

## Hamnet – Film Review

You may perhaps recall that my review of O'Farrell's book was fulsome and that I was deeply moved by the ending. The film did not engage me quite so positively – I anticipated this from some of the mixed critical reviews and lukewarm responses of certain friends – however, I found the film's ending even more moving than for the book.

This is the neglected, mainly unchronicled story of Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway, referred to throughout with a softened pronunciation of her everyday name, Agnes. She is a distinct, individual character able to commune with nature who is never more at ease than outdoors by herself amongst Warwickshire's flora and fauna. She is the sort of eccentric person the Stratfordians are wary about except when they need her expertise with herbal medicines.

Her family are worried about her future at the film's outset as at 26 years old she is already considered near her marital sell by date. However, when she does find a suitor, the son of the local glove maker, they are less than excited. Young Will comes from a family slightly down on the social scale whose father has a rather dodgy reputation. Worse still is that Will has been book educated but has no outlet for his skills and no desire to follow his father's trade as a glovemaker. Yet Anne wants him because she can sense something large, expansive and open within his soul. When she falls pregnant both families opt for a quick wedding and an avoidance of scandal.

Their marriage and family life are presented as strong and loving. However, Will becomes unsettled helping with the glovemaking and some private tutoring. Anne is sensitive to this and supports him in his plan to go to London to find a career more suited to his talents.

As we know, great success beckons but as his work in the theatre achieves huge commercial popularity and takes him more and more away from Stratford, tragedy strikes. His daughter Susanna catches the plague and then passes it on to her twin, Hamnet. Shakespeare arrives from London too late to see his son before he dies.

Understandably he and Ann are engulfed by grief but there is also a wedge between them. Little is said but Ann feels that he has abandoned his family for the glamour and fame of London and he feels unfairly punished for his hard work providing a comfortable life for his family in Stratford.

Things come to a head when Ann ventures to an alien land - London. She makes what is a mind-scrambling journey for someone like her because of a complex of emotional reasons. Her already fiery grief has been super-enflamed by her chance discovery that her husband's new play is called Hamlet (Hamnet and Hamlet were interchangeable names at this time). She is shocked, angry and curious.

The final section is a homage to the power of art and the importance of shared cultural events. This was the strongest part of the film for me as Ann, with little formal education and no knowledge of books or the theatre, begins to understand that this sweeping adventure and revenge drama about the Danish royal family is so much more. There is an

exploration of grief, guilt, family relationships and the nature of death with its possibility of ghosts in some form or other. The end is truly cathartic for Ann but also for so many in the audience around her who have losses of their own in this fragile era. As she finds comfort from the communal response to the play and the emotions it has unlocked, she also begins to understand her husband's true talent. She can see his grief laid bare in the play and the largeness of imaginative empathy that first attracted her to him. This ending was probably the best argument for the importance of culture to our lives that I have seen

Rather than the story and its themes, though, what about the film? The acting was superb. You believed in Buckley as this quietly powerful woman who forges her own way whilst fulfilling her role as wife and mother. Mescal's performance is less showy, deliberately, as this is not about the birth of a genius. This genius is shown in its full flowering at the end but until then he is an ordinary husband and father trying to do his best whilst driven by his need to get the words and ideas out.

So, I am glad I saw this film but would not watch it again. I understand that to get to the emotional payoff at the end, the audience has to be enveloped in the couple's love for one another and for their children; and then we must stand alongside them both, particularly Ann, in her grief at Hamnet's loss. However, my rather prosaic criticism was that this was all overdone and at points became a slog. I can't deny that the production values, the setting, costumes, lighting made me believe in this very different world from four centuries in the past. It was just too much.

By the way, Shakespeare was more than willing to take liberties with history and bend events to his wider, artistic purpose, his greater truth. Just saying, therefore, that O'Farrell stands on that giant's shoulders in her skilful use of the relatively scant information we have about the Shakespeares' lives. There's a lot of creative speculation here for its own valuable purposes.