

‘If no one will say your name, you are forgotten. I am forgotten.’ In what ways does Hannah Kent ensure that Agnes Magnúsdóttir will not be forgotten?

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Hannah Kent’s historical novel, Burial Rites, explore the multi-faceted dimension of Agnes Magnúsdóttir by giving the reader “a more ambiguous” portrayal of her life to rewrite modern day audience’s impression on her. Through the counter-narratives of Agnes, Toti and Margret, Kent attempts to deepen the reader’s understanding of Agnes’ harsh circumstances by using the person narratives to combat against the vilifying biased condemnation in the official records, thus ensuring Agnes’ own voice to be heard and remembered. Nevertheless, Kent intends to rescue Agnes’ reputation by positioning the reader to consider the mitigating circumstances that Agnes had to endure in the unforgiving setting of Iceland and thus consider her worth that is beyond the reputation of bluntly “a murderess”.

In the Icelandic society confined by the patriarchy, Kent exposes the biased official records that vilifies Agnes’ reputation and confiscates her own voice, asserting to the notion that Agnes’ voice is lost and forgotten under the manipulation of the male agenda. Kent demonstrates that it is within this patriarchal nature of the setting that coerce the Icelandic people to regard Agnes as merely “a madwoman” and “the witch caught in her own fateful weaving”, demonstrating the absence of warmth and sympathy that Agnes receives in her journey to the grave. Moreover, Kent underscores the physical and spiritual worthlessness of the powerless people such as Agnes when she juxtaposes her clothing with the greys and earthy elements of the landscape, alluding to the notion that “[Agnes’] name is forgotten” and hence along with her life, her “name” will also be “vanished in the thin air”. With the inclusion of the biased condemnation of Agnes in the historical documents, Kent allows the reader to understand Agnes’ worthlessness in the harsh landscape of Iceland, thus ensuring Agnes’ own voice to be heard through the multi-layered narratives of Toti, Margret and Agnes.

To combat the absolute manipulative male agenda that determines Agnes’ life and death, Kent employs the first-person narrative of Agnes, allowing the reader to consider her mitigating circumstances that was not taken into consideration in the historical documents. Kent asserts Agnes’ disempowerment in the extreme patriarchal society, highlighting Agnes’ “illegitimacy” when she is compelled to live under the servant’s name “Magnus” and ‘the lie for a father’. In addition, Agnes’ unforgiving childhoods ultimately condemns her to a status of a “hapless servant” whose whole life is dependent on ‘the mercy’ of other men. Kent underscores the absence of love in Agnes life by exposing Natan’s manipulative nature when he “toys” with Agnes and betrays her to sleep with Sigga, “drawing the covers of Sigga’s bed”, positioning the reader to sympathise with Agnes and understand the morally ambiguous choices that she had to make for survival. Moreover, Kent uses a line from the Sagas, “I was worst to the one I loved best”, mirroring Gudrun’s motivation to kill her lover with Agnes’ “morally ambiguous” murder. By elevating Agnes’ story to the level of the Sagas, Kent ensures Agnes’ story to be heard, asserting to her modern day audience that Agnes is worthy of consideration in the Sagas.

Through the transformations of Toti and Margret, Kent deepens the readers' understanding of Agnes' character when Toti and Margret affirms her spiritual worth and humanity. Beginning as a "callow" Priest, Toti first expresses a sense of fear towards this "madwoman" but later transforms himself to become more open-hearted towards Agnes when he sees her humanity and is willing to listen to her story. His eventual realisation also parallels Margret's. Having no choice to deny Agnes' arrival, Margret regards Agnes as "the witch" and is afraid to build a conversation with her. However, as her health deteriorates, "in good time I'll be dead", she begins to sympathise with Agnes's circumstances. When she sees Agnes' vulnerability as a powerless servant woman whose whole life is exploited and manipulated by the agenda of men, she even attempts to "unlock the irons" to free her. Hence through the counter-narrative of Toti and Margret, Kent highlights the multi-faceted dimensions of Agnes by emphasising her loving nature and humanity that is absent in the historical records, thus ensuring Agnes to be remembered not as "a whore, a criminal", but an "ambiguous" woman that also shows signs of kindness and love.

Juxtaposing the vilifying historical records with the counter-narrative of Toti, Agnes, the Sagas and Margret, Kent ensures Agnes Magnúsdóttir will not be forgotten but will rather be remembered in a different way that is beyond merely "a criminal". By elevating Agnes' story to the level of the Sagas, Kent rewrites the Iceland people's impression of Agnes, positioning the modern day audience to sympathise with her mitigating conditions and the yielding of love that Agnes wants but absent in her life.

