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HAMLET/HAMNET: HAUNTED BY "THE POISON OF DEEP GRIEF"

Jarrod DePrado

Abstract

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* remains a cultural touchstone after over 400 years, inspiring readers, scholars, and artists. Shakespeare himself occupies a unique place in the Western canon: both a creator of inspired art and a pop culture icon. The scant biographical details about Shakespeare have garnered an equal amount of attention and speculation. A particular focus is given to Shakespeare's relationship to grief, given the death of his son Hamnet at age eleven, and whether it is reflected in his written work, especially *Hamlet*. Comparing the fictional depictions of a grieving Shakespeare in Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet* (2020), Kenneth Branagh's *All Is True* (2018), and Dead Centre's *Hamnet* (2017), a consensus arises of Shakespeare as a grieving father who looks to reconcile his relationship to his deceased son through art in various ways. Ultimately, the fictional Shakespeare serves as a cultural figure of mourning that transcends the limits of biographical accuracy.

Keywords

Biographical criticism, grief literature, Hamnet Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, historical fiction, parental loss

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"what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me!"
– Hamlet (5.2.329–30)[1]

IT is no hyperbole to say that William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is the best-known and most frequently discussed play in the English language. Its pervasiveness in pop culture over the past 400 years is renewed by the multitude of writing – fiction and non-fiction – about every facet of its legacy. We are haunted by the play that keeps finding

[1] References to Shakespeare are drawn from The Arden Shakespeare Third Series *Complete Works* (2020), edited by Ann Thompson, David Scott Kastan, H. R. Woudhuysen, and Richard Proudfoot. In other versions, "I leave" is written as "live." Both are appropriate in evaluating the legacy of everyone involved: Hamlet, Shakespeare, and Hamnet.

new resonance. Just as we find cultural relevance in Shakespeare's works today, there are also frequent attempts to see the author reflected in his work. *Hamlet* in particular is studied as a cipher for Shakespeare's expressions of grief – both from the philosophical musings on death by the eponymous prince and the similarity between the title and the name "Hamnet," Shakespeare's only son who died in adolescence a few years before the play was written. The connection seems obvious, as James J. Marino (2014) writes: "[S]ince the most personal work is held to be the most moving, the most moving is deemed to be the most personal; the poet's life is detected where his verse seems best" (60). Many scholars believe that a multitude of answers lies in the potential symbiosis between *Hamlet* and Hamnet:[2] Shakespeare's relationship with his son is the key to understanding Shakespeare's conception of *Hamlet*, just as the play could help us understand Shakespeare's grief.

Through Juliet, Shakespeare famously asks "What's in a name?" (2.2.43), minimizing the importance of what a specific name entails. In the case of the widespread, contentious debate over whether Shakespeare uses his plays to mourn the death of Hamnet, the name is everything. The close proximity between the spellings of Shakespeare's *magnum opus* and his only son is tantalizingly apt for analysis:[3] Shakespeare's most potent reflections on death are espoused by a character (and in a play) bearing a name similar to that of his recently deceased son. Historically, it is unclear what to make of the strange set of circumstances surrounding the naming of the play. Most of Shakespeare's canon is taken from earlier sources, and *Hamlet*'s origins trace back to the medieval story of a character named "Amleth" and an early modern dramatic adaptation (now lost), often credited to either Shakespeare himself or Thomas Kyd.[4] Additionally, it has been argued that "Hamlet" and "Hamnet" were interchangeable names at the time, but perhaps only because Hamnet Sadler – Shakespeare's friend and neighbor, and his son's namesake – is listed as "Hamlet Sadler" in Shakespeare's will (Honan 1999, 90). These unresolved issues frustrate modern scholars who, despite knowing more biographically about Shakespeare than nearly any of his contemporaries, continue to seek out Shakespeare's emotional response in his works, particularly *Hamlet*. When considering the role of grief

2 See Greenblatt (2004), Bray (2008), Miller (1026), Smith (2011, 2012), and Wheeler (2000).
3 Sigmund Freud does just that in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), diagnosing Hamlet with an Oedipus complex. Freud also writes about the Hamlet/Hamnet connection but focuses more on the potential impact that the death of his father had on the playwright. Peter Bray (2008) builds on Freud's work and argues that *Hamlet* and Shakespeare both struggle with a "spiritual emergency."
4 Kyd is a strong contender because of the similarities to his *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1580s), often considered a spiritual predecessor to *Hamlet*. Scholars continue to speculate about the missing early version of *Hamlet*, referred to as the *Ur-Hamlet*.

in Shakespeare's life, we have the same line of inquiry as Brutus in *Julius Caesar*: "How that might change his nature, there's the question" (2.1.13).

Biographic details about Hamnet Shakespeare are unsurprisingly scarce: he and his twin sister Judith were born in 1585, both named after the above-mentioned Sadler and his wife. Shakespeare was away in London for the majority of Hamnet's childhood and was most likely unable to make it home before his son died of unknown causes in 1596, at age eleven. These minimal details are often enough to whet the appetite to better understand Shakespeare, who left behind a large canon of dramatic and poetic works but no personal writing. Similarly, the reason for writing *Hamlet* several years after Hamnet's death is ripe for speculation. Stephen Greenblatt (2014) suggests that even if Shakespeare adapted the story and produced *Hamlet* out of "strictly commercial considerations, the coincidence of the names – the writing again and again of the name of his dead son as he composed the play – may have reopened a deep wound, a wound that had never properly healed." Whether true or not, the desire to perform a biographical reading of Shakespeare's works, especially *Hamlet*, ultimately reveals more about the audience than the author. Or, as Marino (2014) puts it, "biographical criticism has always been autobiography in disguise" (62).[5]

Because of our cultural affinity to Shakespeare's works and, as Annalisa Castaldo (2022) writes, "because he is so well known, so instantly recognizable, Shakespeare is a convenient mythos figure who can be used for a variety of purposes" (9). Since there is no definitive answer to whether and how Shakespeare grieved, several fictional works make use of the scarce historical information to humanize the mythic Shakespeare through his personal experience with loss. Two recent works, both bearing Hamnet's name as the title, revisit the relationship between the Bard and his son from different perspectives: *Hamnet*, a 2020 novel by Maggie O'Farrell, and *Hamnet*, a 2017 "one-child" play written by Bush Moukarzel and Ben Kidd.[6] Both works answer the unresolved questions with a fictionalized Shakespeare that processes the loss of his son by channeling it into his writing. Additionally, Ken Branagh's 2018 film *All Is True* examines Shakespeare's relationship with Hamnet by focusing on the long-term domestic impact of grief. These works all humanize Shakespeare, not least of all as we consider our relationship to *Hamlet* as literature of mourning

[5] Marino also realistically concludes that reading for "signs of Shakespeare's personal bereavement in *Hamlet* is a closed hermeneutic, leading only and always to its initial principle. These claims are neither false nor true. They are merely expressions of belief" (59).

[6] The writing credit is given to Dead Centre, the production company where they are co-writers and directors, along with producer Rachel Murray.

and examine the transcendent experience of being haunted by "the poison of deep grief."[7]

"I beseech you instantly to visit
My too much changed son"
– Gertrude (2.2.35–36)

Maggie O'Farrell, in the author's note to *Hamnet* (2020), addresses the unknown cause of Hamnet's death by recognizing that the plague, 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," leading her to "[wonder] about this absence and possible significance" (370). Kathryn Harkup (2020) recounts several instances where Shakespeare alludes to the plague, but acknowledges that "no playwright depicted [the] plague in any realistic way or detailed its awful effects. It is almost as though the topic were too terrifying to mention or show onstage" (210).[8] O'Farrell's work, subtitled *A Novel of the Plague*, is as much a dramatization of the marriage of the Shakespeares as a meditation on the loss of a child to the plague.[9] The first half of the novel jumps back and forth between the early relationship of Shakespeare and Agnes Hathaway – whom history knows as "Anne" – and the days leading up to the death of Hamnet. While the novel generally focuses more on Agnes, it does portray a young, well-read Shakespeare often pitted against his father, John, an irascible glove-maker who has been impoverished and publicly shunned. Much has been written about Shakespeare's relationship with his father, whose death in 1601 may have had an impact on the composition of *Hamlet* as well.[10] Because or in spite of this

[7] Spoken by Claudius (4.5.75). The word "grief" appears 15 times in the text of *Hamlet*: five of them attributed to Claudius and three to his Player King representative, with a large emphasis placed on survivor's guilt, not simply Hamlet's filial obligation.

[8] Allusions to the plague are usually part of a curse that "either shows an absolute and serious hatred for recipients of the oath, or gallows humour of the blackest kind" (Harkup 2022, 210), perhaps most famously by Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*: "A plague o' both your houses!" (3.1.101, 108). None of Shakespeare's characters succumb to the plague offstage either, since "the theatre was an escape from everyday worries and audiences did not need reminders of the reality of the terrible pestilence" (210).

[9] Lovelock (2022) reminds readers that there was no recorded outbreak of the plague in Stratford the summer that Hamnet died (164), a pivotal revelation in *All Is True*.

[10] Richard Wheeler outlines an interesting chronology: Shakespeare would have been about Hamnet's age when his father began to fall on financial hard times and become ostracized. Additionally, the year that Hamnet died is the same year that Shakespeare "secures the coat of arms that made his father and himself gentlemen" (137–38). One could argue that there was a cosmic trade-off where Shakespeare regains his father's honor at the cost of his son. Or one could dive into the financial disparity between two fathers (John and William Shakespeare) with sons at a comparable age. As with much

paternal tension, Shakespeare remains a largely absent figure for the young family as he works to make a name for himself in London.

The second half of the novel depicts Agnes's response to Hamnet's death, particularly since her husband is not home when Hamnet dies. Believing that Judith is the one in mortal danger, Shakespeare is unprepared for the loss of his son, which evokes one strong, public emotional response on his part: "[T]he sound that comes out of him is choked and smothered, like that of an animal forced to bear a great weight. It is a noise of disbelief, of anguish," which Agnes can conjure up for the rest of her life (272). Beyond this, and after the funeral, Shakespeare's public grief is muted: "No crying, no sobbing, just sighing," and pacing the floor, unable to sleep (277). Agnes is frustrated by the continued absence of her husband. It is bad enough, as she keeps reminding him, that he was not there (278). By internalizing his grief, he effectively leaves his wife to mourn on her own, disappearing into "the place in [his] head": "Nothing can keep you from it. Not even the death of your own child" (286). The reader can see flashes of his grief that Agnes cannot, as Shakespeare is haunted by memories of his son "everywhere he looks: Hamnet" (280). But Agnes finds her husband as bafflingly elusive in the aftermath of Hamnet's death as scholars do. She cannot comprehend how he can "abandon" his family, both emotionally and physically, and return to London to work (285). For a woman who has been a model of strength, self-determination, and autonomy throughout the novel, the loss of Hamnet and the perceived aloofness of her husband transform her into "a woman broken into pieces, crumbled and scattered around" (277). Later, receiving a hastily written letter from him, Agnes hears about Shakespeare having "great success with a new comedy": "A comedy," she responds, leaving the reader to infer her incredulous tone (294).

Historically, Shakespeare did not retreat into grief after Hamnet's death, as sources note that he purchased a larger house, became more social, and his "creative activity seems undiminished, or even to have increased" (Smith 2012, 30). Rather, Greenblatt (2014) argues that Hamnet's death is the catalyst for a transformation within his writing. It allowed him to find a more developed style with a character, Hamlet, who can articulate a complex evolution of thoughts in a way that his earlier characters cannot. Additionally, Keverne Smith (2012) catalogs the changes in motifs in Shakespeare's work after Hamnet's death, which point to "evidence of displaced and incomplete, complicated mourning" (30): an increase in the number of supposedly-dead characters who are resurrected (31); young women who pretend to be their

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of Shakespeare's biography, particularly what he was aware of during this time, speculation is the only tool available.

male twin (33–34); a larger emphasis placed on father-daughter relationships, not merely father-son (35); parents wracked with guilt, often over loss (36); and displaced families restored to order (37–38). Scholars also note that, in the wake of Hamnet's death, Shakespeare did not write the brooding tragedies of much later years, but, rather, comedies and history plays. O'Farrell's novel explains this by having Shakespeare rely on the latter genre as "a subject safe for him to grapple with": "no pitfalls, no reminder, no unstable ground to stumble upon . . . only with them can he forget what happened" (303). Shakespeare returns home to arrange a purchase of a larger house, nearly a year after Hamnet's death, to relocate Agnes and their girls[11] "away from all of this" and he only returns sporadically over the next several years (321, 329).

Left to run their new home in Stratford on her own, Agnes is visited by her stepmother, bringing news of Shakespeare's next play, a tragedy, and is presented with a playbill on which "right in the middle, in the largest letters of all, is the name of her son, her boy, the name spoken aloud in church when he was baptised, the name on his gravestone, the name she herself gave him" (344). Agnes is scandalized by the play bearing the name of her deceased son, Hamnet/Hamlet, and charges to London to see it for herself and confront her thoughtless husband. Watching the performance of *Hamlet*, she discovers Shakespeare playing the Ghost of Hamlet's father[12] and vacillates between wanting to see the performance and leaving, particularly when she hears her son's name spoken, wondering "How could he thieve this name, then strip and flense it of all it embodies, discarding the very life it once contained? How could he take up his pen and write it on a page, breaking its connection with their son?" (363) But she is captivated by the character of Hamlet, in whom she sees Hamnet "grown into a near-man, as he would be now, had he lived" (364). Watching Hamlet and the Ghost interact, she realized that "Her husband has brought [Hamnet] back to life, in the only way he can" and, as the Ghost, has "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). This interaction gives them both a sense of catharsis, especially since closure seems a distant dream for the still-grieving parents.

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[11] The Shakespeares' first child, Susanna, was born in 1583.

[12] There is anecdotal evidence from Nicholas Rowe (1709) that Shakespeare did actually perform this role. Despite Bloom's assertion that "we *know* that Shakespeare acted the ghost of Hamlet's father" (1998, 424, emphasis added), Cain (2016) reminds us that this is based on hearsay written "nearly a century after Shakespeare's death and [Rowe] does not give a source" (82). Cain and Marino (2014) are both succinct in reminding us just how much is taken for granted as "fact" concerning Shakespeare's biography.

Setting aside its historical setting or omitting the details that make it about the Shakespeare family, the novel's nuanced portrayal of parental grief is more about coping with loss than mere historical fiction about Shakespeare. The reader can see the isolating and debilitating effects on Agnes as well as Shakespeare's desire to smother emotional triggers in his work, regardless of who they are, or were, historically. Since much of Shakespeare's scholarship is based on a reading of (and into) the works he left behind, O'Farrell also looks to unpack the Shakespearean mythos by humanizing him and his family based on the minimal materials available. However, it is notable that Agnes, not the narrator, unlocks the relationship between Shakespeare's play and his son. During her visit to see the performance of *Hamlet*, she (and the reader) finally understands how Shakespeare is processing grief – not just through writing but by literally embodying the role of the Ghost to symbolically guide his son in a time of need. Both the novel and its heroine perform the same ritual as centuries of scholars: looking for evidence of the author's grief in *Hamlet*. Because this *is* a work of fiction, it is not as constrained as scholars are in understanding the "true" story of Shakespeare's connection between the two. William E. Cain (2016) reiterates a running criticism that all the "guesswork and surmise," particularly with this Hamnet/*Hamlet* connection, "is stimulating and fun, but it is fiction, more about us than about him" (81). This is not to suggest that Agnes is incorrect in what she perceives on stage. However, as the first person to embody the role of the biographic scholar, she is trying to confirm Shakespeare's relationship to grief based on an unconfirmed motive for his involvement with *Hamlet*. In true scholarly form, whether true or not, Agnes finds what *she* needs: a version of Shakespeare whose subtextual grief confirms the emotional connection he has to the play.

"And so have I a noble father lost;
A sister driven into desperate terms"
– Laertes (4.7.26–27)

In his 2018 film, *All Is True*, Kenneth Branagh[13] plays an older Shakespeare who returns to Stratford after the Globe Theatre burns down in 1613.[14] As in O'Farrell's

[13] Branagh established his on-screen Shakespeare credentials directing and starring in *Henry V* (1989), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), *Hamlet* (1996), and *Love's Labour's Lost* (2000); directing *As You Like It* (2006); and starring in Oliver Parker's *Othello* (1995). He has an extensive stage resume directing and starring in several Shakespearean productions and has even portrayed Shakespearean film icon Laurence Olivier in the film *My Week with Marilyn* (2011).

[14] As per the preface to the film, the Globe caught fire and burned down due to a canon misfiring during a 1613 production of *Henry VIII*. The title of Branagh's film is the same as the subtitle

novel, the film paints a picture of domestic life for the Shakespeares years after Hamnet's death, with the long-absent Bard now at home in retirement. Shakespeare is still haunted by the death of Hamnet nearly 20 years afterwards, not least of all because the latter appears in hallucinations throughout the film. In an interview with Gary Crowdus (2019), Branagh describes his approach to Shakespeare as trying to "explore the gaps between genius and human": having Shakespeare return home "traumatized" after the tragic loss of his theatre, he must reconcile the problems with the family he left behind (32). Branagh's Shakespeare is quiet and introspective, but acutely aware of his shortcomings as a husband and father. His two surviving daughters are grown but quickly find marital complications that interrupt Shakespeare's intended retirement. Susanna, unhappily married to Dr. John Hall, is accused of having an illicit relationship with Rafe Smith.[15] Judith is unmarried and determined to remain so. She is particularly cold towards Shakespeare upon his return and confronts him about feeling pushed aside in his obvious favoritism towards the deceased Hamnet.

Much to Judith's chagrin, Shakespeare's focus on having a male heir[16] – in this case, a grandson – reflects how he still fixates on all the potential lost with Hamnet's death. Specifically, the film invents Hamnet's proclivity toward writing, with some of his surviving poems becoming Shakespeare's prized possessions. Judith unleashes years of vitriol on her father, who seems ready to leave the bulk of his inheritance to his son-in-law, and confronts him about his feelings toward her: "Every time he reads those bloody poems, which aren't even that good! He thinks why did *she* survive not him? . . . Why did the wrong twin die?" (21:00) Branagh's Shakespeare is unable to contradict what Judith says here, but he is in the same emotional spot as O'Farrell's Shakespeare. Despite knowing that his presence would not have changed anything, he is aware of his absence when Hamnet died and continues to mourn all that his son could have been:

> Hamnet died and I wasn't here! I know that! Hamnet died and the plague took him. But the plague's taken millions and it would have taken him

of *Henry VIII*: *All Is True*. The film labels the fire as the reason for Shakespeare's retirement, which is unconfirmed historically.

[15] While not mentioned in the film, Smith was the nephew of Shakespeare's friend Hamnet Sadler. The accusations and fallout of Susanna's alleged affair are also dramatized in Peter Whelan's 1996 play *The Herbal Bed*, in which Shakespeare is mentioned but is not an onstage character.

[16] An ill-fated concern of Shakespeare's, whose intricate will made specific provisions for male heirs, leaving his family with prolongated legal issues and scholars with questions about his relationship to his wife and daughters. Judith had 3 children, none of whom lived long enough to marry. Susanna's sole child, a daughter named Elizabeth, was married twice but had no children. Shakespeare's lineage ended with her death in 1670.

> whether I was in Stratford or London or on that godforsaken highway. We just- we lost our boy! I know that! And I wasn't here! How many times can I say it? I wasn't here! We lost our brilliant, brilliant boy and I – (52:25)

However, Judith intercuts to undermine Shakespeare's faulty perception of his children. She admits that she, not Hamnet, wrote the poems and that her brother simply copied them down in his handwriting. "Hamnet wasn't brilliant," she tells him, "And you saw what you wanted to see. You saw yourself!" (52:50, 53:50) Since Shakespeare naturally assumed the poems were Hamnet's and, as Anne reminds him, "praised him so," a family conspiracy was born to let Hamnet take credit for Judith's poems. What is devastating for Shakespeare is not just losing the poems he ascribed to the late Hamnet – Judith, after claiming ownership of them, burns them all – but also hearing that Hamnet played along because he "dreaded" Shakespeare's visits, feeling he could never live up to the pressure placed on him. Once tensions cool, Shakespeare apologizes to Judith, who feels guilty for having "stolen Hamnet from [him] twice. Once by surviving him, and now by taking [his] dream of him away" (59:16). Shakespeare takes the loss of Hamnet's legacy in stride, even referring to Judith as a poet, his "new dream." Judith eases up on her resistance to her prescribed gender role by getting married to Thomas Quiney. However, Quiney is already engaged to another woman, Margaret, who is pregnant. Margaret's subsequent death in childbirth brings yet another mark of shame to the Shakespeare family, which has already grappled with John Shakespeare's penury, Anne being pregnant when she married Shakespeare, and the above-mentioned scandal with Susanna.

Shakespeare continues to work to resolve his domestic problems, but something still bothers him about Hamnet's passing. This more nuanced portrayal of Shakespeare is not limited to bouts of anger, depression, and guilt. He is more like Hamlet in unraveling a mystery surrounding the death of a loved one who haunts him.[17] As he tells Anne and Judith after checking the Parish Register, it does not make sense that there were so few deaths ascribed to the plague the summer that Hamnet died since the "Black Death is a scythe," killing large numbers indiscriminately, "it is not a dagger" (1:19:55). When pressed, Anne remains adamant, but Judith reveals the truth: frustrated by the adoration and attention Hamnet received from Shakespeare, she threatened to tell their father the truth about the authorship of the poems.

[17] He is also haunted by his father, though not with hallucinations. John Shakespeare's sordid reputation hangs over Shakespeare, as he fights to escape the stigma his family was supposed to overcome through the sheer force of his self-acknowledged genius (and money). What is perhaps difficult for Shakespeare to hear from the ever-perceptive Judith is that he desperately saw himself in Hamnet: not just the abilities but also a father who was able to recognize and appreciate them. Shakespeare certainly lacked the latter and overcompensated for it with Hamnet to the family's collective detriment.

Hamnet became so distraught at the prospect of his father learning he was not a writer that he threw himself into the pond and drowned. As Castaldo (2022) reflects, "Shakespeare has come to realize the cost of genius is not just isolation but actual destruction – of his theatre, his marriage, and his son's life" (102). Judith once again feels immense remorse and considers herself responsible for her brother's death: Judith lied; Hamnet died. But Shakespeare does not hold Judith responsible, and in fact, this allows their relationship to begin again on more open ground.

The film places Shakespeare into unfamiliar territory: now a rural gardener far from the streets of London, his professional fame replaced by compounded familial shame. Since there are no overt references to the writing of *Hamlet*, it is unclear whether Branagh's Shakespeare sees the connection between his son and the play that O'Farrell's does. Either way, relinquishing control over the legacy of Hamnet also eliminates the *possibility* of seeing his son as the prince. It is Judith, not Hamnet, who bears a resemblance to the tragic hero: lamenting a usurper's place as the heir to her father's literary throne, she uses her intelligence to battle her demons and allow the truth to ultimately prevail, even at a personal cost. Hamnet, by contrast, is relegated to becoming Ophelia by keeping a secret from his judgmental father and ultimately succumbing to suicide. With the genders of the characters reversed, *Hamlet* seems tragically prophetic in hindsight far beyond what Shakespeare might have imagined. Just as O'Farrell's Shakespeare finds solace in how he interprets *Hamlet*, Branagh's version finds closure in learning to let go of his son's potential ambitions. Both cases reinforce that Shakespeare's biography and canon remain open to interpretation by the audience and the author. They both start with the perplexing uncertainty of how Shakespeare grieved, but nearly every work—both scholarly and fictional—begins with the premise that he *must* have grieved.

"what would you undertake,
To show yourself your father's son in deed
More than in words?"
– Claudius (4.7.122–24)

In an interview with *The Guardian*'s Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore (2018), Bush Moukarzel dismisses the idea that because the infant mortality rate was much higher in Shakespeare's time, parents did not grieve the loss of their children: "Cancer is more prevalent now. It does not mean every single life is not mourned with exceptional power […] Every loss of a life would have been felt acutely." It is inconceivable in the twenty-first century to think that the loss of a child at any time would not be

devastating for a parent. This is where fiction finds the key to understanding the biographically elusive Shakespeare: grief is the great humanizing emotion through which we can move from scholarly speculation to artistic recreation of the life of the Bard. In the above depictions of Shakespeare, we find a grieving father looking for his son. Moukarzel and Ben Kidd's "one-child" play *Hamnet* (2017) focuses on the eleven-year-old son, trapped in an otherworldly setting and dressed in modern clothes, searching for his father. The play is more abstract than O'Farrell's novel but also delves into the relationship between Hamnet and *Hamlet* more overtly than in Branagh's film: *Hamnet* (2017) even borrows *Hamlet*'s opening line, "Who's there?" (9)

However, the play is not *Hamlet*, as Hamnet reminds the audience often: "[Y]ou haven't heard of me. You'll think you have at first. But then you'll realize you were thinking of someone else" (10). Contrary to what we see in O'Farrell's novel, or what scholars might be looking for in *Hamlet*, Hamnet is acutely aware that he is not the prince. The above depictions of Shakespeare focus on him processing grief by elevating Hamnet and honoring his legacy. Here, Hamnet is searching for a father whom he does not know and who probably "wouldn't recognize" him anyway (14). Once again, there is a consistent depiction of Shakespeare as the absent father and, as in Branagh's film, Hamnet feels as though he is unable to live up to his father's expectations. He tells us from the beginning that he does not know his father but, like a Shakespearean scholar, he attempts to glean more about him from *Hamlet*: he admits to the audience that he is not a "great man . . . not yet," but is "learning to speak like a great man," as he recites the first line of "to be or not to be" (10). Rather than being honored by the play, Hamnet is intimidated by a character he does not understand and cannot embody.

As in O'Farrell's novel, there is a direct connection to the Ghost scene when Hamnet selects a volunteer from the audience to "be [his] dad" (18), acknowledging that the Ghost is also a "great man," if different from a "nice man" (20–21). When Shakespeare finally makes an appearance on stage, he and Hamnet are separated both physically and emotionally, meeting as awkward strangers in two different realms. Hamnet inundates his father, the supposed "great man," with questions such as "Why did you go away" (27) and "Who do you prefer: me, or Hamlet?" (35) With the latter, while rhapsodizing over Hamlet's various character traits, Shakespeare ultimately reveals the central conceit of why we continue to look for him in his works, particularly *Hamlet*: "[I]t's easy to know so much about a fictional character, because they're alive for such a long time. In fact, they outlive us. There's so much time to get to know them. Whereas people, especially children, like you… they're not as easy to know" (35). It is simpler to apply scholarly criticisms to better understand

the psychology of a character, particularly if they have been part of Western culture for over 400 years. This is true of Hamlet, not Hamnet, and it is true of Shakespeare himself. As mentioned, his mythic status has led scholars and artists to recreate mythological tales to explain the grief that we assume he experienced, many of which are variations on a theme. All three works of fiction discussed here draw from a shared psychological reading of Shakespeare as someone who feels guilty over his estrangement from his family[18] and grief over the premature death of his son: "I was always coming back. It's you that went away. Forgive me!" (37)

For the majority of *Hamnet* (2017), Shakespeare is merely a projection on a screen behind Hamnet, never physically interacting nor inhabiting the space together. However, the two characters swap settings late in the play when Shakespeare recites a portion of Lady Constance's speech from *King John*:

> 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;
> Then, have I reason to be fond of grief? (43)

Moukarzel's[19] Shakespeare remains "haunted" by the loss of Hamnet, just as his son argues that his father is haunting him (42), inspiring him to perform this speech. Just as scholars have debated *Hamlet*'s connection to Shakespeare's grief, this passage from Act 4, Scene 3 of *King John* is another that garners attention. Shakespeare's writing of the latter is generally attributed to around 1596, the year of Hamnet's death. While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the play was written – either before or after Hamnet's death – the speech continues to be a poignant expression of grief and the loss of a child.[20] But *Hamnet* (2017) is abstract enough to not focus

[18] The depiction of Shakespeare as the distant father is carried over into a fourth medium: Neil Gaiman's comic series *The Sandman*. Annalisa Castaldo (2004 & 2022) has written extensively about this. In short: in the "A Midsummer Night's Dream" issue (1990), Shakespeare stages the play for the various fairy creatures who are characters in the play itself. Hamnet is ignored and pushed aside by his father, who is more focused on the show. Then, when Hamnet is later taken by Titania, he dies and is permanently separated from his father, reinforcing again that he was sacrificed in favor of Shakespeare's artistic work (Castaldo 2022, 65; 2004, 104–05).

[19] While writing credit is shared by Dead Centre, Moukarzel played the part of Shakespeare when it was staged.

[20] Gemma Miller (2016) argues that the date of its composition is irrelevant since this "verbal construct of grief is so divorced from the reality of [Lady Constance's] son's death that it is less an expression of 'true grief' than a mere morbid fantasy" (222).

on the importance of a chronological timeline. When Shakespeare recites this speech alone on stage, we see another example of how the Bard turns his private grief into a public performance. As with *Hamnet* (2020), the reality of whether Shakespeare did this matters less than our ability to find another connection to Shakespeare: not just through his works but as a parent whose grief inspires those works.

"What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wandering stars and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I"
– Hamlet (5.1.244–47)

In the "Library" section of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Stephen Dedalus puts forward a theory not dissimilar from O'Farrell's novel: that in acting the part of the Ghost, Shakespeare was addressing Hamnet as much as Hamlet.[21] Richard P. Wheeler (2000) maintains that "Stephen pulls Shakespeare so deeply into the orbit of Joyce's own preoccupation with spiritual fatherhood that the narrative finally tells us more about Joyce than it does about Shakespeare" (153). This is the same biographical reading that is applied to Shakespeare: because this is revelatory in understanding authors from a century ago, it must also work for authors from four centuries ago. Once again, Castaldo (2004) writes that Shakespeare occupies a "uniquely ambiguous position," whose instantly recognizable canon of works and physical appearance makes him a "celebrity" with an "image [that] functions much as his plays do" (94–95). Regardless of the historical accuracy of the correlation between Hamnet's death and Shakespeare's plays, particularly *Hamlet*, the works discussed above show that the playwright transcends the limits of biographical reality. In short, while scholars continue to search for evidence to understand Shakespeare's mental state, one greater purpose is transcending his mythic status as a literary genius to become a universal symbol of grief. Much like in Shakespeare's plays, the historical accuracy matters less than the character development and the story the audience can connect to. As such, and absent of any personal writings, the characters Shakespeare left behind are seen as surrogates for his emotional output. As these fictional works look to humanize the elusive Bard, he becomes the character whose mind we look to unravel. Shakespeare's legacy is dependent on his work, in no small part due to *Hamlet*'s

[21] There are several works by Joyce scholars that examine this scene and its implications within the novel more in-depth. See Rasmussen (2019) for example.

sustained prevalence today. Scholars continue to ask us to consider the multitude of influences on Shakespeare the mythic author since we "shall not look upon his like again." Accurate or not, the fictional works instead argue that Shakespeare the grieving father has an equal claim to that legacy, remembering that first, "He was a man, take him for all in all."[22]

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[22] The final quote, broken in two, is Hamlet's short, public assessment of his father (1.2.186–87), compared to the much loftier one he recites alone earlier in the scene (1.2.139–53). Like Hamlet, perhaps Shakespeare too had difficulty expressing everything he wanted to publicly and, therefore, needed the artistic distance of the performative nature.

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