I must admit that there were several reasons I was initially apprehensive about reading this book:

1. The Title: *Hamnet* – I knew that William Shakespeare had a son named Hamnet, who died when he was eleven years old. As the mother of a ten-year-old son, I wasn’t sure if I could get through this book. As a Shakespearean, I was also a little wary about how a novelist could do justice to the life of William Shakespeare.

2. The Subtitle: *A Novel of the Plague* – Haven’t we all been living through our own personal stories of our own era’s plague? I wondered whether I really wanted to read a novel about another.

I need not have worried. Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet* is a work of great subtlety, depth, and beauty. I won’t deny the deep sorrow the story both portrays and provokes. For anyone who wasn’t already familiar with the name Hamnet Shakespeare, O’Farrell’s own “spoiler” comes in the Historical Note that precedes the story: “The boy, Hamnet, died in 1596, aged eleven.” There are definitely times when I had to put the book down and take a break, because the emotional toll of either anticipating or responding to the young, clever boy’s death was just too much to bear. What pulled me back in was the beauty of the language, particularly the vividly evoked sights, sounds, and scents of the Warwickshire countryside. Having spent many weeks with students in Stratford-upon-Avon on study abroad trips, I can attest that O’Farrell captures the entrancing mix of rural and urban life that still exists there today. You can almost hear the bees buzzing in the lavender or smell the apples ripening in the apple store. (After a memorable scene in said apple store, I am not sure I will ever see the apple orchards around Anne Hathaway’s cottage in quite the same way again.)

As for my concern about reading about a plague while living through another, one of the most memorable and remarkable chapters in the book recounts the exact way that the pestilence came into Hamnet’s town in vivid detail, from the flea on a golden monkey’s back in Alexandria, to a cabin boy’s bandana, to a ship full of dead cats, to the rags surrounding the box of Venetian beads that Hamnet’s twin sister Judith eventually opens in the home of the seamstress she works for on Ely Street. It is both a captivating and horrifying journey to follow.

As for my final concern as a Shakespearean, *Hamnet* is not really the story of the life of William Shakespeare; indeed, he is never mentioned by name in the novel (including in its opening “Historical Note”), unless the dedication “To Will” counts. Instead, the novel probes the inner life of Agnes, Hamnet’s mother, whose grief at the loss of her son matches her keen emotional intelligence and uncanny ability to see the truth in any given situation. Most readers will know Shakespeare’s wife as Anne Hathaway, but O’Farrell chooses the name her father called her in his will, Agnes. This choice is indicative of the fresh perspective, empathy, and dignity with which O’Farrell portrays Agnes throughout the novel. The “official” details of the Shakespeare’s’ marriage that one can deduce from 400-year-old legal records are sketchy at best. We know that Agnes/Anne was eight years William Shakespeare’s senior and three months pregnant with their first daughter, Susanna, when they were married, that they lived in separate cities during the height of William’s professional career, and that William left his wife his “second-best bed” in his will. Shakespeare’s biographers have tended to use these details to paint the relationship in a negative light, suggesting theirs was a marriage of necessity or perhaps even animosity.
O’Farrell, instead, breathes new life into these sparse details. While never contradicting the legal record, she surrounds each fact with a complex, narrative context that imbues the marriage with the messy, complicated texture of real life. The mostly illiterate Agnes, for example, nevertheless has the uncanny ability to “read” people’s characters by gripping the skin between their thumb and index fingers; what she reads in her future husband’s hand is one of the best descriptions of what the poet John Keats called Shakespeare’s “negative capability,” the ability to completely submerge his identity into that of his characters:

When she had taken his hand that day, the first time she had met him, she had felt—what? Something of which she had never known the like. Something she would never have expected to find in the hand of a clean-booted grammar-school boy from town. It was far-reaching: this much she knew. It had layers and strata, like a landscape. There were spaces and vacancies, dense patches, underground caves, rises and descents. There wasn’t enough time for her to get a sense of it all—it was too big, too complex. It eluded her, mostly. She knew there was more of it than she could grasp, that it was bigger than both of them.

O’Farrell manages to evoke the mystery of Shakespeare’s character and genius without demystifying it. Agnes instantly understands that the awkward Latin tutor is someone extraordinary, something Will has already recognized about her from a great distance, as he observes her from a window as she follows her kestrel on the edge of her beloved woods. It is that recognition that ignites their romantic interest in one another and that later impels Agnes to send her husband to London, even though it simultaneously keeps them apart. Theirs may not be an easy marriage, but O’Farrell’s Shakespeares have a relationship based on a deep, mutual (if often unspoken) understanding of what makes each of them feel like outsiders in conventional society.

Telling the story of Hamnet’s illness and death provides O’Farrell, first and foremost, the opportunity to delve into the intricacies of a grieving family, yet even that focus has historical significance. As a friend and fellow Shakespeare scholar reminded me, there are people who question how much premodern mothers would have grieved the deaths of their young children, given the high infant and child mortality rates in the period. The emotional intimacy of O’Farrell’s portrait of the grieving Agnes makes such an impassive reaction to a child’s death as hard to fathom as I believe it should be. And, despite the novel’s light hand, it is not the story of just any grieving family. The book provides a plausible account of how Shakespeare’s reuse of his deceased son’s name for one of the most iconic characters in English literature, Hamlet, might make sense from an emotional and psychological standpoint. (The names Hamnet and Hamlet were interchangeable in parish records in Shakespeare’s day.) While this has always been a historical tidbit that I have mentioned when teaching the play, *Hamnet* gives the fact emotional resonance and nuance. Why, for example, is the father the ghost in the story and not the son? I believe this story provides an answer. While the novel also implicitly and subtly weighs in on scholarly debates such as whether the Hathaway and Shakespeare families were Catholic and what Shakespeare was doing in some of his so-called “lost years,” its value is not ultimately reducible to its extractable theories about William Shakespeare’s life. Agnes is at the emotional core of this story, and her experience of motherhood and loss have left an indelible impression on me—and I hope on you, as well.

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