

Martin Hansen Tilrem

Historical Fiction as Agent for Counter-Memory

Bachelor's thesis in English
Supervisor: Dag Hjorth Endresen
May 2023

Martin Hansen Tilrem

Historical Fiction as Agent for Counter-Memory

Bachelor's thesis in English
Supervisor: Dag Hjorth Endresen
May 2023

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature



Abstrakt

Oppgaven utforsker sammenhengen mellom historisk fiksjon-sjangeren og *counter-memory* prosesser, hvor romanen *Hamnet* av Maggie O'Farrell brukes som det fremste eksempel. Oppgavens påstand er som følger: mekanismene som brukes for å konstruere historiske fiksjonsromaner, tilsvarer med hvordan *counter-memories* skapes. Historisk fiksjon fungerer derfor ofte som talerør for *counter-memories*, et medium hvor *counter-memories* enkelt kan deles.

Oppgaven er skrevet i tre hoveddeler. Først blir *Hamnet* etablert innenfor den historiske fiksjonssjangeren, med teoriene til György Lukács og forfatter Bernard Cornwell som grunnmur. Deretter blir de mekanismene som opererer innenfor sjangeren sammenlignet med de innenfor *counter-memory*, hvor begge er konstruert på lignende måter. Til sist blir *Hamnet* analysert, for å illustrere i praksis hvordan en roman kan fungere som *counter-memory*, til tross for å være av fiksjonell natur.

Abstract

The thesis explores the correlation between the historical fiction genre and the process of counter-memory, using the novel *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell as its primary example. The thesis statement is as follows: the mechanisms with which historical fiction novels are constructed, correspond with the way counter-memories are formed. As such, historical fiction often becomes an agent for counter-memories, a medium within which counter-memories can easily be shared.

The thesis is written in three primary parts. First, *Hamnet* is established within the historical fiction genre, with the theories of György Lukács and author Bernard Cornwell as foundation. Second, the mechanisms within the genre are compared to those within counter-memory, finding that both are constructed in similar manners. Lastly, *Hamnet* has been analyzed to illustrate in action how a novel can function as counter-memory, despite its fictional nature.

Index

1 Introduction.....	4
2 <i>Hamnet</i> and the Historical Novel	6
3 Historical Fiction as Agent for Counter-Memory.....	9
4 <i>Hamnet</i> as Counter-Memory	13
4.1	14
4.2	17
5 Conclusion	20
Works Cited.....	22

1 Introduction

In the classic historical novel, the focus forgoes the great historical figures and instead highlights the lives of regular people. The mechanisms used to construct historical fiction stories have been keenly observed by György Lukács in his study of Sir Walter Scott. Historical fiction must depict the life of ordinary people if it is to convincingly depict an historical period (39). This was true for the emerging genre during the nineteenth century and still rings true when studying modern historical novels, such as *Hamnet*, by Maggie O'Farrell.

The process of shifting focus to ordinary people fits neatly with the processes involved in constructing counter-memory. George Lipsitz explains counter-memory as the process of finding the hidden histories of those typically forgotten in greater historical narratives, and then bringing them forth, in doing so revising the original historical narrative (162). Both the historical novel as a genre, and counter-memory, attempts then to shed light on ordinary lives, while the fantastical stories of great leaders fall into the background. The mechanisms with which historical fiction novels are constructed, correspond with the way counter-memories are formed. As such, historical fiction often becomes an agent for counter-memories, a medium within which counter-memories can easily be shared.

To show this interplay between counter-memories and historical fiction, one must first understand the theory behind both terms. Bernard Cornwell and Lukács' ideas are both central in understanding the historical fiction genre, as well as how historical fiction novels are constructed more broadly. This will become evident as their ideas are applied to a host of historical fiction novels, ranging from the nineteenth century to today. As these ideas are established, they will be compared to the mechanisms working within counter-memory, demonstrating that though not all historical fiction is counter-memory, the genre does provide a range of possibilities for telling counter-memory stories.

I will then apply these theories to the historical novel *Hamnet*, by Maggie O'Farrell. The novel tells the story of William Shakespeare's family, the almost mythical story of Shakespeare himself largely reduced to the background, as focus is shifted towards the ordinary lives of his family-members. It will be argued that *Hamnet* tells two distinct counter-memory stories. Firstly, it serves to balance out the mythical story of the great playwright William Shakespeare, highlighting that his literary exploits in London came with real sacrifice, making our memories of him more grounded in humanity rather than myth. Second, it brings forth the lives of women during the sixteenth century, stories mostly forgotten in the grander historical narratives. The

first section aims to prove the correlation between counter-memory and the historical fiction genre. The close reading of *Hamnet* showcase this correlation within a specific historical novel.

2 *Hamnet* and the Historical Novel

Hamnet by Maggie O'Farrell is both a novel about Shakespeare, and decidedly not so. It partly follows the course of Shakespeare's rise but is more concerned with his family: his father, mother, sister, wife, daughters, and son. In O'Farrell's novel, Shakespeare is never **Shakespeare**. Instead, he is defined based on his relation to the other characters in the novel. He is one part of a couple, he is the father, the eldest, the Latin tutor, a brother, a husband, but he is never William Shakespeare (O'Farrell 5, 22, 28, 71, 217). Though the title suggests the son Hamnet, Shakespeare's wife Agnes is the main character throughout the novel. She is at the centre of their story, mother to the children, wife to Shakespeare, but more importantly she is Agnes, the woman that can cure any ailment —except, in the end, the illness of her son. More than the story of the great William Shakespeare, it is a historical novel depicting life in Stratford-upon-Avon during the end of the sixteenth century. Shakespeare's success is only the backdrop. Life in an English village offer more pressing concerns than the artistic endeavours of one man.

The story of Agnes, though based on Shakespeare's actual wife, is mostly a work of fiction. O'Farrell writes a brief historical account of Agnes in the novel's author's note, recognising that most will know Agnes as Anne, but that the author has decided to use the name written in the will of Agnes Hathaway's father, Richard. She acknowledges that there are few historical records preserved to build her story upon, but that she has attempted to stay true to the few historical facts known about them (O'Farrell 369-370). The point will be discussed further, but it is beneficial early on to denote that the story in *Hamnet* is one mostly fictional. In some ways it might have been more effective, and certainly easier, to base the story on Shakespeare himself, as there are more historical facts to build the story upon. However, the novel's function as a counter-memory requires Shakespeare's literary career to be relegated to the backdrop.

The novel places itself in a genre that first emerged during the 1800s. Lukács pinpoints its inception to around the time of Napoleon Bonaparte's final defeat (19). That is not to say that literature tackling historical periods did not exist before Napoleon, but that they lacked characters whose personalities and motivations stemmed from the time they supposedly existed in. The characters were missing individuality based on the "historical peculiarity of their age" (Lukács 19). For an historical period to be brought to life in literature, it needed to portray the life of ordinary people, the "joys and sorrows, crises and confusion of average human beings" as Lukács puts it (39). He discusses the classical historical novel, such as those written by Sir Walter Scott during the nineteenth century. Yet the mechanisms used to construct those novels

still apply to Maggie O'Farrell's recent historical novel, *Hamnet*, published in 2020. The lives of Shakespeare's family-members are, though interesting, definitely average. Lukács does point to the similarity between the classical and the modern historical novels, though his modern historical novel is that of the first half of the twentieth century. He argues that the difference between twentieth century historical fiction and the classical historical fiction is minor, the contrast between them "only a very relative one" (Lukács 348).

Hamnet, in the tradition Lukács discusses, concerns itself with the lives of average people. Shakespeare himself remains a central character only so long as he remains in Stratford-upon-Avon, where his life for the most part is nothing out of the ordinary. As he leaves for London, he also largely leaves the narrative, becoming more of an abstract idea than a character in the novel. What remains is the story of a small family residing in an average village in the second half of the sixteenth century. It chronicles everyday family feuds, marriages necessitated by sexual relations, the struggle against illness, and, more centrally, a family's loss of a son. O'Farrell paints a picture of sixteenth century village life just as Lukács argues Sir Walter Scott does in his stories, letting the novel's main characters, what he refers to as "important figures," be products of the time they are portrayed to live in, in contrast to depicting that historical period through the historical characters who usually represent it (39). Through the perspectives of O'Farrell's ordinary "important figures," chiefly Agnes, Hamnet and a young Shakespeare, we are allowed to experience what life might have been like for the average person in this specific historical period. Lukács writes that the chief goal of historical fiction is that the reader should "re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality" (42). *Hamnet*, though more modern in ways that will be discussed further in part four, follows these principles, established by Sir Walter Scott, and recognised by Lukács. These principles mostly relate to succeeding in bringing the past back to life. They are not as concerned with the stories that unfold within that historical reality, once brought alive. Lukács' ideas are perhaps more concerned with the "historical" part of historical fiction. The "fiction" part is just as important for the novel in literary terms but cannot work properly if the historical setting is not believably portrayed. *Hamnet* is both historical and fiction. It succeeds in bringing the sixteenth century back to life, but its chief achievement is telling the stories of those living within that period.

Lukács also demonstrates how historical fiction should not attempt to retell historical events as fiction, but instead bring those who partook in those events back to life, through literature (Lukács 42). *Hamnet*, though a novel partly about Shakespeare, does not care much for his literary career, a career that arguably could be referred to as a great historical event.

Instead, it tells the story about Shakespeare's relationship to his abusive father. His position as a latin tutor. It tells the story of how he falls in love with Agnes, much to the dismay of his parents. It portrays his evident yearning to get away, from his father, and from Stratford-upon-Avon, a yearning that eventually leads him to London (O'Farrell). *Hamnet* does not chronicle Shakespeare's rise, it does not retell a great historical event. Instead, it awakens him, in a poetic sense. It turns him into a real person. The reader does not see him through some historical backward glance, but as he was, a man of his time, surrounded *by* that time, brought alive again through fiction.

Hans Robert Jauss argues that a reader of any literary work comes to that work with a "horizon of expectations," a set of expectations the reader has to the work before they start reading it. These expectations are based on previous experiences, like other books they have read within the same genre, or previous books by the same author. In a novel, these expectations might either be met or challenged. If the expectations are met, the reader is not challenged, the horizon of expectation persists unaltered, and the work of literature becomes what Jauss refers to as "culinary," or "light reading." If the expectations are challenged, the reader is forced to take a stand, either to reject or approve. The horizon subsequently changes (Jauss 11-15). This can also be applied to historical fiction. The aforementioned expectations usually stemming from genre or author are instead based on historical narrative. In a novel about Shakespeare the reader might expect the established historical narrative to be confirmed. *Hamnet* instead somewhat rejects this historical narrative and focuses instead on his ordinary family-members. This shift of focus forces a "horizon change" in the reader because the narrative does not match their expectations. This aligns with Lukács' theories because it is his spotlight on 'ordinary lives' that force this horizon change. Jauss' theories point towards the core of what makes historical fiction apt to tackling counter-memory. The reader does not draw its previous experiences from literary works but instead historical reality.

3 Historical Fiction as Agent for Counter-Memory

Author Bernard Cornwell's influential quote: "most historical novels have a big story and a little story, and the big story is the true story" is often referenced when explaining how historical fiction novels are constructed. The two stories switch places, the little story becoming the novel's big story (Flood). In Cornwell's instance, the big story in his book series *The Saxon Stories* is the unification of England. The little story is the largely fictionalized life of Uthred of Bebbanburg (Cornwell). The unification of England becomes in a large sense only background, a setting Cornwell's "important figures" interact with. Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* works in a similar way. The big story is the first world war, the little story is the personal experiences of the German soldier Paul Bäumer. The German narrative of the first world war becomes a backdrop, whilst the life of a specific soldier is put in the foreground (Remarque).

In fact, Cornwell's explanation can be applied to almost any historical novel. In *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy the Napoleonic Wars are in the background, events from them brought forth only as they impact Tolstoy's characters, their little stories put in the foreground (Lukács 43). In *Lancelot* by Giles Kristian, the myth of King Arthur is set in the background, as the author writes a fictional account of the typically secondary character Lancelot's life (Kristian). The big story in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak is the second world war, the little story is the experiences of the young girl Liesel Meminger, living in Germany (Zusak). One notices the switch in Cornwell's own take on the story of Shakespeare: in *Fools and Mortals*, the big story is the grand narrative of William Shakespeare, but it is the struggles of his brother Richard that is the focal point of the novel (Cornwell). Cornwell's little-story-big-story explanation can be applied to seemingly endless examples from within the genre, from nineteenth century *War and Peace* to twenty-first century *The Book Thief*.

The construction of the historical novel, as explained by Cornwell, corresponds well with Lukács theories on the genre. Lukács argues that in order to depict historical people, and to truly understand their motivations, the author needs to focus on smaller events and relationships, as opposed to the "great monumental dramas of world history" (Lukács 42). He uses Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as his main example, refusing the idea that Tolstoy depicts the Napoleonic Wars in any extensive way. Instead, only the events of the wars that impact the lives of Tolstoy's main characters are brought into the narrative. Apart from that, the Napoleonic Wars remain largely in the background, the story focusing on the small lives of his characters. Lukács recognizes that the historical fiction genre primarily must concern itself with the little

stories, the “outwardly insignificant events” and the “smaller relationships” if it is to catch the essence of the historical period it portrays (Lukács 43). These ideas, though not as straightforwardly formulated, support Cornwell’s explanation. Historical fiction consists of small stories set in the foreground, while the larger historical events primarily are used as background and setting.

Counter-memory, as defined by George Lipsitz, is constructed in very much the same way. The counter-memories attempt to highlight history usually excluded from the grand narratives. Whilst the grand historical narratives are established by looking at all of human history, before then narrowing it down to the specific events, counter-memories begin with the something very specific, from which the narrative is then built (Lipsitz 162). The aim is to provide new perspective to already established history, and in doing so also revising it. As Lipsitz writes, the counter-memories are used to “reframe and re-focus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience” (162). The counter-memories, then, are created to challenge the already accepted collective memory of an event, a person, a place, or a time.

Aleida Assmann argues that collective memory is something constructed, not remembered. Large social groups like nations and governments cannot possibly *have* collective memory, in the same way a singular person might remember. Instead, social groups *create* the collective memory. These memories are established and perpetuated through anything from monuments to ceremonies. The memory is constructed parallel to the construction of a collective identity, shared by the social group in question (Assmann 55). She argues that because of this, all collective memory is at its core “mediated memory,” because it is based on “selection and exclusion” (Assmann 55), and as French philosopher Ernest Renan argues, this memory is created mostly by forgetting (Mazrui 13-14). The counter-memories, then, are created to challenge these already established collective memories, which were, after all, constructed in the first place. It is simply the process of trading one constructed memory for another. The counter-memory is constructed, just like the established memory it counters. The counter-memory’s goal is in that sense to revise the established memory, in the process establishing a new constructed memory more balanced than the one it replaces. All collective memory is at its core a construct, therefore there is little to argue against revising it with something also constructed.

Lipsitz’ explanation on how counter-memory is constructed matches Cornwell’s explanation on how historical fiction novels are constructed. In historical fiction there is the big story and the little story, and the stories switch places. In other words, historical novels point to something very specific, from which the novel’s narrative is then expanded. The historical

novel's "big story" becomes the "grand narrative" counter-memories counter. Its "little story" becomes the very specific from which a counter-memory is constructed. Though one is fiction and the other fact, both the historical novel and the counter-memory move the grand narrative to the background, making a smaller story the focus. These similarities, as will be argued through *Hamnet* in part four, makes the historical fiction genre a perfect medium to tell counter-memory stories. Jauss' "horizon of expectation" also highlights the historical novel's counter-memory possibilities. The historical grand narrative, Cornwell's "big story," is the horizon of expectations the reader comes to the work of fiction with. When the little story challenges the reader's horizon of expectation it forces a horizon change, (Jauss 14) while at the same time functioning as counter-memory.

That is not to say, however, that all historical fiction is counter-memory. Stories focusing on the other people in Shakespeare's life do not automatically become counter-memory stories. Bernard Cornwell's own attempt on Shakespeare's life in *Fools and Mortals* tell the tale of Shakespeare's brother Richard. It is from Richard's point of view, but does not challenge the narrative of Shakespeare's life, and is no counter-memory. It is simply a historical novel about Shakespeare's brother, despite being constructed in the same way as Cornwell's other historical novels, with the little story, being Richard's life, in the foreground, and the big story, William Shakespeare's life, in the background. The historical fiction genre can facilitate counter-memories because the two are constructed with similar mechanisms. That does not mean that every historical fiction novel does facilitate counter-memories. Construction aside, what the "little story" actually entails is just as important. The story in the foreground can just as well support a dominant historical narrative. In order for the novel to be a counter-memory novel, it needs to challenge that dominant narrative.

A clear distinction between historical fiction and counter-memory is that the first is fictional and the latter traditionally factual. Counter-memories are not invented, it is a process of highlighting history usually glossed over in historical accounts, they are, as such, uncovered. The question becomes, then, how historical fiction, in its nature being fictional, can be regarded as counter-memory. Anne Fogarty highlights the fact that this fictionalization of history is one of the main criticisms of the genre in general. Historical fiction as a genre has been the recipient of much criticism because of where it deviates from fact, "wilfully meddling" with factual records and attempting to upstage historical research (Fogarty 437). However, Fogarty argues that the genre can tell stories left out of the historical records altogether, to tell true stories, even though they are invented stories, and therefore "necessarily speculative, incomplete and ambiguous" (425). What happens to counter-memory when history, instead of being glossed

over, was never recorded at all, and is therefore completely missing from historical records, were in fact never there to begin with? These instances are when historical fiction can serve its counter-memory purpose. As Fogarty writes, novels might urge us to “adopt the questioning viewpoint of counter-memory” (Fogarty 425). So, although the stories are invented, they can still change the way we collectively remember the past, and that memory is not necessarily false, though it is built on fiction. This becomes possible in essence because the fictional story the counter-memory is based on is not entirely fiction. The story can be fictional, and the dialogue certainly is. But the setting, the characters’ motivations, and sometimes the characters themselves, are rooted in historical research. Historical fiction is partly fiction, but not entirely, which is why it can function as counter-memory, as opposed to other literary genres.

Historical fiction as a genre can provide ample possibilities for telling counter-memory stories, the way they are often constructed coinciding with how counter-memories are formed. I have stated, however, that not all historical fiction is counter memory. A big story and a little story changing places does not automatically make it a counter-memory novel. I have also argued that though historical fiction is just that, fiction, and counter-memory traditionally is about highlighting parts of factual history often glossed over, there are instances where fiction is the only way one might alter the memory of a period where historical records beyond the grand narrative are sparse. *Hamnet* by Maggie O’Farrell is arguably one such novel, which will be analysed and discussed in the coming chapter. A counter-memory historical novel forces the reader to undergo what Jauss refers to as a “horizon change,” because the reader’s expectations, based on a dominant historical narrative, are challenged. The idea is that *Hamnet*, through focusing on the women and children in Shakespeare’s life and telling the story of both Shakespeare and them from their perspective, gives voice to parts of history largely silenced, much like the novels Anne Fogarty bases her arguments on in her article *Memory and counter-memory in Contemporary Irish Fiction* (Fogarty 432). What follows is an attempt to explain what makes *Hamnet* a counter-memory novel despite its largely fictionalised nature, but perhaps also because of it.

4 *Hamnet* as Counter-Memory

If *Hamnet* alters the way we collectively remember William Shakespeare, it is beneficial to outline the mythical nature of the narrative surrounding him. Shakespeare's memory has in no way gone unaltered since his death in 1616. Patrick Cheney points to three waves of Shakespearean mythology: "in some, William Shakespeare is a 'gentle' poet and playwright who uses his political art to write the British nation. In others he is a 'rapt' Shakespeare, an Apollo, Mercury, Pegasus, who uses his high-flying art to become divine." (20) Shakespeare was, even by contemporaries, continually compared to mythical gods, giving Shakespeare himself a godlike image, (Cheney 25) and with time he joined Chaucer and Spenser as the greats of English literature, before eventually surpassing them both, remaining at the top on his own (Cheney 23). Arguably, then, Shakespeare is remembered as an almost divine character, a "citizen of the nation and a god above the fray" (Cheney 26). Shakespeare is riddled in myth, second perhaps only to that of King Arthur in Britain. And as is often the case when dealing with myth, the image portrayed is not very balanced. Certain things have been forgotten, as Renan argues, because they had to be, in the construction of myth (Mazrui 13-14). It certainly applies to the myth of Shakespeare. Whatever wave of Shakespearean myth one subscribes to, what is missing is always the same. Shakespeare was, despite his literary merits, also just a man. He had a family, a wife, daughters, and a son. But the depiction of Shakespeare as a flawed character, a man who for long periods of time abandons his family, who is unable to be there for his wife when she needs him, who has affairs with other women when he is in London, does not match the mythical idea of him as an "icon of authorial fame" (Cheney 20).

The exclusion of the women in Shakespeare's life from his dominant narrative, echoes the exclusion of most women in broader dominant historical narratives. Fogarty argues that writing fictional female characters in historical fiction can "free their imagined subjects from the silences of traditional historical narratives" (Fogarty 432). In other words, though the characters are fictional, they can give voice to the women who most definitely did exist but are missing from the historical records. *Hamnet's* fictional portrayal of women we *do* know existed, might serve to provide depth to the mythical memory of William Shakespeare. It might also alter how the whole period in which Shakespeare was active is collectively remembered. In this sense, it becomes counter-memory.

The anonymization of William Shakespeare is necessary in order to prevent his storyline from overshadowing the others. The depiction of Shakespeare's family, and the emphasis on him leaving them behind, works to give depth to the rather shallow mythical character he is

usually portrayed as. It highlights his sacrifices, and the consequences of those sacrifices, for both his family and for himself. It also demonstrates that William Shakespeare was not infallible. It does so by looking at the typically forgotten areas of his life, in which he must have had flaws. By telling the stories of ordinary sixteenth century women, *Hamnet* also functions as counter-memory by giving voice to those often silenced in traditional narratives. The emphasis on pregnancy helps to understand the motivations of these women. It also shows how O'Farrell, by writing about ordinary women, takes Lukács' ideas one step further. The depiction of women's everyday life might then alter the way the Elizabethan era is collectively remembered.

4.1

O'Farrell's intent to tell Shakespeare's narrative from a different perspective is evident in the historical note prior to the actual story.

In the 1580s, a couple living in Henley Street, Stratford, had three children: Susanna, then Hamnet and Judith, who were twins.

The boy, Hamnet, died in 1596, aged eleven.

Four years or so later, the father wrote a play called Hamlet (O'Farrell "Historical Note").

Shakespeare's children are all referred to by name, Shakespeare himself only as "the father" and one part of "a couple." Shakespeare, then, is at once put to the sidelines, in a setting where he would usually be the main character. Even before the novel has begun, O'Farrell sets her fictional tale in opposition to the dominant narrative of William Shakespeare, not as a momentous mythical figure, but a minor role in a small family.

What can almost be characterized as the anonymisation of William Shakespeare continues throughout the whole novel. He is not mentioned by name until the author's note, and only then by his last name. The reader is first introduced to Shakespeare from his son, Hamnet's perspective. "For a moment, it crosses his mind to call his father's name, to shout for him, but his father is miles and hours and days away, in London, where the boy has never been" (O'Farrell 5). From then on, he is continually defined in relation to the point-of-view of any given character that might be in focus, such as his father John, who "is reduced to living on whatever coin his eldest can send back from London" (O'Farrell 22). In Shakespeare's early years, before London, he is simply reduced to a "latin tutor," and this in a section from his own perspective. His name is not used even when he himself is the focus of the narrative, written in third person, in contrast to the other point-of-view characters, who always are (O'Farrell 28).

From Eliza's point of view, he becomes the brother (O'Farrell 71). Through Agnes' eyes he is always the husband (O'Farrell 184). This constant definition out of something other than himself, a constant defamiliarization of Shakespeare, is summed up near the end of the novel, as the news of his daughter's sickness arrives: "when the letter reaches him, he—lodger, brother, husband, father and, here, player—is standing in a guildhall in a small town on the eastern fringes of Kent" (O'Farrell 217). The novel does not shy away from Shakespeare's story, it is there, but it is not more prominent than the rest of the stories the novel encompasses. With a name as heavily weighted as William Shakespeare, this anonymisation might be necessary, if all the point-of-view characters are to be regarded as equally important. In such a sense, it also becomes important if the novel is to succeed in "supplying new perspectives about the past" (Lipsitz 162) or else the mythical Shakespeare might prevail. The deliberate refrain from mentioning Shakespeare by name might, however, at times defeat its original purpose. The reader is well aware of who he is and grows more aware with every page. Refusing to say his name, especially at times when it would be natural, if not beneficial, sometimes risks turning him into a mythical character again. Not mentioning his name draws more and more attention throughout the novel and though it does not overshadow the counter-memory function, it does not always support it either.

The novel has a clear female perspective both on Shakespeare's story and, in a grander sense, life in sixteenth century England. As Shakespeare's wife Agnes is about to give birth to the twins Hamnet and Judith, the beginning of his grand mythical narrative is all but trivialized, rendered intensely unimportant. It is reduced to something inconsequential, compared to the birth of his son and daughter.

What has she done? Why did she send him away? What will become of them, separated in this way, with him dealing and bargaining for theatre silver, making gloves for the hands of lads to give the illusion of ladies, with her locked and barred in this room, so far away...while he is deciding what length of glove, what manner of beading, what embroidery would best suit a player king, she is clenched by agony and about to die (O'Farrell 228-229).

Shakespeare has moved to London and is at the very beginning of his theatrical career. But he is not present when his twins are about to be born. Agnes is forced to live alone with *his* family, a family that must be characterized as somewhat hostile towards her. Agnes' perspective uncovers what Shakespeare leaves behind as he heads for London—highlighting what is sacrificed for his literary career. It gives depth to a rather shallow mythical character, making him more human and less divine.

Shakespeare's absence from his family at Stratford-Upon-Avon is a constant theme throughout the novel and shows the negative aspects that come with his literary rise. His children are always in anticipation of his letters but seem to have accepted that expecting his arrival usually leads to disappointment. His wife has sent him away to London with her blessing but is still in need of him. In agony she cannot fathom what she has done: "I should never have sent him ... to ... to London ... It was wrong ... I should-" (O'Farrell 235). Shakespeare sends letters and coin but is rarely home. His rise to literary fame has begun. His absence takes a toll on the whole family, not to mention himself; he is not present when his twins are born, and he is not present when one of the twins, Hamnet, dies. In summary, he is not present when his son enters life, nor when he leaves it. Instead, he is in London. The result of O'Farrell's emphasis on the absence of Shakespeare, rather than his constant literary presence, becomes counter-memory because it challenges the mythical playwright as infallible. He is infallible in the traditional narratives because the traditional narratives concern themselves with his literary career, forgetting almost all else. O'Farrell, in contrast, is more concerned with everything except that literary career, and is able to highlight his human flaws, in the process revising the mythical memory of him. The emphasis on everything except his literary career also forces a horizon change. The reader has specific expectations when picking up a novel about William Shakespeare, and those expectations are based on the discussed mythical narrative surrounding him. The focus on his family and his flaws contradicts the reader's expectations. The counter-narrative function and the horizon change align, both negotiating with the reader. Jauss characterizes stories that frustrate the expectations of the reader as "ideal cases" (Jauss 13). These ideal cases can, at least on the topic of historical fiction, be the product of counter-memory.

Whilst mythical narratives detach themselves from broader historical narratives, counter-memories do not seek to remove themselves from already established history, but instead revise it (Lipsitz 162). Shakespeare's sacrifices as depicted in *Hamnet* are fictional. His children were born, his son did die, but whether he was absent at both or neither is speculation on O'Farrell's part. But it seems plausible that it might have been so, simply because Shakespeare did spend a lot of time in London, and therefore away from his family. Yet whether he was present at birth and death or not is beside the point. O'Farrell cannot with certainty tell the reader that these specific sacrifices were made, but she does highlight that similar sacrifices must have taken place. As Fogarty argues, fictional narratives can give voice to those missing from the historical narratives (432). *Hamnet* gives voice to a family often forgotten in the mythical narrative of William Shakespeare, but it also gives voice to part of Shakespeare

necessarily neglected when he is heightened to something more than a man, turning him into a mythical literary character. So, though the sacrifices are fictional, they assert that sacrifices must have been necessary, and so makes Shakespeare immediately more human than the traditional narrative does. Though a fictional account, it changes how we collectively remember Shakespeare, and that altered memory is not necessarily less true than the original. All collective memory is based on the process of remembering and forgetting (Assmann 55). Fiction as counter-memory becomes the process of attempting to remember something completely forgotten, something which cannot be brought forth by traditional counter-memory processes, because it is absent from historical records.

4.2

William Shakespeare's narrative aside, *Hamnet* also serves as counter-memory to the narrative of the sixteenth century, as it explores the lives of ordinary women in the period. Jill Matthews plainly states the original purpose of feminist history: "women have been absent from history – that absence matters – therefore women must be restored to history" (147). During the sixties and seventies, women historians became aware of the utter lack of both women and female perspective in the dominant historical narratives. The women who were present, were only so in the sense that they conformed to the "masculine standards of true womanhood" (Matthews 147). Women in history were either hailed for acting just like men wanted them to act, or for acting like men and being almost as good as them at it (Matthews 147). In other words, the average woman had a very limited voice, and as Fogarty argues, writing women into history through historical fiction has the possibility to "free their imagined subjects from the silences of traditional historical narratives" (432). In doing so it also serves the very purpose of the counter-memory, which is to look to the past "for the hidden histories of those excluded from dominant narratives" (Lipsitz 162) those excluded from the dominant narratives often being women. As O'Farrell tackles the everyday life and struggles of women in the sixteenth century she gives voice to a silenced group, finding hidden stories from those invisible in the dominant historical narratives. There are plenty of women's experiences from the sixteenth century brought forward, all throughout the novel. The topic of dying during childbirth is touched upon early, as Agnes' mother dies when she gives birth to a third sister, who never draws her first breath. "When the belly was swollen for the third time, the woman's luck ran out. She took to bed to birth her third child, but this time, she did not rise from it again" (O'Farrell 48). Not only does it point to the "luck" involved in surviving not even one pregnancy but three, it is also the

first time a constant theme of the novel is touched upon: the death of children. Agnes' sister is stillborn and is buried with her mother, and Shakespeare's mother Mary lost a child to the pestilence, which she is fiercely reminded of when Agnes' children fall ill:

the two women look at one another and Agnes sees that Mary is thinking of her daughter, Anne, who died of the pestilence, aged eight, covered with swellings and hot with fever, her fingers black and odorous and rotting off her hands (O'Farrell 128).

And both of Agnes' twins, Judith and Hamnet, fall ill with the pestilence, the latter eventually dying.

Pregnancy becomes essential in O'Farrell's description of women's lives in the sixteenth century; it is in the centre of all that is good and all that is bad. The fear and real possibility of dying during childbirth, and the fear and probability of that child subsequently dying at a young age. O'Farrell describes both of Agnes' pregnancies, of Susanna and of the twins, and highlights Agnes' fears attached to them: "she will die, she thinks. What other reason can there be for her having no sign that any of this would happen? That she is about to die, to pass on, to leave this world" (O'Farrell 229). Agnes does not die, in the end, but she could have. It was a real possibility, and she was quite aware of it. Yet despite the dangers of pregnancy, Mary's feelings on not being able to give birth anymore are also very complicated, as she is witness to Agnes' first pregnancy. "Mary looks, and looks away. Not for the first time, it strikes her that she will never feel that again, that it is an experience now closed to her, at her age, at her stage in life. The loss of that possibility sears her sometimes: it is hard for a woman to let go of" (O'Farrell 141). In combination, O'Farrell paints a picture of women's lives in which pregnancy is both the most dangerous to women's health, whilst still being in the centre of all meaning, and perhaps of happiness. The depiction of pregnancy becomes key to understanding the life and motivations of sixteenth century women. It functions as counter-memory because these lives and motivations often are forgotten in traditional historical narratives. It is also closely related to Lukács' ideas on how historical fiction should focus on ordinary people to understand the motivations of the age (Lukács 39). "Ordinary people" have, at large, in practise been translated to "ordinary men." O'Farrell takes this one step further, when she writes of ordinary women. She is not detached from Lukács' ideas on historical novels but apply them to stories that are innately counter-memory, because of their conflict with dominant narratives.

The relation to men from a woman's perspective is also explored, especially to Mary's husband, Shakespeare's father, John, who is easily angered, and needs little excuse to hurt those around him physically. As John goes into another one of his angry bouts, the whole family instantly adapts: "she sees, too, that all children flinch if John gets suddenly to his feet, like

animals sensing the approach of a predator. She sees Mary blink slowly, as if closing her eyes to what might occur” (O’Farrell 143). When Edmond, the youngest child of Mary and John, loses his patience during dinner, so too does John, rising from his seat, about to hurt the child. There is very little Mary can do but submit, and let it unfold: “Mary bows her head, as if interested by something in her lap, Eliza’s eyes begin to fill with tears, and John lurches from his stool, yelling, By God, that boy, I will-” (O’Farrell 143). This, along with descriptions of women’s household tasks, with meals to cook and men to “assess, soothe and guide” (O’Farrell 130) insight is given to what domestic and everyday life must have been like for the average woman during the sixteenth century, in the process perhaps changing how we collectively remember the Elizabethan era, pointing out that most in the period were neither mythical playwrights nor powerful queens.

Hamnet tackles two established histories in counter-memory terms. The first narrative is personal: it is the somewhat mythical story of the great playwright William Shakespeare. The second narrative is societal: it tackles how the latter half of the sixteenth century is remembered as a historical period. O’Farrell makes it very clear early on, in the novel’s paratext, that Shakespeare’s literary career is sidelined, the focus instead on his family, and especially the women within that family. The reader’s horizon of expectations is challenged, because the traditional narrative they expect to be presented is significantly altered, forcing a “horizon change.” The focus on the women in Shakespeare’s life do two things: it shows the life he leaves behind as he heads for London, what he sacrifices as his life is absorbed by the theatre, and it tells the story of women in the sixteenth century, leading normal lives, excluding the fact that their father, husband, brother, and son is Shakespeare himself. *Hamnet* becomes an agent for two counter-memories: one that balances out the mythical memory of Shakespeare, bringing forth parts of his history forgotten, and one of silenced, ordinary sixteenth-century women being given a voice. *Hamnet* does not detach itself from the story of William Shakespeare, but it does revise our memory of him. It also seeks out the women traditionally hidden from dominant historical narratives. *Hamnet*, then, serves the same function as any counter-memory, despite its fictional nature.

5 Conclusion

Hamnet is part of a genre that first emerged with the likes of Sir Walter Scott during the 1800s. The process of shifting the spotlight from great historical heroes to ordinary people, in order to better understand that historical period, is what established the genre with Sir Walter Scott. Maggie O'Farrell's focus on Shakespeare's family, his wife and children, places it neatly in the same category. György Lukács' definition of the classical and modern historical novels as being very similar, despite some lesser differences, is supported by how well *Hamnet* fits his ideas, despite being from a different era than Lukács' *The Historical Novel*.

Bernard Cornwell's little-story-big-story analogy also coheres to Lukács' theories. The big story is moved to the background as the novel tackles a smaller story, such as in his own series *The Saxon Stories*, where the unification of England, the story of Alfred the Great, is moved to the background, as Cornwell writes the story of Uthred of Bebbanburg. The analogy can be applied to almost any historical novel, from Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* to Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Lukács argued that the great events of history were less apt to conveying the actual historical period, compared to the smaller lives of ordinary people. Cornwell's ideas support the same theory. Historical fiction is, almost always, a small story set in the foreground, with greater historical events reduced to setting.

Counter-memory works in the same way. George Lipsitz' definition points to how counter-memory begins with something very specific within a greater historical narrative, from which the counter-memory is constructed. In other words: counter-memory begins with a little story, seeking to revise the established historical narrative. In such sense, the counter-memories challenge the collective memory of historical people and periods. Aleida Assmann explains how collective memory is constructed. Collective memory is *created*, before it can be remembered by groups of people. Lipsitz' definition of counter-memory closely resembles Lukács theories on and Cornwell's definition of historical fiction. Though one is fact and the other fiction, the similarities make historical fiction a perfect medium to tell counter-memory stories. Not all historical fiction serves this purpose, but the genre *can* do so. It is not to be glossed over that counter-memory is fact whilst the other is fiction. Yet the nature of counter-memory is to unravel hidden history lost in the established narratives. Historical fiction can tell the stories of those invisible, not only in narratives, but in historical records altogether. Though the stories are invented, they might change how the reader remembers the past, and that memory does not have to be false, at least not any less true than the established collective memory, which is also constructed.

Hans Robert Jauss' "horizon of expectations" can be applied in relation to both historical fiction and counter-memory. Jauss argued that readers come to works of literature with a set of expectations based on previous literary experiences. In historical fiction, those "previous experiences," and "set of expectations" are based on real historical narratives. The work of fiction might either then conform to or challenge those historical expectations. If the expectations are challenged, the process is similar to counter-memory. It forces the reader to take a stand, prompting a "horizon change," altering the expectations and memory of the period portrayed.

Hamnet by Maggie O'Farrell showcases how historical fiction *is* being used as agent for counter-memory. It does so in two primary ways. First, it paints a more balanced image of the usually mythicized, great literary beacon that is William Shakespeare. It highlights what Shakespeare might have had to sacrifice to become who he became, but it definitely highlights that he must have made great sacrifices, whatever they were. *Hamnet* counters how we remember Shakespeare, making him less godlike, at once more human. William Shakespeare was, however gifted, just a sixteenth century man. Second, it gives voice to those typically silenced in historical narratives. The story of Agnes sheds light on what life as an ordinary woman could have been like in a small town during the sixteenth century. Its special emphasis on pregnancy, birth, children, and the fatal risks of all three, makes it easier to understand the sixteenth century, like Lukács argues ordinary lives have the power to do, and it revises a historical narrative dominated by men. *Hamnet* is indeed fiction; but it serves the purpose of counter-memory.

Works Cited

- Assmann, Aleida. "Transformations between History and Memory." *Social Research*, vol. 75, no. 1, 2008, pp.49-72.
- Cheney, Patrick. "The myth behind 'The Shakespeare Myth': Contemporary reports, 1592-1640." *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, vol. 90, no. 1, pp.19-29.
- Cornwell, Bernard. *The Saxon Stories*. HarperCollins, 2004-2020.
- Cornwell, Bernard. *Fools and Mortals*. HarperCollins, 2017.
- Flood, Alison. "Bernard Cornwell: 'I play merry hell with history, I admit it'". *The Guardian*, 15. Oct 2022, www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/15/bernard-cornwell-history-uhthred-sharpe-war-lord. Accessed 6 March 2023.
- Fogarty, Anne. "Memory and counter-memory in contemporary Irish historical fictions: Lia Mills' *Fallen* (2015), Mary Morrissy's *The Rising of Bella Casey* (2016) and Emma Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars* (2020)." *Irish Studies Review*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2022, pp. 423-440.
- Kristian, Giles. *Lancelot*. Transworld, 2019.
- Lipsitz, George. "Myth, History and Counter-Memory." *Politics and The Muse: Studies in the Politics of Recent American Literature*, edited by Adam J. Sorkin, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1989, pp.161-179.
- Lukács, György. *The Historical Novel*. Merlin Press, 1962.
- Matthews, Jill. "Feminist History." *Labour History*, no. 50, 1986, pp.147-153.
- Mazrui, Ali A. "Cultural Amnesia, Cultural Nostalgia and False Memory: Africa's Identity Crisis Revisited." *African and Asian Studies*, vol 12, no. 1, pp.13-29.

O' Farrell, Maggie. *Hamnet*. Tinder Press, 2020.

Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Vintage Penguin, 1994.

Zusak, Markus. *The Book Thief*. Picador, 2005.



 **NTNU**

Norwegian University of
Science and Technology