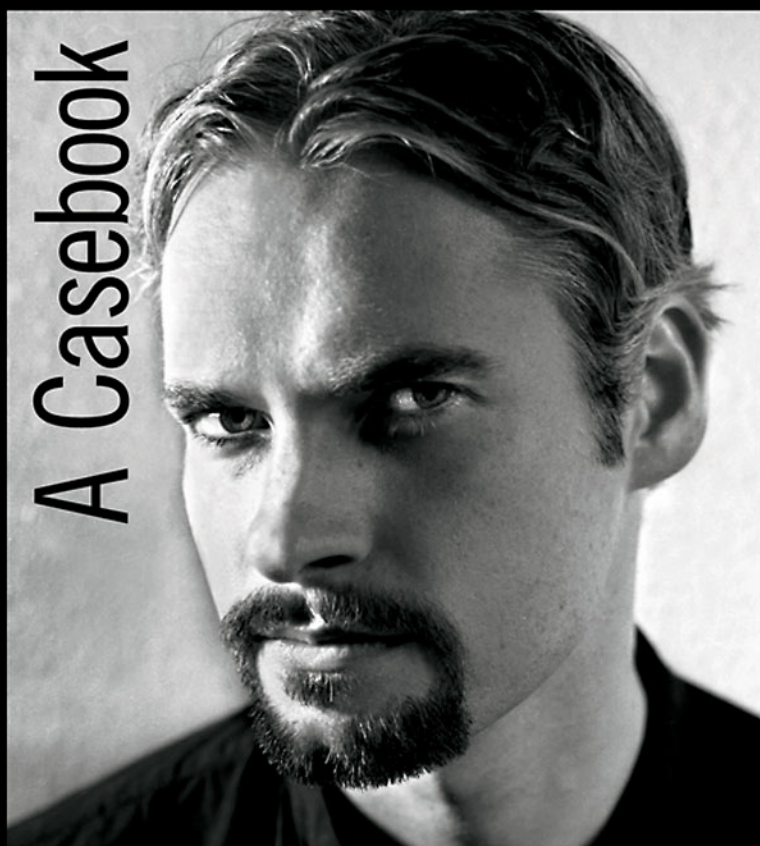


# Martin McDonagh



Edited by Richard Rankin Russell

# Martin McDonagh

“Is McDonagh to be considered a self-consciously postmodern parodist, an ethical satirist or an anarchic cultural bother-boy? This volume of new, informed, and well-argued essays will enable readers to make up their own minds.”

Nicholas Grene, *Trinity College Dublin*

“These lucid, informed and perceptive essays convincingly articulate the global reach of McDonagh’s plays and establish him as a world dramatist.”

Anthony Roche, *University College Dublin*

This book represents the first collection of original critical material on Martin McDonagh, one of the most celebrated young playwrights of the last decade. Credited with reinvigorating contemporary Irish drama, his dark, despairing comedies have been performed extensively both on Broadway and in the West End, culminating in an Olivier Award for *The Pillowman* and an Academy Award for his short film *Six Shooter*.

In *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, Richard Rankin Russell brings together a variety of theoretical perspectives – from globalisation to the gothic – to survey McDonagh’s plays in unprecedented critical depth. Specially commissioned essays cover topics such as identity politics, the shadow of violence and the role of Catholicism in the work of this most precocious of contemporary dramatists.

Contributors: Marion Castleberry, Brian Cliff, Joan Fitzpatrick Dean, Maria Doyle, Laura Eldred, José Laners, Patrick Lonergan, Stephanie Pocock, Richard Rankin Russell, Karen Vandeveld.

**Richard Rankin Russell** is Associate Professor of English at Baylor University, Texas. His essays on modern playwrights have appeared in *Eire-Ireland*, *Comparative Drama*, *New Hibernia Review*, *Modern Drama* and *Journal of Modern Literature*.

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# Martin McDonagh

## A Casebook

Edited by Richard Rankin Russell

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## Notes on contributors

**Marion Castleberry** is Professor of Theatre and Chair of Graduate Theatre Studies at Baylor University in Texas. A Horton Foote expert, he is Founding President of the Horton Foote Society and has published extensively on that playwright, including an edition of Foote's essays entitled *Horton Foote: The Genesis of an American Playwright* (2004). He is also Artistic Director of the American Actors Company and co-founder of the Horton Foote American Playwrights Festival. His most recent directing credit was for the Off-Broadway production of Horton Foote's *The Traveling Lady* (2006), which was nominated for a Drama Desk Award for Best Revival of a Play.

**Brian Cliff** is currently a lecturer in Irish Studies in the School of English at Trinity College, Dublin. He has also taught at Montclair State University, Emory University, and the Georgia Institute of Technology. His primary research is in Irish culture and literature, and he has published and presented on Irish theatre history and on authors including Paul Muldoon, Frank McGuinness, Emma Donoghue, and Anne Enright. His current book project is "Border Writing: Community and Contemporary Irish Literature." He has also co-edited (with Éibhear Walshe) a collection of essays, *Representing the Troubles: Texts and Images, 1970–2000* (2004).

**Joan FitzPatrick Dean** is Distinguished Teaching Professor of English at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, where she teaches drama and modern British, American, and Irish literature. Her books include *Riot And Great Anger: Stage Censorship in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (2004) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (2003).

**Maria Doyle** is Associate Professor of English at the University of West Georgia where she teaches drama and Irish studies. She has published in venues including *Theatre Journal*, *Modern Drama*, and *New Hibernia Review* on playwrights such as Marina Carr, Conor McPherson, and Stewart Parker and is currently writing a book on Marina Carr's drama.



**Laura Eldred** is an assistant Professor of English at Lebanon Valley College in Pennsylvania. She was previously a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she earned her Ph.D. in English Literature under Weldon Thornton. Her essay, "Martin McDonagh's Blend of Tradition and Horrific Innovation" appeared in *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories* (2006), and she has published other articles on authors such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Patrick McCabe.

**José Lanthers** is Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where she also serves on the advisory and curriculum committees of the Center for Celtic Studies. She has published widely on Irish fiction and drama, including the books *Missed Understandings: A Study of Stage Adaptations of James Joyce* (1988) and *Unauthorized Versions: Irish Menippean Satire, 1919–1952* (2000).

**Patrick Lonergan** lectures in the English Department at the National University of Ireland in Galway. He edits the "Books" section of *Irish Theatre Magazine* and regularly reviews theater in the West of Ireland for *The Irish Times*. He has published several essays on Martin McDonagh and is currently writing a book on globalization and Irish theater.

**Stephanie Pocock** earned her M.A. in English literature at Baylor University, where Richard Rankin Russell directed her Master's thesis on Ibsen and Caryl Churchill. An article on Churchill's play, *Light Shining on Buckinghamshire*, drawn from that thesis, was published in *Modern Drama* in 2007. Miss Pocock is currently a Ph.D. candidate in English literature at the University of Notre Dame.

**Richard Rankin Russell** is Associate Professor of English at Baylor University in Texas. His essays on the dramatists Stewart Parker, Marina Carr, Brian Friel, Gary Mitchell, and Tom Stoppard have appeared in *Eire-Ireland*, *Comparative Drama*, *New Hibernia Review*, *Modern Drama*, and *Journal of Modern Literature*, respectively.

**Karen Vandevelde** took her Ph.D. from the National University of Ireland at Galway and has taught there and at the University of Limerick. She currently is Research Policy Advisor at Ghent University (Belgium) in the Department of Research Affairs. Her book, *The Alternative Dramatic Revival in Ireland, 1897–1913*, was published 2005, and she has published articles on Irish drama in a variety of journals.

# Abbreviations

The following is a list of plays by Martin McDonagh and their abbreviations used parenthetically throughout these essays. Full publication information is given in the individual bibliographies following each essay.

<i>BQLOP</i>	<i>The Beauty Queen of Leenane and Other Plays (A Skull in Connemara, The Lonesome West)</i>
<i>Plays 1</i>	<i>Plays 1 (The Beauty Queen of Leenane, A Skull in Connemara, The Lonesome West)</i>
<i>TC</i>	<i>The Cripple of Inishmaan</i>
<i>TL</i>	<i>The Lieutenant of Inishmore</i>
<i>TP</i>	<i>The Pillowman</i>

## General Editor's note

Routledge is pleased to present *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, as McDonagh is one of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' most promising young Irish playwrights. Born in England of Irish parents, McDonagh has written prolifically for the stage. He is best known for his Leenane trilogy, his Aran Islands trilogy, and the Olivier prize-winning 2004 play, *The Pillowman*. Critics have noticed curious combinations of Synge, Mamet and Pinter in McDonagh's writing style, to which I would add Sam Shepard. (I am thinking of the multiple cans of peas in McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan*.) However, it is safe to say that McDonagh represents modern Ireland uniquely and combines traditional lyrical beauty with violence and ironic humor.

Appropriately, this volume is edited by Richard Rankin Russell, an associate professor at Baylor University, who is quickly becoming a major scholar of Irish studies. While Russell's specialty is contemporary Irish drama, he is adept at earlier Irish drama, too, as his recent articles have proven.

Kimball King  
General Editor

# Introduction

In 1994, an unemployed young London-born man of Irish descent, Martin McDonagh, wrote the drafts of seven plays in nine months, the entirety of his dramatic corpus to date (O'Toole, "A Mind in Connemara" 44). While he has insisted that he will never write another play, that remains to be seen, and the existing plays offer a series of challenges to traditional theatrical expectations—in Ireland and abroad. McDonagh's dramas refuse to conform to any lingering stereotypical notions of Irish identity as bucolic or nationalistic. In his rise to fame, however, he has deliberately courted another Irish stereotype—the pugnacious, drunken "Paddy"—most notably when he told Sean Connery to "fuck off" after Connery warned him and his brother John McDonagh to be quiet during the London *Evening Standard* Theatre Awards ceremony in November 1996, a ceremony at which McDonagh received the Most Promising Playwright Prize (O'Toole, "A Mind in Connemara" 45). One is reminded of Brendan Behan's drunken, bumbling interview on the BBC Panorama program with Malcolm Muggeridge in 1956. Although Behan did not even curse and mumbled many of his answers, he quickly helped make the incident an anarchist critique of the staid London establishment. McDonagh has more explicitly claimed to endorse such a viewpoint, telling Fintan O'Toole in interview that his rejection of the cult of sentimentality for dead "martyrs" of the Irish Republican Army in the 1970s and 1980s was based on his immersion in punk rock music such as the Sex Pistols and the Pogues: "I was always coming from a left-wing or pacifist or anarchist angle that started with punk, and which was against all nationalisms" (O'Toole, "A Mind in Connemara" 42).<sup>1</sup>

McDonagh's general contrariness may well have helped generate his dramatic conflicts, many of which feature characters who argue endlessly over petty objects and rehash old arguments with disturbing ferocity, perhaps none more so than the brothers Coleman and Valene Connor in *The Lonesome West* (1997). Anthony Roche has shown how such arguments in McDonagh may have their roots in Irish dramatic antecedents such as Lady Gregory's short play, *The Workhouse Ward* (1908), which features two older male characters divided, yet bound together by fighting ("Re-Working

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*The Workhouse Ward*"). Such quarrelsome companionship typifies many of the relationships between pairs of characters in McDonagh's plays, such as Maureen and her mother Mag in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), McDonagh's first play to be performed, and between Katurian and his brother Michal in *The Pillowman* (2003), his most recent play to be staged. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a Martin McDonagh drama without such relationships.

Partly because McDonagh's plays regularly feature routine violence, they have engendered great critical controversy from the start. Critics have argued over his representations of the elusive, abstract invention that is "Irishness," discussed whether or not he endorses the violence he depicts, and wondered whether or not his work has any real artistic merit. Fintan O'Toole, the prominent Irish drama critic for *The Irish Times*, has long defended McDonagh in a series of reviews and articles that note how his plays such as *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* successfully blend elements of "pre-modern" and "postmodern" Ireland and "the trivial and the tragic" in an effort to offer a clearer picture of western contemporary Ireland partly imagined by McDonagh (*"The Beauty Queen of Leenane"* 379, 381). For example, in his 1996 review of *Beauty Queen*, O'Toole suggests that "The 1950s is laid over the 1990s, giving the play's apparent realism the ghostly, dizzying feel of a superimposed photograph. All the elements that make up the picture are real, but their combined effect is one that questions the very idea of reality" (*"The Beauty Queen of Leenane"* 379–80). Such an effect creates a surrealism that suffuses McDonagh's plays and immerses his audience in an ambiguous world seemingly bereft of morality.

Audiences naturally look for an anchor in the topsy-turvy world of McDonagh's plays and he gives them one in his theory of theater, which is simplicity itself. He has repeatedly noted, in the relatively rare interviews that he has given, that the essence of his art is storytelling, a concern he shares with important earlier Irish dramatists such as W. B. Yeats, John Synge, Lady Gregory, and others. For instance, in a 2005 interview with Jesse McKinley for *The New York Times*, McDonagh explains that he views the theater as "a box to tell a story in, basically," adding, "And that's a beautiful thing" (quoted in McKinley N. pag.).

McDonagh grew up in both the Elephant and Castle area of south London and nearby Camberwell in a working-class family and was raised by a father from Connemara and a mother from Sligo. He spent six weeks every summer in his childhood with his father's family in Connemara, in western Ireland, and the Irish-inflected English he heard there spoken by his relatives and locals served as the catalyst for his playwriting. He told Dominic Cavendish in 2001 that "Writing in an Irish idiom freed me up as a writer. Until then, my dialogue was a poor imitation of Pinter and Mamet. I used to try and write stories set in London, but it was just too close to home. Now I've shaken off those influences, I can move back"

(quoted in Cavendish N. pag.). The idiom spoken in all of McDonagh's plays except *The Pillowman* immediately reminded critics of the Irish-English dialect in John Synge's dramas from the early twentieth century, but McDonagh is cosmopolitan in his literary and dramatic influences, having cited Jose Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, David Mamet, and Harold Pinter as exemplars (O'Toole, "A Mind in Connemara" 43, 44). He was so influenced, in fact, by Mamet and Pinter, that he turned to Ireland and this dialect in part to disguise the influences of these two dramatic giants upon him.

But Irish playwrights, especially Synge, in his exploration of lonely locales in the western area of the republic, have clearly influenced McDonagh. Shaun Richards has even argued that McDonagh's success is predicated upon his successful intertextual engagement with Synge's plays, particularly *The Playboy of the Western World* ("The Outpouring of a Morbid, Unhealthy Mind"). Not only influential for later writers such as McDonagh, Synge's dramatic evocation of the strange blend of tragedy and comedy in the daily lives of inhabitants of the Aran Islands in the 1890s has also proven uncannily prescient for understanding changes to the very genre of drama in the second half of the twentieth century.

One of the critical commonplaces about drama after World War Two concerns its inherently mixed nature. David L. Hirst, for example, notes that post-war tragicomedy is comprised of a "bewildering variety of theatrical idioms [...]" (121). It is this genre that is perhaps most suited to appreciating the continuing dilemma of being human in our complex and fragmentary world, as Beckett, perhaps most memorably of all contemporary playwrights, has shown. Being able to laugh at the most grotesque representations of cruelty onstage, for example, ideally serves not to trivialize the cruelty, but to recognize it and yet reject its power over us. McDonagh has admitted that "I walk that line between comedy and cruelty because I think one illuminates the other. And yeah, I tend to push things as far as I can because I think you can see things more clearly through exaggeration than through reality" (quoted in O'Hagan 24). The often uneasy laughter that attends productions of McDonagh's plays testifies to the audience's discomfort with such a strategy, but it is a strategy with far more of an ethical force than is sometimes admitted in discussions of the playwright's work.

The evolving criticism on many contemporary plays eventually shows their underlying ethical aims, but even sophisticated critics can refuse to recognize this authorial strategy in plays by authors such as McDonagh that present such persistent violence so forcefully. Hirst argues that "The strength of modern drama resides chiefly in its discovery of fresh theatrical structures which serve a serious ethical and social purpose" (128). A significant strand of criticism of Martin McDonagh's work, however, refuses to believe that there is any unifying ethic behind the plays: for example, Nicholas Grene, writing on *The Beauty Queen of Leenane's* project of

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demythologizing Ireland, argues that “With a mother like Mag, with a home like Leenane, matricide is all but justified” (47).<sup>2</sup> And yet, as Richards has shown, McDonagh shares with John Synge, M. J. Molloy, and Tom Murphy a concern to highlight “the economic desolation of the west [of Ireland] and [explore] its negative impact on the lives of his characters” (253). By destroying stereotypical views of western Ireland as an area populated by happy peasants and alerting audiences to the continuing poverty endemic in certain segments of the West despite the rise of the Celtic Tiger, McDonagh’s plays set in that area enact a vital ethical function. Additionally, by holding a mirror up to his audience and showing us the lack of limits to our breathless fascination with violence and cruelty, McDonagh shows us that we desire to watch others’ discomfort and even laugh at it, a point made by several of the essays collected here.<sup>3</sup>

The present volume of essays subtly explores previously unrecognized dimensions of McDonagh’s drama and persistently questions many previous interpretations of his work. They are remarkable for both their sustained attention to the text of the plays themselves and to critical questions that arise from careful readings of McDonagh’s drama through various theoretical lenses. Collectively, these essays demonstrate that far from being settled, the issues raised by Martin McDonagh are vitally important to both our understanding of contemporary drama and for appreciating the complexity of being human in an increasingly chaotic world.

In the opening essay, Jose Lanters draws on her previous work dealing with Irish Menippean satire to articulate a new way of reading McDonagh’s drama: as postmodern satire. Postmodern satire, as she argues, views metanarratives with skepticism and tends to destabilize them, characteristics that account for the varied responses to McDonagh’s work. Through her interpretation of the signifying maneuvers of the various narratives in *The Pillowman*, Lanters leads us to a new appreciation of how McDonagh parodies and deconstructs the “Irishness” of his five plays set in Ireland.

Joan Dean’s essay on McDonagh’s stagecraft explores the surprisingly conventional theatrical tropes that the playwright often deploys, such as a character’s sudden reappearance from the dead, in order to subvert audience expectations and highlight his works’ performative nature. Although his dramaturgy may be conventional, Dean argues that McDonagh’s manipulation of timeless stage gimmicks generates epistemological uncertainty on the part of his characters. Even when two endings are possible, as in the conclusion of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, McDonagh offers his audiences unexpected satisfaction and closure after overturning a series of stereotypes about the Irish and the West of Ireland.

Several of the contributors attend primarily to one play, in the process illuminating heretofore unrecognized elements of McDonagh’s work. For example, Marion Castleberry, a playwright, director, and theater professor, shows how McDonagh creates comedy in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* by variously juxtaposing the mundane and the shocking and featuring

characters who obsess over trivial things in the midst of cruel conversations. Castleberry references the ground-breaking work of Vivian Mercier in *The Irish Comic Tradition* (1962) and for good reason: McDonagh's comic blending of the macabre, grotesque, and fantasy connects him to the oral and written Irish comic tradition from its oral roots through its twentieth-century manifestations.<sup>4</sup>

Catholicism, long a favorite whipping boy for a range of Irish writers, figures prominently in McDonagh's work, but critics have either dismissed it as mere background or played down any sense of the transcendent associated with it in analyses of McDonagh's work. Stephanie Pocock, however, explains here that the character of Father Welsh in *The Lonesome West* is actually far more humane and moral than critics have generally suggested in spite of his ineptitude and choice to take his own life. Pocock argues that the heart of this under-valued play lies in McDonagh's approving treatment of his sacrificial priest, a treatment that places McDonagh in a long line of Irish writers such as George Moore and James Joyce who, despite disdain for the Catholic Church in its institutionalized form, have nonetheless offered up similarly sympathetic priest characters in their fiction.

The work of any author that stands the test of time finally surmounts its immediate physical setting and attains a universality. Karen Vandeveld shows how several Flemish and Dutch adaptations of McDonagh's *The Leenane Trilogy* overcome language barriers and communicate a different set of meanings to their continental audiences than those conveyed by the original, more realistic production by Irish director Garry Hynes with the Druid and Royal Court theater companies. Vandeveld suggests that the re-ordering of crucial scenes across *The Leenane Trilogy* and the resulting four-hour production emphasize a contemporary European dramatic focus on ambiguity and meta-theatricality, qualities that are latent in McDonagh's scripts.

Maria Doyle's essay explores a series of McDonagh's plays that employ violence in unexpected ways and with unexpected consequences for audience perception. Visceral scenes such as the drug dealer hanging by his ankles in the opening of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* draw audiences in by their immediacy, an immediacy that film, McDonagh's most influential source, cannot achieve. Doyle draws on conventions inherent to the Grand Guignol and on the searingly intimate violence of contemporary British playwright Sarah Kane's *Blasted* to demonstrate how McDonagh both borrows from these exemplars and, at times, inverts them to manipulate audience expectations about violence, implicating us in the process, an inherently ethical maneuver.

While several contributors touch upon McDonagh's love of film, Laura Eldred compellingly explains the influence of the horror film in particular upon McDonagh's drama, especially by assessing that genre's creation and subsequent destruction of monsters. She shows that McDonagh often



## 6 Introduction

creates monsters but then leads the audience or reader into sympathy for them, rather than killing them, subverting the monster's destruction we have been conditioned to expect by our own viewing of horror films. McDonagh's sympathetic monsters, such as Maureen in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and Padraic in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, refuse to conform to stereotypical, romantic constructions of Irish national identity that obtained during the nadir of Irish nationalism under former leader Eamon de Valera and, somewhat disturbingly, offer counter-narratives to a neatly defined nationalist history. Like Doyle, Eldred suggests how the audience is thus indicted in McDonagh's dramatic depictions of violence as we reveal our own bloodlust.

Brian Cliff, in his contribution, shows that *The Pillowman*, McDonagh's least Irish play, inscribes a narrative of potential redemption into a text that is suffused with the torture of adults and children as well as murder. Cliff carefully surveys this strange play's performance history in locales ranging from London to New York to Japan, unfolds its intricate plot, and subtly discusses its critical reception before showing how many of these responses misinterpret the play's conclusion, suggesting its real emphasis is on unexpected grace in the form of the policeman Ariel's salvaging of the writer Katurian's stories.

One of the great pleasures in editing a collection of essays is the ability to include contributions that would normally not be published in journals for reasons of length. The final essay in the collection, by Patrick Lonergan, an expert on both McDonagh and globalism and its cultural impact, is a masterly survey of the inspirations for McDonagh's drama from a variety of sources around the world, including American, Australian, and English soap operas, American movies directed by Quentin Tarantino, and the British movie *Shallow Grave*. He lucidly and convincingly details these influences and traces their impact on McDonagh's corpus by carefully explaining how his use of a peripheral Irish idiom—his use of a recognizable rural Irish dialect and setting—generates the marked mobility of his plays across national boundaries. The result of this process has resulted in a conceptual authenticity instantly recognizable in its cultural sources, which now replaces the typically authentic aura of the live stage production. Lonergan's essay gestures toward the movement, openness, and freedom implicit in McDonagh's work and serves as a fitting conclusion to a collection celebrating a body of work that continues to travel well.

## Notes

- 1 See John Waters's essay "The Irish Mummy" for a thoughtful brief exploration of McDonagh's plays through the music of the Pogues. Waters suggests that McDonagh shares the Pogues' attitude of both connection to and distance from Ireland and that this status creates the curious blend of "loathing and pride, attachment and rejection, assault and embrace" common to their respective art:

- "The Pogues, by virtue of profound connections with Ireland had access to the culture without necessarily being hidebound by its various paralyzing elements. Being mainly outsiders in the sense of being removed by a generation and a stretch of water, they achieved a detachment which enabled them to see something we all knew but could not speak. In a sense, their removal allowed them to participate in the organic growth of the culture in a more authentic manner than if they had fully belonged. So it is with Martin McDonagh" (31, 31–32).
- 2 See, too, the far angrier response from Vic Merriman, in his essays "Decolonization Postponed: The Theatre of Tiger Trash" and "Settling for More: Excess and Success in Contemporary Irish Drama." In the first essay, Merriman argues that McDonagh's first four stage plays "stage a sustained dystopic vision of a land of gratuitous violence, craven money-grubbing and crass amorality. No loyalty, either communal, personal or familial can survive in this arid landscape. Death, affection, responsibility appear as meaningless intrusions in the self-obsessed orbits of child-adults" (273). See Richards's "'The Outpouring of a Morbid, Unhealthy Mind'" for a penetrating refutation of Merriman's argument. The second Merriman essay generally recycles the essential argument of the first essay, often *verbatim*.
  - 3 For a compelling moral reading of McDonagh's most controversial play, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, see Catherine Rees's essay, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly." Rees argues that McDonagh is following Synge in part by "writing within this classical Irish tradition of the idyllic, pastoral countryside, while savagely attacking the sentimentality of the terrorist movement as a noble response to 'the love of one's land' by employing the overt and dramatic tactics of the London playwrights of the late 1990s, the so-called 'in yer face' British drama. It is this combination of dramatic styles which makes *The Lieutenant* so hard for critics" (30). Rees's essay explicitly critiques the claim made by Mary Luckhurst in her essay, "Martin McDonagh's *Lieutenant of Inishmore*: Selling (-Out) to the English," that the outdated constructs of rural Ireland in that play pander to English critics' continuing stereotypes of Ireland and the Irish mainly to generate more money for McDonagh.
  - 4 Anthony Roche was the first critic to suggest that Mercier's conception of "the Irish comic tradition," in particular elements of satire, the macabre, and the grotesque" is helpful to understanding McDonagh's drama. See his "Re-Working *The Workhouse Ward*" 173.

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# 1 The identity politics of Martin McDonagh

*José Lanthers*

Martin McDonagh has been accused by his most hostile critics of writing shallow soap operas and, in his “Irish” plays, of trivializing Irish politics and perpetuating Irish stereotypes. Writing in the *Independent*, Paul Taylor calls *The Pillowman* “mere entertainment” written by a playwright with “a disturbingly defective moral sense” (N. pag.) Vera Lustig terms his rural Irish tragicomedies “empty,” and accuses McDonagh of misogyny: “The men [ . . . ] are naturalistic creations; while the women are painted in crude brush-strokes” (42). Mary Luckhurst bluntly argues that McDonagh “relies on monolithic, prejudicial constructs of rural Ireland to generate himself an income” (35), and objects to the “orgy of random violence” in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, perpetrated by characters who are “all psychopathic morons” incapable of “meaningful political discussion” (36 emphasis in original). However, I will argue that it is precisely through the erasure of boundaries between the trivial and the profound, the fragmentation of identity, and the radical destabilization of traditional norms and values, including those relating to gender and sexuality, that McDonagh’s postmodern plays engage satirically with the foundations of Irish nationalism. Jean-François Lyotard has argued that in contemporary society and culture, “[t]he grand narrative has lost its credibility” (37). Postmodern satire rejects and discredits metanarratives, and focuses instead on the radical contingencies of what Lyotard calls *petites histoires* or “*petits récits*” (60): small-scale fictions that are always situational and preliminary. In doing so, postmodern satire exposes the inadequacies of all categories, and indeed of language itself, not (just) as an act of nihilism, but as a way of critiquing the ideology of bourgeois society and the nation state.

The point Stanley Fish makes about irony—that it is “a risky business because one cannot at all be certain that readers will be directed to the ironic meanings one intends” (181)—holds particularly true for McDonagh’s satire: some audience members see his depictions of Ireland as negative representations of the “real thing,” others interpret them as grotesque parodies of stale clichés about the nation and its inhabitants, while still others regard them romantically as the quintessence of Irishness. One female audience member reportedly called *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* “disgusting. I’ve never seen anything so racist” (quoted in Tymoczko 16),