

Conflict, Carnage, and Cats: Toward a Comic Cú Chulainn in Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*

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*Acres will be dense with dead,
as he mows the battlefield,
leaving a thousand lopped heads:
these things I do not conceal.*

*Blood spurts from soldiers' bodies,
released by this hero's hand.
He kills on sight, scattering
Deda's followers and clan.
Women wail at the corpse-mound
because of him—the Forge-Hound.*

—Fedelm, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*

So all this terror has been for absolutely nothing?

—Davey, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*

Martin McDonagh is one of Ireland's¹ most visible and controversial theatrical exports, and perhaps none of his works has garnered as much controversy and critical discourse as *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001), the story of rogue INLA terrorist Padraic's return to his father's home in the Aran Islands, where he learns of the death of his precious cat, Wee Thomas, and enacts bloody revenge. McDonagh's plays can be seen as a bricolage of traditional Irish drama, imagery, folklore, and, interestingly, stereotypes, melded with the films of Quentin Tarantino and John Woo; violence and humor commingle with an exaggerated image of the "stage Irish," resulting in a troubling tapestry of tradition and iconoclasm. A great deal of scholarship has been devoted to interrogating his connections to earlier Irish playwrights such as Synge, O'Casey, Yeats,

and Gregory.² However, while much has been made of these playwrights' affinities for folklore, oral tradition, and mythology, there have not been similar attempts to link McDonagh or his works to these ancient tales and traditions. That said, there are nonetheless certain thematic, ideological, and figural connections between Cú Chulainn,³ the epic hero of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* of Ireland's mythological Ulster Cycle, and *Lieutenant's* Padraic. In the following pages, I will utilize the mythology of Cú Chulainn as a lens through which to view McDonagh's contemporary exploration of the Irish "hero" as it pertains to both theatrical and cultural spheres. Through a comparative study of the two texts, I shall examine the ways in which *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* satirizes ideologies permeating the sectarian conflict in Ireland during the latter half of the twentieth century. To that end, I will analyze McDonagh's comic subversion of Cú Chulainn's status as a symbol for Irish nationalism, leading to the development and construction of a postmodern comic hero for a divided Ireland.⁴

Briefly, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, set on the titular island in 1993, tells the story of Padraic, a rogue INLA member who, having splintered off from a smaller splinter group, returns to the cottage of his father in Inishmore after hearing that his beloved cat, Wee Thomas, has fallen ill. When he arrives, he finds that his cat is not sick, but has been killed; Christy, a former colleague of Padraic, has seen to the cat's death in order to lure Padraic to Inishmore so that he might kill him. So begins a gruesome and bloody tale of revenge, or perhaps more accurately, vengeance. After unintentionally seducing Mairead through their mutual appreciation of violence, Padraic kills Christy and his two cohorts, as well as one orange cat (Mairead's Sir Roger). Mairead discovers Sir Roger's corpse and kills Padraic in another act of revenge, before adopting the title of "Lieutenant of Inishmore" and vowing to mount a full investigation into the cat's death. After all this slaughter, Wee Thomas enters the cottage, alive and well—the original dead cat was a case of mistaken identity. Mairead's brother, Davey, and Donny, having survived the massacre, try to kill Wee Thomas in retribution for all the blood shed in his name, but cannot bring themselves to do so and instead feed him a bowl of Frosties as the play ends. Written in 1994, but not performed until 2001⁵ (presumably due to anxieties surrounding the play's controversial material), *Lieutenant* is, to date, McDonagh's only overtly political work, set amidst and referring to

the violence of the period known as “the Troubles.”⁶ Indeed, the play takes on the form of a farcical “living newspaper” of sorts, where references to real-world violence meld with the play’s chaotic comic spirit; the comic center of the play is the wildly unpredictable and bloodthirsty Padraic, who bears more than a passing similarity to the mythological Cú Chulainn.

Both Cú Chulainn and Padraic have notorious reputations that precede them. For example, Fergus describes Cú Chulainn in detail:

You’ll not meet a tougher opponent—no spear-point sharper, quicker or more piercing; no fighter fiercer, no raven more ravenous, no one of his age a third as brave, no lion more ferocious; no bulwark in battle, no mighty sledgehammer, no shield of soldiers, no nemesis of armies, as able as him. There’s no one of his generation to match him for build, for gear, for fearsome looks or sweetness of expression; none to match his splendid form and voice, his stern strength, his striking-power and battle-bravery, his doom-dealing fire and fury and his violence in victory, his skill in stalking and slaughtering game, his swiftness, sureness and unconquerable rage, not to mention the feat of nine men on every spear-point—no, there’s none to match Cú Chulainn.⁷

This description could well describe Padraic, though it is doubtful that any of the play’s characters—with the exception of Mairead—would offer such praise for his character and deeds. Indeed, the characters of *Lieutenant* generally regard Padraic with fear, disdain, or trepidation:

Davey: As if he wasn’t mad enough already. Padraic’s mad enough for seven people. Don’t they call him ‘Mad Padraic’?

Donny: They do.

Davey: Isn’t it him the IRA wouldn’t let in because he was *too* mad?

Donny: It was. And he never forgave them for it. (7)

Similarly, Donny knows the violent prowess of his son, telling Davey, “I can just see his face after he hears [about Wee Thomas]. And I can just see your face too, after he hears your fault it was. I can see him plugging holes in it with a stick” (7). Furthermore, Cú Chulainn is described as having both “fearsome looks” and “sweetness of expression” concomitantly; this too can be said for Padraic. When we first see him, he is torturing James, a drug dealer and fellow Republican Catholic; having removed two of his toenails, he tells James that he is about to remove one of his nipples. For all his violence, however, Padraic reveals a sensitive side, remarking,

“[I]t was only two [toenails] I took off, and them only small ones.... You’d hardly notice them gone.... If I hadn’t been such a nice fella I would’ve taken one toenail off of separate feet, but I didn’t, I took two toenails off the one foot, so that it’s only the one foot you’ll have to be limping on and not the two. If it had been the two you’d’ve found it a devil to be getting about” (11), before offering James the choice of which nipple he would prefer amputated. Here McDonagh comically reveals Padraic to be not only ruthless, but similarly sympathetic and kind-hearted as well. Furthermore, upon hearing of Wee Thomas’s supposed ailment, he begins “*crying heavily*” (14), and when he arrives at Donny’s house, he calls out for his beloved cat, whispering, “Thomas? Wee Thomas? Here, baby. Daddy’s home. Are you not well, loveen? I’ve some ringworm pellets here for ya” (38). However, when he realizes that Wee Thomas is missing, replaced by a decoy (Mairead’s orange cat, Sir Roger, covered in shoe polish), “*He shoots the sleeping cat, point blank. It explodes in a ball of blood and bones. Davey begins screaming hysterically. Donny puts his hands to his head. Padraic shoves Davey’s face into the bloody cat to stop him screaming*” (40). His immediate and aggressive shift from “sweetness” to “fearsome,” to use the terms associated with Cú Chulainn, reveals him to be very much aligned with the mythological hero.

Padraic is further revealed to have connections to Cú Chulainn through the notion of *fír fer*, or “fair play,” a crucial framework for war and heroism in the *Táin*.⁸ *Fír fer* establishes the rules of battle and the code of honor, innately known to the warriors and heroes of the *Táin*, though as Philip O’Leary notes, Cú Chulainn “manages to bend the rules just short of the breaking point.”⁹ Indeed, throughout the *Táin*, rules are established, hearkened to, and, through Cú Chulainn, challenged in their flexibility but never broken, despite his seemingly uncontrollable violence and his penchant for decapitation. Despite this creativity, Cú Chulainn affirms, “All I need is fair play and fair fight” (67), suggesting that for all his murderous creativity and bloodthirsty cunning, Cú Chulainn is intrinsically honorable. Likewise, Padraic, though described as “mad” and seemingly heartless, continually invokes a number of seemingly arbitrary standards and limitations in regard to his employment of violence, though his honor is undercut by his hypocrisy. For example, when torturing James, he remarks, “You do push your filthy drugs on the schoolchildren of

Ireland, and if you concentrated exclusive on the Protestants I'd say all well and good, but you don't, you take all comers" (12), blatantly suggesting that the rules he enforces can be broken if doing so serves the aims of the INLA or IRA. James, Padraic also notes, is a "valid target," a phrase used by the IRA "to justify attacks on off-duty soldiers, on establishments frequented by the military, and on individuals who worked with the military in some capacity."¹⁰ Padraic later reveals that even the INLA is flawed, for when Mairead asks, "Does it make you think twice about the INLA, so, that they let fellas like Christy in, would do that to a cat?" he replies, "Sure, you do get bad apples in every organisation" (58). Here Padraic overtly disregards his own notion of *fír fer* as it applies to his actions, condemning Christy for killing a cat, when, in the previous scene, he himself shot Sir Roger. Furthermore, Padraic feels that the murder of his own father (Donny) is warranted retribution for the death of Wee Thomas, though he expresses sympathy toward Mairead's brother, Davey, stating, "I was all set to blow [Davey's] head off now, along with the feck beside him [Donny], but if he's family I won't. I'll have some respect," which he humorously follows with, "I'll kill me dad on his own" (53). His sense of *fír fer* even seems to infect Mairead's attitudes toward her newfound profession as a terrorist by the play's conclusion:

Davey: What did Mam say to you when you left?
Mairead: She said good luck and try not to go blowing up kids.
Davey: And what did you say?
Mairead: I said I'd try but I'd be making no promises.
Davey: And what did she say?
Mairead: She said so long as you try is the main thing.
Davey: I suppose it is. (57)

Likewise, she decides to "make a list of valid targets. From one to twenty. Like *Top of the Pops*" (60). What makes Padraic's (and eventually Mairead's) notion of *fír fer* humorous in comparison to Cú Chulainn's approach, then, is that he actually breaks his own rules. Padraic's hypocrisy is apparent to everyone except him: he is, ironically, a cat-killer who murders cat-killers. There is a jarring lack of honor in Padraic's own code of honor, having been replaced with vitriol and malice, and this disconnect is a source of a great deal of the play's dark humor.

Padraic is not the only character through whom we can trace connections to Cú Chulainn and the *Táin*—a number of further similarities are found throughout the play. Mairead, arguably the title character of the play (she adopts the title after killing Padraic), bears a remarkable similarity to the *Táin*'s seductive goddess, Morrigan, who, upon meeting Cú Chulainn, remarks:

"I've come to you. I love you because of all the things I've heard about you, and I've brought my treasures and my cattle with me."

"This is not a good time," said Cú Chulainn. "We suffer failure and famine. It wouldn't be right for me to go with a woman, in the midst of such troubles."

"I could be a help to you."

"It wasn't for a woman's arse that I took this on."

"Then I'll add to your troubles," said she. "I'll go for you when you're deep into fighting." (92)

In *Lieutenant*, we are presented with a strikingly similar encounter between Padraic and Mairead:

Mairead: The girls must be falling over themselves to get to you in Ulster....

Padraic: A few have fallen but I paid no mind. Not while there was work to be done ridding Erin of them jackboot hirelings of England's foul monarchy, and a lot of the girls up North are dogs anyways, so it was no loss.

.....

I'm interested in no social activities that don't involve the freeing of Ulster.

Mairead: But that narrows it down terrible.

Padraic: So be it.

.....

Mairead: Will you let me join up this time when you go back, so, if I'm such a tough oul feck with balls?

Padraic: We don't be letting girls in the INLA. No. Unless pretty girls. (33, 35)

Both exchanges illustrate the refusal on the part of the hero to allow a woman to accompany him into battle, and both Cú Chulainn and Padraic admit that sex is not the reason they are fighting.¹¹ Likewise, both Morrigan and Mairead prove fatal to their respective heroes, for "[w]hen Cuchulainn rashly claimed he needed no woman's help in battle, and

reacted disdainfully to the goddess's charms, she became his mortal enemy and made his tragic fate inevitable."¹² So too does Mairead contribute to Padraic's ultimate fate, though, admittedly more overtly: she shoots him in the head, while Morrigan's impact on Cú Chulainn is relatively indirect.

Beyond characterizations, one of the most substantial correlative features of these works is their representation of violence and grotesquerie. Above all, what is striking about the use of violence in both texts is the use of humor to establish a narrative mode throughout, despite the fact that, as Martin Williams suggests, the Ulster Cycle "is notable for its realistic depiction of violence."¹³ The same can also be said of *Lieutenant*. Violence and its excesses, however, are not merely the product of epic or tragic narratives. For example, Alex Johnson, in his "Notes towards a Foundation for a Theory of Comedy," puts forth two axioms regarding comedy, the first of which states clearly, "Comedy is a form of verbal and/or conceptual violence,"¹⁴ and it might be said that the violence in these works is an exploration of the limits of conceptual or verbal *comic violence*, as it transforms into actualized violence. Similarly, in his exhaustive and comprehensive study *The Irish Comic Tradition*, Vivian Mercier notes Irish humor's "most characteristic aspects [are] fantasy, the macabre, and the grotesque"¹⁵ and that "it would be hard to prove that some of the earliest tales we know, even in the noble Ulster Cycle, do not contain fantastic humour that was deliberately intended as such."¹⁶ For McDonagh, such violence is implemented through the use of farce as a theatrical form. The term *farce* rests with the Latin *farciere*, "to stuff," which was appropriated by the French (who perfected the comic form) as a culinary term meaning *force-meat* or *stuffing*. The final scenes of *Lieutenant*, then, depict a grotesque image of *force-meat*, of a cottage quite literally stuffed with bodies, bones, and blood. Though *Lieutenant* contains gruesome and excessive violence, one must recognize that the play is, structurally, a dark farce, and as Eric Bentley notes, "in all comedy there remains something of destructive orgy, farce being the kind of comedy which disguises that fact least thoroughly."¹⁷ The excessive violence is a dramatic tool within the framework of the farce, albeit highly exaggerated here, even within the form—though McDonagh further employs a satirical edge to his humor, suggesting that the violence in his work is not without meaning or critical edge, a concept that I shall return to shortly.

Unsurprisingly, these farcical elements are present in the tales of Cú Chulainn as well. In the *Táin*, for instance, Cú Chulainn impales, decapitates, mutilates, wounds, disembowels, and perforates countless enemies,¹⁸ and in one of his more comic encounters,

Cú Chulainn fired his spear, but upwards, so that it landed on the crown of Nad Crantail's head and went through him into the ground.

“Good grief,” he said. “Truly, you are the best warrior in Ireland. I have twenty-four sons in the camp. Let me go and tell them about my hidden treasure. Then I'll come back and you can cut off my head, for if this spear is taken out I'll die anyway.”

“Fair enough,” said Cú Chulainn. “But do come back.” (81)

This scene is rife with comic imagery, from the image of Nad Crantail's mundane reaction to his hideous injury, to Cú Chulainn's polite request, “do come back.” The lightness of tone here is echoed throughout the *Táin* as the extremity of the situation becomes fantastic and, to an extent, surreal, aligning the tales of Cú Chulainn with the earliest forms of the Irish comic tradition. The comic tone found in the above passage from the *Táin* seems to find an echo throughout *Lieutenant*. When Padraic threatens to cut off James's nipple, the violence is buffered, as I have illustrated previously, by a sense of kindness and clinical directness. Padraic suggests of James' nipple:

I'll be giving him a nice sliceen and then probably be feeding him to ya, but if you don't pick and pick quick it'll be both of the boys you'll be waving goodbye to, and waving goodbye to two tits when there's no need but to wave goodbye to one makes no sense at all as far as I can see. In *my* eyes, like. In fact it's the mark of a madman. So be picking your nipple and we'll get the ball rolling... (12)

He later gives James bus fare before remarking, “[Y]ou want to get them toes looked at. The last thing you want now is septic toes” (16). The violence in *Lieutenant* is surrounded by an air of nonchalance and absurdity, echoing the comic violence in the tales of Cú Chulainn and the *Táin*. The humor rests in the juxtaposition of grotesque violence and casual language—excessive violence has become normative in these worlds, and we find ourselves laughing at the characters' nonchalance.

What, then, of the final two scenes of *Lieutenant*, where the violence reaches a fever pitch as blood, brains, bones, and cat erupt onto the walls, coat the set, and drip from the edge of the stage, captured in stark and

sanguinary realism? Again, Mercier provides a suggestion, remarking, “It is true that life is cruel and ugly, but the macabre and grotesque do not become humorous until they have portrayed life as even more cruel and ugly than it is; we laugh at their absurd exaggeration, simultaneously expressing our relief that life is, after all, not *quite* so unpleasant as it might be.”¹⁹ Indeed, the extremity of the violence—all because of one dead cat—reveals the characters, and Padraic in particular, as “more cruel and ugly” than would be easily found in reality. The monstrosity of the characters, Ashley Taggart notes of the play in production, resulted in an “act of collective repression in the audience [that] began to feel increasingly strained,”²⁰ until the play’s final scene, which is described in McDonagh’s stage directions:

Donny’s house, night. As the scene begins the blood-soaked living room is strewn with the body parts of Brendan and Joey, which Donny and Davey, blood-soaked also, hack away at to sizeable chunks....Padraic is sitting on Christy’s corpse, stroking Wee Thomas’s headless, dirt-soiled body. Through Christy’s mouth, with the pointed end sticking out the back of his neck, has been shoved the cross with ‘Wee Thomas’ on it. Padraic has a sad, faraway look about him. (55)

Taggart states that upon viewing this bloody spectacle, “the dam finally, belatedly, burst and the auditorium exploded with laughter. The last 15 minutes of the play rode a massively cathartic surge of (slightly hysterical) energy, powered by the very constraints [*sic*] which had once held it in check.”²¹ The carnage, as Mercier might suggest, entered into the comic realm of the “excessive and absurd,”²² and while the play has been described as “an orgy of random violence,”²³ and criticized for its “splatter-fest” ending,²⁴ there can be no mistaking the fact that the boundless nature of the violence subverts the realism with which it is portrayed, and in the right hands, this excess becomes, as with the *Táin*, comic.

It should be noted that although Padraic tortures James by removing toenails, asks Mairead for “a knife, a cheese grater, a razor, an iron and anything to gag the screaming” when he “*tortures [Christy], blood splattering,*” (54), and shoots three people at point-blank range onstage, one of the most shocking moments of the play comes when Padraic shoots Sir Roger (the only nonhuman killed onstage). Susannah Clapp argues that McDonagh “uses the squeamishness of his audience—who are more accustomed to seeing a stage littered with human corpses than witnessing

the death of one pet puss—to highlight the sentimentality which often accompanies thuggishness.”²⁵ This seems to suggest that Sir Roger’s death is, beyond being an arresting moment theatrically, a crucial moment of the narrative as well. As Donny and Davey paint Sir Roger with shoe polish to trick Padraic into believing that he is Wee Thomas, they remark:

Donny: As soon as he walks through the door he’ll know that isn’t his cat. Sure that cat’s orange.

Davey: He won’t be orange by the time I’ve finished with the feck. He’ll be black as a coon.

.....

[*Donny:*] *finishes polishing the cat, then holds him high up in the air for Davey to see.*

Donny: What do you think, Davey? Will we get away with it?

.....

Davey: He’ll put a gun to our heads and blow out what little brains we have.

Donny: (*laughing*) He will! (23, 26)

In a remarkably similar passage in the *Táin*, King Ailill (in an attempt to lure Cú Chulainn into an agreement to marry his daughter, Finnabair) suggests, “Let my fool go as me...with a king’s crown on his head. Get him to stand at a distance from Cú Chulainn so that he won’t be recognized” (99). Cú Chulainn’s response anticipates Padraic’s in *Lieutenant*:

So the fool—his name was Tamun, the Stump—went to Cú Chulainn with the girl and spoke to him from a distance. Cú Chulainn knew from the way he spoke that he was a fool. He was carrying a sling-stone in his hand and he threw it at him. It penetrated the fool’s head and knocked his brains out. Cú Chulainn went up to [Finnabair] and cut off her two plaits and thrust a pillar-stone through her cloak and her tunic. He thrust another pillar-stone through the fool’s middle.... After that there was no further truce between [Ailill and Medb] and Cú Chulainn. (99–100)

This moment in the *Táin* is intriguing for a number of reasons, not the least of which is its similarity to McDonagh’s work. First, we see Cú Chulainn’s violent and impulsive retribution for his enemies’ assumption that he would be so easily hoodwinked by a fool wearing a crown; Padraic echoes this violence after seeing the decoy, as previously illustrated. Both “heroes” brutally murder the impostor (the fool and the cat, respectively), rather than the perpetrators of the deception. Furthermore, Davey, who

is consistently referred to as feminine throughout the play because he rides a girl's bike and has long hair, takes the place of Finnabair here in a humorous twist, as Padraic "*takes out a bowie knife and starts roughly hacking off all of Davey's hair*" (as Cú Chulainn does with Finnabair), stating, "I'd be scared the bullets wouldn't be getting through this girl's minge" (42). Finally, despite the myriad soldiers under Medb and Ailill that Cú Chulainn has slaughtered previously, it is the death of Finnabair—and, interestingly, a fool—that ends whatever tenuous truce may have existed. The death of the cat becomes a similar "last straw" for Padraic, as he immediately turns on his own father and prepares to murder him in an act of vengeance. This retribution is further sown via Mairead when she learns that Padraic killed her cat and shoots him in an act of vindication. Just as Sir Roger and the *Táin's* fool are linked, Mairead's truce with Padraic ends when she discovers he killed her cat, her "fool." The death of the cat in *Lieutenant* becomes a point of great significance, and, in light of the tales of Cú Chulainn, not only reveals correlations between the two male figures but also once more brings Mairead within this extended mythology as well.

This leads me to a discussion of death as it functions within both of these worlds. Specifically, the destruction of the head becomes critical in the depictions of death for both works. Christopher Free notes, "In both Celtic and Germanic literary sources the head is often construed as the repository of wisdom and power, and is thought able to continue to control and distribute such power even after it has been removed from its body."²⁶ Cú Chulainn frequently decapitates his victims, often placing their heads on pikes or geographical landmarks as warnings or reminders of his power—and in one comic scene, a young Cú Chulainn decapitates a man "with his hurley, and [begins] driving it like a ball across the plain" (40). The victim's head becomes a comic plaything for the boy, a sequence that again relishes in the fantastic and grotesque while simultaneously placing significance on the head as both a source of *life* (play, frivolity, excitement, pleasure) and *death* (blood, carnage, finality). Throughout the *Táin* and the tales of Cú Chulainn, there are numerous references to decapitation: Cú Chulainn leaves "a thousand lopped heads," while one particular passage humorously suggests "[h]eads would fly from necks like bees buzzing to and fro on a fine day (14, 201). In *Lieutenant*, Padraic too makes many

references to the destruction of his victims' heads: "These guns are only circumstantial, so, and so too your brains'll be only circumstantial as they leave your heads and go skidding up the wall" (42); "What I want ye to remember, as the bullets come out through yere foreheads, is that this is all a fella can be expecting for being so bad to an innocent Irish cat" (44); even the first dead cat's head has been bludgeoned to the point that Padraic cannot recognize that it is not Wee Thomas.

Padraic's preferred mode of execution, where he places two pistols against his victim's head, not only is a staple of many John Woo films; it also corroborates his debt to Cú Chulainn. Just as Cú Chulainn's magical spear, the *gáe bulga*, goes to brutally unnecessary extremes (often penetrating his victims' anuses, where it expands, destroying them from within), Davey and Donny remark upon Padraic's "style":

Donny: Padraic has an entirely different style.

Davey: Padraic goes all the way up to ya.

Donny: Padraic goes all the way up to ya, and then uses two guns from only an inch away.

Davey: Sure, there's no skill in that.

Donny: I think the two guns is overdoing it. From that range, like.

Davey: It's just showing off, really. (56)

Again we see ties to Mercier's notion of the grotesque and macabre in both Padraic's and Cú Chulainn's slaughter. McDonagh adds humor by overtly mentioning the excessive nature of such viciousness, calling attention to the tools with which he is crafting his satire as well as acknowledging the history of violence as an element of the poetic and performative in Irish narratives.

The two heroes do not merely dole out death—it eventually finds them both as well. Despite being described as "hard to kill" (125), Cú Chulainn "is mortal. He is not beyond capture" (36). Maria Tymoczko notes, "The greatest tragedies can be marked by farce, and comedy has its own cutting edge. Even in the story of CuChulainn's death, the narrator finds humour irresistible."²⁷ Indeed, after being impaled by a spear, he, in a gloriously gory moment, "gathered up his entrails in his arms and went off to the lake," where he bathes before binding himself to a standing-stone so that he

will die standing.²⁸ After he is decapitated at the standing-stone, his “hero’s light” blazes and his sword falls, cutting off the hand of his executioner, Lugaid; Lugaid takes Cú Chulainn’s right hand in retribution.²⁹ Tymoczko suggests that Cú Chulainn is “killed by his own weapons,”³⁰ namely, the spear; similarly, Mairead shoots Padraic with his own guns, in his signature style. While Cú Chulainn’s death may be seen as tragic (despite certain comic elements), Padraic’s death is overwhelmingly and inherently comic. Frank Stayton notes, “comedy is tragedy without dignity,”³¹ and here we see two similar deaths wherein the difference between the tragic and the comic lies in such a discrepancy. Cú Chulainn dies standing, a noble warrior who refuses to lie down, while Padraic dies arrogantly, clutching the rotten, filthy corpse of a cat (not even his own) in his hands. It must be noted that Cú Chulainn “was not faultless or invincible, or even always dignified—an observation that also can be made... perhaps of all heroes,”³² Padraic included; similarly, as these death tales reveal, “heroic death is not as arbitrary, or as unsullied, or as tragic as we would sometimes have it.”³³ I suggest, then, that the heroic death, as these two figures illustrate, can be comic, following Conrad Hyers’s suggestion that “[t]he clowns who have indulged us vicariously, must also vicariously pay a price for their profanities.”³⁴ Such is the case for Padraic as with Cú Chulainn.

Tymoczko notes, however, that Cú Chulainn’s “death tale [does not] end...with the hero’s death.... [T]here is a coda of vengeance and fighting. Though one hero dies, others rise to fill his place,”³⁵ a pattern that McDonagh observes in his narrative: Mairead demands of Donny and Davey, “[D]on’t be countermanding me orders, cos it’s a fecking lieutenant ye’re talking to now” (66). Mairead rises to take Padraic’s—and the play’s—title, promising to discover why Sir Roger was in the house, which suggests that the slaughter has not ended with Padraic’s death and that she will return for her revenge shortly. Death here is foregrounded while life is trivialized, and in both pieces the lives of animals seem to supersede the cost of human suffering—in the *Táin*, myriad soldiers die because of the theft of a bull, while in *Lieutenant*, “all this terror has been for absolutely nothing” but the death of a cat (68). When the true Wee Thomas, healthy and jovial, enters in the play’s final moments, Donny and Davey, surrounded by the body parts that they have been busy

butchering, cannot bring themselves to shoot “the poor beggar” (69). By valuing animal lives more than human lives, these comic visions align with Mercier, who suggests macabre and grotesque humor serves as a catalyst to “help us to *accept death and to belittle life*.”³⁶

This suggests that the application of violence is not merely an artistic or stylistic mode, but a satirical touchstone as well. For all of the blood spilled in each work, there is a haunting ethos of anti-violent rhetoric at play. For instance, a satirist accompanies Cú Chulainn when the following encounter takes place:

Then he saw two men exchanging blows. He did not part them.
 ‘You lose honour by not parting these two,’ the satirist said.
 With that CuChulainn leapt down toward them, and gave each a
 punch in the head so their brains came out through their ears and noses.
 ‘You have parted them now,’ the satirist said. ‘Neither is harming
 the other.’³⁷

The mordacious sting of satire within this moment is clear: violence as a means to achieve peace is foolish, and because this scene is capped by a wry remark from the satirist, it seems that those who perpetuate such views toward “peace” are seemingly *valid targets* for satire. Ann Dooley notes that, within the *Táin*, “even as the killing is enacted, the rage for order goes on, not one step behind but pace for pace,”³⁸ while McDonagh suggests that *Lieutenant* “came from a position of what you might call pacifist rage. I mean, it’s a violent play that is wholeheartedly anti-violence.”³⁹ I posit that both works, rather than glorifying violence, share the common theme of interrogating the destabilizing effects of violence, captured most effectively in the establishment and destruction of borders, be they geographic, political, or corporeal.

Much of the *Táin* occurs within the liminal spaces of fords, themselves boundary zones, complex and flowing topographical areas serving as borders and gateways, transmuted into loci of bloodshed and confrontation, quite literally polluted through acts of violence and bloodshed. The ford, this symbolic boundary, becomes critical in understanding the implications of warfare and conflict. Jeremy Lowe argues of the *Táin*, “As violence proliferates, it begins to eradicate the boundaries that separate individuals and the social ties that bind them

to one another... [I]t breaks down walls and reduces everything to base matter."⁴⁰ Using this argument as a basis, allow me to investigate its relevance to *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, for the two works engage in a nearly identical destructive model. First, regarding the concept of "base matter" in *Lieutenant*: this is blood, bone, and other such corporeal remnants. We witness Donny and Davey breaking down the bodies of the deceased into smaller and smaller parts, burning off fingertips and hammering out teeth to render the corpses unidentifiable; Sir Roger is exploded into bits, and even the first dead cat is so mutilated that nobody realizes that it is not, in fact, Wee Thomas. Furthermore, McDonagh challenges theatrical boundaries through violence, for by setting the play for the most part in a cottage, and, more generally, in the rural and isolated Aran Islands, McDonagh is both adopting and subverting traditional images of Irish theatricality and the common use of the quaint Irish cottage.⁴¹ Part of this theatricality also depends on his blending of horrific violence and riotous farce, for as McDonagh notes, "I walk that line between comedy and cruelty...because I think one illuminates the other,"⁴² a comment that reveals ties not only to the history of Irish comedy as illustrated by Mercier but also to the humorous portrayals of violence in the tales of Cú Chulainn. Finally, by transposing the conflicts of the Troubles to a domestic conflict surrounding the health of a cat, McDonagh is himself using violence to break down the "walls" of sectarian violence, allowing us to see its effects on individuals, while reducing the national conflict to its smallest, most insular, and microcosmic unit: Wee Thomas, who becomes the "base matter" of McDonagh's interrogation of violence, the omnipresent⁴³ and indestructible⁴⁴ source of bloodshed and vengeance. Indeed, Wee Thomas perfectly embodies the concept 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...that McDonagh's postmodern plays engage satirically with the foundations of Irish nationalism."⁴⁵ Wee Thomas is both trivial and profound, sacred and profane, inspiring at once violence and, finally, the cessation of violence. In McDonagh's satire, Wee Thomas becomes the quintessence of the ideological, psychological, and corporeal function of terrorism and sectarian conflict.

The destruction of borders further becomes critical in the function of both Cú Chulainn and *Lieutenant* within the political landscape of a divided and fragmented Ireland during the twentieth century. Cú Chulainn is “a guardian of Ulster’s borders. We see him guarding the borders in many tales including *Táin Bó Cúailnge* itself.... In some tales he is shown watching Ulster’s border with the sea and warding off invaders from the sea.”⁴⁶ It should come as no surprise, then, that as a hero and guardian of Ireland, Cú Chulainn becomes an image of power, strength, and identity before and during the Troubles, though ironically, he is appropriated by both nationalists as well as unionists for various reasons. Irish Nationalists see him as the most important Celtic hero, defending Ireland from foreign invaders—indeed, one of his most famous images is a statue of his death that today stands at the Dublin General Post Office as a monument to the 1916 Easter Rising. Likewise, Ulster Unionists see him as defending Ulster from enemies from the south, and his image serves as the logo of the Ulster Defence Association, superimposed on a six-county Ulster. However, the image of Cú Chulainn was adopted most notably by Padraic Pearse, one of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising, as a symbol for nationalism.

To Pearse, with whom *Lieutenant*’s Padraic shares a name, “Cuchulain was nothing if not a guide to action.”⁴⁷ R. F. Foster notes, in a critical analysis of Pearse’s ideology, that his view of history consisted of “a visionary world of early Celtic traditions where racial identification was automatic, a national sense was the paramount priority, and the sacrificial image of the ancient hero Cuchulainn was inextricably tangled with that of Christ,” and further suggests, “Pearse’s use of Irish history was that of a calculatedly disingenuous propagandist.”⁴⁸ Leading up to the Easter Rising, for example, the dissemination of and identification with the image of Cú Chulainn “glorified both individualism and action on behalf of the tribe.”⁴⁹ Pearse himself frequently identified with the mythological hero, and suggested of Cú Chulainn, “There is only one way to appease a ghost. You must do the thing it asks you. The ghosts of a nation [here, Cú Chulainn, among others] sometimes ask very big things; and they must be appeased, whatever the cost.”⁵⁰ Propaganda, for Pearse, rested on the shoulders of mythology and history, and Cú Chulainn was the primary figure in his nationalist rhetoric.

McDonagh subverts the image of Padraic/Cú Chulainn/Pearse within *Lieutenant* in a number of ways, both theatrically and ideologically. For example, he lampoons the use of a figurehead for nationalist rhetoric, and Patrick Lonergan suggests that though he is characterized as a psychopath, “the only time that Padraic sounds rational is when he is delivering nationalist rhetoric.... [O]nly someone who is entirely insane, and entirely lacking in any sense of moral values, could genuinely hold such beliefs.”⁵¹ Padraic’s nationalist rhetoric, which echoes Pearse’s concept of “ghosts,” is wholly centered on Wee Thomas, who, as I illustrated earlier, is the “base matter” of the Troubles in McDonagh’s satirical view. Padraic, faced with the death of his cat, bemoans, “I will plod on, I know, but no sense to it will there be with Thomas gone. No longer will his smiling eyes be there in the back of me head, egging me on, saying, ‘This is for me and for Ireland, Padraic. Remember that,’ as I’d lob a bomb at a pub, or be shooting a builder. Me whole world’s gone, and he’ll never be coming back to me” (44). Padraic’s “Cú Chulainn,” to use Pearse’s identifier, is Thomas, and the cat becomes not only intrinsic to his identity, but an emblem for revolution as well: “all I ever wanted was an Ireland free. Free for kids to run and play. Free for fellas and lasses to dance and sing. Free for cats to roam about without being clanked in the brains with a handgun. Was that too much to ask, now? Was it?” (60). This image of the animal, and the importance of the animal within nationalist rhetoric, becomes critical in understanding McDonagh’s comic vision and satiric approach to sectarian ideology.⁵²

Furthermore, Cú Chulainn’s appropriation by both “sides” of the conflict as a hero and figurehead suggests, in a paradoxical combination of symbolic and actualized hostility, that both sides are destroying themselves from within—Cú Chulainn is fighting Cú Chulainn, Ireland is fighting Ireland, and both are equally matched, resulting in inevitable self-destruction. McDonagh wrote *Lieutenant* in 1994, “a time when it really seemed as though the Troubles would never end,”⁵³ and the play contains numerous references to the endlessness and absurdity of the conflict, both within the cottage and in Ireland in general. Davey remarks, “Oh, will it never end? Will it never fecking end?” to which Donny responds, “It fecking won’t, d’you know!” Likewise, after Padraic announces that he and Mairead will marry once Ireland is free, Donny remarks, “That’ll be a long

fecking engagement!” (67, 61). Surrounded by corpses, Donny and Davey finally ask, “Hasn’t there been enough killing done in this house for one day?” (69), effectively expressing the exhaustion, the mental and physical toll of an endless and stagnant conflict. While an IRA ceasefire was called in 1994, McDonagh seems to remark upon the failure of that event to fulfill its promise of hope as violence continued; the threat of violence by way of Mairead—and the survival of Wee Thomas, who effectively catalyzed the violence—still looms over the house, and, indeed, all of Inishmore, which itself serves as a microcosmic representation of Ireland.

The consequences of this stalemate, the eternal struggle of two equally matched opponents until they destroy themselves, is captured most succinctly in a trait of Cú Chulainn’s that I have yet to mention: his *warp-spasm*, or *Torque*. The Torque transforms Cú Chulainn into a monstrous creature, an act of devastating and detrimental bodily eversion:

The first Torque seized Cú Chulainn and turned him into a contorted thing, unrecognizably horrible and grotesque. Every slab and every sinew of him, joint and muscle, shuddered from head to foot like a tree in the storm or a reed in the stream. His body revolved furiously inside his skin. His feet and his shins and his knees jumped to the back; his heels and his calves and his hams to the front.... Then he made a red cauldron of his face and features: he sucked one of his eyes so deep into his head that a wild crane would find it difficult to plumb the depths of his skull to drag that eye back to its socket; the other popped out on to his cheek. His mouth became a terrifying, twisted grin. His cheek peeled back from his jaws so you could see lungs and liver flapping in his throat.... [A] stream of white-hot flecks broad as a ram’s fleece poured from his mouth.... The hero’s light sprang from his forehead, long and thick as a warrior’s whetstone, long as a prow.... Then thick, steady, strong, high as the mast of a tall ship was the straight spout of dark blood that rose up from the fount of his skull to dissolve in an otherworldly mist. (108–9)

The destructive force of his Torque is such that he is forced to wear protective armor “to prevent his inner being and his brain from breaking loose at the onset of his fury” (108). This image of Cú Chulainn is particularly useful in understanding the multifaceted nature of self-destruction within Irish nationalism, and such an understanding is further present in *Lieutenant*, as the initial image of Padraic torturing James, a Catholic, becomes, as Lonergan asserts, a reminder of “the way in which Northern Irish paramilitary groups frequently victimised their

own people,”⁵⁴ suggesting that the most destructive force in a time of war or conflict can ironically be the people who are turned to for protection. However, Cú Chulainn as a character differs from the actualized conflicts under his mantle (using this frame of self-imposed violence) in that, as Lowe notes, “[B]ecause he is fluid, when violence emerges from within him, as it does in the form of the ‘warp-spasm,’ the effects, though catastrophic, do not result in his [own] destruction.”⁵⁵ Nonetheless, this is an image of violence enacted upon the self as a means to become a stronger warrior, a more powerful hero—the implications of which are clear when analyzing Cú Chulainn as a central image for both “sides” of the conflict, as violence seems to destroy the very figures who use it as a means to achieve freedom or nationalist goals. As Donny remarks upon the death of Padraic, “Sure, there’s no fecker left in the INLA now!” (66).

McDonagh seems to be interrogating the figure of Cú Chulainn as a touchstone for nationalist rhetoric, addressing the assumed foolishness or naïveté with which figures like Pearse use his image in the name of peace and freedom, while simultaneously engaging in acts of rebellion, violence, and terrorism. McDonagh subverts traditional views of Cú Chulainn as a heroic paradigm justifying martial violence, while questioning the values and ideologies that would allow for such identification in the first place. Mairead concludes, “I thought shooting fellas would be fun, but it’s not. It’s dull” (66). Lowe recognizes “the way that violence permeates and distorts both social and physical systems in the *Táin* reveals a society deeply aware of the consequences of martial heroism. The *Táin* is the product not of a society in decline but of one that questions the traditional ideals that ostensibly define it.”⁵⁶ So, too, does McDonagh’s image of Ireland reveal a country profoundly aware of the consequences and repercussions of such ideology within sectarian conflict. *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* questions the validity of the past, of patriotic images that have become indelibly fused with nationalist rhetoric, suggesting that Padraic is fighting both for and against a history and past that he does not fully understand; within the context of the Troubles, Cú Chulainn has been wrongly disinterred from a false, mythological history and placed incongruously within a cultural framework whose interests have distorted his image and thus his cultural, political, and, perhaps most importantly, *comic* significance.

Throughout *Lieutenant*, McDonagh presents the image of Padraic (and, to an extent, Mairead) as a comic hero, seemingly drawing upon Cú Chulainn as a source for images of the hero emphasized by figures such as Pearse. G. Ó. Danachair notes, “The primary objective of the IRA is to achieve the freedom and unity of Ireland by forcing a British withdrawal. It is generally agreed that this is a legitimate aim based on Ireland’s rights as a nation. The controversy centres on how this is to be done.”⁵⁷ McDonagh’s use of farce, satire, and humor, therefore, seem to usher in a new, postmodern *comic* hero in artistic and propagandistic visions of the conflict. Where Pearse falls to nationalism and gravity, McDonagh embraces comedy, the carnivalesque, and the grotesque. It is easy to look at Cú Chulainn as a tragic hero, as Pearse did—a figure worthy of utmost respect and dignity—and such an analysis traditionally recognizes the heroic ethos at the core of narratives surrounding Cú Chulainn. However, Hyers notes that the tragic hero’s strength rests in the “exaltation of *warrior* virtues: courage, loyalty, duty, honor, pride,” and the like, but suggests, “these virtues have so often led... to all manner of evil. The dreams of one group of people collide with the dreams of another, creating a nightmare for both.”⁵⁸ This is an apt analysis of Cú Chulainn, as he has historically motivated violence and aggression, but failed to achieve peace or unity.

To conclude, then, I suggest that traditional views of Cú Chulainn as a tragic hero are fundamentally misguided, for by all accounts, Cú Chulainn can be seen as a *comic* hero—he plays games, he jokes, he is not afraid to be covered in filth, he has sex. Wylie Sypher suggests, “The tragic hero... must heed some ‘golden mean’ between extremes; he does not dare *play* with life as the comic hero does.... The tragic hero, noble and magnified, can be of awesome stature. The comic hero refuses to wear the trappings of moral or civil grandeur, usually preferring motley, or the agility of the clown.”⁵⁹ Cú Chulainn, though he shares elements of the tragic hero, is arguably comic—specifically, he is aligned with the trickster figure, and like the trickster in so much of Western folklore, he is also identified with an animal.⁶⁰ Lowe argues that Cú Chulainn poses “a continual threat to harmony and order,”⁶¹ while Hyers similarly notes that the trickster “has always supported a chaos theory of the universe.”⁶² Order, for Cú Chulainn, is secondary to his violent warpath and his chaotic

warp-spasm; he does not wholly represent the ideal hero, but rather, he is those ideals distorted, expanded, taken to excess (excess, again, being intrinsic to Mercier's understanding of Irish comedy). Cú Chulainn is a grotesque exaggeration of the epic hero, a figure so extreme in his abilities, ideology, sexuality, destructive potential, and transformations⁶³ that he can only be viewed as comic. Even his violent and self-destructive Torque is comic, for the image of the hero stuffing himself into tight, restrictive armor cannot help but invoke images of "force-meat" and "stuffing" that lie at the etymological root of *farce*. Given the myriad correlative aspects of Padraic and Cú Chulainn, one sees that Padraic becomes, as with the mythological figure, a comic hero for an Ireland divided. By burlesquing the trappings of tragic or epic heroism, Padraic becomes a darkly comic hero who transforms by degrees into a ludicrous villain by way of his inflated dogmatism and misplaced nobility.

In creating his postmodern version of the comic hero, McDonagh suggests, "[W]e're all cruel, aren't we? We're all extreme in one way or another at times, and that's what drama, since the Greeks, has dealt with."⁶⁴ Padraic is an extreme, exaggerated character, an example of nationalist sentiment and terrorism grown reprehensibly malignant. Terrorism and violence are a blight upon the land (a problem emphasized by post-9/11 productions of the play across the globe), and *Lieutenant* has been condemned and attacked for its seeming disregard for the painful reality of the Troubles and for the victims of terrorist attacks, as well as for McDonagh's supposed amorality.⁶⁵ However, just as Lowe says of the *Táin*, which "does not bear witness to the end of all values...but instead reveals how social systems remain continually under threat from violent conduct and hints at the abyss that lies beneath any society defined by its martial heroes,"⁶⁶ so too does McDonagh suggest that violence can only beget violence, and that terrorism—and identification with heroes such as Cú Chulainn without recognition of their status as comic figures—can only destabilize and destroy without ever rebuilding or rehabilitating.

Tragedy, for McDonagh, does not create—only comedy can, though by nature, it must destroy that which came before. Fittingly, "McDonagh's [*sic*] plays do not so much *forget* their originals...but they *empty* those originals of their cultural signification, and their contemporary cultural

significance.⁶⁷ In developing comic heroes drawn from the world of Cú Chulainn and the *Táin*, McDonagh empties Cú Chulainn of his cultural and political significance as a martial emblem, voiding him of his traditional tragic heroism and replacing his image with that of a fool—an affirmation that such images are not conducive to peace. To embrace violence as a means to achieve harmony, it seems, is to don the fool's motley, but to lack the fool's wit.

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NOTES

¹ McDonagh is a London-born playwright of Irish descent, writing primarily about western, "rural" Ireland (he vacationed as a child in Connemara) and Irish people. McDonagh has described his own sense of identity as "somewhere kind of in-between" (quoted in Patrick Loneragan, "Commentary," in Martin McDonagh, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* [London: Methuen, 2009], xvi–lvii [xix]). (All quotations from the play are taken from this edition and cited in the text.) This fact, coupled with longstanding conflict between Ireland and Great Britain, has prompted a number of varied arguments regarding McDonagh's status as an "Irish playwright." Likewise, his exploration (and, as some might argue, *exploitation*) of stereotypes in his construction of "Irishness" has proven problematic as well, with Mary Luckhurst and Vic Merriman serving as the two most vociferous critics of McDonagh's problematic treatment of Ireland. Despite the controversy, during the 2012 Irish Seminar, which focused on contemporary Irish theater (from 1980 to today), a number of speakers (including Shaun Richards, Joseph Lennon, José Lanter, Susan Harris, and Marina Carr) cited at least one of McDonagh's plays as one of the top five most important Irish plays of the last thirty years. I contend that, despite the conflict surrounding his identity, he is a crucial figure in contemporary Irish theater. I am likewise not interested in exploring controversies of heritage or cultural authenticity in this essay, for such arguments have been well plumbed by scholars, critics, and artists alike. In addition, this debate has also been reflected in the longstanding feud between Conor McPherson and McDonagh, who have publicly lobbed angry accusations and attacks at each other's characters and talents over the last several years. See Richard Rankin Russell, ed., *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), specifically, José Lanter, "The Identity Politics of Martin McDonagh," 9–24; Mary Luckhurst, "Martin McDonagh's *Lieutenant of Inishmore*: Selling (-Out) to the English," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14, no. 4 (2004): 34–41; Victor Merriman, "Decolonisation Postponed: The Theatre of Tiger Trash," *Irish University Review* 29 (1999): 305–17; and Fintan O'Toole's 1998 interview with McDonagh, "Martin McDonagh," *BOMB* 63 (1998): 62–68.

² Mary Trotter, *Modern Irish Theatre* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 178–79, suggests that "Martin McDonagh fills his plays with intertextual references to classical Irish drama (along with some strong peppering of allusions to English theatre and American theatre and film)." For other references, see Russell's introduction to *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook* (1–8) and the majority of articles within, which cite in particular McDonagh's relationship to Synge (though Yeats, Gregory, O'Casey, and Beckett are all cited throughout the compilation as touchstones for McDonagh); José Lanter, "Playwrights of the Western World: Synge, Murphy, McDonagh," in *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage*, ed. Stephen Watt et. al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 204–22; Peter James Harris, "Sex and Violence: The Shift from Synge to McDonagh," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies: Irish Literature and Culture: Getting into Contact*, 10, nos. 1–2 (Spring/Fall, 2004): 51–59, Michal Lachman, "'From Both Sides of the Irish Sea': The Grotesque, Parody, and Satire in Martin McDonagh's *The Leenane Trilogy*," in the same issue (61–73); Shaun

Richards, "'The Outpouring of a Morbid, Unhealthy Mind': The Critical Condition of Synge and McDonagh," *Irish University Review* 33.1–2 (2003): 201–14; Nicholas Grene, "Ireland in Two Minds: Martin McDonagh and Conor McPherson," *Yearbook of English Studies: Irish Writing since 1950*, 35 (2005): 298–311; Eamonn Jordan, introduction to *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, ed. Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort, 2000), xi–xlvi, and Karen Vandeveld's essay in the same collection, "The Gothic Soap of Martin McDonagh," 292–302; and Jan-Hendrik Wehmeyer, "Good luck to ya': Fast-food Comedy at McDonagh's," in *The Power of Laughter: Comedy and Contemporary Irish Theatre*, ed. Eric Wentz (Dublin: Carysfort, 2004): 87–94. This represents a small sampling of such comparisons between McDonagh and earlier Irish playwrights, though it should be noted that Synge is arguably the playwright most often asserted as an influence on McDonagh, while Yeats, Gregory, and O'Casey are often referred to as establishing theatrical and literary conventions that are later exploded in McDonagh's works.

³ Cú Chulainn's name, like the hero himself, is somewhat transformative and appears in various forms throughout a variety of sources. While I use *Cú Chulainn* in my argument, I have nonetheless maintained the spelling and translations utilized by individual authors (though it should be noted that, generally, *Cú Chulainn* refers to the mythological figure, while *Cuchulain* or *Cuchulainn* refers to literary or dramatic interpretations outside of the Ulster Cycle).

⁴ It must be said that I am not implying here that McDonagh directly drew inspiration from narratives or mythologies surrounding Cú Chulainn. Even if that were the case, McDonagh would likely deny any such intersection between the works. A notoriously cryptic playwright, McDonagh has repeatedly deflected claims of authorial overlap or inspiration (though, as he is a satirist, one must be wary of taking him at his word). Nonetheless, I must make it clear that I am engaging in a speculative analysis; my aim in viewing *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and Cú Chulainn in light of each other is to reveal new approaches to reading and understanding both works.

⁵ The actual date of the play's composition has been subject to debate. Patrick Lonergan suggests that *Lieutenant* was written in 1994, in a burst of creative output that included McDonagh's *Leenane Trilogy*, his *Aran Islands Trilogy*, and *The Pillowman* ("Martin McDonagh," in McDonagh, *Lieutenant*, v–vii), an idea that seems to be drawn from Fintan O'Toole, "A Mind in Connemara: The Savage World of Martin McDonagh," *New Yorker*, 6 March 2006: 40–47, who suggests that McDonagh wrote what had theretofore been his opus in nine short months. However, Penelope Denning, "The Scribe of Kilburn," *Irish Times*, 23 April 2001, posits that the play predates the writing of *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, while Liz Hoggard, "Playboy of the West End World," *Independent*, 15 July 2002, suggests that *Lieutenant* was written after 1996, as a response to the failure of the 1994 IRA ceasefire. Because of O'Toole and Lonergan's agreement, and their personal interactions with McDonagh, I posit that 1994 remains the most plausible date for the initial writing of *Lieutenant*, which undoubtedly went through changes, as any play does, in the time between its inception on the page and its production on the stage in 2001.

⁶ "The Troubles" is a euphemistic term used to describe the Northern Irish conflict, which lasted from 1960 until 1998 (though remnants of this period are still apparent today). I use the term in this study with full awareness of its milquetoast quality because, despite its problematic aspects, it is one of the most accessible terms used to describe the period.

⁷ In this study, I use Ciaran Carson's translation, *The "Táin": A New Translation of the "Táin Bó Cúailnge"* (New York: Viking, 2008), for it retains much of Thomas Kinsella's seminal 1969 translation while simultaneously drawing from Cecile O'Rahilly's editions and Lady Augusta Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, among numerous others. Likewise, Carson's translation is notably "modern" in its use of language, which becomes useful when analyzing it alongside McDonagh's contemporary work. This quotation appears on page 36; subsequent quotations from this edition will be cited in the text. In drawing upon further tales of Cú Chulainn as he appears outside of the epic, I have turned to Lady Augusta Gregory, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (London: J. Murray, 1926), and Maria Tymoczko, *Two Death Tales from the Ulster Cycle* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1981).

⁸ For brevity's sake, I approach the notion of *fir fer* as "fair play," or, perhaps more appropriately, the warrior's code. For a more comprehensive analysis of *fir fer*, see Philip O'Leary, "Fir fer: An Internalized Ethical Concept in Early Irish Literature?" *Éigse* 22 (1987): 1–14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ Patrick Lonergan, in McDonagh, *Lieutenant*, note 19, p. 73.

¹¹ Patrick Lonergan states, "Irish dramatists often suggested that militant nationalism arises not from political ideology but from sexual dysfunction." ("Commentary," xliii). While Cú Chulainn is chronicled to have had a number of sexual exploits, one might view McDonagh's version of the hero as subverting the image of the sexually promiscuous and virile hero, as his initial dismissal of Mairead may be seen as an attempt to avoid a sexual encounter. Notably, it is only when Mairead illustrates her prowess as a soldier that any sort of romantic or sexual bond forms. Lonergan further suggests that Mairead "gain[s] acceptance within a military setting...only by becoming more masculine than most of the men around [her]" (xliv), an interesting and intriguing implication, but admittedly, a topic for another study.

¹² Christopher R. Free and David A. Leeming, *Gods, Heroes, and Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 173.

¹³ Martin Williams, "Ancient Mythology and Revolutionary Ideology in Ireland, 1878–1916," *Historical Journal* 26 (1983): 307–28 (308).

¹⁴ Alex Johnston, "Notes towards a Foundation for a Theory of Comedy," in *The Power of Laughter: Comedy and Contemporary Irish Theatre*, ed. Eric Weitz (Dublin: Carysfort, 2004), 173–86 (174).

¹⁵ Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), ix.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

¹⁷ Eric Bentley, "The Psychology of Farce," in *Let's Get a Divorce! and Other Plays*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), vii–xx (xiii).

¹⁸ I use the term "countless" here somewhat hyperbolically, for there are many passages throughout the *Táin* that poetically tally the hero's conquests. In one particular battle, for instance, Cú Chulainn kills 731 soldiers, while he injures or otherwise maims 1740.

¹⁹ Mercier, 1.

²⁰ Ashley Taggart, "An 'Economy of Pity': McDonagh's Monstrous Regiment," in *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, ed. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort, 2006), 163.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Mercier, 49.

²³ Mary Luckhurst, "Martin McDonagh's *Lieutenant of Inishmore*: Selling (-Out) to the English," in Chambers and Jordan, eds., *Theatre of Martin McDonagh*, 116–29 (119).

²⁴ Paul Taylor, "The *Lieutenant of Inishmore*: A Bloody Farce," *Independent*, 16 May 2001.

²⁵ Susannah Clapp, "Please Sir, I Want Some Gore," *Observer*, 20 June 2001.

²⁶ Free and Leeming, 198.

²⁷ Maria Tymoczko, trans., *Two Death Tales from the Ulster Cycle: The Death of Cu Roi and the Death of Cu Chulainn* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1981), 13. Unless otherwise noted, quotations attributed to Tymoczko will refer to this text.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁹ McDonagh's most recent play, *A Behanding in Spokane*, centers on Charmichael—a figure who shares a number of character traits with Padraic—and his search for his missing hand, taken from him by a group of thugs nearly two decades prior. A slight, but notable similarity to Cú Chulainn, perhaps?

³⁰ Tymoczko, 12.

³¹ Frank Stayton, *Threads* (New York: Century, 1921), 148.

³² Tymoczko, 13.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Conrad Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy: Comic Heroism in a Tragic World* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1996), 150.

³⁵ Tymoczko, 14.

³⁶ Mercier, 49. Emphasis in original.

³⁷ Tymoczko, 56.

³⁸ Ann Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga "Táin Bó Cúailnge"* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 207.

³⁹ Quoted in Sean O'Hagan, "The Wild West," *Guardian*, 24 March 2001.

⁴⁰ Jeremy Lowe, "Contagious Violence and the Spectacle of Death in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*," in *Language and Tradition in Ireland: Continuities and Displacements*, ed. Maria Tymoczko and Colin Ireland (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 84–100 (91).

⁴¹ So much has been made of McDonagh's use of the "stage Irish" and traditional Irish theatrical imagery that it would be redundant and unnecessary to rehash the arguments here.

⁴² Quoted in O'Hagan.

⁴³ I use the term *omnipresent* here because Padraic's actions are, as soon as he hears of his cat's supposed illness, performed almost entirely in the name of his cat. Likewise, even when the actual Thomas is not present, his doppelgänger—the original dead cat—and Padraic's aggression become constant reminders of the consequences of his death.

⁴⁴ Wee Thomas is at least fifteen years old and proves "immune" to gunfire, the cause of death for nearly every other victim of the play, as Donny and Davey cannot bring themselves to shoot him.

⁴⁵ José Lanter, "Identity Politics of Martin McDonagh," 9; emphasis added.

⁴⁶ Tymoczko, 89.

⁴⁷ Christopher Clausen, "Padraic Pearse: The Revolutionary as Artist," *Shaw Review* 19, no. 2 (May 1976): 83–92 (85).

⁴⁸ R. F. Foster, "History and the Irish Question," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, fifth ser., 33 (1983): 169–92 (185).

⁴⁹ Maria Tymoczko, *Translation in a Postcolonial Context: Early Irish Literature in English Translation* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 1999), 79.

⁵⁰ Padraic H. Pearse, *Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin: Talbot, 1952), 221.

⁵¹ Lonergan, "Commentary," xxxi.

⁵² As further evidence of the importance of the animal, Padraic and Cú Chulainn seem to share an element of the bestial, both within their respective texts and within the social and political frames of an Ireland divided and engaged in a propagandist war. Cú Chulainn's name is originally Setana, and he receives his new title as a child, after killing Culann's ferocious hound in

an act of comic violence: "The hound got his scent and began to bay. Then it went for him. The lad struck his ball with his hurley so that the ball shot down the throat of the hound and carried its insides out through its backside. Then he grabbed two of its legs and smashed it to pieces against a nearby pillar-stone." Cú Chulainn, as penance, offers to "be your hound to guard your cattle and yourself. And I will guard Muirthemne Plain; no herd or flock will be led away from me without my knowing it," after which he is given the title Cú Chulainn, "the Hound of Culann" (Carson, 42–43). Similarly, Christopher Morrison suggests that McDonagh based Padraic on a real INLA terrorist, Dominic "Mad Dog" McGlinchey (though this comparison may be tenuous at best, Padraic and McGlinchey do share more than a passing similarity; see Lonergan, "Commentary," xxx–xxxii). Therefore, both Cú Chulainn and Padraic seem to be tied, at least in name, to images of ruthless canines. Interestingly, sociologist Mary Kelly refers to the depiction of the IRA as animals within British and Irish propaganda, including descriptions of terrorists as "a pack of cornered wolves" (Mary Kelly, "Power, Control and Media Coverage," in *Ireland: A Sociological Profile*, ed. Patrick Clancy [Dublin: IPA, 1986], 419) which, placing Padraic and Cú Chulainn as emblems of nationalist resistance, lends further credence to their theriomorphic identities.

⁵³ Lonergan, "Commentary," xxxiii.

⁵⁴ Lonergan, in McDonagh, *Lieutenant*, note 10, p. 72.

⁵⁵ Lowe, 95.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁵⁷ G. Ó. Danachair, *Provos: Patriots or Terrorists?* (Dublin: Dublin Irish Book Bureau, 1974), 29–30.

⁵⁸ Hyers, 27.

⁵⁹ Wylie Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy," in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher et al., (1956; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 239.

⁶⁰ Tricksters are often depicted as clever animals: coyote, wolf, raven, fox, badger, spider, raccoon, and the like. For a thorough study, see Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World* (New York: North Point Press, 1998).

⁶¹ Lowe, 87.

⁶² Hyers, 175.

⁶³ The trickster is often depicted as a shape-shifter, a malleable and easily adaptable being capable of a variety of transformations.

⁶⁴ Quoted in O'Hagan.

⁶⁵ For two comprehensive studies of the variety of critical responses to *Lieutenant*, see Catherine Rees, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: The Politics of Morality in Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*," *New Theatre Quarterly* 21 (2005): 28–33; and Patrick Lonergan, "Too Dangerous To Be Done?: Martin McDonagh's *Lieutenant of Inishmore*," *Irish Studies Review* 13 (2005): 65–78.

⁶⁶ Lowe, 97.

⁶⁷ Sara Keating, "Is Martin McDonagh an Irish Playwright?" in Chambers and Jordan, eds., *Theatre of Martin McDonagh*, 281–94 (290).

Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*: nostalgia, mythology, terrorist violence, and the impossibility of a national literature. by Brian James Stone. B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2007. The interesting thing here is that this particular event demonstrates the prevalence of these conflicting ideologies in the audience of the Abbey theatre; in the Irish audience. While the intentions of Yeats and Gregory in establishing this theatre was to have an Irish theatre, distinct from other theatre, the question of loyalty was not absent from these performances.