall be yours. I give it to you” (201). Hamnet gives his life to Judith so that she will live. After he draws his last breath, “there is silence, stillness” (252) as both the life of the Shakespeare family and the narrative come to a halt.

The absence of Hamnet, the pain of his loss, and the different ways of coping with grief become an ultimate test for the integrity of the family. Similar to the narrative, which breaks down into shorter, more fragmented pieces after Hamnet’s burial, the family members struggle to remain united: “How were they to know that Hamnet was the pin holding them together? That without him they would all fragment and fall apart, like a cup shattered on the floor?” (277). Judith lacks the words to express what she is without her brother; there is no word, she learns from her mother, for a twin who survives their deceased other half (292). She keeps looking for Hamnet in familiar places and sometimes can sense his presence in

ordinary things and chores, but does not tell anyone: “She folds the knowledge into herself” (298). As Fuchs describes, this “ambiguity of presence and absence” is “the core conflict of grief” (51). It is most painfully experienced by Agnes, who becomes “a woman broken into pieces, crumbled and scattered around” (277) after having buried her son. Like Judith, she continues looking and calling for Hamnet, she continues smelling his clothes and can feel his absence in the empty shapes that his feet left in his boots (288). By contrast to her daughter, however, she “cannot locate the spirit of her own child” (298); when she listens into him for a final time as he is laid out for burial, his absence manifests itself in silence: “Nothing comes. Nothing at all. Never has she felt this before” (262–63). Agnes is “painfully torn between acknowledgment and denial of the loss” (Fuchs 44) and retreats into herself, feeling “unmoored, at a loss” (299), becoming more absent by the day, much like her husband before he escaped to London.

As she struggles with her grief, Agnes is unable to understand that her husband mourns differently to her. He feels guilty about not having been present at his son’s death; his wife’s repeated reproach, “You weren’t here” (277), pronounces both her unspeakable pain and the widening gap between them. Again, he “feels as though he is caught in a web of absence, its strings and tendrils ready to stick and cling to him, whichever way he turns” (281). His decision to return to London only a few days after Hamnet’s burial causes outrage in the family. For Agnes, her husband’s absence is “an ordeal of abandonment” (Barthes 13) all over again, and Barthes’s observations concerning women’s role in the “discourse of absence” ring true to Agnes’s life:

> Historically, the discourse of absence is carried on by the Woman: Woman is sedentary, Man hunts, journeys; Woman is faithful (she waits), Man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises). It is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction, for she has time to do so (13–14).

Agnes indeed gives shape to absence and elaborates its fiction as the main focaliser after Hamnet’s death; she suffers a double “ordeal of abandonment”, having lost her son to the pestilence and her husband to the London stage.

O’Farrell’s portrayal of the Shakespeare family’s vulnerability as they suffer a bereavement challenges our empathic capacities as readers. We are likely to side with Agnes in her complete bewilderment in face of her husband’s abandonment and flight to London. Only when the focalisation switches to the husband are we able to grasp his inner feelings, his seeking refuge and distraction from grief on the stage—comedies and histories can make him forget the tragedy of his own life temporarily—and his relentless search for his lost son: “he must be somewhere; all he has to do is find him” (303). Finally, he finds him, or creates him anew in *Hamlet*. Parallel to how O’Farrell uses the historical gap surrounding Hamnet Shakespeare to tell his story in *Hamnet*, the novel posits that the boy’s father fills the emptiness caused by his son’s death by writing him back to life. When Agnes watches her husband’s play and sees him perform as the ghost of old Hamlet, she experiences a moment

of epiphany: “He has, Agnes sees, done 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). The play is powerful enough to reconcile Hamnet’s parents, to reunite them in their grief and make them understand that their mutual “ordeal of abandonment” can be overcome. There is a final moment of union between mother, father/ghost, and son/Hamlet, which feels so real to Agnes that she wishes to “pierce the boundary between audience and players, between real life and play” (367). This attempt to break the fourth wall mirrors the novel’s agenda: it probes the boundaries between what is real and what is imagined, between what is present and what is absent, between life and art.

As the ghost exits with his famous words, “Remember me” (367), we realise that Hamnet is not a novel about absences, but about exploring how we fill absences meaningfully—as mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers, but also as readers and writers. To conclude, by looking at significant absences both in terms of their impact on the Shakespeare family and regarding their narrative functions in O’Farrell’s *Hamnet*, this essay has revealed the novel to be a study about the power of literature itself. Literature, we find, is capable of filling blanks with essence, of infusing gaps with words and life, of creating meaning and empathy from what was before unspeakable and unimaginable. Absences are significant because they invite us to think beyond understanding them in terms of lack or loss—they stimulate us to imagine.

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