MARTIN MCDONAGH'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL INSTABILITY: THE NOOSE OF *HANGMEN*

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Just before *Hangmen* opened at the Royal Court Theatre in London in September 2015, Martin McDonagh told Sean O'Hagan of *The Guardian*: "I really didn't want it to be a message play" (O'Hagan). Yet a message play it is, one that argues cogently against capital punishment. In his fullest exploration of the often-intricate power structures of male hierarchy, McDonagh's most recent play realizes what several of his likely surrogates – storytellers like Cripple Billy in *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1997) or writers like Katurian in *The Pillowman* (2003) and especially Marty in *Seven Psychopaths* (2012) – had hoped for: "something life-affirming" as Marty puts it.

Reviewers of McDonagh's work, especially of the early plays, sometimes sensed an apparent moral nihilism. In reviewing The Leenane Trilogy in 1997, Fintan O'Toole wrote that "the Ireland of these plays is one in which all authority has collapsed" (179). Patrick Lonergan described *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* as "a world in which morality is disturbingly confused" (73). Critical commentary returns to these questions so often because concerns about integrity and morality have never been far from the surface of McDonagh's works. More recent critics are often candid about the moral dimensions of McDonagh's work. In 2002, for instance, Liz Hoggard described *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* as "a fiercely moral play" (Hoggard 11). In reviewing the 2017 Broadway revival of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), the *New Yorker*'s Hilton Als referred to McDonagh as "a proper moralist" (Als 74). That questions of morality often remain totally abstract, recondite, and mysterious for many of his characters, especially in his Irish plays, is itself noteworthy. In *The Lonesome West*, Coleman can appreciate the Catholic Church's teaching on suicide only through reference to the death of an actor from the television series *Alias Smith and Jones*. Beyond the many references to the Catholic Church in the Irish plays, McDonagh's films, *In Bruges* and *Seven Psychopaths* are even more laden with religious imagery. His work immediately preceding *Hangmen,* the film *Seven Psychopaths*, contains references to Buddhists, Quakers, Christianity, the afterlife, and even the Amish. *Hangmen* is in this regard unlike his earlier works: not only is it purely secular but its characters are singularly soulless. Its exploration of morality and integrity eschews reference to organized religions or belief systems but compel its audiences to examine what is right, decent, and legal.

Hangmen uses McDonagh's most formidable weapons – his manipulation of an audience's gullibility, the storyteller's narratives, and life's epistemological uncertainties – to specifically moral ends. Because so many of his characters concoct schemes to deceive other characters, the audience is often deceived along with them. Comparable ruses appear throughout Shakespeare, especially the comedies, where they are often called “practices.” Werner Huber used McDonagh’s own Hiberno-English term “codding” for this pervasive pattern of deception:

> the art of “codding” (Huber, “The Plays” 568-70) is prefigured in the earlier plays [before *The Pillowman*], which begin with cleverly crafted expositions and rely on the conventions of confidence-building, before the “codding” starts and tricks are played on the *dramatis personae* and the spectators alike. (Huber, “From Leenane” 291)

Beyond these fabrications and ruses, the truth in McDonagh is often neither plain nor simple. When asked if he breaks up disinterred bones and dumps them in the slurry, Mick in *A Skull in Connemara* (1997) answers: “Oh, maybe it’s true now, and maybe it isn’t at all” (*Skull* 13). Katurian similarly asks his brother, “Which particular truth?” (*Pillowman* 51). From his very earliest work, McDonagh has sown and cultivated such epistemological instability; in *Hangmen* it figures even more importantly.

Set in 1963, the first scene of *Hangmen* acts as a prologue that depicts Harry Wade’s execution of Hennessy, a young man who violently resists in a final protestation of his innocence. After a prolonged, agonizing struggle during which Harry strikes the prisoner with a billyclub, Harry’s assistant, Syd, binds the prisoner’s arms with a strap, and two prison guards are needed to subdue Hennessy. Harry finally manages to place a hood and then the noose on the prisoner’s head and levers open the trap door through which Hennessy drops to his death. The entire process of execution is so brutal, degrading, and lacking in dignity that Harry orders the prison governor to say nothing of the struggle in the official report. Then Harry demands his breakfast.

The remaining six scenes play out over twenty-four hours, principally in the Oldham pub now operated by the executioner Harry Wade. With his wife and teenage daughter, Harry lives in an apartment above his pub. Just as Britain outlaws capital punishment two years after the first scene, two strangers seek out Harry. The first is a newspaper reporter, Clegg, whose interview with Harry appears in the local newspaper the next morning. The second stranger is Peter Mooney who is suspected of interfering with (more specifically, abducting and murdering) Harry’s daughter. In the play’s final act, Mooney will be lynched in circumstances that unmistakably link his death to that of Hennessy.

McDonagh’s plays and films typically rely on power structures that are grounded in knowledge – often, the knowledge of secrets. What characters know, how they know it and how certain their knowledge is, all shape, if not determine, their actions. His drama, like most, draws its energy from methodically revealing and refining knowledge; his dramatic irony, like most, is predicated on the disparity between imperfect understanding and what is finally disclosed as the truth. *Hangmen* again demonstrates McDonagh’s formidable gifts in plotting a dramatic piece, but the central concerns of *Hangmen*, including capital punishment and matters of life and death, raise issues that demand absolute certainty and demand an end to epistemological instability. McDonagh very deliberately reveals information incrementally, strategically.

Whereas the opening exposition in an Ibsen play is typically reliable, forthright, and even comprehensive, crucial episodes from the past are not revealed in McDonagh's works until they are most effectively and surprisingly revealed. McDonagh exerts enormous control over the audiences for his plays and films. Most authors do, but McDonagh consistently manipulates what and when his audience learns, knows, or believes. He and his characters are anything but forthcoming, even when, as so often, they are hilariously blunt. What characters as well as the audience know or believe they know is often misguided, unreliable or flat-out wrong.

Other striking continuities exist between *Hangmen* and McDonagh's earlier works. Revenge is a pervasive motive that links McDonagh's works from first to last. In *Hangmen* Syd hopes to take revenge on Harry for "shopping" him to the authorities. Indeed, Syd was arrested, convicted, and sent to prison for importing illegal Danish pornography ("fannies, not cocks" [61]). Now Syd plans "to take that bigshot bastard down a peg or two. Plan to scare the living daylights out of him so next time he'll think twice before shopping his mates to Prison Commissioners over one single cock joke in the heat of the moment" (67). Syd's script for warning Harry about "a skinny fella, short blond hair, London accent, I think, and well enough dressed but with sort of a menacing look" (63), soon gets away from him. In embellishing his story, Syd moves from the vague to the definite. As Mooney explains:

> MOONEY: Now, if I walk into that pub right now, what will their attitude toward me be? Not, as planned, that I am a *vaguely* menacing individual who turned up saying some *vaguely* menacing things at *vaguely* the same time their daughter went missing and who by all means requires a *vague* eye being kept on, *no*. That I was *definitely* involved in an attack on a girl a year ago, carried out on the anniversary of the hanging of a man who was *definitely* hanged by a man who's [sic] daughter has just *definitely* gone missing. (70)

The "plan" was to operate in that gap between the *definite* and the *vague*, the gap in which we often find ourselves.

Syd is not the only storyteller in *Hangmen.* Fry reports the details of Phyllis Keane's incarceration in a mental home, a true story from an esteemed gossip-monger who evokes the memory of Johnnypateenmike in *The Cripple*. Harry's stories of why he never executed any Germans are only excuses, crude fabrications. To demonstrate his sanctimonious outrage at Syd's expression of surprise over the dimensions of a Manchester gangster's genitals, Harry has to repeat the story in detail, a prurient exercise that may be worse than whatever expression of surprise might have issued from Syd in that moment. Syd (and the audience) believes Mooney's very sinister story of abducting Harry's daughter Shirley and leaving her to die, not least because it is so rich in detail. Syd's story is perhaps the most pernicious because rather than sticking to a dubious plan to suggest that Mooney is vaguely menacing, he embellishes extemporaneously to make Mooney definitely evil. The stories told in *Hangmen* do not come from reciters, artists or fabulators but craven hypocrites. Status, control and power derive from some stories, especially ones that impart secrets. As in *The*

Pillowman and *Seven Psychopaths,* all of these stories have consequences well beyond anything their tellers ever intended or imagined. In scene six, immediately after the audience's assumptions (specifically, that Syd acted altruistically in approaching Harry) have settled during intermission, they are undone by learning that Syd and Mooney not only know each other, but have conspired. Again, the audience along with Syd must adjust to a now-vertiginous horizon of expectations.

McDonagh's Irish plays in particular demonstrate the signal importance of a specific time and a specific place. Huber described "the typical McDonagh locale [as one in which] everything is put into a 'parochial' perspective" ("Plays of Martin McDonagh" 564). The first of his plays set in the country of his birth, *Hangmen* was lauded for its adept handling of the period and place. McDonagh's use of the Oldham dialect drew praise from an Oldham native, Matthew Dunster, the director of the play's premiere:

> [McDonagh]'s responding to the north of England rather than the west of Ireland, so the vernacular is different, but he nails it. There's a precision to his writing and he has an ability to summon up this incredible sense of place purely out of his imagination. I'm actually from Oldham and he's never even been there, yet Oldham is there, real and recognisable, in the play. (O'Hagan)

Much of the critical controversy over the Irish plays in particular struggle with their mimetic representation of the West of Ireland, but critics celebrated the accuracy of McDonagh's parochial Oldham.

Perhaps even more important than the faithful staging of place in the instance of *Hangmen* is its fidelity to a specific moment. As much as 1934 is crucial to *The Cripple of Inishmaan* and the years immediately before the Celtic Tiger (1990-1992) are vital to *The Leenane Trilogy*, 1965 is crucial to *Hangmen*. Published and first performed fifty years after the abolition of the death penalty in Britain, Hangmen captures what director Dunster describes as

> the fascination with that period … that particular time when we are celebrating the freedom that seems to come with pop music and pop culture and we're still murdering people by the state. There's something about that sort of Rubicon that's obviously deeply fascinating to Martin. And Orton and Pinter are products of that atmosphere, so it is just feels absolutely right… (Trueman)

For all of the trademark continuities with his earlier works, *Hangmen* departs from them in many ways. Not only in the time (one reason that there is vastly less vulgarity in *Hangmen*) and place of its setting, but also its characters and plot are closer to stage realism, especially in its treatment of the body and of violence. We see two deaths on stage in *Hangmen,* but hear of hundreds. McDonagh relies more heavily on historical events (such as Britain's abolition of capital punishment) and executions of real people (the "controversial" cases that Clegg asks Harry about – Derek Bentley, Timothy Evans and Ruth Ellis who were all actually executed in the 1950s), so the gravitation toward realism might be expected. The play moves away from the hyperbolic physical violence against humans, animals, and major appliances in earlier works to examine society's institutional violence. Although representatives of the law or legal system appear in *A Skull in Connemara* (the vain, self-important Gardaí Tom Hanlon) and, much more centrally, in *The Pillowman* (the two detectives, Tupolski and Ariel), those in *Hangmen* underscore the play's attention to relationship between personal and civic morality.

The principal setting for *Hangmen* is Harry Wade's pub in Oldham, both a domestic space for the nuclear Wade family and a public space populated by a handful of regulars and four outsiders: the reporter Clegg, Harry's former assistant Syd, the mysterious Mooney, and Harry's nemesis hangman Pierrepoint, all of whom are drawn on some level to Harry because of his former position as hangman. From a production standpoint, however, perhaps the outstanding feature of *Hangmen* in comparison to McDonagh's other plays is its significantly larger cast. Even with doubling (by having the prison guards, doctor and governor in the first scene also play the denizens of Harry's pub), *Hangmen* demands no fewer than twelve in its cast, more actors than appear in all three plays in *The Leenane Trilogy.* To the core group of six – Harry, Alice, Shirley, Mooney, Syd, and Pierrepoint – that propels much of the action of the play are added representatives of society's institutions: the prison doctor, its governor and guards in the prologue; later, a police detective and a journalist appear. And in addition to these characters are the habitués of Harry's pub: the "*cronies"* as McDonagh describes Bill, Charlie and Arthur at the beginning of scene two. These three form a chorus that variously echoes and repeats the dialogue, placing particular emphasis, explaining nuances, and, like the chorus of classical theatre, directing however obliquely audience response.[1] Charlie summarizes much of the conversation for the benefit of the slightly deaf Arthur, often to celebrate Harry's wit and insight (which, of course, isn't at all witty or insightful). The cronies endure Harry's corrections, his abuse, and his insults: "bloody jackdaws" (27); "a daft pillock" (21). Harry tells his customers what they will and will not drink; when to wait and when to drink up. The three cronies are at the very bottom of *Hangmen*'s elaborate hierarchy. Even Harry's wife Alice can rebuke them (28). They are, of course, exclusively male and derive pleasure or at least satisfaction from acting as a group.

Since 2000, McDonagh's work both on stage and in film gravitates toward the closed world of men as seen in the two brothers investigated by police detectives in *The Pillowman* or the demi-monde of assassins and hit men in *In Bruges* (2008). A lone woman appears in *A Skull in Connemara*, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, and *A Be-*

1 Although they hardly call attention to themselves, several features of classical Greek theatre course throughout *Hangmen.* McDonagh consistently denigrates his knowledge of theatre, but his incorporation of elements or variants of the formulae of classical tragedy in *Hangmen* is prodigious. In its relentless focus on capital punishment, *Hangmen* embraces unity of action. After a prologue, the play's action unfolds within twenty-four hours, suggesting unity of time and of place (although there are two locales in Oldham for most of the play).

In the first scene (or prologue), Hennessy prophetically curses Harry and Syd, "I will come back to whatever northern shithole you live in and I will fucking haunt you" (13).

handing in Spokane (2011). Harry's pub offers yet another male sphere where status is tied to power over others. In concert with Inspector Fry, the cronies deal with the journalist Clegg, first, through Fry's threat to arrest him for underage drinking or "just give him a bloody hiding" (17) and by taunting him as accountable to his mother. They handle another "stranger in the house", Mooney, by impugning his masculinity in labeling him "the Babycham Man." When Arthur refers to Mooney as "the *new* Babycham man" (33; emphasis added), we might suspect that this may be a recycled trope to demean newcomers. If these insults, corrections, and put-downs existed on a smaller scale, they might be called microaggressions, but writ large and as pervasive as they are, they are full-blown aggressions intended to reinforce and maintain the male hierarchy in their closed world. As well as insults and punishments, there are also rewards: an invitation, extended to Clegg and later Fry to speak privately with Harry upstairs. And there are free drinks that come from pleasing Harry.

Mooney's immediate recognition of this systematic intimidation and humiliation in this male domain is highly evocative of what Martin Esslin described as Harold Pinter's comedy of menace. An intricate series of aggressions, retreats, and truces, analogous to those in Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1956) or *The Homecoming* (1965), creates a recurrent pattern in *Hangmen* in which characters either claim a place in this pecking order or submit to others. Returning from the bar with his second pint, Mooney pauses to whisper something in Clegg's ear, something that may well trigger the young journalist's successful gambit to get an interview from Harry. Soon after enduring a barrage of insults about living with his mother, when Clegg proposes to leave so he can speak with Pierrepoint, "*the pub suddenly goes silent and Harry stops what he is doing to stare at [Clegg]*" (25). The moment Clegg refers to Pierrepoint as "being, y'know…the Number One hangman all them years" (25) Harry summons Clegg upstairs for the interview seen in scene three. Occasionally the game that dominates their interactions is acknowledged in the rare compliment for one-upmanship, for playing this ritualized male game well:

> FRY: Alright, lad. Very good.
>
> MOONEY: Did you like that? Did you like how I made that turn, Officer?
>
> FRY: We'll leave it at that then, shall we?
>
> MOONEY: No more of this Babycham business. I know only too well what Babycham is. I know all of its connotations. Alright?
>
> (MOONEY drinks his pint in one.) (31-32)

Mooney's downing his beer is a gesture of defiance and assertion is somehow meant to authenticate his manliness – that, certainly, is the effect it has in silencing the other men. In the final scene, strung up by what has become a mob, masculine bravado drives Mooney to defy his tormentors with cheeky taunts that fuel their rage. As he stands precariously perched on a chair with his neck in a noose, Mooney is interrogated one last time by Harry:

> HARRY: Where is she?
>
> MOONEY: She's … (*Gasping.*) She's …
>
> HARRY: Aye?
>
> MOONEY: She's up shit creek … and I don't think she's got a paddle … which is very dangerous … cos she was never a lightweight girl, was she? (94)

This enlarged cast provides not only a cross-section of society ranging from the gainfully employed (even "a servant of the Crown" [18]) to the marginally tolerated, but it also enables McDonagh to show that Mooney's lynching is made possible through the action and inaction of the many, not just the few. Not only are the many complicit in Mooney's death but also in covering up the discovery of it in order to protect those most culpable.

The pattern that characterizes every scene in *Hangmen* is one in which a character attempts to assert dominance over others and claims a privileged place in the hierarchy, to establish himself (in this case) as the alpha male by intimidating, cajoling, wheedling, insulting, threatening, or much more rarely, by charming others. In the first scene, a prologue set two years earlier, Harry asserts his dominance over six other men, first through his avuncular treatment of the condemned man. But as soon as Hennessy suggests that Harry is a lesser hangman than Pierrepoint, Harry quickly resorts to an authoritative manner: he bullies the prison guards and officials, mocks Syd's nervous stammer, and renders the prisoner semiconscious with a billyclub. Harry regulates his wife's drinking and (mistakenly) corrects his daughter Shirley over "cloud" and "clown." Shirley is repeatedly labeled a mope by both her parents. As she laments to Mooney, at fifteen "everybody just keeps is having a go at ya" (48). We see aggression in Mooney as well, especially in his highly-charged encounters with Alice and Shirley. One of Mooney's most menacing actions is to interrupt Alice and later Shirley to "shush" them. However, most of these aggressions are not directed toward women but at men by men in the form of denigration, humiliation, belittlement and, more rarely, flattery. Especially in Clegg's "interview," Harry repeatedly denigrates Pierrepoint claiming that if you do not count the Germans that were hanged during and after the war, Harry really is the number one hangman. This pattern of aggressions builds subtly throughout the play aiming to establish the alpha male.

Very late in the play, McDonagh brings a new character, Pierrepoint, on stage to correct what Harry has said in his interview in that morning's *Oldham Gazette* by asserting himself as a man of integrity. Pierrepoint demands to know if "the word sacrosanct mean[s] anything" (96) to Harry. Indeed, the word echoes through the play, as does the larger question of professional discretion, which Inspector Fry travesties in discussing the particulars of poor Phyllis Keane's incarceration in a mental home. In declining Clegg's requests for an interview, Harry repeatedly announces himself as one who "keeps my own counsel" (18, 19 [twice], 21 [twice], 27, 34) as key to his professional and personal integrity. Pierrepoint comprehensively asserting himself over the reigning alpha male, by calling Harry "a whiny, insecure, dicky-bow wearing fuckpig who was never any good at his fucking job" (96) whose "shitty, fat, nondescript Oldham's publican's fucking life" is entirely without integrity. Not only does Pierrepoint assert his own integrity but he also must refute Harry's slur that Pierrepoint's hair smells of death. While Mooney is strangled to death, Pierrepoint tells a parable of integrity (concerning a Frenchman he executed) and then slowly, methodically steps before all the pub's patrons to demand that they smell his hair.

The notion of culpability that echoes throughout *Hangmen* chimes with McDonagh's persistent concern with morality, an innate or cultural sense of what's right and wrong, and a recognition of responsibility, sometimes sought but rarely found in institutional religion. In the first scene, Hennessy ascribes "responsibility" for his execution personally to Harry and Syd. Harry blames Hennessy and, to a lesser extent, Syd for the "dust up" during his execution. To Hennessy's protestation of innocence, Harry defers any responsibility telling him: "It's the courts that's hanging ya, not us …That's nowt to do with me" (18). Similarly, when Alice objects to Harry taking Clegg upstairs because it's "a pigsty," Harry demands, "Whose fault is that?" (27). To blame others and deny responsibility is part of the larger pattern of claiming and maintaining status. Sickened by the idea that Shirley has been abducted, Syd cannot go to the police because he's culpable:

> MOONEY: That's nothing to do with me.
>
> SYD: It *is* to do with you. It's all your fault....
>
> I'll go to the police!
>
> MOONEY: You can't, can you, Syd? Culpable. Unfortunately. (72)

All of the characters on stage in the final moments are culpable. Inspector Fry twice threatens to interrupt the lynching, but does not. The chorus of alcoholics along with Syd fail to act when they might. Alice brings the arm strap. With the exceptions of Shirley and the two men executed, they are all hangmen.

The death penalty involves finality unlike any other punishment and, quite simply, this play argues that no one can reach that level of certainty. Human knowledge is inherently limited, flawed and imperfect. Syd may well have been haunted by Hennessy's curse. He tells Harry that he has doubts about Hennessy's guilt for several reasons, including testimony from a prostitute that might have exculpated Hennessy, but Harry dismisses this out of hand: "Evidence from a tart!" (62).

Now open to us is the possibility of reading McDonagh's recent plays as moral arguments against torture in the case of *The Pillowman* and against the death penalty in *Hangmen*. The play graphically shows the death penalty as indefensible: cruel, undignified, and inhumane. Of course, the death penalty was abolished in 1961 in the UK and in 1964 in Ireland (with the last execution having taken place ten years earlier); it is still legal in thirty-eight American states, including California. Although on its surface it is no less politically incorrect than his other works, *Hangmen* is yet another step in the direction of engagement with contemporary social issues towards the aspiration of Marty in *Seven Psychopaths:* towards love, towards the rejection of violence.

Mooney remains the most cryptic of McDonagh's characters. His motives remain opaque, his background obscure. He refers to the philosophers Kierkegaard and Nietzsche ("I am my own man. I do my only thing. Like Nietzsche" [66]); his vocabulary runs to "connotation" and "prurience." Like Shirley and her mother, the audience is intrigued by a man willing to venture into the extraordinarily closed, xenophobic atmosphere of Harry's pub. Mooney is abrupt, rude, and given to racial slurs and jibes. Compounding his unknowability is the fact that he uses grotesquely specific language to lead Syd and the audience to believe that he has abducted Shirley and is about to kill her. He deliberately cultivates a menacing air, is condescending, and creepy (especially in his questions about Shirley's swimsuit). By speech, behavior, and age, he is unlike everyone in the play except Hennessy. Both are mistakenly (if we doubt Hennessy's guilt) linked with the abuse and murder of a young woman. They share a London accent, and even in the most vulnerable situations they are cheeky and provocative, even when they face imminent death. Both are struck by Harry using what the stage directions stipulate is "*the same billyclub*" (89); they both complain of a "bad wrist" (14 and 91) and refer to the people executing them as "nincompoops" (13 and 93). The lynching of Mooney in the final moments is thereby unequivocally linked to Hennessy's execution. Mooney does the logical thing to demonstrate his innocence in Shirley's disappearance: he returns to the pub as only an innocent would. Caught up in a mob action in Mooney's lynching, Harry and his pals are not only hypocritical bullies, they are irrational hypocritical bullies. We know Mooney is innocent and we are left believing that Hennessy was as well.

The conclusion of *Hangmen* illustrates yet another crucial difference between *Hangmen* and much of his earlier work: the lack of closure. McDonagh's previous plays typically ended with a satisfying moment of theatrical legerdemain. The entrance of the supposedly dead cat, Wee Thomas, in the final moments of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* is perhaps the best example. McDonagh might have had Shirley return home moments earlier or might have arranged for Pierrepoint to arrive moments later. But Mooney's death and his innocence are both key. Consequently, the end of *Hangmen* leaves many questions unanswered. Did Syd seek out Mooney or vice versa? Did Mooney really know Hennessy as he tells Syd he did? What were Mooney's motives? Did he act to avenge Hennessy's unjust execution? After Mooney's death, these and others are questions that we cannot hope to answer. Mooney is, finally, an unknowable character. Mooney tells Syd that he picked Syd out, although Syd challenges this absolutely (70). Mooney is a consummately unreliable narrator, but the ending of *Hangmen* reminds us of death's finality. Despite the epistemological instability McDonagh explores, we can know some things are beyond doubt and that there are absolutes. We know that Mooney did not abuse and murder Shirley and that he did not deserve to die. There are truths: Mooney's death and his innocence being two examples.

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