

A PACIFIST RAGE: MARTIN MCDONAGH'S *HANGMEN*

In the world today, almost 40 nations are still using the death penalty. In most of those countries, you can be executed only for two crimes: murder and treason. But in a small number of places, the state is willing to kill you for other reasons too. Being gay, for example. Or committing adultery. Or practising witchcraft.

The death penalty has its supporters, of course. Fifty years after capital punishment was abolished in the UK, survey after survey shows that a majority of voters here favour its re-introduction, especially for such offences as child abuse or terrorism – despite the fact that we've seen repeated evidence of people being wrongfully convicted of capital crimes, here and around the world.

And indeed, at the heart of positive attitudes to the death penalty lies a fundamental incoherence: killing someone, we're told, is so severe a crime against our society that the only way to avenge it is by killing someone.

As a filmmaker and playwright, Martin McDonagh has spent twenty years skewering this kind of twisted logic. His movie *In Bruges* gave us a gangster called Harry (a name he shares with the protagonist of this play) who talks constantly about honour – all the while displaying a psychopathic indifference to the suffering of others. Similarly, McDonagh's wonderful 2003 play *The Pillowman* gave us two policemen – supposedly charged with upholding law and decency – who seem desperate to convict an author of crimes that he didn't commit. "Dimwits we can execute any day," they explain. "But you execute a writer, it sends out a signal".

Most notably, there is McDonagh's 2001 dark satire, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. Set on an island off the west coast of Ireland, that play was a stunning rebuttal of the rhetoric associated with Irish terrorism – of the notion that Republican paramilitaries could have "valid targets", that they were entitled to conduct so-called "punishment beatings" on members of their own community, or that the best way to free Ireland was by blowing up innocent men, women and children. As McDonagh told the journalist Sean O'Hagan, *Lieutenant* is a gruesomely violent play that is wholeheartedly anti-violence. It was written, McDonagh explains, from a position of "pacifist rage".

The push and pull of those two forces – rage and a contempt for those who express their rage through violence – is the dynamic that drives *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. And it also offers us a useful way to think about *Hangmen*.

The play's protagonist Harry is a man who finds himself on the wrong side of history. For years, he has taken pride in his work as a hangman, telling himself (and others) that he's enacting his country's laws, that he is offering criminals a way of dying that is both dignified and humane. But the 1965 abolition of the death penalty in Britain has redefined his place in society, meaning that what was once considered an important service to Harry's country is now deemed uncivilised and intolerable. One consequence of his enforced redundancy is that Harry will never be able to surpass the achievements of his rival hangman Pierrepont; forevermore, Harry will be known as England's second most famous hangman. You can understand his frustration.

From its opening scene, *Hangmen* probes the motivations and morality of the public executioner. What inspires an individual – and, by extension, a nation – to take the life of another person in the name of justice? Is this act grounded in a dutiful sense of upholding the law – whatever the cost? It a form of revenge? Or does it arise because the differences between the murderer and the hangman are far less straightforward than we might think? Such questions haunt this play, shifting us from

thinking about why Harry do what he does to thinking about our own motivations and responsibilities.

With its 1960s setting and its coiled, intimidating dialogue, *Hangmen* will evoke memories of the great early plays of Harold Pinter. Like that writer, McDonagh creates characters whose use of language (and silence) to coerce, threaten and overpower others is deeply unsettling.

Yet *Hangmen* may also recall an Irish play: John Millington Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*. In that 1907 drama, Synge brings us to a pub in the middle of nowhere, a place whose owner spends his days spinning yarns before a small group of hangers-on and drunken flunkeys, while his lonely daughter dreams of better things. That scene is interrupted by the arrival of an eloquent stranger who first delights but then enrages the locals by confronting them with the truth about their attitudes to violence.

Synge's play set out to show us that there is a "great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed" – we might enjoy telling stories about violent acts, but taking another person's life is, in reality, messy, sordid, and anything but heroic. Synge's first Irish audiences were so infuriated by his portrait of their country that they rioted. So, at the risk of oversimplifying things, we could argue that they protested against Synge's portrait of the Irish as being prone to violence by ... being violent. We're back again to an example of the incoherence of any morality that seeks to combat violence with vengeance.

Hangmen too seeks to chart the gap between stories (like Harry's boastful newspaper interviews) and the reality of what it means to string someone up until he has suffocated to death. And in that gap we as audience-members may be able to discern our own reflection. We may be disgusted or enraged by some of the things that Harry says and does. And we may condemn other countries today for executing their citizens for actions that we might not even consider to be crimes. But as McDonagh shows, state violence is only made possible by the tolerance of an entire population. What, then, might *Hangmen* be telling us about ourselves?

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