

MARTIN MCDONAGH'S INHERITANCE OF CULTURAL MEMORY: GENDER  
AND THE ENDURING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUNGER AND POWER IN  
*THE CRIPPLE OF INISHMAAN AND THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF LEENANE*

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of  
Texas State University-San Marcos  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of ARTS

by

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San Marcos, Texas  
May 2013

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Years before writing my thesis, Dr. Nancy Wilson advised me to select a graduate thesis topic as early as possible. With a topic in mind from the outset, she explained that I could employ my graduate courses as a means of evolving my thesis ideas. I did exactly that, and I owe perhaps the largest debt of all to Dr. Wilson for this advice.

This long evolution, of course, necessitates a long list of appreciation. Each of my committee members represents a stage of this evolution. Steve Wilson's guidance and encouragement as my chair in the process of writing my thesis was invaluable. However, I am also grateful to have had the benefit of his Irish literature course held for five weeks on the campus of University College Cork, Ireland, which introduced me to, among many Irish authors and subjects, the work of Edna O'Brien. I am also grateful to Dr. Paul Cohen, whose undergraduate Twentieth-Century British Literature included foundational texts of Irish Literature that continue to influence my study such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and, in Dr. Cohen's class, I first learned about Grace O'Malley and her importance in Irish culture. Finally, in Dr. Michael J. Hennessy's graduate Joyce course, I accomplished the difficult and rewarding task of reading *Ulysses* in whole, which further developed my knowledge and ideas about Joyce's works in particular and Irish literature in general.

Yet, many professors apart from my committee contributed to my study and understanding of subjects included in my thesis. Dr. Nancy Wilson's Travel Writing course held in Ireland deepened my insight of country as place and people, including

introducing me to the figure of Queen Medb. Dr. Robin Cohen's graduate Postcolonial Literature course introduced me to Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan*. And Dr. Susan S. Morrison's Medieval Women and Literature course allowed me to explore the figure of St Brigid within the context of medieval women from around the world.

Further, the support of friends and family when taking on a project of such a scale absolutely cannot be underestimated. I would like to thank my parents, Carol and Harold Fitzgerald, as well as my grandmother, Mary Phyllis O'Boyle Dengler. I also must express gratitude to my friends and colleagues who encouraged me in a variety of ways in the process, including Erin Jines, Mandy Brown, Gretchen Vollmer, Terra Wright, Michelle Elliott, Amanda Meyer, Taylor Cortesi, Iza Martinez, and Chad Starrak.

While my educational, familial, and social environment contributed greatly to the beneficial adaptations I made in the course of my thesis work, looking back at more distant branches on my ancestral evolutionary tree also contributed to my work. Learning about one set of my Irish ancestors before studying abroad in Ireland heavily colored my views of Irish culture and, thus, literature. In 1849, Francis and Margaret O'Boyle, my great-great-great grandparents, left County Mayo during the height of the Famine with five children, including my eleven-year-old great-great grandfather, Timothy Patrick O'Boyle. Not only did the entire family survive the transatlantic journey during a time when dead bodies were being thrown over the sides of ships in Boston Harbor because of a backlog of diseased and starving Famine survivors hoping to begin a new life in North America, but the family also managed to stick together on a trek that led them from County Mayo, to Canada, to Indiana where Francis died working on the railroad, and finally to Iowa. Once in Iowa, Timothy bought land and established a home for his

mother and siblings. Like the association of food with power that has survived for centuries in Ireland, the O'Boyle family still thrives in this area well into the twenty-first century.

This thesis was submitted on March 4, 2013.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Hollywood is fond of making films about itself. *Argo*, the winner of the Best Picture Oscar at the 85th Academy Awards in 2013, provides an excellent example. In this fictionalized story of actual events, the film industry contributes to the rescue of Americans during the Iranian hostage crisis. Hollywood screenwriters also seem to enjoy offering the unlikely screenwriter as a character in brave roles, embarking on unexpected adventures, such as the 2002 film, *Adaptation*. Martin McDonagh's 2012 film, *Seven Psychopaths* does the same. In *Seven Psychopaths*, for which McDonagh served as screenwriter, the comically exaggerated action and deeply dark humor may overshadow the presence of something odd in this self-referential Hollywood film: a characteristic McDonagh Irish stereotype. As usual, McDonagh clearly wants audiences to notice that Marty, who is unabashedly a fictionalized version of McDonagh himself, is in some ways an Irish caricature. The dialogue itself addresses the issue. Facing the loss of his girlfriend after a night of overconsumption, Marty claims, "I don't have a drinking problem. I just like drinking." Marty's friend Billy replies, "Of course you do, Marty. One, you're a writer. Two, you're from Ireland. It's part of your heritage . . . Spanish've got bullfighting. The French got cheese. And the Irish have got alcoholism." As we will see in this thesis, McDonagh's characters, often Irish stereotypes, not only regularly

overconsume alcohol, but also frequently reveal obsessions with the consumption of food.

*The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Cripple of Inishmaan* are the two best examples of McDonagh plays that present characters pre-occupied with food. However, these plays strike a sharp contrast among many of his other works. McDonagh also has a penchant for depicting violence. Indeed, Fintan O'Toole calls him "savage" ("A Mind in Connemara"). While *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple* are certainly not free of violence, they complicate the all too frequent and shortsighted McDonagh and Quentin Tarantino comparison made by many reviewers. However, in these two plays, McDonagh's ironically humorous violence is employed in a much different way than in his other works. Perhaps the biggest differences are revealed by examining the basic elements of the plays' *mise-en-scène*. *Beauty Queen* takes place exclusively in a "living room/kitchen" (3), and almost half the items on the "Property List" in *Cripple* are food items (72). These choices of setting and props place food at the center of the plays, and this food becomes a means of violence. The idea of food being used as violence may seem a bit strange at first. However, a little more thought reminds us that food is necessary to sustain the body, and thus it easily can become an instrument of power and control, particularly when supplies of food are limited: "The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 549). Consequently, in McDonagh's *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple*, characters associate power with food.

While Foucault's assertion makes the connection between food and power appear obvious, most would agree "power" is not the first word that comes to mind when one thinks about food. One might wonder what influenced McDonagh's exploration of this association. O'Toole's 2006 interview with McDonagh provides some insight. Early in the rise of *Beauty Queen*'s popularity, the play's producer "and the actors in the cast took him out to dinner. It was McDonagh's first meal in a fancy restaurant. One of the actors ordered tzatziki, and McDonagh, who had never tasted it, was deeply impressed and, for the first time, aware of his lack of social experience" ("A Mind in Connemara"). While O'Toole uses this as an example of McDonagh's generalized lack of experience, his "first meal in a fancy restaurant" is testament to his socioeconomic deprivation. What impresses McDonagh is, in fact, the food of the rich and powerful. In a 2012 *Guardian* interview with Alex Godfrey, McDonagh comments, "If you're a working-class kid and you end up working in British theatre, especially with an Irish background, you feel like you're not welcome." McDonagh felt like an outsider economically as well as ethnically. This might lead one to believe that McDonagh's exploration of food as a means to agency is explicable as a neurosis, which might be the best answer if McDonagh were the only Irish author to incorporate this theme into his works. Yet, such is not the case. In fact, McDonagh is the recipient of a legacy of literary and cultural memory infused with a connection between food and power that some rightly associate with the Great Famine.

Any attempt to understand what has influenced Irish literature after 1845 to conflate hunger and agency obviously must include a consideration of the Famine. The postponement of a reasoned examination of this event until the 1990s is, in fact, what placed it and kept it as a prominent idea in the minds of Irish writers. This is because, as

Famine historian Stuart McLean notes, the previously ill-attended horror and complexity of the Famine result in its continuous reappearance as trauma and symbol in Irish culture. Certainly, “for many years Irish people had only the haziest notion of what happened during the Famine,” according to Irish historian Tim Pat Coogan’s 2012 book *The Famine Plot* (4). An event as significant as the Famine, especially because of its historical suppression, has the ability to be transmitted “from one generation to another” (McLean 156-57). More to the point, literature can play out in a “scene of haunted memory” as a result of “the legacy of a traumatic history” (Caruth 420-21). Coogan argues, as have many others, that the 1841 census, which estimated over 8 million people living in Ireland, is flawed. Still, it is the only measure historians have, and “it is generally accepted that during the Famine period Ireland’s population fell to some six and a half million.” However, as Coogan asserts, even if these figures are accurate, they still “mask the shock the famine caused Ireland.” Coogan notes that the percentage of famine deaths in Ireland’s population was higher than in contemporary Third World famine tragedies, using the example of Darfur, “which claimed approximately one hundred thousand lives” but “did so out of a population of 27 million” (10). If one agrees with Coogan in this case, the impact of the Famine cannot effectively be measured merely by citing the generally accepted death toll of about a million (with another million and a half fleeing Ireland), but, instead, by examining the stunning percentage of population loss. This is especially true of Connaught, where *Beauty Queen* and *Leenane* are set. There, Coogan reports a shocking excess mortality rate of 40.4% during the Famine (2). From a broader perspective, Ireland lost “25 per cent” of its population during “just six years” (Kinealy 22). In other words, the empty, green landscapes of

Ireland that now draw tourism from around the world also ironically serve as poetic testimony to starvation and immense loss.

Whether one looks for blame in nature or colonialism, it is clear that the Irish lacked agency during the Famine. While Coogan contends, as others have, that England's role in the Famine amounts to genocide (229-31), this thesis will not rely on that view. However, there is no doubt that the ethnocentric attitudes of the British towards the Irish, combined with the negligence of the English government that held colonial control during the Famine, greatly contributed to the tragedy. Tony Blair's 1997 apology to Ireland for the Famine on its 150-year anniversary is generally acknowledged as the beginning of Ireland's true reckoning of the tragedy:

The famine was a defining event in the history of Ireland and Britain. It has left deep scars. That one million people should have died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today. Those who governed in London at the time failed their people. (quoted in Marks)

The body, established by Foucault as a site of agency, was powerless in the face of a widespread crop failure and the lack of government intervention. The scale of loss during the Famine, the degree of its trauma, and colonial negligence all serve to cement the relationship between food and a loss of power in Ireland's cultural memory.

The Famine thus became emblematic of an existing *topos*. Indeed, the linking of food with power begins even before Ireland's written history. Daniel Melia notes that the legal remedy of *troscud*, spanning from "pre-Christian Irish law" to the "later middle ages," prescribes "publically fasting against the person of higher status" thereby

empowering “the person of lower status” to oblige “his adversary to match his fast, pay the debt, or face ritual pollution of his household” (41). Another example comes from the first-century *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, as recounted in a twelfth-century manuscript, which tells the story of an attempt to gain power through the acquisition of livestock—in other words, food. After the arrival of Christianity, the Irish fasted for spiritual power with a severity matched only by the Desert Church fathers (Bynum 38). Beginning in the seventh century and continuing through the late Middle Ages, Irish Catholics also wrote hagiographies of St. Brigid, cleverly conflating her with the goddess Brig and providing numerous accounts of food and Eucharist miracles, thus employing Brigid’s miraculous power to assert Kildare’s dominance over other monastic settlements. However, this recognition of food’s relationship to power was not restricted to Irish Catholics. In the eighteenth century, Anglo-Irish Jonathan Swift picked up this cultural thread, satirically proposing that crowded, starving Irish families might gain economic agency by selling their babies as food. It is not a coincidence that many assume Swift wrote “A Modest Proposal” in response to the Famine because Ireland’s history of associating food with power is obviously long and complex enough to fuel this anachronism. Not surprisingly, such a history, as well as a reluctance to address the Famine as noted by Coogan and McClean, leads to the repetition of this theme in literature. Works from the Irish Canon and beyond by authors such as William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Edna O’Brien form the literary cultural memory of food’s reciprocal relationship with power that McDonagh has inherited.

This literary lineage reveals another intriguing dynamic: the use of gender to highlight the connection between eating and agency. Because of women’s role as food

preparer and distributor in patriarchal culture, gender serves as a clarifying lens through which to view this *topos*. Strong female characters pulse in *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple*. However, this is not always the case in works by McDonagh. Returning to *Seven Psychopaths* provides a glimpse into McDonagh's more typical use of women characters. In the film, the character Billy comments that while it is acceptable for women to be killed in a screenplay, audiences will not tolerate brutality against animals. This is ironic given the violence against animals portrayed in *Cripple* and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, but without a doubt the greater irony—and in McDonagh's works there is always a greater irony—is the acceptability of prioritizing the deaths of women in film over the depiction of violence against animals.

Una Mullally, a freelance journalist and blogger for *The Irish Times*, is not amused. Although she acknowledges McDonagh is depicting his own ironic struggle with studio executives in regards to women and animals, she is nevertheless offended. She also comments on another self-conscious moment in *Seven Psychopaths* that similarly exposes the portrayal of women in Hollywood film: “Christopher Walken’s character, Hans, berates Marty for having awful female characters in his script.” Mullally quotes Alex Godfrey’s *Guardian* interview in which McDonagh jokes about Hans’s comment: “it’s a kind of easy Get Out of Jail Free card to say that in the middle of the film. It would have been better to write some better women characters and not have them die.” Like the Queen Victoria of identity politics, Mullally simply responds to this statement with a one-word sentence: “Quite.” In spite of her insistence that “I get it. I totally get this film,” Mullally refuses to acknowledge that McDonagh is solidly resisting Hollywood sexism through the film’s self-awareness. Mullally also ignores what immediately follows

McDonagh's comment on sexism and his women characters in the Godfrey interview. Godfrey reports, "He says the lead character in his next film, a 55-year-old woman, is as strong as anyone he's ever written" and then comments that "anyone who's seen his 1996 mother-daughter play *The Beauty Queen Of Leenane* will know he writes great female characters." Furthermore, the day before Mullally's piece was published, Donald Clarke published an interview in the same paper in which McDonagh also responds to the Hans comment: "The first play was all about female characters. So I don't see it as a criticism of myself. It is a comment on Hollywood and on this particular script. It's a red herring concerning writing in general." The first play McDonagh is talking about, of course, is *Beauty Queen*. However, perhaps the most important thing all of these critics are missing is "Marty" McDonagh's response to Hans's criticism of women in his work: "Well, it's a hard world for women. I guess that's what I'm trying to say." This reality is precisely what McDonagh demonstrates not only in *Beauty Queen*, but in *Cripple* as well. Mag, Maureen, Helen, Kate, Eileen, Mammy, and even some of the male characters struggle with the effects of gender on their lives. Indeed, the expectations regarding gender that burden women with the responsibility of food is one prominent way in *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple* that McDonagh portrays the difficulty of living life as a woman. Gender becomes the paint on McDonagh's inherited canvas of agency and hunger.

McDonagh is not the only Irish author to use gender to color the relationship between food and power. While many agree that "Martin McDonagh's works are a natural evolution of the Irish canon" (Castleberry 45), little if any critical attention has been paid to the context that gender provides for food and its association with agency. Scholars, however, have noted the abundance of food references in the Irish Canon.



James Joyce's *Ulysses* has received, perhaps, the most critical attention in terms of such references. Allison Armstrong even published *The Joyce of Cooking*, an Irish cookbook that was inspired by and often comments on Joyce's work. Bonnie Roos, Lindsey Tucker, Ariela Freedman, and Miriam O'Kane Mara have all published books and articles on Joyce's use of food. Likewise, important Irish scholars including Christopher Morash, Nicholas Grene, Margaret Kelleher, and Christine Kinealy have commented, although less frequently, on the appearance of the Famine in the Irish Canon. Curiously, the abundant references to food in *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple* receive little if any scholarly attention, and when food is mentioned in regards to McDonagh's work, scholars seem to struggle to find meaning in it.

Karen O'Brien views food as an "area of ecocritical investigation" in *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple*, tying the food in these plays to issues of ecology and the global food supply. However, while *Beauty Queen* takes place in the 1990s, *Cripple* is set in the 1930s, and it is therefore difficult to accept O'Brien's assertion that "The peas" Kate and Eileen tyrannically stock simply "represent a product of the global ecosystem." Taking another perspective, Joan FitzPatrick Dean connects the use of poor taste in food to Irish stereotypes of provincialism, commenting that "McDonagh's Irish characters talk about junk food as much as they do about bad television programming and are better informed about both than about Catholicism or Irish history" ("Martin McDonagh's Stagecraft" 31). However, while some of the characters are ill-informed and enjoy junk food, not all of them are ignorant about history. Helen notably treats Billy to a kinesthetic experience of Irish history in *Cripple* and Maureen attempts to do the same with Mag in *Beauty Queen*. Thus, Dean's argument, while it notes the presence of food, is not supported by

the texts. Marion Castleberry has also acknowledged the use of food in *Beauty Queen*. She believes, as José Laners has proposed, that “Mag’s world revolves around food” due to her “need for objective reality in the midst of . . . postmodern confusion.” Although Castleberry confirms that “Maureen controls her mother” with food, Castleberry rather confusingly chalks it up to little more than a postmodern-influenced narcissism. There does not appear to be a single McDonagh scholar who finds cultural significance to the playwright’s use of food in *Beauty Queen* or *Cripple*. On the other hand, many critics have found the issues of gender raised by the plays to be of great interest, which will be explored later in this thesis. Even so, there is little to no effort among McDonagh scholars to explore the connections between gender and food.

Perhaps such oversights are due to a general assumption that food in literature is superfluous. However, as Terry Eagleton points out, “If there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just about food” (“Edible Ecriture”). Furthermore, and perhaps more intriguingly, the avoidance of addressing food in McDonagh’s work may be the result of a lingering avoidance of examining the impact of the Famine on Irish culture. Indeed, the scholarly attention paid to food in general and the Famine in particular in Irish literature is relatively new and was once thought to be reductive or even distasteful. As Christine Kinealy points out, the Famine’s “long term legacy, especially in literature and culture, remains little explored” (7). In his afterword to a collection of essays on the Irish Canon’s images of the Famine, *Hungry Words*, Christopher Morash describes his early experience “thinking about Irish Famine literature.” “Back in the mid-1980s,” Morash explains, his colleagues’ reactions to his ideas were “almost always the same, [he] would get a quizzical look, followed by: ‘There’s not much to study, is there?’” Yet,

as the 150-year anniversary of the Famine coincided with literary scholarship's relatively recent turn towards more frequent use of interdisciplinary modes of inquiry—including that of history, as well as the emergence of postcolonial theory—this situation began to change. Additionally, “the other major tectonic shift that took place in those years was the permission—borrowed from the wider field of cultural studies—to consider literary texts as cultural artefacts rather than as aesthetic objects to be assessed” (300-01).

Published in 2006, “*Hungry Words* marks a shift in the study of Famine literature in that it gathers essays whose scholarly agenda is to relocate the Famine at the heart of a traditional, aesthetically defined, Irish literary canon” (302). While the “politics of the interpretation may vary,” Morash indicates many felt “that the Famine remained taboo for more than a century” (303). Whether this attitude is behind the lack of substantial investigation into the use of food in *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple* is impossible to say. Nevertheless, as McDonagh's plays enter the Irish Canon, they also join a richer field of study into food, especially with concern to the Famine—the event that galvanizes Ireland's ongoing cultural associations of food with power.

Exposing these connections may be more important than ever, not only with a view to the past but also with a view to the future. While Irish writers seem never to have lost sight of the influence of the Famine and its inherent ties to gender and power, Ireland itself may be reversing the cultural process into a pattern of forgetting. Coogan's *The Famine Plot* skillfully connects the dependency of Ireland before and during the Famine on the exploitation and striking apathy of the British. However, Coogan is careful to point out that, while the Irish could do little to prevent their own suffering during the Famine

years, the current dependency of Ireland on other nations places the country in a similarly vulnerable position:

The influence of the unacknowledged portion of the legacy is the stark warning to today's Republic of Ireland's citizenry of what can happen when a country has no government of its own and must rely for its sustenance on the droppings from the table of a wealthy neighbor.

Ireland's tragedy at the time of the Famine was that, through conquest, she had no government of her own. (1)

The serious economic difficulties that Ireland now faces have led to increasing reliance on the European Union, particularly Germany, in the wake of the rapid collapse of the Celtic Tiger and the worldwide economic downturn. Yet, according to Terry Eagleton's *The Truth about the Irish* (published during the Celtic Tiger period), even the hopefulness of the 1990s was a "precarious prosperity" that was "deeply dependent on outside sources" (40). Yet, it was a period when, following "centuries of grinding poverty," the wants of some Irish people, "or even in some cases necessities, which they only dreamed of, [could] now be theirs" (40-41). Perhaps the relatively short-lived economic boom in Ireland caused complacency among the public. Coogan, though, knows that the "learned helplessness" of Ireland has been and continues to be its greatest liability. Coogan's warning, of course, comes with some measured hope: "A land that could survive the Famine can survive almost anything. It absolutely can "emerge with some strength from its current difficulties" (233). In order to do this, however, Ireland must remember the susceptibility of food to manipulations by those seeking power, no matter how painful this memory may be. Indeed, the use of food as an agent of power in two works written

during the Celtic Tiger, *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple*, could themselves be read as warnings. Whether or not one chooses to do so, it is clear that these plays bring to light important issues that ought to remain fresh in the Irish consciousness. Scholarship may have begun to identify the long history of references to the conflation of food with power in Irish literature. However, given the fragile state of the contemporary Irish economy, there is a sense of urgency attesting that this recognition must not stop with the works of writers such as Yeats, Joyce, Beckett, and Edna O'Brien.

Therefore, this thesis will examine the rich cultural memory of food's association with power that has surfaced in many works of the Irish Canon, inherited and forwarded by Martin McDonagh's *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple*. This will be achieved by looking through the lens of gender, which further clarifies and magnifies this association. Gender, as previously discussed, is an important issue to McDonagh and the works of Irish literature that precede *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple*. In doing so, this thesis will fill a hungry gap in scholarship that ought to acknowledge a truth important enough to be traceable and enduring for centuries: in Ireland, food equals power.

## CHAPTER II

### MURDERING MOTHER IRELAND

The cultural memory Martin McDonagh inherits—a history steeped in connecting food to agency—is inevitably complicated by the traditional view of Ireland as mother. Novelist Edna O’Brien opens her memoir, *Mother Ireland*, by explaining that “Countries are either mothers or fathers, and engender the emotional bristle secretly reserved for either sire. Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and, of course, the gaunt Hag of Beare” (1). O’Brien titled this opening chapter “The Land Itself,” and it is perhaps the rugged and challenging land that led not only to the view of Ireland as mother, but also to the conflation of power with nutrition. Such is the setting in which the legends of the Catholic mother of Mother Ireland, Saint Brigid, were born. Lisa M. Bitel notes “the brutality that permeated the daily life” of the religious and those they sought to protect: “death and destruction stalked the people of early Ireland.” Violence could result in “the year’s food supply [being] lost under the hooves of horses and the torches of raiders” and “cows and pigs [being] scattered and stolen” (*Isle of Saints* 145). In this harsh environment, where food is so vulnerable to environmental pressures, the seventh-century writer Cogitosus, author of what most believe to be Saint Brigid’s oldest vita, begins a tradition of employing “the life of Brigid

to support the ambitions of the see of Kildare for supremacy against the see of Armagh” (O’Donoghue 108). One of the best indications that Cogitosus was attempting to portray Kildare as powerful comes from the number of miracles involving food he recounts in his version of Brigid’s life, offering only “a few” miracles “from innumerable instances” (208). The vast majority of the miracles Cogitosus chooses are food-related, thus initiating a long-standing connection between food and power that McDonagh exposes in *The Cripple of Inishmaan* and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*.

Among Brigid’s food miracles, those involving milk and milk products are abundant. Brigid’s ability to provide milk would have been especially noteworthy in Ireland: “Milk was an essential part of the Irish diet. The lack of sunlight in Ireland means that human bodies were physiologically not able to produce enough vitamin D. Fortunately, milk is a source of vitamin D, as well as a number of important proteins” (Torma 2). Regina Sexton, food and culinary historian at University College Cork, Ireland, notes that milk products were tellingly referred to as “the white meats.” Of course, Brigid’s ability to conjure milk is symbolically important as well. As a mother figure, she metaphorically nurses Kildare and, eventually, all of Ireland with her miracles. Often called “Mary of Gael,” Brigid is the Christian mother of Ireland, just as the Virgin Mary is the mother of the whole of Christianity. Bitel views both Mary and Brigid as “perfect mothers”: “They sheltered, protected, and loved their children” (*Lands of Women* 108). In these milk-soaked saint’s tales, Brigid’s hagiographers were able to interweave the pagan and the Christian because, as Thomas Cahill explains, “Unlike the continental church fathers, the Irish never troubled themselves overmuch about eradicating pagan influences, which they tended to wink at and enjoy” (148-49). This

allows Brigid to be both Christian and Pagan mothers to Ireland simultaneously. She takes “the veil on the Hill of Uinech, Ireland’s primeval navel and the mythical center of its cosmic mandala” (172-73). The association with this *omphalos* cements Brigid’s legend to the conception of Ireland, the land itself as mother, as does the association of the mythological tradition of *Brug na Bóinne*. *Brug na Bóinne* is located in the Boyne Valley and is said to have given “hospitality to countless guests in hundreds of Irish stories” (“*Brug na Bóinne*”). The Boyne River, which runs through the valley, starts at a bog near Brigid’s Kildare, and “Boyne” significantly translates to “River of the White Cow” (“Boyne River”). Furthermore, *Imbolc*, Bríg and Brigid’s shared feast day, may come from an Indo-European root word meaning “milking” (Torma 2-3). These associations of Brigid as goddess and mother strengthen the reputation and usefulness of her spiritual power to provide nutrition, which McDonagh interrogates almost a thousand years later.

Brigid’s portrayal as a mother with miraculous power to provide sustenance in spite of the unforgiving land endures for centuries. Over a hundred years before McDonagh, William Butler Yeats’s nationalistic plays *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *The Countess Cathleen*, according to Jerome Joseph Day, “may be connected to the Irish tradition of the earth goddess” as well as to “the Saint Brigid cult” (126). Yeats’s *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is set in the wake of the Irish Rebellion of 1798, and the title character is an old woman who, as countless scholars have noted, embodies Mother Ireland and her struggle for freedom from British imperialism. The Old Woman complains of “Too many strangers in the house.” Her “four beautiful green fields” were “taken from” her. The four fields, of course, refer to Ireland’s four provinces. Two



characters in the play, Bridget and Peter, want to feed her, but feeding Mother Ireland will not suffice. In response to Bridget and Peter's offer of hospitality, the Old Woman reveals that she wants Irish souls in exchange for her motherly sacrifice: "If anyone would give me help he must give me himself; he must give me all." Whether or not Yeats intended his Mother Ireland in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* to be a guilt-inducing, smothering figure, the Old Woman nevertheless takes on such a role. Mother Ireland demands the power to consume men's lives, and McDonagh will ultimately challenge her commands.

Yeats combines "the self-sacrificing victim, usually male, and the idealized national personification, usually female" into the central character of another play: *The Countess Cathleen* (Day 123). Problematically, this other incarnation of Mother Ireland is a landlord. Even though some landowners during the Famine may have treated their tenants with compassion, the callousness of those holding land is infamous in the history of the Famine. Yet, according to Day,

in spite of Yeats's own background, his circle of friends and his proximity to the Great Irish Famine, it is ironic in the extreme that he could so structure his play that the explosive implications of the text eluded him. Yeats wanted to present a drama connecting the real world to the spiritual aspirations he set for Ireland by gossamer and fairy dust. Unwittingly, however, he ensnared his play in the web of competing discourses originating in the Famine era and continuing to polarize Ireland. (111)

In order to prevent her tenants from starvation and religious manipulation with food, Mother Ireland as landlord surrenders all in this play, including her life. This means that "Yeats's 1899 audience, then, the victims, peasants who remained overwhelmingly

faithful to Roman Catholicism, have been made into the villains, churls who will sell their souls for a bowl of soup” (113). Although this version of Mother Ireland sacrifices herself to feed her children, these children are still being asked to live up to unrealistic parental expectation. In the face of hunger, they must turn down food to maintain national pride.

McDonagh’s criticisms were not the first to express the disparity of Mother Ireland’s requests as portrayed by Yeats. As Day makes plain, “Yeats’s first audiences recognized the connections and the implications” (111), and among these early audiences was a young student named James Joyce (124). Significantly, Joyce too reminds us of the vice the Famine put on faith when in *Ulysses* Bloom thinks, “They say they used to give pauper children soup to change to protestants in the time of the potato blight. Society over the way papa went to for the conversion of poor jews. Same bait” (8.1071-74). Joyce and Yeats both acknowledge the exploitation of the agency of hunger-starved Famine victims; however, Joyce’s portrayal of Mother Ireland is harsh, haunting, and sometimes grotesque, directly challenging Yeats’s Mother Irelands who demand nationalistic devotion. Significantly, Joyce’s greedy Mrs. Kearney, who in “A Mother” sits “amid the chilly circle of her” upper-class achievements and consumes “a great deal of Turkish Delight in secret” (91), attempts to exploit the nationalistic value of her daughter’s name, Kathleen. In doing so, Joyce mocks not only Yeats, but also his image of Mother Ireland. In fact, Joyce’s confrontation of this image of Mother Ireland is present in a third and fourth work. Stephen Dedalus, in *Portrait of an Artist*, as well as in *Ulysses*, describes Mother Ireland as cannibalistic: “Do you know what Ireland is? asked Stephen with cold violence. Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow” (151). The old sow mirrors the Old

Woman in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, who asks for and devours men's entire lives.

McDonagh's *Cripple* and *Beauty Queen* are heir to all of these versions of Mother Ireland.

Importantly, the majority of Joyce's images of Mother Ireland in *Ulysses* are presented in the "Circe" episode, which is written in the form of drama. Indeed, Joyce and McDonagh's incarnations of Mother Ireland are theatrical descendents of Yeats's versions of Cathleen. Joyce revisits the cannibalistic old sow in the form of Stephen's own mother, who is "*emaciated*" and whose mouth is "*green with gravemould*" (15.4157-59). While gravemould may or may not be green, Day notes Yeats's use of the walking dead in connection with mouths green with weeds eaten out of hunger in *The Countess Cathleen* and asserts that "Subsequent Famine literature frequently employs the green-stained, gaping mouth of the starving, as well as . . . half-dead spectres" (113). Joyce does not glorify this image of Famine, mother, and Ireland. Indeed, Stephen intends to destroy her, calling out, "Nothung!," which is the name of a transfigured mythological sword in Wagner's *Ring Cycle* (Gifford and Seidman 518), as he raises his ashplant above his head and brings it crashing down (15.4242-45) on the ghost of his mother and, in turn, Mother Ireland—who, in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, demands that the men of Ireland give all of their power to her. Bonnie Roos, who attempts to trace the Famine through *Ulysses*, reads "Circe" as the tale of men, Stephen and Bloom, who are haunted by the Famine, which emasculated them. Due to the trauma of the emasculating Famine, they may have a psychological need to ignore the void of agency that a lack of food caused, but much to their dismay, Mother Ireland continues to reappear as a disturbing reminder.

There are other instances of Joyce complicating or destroying the image of Mother Ireland. In one instance later in “Circe,” Old Gummy Granny appears. She is an obvious parody of The Old Woman in Yeats’s *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, directly quoting from the play when Old Gummy Granny complains of “Strangers in her house” (15.4585). Furthermore, “Leprechauns are traditionally depicted as seated on toadstools, with sugarloaf hats” (Gifford and Seidman 524), and Old Gummy Granny “in sugarloaf hat appears seated on a toadstool.” By connecting this mother figure with another mythological and stereotypical image of Ireland, Joyce strengthens the association of mother and Ireland. Still more significantly, Old Gummy Granny is wearing “the deathflower of the potato blight on her breast,” and Stephen recognizes her as “The old sow that eats her farrow” (15.4578-92). At once, Joyce mocks Yeats’s jingoism and, more generally, the image of Mother Ireland. However, Joyce is unsuccessful in fully destroying this idealized Mother Ireland with the power to deny or provide nourishment. McDonagh must try to finish the job.

In *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple*, McDonagh seems as anxious as Joyce to violate Ireland’s maternal mythology and its association with food. As Joan FitzPatrick Dean points out, McDonagh does not write “the stereotypical nurturing, self-sacrificing mothers.” Instead, in *Beauty Queen and Cripple*, “he confronts us instead with the consummately selfish Mag” and “the alcoholic Mammy Dougal,” who “express their desire to see their children dead.” Further, “not only was Billy’s mother” unattractive, “but she made every effort to kill her son” (“McDonagh’s Gender Troubles” 214). Nicholas Grene notes that in *Beauty Queen*, “The violently dysfunctional relationship of Mag and Maureen is central to this strategy of demythologizing Ireland . . . negative

figurations of mother Ireland and her children are nothing new” beginning with “Joyce’s ‘old sow that eats her farrow’” (“Ireland in Two Minds” 301). Moreover, in *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple*, McDonagh wants to do more than mock and demythologize the symbol of Mother Ireland: “Archaic Ireland is dead but it won’t lie down: the fierceness of McDonagh’s iconoclasm feels like an effort to kill it at last” (“Ireland in Two Minds 306). Although Grene is exploring outdated attitudes and beliefs with roots in more than maternity, *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple* make it clear that one of McDonagh’s goals is to murder the memory of the mythological Mother Ireland, as well as all of her associations with hunger.

McDonagh’s antagonistic attitude towards Mother Ireland is equally plain in *Cripple*. Billy’s monologue in Act Two, Scene 2, reveals his linking of Mother Ireland to Irish stereotypes:

Mam? I fear I’m not longer for this world, Mam. Can’t I hear the wail of the banshees for me, as far as I am from me barren island home? A home barren, aye, but proud and generous with it, yet turned me back on ye I did, to end up alone and dying in a one-dollar rooming-house, without a mother to wipe the cold sweat off me . . . An Irishman! (*Pause.*) *Just* an Irishman. With a decent heart on him, and a decent head on him, and a decent spirit not broken by a century’s hunger and a lifetime’s oppression.  
(47-48)

Patrick Lonergan notes the stereotypical nature of Billy’s speech, cataloguing the Irish stereotypes presented. This speech, of course, is later revealed to be a Hollywood screen test. Furthermore, audiences learn that Billy “was not only unsuccessful in his attempts to

gain the part for which he had been auditioning, but contemptuous of the lines he had been speaking” (“Too Dangerous” 71). Lonergan argues Billy’s stage test and his feelings about it reveal that McDonagh’s use of stereotypes is actually a challenge to his audiences’ perception of such clichés: “McDonagh’s theatre demands of audiences that they apply more rigorous attention to their reception of mass-mediated cultural products, such as the Hollywood film for which Billy auditions” (“Too Dangerous” 73). This challenge of stereotypes is also a challenge to Mother Ireland, who maintains a powerful grip on food.

Lonergan’s insightful analysis overlooks the presence of the mother in Billy’s stage test, as well as Billy’s condemnation of the “arse-faced lines” (56) he recites. During the stage test, Billy considers writing his mother, but decides to put it off until later: “Ah, ‘tis late Mammy. Won’t tomorrow be soon enough?” before beginning to sing “The Croppy Boy” (48). The association of this song with Mother Ireland is another cultural legacy inherited from Joyce. Shortly before the appearance of *Ulysses*’s Old Gummy Granny, the Croppy Boy himself appears in “Circe.” As he is hanged to death, his last words are “Horot ho hray hor hother’s hest” (15.4547), which is a distortion of “Forgot to pray for [my] mother’s rest,” a line from the nationalistic song. Stephen, of course, refused to pray with his mother on her deathbed. While the words Billy sings do not include the lines of regret for passing by his mother’s grave, Billy certainly is passing on an opportunity to communicate with his mother. This choice, combined with the song’s associations with maternity already so well established by Joyce, make Billy’s rejection of being forced to sing “the fecking ‘Croppy Boy’” (56) also a rejection of Mother Ireland itself. Indeed, Billy even connects his mother to the land in his screen test

monologue: “What would Heaven be like, Mammy? I’ve heard ‘tis a beautiful place, more beautiful than Ireland even, but even if it is, sure, it wouldn’t be near as beautiful as you” (48). Here, Billy, ironically an orphan, further emphasizes the concept of Ireland as mother.

Yet, it is the ancient character of Mammy in *Cripple*, rather than the “fictional” Mammy of Billy’s screen test, who best exposes McDonagh’s feelings about Mother Ireland, food, and power. Mammy is over ninety years old, and without the assistance of her son Johnny, she is no longer able to prepare her own food nor obtain the alcohol that is her only comfort. Abusing this power, Johnny subjects Mammy to bizarre meals that include “beetroot paella” (33) and “carrot omelettes” (53). In the past, Mammy likely sacrificed herself to feed her family, just as the mother in the film *Man of Aran*, an intertext of *Cripple*, sacrifices herself for the care of her children and husband. As Edna O’Brien explains, “Mothers were best. Mothers worked and worried and sacrificed and had the smallest amount on their plates when the family sat down to eat” (66). However, what O’Brien fails to mention is that mothers, whose central role was keeper of the hearth, also controlled the food they provided. The woman who once controlled Johnny’s food is now ironically under his control, thus turning the dinner table on Mother Ireland’s tyranny.

However, the character of Mammy stands in stark contrast to Yeats’s Cathleens. The first noise that Mammy makes in the play is a burp, accompanied by her ambivalent reply to her doctor about her drinking problem, “I *have* been laying off the drink or I’ve sort of been laying off the drink” (29). This perverted Mother Ireland figure has been long-suffering. Even though Johnny knows that Mammy has been “trying to drink herself

dead for sixty-five years with no luck” after her husband was “ate be a shark” (30), Johnny continues to bring her alcohol, in spite of her doctor’s advice against drinking, as long as Mammy gives up her power in exchange. In one instance, Johnny forces her to remand her verbal power for alcohol:

MAMMY: Get me a drink, goose.

JOHNNY: If you retract goose I’ll get you a dr....

MAMMY: I retract goose. (32)

In fact, Johnny claims he wants Mammy to die as much as Mammy wants to kill herself, “I’d enjoy seeing *you* in *your* coffin the same as ya, if we can find a coffin big enough to squeeze your fat arse into” (34). Other characters in the play, such as the shop owners Eileen and Kate, express indifference or ignore Johnny’s hope for Mammy to die:

JOHNNY: Me mammy’s fine, so she is, despite me best efforts.

EILEEN: Are you still trying to kill your mammy with the drink,  
Johnnypateen?

JOHNNY: I am but it’s no use. A fortune in booze that bitch has cost me  
over the years. She’ll never go. (38)

This incarnation of Mother Ireland cannot be killed because of the cultural memory she represents. Like Joyce, McDonagh has inherited the symbol of mother as Famine, as well as the symbol of Mother Ireland. Mammy is described as being in her “early nineties” in 1934 (4), which means she was born between 1845 and 1849, the height of the Famine. McDonagh’s Mammy cannot die, despite the large amounts of alcohol used in hopes of drowning this memory, because the cultural memory of the Famine is too persistent. McDonagh may want to destroy the paralyzing mythology of Ireland as mother, but he



cannot destroy the Famine and the inevitable associations of food with power that the event brings to mind.

Lonergan asserts that *Beauty Queen* also “portrayed Ireland as a place where things that ought to be dead are still clinging desperately to life—from the Irish language to Catholicism to Mag Folan herself” (*Theatre and Films* 20). Mag, like *Cripple’s* Mammy, was once under the yoke of food preparation and distribution and, conversely, in control because of this burden, but when audiences meet her in *Beauty Queen*, Mag is in the process of losing her agency, and the roles of mother and child are reversing. This is illustrated when Mag’s childless daughter Maureen complains that she has “Enough babies” (39), alluding to the nurturing care that she must provide to her mother.

McDonagh frequently demonstrates this turnaround in power through food. One way he does so is through his physical description of characters in terms of weight. While audiences learn that Mammy is overweight, at least in the eyes of Johnny, through dialogue, McDonagh explicitly divulges Mag and Maureen’s weight in the stage direction. In the character list, Mag is “*Stout*” and Maureen is “*slim*” (2). Weight, therefore, is essential to understanding this pair. Mag’s weight bears witness to her winning her struggle with power through food until her age and her daughter conspire to subvert that power. The play opens with Maureen discovering Mag can feed herself: “So you can get it yourself so” (4). In addition to being described as large, Mag is also described as “*frail*” (2), yet it is clear that she is not completely incapacitated. Mag depends on Maureen for her food not only because it has become difficult for her to prepare her own food, but also, and more importantly, because of the control her need holds on Maureen. Marianne Castleberry acknowledges that “Mag’s world revolves

around food—she is obsessed with being fed” (49). This food obsession is based on Mag’s desire to keep Maureen in her household, and it appears that so far Mag’s play for power through food has been successful. Maureen is a 40-year-old virgin.

The tide, however, is turning, and this is a battle that Mag is destined to lose. Both Mag and Maureen employ food as a weapon in this struggle for power. Following Maureen’s discovery that Mag can feed herself, Mag uses Maureen’s abuse and the resulting guilt as well as exaggerated health problems to control Maureen through food, getting her to prepare porridge (6-9). Maureen attempts to use this particular act of feeding to silence her mother, but Maureen forgets the tea, which allows Mag to speak again (9-10). Like Mammy, Mag’s verbal power is tied to her consumption. Then, when Mag complains about Maureen forgetting to put sugar in her tea, Maureen takes her tea and porridge and throws it out, denying Mag food entirely (11). In the next major battle of this war, Mag has lost even more footing. Maureen realizes that Mag has lied about Ray Dooley’s visit and is attempting to hide the message that Mag was trusted to relay to Maureen. Ray was delivering a message from Pato, his brother and Maureen’s love interest. Maureen punishes Mag by force-feeding her Complan—“*the sickly brew.*” Mag’s excuse for her deception is that “Young girls should not be out gallivanting with fellas,” exposing her need to keep Maureen under her control and in her service, and Maureen’s response reveals how successful Mag has been up until this point: “I’ve heard it all now. What have I ever done but *kissed* two men the past forty years?” (21-23). Shortly afterwards, McDonagh reveals that Mag loves shortbread biscuits but does not like Kimberley’s (24). Later, Maureen taunts Mag with shortbread cookies, equating them with the sex she has been denied because of Mag’s control (62-64). Maureen also

implies Mag's complete loss of power over everything by threatening to put her into "a home for deaf people": "And it isn't cod in butter sauce you'll be getting there. No. Not by a long chalk. Oul beans on toast or something is all you'll be getting in there. If you're lucky. And then if you don't eat it, they'll give you a good kick, or maybe a punch" (60). Maureen illustrates the nature of her threat, of course, using terms of food. Mag, as a representation of Mother Ireland, is being stripped of her power over her child and food.

One way Mag resists the loss of power is by pouring her urine in the kitchen sink, which also serves to further the exchange of mother and child roles in their relationship as well as mocking the image of Mother Ireland. Mag offers no explanation for her behavior. In one instance, she attempts to deny the odd and rather childlike act. This occurs when Ray is uncomfortably waiting to deliver another message from Pato to Maureen:

RAY: This house does smell of pee, this house does.

MAG: (*pause. Embarrassed*): Em, cats do get in.

RAY: Do cats get in?

MAG: They do. (*Pause.*) They do go to the sink.

RAY: (*pause*) What do they go to the sink for?

MAG: To wee. (57)

Mag also demonstrates in this exchange that she knows how to use food as a weapon in yet another way: she asks Ray for food shortly after this scene occurs. Mag knows from experience that asking Ray for food will result in his leaving, significantly allowing her to destroy Maureen's letter from Pato (58-59). Although Mag does not attempt to use the cat excuse with her daughter, Mag also becomes defensive when Maureen mentions her

strange habit to Pato. Maureen uses it as a way to shift attention away from her own faults; however, in doing so, Maureen exposes the power Mag wields over food with her urine. Mag's urine affects Maureen's food and agency: "And she does have a urine infection too, is even less hygienic. I wash my prairies in there" (41), she complains. Whether this is a conscious or unconscious choice by Mag, the urine contaminates the food area, thus maintaining at least some of Mag's control over food and her daughter while further soiling the image of Mother Ireland.

Mag's urine misbehavior strikes a sharp enough contrast to the Mother Ireland of Yeats's plays, as does her controlling behavior. However, Maureen's actions, especially considering her motherly role in Mag's life, overshadow an intentional mishandling of wee. Maureen becomes a murderer of her own mother, as well as a motherly figure who murders her own, bringing to mind the old sow of *Portrait of an Artist* and *Ulysses*, as previously discussed. Mag in *Beauty Queen*, like Mammy in *Cripple*, also serves as a representation of an "Archaic Ireland" that, as Grene asserts, McDonagh rails against. Indeed, Mag demonstrates several undesirable characteristics of provincial Ireland that many would like to see die. For example, in an incident spanning three pages of text, Mag is annoyed when the radio plays music in Irish rather than English, describing it as "an oul fella singing nonsense" and asking, "Why can't they just speak English like everybody?" Maureen responds by asking Mag which country she lives in, to which Mag amusingly and tellingly replies, "Galway." Her ignorance of Irish nationalism and the importance of the Irish language to this cause are heightened when she asks Maureen, "where would Irish get you going for a job in England? Nowhere." Maureen, frustrated by her mother's lack of awareness, replies, "If it wasn't for the English stealing our

language and our land, and our God-knows-what, wouldn't it be we wouldn't need to go over there begging for jobs and handouts?" However, Mag is not finished demonstrating characteristics of an Archaic Ireland. Mag tells Maureen that "If it was America you had to go begging for handouts, it isn't Irish would be any good to you. It would be English." Maureen then summarizes the problem with Mag's view: "Bringing up kids to think all they'll ever be good for is begging for handouts from the English and the Yanks" (7-10). Here, Mag stands as a representation of things that McDonagh and modern Ireland would rather destroy, epitomizing negative aspects of "old" Ireland. This Mother Ireland, however, unlike Mammy in *Cripple*, can, and will, die.

Mag represents the cloying Old Woman as well as later incarnations of Archaic Ireland that McDonagh, like Joyce, wants to bury. Yet, before the funeral, Maureen uses food to not just mentally but also physically torture her mother, burning her with chip fat on one occasion before the play begins and in another brutal instance after Maureen discovers that Mag has destroyed Pato's letter. Maureen's malice also includes teasing Mag about her death, just as Johnny taunts Mammy about her death. Importantly, and again like Johnny and Mammy, Maureen ties killing Mag and her death to liberation from her food bondage. In fact, in one instance, when Mag turns the death threat around on Maureen, Maureen even considers that her own death would allow her the same freedom. Maureen exclaims, "I wouldn't mind going at all, going first. Oh no. I'd enjoy it. I would. No more ould Complán to get, and no more ould porridge to get" (10-11). Later, Maureen ties Mag's death to the freedom she has most cruelly been denied: "I have a dream sometimes there of you, dressed all nice and white, in your coffin there, and me all in black looking in on you, and a fella beside me there, comforting me, the smell of

aftershave off him, his arm round me waist. And the fella asks me then if I'll be going for a drink with him at his place after" (23). Mag's control of Maureen through food has prevented Maureen from living a fulfilling adult life, and Maureen realizes that Mag's death will free her from this smothering relationship with her mother. Moreover, Mag's death satisfies McDonagh's death wish for Mother Ireland.

The results of murder and attempted murder in *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple* respectively demonstrate that while there are elements of Archaic Ireland in the form of Mag that can be killed, Mammy, as a representation of the Famine, may never find rest. Yeats's goal was to "compose a myth," as Terry Eagleton explains (*Heathcliff* 309). About a century after Joyce began to deconstruct and destroy Yeats's mythology, McDonagh demonstrates that the figure of Mother Ireland persists, yet, in the form of Mag, she can be destroyed. The mother that demands her children sacrifice themselves for her to swallow whole is executed in *Beauty Queen*. However, like Stephen Dedalus's mother and Old Gummy Granny, who simultaneously represent Mother Ireland and the Famine, Mammy will continue to haunt Inishmaan with memories of lost agency and hunger. As Catherine Rees argues, "McDonagh's view of Ireland, like his presentation of history and character, is not accidental" (31). It is certainly true that Mammy's connection to the Famine and her inability to die comment on the enduring effects not only of the Famine, but also on the connection of food and power to Mother Ireland that began with Saint Brigid almost a millennium earlier.

### CHAPTER III

#### RUNNING AWAY WITH THE SPOON: GENDER, SEXUAL AGENCY, AND FOOD IN CATHOLIC IRELAND

As Joan FitzPatrick Dean notes, “none of McDonagh’s protagonists enjoys a healthy or even adequate sex life” (“McDonagh’s Gender Troubles” 216). The repression of sexual agency in Ireland is a feature of Martin McDonagh’s plays that unforgivingly reflects realities of Catholic Ireland’s past and present, and a recent news story illustrates one potential outcome of those realities. Before moving to Galway in 2008, Savita and Praveen Halappanavar heard that Ireland was a good place to have a baby. And perhaps it is. However, it may not be a good place to have a miscarriage. On October 21, 2012, Savita “presented at Galway University Hospital and was told she was losing the pregnancy. Despite a number of requests that the pregnancy be terminated—given the distress Ms Halappanavar was in and the fact the baby could not be saved—this was repeatedly refused as the foetal heartbeat was still present” (Holland). Savita eventually died, with Ireland’s strict anti-abortion laws arguably contributing to her death. Ireland’s abortion policies are not aimed simply at repressing the sexuality of women. However, one would have to ignore the context of this law among the many laws that limit women’s sexual agency based on the theology of the Catholic Church. Birth control pills could not be legally sold in Ireland until 1980, and after 1980 they were only available to

married couples. Condoms and spermicide became legal in 1983, but only to those 18 and older. Finally, divorce was not legal until 1995. Each of these issues on their own arguably reaches beyond the boundaries of sexual repression, as Carol Coulter asserts about the divorce amendment (269-70). Interestingly, though, the forgiving cultural relativism that allows so many historians to deny, qualify, and dismiss the oppression of women and their sexuality in Ireland is much less frequently extended to nations who base their restrictive laws on Islam rather than Christianity. Indeed, all of these measures against women's reproductive and sexual rights undeniably attest to the women of Ireland suffering sexual repression under laws based on Catholic doctrine. Not surprisingly, then, the lack of power Irish women, as well as men, have and continue to cope with in regards to their sexuality is frequently demonstrated in Irish literature, with Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Cripple of Inishmaan* focusing on food as a means of exploring characters' struggles with sexual agency.

As previously noted, McDonagh has inherited a literary legacy that recognizes the relationship between sexual agency and food. When one examines the many food miracles of Brigid discussed in the preceding chapter, readers of at least one of her hagiographies discover that she holds power not only over food, but also over women's reproductive power when she "miraculously ends a pregnancy" (Cogitosus 211). The recognition of this provocative "fact" is arguably behind her official although unpopular decanonization. However, the notion of women's use of food to gain agency over their reproductive power reaches a bizarre height in Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," in which Swift satirically, but tellingly, suggests that women living in crowded, starving Irish households might improve their lot by selling their babies as food for the wealthy.



While Swift is writing satire, he nevertheless insightfully connects food to sexual agency in eighteenth-century Ireland. Food might seem an odd reservoir from which to draw power. However, as Michel Foucault explains in his *History of Sexuality*, “power is not an institution, and not a structure. . . . It is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical [sic] situation in a particular society” (92). As such, power is not situated solely within the walls of government or in the hands of the wealthy. It can be found anywhere, and for agency impoverished Irish women, one of the few options for increasing agency is often through their control of food.

McDonagh, like his predecessors, recognizes that men too are subject to the regulation of their sexual lives by the theology of the Catholic Church. Charles Stewart Parnell, one of Ireland’s most legendary nationalist leaders, who many thought would at last bring home rule to the island, had his political career tarnished in the eyes of many simply because of an affair and his divorce from his wife, as alluded to in James Joyce’s “Ivy Day in the Committee Room” and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce’s *Ulysses* also frequently connects food to a lack of sexual power; for instance, Bello/Bella compares sadomasochism to cooking food (15.2890-92). Boylan asserts power over the cuckolded Bloom when he compares the lingering smell of Molly on his fingers after their adulterous meeting to “Lobster and mayonnaise” (15.3753). In fact, Leopold and Molly Bloom’s substitution of food for sex in their marriage provides one of the best examples of food’s association with a lack of sexual power. There may be no more poignant scene in literature than the “Calypso” episode of *Ulysses*, in which Bloom ascends the stairs with the breakfast his wife, who he knows is plotting adultery, is demanding. It seems the absence of sex in their marriage, or the death of their son Rudy

that likely led to their sexlessness, has conferred some sort of power to Molly over Bloom, and this power is demonstrated by Bloom's culinary servitude. While it is not culture but tragic circumstance that likely prevents a sexual relationship between the couple, Joyce still recognizes food's ability to confer power to fill the void of sexual agency.

However, perhaps the most important examples for this discussion come from Joyce's connection of colonial control, the Famine, and women's sexual repression within Catholicism, demonstrating that the force of Famine-era British colonialism may actually pale in comparison to the authority of religion in Irish culture. The church looms large over the island and over many of the women in *Ulysses*. Early in "Lestrygonians," Bloom reflects on the Catholic Church's strategy to maintain and expand its power by demanding that women "Increase and multiply" (8.33). Bloom believes that a woman must comply or "the priests won't give the poor woman the confession" (8.32-33), thus sentencing women's souls to eternal damnation. Through Bloom's eyes, Catholic women lack agency—it is either to hell or to the delivery room. Catholic families cannot even help each other because so many are themselves facing the challenge of families too large to support: "No guests. All for number one. Watching his water. Bring your own bread and butter" (8.38-39). The religious hierarchy does not understand such pressures because they have "No families themselves to feed" (8.34). Bloom's spotting of an "Underfed" Dedalus daughter (8.41), one of "Fifteen children" (8.31), spurs his thoughts on the encouragement of the Catholic faith to create overburdened, hungry families. He knows she likely survives on "Potatoes and marge, marge and potatoes" (8.42), and says it reminds him of the legendary soup lines during the Famine, charity that offered

Catholic and Jewish children soup if they agreed to convert to Protestantism. Readers do not necessarily need a potato reference to see a connection to the Famine, but the potato's presence leaves little doubt that Joyce is alluding to Ireland's starving past by exposing hunger resulting from another ideology intended to keep agency in the hands of the powerful. Nearly a century later, McDonagh continues and furthers these connections in *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple*.

However, it would take almost another half a century for a woman's voice regarding the relationship between sexual agency, food, and power to be heard. As Eamonn Jordan points out when speaking about McDonagh's work, women can be viewed as "doubly colonized" (207). Although Bloom admittedly becomes "the new womanly man," his is not a literary substitute for the true voice of the sexually repressed women of Ireland. Yet it will be a long wait because in "the Ireland of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, marriage was still the only lifestyle choice, apart from the convent, open to women" (Coulter 270). Unfortunately,

rural Ireland marriages were contracted more for the preservation of property and the assurance of inheritance than for love and companionship. Opportunities for young people to get to know each other in an unsupervised environment were rare and unapproved of. If they occurred, the very rarity of the opportunity meant they were more likely to result in physical than emotional intimacy. So people usually entered marriage not knowing each other well, with little expectation of emotional intimacy, and with a sense that marriage was more a social obligation than an opportunity for personal fulfillment. (270-71)

Women and men alike had little or no agency over their sexual choices, and often found themselves trapped in passionless, repressive marriages.

Published in 1960, Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls*, a book banned likely as much for the sex of its author as for its content, offers an excellent illustration of such marriages, and, significantly, the association of food as a substitute for sexual agency. The first time the reader is introduced to the character of Martha, for example, there is something incongruous on her bed: "a cooked chicken on a plate" sits "in the center of the big bed." Martha allows Cait and Baba, Martha's daughter, into her bedroom while begging for their silence. The reader cannot help but wonder why the chicken is such a secret and why it is in on the bed rather than in the kitchen? In Martha's world, food clearly represents something important that needs protection. Finally, it is explained that the chicken is being hidden from "the aul fella" (30). While Martha and the children furtively feast on chicken and trifles on her bed, Mr. Brennan must attempt to enjoy a cold dinner. Ironically, Mr. Brennan is the most positive male character in the novel. Nevertheless, he represents a system of oppression as Martha's husband that renders her relatively powerless, and the location of the chicken on the bed is thus no coincidence. This site is representative of her sexual subjugation to Mr. Brennan and the Catholic, patriarchal society that commands her. O'Brien fictionalizes a society in which women find agency, and therefore comfort, through food against the violation of their sexual agency. Similarly, Martha's only means of power in her society is hiding the chicken on the symbolic center of her sexual life as a married woman, the bed. Martha's husband has undeniable control over her, and all she has is a covert, yet symbolically vital, chicken.

While Catholicism undeniably informs Martha's experience and social role, *The Country Girls* makes much more overt connections among Catholicism, sexual repression, and food. According to Catherine B. Shannon, "In both rural and urban areas the authority of the Roman Catholic Church was more or less unquestioned, a situation that came from the high per capita number of priests and nuns in the Irish population whose pastoral and educational work tended to inculcate passive attitudes among Irish women" (254). This inculcation was nowhere more encompassing in Catholic Ireland than in the convent boarding schools that insulated Irish girls from their sexual identities in order to prevent their religious, social, and economic "ruin." For the sexually hungry and otherwise powerless young women locked in the convent, food becomes agency. Cait and Baba's first night at the convent includes an important example: "I got in between the icy sheets and ate a piece of seed cake. The whole dormitory was crying. You could hear the sobbing and choking under the covers. Smothered crying." Cait concludes by noting that all the girls in bed "seemed to be eating and crying for their mothers" (70). Cait's mother is dead, but all the girls suffer the same sense of separation at the convent. Food is the only thing they have to replace home and mother, and it thus provides them with a means of control in their otherwise immobilized lives. The repression of sexuality in the convent goes hand-in-hand with the convent's strict dietary limitations. Cait and Baba's first meal "was terrible," consisting of "cabbage water" and "brutal-looking" meat, which "had a faint smell as if gone off" (75). So severe is the nuns' control over these girls and their bodies that Cait believes her roommate "was eating for hours" beneath her covers. Cait has already exhausted her food supply and is forced to use the "sickening taste" of "a small blob" of Vicks Vapo-rub to alleviate what

may be actual hunger, but is likely also, at least in part, a need for a feeling of some control over her life.

O'Brien provides another insight into the culture in which *The Country Girls* is set in *Mother Ireland*, writing that "a gl  ce cherry was as precious as a jewel...a shop cake, a swiss roll say, stale as rice paper, spoke of another world where heroines stood at the casements in the sun's last beam, and were flushed with a deep suffusion of the crimsoned firmament" (78). The fuzzy vision of female victory associated with decadent treats ideally fits into the idea that food and power are linked in the culture that O'Brien portrays. Indeed, one way Cait and Baba gain control over the hold Catholicism and the nuns have over their lives is, once again, through food. In spite of the warnings from the senior convent students, Baba and Cait stuff the disgusting food from their first meal into Baba's pocket. Baba even dares to ask if the unmistakable bulge in her clothing containing the food is "sexy" (76). Thus, Baba is not only getting away with this small exertion of power, she is delighted by her victory, emphasizing the importance of using food to gain control in powerless situations. Moreover, Baba equates sexuality to her taking back of power through food.

Another way power is gained by means of food in the convent is through homosocial and, likely, homosexual relationships. During a celebratory binge-eating session at the convent, Cait and Baba make each other jealous through their associations with other young women who feed them. Cynthia and Una employ the power of food to pull apart the seemingly inseparable Cait and Baba. Baba in turn seems to use Una and her food to pay back Cait, who made Baba jealous by befriending Cynthia and accepting Cynthia's "lovely homemade oatcakes." Furthermore, Una also uses food to control not

just Baba, but others, in order to have friends who would otherwise not associate with her: “No one liked her and she was always bribing people to be her friends.” Although Una harbors a severe lice infection, she is empowered by possessing “four boxes of chocolates and three shop cakes and heaps of sweets and nuts” (82-83). Thus, food tears at and creates relationships between sexually repressed young women in the convent.

The nuns, conversely, repress both their sexuality and their food intake. During the above-discussed celebration of food and exertions of social and sexual power, a nun enters and Cynthia offers her an oatcake: “‘Have one, Sister,’ Cynthia said to Sister Margaret, who was walking in and out among the tables. She even smiled at Baba. She took two oatcakes but she didn’t eat them. She put them in her side pocket, and when she moved away, Baba said, ‘They starve themselves.’ I think she was right” (82). The nuns at the convent who sacrifice their sexual lives for God significantly also deny their nutritional needs in exchange for spiritual power. Rudolph M. Bell’s *Holy Anorexia* and Catherine Walker Bynum’s *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* describe medieval women starving themselves for power in the form of spirituality in their otherwise repressed lives. The lives of Catholic nuns in Ireland during the first half of the twentieth century are not very different from the lives of medieval religious women. O’Brien’s *The Country Girls* finally revealed the sexual repression of women by an oppressive Catholic society from a women’s perspective, and like Martin McDonagh’s *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple*, the lack of sexual freedom is frequently communicated in terms of food.

Most women wanted more freedom than life as a nun in a convent offered. Thus, in a country where women had so little control over their own lives in the first half of the twentieth-century, competition for male attention becomes all the more important

because marriage was the only path to financial and sexual stability for women. This is certainly notable in *The Country Girls*. McDonagh inherits this, as well as other responses to the lack of sexual agency in Ireland. The relationship of power to food in the Irish cultural memory, especially when it is related to gender, inevitably leads to the conflation of sexual agency and food.

In McDonagh's *Cripple*, Helen's smashing of eggs often seems to be a reaction to this gulf of agency. Women, of course, are intrinsically associated with eggs, and frustrations regarding gender inequity often motivate Helen's abuse of egg power. Men seem to be especially at risk in Helen's reign of ovulatory terror. As Helen puts it, "I do like breaking eggs on fellas" (45). Also, Helen throws eggs at the showing of *Man of Aran*, most likely because she is unable to find a way into the film herself. Yet, it is arguable that she is rebelling against her lack of power in gender as well. Helen complains that "they could've had" a lass rather than a man of Aran (46). Furthermore, when she does throw eggs at the bed sheet that serves as a movie screen, she throws them, as Bobby points out, "at the poor woman" in the film (51). Helen's targeting of the woman in the film seems to be a result of her anger at another woman holding more power than she has. She understands that in sexually repressed Ireland, her sexuality itself is one of her few means of power. José Lanthers points out that "Helen trades kisses for favors with Babbybobby, four film directors (who turn out to be stable-boys), and an actor, and possibly exchanges more than kisses with the egg-man" (18). Helen certainly despises the egg-man's wife without a clear explanation. Helen says that the egg-man's wife "just deserves spitting on" (66). Significantly, the egg-man's wife is the only other woman who could lay claim to the power Helen finds in eggs and the egg-man. "Slippy"



Helen also exerts her power with eggs over her abusers. Dean assumes that “her nickname is owing to her probably breaking more eggs than she delivers” (“McDonagh’s Gender Troubles” 211). However, the *OED* defines “slippy” as “nimble,” the exact opposite of clumsy; but, even more interestingly in another sense, as “slim” and “slender” (“Slippy”). If McDonagh is calling Helen nimble, it may be an ironic use of the word that mocks Inishmaan’s inaccurate view of Helen as clumsy, or, more likely, it could be a description of Helen’s physical ability to effectively exert power over others. However, the most interesting possibility is that McDonagh, aware of the word’s dual meanings, may have intended to call Helen thin as well as nimble, portraying her as not only physically but also mentally hungry for power over her life. The lack of Helen’s agency in a society that creates such a highly competitive environment for women leads Helen to find power wherever she can, and she finds it in the symbolically potent egg.

Sexual competition for women in patriarchal Ireland is evident; however, the most explosive way that the restrictions of sexuality and the resulting sexual taboo has harmed the nation can be found in revelations of endemic sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. McDonagh likens the power the Catholic Church holds over victims of abuse to organized crime:

All the things that have been going on in Ireland in the last few years, the revelations about child abuse by priests, were at the back of my mind while I was writing. Having somebody representing a gang of people, some of whose members are vicious bastards who are defended by the same system—it is like the mafia, the church with the cappos. (O’Toole and McDonagh 67)

People often respond to sexual abuse by developing eating disorders because this gives them a way to cope with the lack of agency in their lives. Thus, Helen's thin appearance, combined with her sexual abuse by a priest, may have a well-known psychological connection. Most psychologists believe that eating disorders are the result of a person attempting to have control over something in his or her life. A "widely accepted theory proposes that people who were sexually abused had no emotional control over what happened to their bodies; thus, they develop eating disorders as a way of regaining that emotional control." Consequently, eating disorders "become viable ways to alleviate immediate feelings of discomfort and powerlessness" (Levitt, Sansone, and Cohn 176). Sexual abuse inside and outside the Church can result in eating disorders. However, the betrayal of trust by not only an adult, but also one with religious authority, must be especially damaging to an individual's feelings of agency. So, if one accepts the definition of "slippy" as "slim," power-hungry Helen may be turning her desire for control on her own body. She certainly turns it outward in her typical manner: "I didn't drop them eggs at all. I went pegging them at Father Barratt." Helen is once again using food to regain the power she lost when Father Barratt "went touching [her] arse in choir practice" (14). And it is far from the first time Helen experiences sexual abuse. She admits to Billy that she learned "to be so violent" in order to not "be taken advantage of," as she was when she was six and "ruptured a curate" (66). It is commonly acknowledged that sexual crimes are typically based in a criminal's desire for power rather than sex. Helen attempts to reclaim this power with eggs and possibly by controlling food intake enough to earn a nickname that likely describes her thinning body. Indeed, food is at the

forefront almost every time Helen asserts herself because she associates food with the sexual power that she is denied by Catholicism and the Irish society it controls.

Bartley also seems to be a victim of some type of sexual assault by a Catholic priest. Helen questions Bartley's assertion that victims of sexual assault are powerless: "on their own and small." Interestingly, in a documentary on the making of the *Man of Aran*, *How the Myth was Made*, one of Robert J. Flaherty's film crew explains that Flaherty understood the commercial appeal of "small boys." When Flaherty found little Michael Dillane, however, the boy and his family did not want to be part of the film despite the producers offering his mother "more money than she had ever dreamed of in her life." Flaherty was not dissuaded and asked a priest, Father Egan, to "intercede." According to the crew, under this pressure from a representative of the Catholic Church, Dillane's mother "handed the boy over." This is important not only because McDonagh may have seen *How the Myth was Made* and mirrored this incident in the sexual abuse of Bartley, but also simply because it demonstrates the power of the Catholic Church over the people of Ireland. Bartley tells Helen, "Sure, getting clergymen groping your arse doesn't take much skill. It isn't being pretty they go for. It's more being on your own and small." Helen then asks Bartley, "And you, you're small and often on your own. Have you ever had your arse groped be priests?" Bartley "*Quietly*" responds, "Not me arse, no." Bartley's response to Helen denies arse-touching, but actually seems to confirm some other sort of fondling. Importantly, after Bartley makes this denial-confirmation, he quickly switches the topic to his favorite subject: sweets. Bartley seems to find relief in candy with obsessive regularity in *Cripple*—Mintios, Fripple-Frapples, Yalla-mallows, Chocky-top Drops. Bartley's obsession with sweets and the sister store owners' reactions

are undoubtedly funny, but because the examples compound, they demand close attention by the reader. Bartley's reaction to Billy's probable death in America is to mourn the candy Billy did not bring back. Bartley and Helen attempt to medicate a lack of power over their sexuality by controlling food intake. The fact that they find control in their lives through food from opposite ends of the eating disorder spectrum, bingeing on candy or starving while maintaining control over eggs, underscores this point.

McDonagh's use of food as sexual agency is a much different matter in *Beauty Queen*. For one thing, despite the fact that *Beauty Queen* was written before *Cripple*, it is set sixty years after *Cripple*, in the 1990s. Terry Eagleton summarized the odd mix of progressive yet traditional values and their conflict in Ireland during this decade:

There's a refreshing new open-mindedness, but also a sense of spiritual drift and anxiety. As one commentator put it, Ireland is now in the process of breaking up and selling all existing beliefs. It's a nation caught on the hop between the traditional and the modern, between the Bishop of Rome and the Treaty of Rome. (*The Truth* 177)

These attitudes are certainly present in *Beauty Queen*, and the nature of the conflict between old and new values is demonstrated in the lives of women. According to Dean, "*The Beauty Queen* offers the fullest exploration of the debilitating constraints on an unmarried woman in rural Ireland. So rigid are those strictures that Mag can respond to her forty-year-old daughter's admission that she has only kissed two men by calling her a whore" ("McDonagh's Gender Troubles" 217). While Mag uses the excuses of a society influenced by Catholicism, her motivation to suppress Maureen's sexuality is much more complicated. Mag tells forty-year-old Maureen that "Young girls should not be out

gallivanting with fellas.” One of Mag’s favorite songs, in fact, is “The Spinning Wheel.” Maureen tells her love-interest Pato, “Me mother does love this oul song. Oul Delia Murphy” (32). In the song, a young maiden, Eileen, must sneak away from the watchful eye of her grandmother in order to meet her lover. As Lanfers explains, “In the play, the plot of the song is gruesomely distorted as Mag, a much more cunning old woman than the drowsy grandmother, is murdered by her daughter Maureen after Mag has taunted her with her unconsummated one-night affair with a neighbor” (14). In a soliloquy, Mag also comments on the skimpiness of Maureen’s dress and her lateness in arriving home from a party, but in doing so, Mag reveals her real motivation for attempting to enforce the sexual repression common in Irish culture:

I suppose I’ll have to be getting me own Complán too, the hour you dragged yourself in whatever time it was with your oul dress. (*Quietly.*) That dress just looks silly. (*Loudly.*) Go the whole hog and wear no dress would be nearer the mark! (*Quietly.*) Snoring the head off you all night. Making an oul woman get her Complán, not to mention her porridge. Well, I won’t be getting me own porridge. I’ll tell you that now. I’d be afeard. You won’t catch me getting me own porridge. Oh no. You won’t be catching me out so easily. (37)

Mag acts as though she is imposing the sexual morality of Catholic Ireland on Maureen to maintain cultural norms; however, the audience easily “catches her out” during this speech. In fact, “in [McDonagh’s] *The Lonesome West* Valene reveals that Maureen Folan (from *Beauty Queen*) once wanted to ask Coleman to go on a date with her. That revelation . . . changes our understanding of Maureen, showing that her desire to form a

loving relationship in *Beauty Queen* had been thwarted at least once before” (Lonergan, *Theatre and Films* 5). Certainly, then, Mag’s true drive is to control Maureen, keeping Maureen in her mother’s company and service, especially in terms of providing her food.

While Mag equates Maureen’s sexual repression with power over food, Maureen associates her sexual liberation with food: “Maureen flaunts her imaginary sexual activities” (Dean, “McDonagh’s Gender Troubles” 217). Following her speech, Mag is shocked to learn that Pato has actually spent the night with Maureen. Maureen relishes in the discomfort this causes Mag, embarrassing Pato with her casual talk about sex in front of her mother. Maureen tells Pato, “You’ll have to be putting that thing of yours in me again before too long is past, Pato. I do have a taste for it now, I do. . . . A mighty ool taste. Uh-huh” (39-40). Maureen exposes her conflation of sex and food, and gains power over her oppressor by doing so. Yet, it is a span of four pages of text that lead directly up to the climax of the play. In these pages, Maureen withholds Mag’s favorite cookie, shortbread biscuits, while discussing what Maureen believes to be the failure of an attempt to win Pato. As she eats these cookies in front of her mother, Maureen acts as though she is not hurt over the loss of the potential relationship, but instead is liberated by the experience, explicitly speaking about the role of sexuality in the lives of modern women. When Maureen finally does offer Mag her favorite cookie, Maureen, guided by McDonagh’s stage direction, “*waves it phallically in the air a moment*” (60-64). In this moment, Maureen reverses Mag’s power over food and emphasizes it by merging it with sexual power.

Significantly, this association of food with sex and agency occurs right before the climax of the play. Maureen learns that Pato actually did want to see her again, and

punishes Mag with physical abuse that includes food: the burning of Mag's hand in chip fat. Food's conflation with power in McDonagh's plays is not only prominent, but also consequential. Equally consequential is Maureen's sexual repression, the frustration of which is acted out first with the use of food. According to Dean, it is "The inability of Maureen and Pato to succeed in the physical act [that] leaves their relationship in doubt, facilitates the continuing miscommunication between them, and precipitates the double tragedy of Mag's death and Maureen's madness" ("McDonagh's Gender Troubles" 218). Indeed, Maureen's lack of sexual fulfillment is the force behind her violence, making it the perfect example of the provocative turn-of-century British "In Yer Face" drama because McDonagh seeks to mirror the power over sexuality in the agency of nourishment while challenging the predominantly Catholic establishment. While it certainly is true, as Stephanie Pocock observes, that *Beauty Queen* "contains the fewest references to religion in the *Trilogy*" (64), it nevertheless presents challenges to those who support the Catholic Church and its sexual stranglehold over Irish society. Colin Graham has asked how gender can be fit into a discussion about subalternity and postcolonial identity in Ireland. Graham's intention is not so much to provide an answer, but instead to comprehensively ask the important questions necessary for a complete understanding. One, among many possible answers, is that the centuries-long suppression of religious freedom in Ireland by the British contributed to Catholicism's power over Ireland, yet this combination of Catholicism and nationalism, this demand for freedom, is exactly what leads to a deprivation of sexual agency, especially among women. This is a lack that Joyce, O'Brien, and McDonagh associate in their works with food because of the cultural memory of food's link not only to women, but also to power.

## CHAPTER IV

“THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE HAS ROCKED THE SYSTEM”:

GENDER INSTABILITY, FOOD, AND POWER

The first-century *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, or *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*, features a female character that Western culture, since its foundation, has trouble matching: Queen Medb. According to Thomas Cahill, “Medb dominates the *Tain* as does no other woman in any epic we have left to us. In the *Iliad* Helen makes her cameo appearance; in the *Aeneid* Dido has an interesting supporting role . . . one cannot imagine a woman in Greece’s heroic age . . . standing on the Trojan battlefield or traveling with Odysseus.” And Medb is not an anomaly in Celtic myth. In fact, “Cuchulainn is trained in battlecraft by three women, each more extraordinary than the one before,” and “The god of war,” who barely appears in the *Táin*, “is put in the shade by the three goddesses of war, who regularly make the scene and stir things up” (Cahill 87-88). Medb is not the sort of woman, clearly, to let her power be challenged. So when her husband, Ailill, compares their respective wealth and maintains that his is superior because he owns a bull, Finnbennach, that left Medb’s herd because he could not tolerate being owned by a woman, Medb assembles troops and starts a war in order to acquire a bull of equal strength for her herd. The *Táin*, then, not only makes an early connection in Ireland



among food, livestock, and power, but it also stands in stark relief to traditional Western notions of women's gender roles. About a thousand years later, Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Cripple of Inishmaan* advance this legacy of food's depiction as means of agency through gender role reversal and subversion.

As noted in Chapter 2, Cogitosus's hagiography of Brigid portrayed her as a mother with supernatural control over food, seeking to further the reputation of Kildare's power by writing overwhelmingly about the miraculous production of food. Yet, it is equally important to recognize that Brigid's power over food also resulted from a difference in Pre-Christian Irish attitudes about gender roles that would later be overruled by Roman Catholicism. Cahill notes that in early Christian Ireland, the "new monastic city-states," such as Brigid's Kildare, allowed women to "reign as Medb had once done over Connacht." Brigid was the leader of an "immense" gender-mixed religious community, later offending "Roman Catholic sensibility, which to this day imagines rule by a woman over men as a perversion of the natural order" (172-73). Indeed, Brigid's wielding of spiritual power is so extraordinary that it appears to impress, and perhaps even threaten, a man whom Kildare's rival, Armagh, claimed as its own: St Patrick. Brigid's spiritual agency may have been a bit too effective for Patrick's comfort. The *Bethu Brigte* recounts Brigid's conversion of a pagan who had previously refused conversion by Patrick. Patrick's response is not celebration or praise to God or Brigid for the conversion. Instead, he tells Brigid never again to travel without the escort of a priest (31-32). This account does not explain why Patrick made such a declaration, and some will legitimately argue that Patrick is attempting to protect Brigid. However, in examining this account in the absence of explanation, it seems just as likely that Patrick

reasserts his own, as well as Armagh's, power by declaring Brigid unfit to travel without an ordained religious male chaperone. In either case, it demonstrates the greatness of Brigid's reputation. Brigid's confrontation of Western and Christian gender roles is legitimized by her agency over food and is an important precursor to Irish authors' long history of doing the same.

Despite his concerns, Brigid's gender-challenging position does not cause Patrick to distance himself from her. He instead appears to have found it beneficial to associate himself with her powers. In *Bethu Bhrigidi*, Brigid, amusingly, falls asleep as Patrick preaches. When Patrick asks her about it, she claims to have experienced a vision:

“I saw,” quoth she, “four ploughs in the south-east, and they ploughed the whole island, and before the sowing was finished the harvest grew up, and clear well-springs and shining streams came out of the furrows, and white garments were round the sowers and ploughmen. I beheld four other ploughs in the north, and they ploughed the island athwart, and before the harvest came again, the oats which they had sown grew up at once and ripened, and black streams came out of the furrows and black garments were on the sowers and on the ploughmen.” (70-71)

Although Brigid's vision has a dark ending, Patrick tells her that it is essentially a positive vision because “The first four ploughs which thou beheldest, those are I and thou. We sow the four books of the gospel with seed of faith and confession. The harvest which appeared to thee, that is the perfect faith of those men-folk.” The later four ploughs, according to Patrick, “are the false teachers and the liars” who “will overturn the teachings that we sow” (71). Here, even though Brigid may offend Patrick by falling

asleep while he preaches, he links himself with her as a legitimate religious visionary. More to the point, it is no coincidence that the vision Patrick chooses to interpret as linking him to Brigid involves an extensive food cultivation metaphor.

In another account of a miracle in *Bethu Bhrigidi*, St Patrick realizes the significance of Brigid's spiritual power, inserts himself into the activity of the miracle, and makes himself responsible for the bounty of the miracle to be distributed:

Brigit with her virgins, was at Armagh, and two went by her bearing a tub of water. They came to Brigit to be blessed, and the tub fell behind them and went back over back from the door of the Rath as far as Loch Lapan. And it brake not, and not a drop fell thereout. It was well known to every one that Brigit's blessing had caused this, and Patrick said: "Deal ye the water throughout Armagh and Airthir." (76)

According to Neil X. O'Donoghue, a similar account in the *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae* ends with the water being mixed with the communion wine and consumed, as well as being used as a cure for illness. O'Donoghue remarks that the text implies wine was more plentiful than water at this time, which increases the significance of the miracle (110). Water scarcity would confer more power on those with a miraculous ability to provide it. In this miracle, Patrick harnesses Brigid's power to protect and provide an item of essential sustenance, this time in the form of drink, to heal the residents of Armagh, not Kildare. Thus, in spite of Patrick's attempts to reassert his authority, Brigid's hagiographies, like those portraying Medb in the *Táin*, help build a foundation of challenging traditional gender roles by locating power in food as controlled by women.

One must also consider the figure of Gráinne Ní Mháille, also known as Grace O'Malley, in this history of gender role reversal. According to Terry Eagleton, Gráinne was a wicked Irishwoman. She was a rebel against Queen Elizabeth I in the sixteenth century, and for forty years was the moving spirit behind anti-English uprising in the west of the country. She commanded a large private army, a fleet of boats, and was a formidable military strategist. Through her kinsfolk and allies, Grace dominated most of the fortresses of the western seaboard. In fact, she was a notorious pirate, sailing up and down the western coast and giving the English a hard time. She had her eye on a fine castle, and secured it by marrying its owner on a trial basis for a year. At the end of the year she kicked him out, having taken care to get pregnant by him in the meanwhile to secure herself an heir. (*The Truth* 136-37)

Although Gráinne's control of the seas clearly defies traditional Western notions about her gender, it might be easy to overlook that her control of the Irish coastline gave her command over the ocean as a food source and made her a provider to her people. Gráinne not only collected taxes or tribute from the English and the Irish to fish off the western coast, but she also maintained power through harvesting the bounty of the sea: "Fishing was an important source of the clan's income. The fishing grounds off the coast of O'Malley's lordship were considered one of the most fertile in Ireland. . . . The fish was usually salted or smoked and packed in wooden barrels for export" (Chambers 11-12). Thus, Gráinne maintains her power through the economic exploitation of the seas in direct opposition to prescribed gender norms. The long history in Irish literature and

culture of women exchanging one set of gender roles for another in order to gain agency through food owes a debt to the women who modeled this behavior in Celtic, Early Christian, and Renaissance Ireland.

In fact, Medb, Brigid, and Gráinne's affront to the gender roles that would make them submissive underscores the paradoxical role of women in Irish culture:

Not all Irish women are Grace O'Malleys, but the typical image of them is as strong, shrewd, practical and affirmative. This may be because they've been saddled with so many hopeless men. For all his occasional bluster and bragging, the Irish man has often been seen as emotionally retarded and much given to sentimentality, perhaps because late marriage made him dependent too long on his mother or "mammy." Irish women, by contrast, tend to be deeply unsentimental and unromantic, as women needed to be in a rural culture where they shouldered a lot of the responsibility. The blushing English rose doesn't grow readily in Irish soil.

*(The Truth, Eagleton 174)*

Indeed, while Irish women may be repressed by Roman Catholicism and its influence on government, as discussed in the previous chapter, they ironically have often taken a leading role in Ireland's ongoing struggle for independence from England, as well as in Irish government. The subtext of Eagleton's evaluation of Ireland's reversed gender roles is that Irish men have been emasculated by British occupation. Eamonn Jordan explains, "considerations of gender feed into any postcolonial reading, in part due to the feminisation of indigenous populations, and also to the feminine symbolisation of resistance" (207). Some have viewed James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus's lack of

masculinity in exactly this way. However, Stephen may reverse gender roles for another reason in *Portrait of an Artist* and in *Ulysses*. As Lindsey Tucker points out, “to become the artist is to become immersed in unconscious energies that are usually viewed as female” (12). In *Ulysses*, Stephen claims it is only “Liquids I can eat,” denying himself food in spite of having money in his pocket and Bloom’s bought bun in front of him (16.815). Miriam O’Kane Mara argues Stephen’s “food rejection behavior” results from “a rejection of materiality” in exchange for “spiritual and intellectual pursuits” (96). In this light, Stephen rejects food, thus exchanging his maleness for artistic power.

Yet, it is not Stephen but Bloom, in Episode 8 of *Ulysses*, who clearly connects the refusal of food with the reward of feminine creative power: as Tucker points out, Bloom “uses gastronomic images when thinking of creation” (62). Specifically, Bloom recognizes that vegetarians tend to be “literary ethereal people” (8.543) and that a limited diet “produces the like waves of the brain the poetical” (8.545). Meat eaters, on the other hand, such as “policemen sweating Irish stew into their shirts,” cannot “squeeze a line of poetry out” (8.546-47). Bloom concludes that the rejection of food, specifically meat, is a mind-expanding practice resulting in metaphysical power. Moreover, it is a subversion of masculinity to gain power through the denial of food. Joyce contrasts the intellectual benefits gained by the denial of food when Bloom enters a scene of primitive, male power at the Burton. There he encounters “Men, men, men” grotesquely devouring heavy lunches (8.653), leading Bloom to decide that a “Hungry man is an angry man” (8.662-63). Ariela Freedman contends Bloom further recognizes the vegetarian belief that “meat eaters consumed the terrors of the beasts, and were haunted by their traumas,” linking it to metempsychosis (449). This is clear when Bloom concludes, “Every fellow for his

own, tooth and nail. Gulp. Grub. Gobstuff. . . . Eat or be eaten. Kill! Kill!” Significantly, Bloom thinks this as he heads “back towards Grafton Street” (8.701-03). Grafton Street housed Sunshine, the only vegetarian restaurant in Dublin (Regan 464). Here, the suffering of animals and human beings due to a lack of agency in relation to food symbolically combine. After mulling over other instances of mostly male-dominated violence—cannibalism, religion, and war—in gastronomic terms, he opts for a cheese sandwich cut into lady’s fingers at Davy Byrne’s, a “Moral pub” (8.732). Thus, Bloom, complicating gender roles, also rejects his masculinity in exchange for moral, spiritual, and intellectual agency through his food choices, setting the stage for later Irish authors.

Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is another such work. Didi holds all the power over the food in his pockets, but it must not go unnoticed that he shows absolutely no interest in actually feeding himself. Instead, Didi feeds Gogo in a motherly manner. It is clear to most readers that Gogo “is clearly more feeble, needs help in removing his boots, sleeps while Didi remains awake, and has his food doled out to him by Vladimir” (Stempel 269). In one instance, Didi has difficulty calming Gogo and offers Gogo a radish as though it were a pacifier. Gogo then complains about the lack of carrots, which results in Didi asserting motherly power over Gogo’s food intake by chastising him as though he were a child: “you overdo it with your carrots.” Gogo is not pleased with the blackened radish he receives and claims that he “will go and get a carrot” but “does not move” (2.443). Gogo’s tantrum is unsuccessful. In his old age, Gogo has absurdly been reduced to the equivalent of a child because he stands powerless before his basic need for food. Didi, who apparently lacks power himself simply by not being able to end his own wait, seems to be exerting the only kind of power he does possess. In an absence of any

other kind of power, Didi enjoys his power to deny himself food and to control Gogo's food intake as though he were a mother. In a study of Italian women who fulfilled the patriarchal gender roles of their society by supplying, and thereby controlling, their families' food, the women felt powerful because they possessed "the ability to deny" due to "the influence wielded in the act of giving" (Counihan 52-53). This study confirms Foucault's assertion that power is found where power lies and that the body is often the site of exertions of power, as discussed in the previous chapters. Because his mind is often clearer than Gogo's, most likely due to Gogo's age, Didi seems to relish his relatively superior influence, not unlike a traditional Italian homemaker, by delaying or denying Gogo's food requests. Importantly, Didi retains the food and the power through taking on a female role. Moreover, like Stephen, Bloom, and *Cripple's* potentially anorexic Helen (as discussed in Chapter 3), Didi gains additional agency by choosing not to eat despite having access to food.

In *Cripple* and *Beauty Queen*, McDonagh explores this well-established Irish cultural phenomenon of food's ability to confer agency through the subversion of conventional gender roles. *Cripple's* Johnny begrudgingly exchanges his masculinity for the role of a motherly provider in his feeding of Mammy, but in the bargain achieves power over her, as discussed in Chapter 2. Like Didi, Johnny also perverts this traditional role through his cruel enjoyment of the agency food provides. *Beauty Queen's* Maureen, however, generally adheres to her gender role. Yet in her feeding of Mag, she complains about her entrapment in the traditional mother role. As noted in Chapter 2, Mag's childless daughter Maureen complains that she has "Enough babies" (39), alluding to the motherly care that she must provide her mother. Even so, although Maureen eventually



recognizes that the gendered role she has been forced to assume can actually provide power, she, like Johnny, distorts and thus challenges this gendered norm in her verbal and physical assaults on her mother, which generally involves the providing of food. While McDonagh's Maureen may not exchange gender roles, the role of mother is subverted by the exchange of mother and child roles as well as Maureen's merciless wielding of power over food, like *Godot's* Didi and *Cripple's* Johnny.

Set in heavily patriarchal Western Ireland during the 1930s, *Cripple* offers a female character, Helen, who in many ways also significantly challenges the norms of her gender-stratified society: Bartley asks Helen if "everything" she does "involves egg-pegging," to which Helen responds, "I do take pride in me egg-work, me" (46). Helen lacks power in several fundamental ways, but when she destroys "the only eggs [the eggman] had" (11), she puts the entire island under her control because they now will have to wait for more eggs, an essential element of their diets, to be produced. As eco-critic Karen O'Brien points out, "Slippy Helen . . . consistently breaks eggs, diminishing the food supply" (185). Considering the oppression of women in Ireland, especially in rural Western Ireland, during the first half of the twentieth century, it would be a rare opportunity for a young woman in 1934 to exert such power over the lives of every individual on Inishmaan. And, like Medb, Brigid, and Gráinne, Helen takes back some of the power she is denied because of her gender by challenging her gender role through the control of food: becoming a warrior who uses the gender-infused, metaphorically charged egg as her weapon.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Helen responding through her use of eggs to disparities in her power created by sexual abuse and repression, which results in extreme

competition among women, may be behind her throwing eggs at the showing of Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran*. However, Helen's throwing eggs at the film may also be viewed as a response to the typical gender passivity she sees in the character played by Maggie Durrane—a passivity Helen rejects. Patrick Lonergan notes that “Flaherty invited us to look at Maggie Durrane as she watched *Tiger King*—and he did so as a way of subtly asserting the authenticity of his vision. . . . The ‘audience’ in *Man of Aran* (that is, Maggie) is passive, accepting and mute; the ‘audience’ onstage in *Cripple* is active, unruly, outspoken and unwilling” (*Theatre and Films* 64). From this point of view, Helen is the leader of this loud group who may be counteracting Maggie's acceptance of gender roles through her unfeminine, destructive, and therefore symbolically ironic, use of eggs. However, still another explanation for Helen's egg throwing exists. Helen's challenging of gender roles may in fact be being challenged by the Maggie Durrane character. In George Stoney's documentary *How the Myth was Made*, a gathering of the real residents of Inishmaan in the 1970s heatedly argue about whether or not a woman like Maggie would have engaged in such hard labor. One woman in particular stresses that greater gender equality in everyday work existed in the time Flaherty made the film, stating, “I think Flaherty was emphasizing the hard life women had.” This statement angers a man in the audience who unwaveringly contends that men of that time would not have put such heavy burdens on a woman. Either way, therefore, it is possible Helen views Maggie as a woman who may be following or subverting her female gender role, thus testing Helen's own power of gender-role reversal, causing her to react by throwing eggs at the screen. In other words, Helen's egg-throwing rebellion at the viewing of *Man of*

*Aran* may be fueled by Helen's perception of competition in her subversion of gender norms.

It is equally important to recognize that Helen knows she lacks power simply by being Irish. Spurred by Bartley's joking defense against being the subject of Helen's egg violence—"there comes a time for every Irishman to take a stand against his oppressors"—Helen also uses her egg throwing to portray her lack of power as the citizen of a country unable to completely free itself from the colonial vise of the British Empire; however, as Patrick Lonergan explains, the "story of national liberation is further re-imagined, not as the heroic struggle of a small nation against an empire, but as a rather cruel game involving eggs" (*Theatre and Films* 68). When Helen asks Bartley if he was quoting Michael Collins, Bartley answers, "It was one of the fat ones anyway" (45-46). Bartley's use of "fat" to describe Michael Collins significantly ties the slain rebel leader to food as well as power. History looks upon Collins, like many Irish leaders, as both a hero and a bit of a disappointment. Collins, who was nicknamed "Big Fella," was overweight later in life (Coogan). Significantly, his nickname is likely due not simply to his physical size, but also as a description of the power he held as a leader of the Irish resistance. Unfortunately, despite his power, he did not fully liberate Ireland from colonial oppression. Irish Helen knows that her lack of power is in no small part due to geography and illustrates it with food, using Bartley as her foil:

HELEN: Do you want to play 'England versus Ireland'?

BARTLEY: I don't know how to play 'England versus Ireland'.

HELEN: Stand here and close your eyes. You'll be Ireland. (*Bartley faces her and closes his eyes.*)

BARTLEY: And what do you do?

HELEN: I'll be England. (*Helen picks up three eggs from the counter and breaks the first against Bartley's forehead. Bartley opens his eyes as the yolk runs down him, and stares at her sadly. Helen breaks the second egg on his forehead.*)

Helen informs her brother that she is giving him “a lesson about Irish history,” explaining that “There'll be worse casualties than egg hair before Ireland's a nation once again” (46). Importantly, Bartley, a male, does not recognize what might happen if he passively takes on the role of Mother Ireland while Helen plays the more masculine part of the colonial oppressor, despite his awareness of Helen's egg abuse. As Eagleton points out earlier in this chapter, male passivity is a common stereotype in Irish culture, and Joan FitzPatrick Dean contributes, “Whereas the adolescent boys in McDonagh's Irish plays seem gormless and dim-witted, their female counterparts are characteristically ruthless and determined” (“McDonagh's Gender Troubles” 212). McDonagh's play can most definitely be viewed as a response to the disenfranchisement of Irish men living in colonial or even still-partitioned and occupied contemporary Ireland. Furthermore, Helen's assumption of colonial power, as well as her superior understanding of the politics and complexities that underlie Ireland's occupation, demonstrates a radical departure from her expected gender role through her use of a food product. Indeed, gender norms actually became part of Irish law shortly after the year in which *Cripple* is set. According to Catherine B. Shannon, “the provisions of de Valera's 1937 constitution declaring the family as the basic social unit and woman's primary role, that of ‘wife and mother,’ were formidable disincentives to women's political participation” (255). By

taking on the role of the masculine British oppressor, putting passive Bartley into the role of Mother Ireland, and challenging the expectations of gender norms in political participation using the symbolically potent egg, Helen at once confronts both the emasculating British occupation and the suppression of women's political power by using food as a weapon.

Helen is not the only woman in McDonagh's *Cripple* who tests acceptable norms regarding gender. Kate and Eileen are sisters who run the only food shop on the tiny island. Independent entrepreneurs, they certainly do not conform to Ireland's gender roles. Dean observes that "More often than not, it is McDonagh's women characters rather than his men who are associated with gainful work. . . . In *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, Kate and Eileen run a shop that is anything but customer-friendly, not least because Eileen wolfs down many of the 'sweeties'" ("McDonagh's Gender Troubles" 211). They are shrewd business owners who hold power over the residents of Inishmaan by maintaining power over the food supply in a way that dwarfs Helen's control of one food item. When Kate ignores Bartley's requests for Fripple-Frapples, McDonagh's stage direction indicates that Bartley should pick up a conveniently placed wooden mallet and smash the eggs on the store's counter in retribution (47). Kate has not only passively asserted power over someone who already feels powerless, but she also has denied him the power he relies upon to comfort himself, as discussed in Chapter 3. Bartley responds to Kate's assertion of traditionally masculine power by trying to take his power back in a way he has witnessed repeatedly, Helen-style, by smashing the eggs. Ironically, in doing so, he is imitating another female, his sister, who defies the conventions of gender by exploiting food as a means of power.

Bartley's fixation on food ought to be more understandable to Kate. While Kate takes comfort in "stone conversations," she points out that Eileen binge-eats sweets: "Sure with Yalla-mallows, when you eat one, there's no stopping ya." Apparently, this is not an isolated incident. Kate says that it was "the same excuse with the Mintios. Well if you lay one finger on the Fripple-Frapples when they come in, you'll be in for the high jump" (36). So, not only does Eileen eat for comfort often, but it is also clear that the sweets that Bartley craved have been in the shop after all. Eileen intentionally maintained her powerful position of gender nonconformity by hoarding candy, bingeing on it, and denying it to Bartley. As women, Eileen and Kate's unconventional control over the food in their shop is the only power they have. Furthermore, it is necessary to recognize that Kate resists Eileen's persistent draw on the sisters' inventory, and thus power, as shopkeepers, jokingly threatening her sister with death. Despite Kate eventually telling Eileen to eat as she likes because she recognizes the comfort the Yalla-mallows will give her sister, Kate understands that the agency she and her sister exercise by challenging gender roles through the control of the island's food is endangered by Eileen's overeating.

Kate and Eileen's power-hungry practices reach their peak with the unresolved reason behind the shopkeepers' overbuying of peas. Shelves stocked almost exclusively with peas cannot be explained by a miscalculation of demand. The mystery deepens, as neither Eileen nor Kate is willing to explain it. Even when Johnny directly confronts Eileen with the fact that she buys "too many peas," Eileen ignores Johnny's comment (63-64). In offering these details, McDonagh has created an extensive allegory of a supposed mystery surrounding the reliance of the Irish on a single food crop, the potato,

during the Famine, as well as connecting Kate and Eileen's nonconformist gender roles to food and agency. The issue surfaces repeatedly. In one instance, Billy comments on the monotony of the food available on Inishmaan: "The peas, the praities, the peas, the praities and the peas" (67). Here, Billy connects potatoes ("praities") to peas, but the sisters' inexplicable overstocking of peas itself implies enough of a connection to the Potato Famine because of the historical ambiguity surrounding the mystery of the Irish people's reliance on the potato crop alone for nutrition during this tragedy. In fact, the Irish did grow other crops and raise livestock; however, as Rev. Philip Foy explains in a speech quoted by County Cavan's *Anglo-Celt* newspaper in May of 1846, "More than two millions [sic] of Irishmen are starving, while we export more provisions than would feed five times our population" ("Important Meeting in Shercock"). The British, along with some of the Irish themselves, continued to enforce the exportation of food even during the height of the Famine. Kate and Eileen take on the role of the British in McDonagh's Famine allegory, and, like Helen, gain masculine force in doing so. When those trusted with the answers are also those in or influenced by power, like England or the gender challenging shop-keeping sisters of *Cripple*, the full story may take decades or centuries to be told. McDonagh appears to recognize that the incomplete telling of the Famine story is part of what causes it to hang so heavily over Ireland's head. In Cathy Caruth's analysis of Balzac's *Colonel Chabert*, she describes the notion of "traumatic return," defining it as "a history of death that insists on returning precisely to the extent that it is not fully understood" (426). The unresolved questions about the peas in *Cripple* and the potatoes in the Famine are questions that reappear until they are exposed as

common knowledge. McDonagh thus illustrates relationships between food and power by linking Kate and Eileen's gender-defying control of food to the Famine.

Gender roles in McDonagh's *Beauty Queen*, set in the 1990s, strike a sharp contrast to those in *Cripple*. This is likely due to the painfully slow social change for women that was beginning to codify during the late twentieth century. Yet, as noted earlier in this thesis and as Eagleton points out in his 1999 *The Truth about the Irish*,

Women have by no means swept all before them. Ireland today is a deeply divided society on these questions, as traditional values fight it out with progressive ones. Divorce, for example, got through only by the skin of its teeth. Rural women in particular have a hard time, marooned from social services and doing much of the farm work with scant recognition. Some features of the old Ireland may be dead and buried, but morally and psychologically speaking the place is still much in evidence. (176-77)

Maureen must feed the chickens, a continuation of traditional roles that Eagleton examines in discussing the continuing pressures on rural Irish women. As Mag explains to Ray Dooley, who is waiting to deliver a message from his brother Pato, Maureen's love interest, "At the chickens, Maureen is" (14). Yet, as Maureen points out to Mag, "We do have equality nowadays. Not like in your day." Mag counters that "There was nothing wrong in my day." Maureen pushes her mother's notions of gender equality and traditional gender roles further, purposely attempting to shock her mother, who we read as a representation of old Ireland: "Allowed to go on top of a man nowadays, we are. All we have to do is ask. And nice it is on top of a man, too." Maureen and Mag's discussion of the changing roles for women in Irish society ironically come directly after Maureen



feeding Mag. However, Maureen's adherence to her gender role is undercut when Mag compliments her cooking, and Maureen responds, "All I do is boil it in the bag and snip it with a scissor" (61). Even though Maureen takes her proper, gender-defined place at the hearth, McDonagh demonstrates that the hearth is not what it used to be. As Marion Castleberry puts it, "McDonagh's kitchen is no haven of nurture and nourishment" (47). Maureen gains agency, like *Godot's* Didi and *Cripple's* Johnny, by being in the position to provide Mag's food while at the same time denigrating the traditional role of mother with varying degrees of cruelty. Conversely, Maureen has the power to cause her mother discomfort by instead challenging her notions of gender roles in sexual terms. Maureen exemplifies Eagleton's depiction of women's changing, yet in some ways stagnant, gender roles in Irish culture during the 1990s, and this interplay of the dynamic and static provides McDonagh with an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the relationship between food and power.

Perhaps the most interesting reversal of gender roles through the use of food in *Beauty Queen* is a subtle one that counterintuitively involves Ray's faithfulness to traditional gender boundaries. As briefly mentioned earlier in this thesis, Mag understands that Ray's strict obedience to his patriarchal male role will cause him to leave, thus allowing her to deceive her daughter and prevent the loss of power that Mag will incur if Maureen becomes seriously involved with Pato. Ironically, of course, as Nicholas Grene observes, "It is when she discovers that her mother has destroyed the letter and the glimpse of happiness beyond Leenane that Maureen is driven to murder" (301). Mag's realization that Ray not only refuses to prepare food or drink for her, but that he actually becomes angry and leaves when she asks him to do so, occurs in the first of his two visits to deliver Pato's messages. When Mag requests tea and then soup, Ray is

obviously spurred to leave as soon as possible. Almost immediately after Mag's request for the soup, Ray quickly finishes writing out a message for Maureen from Pato and "*gets up*" before saying, "There. Forget about the soup." In case Mag has missed the frustration Ray experiences when she asks him for food, she must know for sure that Ray despises receiving instruction of any kind from women when she asks him to pull the door fully closed as he leaves. Ray responds, "I was going to pull the door anyways," and "I don't need your advice!" (17-18). Mag uses Ray's discomfort in the face of her challenging of gender roles when Ray visits again with a message for Maureen from Pato, getting him to leave so that she may destroy Pato's message and maintain her exclusive power over Maureen. Mag exploits Ray's adherence to gender roles by asking him to perform household tasks including the making of tea (54). He obviously wants to leave and will not comply with Mag's purposefully antagonizing, gender role defiant requests, but for a while longer, he seems to feel bound to his messenger duties, until he is subjected to Mag's assertion that cats come in specifically to urinate in the sink. He responds by saying, "I don't want to be here" over and over again. Mag capitalizes on his frustration by again suggesting, "Do me a mug of tea, Ray. (*Pause.*) Or a mug of Complan do me, even. (*Pause.*) And give it a good stir to get rid of the owl lumps." When Ray again responds negatively, Mag pushes again, saying, "Or a Cup-a-Soup do me." Ray responds by gritting "*his teeth and begins breathing in and out through them, almost crying,*" and—as Mag wants—by leaving (57-59). Mag believes she has secured her power over Maureen by getting Ray to leave, utilizing his adherence to the norms of gender and his discomfort about these conventions being even slightly challenged, and she does so through food.

Pato is Ray's gender role opposite. Indeed, Pato and Ray seem to represent reverse ends of a spectrum of reactions to the evolving gender roles in Ireland during the 1990s, the same spectrum that possesses Maureen in full. Pato switches gender roles to feed Mag (37-39), but brother Ray absolutely refuses and is offended by the request, illustrating that gender boundaries may be changing in Ireland, but nevertheless retain a footing. So, the long history of the defiance of gender roles through food to gain or maintain power in Ireland extends from the great gender-defying women of Irish legend and history to Irish authors such as Joyce and Beckett. It may at first seem surprising that the gender roles, as well as their subversion, are still relevant to a contemporary author. However, McDonagh, as an inheritor of a durable literary memory, employs the characters of *Cripple* and *Beauty Queen*, both written at the turn of the twenty-first century, to illustrate the continuing association of gender role reversal to assert power through food centuries after a traceable lineage first appears. Indeed, the connection of the challenging of gender roles with the power of food that unrelentingly haunts Ireland seems to be a key to its endurance.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION:

#### WHAT'S EATING IRELAND—SWALLOWING THE CULTURAL MEMORY OF HUNGER AND POWER

This thesis has traced the enduring cultural memory of food and power in relation to gender, codified by the trauma of the Famine, from the foundations of Irish literature down to its twenty-first-century heir, Martin McDonagh. One may rightly wonder what it might take for the Irish finally to put this haunting legacy to rest. The harsh land itself will always challenge Ireland's ability to produce its own food, as illustrated by the earliest records of an association of food with power in Queen Medb and Saint Brigid's time. However, the importing of goods and advances in modern farming techniques have significantly reduced the challenges of obtaining food and coping with potential crop failure. Social programs now provide Ireland's poor with the essentials needed to survive economic downturns. This is not to suggest that there are not hungry people living in twenty-first-century Ireland, yet one would be justified in expressing curiosity about how the psychological effects of past suffering could persist in the relative wealth of a modern, Western European nation.

A path to an answer begins in an unlikely place: an American film. In *The Departed*, Irish American Colin Sullivan quotes Sigmund Freud, fittingly over dessert, as

supposedly saying, “What Freud said about the Irish is: We’re the only people who are impervious to psychoanalysis.” While there is no written evidence to support attributing this infamous quotation to Freud, it seems likely that this comment is not a compliment. Still, many, as exemplified by Sullivan, obviously take it as a sort of perverse flattery. Perhaps this quotation survives despite its dubious origins because it is a profound truth in need of ethos. According to the writer of the screenplay, William Monahan, “If Freud didn’t say it, he should have. If Freud didn’t say it, I am enormously sorry for him, because it is the only statement of truth to which his name has ever been connected” (Pallasch). Clearly, the Freud quotation fulfills a need to explain something essential about Irish identity. While Monahan might cringe, one may understand the need that the misattribution fulfills, as well as the persistence of the food-agency association in Ireland, by considering the ideas of the much-maligned Sigmund Freud. From Freud’s point of view, recovering from the pain of the past can be such a long process that it may appear the psyche that needs healing is “impervious” to intervention.

Cultural trauma studies is a field that frequently employs Freudian psychoanalytic theory to understand the pervasive and lasting trauma experienced as a result of factors such as gender, ethnicity, and colonialism. A leader in this field cited elsewhere in this thesis, Cathy Caruth, argues that literature has the ability to be a site of “haunted memory” as a result of “the legacy of a traumatic history” (420-21). Freud’s essay “Mourning and Melancholia” is a foundational text for this approach. While Freud mainly uses the loss of a loved one as an illustration for both mourning and melancholia, he maintains that both can also be a result of losing “one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.” Mourning and melancholia may result from similar causes, yet their effects are,

especially in the long term, different. In mourning a loss, according to Freud, it is evident that what has been loved “no longer exists,” and “respect for reality gains the day.”

However, in melancholia, “there is a loss of a more ideal kind,” and frequently

one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. . . . This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious. (245)

In mourning, a physical “impoverishment” may be faced and overcome. Yet in melancholia, the resulting hunger may be invisible (243-46). The agency lost to Ireland through colonialism’s role in the Famine is difficult to see. So, too, is the loss of agency among women in patriarchal Ireland that makes the relationship between food and power so clear. Arguably, women living in a male-dominated society may have difficulty identifying what they have lost, or fully validating it, because a sexist cultural ideology diminishes the very idea of women’s agency. The illusory nature of this sort of loss can add fuel to its persistence. Freud lists the symptoms of melancholia as “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feeling to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.” This results in a general disregard for one’s well-being, including the possible reaction of food denial (245-46). Many of the symptoms of melancholia are

demonstrated in Irish culture and literature by the injured and still-wounded national psyche.

The denial of food by characters who have experienced a loss of power, as discussed in earlier chapters, certainly is explicable using a theory behind anorexic behavior: a lack of power in one's life leads to a desire for control, and controlling one's body often serves as the most convenient, and sometimes only available, means of power. Furthermore, Freud employs the character of Hamlet to provide an example of melancholic symptoms (246). Clearly, then, Freud believes literature has the ability to represent melancholia, and this underlies its central role in critical cultural trauma studies of literature. Denying food as a means of gaining power is illustrated by James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus; Samuel Beckett's Vladimir; Edna O'Brien's nuns; and, of course, Helen in McDonagh's *Cripple*. It is also understandable through Foucault's belief, as noted earlier and expressed in *History of Sexuality*, that power may be found anywhere it is available. However, Freud's elucidation of melancholia provides an additional explanation for these characters' behavior. Freud concludes, drawing on the work of his contemporaries, that the ego, based in "the oral or cannibalistic phase," demands the incorporation of a loss into oneself, and the ego "wants to do so by devouring it. Abraham is undoubtedly right in attributing this connection to the refusal of nourishment met with in severe forms of melancholia" (249-50). As a result of melancholia, the delusional expectation of punishment because of self-hate causes a self-ordered penance through food restriction, preventing the mind's absorption of a loss into the ego. Indeed, melancholia "behaves like an open wound . . . emptying the ego until it is totally

impoverished” (253). The missing agency in the lives of Irish characters such as those mentioned above leads to a starvation of the body and the soul.

Ireland’s depleted, melancholic national ego is also observable in McDonagh’s work. Mag and Maureen’s feelings about Ireland in *Beauty Queen*, as discussed in Chapter 2, provide an excellent example. Mag dislikes Irish language and music, acknowledges charity provided by the UK and US, and insists that a chance for a better life can only be found abroad. Freud claims that in melancholia one blames oneself for his or her own loss, self-labeling as “petty, egoistic, dishonest, lacking in independence” (246). Mag finds the use of the Irish language and music to be petty and egoistic and the portrayal of Ireland as a land that offers anything of value to its people dishonest. Additionally, Maureen views “handouts” from other nations to indicate an absence of autonomy. Likewise, Ireland’s self-critical behavior in response to its own colonial trauma, especially due to the Famine, is evident throughout the culture. Such self-judgment is offered by even the most jingoistic of Irish historians and cultural critics, and it seems reasonable. Freud, of course, predicts exactly that, explaining that melancholia may appear to give the sufferer “a keener eye for the truth than other people who are not melancholic” (256). However, Freud points out that it is essential to consider

that after all the melancholic does not behave in quite the same way as a person who is crushed by remorse and self-reproach in a normal fashion. Feelings of shame in front of other people, which would more than anything characterize this latter condition, are lacking in the melancholic, or at least they are not prominent in him. One might emphasize the



presence in him of an almost opposite trait of insistent communicativeness which finds satisfaction in self-exposure. (247)

To explain, when errors are made and then brought to light, the responsible party normally feels embarrassment. However, Ireland cannot cease commenting on its own flaws, thoroughly exhibiting this symptom of melancholia.

Ireland's harsh self-evaluation is also demonstrated in McDonagh's use of Irish caricature. Many Irish critics are eager to claim McDonagh as their own, despite his British citizenship and his persistent use of Irish stereotypes. The critics who disagree tend not to be Irish—such as the British professor, playwright, and critic Mary Luckhurst, who has gone so far as personally attacking McDonagh for his stereotypes, accusing him of stereotyping Irishness unfairly out of a personal moral failure: greed. Luckhurst even suggests, "Perhaps McDonagh does not know the 'Manifesto for the Irish Literary Theatre,'" sarcastically inviting him to read Lady Gregory's pledge to present Irish people as human beings rather than stereotypes:

We believe [. . .] that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented. (quoted in Luckhurst 41)

The biggest problem with Luckhurst's criticism, apart from it being mostly an *ad hominem* attack, is that it focuses solely on one play, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. While limiting analysis to a single play is not necessarily a problem, Luckhurst cannot hope to

understand McDonagh's use of stereotypes simply by viewing one play through a fallacious microscope. Indeed, it seems only fair that Luckhurst be encouraged to read McDonagh's *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple*, which are contemporary to *Lieutenant*. McDonagh, in direct opposition to Luckhurst's contentions, is in fact following all of Lady Gregory's wishes for Irish theater, while also, in turn, embodying the process of melancholia that Freud describes.

When viewed as melancholic self-judgment, McDonagh's stereotypes of Irish characters in *Beauty Queen* and *Cripple*, as well as *Lieutenant*, precisely express what Lady Gregory calls, "the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland." In contrast, critics such as Luckhurst seem to be looking for "easy sentiment," rather than the problematic presentation of Irishness that McDonagh provides. In a 2012 *Irish Times* article, Patrick Lonergan, a prominent McDonagh scholar, points to *Cripple* as a key to understanding McDonagh and his use of stereotypes. According to Lonergan, *Cripple* is

a play that shows the Aran islanders' hostile reaction to *Man of Aran*, Robert Flaherty's documentary. It shows that, far from exploiting Irish stereotypes, McDonagh has tried to refute them. And crucially, that play also shows us how an Irish audience that's being misrepresented must react: by pegging eggs at their cinema screen. ("Seven Steps")

Lonergan, as well as many other scholars, stresses that McDonagh's stereotypes make meaning and challenge bigoted views of the Irish. Indeed, this thesis makes it plain that McDonagh harnesses these stereotypes in order to honor the painful legacy bestowed by a heritage that is inextricably linked to manipulations of power through food. Moreover, McDonagh's use of Irish stereotypes and their acceptance in Ireland confirm Freud's

conjecture. The Irish have not had the wind at their backs in the healing process and the approval of stereotypes may be a result of the sluggish, melancholic response to the traumatic loss of power due to the Famine.

If the ego and the body, respectively, can survive the self-blame and possible self-harm described above, Freud posits that eventually ambivalence will develop, leading to a need to destroy the loss. Luckhurst insists that *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* “lets the English off the hook because it reinforces familiar stereotypes about ‘Irishness’ and ‘Ireland’ that were originally invented to brutalise a nation and justify colonisation,” and therefore, “McDonagh . . . is getting away with murder” (37-38). However, murdering the loss of power is the next necessary step in healing melancholia, according to Freud, “as mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live . . . so does each single struggle of ambivalence loosen the fixation . . . to the object by disparaging it, denigrating it and even as it were killing it” (257). Indeed, as proposed in Chapter 2, McDonagh wants to murder Mother Ireland. His “disparaging” of Irishness is a means to execute the pain of the past.

Therefore, the linking of food with gender and power may be the result of melancholia. Furthermore, Freud suggests that “traumatic experiences in connection with the [lost] object may have activated other repressed material” (257). The repression of the trauma caused by the Famine is thus, as argued in the Introduction, what leads to the repetitious expression of agency-starved characters employing food to regain control over their lives. As cultural trauma theorists assert, “‘trauma’ refers not so much to the traumatic event as to the traumatic aftermath, the post-traumatic stage. Trauma thus

denotes the recurrence or repetition of the stressor event through memory, dreams, narrative” (Visser 272). This thesis makes it plain that Irish authors—including William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Edna O’Brien, and Martin McDonagh—have repeated and acknowledged the invisible trauma caused by the relationships among food, gender, and power in Ireland, and we can trace this enduring cultural memory through their work.

Unfortunately, bringing the trauma to consciousness does not solve the resistant complex of melancholia. As Freud explains, “What consciousness is aware of in the work of melancholia is thus not the essential part of it, nor is it even the part which we may credit with an influence in bringing the ailment to an end.” According to Freud, the cessation of melancholia occurs “after the fury has spent itself” or when the loss can be “abandoned as valueless” (257). It is difficult to imagine the lessons of the Famine ever becoming valueless for Ireland, which means that until Ireland builds a new past that overshadows the pain of the old one, Ireland must continue to work out its rage, to the dismay of those such as Mary Luckhurst. Moreover, Ireland will have difficulty extinguishing “the fury” of the Famine and the British Empire’s responsibility for it while the island is still partially occupied by England.

Freud continues by asserting that mania is a sign that healing from melancholia has moved beyond self-criticism, ambivalence, and the resulting wish to destroy the loss because the “conflict within the ego, which melancholia substitutes for the struggle over the [loss], must act like a painful wound which calls for an extraordinarily high anticathexis” (258). The work of anticathexis is exhausting, so when the loss is finally absorbed, “the manic subject plainly demonstrates his liberation from the object which

was the cause of his suffering, by seeking like a ravenously hungry man for new object-cathexes” (255). Newer works of Irish literature and of Irish history, such as Tim Pat Coogan’s *The Famine Plot*, reveal that the traumatic loss has not reached this point in healing, and the fixation endures.

Once melancholia is terminated through the sluggish process of fully masticating, swallowing, and absorbing the nutrients of the loss into the national psyche, “The ego may enjoy in this the satisfaction of knowing itself as . . . superior to” what has been lost (Freud 257). It is difficult to imagine how this might take shape in Ireland. “The Gathering 2013,” a government-sponsored program calling for diasporic Irish—of whatever percentage Gael—to return “home,” could be viewed as traumatic repetition, but it could also be considered an early sign of overcoming trauma by becoming, in a way, superior to it. According to The Gathering 2013 website, “Over 70 million people worldwide claim Irish ancestry. The Gathering Ireland 2013 provides the perfect excuse to reach out to those who have moved away, their relatives, friends and descendants, and invite them home.” While the Gathering site avoids the topic of the Famine, it is clear that the trauma of the Famine is at the heart of this event. The *Irish Times* recently announced that a painting, “The Walking Dead,” which is “an abstract depiction of victims of the Famine,” “will be hung in the Department of the Taoiseach for the remainder of 2013, the year of the Gathering, and thereafter become part of the State’s art collection.” According to the article, this work of art was accepted “on behalf of the State and in recognition of the year of the Gathering in Ireland,” and “the subject matter is, of course, something Irish people all over the world hold close to their hearts” (Parsons). One could justifiably view The Gathering as further evidence of a cyclical, melancholic

return to the trauma of the past, meaning that the Irish psyche is still in need of further healing. However, whether one sees *The Gathering* as honoring or exploiting the trauma of the Famine to promote tourism, one could also contend that it is actually Ireland taking control of its own trauma to heal the nation. In this sense, some may see proof that Ireland is, in a way, finally becoming superior to its loss of agency.

In either case, as long as the unashamed insistence on self-criticism continues, as demonstrated in *The Departed*, one can be sure that the process of overcoming melancholia is incomplete; the seeming impenetrability of the Irish psyche that Freud may never have commented on (but should have) will remain opaque. Indeed, this brand of self-abasing humor seems an essential part of Irish culture. Ironically, if Ireland heals and discards it, those who love Irish literature may find themselves dealing with a less traumatic but still significant process of melancholia because of this loss. In the unlikely event of this emergency, we can take comfort in the words of psychoanalyst Madolyn, Colin Sullivan's dinner date in *The Departed*: "Some people do get better."

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