

THE ROLE OF FEMALE AGENCY IN BIOFICTION: THE CASE OF MAGGIE O'FARRELL'S *HAMNET**

FERNANDO GALVÁN

University of Alcalá

Abstract: Both the so-called “historical turn” and “ethical turn” have proved fundamental critical trends in the development, in recent decades, of the historical novel and the biographical novel in English. Historical revisionism of major and minor characters and events have opened new approaches to the discourses of history and biography, providing alternate views of the past and raising ideologically motivated themes and personages that had been hidden or ignored by traditional historiography. This paper is an attempt to tackle some of the features of biographical fiction or biofiction by discussing the character of Shakespeare's wife in Maggie O'Farrell's novel *Hamnet* (2020).

Keywords: biofiction, biographical novel, female agency, presentism, Shakespeare's wife

1. Introduction

The development of biographical fiction or biofiction, even if its origins can be dated back a hundred and fifty years ago (Lackey 2022: 4, 9), has spread widely in the last three decades, as a subtype of – but also, for some scholars at least, in opposition to – the historical novel (on this controversy, Novak and Ni Dhúill 2023: 3-7). However, the use of the term *biofiction* itself is more recent, as Michael Lackey (2016, 2021) has explained. Many authors and titles come easily to mind if we think of how the fictional retelling of the lives of some historical figures have become popular and have drawn the readers' interest worldwide. Not only in English: in addition to the works of acclaimed English-speaking writers like J.M. Coetzee's fictionalised account of Dostoyevsky in *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), David Lodge's and Colm Tóibín's biographical fictions on Henry James (*Author, Author* and *The Master* respectively, both in 2004), as well as Tóibín's more recent novel on Thomas Mann (*The Magician*, 2021), Hilary Mantel's trilogy on Thomas Cromwell (*Wolf Hall*, 2009, *Bring Up the Bodies*, 2012, and *The Mirror and the Light*, 2020), and Julian Barnes's portrait of Shostakovich in *The Noise of Time* (2016), there are also conspicuous and recognised writers in other languages, such as Spanish Javier

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Cercas's *Soldados de Salamina* (2001) and *El impostor* (2014), or Peruvian-Spanish Mario Vargas Llosa's *El sueño del celta* (2010) on the Irish patriot Roger Casement.

All the historical characters mentioned so far are men, even if they belong to different nationalities and historical periods. This paper however is not concerned with the likes of great men from the past (Dostoyevsky, Henry James, Thomas Mann, Thomas Cromwell, Shostakovich...), but it deals with a neglected historical woman from the early modern period. She is Agnes or Anne Hathaway, the 16th-century protagonist of the acclaimed novel by Northern-Irish writer Maggie O'Farrell, *Hamnet* (2020). Not that O'Farrell's case is exceptional or unique. On the contrary, as Marisol Morales (2024: 149) states, "In Ireland, the number of biographical novels that have engaged with the unearthing of the lives of forgotten and silenced figures from the past, including women, nobodies and marginal others, or that have offered alternative perspectives to official narratives, clearly abound". The names of Marita Conlon-McKenna, Martina Devlin, Emma Donoghue, Anne Enright, Henrietta McKervey, Lia Mills, Mary Morrissy, Julia O'Faolain, or Nuala O'Connor are good examples (see also Lackey 2021: 6). This is precisely the critical domain in which this paper has been written, i.e. how historical women have been silenced, forgotten, neglected or marginalised in the writing of history. What these writers have been doing is to place those female historical figures "at the centre of narratives from where they recover their own agency and visibility" (Morales 2023: 22).

2. Historical novel, literary biography and biofiction

One of the aesthetical and ethical issues involved in the historical novel, and in biofiction particularly, as Lackey has widely discussed, is undoubtedly the lack of biographical and historical accuracy, especially in the cases where so few or reliable documents have survived about those silenced women; which inevitably compels writers to use their imagination and inventive ability to make up for the lack of true testimonies. This has led some critics, from Georg Lukács in his pioneering *The Historical Novel* (1937) onwards, to condemn "the biographical novel as an irredeemable aesthetic form that necessarily distorts and misrepresents the objective proportions of history" (Lackey 2016: 3) or as "an unethical genre" (Lackey 2021: 2-3), because writers, so to speak, "steal" the identity and voices of their characters. Some scholars in fact talk about "identity theft", apparently forgetting that we are dealing with fiction, with novels, not with biographies.

Literary biography is something different, a genre that, as one of the great English biographers of our time, Michael Holroyd (1973: 26), has put it, "fuse[s] an imaginatively kindled re-creation of the inner lives of [...] characters with the rigorous documentation and exactitude of strict biographical method". For him, according to his experience in the writing of the biographies of, among others, Lytton Strachey and George Bernard Shaw, that "rigorous documentation" implies examining thousands of letters, diaries, conducting interviews with hundreds of people who met or corresponded with the subjects of his biographies (Holroyd 1973: 25-31). He claims, however, that good biographies are not to be judged exclusively

by the new documents they provide, as if “non-fiction” were necessarily equivalent to “non-creative” (idem: 104-105).

This paper however does not deal with biographies, but with biofictions, in the clear terms defined by Lackey (2016: 4-9). It is healthy in this respect to recall Colm Tóibín’s claims (quoted in Lackey 2021), about his use of the factual and the empirical in his novels: “I live in an imaginative country which is defined by the concrete”; interestingly enough, the writer himself admits, as Lackey (2021: 91) quotes, that “‘facts’ are something that authors of biofiction ‘have to deal with,’ but the facts are ‘nourishing as well as restricting.’” Tóibín (qtd. in Lackey 2021: 91) uses a maritime metaphor to clarify what he means, by stating that the author gets “an anchor from certain facts, and that anchor is not merely factual but emotional, and it brings a great deal with it, it carries you. And because it carries you, you can get a great deal of energy from it”. In short, facts cannot be the whole story in fiction, an argument which would take us back, in another context, to the fundamental issue of Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times*, as caricaturised in the character of Mr Gradgrind. Lackey’s distinction (2016: 7) is certainly illuminating:

What we get in a biographical novel, then, is the novelist’s vision of life and the world, and not an accurate representation of an actual person’s life. Put differently, biographical novelists differ from biographers because, while authors of traditional and fictional biographies seek to represent the life (or a dimension of a life) of an actual historical figure as clearly and accurately as possible, biographical novelists forgo the desire to get the biographical subject’s life “right” and, rather, use the biographical subject in order to project their own vision of life and the world.

Besides the indisputably ethical dimension concerning truth and facts, there are also others which need some consideration and clarification, as Novak and Ní Dhúill (2023: 20-22) have pointed out. But I wish to focus on the fact that biofiction has become an alternative to silence and to the ideologically distorted views of the past we have inherited from traditional historiography. It could even be asserted that it is a sort of medicine against amnesia, as those biofictional accounts of women provide a new ethical dimension about the level of their silences, misrepresentation, invisibility and vulnerability. This paper addresses some of those questions in dealing with a narrative about Agnes or Anne Hathaway (Shakespeare’s wife), whose position in society – even if it cannot be termed as marginal in terms of social class – can be described as decentred and manifestly neglected. I will try to show how O’Farrell has managed to present her character as possessing the sort of agential living that traditional historiography never thought she had. In the case of Anne Hathaway or William Shakespeare we do not have personal diaries or correspondence which might illuminate their feelings. When Holroyd (1973: 171-175) praises, as an excellent instrument for the biographer, the correspondence between Thomas Carlyle and his wife Jane, which covers even the period of their courtship prior to their marriage, we must be fully conscious that nothing similar exists in the case of Shakespeare and his wife. Thus, the writers of biofiction need to invent, to imagine what might have happened.

One of the key ingredients of biofiction, according to Lackey (2022: 13-16), is precisely agency, understood in relation not only to the author, but also to the biographical subject and the reader. That feature gives a greater richness and flexibility to this type of fiction in comparison with traditional 19th-century historical fiction, thus making the acts of writing and reading more powerful and fascinating. Lackey (2021: 8) writes that agency is “the stuff biofiction is made of, and it is one of the primary features that distinguishes it from historical fiction”. There are some other theoretical and ethical implications which are somewhat controversial and which I cannot discuss here now, like his discussion of the ethics of fictionalising a life (Lackey 2022: 111-125). Another key issue of biofiction for him is that the Irish have been instrumental in the development of this type of fiction, “because – he says – its history so incisively expresses the yearning for and the ever-evolving reality of what it means to be an agential being and many Irish men and women could so easily be converted into symbols or metaphors of a more universal and comprehensive form of emancipation” (Lackey 2021: 11).

Paradoxically, however, he admits that authors of biofictions do not need to be Irish. The case of Mario Vargas Llosa’s *El sueño del celta* is an example Lackey mentions. He (2022: 50-53) also adds that not even the topics and characters are to be necessarily restricted to an Irish focus, although by the end of the day those characters encapsulate the essence of Irishness in their desperate search for personal agency and political autonomy, in close association with the decolonisation of the mind. My contention in this paper follows some of those ideas, because the novel I will be discussing does not deal with Irish characters, even though the author is a Northern Irish writer brought up in Scotland.

3. Agnes Hathaway, from a neglected wife to a modern woman

In the last few years there have been a number of biographies and biographical novels about women who lived very close to great contemporary writers, but have been generally neglected by critics. In connection with Joyce, for instance, those on Nora Barnacle by Nuala O’Connor (*Nora*, 2021) and Mary Morrissey (*Penelope Unbound*, 2023), as well as those on Lucia Joyce by Annabel Abbs (*The Joyce Girl*, 2016), Joyce Garvey (*Lucia: The Girl Who Danced in the Shadows*, 2017) and Alex Pheby (*Lucia*, 2018). Also Orwell’s first wife, Eileen O’Shaughnessy, has been the subject of Sylvia Topp’s biography *Eileen: The Making of George Orwell* (2020) and Anna Funder’s fictionalised account *Wifedom: Mrs Orwell’s Invisible Life* (2023). Maggie O’Farrell’s novel *Hamnet* on Shakespeare’s wife (Agnes Hathaway) clearly belongs within that group of books on women who have been omitted or forgotten when the lives of the great writers have been told and retold. As reviewers said when the book was published, this novel is focused “on the everyday, domestic life of [Shakespeare’s] family”, where Agnes, instead of her husband, “is the celebrity, known in the town for being unconventional, free-spirited, a gifted herbalist who trails rumours of other, stranger gifts” (Merritt 2020). Also John Mullan (2020), writing for *The New Statesman*, asserts that “it is Shakespeare’s wife who dominates” to the extent that “[h]er husband is never named”, because this is “a novel about wifedom and motherhood”.

Historical documentation about Shakespeare's wife is certainly scanty. Even her real name is subject to some controversy, since she is usually known as Anne Hathaway, although her father, Richard Hathaway, refers to her, in his will, as Agnes. The reason for that is, as Germaine Greer explains (2007: 12), that both names were interchangeable at the time and Agnes was pronounced "Annis". Apart from the few mentions in the church archives at Stratford of her own wedding, or the baptisms, deaths and weddings of her children, no other relevant document that throws light on her personal life has survived. In Shakespeare's will there is just a very brief allusion to her, when the writer says that he bequests his "second-best bed with the furniture" to his wife, not even mentioning her name. This lack of documentation may account for the existence of only one full-length biography of her (Greer 2007). This is a highly controversial book, criticised for its high level of speculation and imagination, unsupported by documentary evidence, as well as by Greer's combative feminism (see reviews by Katherine Duncan-Jones 2007 and Charles Nicholl 2007). Greer, very much against the grain of traditional Shakespearean scholarship, presents her protagonist as an independent and influential woman.

What Maggie O'Farrell has done in her biofiction *Hamnet* is to fictionalise this character, whom she prefers to call Agnes Hathaway instead of Anne. O'Farrell (2020: 371) acknowledges the use, among other books on Shakespeare, of said Greer's biography, and many of the details of her character's everyday life follow the descriptions made by Greer about women living in a provincial setting in Elizabethan times. As Duncan-Jones (2007) has remarked, Greer presents Anne Hathaway's son-in-law, John Hall, who was a physician, as someone useless "except in so far as he may have learned a little bit about herbal medicine 'from women like Ann Shakespeare'". This view lacks documentary support, according to Duncan-Jones. But the idea that Shakespeare's wife was knowledgeable in medicinal plants is followed and extensively exploited by O'Farrell in her novel.

Certainly O'Farrell's characterisation of Agnes emphasises her agency, making her a wholly independent and strong woman, who cares for those in sickness and provides them with herbs and concoctions to cure them. She is presented in the novel as an expert in that field, someone who is familiar with nature, including animals such as bees and a hawk, and also grows and classifies a great diversity of plants and flowers (O'Farrell 2020: 16-18; 26; 36-40; *passim*). She receives in her home all sorts of people – mostly women – who come to her "from all over town, all over Warwickshire and beyond" (60), instead of visiting the physician. Curiously and paradoxically enough, considering how women who did that sort of healing were treated as witches and sorceresses, O'Farrell presents her heroine as a modern woman. When her own daughter Judith falls ill with the bubonic plague and the local physician is called to treat her, Agnes strongly opposes the superstitions shown by that man, as he prescribes the use of a dried toad to cure the girl (148-149). She furiously rejects that and instead prepares her own herbal medicines (122-130). The association of some women to this cultivation of herbal medicine is not unusual in the modern period, as Naomi J. Miller (2022) has recently recalled, when explaining the practice of alchemy and chemical and herbal remedies prepared by her character, the noble lady Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke and

sister to Sir Philip Sidney. This protagonist of Miller's biofiction *Imperfect Alchemist* (2020), in addition to her influential role in literary circles, also practised what was then considered science by some, and sorcery by others (Miller 2022: 131-132, 134).

Thus O'Farrell clearly decides to make Agnes Shakespeare a modern; independent woman in that sector, closer to science and to men's professions. She might have followed Greer's proposal in her speculative biography in which Shakespeare's wife, like other contemporary women of her class, was a sort of entrepreneur business woman, who made malt and lent money to others (Greer 2007: 276; 329; 333 *passim*); or even someone whose main productive activity was sewing and knitting, as she might have collaborated with Shakespeare's younger brother Gilbert, who was a haberdasher (idem: 170-184). However, O'Farrell prefers to take the option of presenting Shakespeare's wife as an independent woman in a different position, surely a much bolder and provocative hypothesis, far from the usual female roles. It is true that Greer also points occasionally to the possibility that Agnes Shakespeare was familiar with herbs and, like many other women of her class and time, used them to assist those who are ill (Greer 2007: 244-245; 247-248), but O'Farrell makes this issue of herbs a central concern of her novel and her depiction of the protagonist.

4. A herbalist, a freethinker and a compassionate mother

It seems logical that O'Farrell chose to follow this path, if we consider that the novel pivots around the death of the protagonist's son, Hamnet. As Lackey (2021: 107) has written, "one of the standard practices of biographical novelists [...] is to take something significant from the life of someone and then to build a fiction around that event, trait, or character". That "something significant" is undoubtedly the central trauma of Agnes Shakespeare's life, the death of her infant child Hamnet. She, who was so well recognised by many as a proficient healer, thanks to her knowledge of herbal medicine, was however unable to save her young son when he was attacked by the bubonic plague. Initially the plague affected Judith, the weaker twin, but her mother managed to cure her (O'Farrell 2020: 122-130). However, when the plague was passed on to Hamnet, who was so close to his sister, nothing could be done, even though she tried all sorts of remedies, including those in which she did not believe herself, such as those prescribed by physicians (idem: 248-252). Hamnet's death is crucial in her life, altering her capacities to act and to perceive reality. She initially reproaches herself for not being able to foresee her son's death, for not curing him, and abandons her herbs and patients (idem: 262-263; 278; 298-299).

Agnes's familiarity with herbs and plants permeates the whole narration, not only the episode of her child's death, to the extent that on their wedding night she holds a book that her husband gently takes from her hands, discovering that it is a treatise on plants: "Their uses. How to recognise them. How they heal certain illnesses and distempers" (idem: 136), and which surprisingly is written in Latin. She explains to Shakespeare that a neighbour gave it to her when she died; the book had belonged to her neighbour's husband, an apothecary, and she adds that, as a child, she used to help her neighbour with the garden. Once that neighbour told Agnes that

“she and my mother used to consult it together” (ibid.), thus making Agnes’s mother and that anonymous neighbour members of a female saga of herbal healers. Agnes can barely read (idem: 65), and of course has no Latin, so the playwright promises to read and translate it for her on another occasion (idem: 137).

What O’Farrell does in her novel goes beyond this central issue of Hamnet’s illness and death and Agnes’s agency as a healer. The protagonist is shown in the novel as possessing other qualities that make her a very special character. One of them is, for instance, her power of divination, which she exerts when touching other people’s hands, or through smells, a capacity that allows her some foresight into their futures, most notably what lies in her husband’s future as a playwright and writer (idem: 53; 55-58; 81; 142-143; 152; 162; 182-185; 210; 213 *passim*). That puts her in closer relation to some usual superstitions at the time, clearly making her look like a witch or sorceress. Her mother-in-law, Mary Shakespeare, is well aware of that, to the extent that she looks at her as a sort of devilish creature who has bewitched her son to make him fall in love with her: “This creature, this woman, this elf, this sorceress, this forest sprite – because she is that, everyone says so, Mary knows it to be true – bewitched and ensnared her boy, lured him into a union. This, Mary can never forgive” (idem: 207). When Agnes is absolutely desperate after her son’s death and fears she is also going to die, she implores her mother-in-law to take care of her two daughters (O’Farrell 2020: 235):

Mary is chilled, discomforted, her skin crawling with horror. She refuses, for the main part, to believe what people say about Agnes, that she can see people’s futures, she can read their palms, or whatever it is she does. But now, for the first time, she has a sense of what people mean. Agnes is of another world. She does not quite belong here.

In fact, Agnes seems to belong in that respect to our days, instead of to the 16th century. Those features that make her look like an alien to Mary Shakespeare and her contemporaries are rather examples of the female agency, freethinking and independence of a 21st-century woman. We appreciate it, for instance, in the way she contrives to have sex with the young “Latin tutor” (no other than Shakespeare himself), who visits her home to teach her younger half-siblings, and ultimately to marry him. It is she who takes the initiative, not the young and inexperienced Shakespeare, as also Duncan-Jones and Greer believe (qtd. by Greer 2007: 42), but that is not presented by O’Farrell as a negative trait (O’Farrell 2020: 83-84). For the novelist, Agnes is not a manipulator, contrary to what many Shakespearean scholars (particularly from the Victorian period onwards) have thought. For them she was a 26-year-old woman desperate to get married who managed to seduce and get pregnant by an 18-year-old boy, thus compelling him and his family to repair the damage through marriage (Greer 2007: 48). O’Farrell follows more closely Greer’s ideas in this episode, thus claiming a sort of proto-feminist personality for Agnes Hathaway.

Also against the opinion held by many Shakespearean scholars, the Agnes Hathaway O’Farrell has created in her novel is not abandoned by Shakespeare, a husband who allegedly dislikes and hates her for having ensnared him, and who departs for London to start a new life away from his wife and children. For O’Farrell,

it is precisely Agnes the person who devises, plans, and encourages Shakespeare's departure from home, his parents, and particularly his father. She is convinced that his family cannot understand what he is like and what his literary ambition represents. In fact, she manages to indirectly persuade Shakespeare's father to send his son to London, making him believe it was his idea rather than hers (O'Farrell 2020: 190-194; 205-209). So the implication is clear: without Agnes Hathaway's agency, Shakespeare's genius would not have existed. Nothing of what the "great man" produced would have been possible without that female agency.

Agnes's agency is moreover enhanced at the end of the novel, when she hears about the success her husband's play *Hamlet* is obtaining on the London stage only a few years after Hamnet's death. She is shocked and angry when her stepmother hands her a playbill announcing the play, since the names Hamlet and Hamnet are equivalent, sound alike, and wonders how her husband has been able to write a play on their dead son. That makes her leave Stratford for the first time, in the company of her brother Bartholomew, and go to London to watch the play herself and ask her husband about it (idem: 344-347). She is initially furious, thinking that her husband has no feelings for their dead child, that "he has taken the most sacred and tender of names and tossed it in among a jumble of other words, in the midst of a theatrical pageant" (idem: 363). But she changes her mind and experiences a beautiful epiphany when she attends the performance of the play. She is astonished when watching and listening to the young Hamlet on the stage, because the actor moves and speaks exactly like her son Hamnet, and she can't understand how Shakespeare has been able to find and train the young actor to behave like Hamnet. She suddenly sees the fantastic paradox of it all: the dead Hamlet is not her son Hamnet, but the ghost of the old king, whereas the young Hamlet is alive, what she would have wished her son to be (idem: 366):

Her husband has brought him back to life, in the only way he can. As the ghost talks, she sees that her husband, in writing this, in taking the role of the ghost, has changed places with his son. He has taken his son's death and made it his own; he has put himself in death's clutches, resurrecting the boy in his place. [...] 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.

In this respect, it is relevant to echo Jonathan Gil Harris's (2011: 618) reflections in his essay "Four Exoskeletons and No Funeral", when he talks about the ethical dimension evoked in the famous phrase by Marx and Engels "a specter is haunting Europe". For this critic, the ghost in *Hamlet* "has a dissident potential" because that ghost is "the sign of a body that has died, that belongs properly to another age. Moreover, the call to justice that the ghost utters is also a request that all appropriate rites should be performed so the dead might rest and time might advance once more into a better future" (idem: 619). Considering these words, and applying them to O'Farrell's novel, it is precisely Agnes Hathaway who favours this interpretation by reading and advocating in Shakespeare's text the future life of her dead son Hamnet (the future-to-be). This takes place through art, thanks to her husband's capacity to transcend death; Horace's verse *non omnis moriar* and many

of Shakespeare's sonnets about the power of poetry to transcend decay and death are certainly witness to that.

Finally, another important evidence of Agnes's agency in the novel is represented by the episodes of the labour and childbearing of her own children. Marisol Morales (2023: 35) has referred, in relation to Emma Donoghue's historical novels *The Wonder* and *The Pull of the Stars*, to the usual "absence of literary works devoted to pregnancy and the experience of labour, a unique female experience", which she considers "inexcusable, especially if we compare it with the visibility of mothering and motherhood". O'Farrell depicts in detail how Agnes Shakespeare favours natural birth, avoiding in the labour of her first child, Susanna, all the typical arrangements surrounding childbearing in her time. She leaves her home and escapes to the forest, as if following an enigmatic call from her dead mother. There, in the seclusion of a "shelter" of branches in the forest, where nobody can disturb her, she successfully performs her first labour all by herself, without any mid-wife (O'Farrell 2020: 152-160). She has assisted other women in labour before and has of course seen animals do it many times, helping her father on several occasions "when lambs were stuck" (idem: 155). So she feels safe and sure about the process and is not afraid. She experiences the throes of labour next to the trees, the plants and flowers she loves, and thus her baby is born free and pure, like an animal or an extraordinary creature, a fantastic mere-child, from the forests. The description of Agnes's emotion when she contemplates Susanna, her first baby, is powerfully poetic (idem: 159-160):

Agnes turns her on to her side, as her father always did with lambs, and watches as the water – from that other place where she has been, these long months – leaks out of her mouth. Her lips become tinged with pink and then the colour spreads to her cheeks, her chin, her eyes, her forehead. She looks, suddenly and completely, human. No longer aquatic, a mer-child [*sic*], as she did when she emerged, but a small person, very much herself, with her father's high forehead, his bottom lip, his swirl of hair at the crown of her head, and Agnes's sharp cheekbones and wide eyes.

This episode of her first labour contrasts sharply with that of the labour of the twins, Judith and Hamnet. Although Agnes tries to do the same as she did in the case of Susanna's birth, she is stopped by her mother-in-law and other members of the family. She is forced to stay at home and the labour takes place there, in the Henley Street cottage she shared with her in-laws, with the help of a mid-wife and Mary Shakespeare (O'Farrell 2020: 227-230). The implication of this change of scenario seems to be the ruin of the future development of those twins, and particularly Hamnet's dramatic death at a very early age, as if he could not be protected by the natural forces that had helped his elder sister Susanna (later Susanna Hall) in her long life (she died at 66).

5. Conclusion

What we have seen so far shows how O'Farrell favours, at least in this biographical novel, "presentism", a concept usually dismissed by scholars. However, as Rita Felski (2011: 576) has pointed out, some scholars of the Renaissance are now

particularly reclaiming the term “as a badge of honor [...], unabashedly confessing their interest in the present-day relevance rather than historical resonance of Shakespeare’s plays”. *Hamnet*, in fact, invites to be read from the context of the 21st century, because this is a novel obviously written and addressed to readers living now and not in the 16th century. Those values associated with female agency and other issues currently in the public debate in our contemporary society are evidence of that. As Felski (2011: 579) also notes, we as readers need to question ourselves how those issues, which are now ours – but must have also been relevant in the past –, “change our understanding of temporality”, challenging the artificiality of historical and literary periodisation: “Cross-temporal networks mess up the tidiness of our periodizing schemes, forcing us to acknowledge affinity and proximity alongside difference, to grapple with the coevalness and connectedness of past and present”.

It is appropriate to recall Lackey’s (2022: 17) emphasis on the agency of readers (not only of writers or of the biographical subjects) in biofictions, in opposition to what – he says – happens with historical fictions, at least those in the 19th century:

[h]istorical fiction gives readers deterministic truths of how we came to be as we currently are, but biofiction transports readers into the world of agential possibilities so that they can create themselves into something unique, original, and new. That biofiction came into being in order to counter the determinism and even fatalism of the historical novel partially explains why agency is one of the primary features of the literary form.

Although contemporary historical fiction is probably not affected so severely by that determinism Lackey mentions, it seems obvious that O’Farrell’s novel transcends that. What she has accomplished through her creation of Agnes is a defeat of that sense of determinism and fatalism, thus erasing the traditional view of Shakespeare’s wife as a shadow.

Martin Jay (2011) has written about the text and context and the limits of contextualisation in relation to Derrida’s well-known notion that “there is nothing outside of a text”, pointing to the idea that deconstruction is essentially a “radically textualist method”, although he remarks that Derrida “has also been called a ‘contextualist *par excellence*’ because of his dissolution of texts in a boundless sea of intertextuality” (Jay 2011: 568). Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet* is clear evidence of that as well, of the “boundless sea of intertextuality” shown in this paper: O’Farrell’s merit, we might say, consists of presenting an important episode in the life of a 16th-century woman (the death of her son) by putting her in context with the texts – literary and non-literary – which conform her life. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* – we can say – provides one of the contexts to interpret the protagonist of the play in the light of Agnes’s dead son in *Hamnet*, but also in the context of what surrounded that death and what possibly that death meant for Shakespeare and his family, and more specifically for his wife. As John Mullan (2020) put it, asking whether “people in the past [were] more stoical about infant mortality, when it was such a frequent fact of life”, the answer O’Farrell gives us is very clear: “no, no, no [...] *Hamnet*’s mother has no reason to expect her children to live, no right to feel appalled if any of them die. Yet incredulous and desolate she feels”.

In short, biofiction and female agency in this case constitute a powerful mechanism to prove Derrida right in his notion that “there is nothing outside the text”, no matter if the text and the context – real or invented –, in their complex intertextual intermingling, look apparently so distant and for some readers perhaps somewhat far-fetched. Because it is ultimately the agency of readers, and not only that of Maggie O’Farrell the author, or that of Agnes Hathaway/Agnes Shakespeare the biographical subject, what infuses meaning and significance to the myriad of texts and contexts.

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