

FILM REVIEW:

*HAMNET*¹

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Zhao, Chloé, director. *Hamnet*. Focus Features, 2025.

There is nothing more universal than every parent's greatest fear: the loss of their children. That is precisely the topic of *Hamnet* (2025), a historical drama directed by Chloé Zhao and inspired by the 2020 novel of the same name by Maggie O'Farrell, who also co-wrote the screenplay with Zhao. The movie is set in Stratford-upon-Avon and follows the family life of a young Shakespeare (Paul Mescal) and his wife, Agnes/Anne Hathaway (Jessie Buckley), from the time they meet until the death of their son, Hamnet, which forces both characters to cope with bereavement.

Despite the somewhat speculative nature of the association, based on some linguistic evidence, the names of Hamnet and Hamlet were interchangeable in Stratford during the late sixteenth century, and that is why *Hamlet* is thought to have been written by Shakespeare in order to come to terms with the death of his son. Notwithstanding this initial disclaimer, the interchangeability between the names, this association makes the narrative slightly unreliable since this could just be a coincidence because of the lack of living proof that accounts for the real reason why Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. Far from being a Shakespeare biopic, this movie is an exploration of the grief and trauma experienced by the loss of a child, and how that may affect the dynamics of an entire family and of someone as creative as William, who channels that grief into his art craft. What is clear is that Zhao has done a great job making the spectator feel every form of human emotion during the two hours and five minutes that the movie lasts.

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The time Agnes spends in the forest and her role as mother are directly interconnected with her mother's witchcraft heritage, and it is something on which the movie relies to show how smart she is in a world ruled by men. Every look and wide smirk on Buckley's face accounts for this magical legacy, and every time she sets foot in the forest feels like entering a haunted place thanks to the artistry behind the framing of the scenes. Zhao intercuts shots of Buckley and some elements inside the forest, as if nature somehow were always communicating with Agnes in some sort of trance through the presence of a hawk that will become the key element for every major event. The movie introduces a woman who is confident in her convictions, and one who is entirely aware of her independence and strength -precisely thanks to this witch-like identity- before and after becoming a wife and a mother. Yet she also looks for emotional support in William. They both get married even though William's mother, Mary (Emily Watson), does not agree at first. Agnes delivers her first baby, Susanna, in the forest by herself, but she is forced to give birth indoors at the end of her second pregnancy, which she considers a bad omen. This second time, Agnes gives birth to twins Judith and Hamnet. While William is in London following his dream of becoming a poet, illness strikes Shakespeare's family.

It feels impossible to avoid the feeling of being part of the movie, as if you were walking alongside Agnes through the forests of Stratford. The sound of nature and the busy country life, intertwined with Mescal and Buckley's voices, adds to this feeling of belonging to a way of life that has long been lost for centuries. Yet you cannot avoid the kind of longing that lingers for days or even weeks after watching the movie. The magical silence of the countryside alternated with scenes of huge uneasiness account for the impact of the movie at an emotional level. It is filmed with natural light, and the most predominant colours are organic, like green and brown, since the film has a naturalist aesthetic because of the predominance of rural areas. The movie searches for intimacy because of the close-ups of the characters, especially those of Agnes, and the pace is slow in order to give room for reflection between highly emotionally charged scenes. Even though the dialogues between Agnes and William are precise and flawless, there is a special emphasis on what is not said, on silence and facial expressions. Another key element of the movie is that it is focused on the character of Agnes, despite the fact that William Shakespeare is the other main character. With this approach, Zhao is focusing more on maternity and the mother's grief through the emotional state of Agnes, which is

at all times linked to nature. Sometimes a slight change in the natural environment foreshadows a change in the story, which moves forward along with the characters' emotions rather than their actions. What is important about this movie is the unconventional way the story is told by Zhao, not the story itself.

While Mescal does an incredible job playing a more tormented version of Shakespeare because of his desperate need to be a successful poet, what really excels is the performance of Jessie Buckley, who has already won every major award for her role as Agnes, including an Oscar for best actress. Buckley manages to transmit every hint of emotion that Agnes feels throughout the movie, most of the time without saying anything at all. Even though the film is somewhat slow at times, we can certainly attribute the recognition that this film has garnered among the critics to Buckley's performance, since some scenes are long enough for everyone to notice Buckley's flawlessness and spontaneity.

There is something about *Hamnet* that is very similar to Zhao's previous movie, *Nomadland* (2020), and that is the experience of having to cope with bereavement. In both movies, she uses natural light and emphasizes emotional intimacy through the close-ups of the characters and their silence between dialogues. In addition to that, she uses the environment as a reflection of the emotional state of the characters: in *Hamnet*, she does that through nature, and in *Nomadland*, she does the same thing through various landscapes such as badlands, deserts, open roads and forests. *Sentimental Value* (2025), directed by Joachim Trier, also shares the topic of grief that comes after losing a family member, and how this experience can become art when someone creative uses their art and craft to go through the hardships of life. This is the case of Gustav Borg (Stellan Skarsgård), who is a movie director, and Nora (Renate Reinsve), Gustav's daughter and an actress, who reunite after her mother's death. In this movie, the silence of the characters is also more important than the dialogue itself: more things are told by the look on the characters' faces than by their own words.

Overall, *Hamnet* allows you to experience a whole range of emotions, some of which may have remained completely unknown before watching the movie. The intimacy with which the characters of Agnes and William are portrayed creates a truly immersive experience where the spectator becomes one more character in the movie. Although slow at times, the movie is highly emotionally charged and is characterized by the unease of

certain scenes. What may seem like scenes in which nothing really happens are, in fact, moments when the spectator can take a breath of fresh air and find a moment of relief.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

GEMA JIMÉNEZ-PALAZÓN is a PhD student at UNED, Madrid. She is enrolled in the *Filología. Estudios Lingüísticos y Literarios* doctoral program, and currently she is on the first year of this program. Her area of study is cultural and literary studies, especially related to feminism, pop culture and Swift & swiftie studies. Her research includes the analysis of the lyrics of songs by female Anglo-American pop stars in the 21st century including Taylor Swift and Sabrina Carpenter. She is also an enthusiast of films and books, and she likes to write analysis of these with a deep level of detail.

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