

Philip Dine and Seán Crosson (eds)

**Sport, Representation and Evolving  
Identities in Europe**



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## Chapter 9

## Antihero as National Icon? The Contrariness of Roy Keane as Fantasy Embodiment of the 'New Ireland'

Roy Keane's career as Republic of Ireland international soccer player and captain included many controversial episodes, most famously his expulsion prior to the 2002 World Cup following outspoken criticisms of manager Mick McCarthy's squad preparation in Saipan. Previously, in 1996, he was sent off following a dangerous tackle in his first game as captain and missed a post-season international tournament for a family holiday. He subsequently missed numerous internationals due to injury, an explanation that when challenged by McCarthy prompted the outburst that precipitated his dismissal in Saipan. His Manchester United club career was also blighted by controversy, foremost being a horrific tackle on Alfie Haaland, compounded in its seriousness by the later apparent admission of intent to cause injury and punishment by the English Football Association for bringing the game into disrepute.<sup>1</sup>

However, as a successful Manchester United captain in the 1990s and early 2000s, Keane was also an exemplar of successful Irish emigration to Britain, still a key gauge of personal and collective Irish achievement internationally. He was voted Irish player of the tournament in the USA '94 World Cup by Irish public service broadcaster RTÉ's viewers,<sup>2</sup> the man who 'dragged Ireland to the World Cup in 2002 by using the engine of his

<sup>1</sup> R. Keane and E. Dunphy, *Keane: The Autobiography* (London: Michael Joseph, 2002), p.231.

<sup>2</sup> S. Hildred and T. Ewbank, *Captain Fantastic: Roy Keane, the Biography* (London: John Blake, 2000), p.150.

own fierce willpower and rage' (see Figure 9.1),<sup>3</sup> and voluntarily returned to the national team in 2004. In 2006 he was appointed Sunderland football club manager by chairman Niall Quinn (former Ireland player and McCarthy ally in 2002), compounding the impression of an 'Irish' club takeover by the Quinn-led 'Drumaville' consortium. He won the English Championship and promotion to the Premiership in his first season, and became an amusing commentator on British football for a British, but more particularly an Irish audience deeply ambivalent towards British football, having a huge British club fan base, regularly monitoring Irish footballers in Britain, but somewhat sceptical of the media 'hype' surrounding leading players and clubs.

Many soccer supporters and professional commentators questioned his apparent pursuit of individual over collective interests,<sup>4</sup> seemingly extended

3 J. Doyle, 'Goal, The New York Times Soccer Blog: Roy Keane, the Celtic Tiger Tamed', *The New York Times*, 10 December 2008, <<http://goal.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/12/10/roy-keane-the-celtic-tiger-tamed/?>> (accessed 23 January 2009). Such hyperbole in Irish journalism abounded. Vincent Hogan wrote of Keane's performance against Holland (in a crucial World Cup qualifier) that 'Holland seemed to fear the force of his character as much as his legs. His greatness [...] bears the simple mark of efficiency and unrelenting manliness'. 'Dutch transfixed by glare of "The Stranger"', *Irish Independent*, 4 September 2001, <<http://www.independent.ie/sport/soccer/dutch-transfixed-by-glare-of-the-stranger-331465.html>> (accessed 16 January 2009). Likewise marvelling at his 'hard' masculine quality, Jonathan O'Brien remarked: 'Without Keane, the Irish team is a bit like the weakling schoolkid whose strongly-built elder brother, normally his protector and guardian in the vicious maelstrom of the playground, is sick at home'. 'About a Roy', *Hotpress*, 8 November 2001, <<http://www.hotpress.com/archive/1571590.html>> (accessed 10 November 2008).

4 The *Irish Independent* editorial, for example, opined that Ireland's reaching the 2002 World Cup second round 'was a victory over [his] selfishness, ego and begrudgery'. 'Triumph for a true team', *Irish Independent*, 12 June 2002, <<http://www.independent.ie/opinion/analysis/triumph-for-a-true-team-302628.html>> (accessed 18 January 2009). Another commentator deemed him 'the perfect national hero for Celtic Tiger Ireland: 100 grand a week for acting the prick and throwing strops while no one is quite sure what it is you actually do.' 'It's déjà vu once again for Roy', *Sunday Independent*, 16 October 2005, <<http://www.independent.ie/opinion/analysis/its-deja-vu-once-again-for-roy-473286.html>> (accessed 20 January 2009).

by his premature resignation from Sunderland in December 2008.<sup>5</sup> For others, however, Keane's contrariness inspired his celebration as an exemplary figurative representative and literal embodiment of a 'new Ireland' of rigorous, uncompromising professionalism – contrasting with an 'old Ireland' of underachievement and routine incompetence – the 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland of the mid-1990s to mid-2000s economic boom:

He [achieved his success] through talent, force of will, dedication and a winner's attitude – all the things that Irish people were now associated with in the days of the Celtic Tiger. Irish society was now a society of success, of entrepreneurs, of results. So the Roy Keane attitude of 'fail-to-prepare, prepare-to-fail' rang true.<sup>6</sup>

His departure divided Ireland into two camps, between the new, professional and highly ambitious Irish, who see no Pearsean triumph in failure, and the traditionalist Ireland that thinks: 'It'll do.'<sup>7</sup>

[Keane] is the perfect exemplar of the new Celtic Tiger Ireland that has taken off since the 1994 World Cup. Like the new Ireland, he is rich, upwardly mobile and driven by a ruthless work ethic.<sup>8</sup>

As a player he was the best of the Premiership generation, one of the young Celtic cubs who grew up to be Tigers.<sup>9</sup>

5 Again, Keane's alleged hubris, petulance and childish selfishness supposedly precipitated his downfall. See, for example, Aidan Fitzmaurice's comparison of Keane as manager to 'one of the kids in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, holding the golden ticket, surrounded by goodies but never satisfied with what he got, spitting out something if he didn't like it and getting something else instead'. 'Roy's Golden Ticket Expired', *Evening Herald*, 5 December 2008, <<http://www.herald.ie/sport/soccer/roys-golden-ticket-expired-1564855.html>> (accessed 8 January 2009).

6 D. Whelan, *Who Stole Our Game?* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2006), p.221.

7 P. West, 'The New Ireland Kicks Ass', *New Statesman*, 17 June 2002, <<http://www.newstatesman.com/200206170012>> (accessed 15 January 2009).

8 F. O' Toole, 'The ruthless Celtic Tiger turns his back on the auld sod', *The Guardian*, 24 May 2002, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2002/may/24/worldcupfootball2002.sport6>> (accessed 20 November 2009).

9 G. McDermott, 'Football world waits for Keane's next step', *Irish Independent*, 13 June 2006, <<http://www.independent.ie/sport/soccer/football-world-waits-for-keanes-next-step-92441.html>> (accessed 21 January 2009).

[...] the Celtic tiger, a thrusting European state, young, ambitious, claret-quaffing and Armani-clad. [...] To adherents of the latter idea of Ireland, his steely-eyed professionalism and insistence that the team should give themselves the best possible opportunity of actually winning the [World Cup], however crazy an idea that seemed, make him something of a latter-day saint.<sup>10</sup>

This chapter argues that such claims were individual and collective imaginative fantasies of a homology between Keane's masculine corporeal economy and competitive zeal and the then increasingly competitive Irish economy,<sup>11</sup> illustrating how 'heroic reputations are products of the imaginative labour through which societies and groups define and articulate their values and assumptions, and through which individuals within those societies or groups establish their participation in larger social or cultural identities.'<sup>12</sup>

It additionally argues that such 'native' commentaries, both 'professional' and 'amateur', positive and negative, were discursive 'performances' of national-as-gendered, typically (but not exclusively) masculine identities, in Judith Butler's sense of discourse performatively reproducing the 'phenomenon that it regulates and constrains'.<sup>13</sup> These discursive constructions

10 D. Kelly, 'Keane lost on radio ga ga', *The Times*, 4 September 2006, <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/sport/columnists/article627337.ece>> (accessed 20 November 2008).

11 A 1999 OECD Survey typified its celebration: 'the Irish economy has notched up five straight years of stunning economic performance', with output growth averaging 'over 9 per cent on a GDP basis in the period 1994-1998'. In the 1980s, by contrast, 'output was stagnant; the unemployment rate was surging to the record high level of 17%, despite heavy emigration; real investment was sliding by a cumulative 25%; the current balance was on average in deficit to the tune of over 7% of GDP'. OECD, *OECD Economic Surveys: Ireland 1998/1999*, vol. 1999, no. 14, 1999, Paris: OECD, <<http://oberon.sourceoecd.org/vl=13622975/cl=13/nw=1/rpsv/ij/oecd-journals/03766438/v1999n14/s1/p1>> (accessed 11 January 2009), pp.10-11.

12 G. Cubitt, 'Introduction: heroic reputations and exemplary lives', in Geoffrey Cubitt and Allen Warren (eds), *Heroic Reputations and Exemplary Lives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p.3.

13 J. Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.2.

reproduced, negotiated and created gendered 'imaginary positions'<sup>14</sup> in relation to existing discourses of national identity, thereby both creating while invoking Keane's figurative and literal embodiment of inexorable economic, social and cultural change and enabling their originators to perform gendered personal-national identities themselves. Such phenomena associating Keane with national economic regeneration and the proliferation of classical analogies to make sense of his behaviour – Philoctetes, Achilles, Coriolanus, etc. – may be seen as means of gendered self- and national aggrandizement on the part of those who coined such analogies, rather than being in any way explanatory of social and cultural change.

Keane additionally became a symbolic means of expressing nuanced, gendered and competing varieties of Irish identity through, for example, his association with Cork (commonly known in Ireland as the 'Rebel County', mainly due to its prominence in the War of Independence) and, as Sunderland manager, his symbolizing Irish success in Britain following emigration. However, the considerable variety in positions taken with respect to such symbolism and the dialogical interactions between proponents and dissenters illustrate the seeming paradox that shared national identity is frequently enhanced through argumentative differences with respect to such controversial figures, giving affective intensity to the imagining of that common identity.

But they also illustrate how his national-hero status has been somewhat tempered by his own 'antiheroic' confounding or refusal of heroic status as an often elusive object of fantasy projections, particularly during his managerial career, whose highlights have been verbal declarations rather than exploits on a par with his achievements as a player, and because his working-class background and career trajectory fit uneasily with 'Celtic Tiger' fantasies. Hence, Keane's has been an uneven and contested career as a national sporting icon in Ireland that nonetheless has inspired the sense of national affinity amongst fans and detractors alike.

14 M. Wetherell and N. Edley, 'Negotiating Hegemonic Masculinity: Imaginary Positions and Psychodiscursive Practices', *Feminism & Psychology*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1999), pp.335-6.

## Why Sport, and Why Roy Keane?

As a rich source of metaphors, in discourses ranging from politics to business, warfare and sexual relations,<sup>15</sup> sport offers a 'world of ethical clarity and functional simplicity', granting 'the possibility of sanctuary from the complications of the everyday'.<sup>16</sup> Figures like Keane become attractive as metaphors which help to 'structure how we perceive, how we think, and what we do',<sup>17</sup> exemplifying popular heroes' incorporation, literally in their corporeal actions, 'of normative and disruptive tendencies',<sup>18</sup> and the sporting hero's 'duality', being 'aggressive and officially supported, anarchist and institutionalized [...] representative and elite, collective and individual'.<sup>19</sup>

Sports journalists concerned with fellow national competitors are frequently partisan fans, even in 'quality' broadsheet varieties. For these Irish commentators, just as Keane 'like[d] to get his retaliation in early'<sup>20</sup> to dominate opponents, so he simultaneously represented a competitive Irish economy 'punching above its weight'<sup>21</sup> on the 'world stage'. Even the

- 15 J. O. Segrave, 'The Sports Metaphor in American Cultural Discourse', *Culture, Sport and Society*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2000), pp.48–60.
- 16 J. O. Segrave, 'Sport as a Cultural Hero-System: What Price Glory?', *Quest*, vol. 45, no. 2 (1993), pp.182–96.
- 17 G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p.1.
- 18 Cubitt, 'Introduction: heroic reputations', p.8.
- 19 J. Calder, *Heroes: From Byron to Guevara* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1977), p.184.
- 20 A. McLeod, 'Whither Now Roy Keane?', *Irish Independent*, 1 October 2005, <<http://www.independent.ie/sport/soccer/whither-now-roy-keane-233657.html>> (accessed 20 January 2009). The paradoxical exhortation, 'get our retaliation in first' has been attributed both to former Ireland and Lions rugby captain Willie John McBride and former Lions coach Carwyn James.
- 21 Examples of this common sporting metaphor include its use as a metaphor for the 'Celtic Tiger' (itself a metaphor) in a 2004 *Economist* survey; J. Peet, 'The Luck of the Irish', *The Economist*, 14 October 2004, <<http://www.economist.com/PrinterFriendly>

growing tendency towards critical quotation or parody in Ireland ironically reflected the power of the myth:

[...] was it [the] real fans who hounded Mick McCarthy out of his job? In fact, you'll find it was the Johnny-come-lately prawn-sandwich brigade, the Celtic tigers who see Keane as the embodiment of the new can-do professional Ireland.<sup>22</sup>

And when Keane's departure from Sunderland in 2008 coincided with the Irish economy's rapid decline, comments like John Doyle's completely elided the distinction between psychic projection, metaphor and reality: 'He is us. We are him. As he goes, so do we. The Celtic Tiger is tamed.'<sup>23</sup>

These remarks reflect the growing significance of spectator sports in Irish media and popular culture, from the Gaelic Athletic Association's resurgence, Munster's (2006, 2008) and Leinster's (2009) Heineken Cup rugby successes, Ireland's 2009 Six Nations Rugby 'Grand Slam' victory and Ireland's celebrated but modest achievements in the Euro '88 and 1990 and 1994 World Cup soccer tournaments. They also reflect the repeated association of Irish international sporting success with literal, rather than merely metaphoric national economic regeneration, exemplified by the following:

As all smart economic historians know, the date of birth of the Celtic Tiger was June 12, 1988 (2.36pm to be precise.) [...] the date and time when Ray Houghton put the ball in the English net at the European Championships in Germany. [...] The debt/

- cfm?Story\_ID=3261071>, p.2 (accessed 11 January 2009); and its use as a metaphor for economic competitiveness by the Director General of Science Foundation Ireland, who directly compared Keane's managerial challenge to 'mov[ing] up the league' with Ireland's research and development prospects: 'Now we need to move to the industries of the future. That's the league to strive for'. John Kennedy, 'Putting Ireland in Premier League', *Irish Independent*, 13 September 2007, <<http://www.independent.ie/business/technology/putting-ireland-in-premier-league-1078722.html>> (accessed 23 January 2009).
- 22 B. O' Connor, 'Keane holds to ransom our sporting future', *Sunday Independent*, 10 November 2002, <<http://www.independent.ie/opinion/analysis/keane-holds-to-ransom-our-sporting-future-504908.html>> (accessed 13 January 2009).
- 23 J. Doyle, 'Goal, The New York Times soccer blog'.

GNP ratio, then hovering at 130 per cent, immediately went into reverse; exports soared; the level of foreign direct investment grew dramatically. [...] The Stuttgart Effect sustained the economy for the next 14 years.<sup>24</sup>

Keane's disruptive persona linked both favourable and antagonistic commentaries, whether the Ireland he rocked was construed as a staid, rigidly hierarchical and mediocre society or a collective, inclusive, integrative 'community' valuing 'national' over self-interest. His heroic qualities mingled in the popular imagination with the 'antiheroic'. The literary character whose 'personal value system conflicts with that of the powers that be and implies its impoverishment or irrelevance',<sup>25</sup> the antihero is typified by the post-war American 'tired, apathetic, cool, and beat rejection of lofty goals'.<sup>26</sup> But for his proponents, Keane's antiheroic contrariness, criticism and refusal of authority embodied a code of professional excellence exceeding that of his social 'betters'. Yet his belligerent style also repeatedly affirmed conventional, culturally constructed attributes of sporting mas-

24 'Did Roy Keane shoot down the Celtic Tiger?', *Sunday Independent*, 20 October 2002, <<http://www.independent.ie/business/irish/did-roy-keane-shoot-down-the-celtic-tiger-504485.html>> (accessed 15 January 2009). Journalists in an Irish radio discussion ('What if?', *RTE Radio One*, 29 September 2004) posited that the economic boom 'was all to do with the confidence factor engendered [...] once we qualified for Euro '88' (Ronan Furlong) and that 'people began to think [...] we can go out, compete in markets and put people under pressure' (Eoghan Corry). See also Aidan O' Hara's 'Spirit of '88 opened up a sense of unlimited possibilities we hadn't dared to contemplate', *Sunday Independent*, 8 June 2008, <<http://www.independent.ie/sport/soccer/spirit-of-88-opened-up-a-sense-of-unlimited-possibilities-we-hadnt-dared-to-contemplate-1401880.html>> (accessed 15 January 2009). Later, the 2009 Six Nations (rugby union) Grand Slam was repeatedly cited as a source of direct rather than metaphorical 'lessons' and thus inspiration for surviving the then worsening economic recession. A management consultant on *RTE Radio One's* 'The Business' (22 March), for example, suggested that the Cabinet would 'have to really, now, start to get out and start training'.

25 R. B. Rollin, 'General Introduction', *Hero/Anti-Hero* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. xvii.

26 O. E. Klapp, *Heroes, Villains and Fools: the Changing American Character* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 157.

culinity: self-reliance, independent-mindedness, physical strength, desire and ability to dominate opponents, and will to win. Thus, his proponents made him a weapon with which imaginarily to beat an 'older' Ireland of complacency, hierarchy and economic stagnation into an economically productive, competitive future, mapping an idealized version of Keane's corporeal achievements on to the nation. These associations gave physical form to the implicitly but often also explicitly masculine hero of neoliberalism, the economic orthodoxy from the mid-70s onwards.<sup>27</sup>

However, the rhetoric often contradictorily evoked an earlier era, with Keane as a 'footballing dinosaur' threatened by a 'morally redundant and relativistic' contemporary world.<sup>28</sup> Central to this impression was Keane's ghost writer, (auto-)biographer Eamon Dunphy. A former professional footballer, Dunphy had championed a 'hard', uncompromising, distinctly 'masculine' football from his classic *Only a Game?* (1976), through his contributions as a newspaper columnist and pundit for RTÉ television's football coverage. His description of football as a 'test' of ability to 'cheat fate and [...] get some sort of result. As opposed to caving in and getting done'<sup>29</sup> underpinned often scathing critiques of stylish but allegedly lazy footballers. Later, as a radio (*Today FM*, 1997–2004) and television chat show host (*The Dunphy Show*, *TV3*, 2003), and as a ubiquitous interviewee himself, he was a populist mouthpiece for the neoliberal economic orthodoxy pervading Irish politics and business. For Dunphy, Keane linked an old-fashioned football embodying 'virtues [...] fundamental to our nature: resilience; determination; physical endurance [...] willingness to battle harder and longer'<sup>30</sup> with 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland. So, typically, following Keane's dismissal in Saipan, he conflated Keane's footballing prowess with his pre-eminence as 'a *man* [stretching the vowel sound] [...] a perfect

27 D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

28 C. Brick, 'Boom Boom: Roy Keane and the Footballing Dinosaur', *M/C Reviews: Culture and the Media* (July 2002), <<http://reviews.media-culture.org.au/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1853>> (accessed 4 January 2003).

29 E. Dunphy and P. Ball, *Only a Game?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 73.

30 E. Dunphy, 'A law unto himself', *Sunday Independent*, 12 June 1994, p. 12.

human being, and equated Keane with 'the financial services area [...] where excellence is achieved and required' (interview on the 'Gerry Ryan Show', 2FM, 24 May 2002), echoing Irish economists' celebration of the 'new self-confidence' and entrepreneurialism of Irish 'business culture'.<sup>31</sup>

Given the financial services sector's role in the current recession,<sup>32</sup> this now seems rather ironic. But why was Keane such an unprecedentedly symbolic figure at this time? Perhaps it reflected the 'new' Ireland's questionable existence and the absence of any comparable 'hero' in the Irish business world. As O'Hearn<sup>33</sup> has argued, Ireland 'bought economic tigerhood' by encouraging foreign direct investment through low corporate tax rates, rendering a high proportion of nominal GDP fictional due to multinationals' capital 'repatriation'.<sup>34</sup> Rampant consumerism and debt were fuelled by low EU-set interest rates and income tax reductions despite poor transport, health and social services infrastructural investment and development.<sup>35</sup> Foreign investment progressively shifted to cheaper economic locations from the mid-2000s, and an unsustainable construction boom rapidly declined from 2007 to 2009, directly and indirectly increasing unemployment.<sup>36</sup>

As Whannel maintains, sports stars' images 'constitute rich tools for cultural analysis' as 'thermometers and barometers' by which 'to take the social temperature and to assess the pressures generated by tensions and

- 31 J. Fitzgerald, 'The story of Ireland's failure – and belated success', in B. Nolan, P. J. O'Connell and C. T. Whelan (eds), *Bust to Boom: the Irish Experience of Growth and Inequality* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2000), p.55.
- 32 For analysis, see, for example, Simon Carswell's review of the 2008 financial year, 'Bad dreams become reality', *Irish Times*, 2 January 2009 <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/finance/2009/0102/1230842348874.html>> (accessed 10 February 2009).
- 33 D. O'Hearn, 'Globalization, "New Tigers", and the end of the Developmental State? The Case of the Celtic Tiger', *Politics & Society*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2000), p.74.
- 34 Fitzgerald, 'The story of Ireland's failure', p.54.
- 35 P. O'Connell, 'The Dynamics of the Irish labour market in comparative perspective', in Nolan et al., *Bust to Boom*, pp.58–89.
- 36 For an analysis of the rapid downturn in the Irish economy, see A. Barrett, I. Kearney and J. Goggin, *Quarterly Economic Commentary, Winter 2008* (Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute, 2008), <<http://www.esri.ie/UserFiles/publications/20081218171124/QEC2008Win.pdf>> (accessed 10 February 2009).

contradictions'.<sup>37</sup> A visceral 'hard man' with uncompromising drive and ambition was a highly attractive symbol of fantasized collective achievement, a powerful icon because physical competition is corporeal, visible and measurable, generating 'moments when an affective unity can be posited against the grain of structural divisions and bureaucratic taxonomies'.<sup>38</sup> And Keane's asceticism as both player and manager neatly coincided with the neo-liberal managerialist discourses of the 'lean', competitive economy in 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland, local variants of the congruence between the discursive construction of 'male athletic' and '(white) managerial masculinities'.<sup>39</sup>

Keane's supposed historical transitional symbolism was elsewhere formulated by academic commentators who argued that his aggressively masculine challenge to British-born McCarthy was an assertion of postcolonial independence from a history of colonial subordination. For Featherstone, Keane was refusing 'to agree to the maintenance of a subordinate position, social (that is, class-based) and national (colonial)'.<sup>40</sup> Sharkey posited that Keane represented 'the growing power of the post-colonized over the national symbol of the colonizer: the beautiful game. One suspects that the next Irish manager will have an Irish accent, and in a few years his name will be Keane. [...] Meanwhile, this World Cup, Ireland must cope without its Celtic Tiger'.<sup>41</sup> Sharkey's unashamedly partisan reading both constructs and validates a narrative of Keane as embodiment of the 'new Ireland' which it purports to analyse. Indeed the hyperbole here matches

- 37 G. Whannel, *Media Sport Stars: Masculinities and Moralities* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.46.
- 38 D. Rowe, J. McKay and T. Miller, 'Come together: sport, nationalism and the media image', in L. A. Wenner (ed.), *MediaSport* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp.119–33, p.120.
- 39 A. Knoppers and A. Anthonissen, 'Male Athletic and Managerial Masculinities: Congruencies in Discursive Practices?', *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2005), pp.123–35, p.123.
- 40 S. Featherstone, *Postcolonial Cultures* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp.93–4.
- 41 R. Sharkey, 'Reading Cultures: Mediating Power', *M/C Reviews: Culture and the Media* (July 2002), <<http://reviewmedia.ci.qut.edu.au/modules.php?name=New&file=article&sid=1849>> (accessed 4 January 2003).



Fintan O'Toole's classical analogy of Sophocles' Philoctetes<sup>42</sup> for Keane's abandonment in Saipan, and a contributor to the 2007 television documentary *Red Mist*, who compared Keane to Shakespeare's Coriolanus.<sup>43</sup> Such classical analogies and historical connections give 'legitimacy' to the otherwise trivial world of sport and its supposed symbolism of social and cultural transition.<sup>44</sup>

Central to this 'antihero' persona is a myth of belligerent masculinity as 'authenticity', 'truth' to oneself and contrariness. The contrarian antihero romantically invokes Aristotelian 'virtue', the achievement of a 'mean' between unreasonable extremes,<sup>45</sup> here complete subservience to an abstract 'national' cause and utterly self-serving individualism, contrariness being an intermediate rather than an oppositional state. Keane's idiosyncratic discursive pattern, exemplified by the interview precipitating his confrontation with the offended McCarthy in Saipan,<sup>46</sup> fuelled this impression: the repetition of metaphorical ('tip of the iceberg', 'not my scene'), metaphorical-metonymic ('get my head down') and matter-of-fact ('it's not

42 F. O' Toole, 'Let's get back perspective and recall a true World Cup tragedy', *Irish Times*, 28 May 2002, <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/opinion/2002/0528/1017357805762.html>> (accessed 20 November 2008).

43 Directed by Eamon Little (Wildfire Films), broadcast on Setanta Ireland, 26 December 2007.

44 Variations on this theme proliferated. Colin Teevan's poem 'The RoyKeaneiad', in *Missing Persons: Four Tragedies and Roy Keane* (London: Oberon Books, 2006), pp.57–64, compared him to both Achilles and Philoctetes. A collection of Keane quotations, no author (or page numbers), *The Little Book of Roy Keane by the Unknown Fan* (Dublin: New Island, 2002), introduced him as 'the Spartan General'. The Philoctetes analogy was repeated, additionally gesturing towards Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* (1934) in the musical stage dramatization of the Saipan affair, *I, Keane* (2005).

45 Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle: the Nicomachean Ethics Book II*, trans. by J. A. K. Thomson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953/1976), pp.101–2. This 'virtuous' mean was exemplified by John Wayne's screen personas; see S. Matheson, 'The West-Hardboiled: Adaptations of Film Noir Elements, Existentialism, and Ethics in John Wayne's Westerns', *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 38, no. 5 (2005), pp.888–910.

46 T. Humphries, 'Keane says he will quit Ireland after World Cup', *Irish Times*, 23 May 2002, <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/frontpage/2002/0523/1017357801102.html>> (accessed 15 November 2008).

right') phrases and of rhetorical questions ('what was I supposed to do?') in a progressive self-justification, combined with mock humility ('maybe I just don't get it'; 'I want what's best. If it's a crime, fuck it, I'm guilty') and mock self-deprecation (on his own managerial prospects: 'Nobody would play for me but we'd have great facilities'). He later engaged in a typically imaginary, hypothetical conversation with himself concerning his refusal to apologize to McCarthy, concluding with characteristic self-reassurance: (*RTE One Television*, 27 May 2002) 'if there was any doubt in my mind that "Roy, you were a little bit out of order" [...] But I won't accept, I can't accept this.' As Wetherell and Edley highlight, resisting conformity – by 'being his own (and by implication, superior) man', placing himself outside the heavy-drinking, euphemistically labelled 'male-bonding' raucousness of the Irish squad and their acceptance of poor preparation – is a classic means of constructing masculine identity as autonomous individuality.<sup>47</sup> Arguably, too, this asceticism appealed to broadsheet journalistic and other middle-class commentators historically ambivalent towards the undisciplined working-class body.<sup>48</sup>

In a variation apparently propagated by Keane himself, while Sunderland manager, he was cast as an outsider among over-indulged European footballers, representing an Irish tradition of diligence and honesty while British football was dominated by pampered mediocrity. For Keith Duggan, he was a 'conscience for the increasingly manufactured world of the Premier League',<sup>49</sup> typified by his criticism of Manchester United's corporate boxes and growing new middle-class fan base in the 1990s: they 'have a few drinks and probably the prawn sandwiches, and they don't realize what's going on out on the pitch';<sup>50</sup> and, as Sunderland manager, by his retrospective

47 Wetherell and Edley, 'Negotiating hegemonic masculinity'.

48 R. Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p.163.

49 K. Duggan, 'Premier League circus loses a compelling act', *Irish Times*, 6 December 2008, <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/sport/2008/1206/1228494049031.html>> (accessed 15 January 2009).

50 Quoted in A. Hooper, 'Keane slams "prawn sandwich" fans', 9 November 2000, <<http://soccer.net.espn.go.com/archive/england/news/2000/1109/20001109mufckeanefans.html>> (accessed 8 January 2009).

acknowledgment of a vocal supporter's 'spot-on' criticism, at a game, of his failing tactics.<sup>51</sup> Keane's unsolicited interview and press conference remarks have continued in this deconstructive vein. Difficulties in attracting players to Sunderland, for example, were attributed to wives preferring London's shopping: 'it's a lifestyle move. It tells me the player is weak and his wife runs his life. [...] The players we're talking about are soft.'<sup>52</sup> Such remarks typify the reiteration of 'symbolic opposition to femininity' and 'inferior' masculinities subject to feminine control 'in order to confirm [men's] own sense of masculinity'.<sup>53</sup> Their wide reporting undoubtedly appealed to the largely male football news readership by validating an 'old fashioned', functionally – and production – orientated working-class sporting body focused on the maximizing of embodied 'physical capital'<sup>54</sup> to justify the rewards of economic capital, but with an ascetic disdain for self-indulgent consumption – by 'supporters', players or female partners.

### The Intersubjective Work of National-as-Gendered Fandom

Despite his popularity, Keane's antihero-as-hero status was not uncontested. Nonetheless, as the focus of argumentative differences he may be seen as a vehicle for the creative and constructive intersubjective *work* of fandom and commentary in forging, renewing and transforming individual and collective identities. For detractors and supporters alike, as a fantasy object of identification or dislike, he inspired the imagining of national

51 T. Humphries, 'United still feel the sting of Roy's venom', *Irish Times*, 5 April 2008, <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/sport/2008/0405/1207343051691.html>> (accessed 15 November 2008).

52 L. Taylor, 'Roy Keane sees red again with outburst about Wags and their shopping jaunts', *The Guardian*, 15 August 2007, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2007/aug/15/football.britishidentity>> (accessed 15 February 2009).

53 S. Johnson, 'Theorizing Language and Masculinity', in S. Johnson and U. H. Meinhof (eds), *Language and Masculinity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp.8–26, p.22.

54 P. Bourdieu, 'Sport and social class', *Social Science Information*, vol. 17, no. 6 (1978), pp.819–40.

community, even through disagreement, by enabling commentators' performative discursive constructions of gendered national identity (largely, but not exclusively masculine) in 'sideline' contests through which he or his opponents were subjected to disciplinary fantasies. These fantasies connected even diametrically opposed commentators as fellow 'national' subjects through their degree of *affective* investment, mapping the boundaries of nation and gender in the process.

I use 'performative' in Butler's<sup>55</sup> sense of gender as a performance (rather than a biological given) 'that enacts or produces that which it names' through discursive and bodily behaviour. Those features of masculine identity mapped on to Keane and in turn mapped on to the collective 'we' of the nation as a masculinized, thrusting, invasive force might be seen as facilitative of varied performative constructions of gender through identification with this symbolic figure. But, for male detractors, Keane's otherwise celebrated contrariness contrasted with their own unswerving national loyalty, implicitly gendered as masculine steadfastness and reliability. Indeed, some accusations explicitly or implicitly questioned his masculinity, his implied fragility indirectly rhetorically confirming their own masculine credentials. Note, for instance, the constructive discourse of masculinity as consistency, self-sacrifice and machine-like reliability in these radio phone-in exchanges ('Liveline', 22 May 2002, *RTE Radio One*, following Keane's initial voluntary withdrawal from the Ireland squad in Saipan; it may usefully be noted in this context that, as 'Liveline' is the second most popular radio show in Ireland, the programme's rating status and role as occasional agenda setter for news media in Ireland is possibly unparalleled in Europe).<sup>56</sup> Caller C, a thirteen-year-old boy, is already schooled and being schooled in the discourse of post-Oedipal submission to masculine authority.<sup>57</sup>

55 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p.23.

56 See A. Healy and K. Doyle, 'RTE Radio One Remains Most Popular Station', *Irish Times*, 12 February 2009, <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/breaking/2009/0212/breaking77.html>> (accessed 8 June 2009).

57 On sport as institutionalized enactment of the resolved Oedipus Complex and acceptance of symbolic 'paternal' authority, see L. E. Peller, 'Libidinal Phases, Ego Development, and Play', *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, vol. 9 (1954), pp.178–98.

CALLER A: It's a wheel and he is one of the spokes. He can be replaced. [...] We're a team, and it's a team with 11 men, and not one man.

CALLER B: [...] Niall Quinn, right, he was injured for a period and he went on and played for his country in a number of games.

CALLER A: Exactly.

[...]

CALLER C: I think it's a disgrace [...] that he is the best player on the Irish team and [...] that he's basically saying to 'do what I say or ...'

CALLER A: He's abusing his ability, exactly.

[...]

PRESENTER [Caller C has compared Keane to his own teammate]: And how does he behave?

CALLER C: Like he loves himself. [...] If you're in the spotlight, you eventually just think you're great, you're known to be the best player and then you get too cocky and then you get smacked down. [Keane is] acting like a spoilt child.

Caller B further asserted:

It's about being patriotic for your country, I mean I'd cut off my left arm [to play ...] He's got millions of pounds, right, and I think it's time he gave something back. [He played] against Man City last year and he put in a tackle on [Alfie Haaland] and the guy'll never again play football. [...] There's two million like myself who'd probably give their right arm to be on that squad, and there Roy is and he (sic) abusing it.

The 'left arm' / 'right arm' / money / tackle comments suggest envious resentment at Keane's remaining physically intact, both undiminished by and financially gaining from international football, but lacking commitment comparable with the supporters'. The corporeal, castration-like metaphor of willing self-sacrifice and the desire for Keane to give 'something back' suggest frustration at Keane's self-serving individualism, corporeal and financial integrity and refusal of self-sacrificial incorporation into the imaginary nation by identifying with a post-Oedipal masculine ideal.

On sport's facilitating of a psychodynamic tension between the post-Oedipal and 'pre-Oedipal fantasy and play', see M. Free, 'Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Sport: A Critical Review', *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, vol. 5, no. 4 (2008), p.276.

Irish women also engaged in gendered performances of national identity in mediated discursive interactions, typically by eliding the distinction between nation as metaphorical and actual family. Thus, on the same programme, a female caller performed a form of maternal femininity by continuing the 'spoilt child' analogy: 'he really should pull his socks up now, he's not a child. [...] There's no need to throw a wobbly for every little thing like a child'. And there was considerable variation. Another used her identification with Keane's masculinity to articulate an aggressive, geographically specific (Cork as 'Rebel County') but national feminine identity by invoking her grandmother's memory: 'That man that's criticizing him from Cork, I hope you're run out of Cork. [...] It's because he's a Cork man he's a fiery man, and that's it. My grandmother's from Kanturk [in Cork] and I'm the same temperament.'

These gendered performances symbolically constructed shared national identity ironically both despite and through their differences. The divergences of interpretation might confirm Sandvoss's position that fans project their own concerns and fantasies on to 'their' team, that 'fan texts' are 'neurosemic', facilitating such divergent readings that 'intersubjectively' they are meaningless.<sup>58</sup> However, the distinct patterns of support and criticism suggest that Keane's projected symbolism was specific to a collective sense of transition, read positively or negatively. The fantasized embodiment of and individualist threat to national identity were connected, both deriving from and feeding a sense of national community through shared, distinctively gendered affective investment.

For negative journalistic commentators, too, Keane was a symbolic vehicle by which they articulated gendered positions regarding football, sport and Irish society. Indeed some, particularly following his managerial resignation, and like the examples above, indicated a degree of envy, now combined with schadenfreude. Eoghan Corry commented that:

<sup>58</sup> C. Sandvoss, *Fans* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), p.126.

The Achilles who sulked before the gates of Troy in 2002 has all his vulnerability on display once more, the arrow of misfortune through his heel. A sports locker room is no place for a tortured genius. It is where the language is foul and the bully is king.<sup>59</sup>

Such comments rhetorically claimed a harder-than-thou masculinity, as did Cormac Murphy's assertion that Keane's wife, 'the rock that has guided her fragile husband through his turbulent adult life' was 'showing the strain' of 'Roy's exit';<sup>60</sup> the reference to fragility and female dependency suggesting inferior masculinity. Even former supporter Eamon Dunphy, renowned for ferocious verbal attacks, now criticized Keane for becoming 'a rent-a-quote [...] deflecting attention away from his own flawed approach to the job', his 'failure of humility and people skills.'<sup>61</sup> Such attacks typify the ambivalent envy afforded celebrities whose commodified (and dispensable) images make them 'fair game' for both idealizing and denigrating (or alternating) fantasies.<sup>62</sup>

But whatever their differences or vicissitudes, each position here contributed to reinforcing the status of 'sport as a masculinizing practice that organizes various knowledges about bodies and shapes relations of power between multiple "subjects"'.<sup>63</sup> Whether Keane was deemed right or wrong, success in football as a (particular type of) *man's* game was reinforced as a gauge of national achievement in the 'new Ireland'.

59 'A locker room is no place for a tortured genius', *Evening Herald*, 5 December 2008, <<http://www.herald.ie/opinion/comment/a-locker-room-is-no-place-for-a-tortured-genius-1564842.html>> (accessed 8 January 2009).

60 C. Murphy, 'Did Roy's exit become too much for Theresa?', *Evening Herald*, 5 December 2008, p.12.

61 E. Dunphy, 'I never thought this was a relationship that could work...', *Irish Daily Star*, 5 December 2008, p.93.

62 See also S. Wagg, 'Angels of us all? Football Management, Globalization and the Politics of Celebrity', *Soccer & Society*, vol. 8, no. 4 (October 2007), pp.440-58; Whannel, *Media Sport Stars*, pp.203-6.

63 P. Markula and R. Pringle, *Foucault, Sport and Exercise: Power, Knowledge and Transforming the Self* (London: Routledge, 2006), p.102, original emphasis.

## Keane as Elusive Object of Fantasy

In the wake of Saipan, Keane, his fans and detractors have inspired various humorous impersonations and parodies in the Irish media, including sketches by a trio of comedians, 'Après-Match' (who commenced their regular post-match spoofing of football punditry on RTE television during the 1998 World Cup), a stage musical, *I Keano* (first performed in 2005), and a series of radio sketches entitled 'Radio Roy'.<sup>64</sup> 'Laughing at ourselves', recognizing shared peculiarities through laughter that may mystify or alienate 'outside' observers, both confirmed shared national identity through lampooned internal differences and rendered Keane a vehicle for the performative construction of a distinctive form of Irish masculinity founded on ironic distance from and identification with their comic referents. These contributions reinforced the masculine world of football as important in itself, symbolic and indicative of national identity and fortunes, and signified a 'mature' collective masculinity sufficiently 'thick-skinned' (using an appropriately corporeal metaphor) to lampoon 'our' absurdities.

Nevertheless, Keane remained a contradiction who eluded straightforward elevation to national iconic status. He repeatedly placed individual conscience and personal commitments above external loyalties; was a committed team-player who led by example and exhorted maximum effort from team-mates; yet, in his public utterances and on-field actions, frequently transgressed both the official code of sportsmanlike conduct and the unofficial euphemism and cliché-ridden code of 'sportspeak' in their verbal bluntness and their rule-stretching (or breaking) physicality respectively. Keane's verbal playfulness was increasingly tinged with serious introspection and anger outwardly directed at his own players. Hence the double-edged, ironic gibe at Nyron Nosworthy: 'Now that Nos has switched to centre-back he's got much less time on the ball, which is best for

64 Part of Mario Rosenstock's 'Gift Grub' sketch series on 'The Ian Dempsey Breakfast Show', *Today FM* (2000-present).

all concerned';<sup>65</sup> and (implicitly criticizing his own managerial purchases), following a defeat, 'that's maybe why these footballers are at Sunderland or at other clubs that might be classed as mid-table or bottom half'.<sup>66</sup>

These consistently, perhaps increasingly, attacking and aggressive remarks are suggestive of a masculinity so contingent that it requires reinforcement through repeated discursive reiteration, particularly, perhaps, when the sporting body is no longer active as such. And Keane's deliberate outspokenness attracted accusations of hypocrisy and of representing the style-over-substance world of English football he was otherwise held to oppose. As exemplified by Dunphy's later criticisms, Keane's style was now construed as destructive of younger, more vulnerable men. James Lawton, for example, concluded: 'when [at Sunderland] the hour of crisis called, a man 'stridently judgemental' of others had 'run away'.<sup>67</sup>

As for his playing career, most famously he was accused of breaking a fundamental sporting code by admitting intent to injure Alfie Haaland in an illegal tackle with the 'recalled' words 'take that you cunt',<sup>68</sup> so crudely feminising a male opponent and thus causing him to lose some of his own erstwhile supporters (though Keane was defended by ghostwriter Dunphy – who claimed 'artistic licence' – for his retrospective honesty!).<sup>69</sup> Even

65 S. Turnbull, 'The second coming of Roy Keane', *The Independent*, 11 April 2007, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/football-league/the-second-coming-of-roy-keane-444129.html>> (accessed 8 January 2009).

66 M. Walker, 'How the Wearside Messiah lost the plot in just 40 days', *The Independent*, 5 December 2008, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/premier-league/how-the-wearside-messiah-lost-the-plot-in-just-40-days-1052356.html>> (accessed 15 February 2009).

67 J. Lawton, 'Keane – the fighter who quit when most needed', *The Independent*, 5 December 2008, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/news-and-comment/article1052354.ecc>> (accessed 15 February 2009).

68 Keane and Dunphy, *Keane*, p.231.

69 M. Walsh, 'The ghost in the machine', *New Statesman*, 16 September 2002, <<http://www.newstatesman.com/200209160046>> (accessed 10 February 2009). Walsh notes that Keane at times seems no more than a 'ventriloquist's dummy' for Dunphy in the 'autobiography', suggesting an imaginary Keane as Dunphy's own fantasy projection.

the staunchest supporters justified his actions with sometimes strained rhetoric. Hence, following his resignation from Sunderland, Roy Curtis's rescuing of – to others – extreme self-serving individualism as a heroic exercise of conscience: 'he looked in the mirror and posed the hardest questions of all. Am I the right man for the job? Might somebody else be better equipped to move the club on? [...] Does defeat hurt these players as much as it does me? [...] Keane left [...] because he cared too much'.<sup>70</sup> If the humorous parodies signified a 'thick-skinned', self-reflexive nation comfortably 'laughing at itself', perhaps the vehicle for the laughter was altogether more 'thin-skinned'.

Keane also proved problematic as a national symbol by positioning himself somewhere between abstract symbolic representative and self-serving individual, and repeatedly highlighting football *as* a game, maintaining a playful commentary on it, while being a participant in it at the same time. He commented, for example, unusually and very consistently on a key condition of footballers' extraordinary, but temporary wealth and exalted cultural status, the commodification of their labour power, such that they can be moved or discarded against their will: 'to football clubs, players are just expensive pieces of meat. The harsh realities remain and when a club decide they want to sell there is little you can do'.<sup>71</sup>

This directness, combined with his 'value-for-money' consistency and clearly felt need to 'prove' himself as a player is perhaps more explicable in terms of a 'professionalism' cultivated as an *emigrant* at a *British* club, having emigrated from Ireland as an unemployed teenager,<sup>72</sup> than as symptomatic of 'native' virtue. But his appropriation as national representative typifies how Irish twentieth-century emigration has been recast in recent years as a narrative of adventure and success, rather than an index of post-Independence Irish economic failure. As Ken Early argued (though still celebrating Keane's 'heroic' status):

70 R. Curtis, 'Roy cared too much – that's why he's gone', *Sunday World*, 7 December 2008, p.143.

71 '10 classic Roy Keane rants', *The Guardian*, 24 August 2006, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2006/aug/24/sport.comment>> (accessed 9 January 2009).

72 Keane and Dunphy, *Keane*, pp.10–11.

Keane doesn't really exemplify anything about the new Ireland. You could argue he fits into the tradition of the Irish emigrant made good, like the Kennedys or Ambrose O'Higgins, or at a stretch that of the exiled artist, forging the uncreated conscience of his race ... But the Celtic Tiger? Where is Keane's obsession with excellence, his determination to make the most of every last ounce of his potential, reflected in [its] waste and chaos.<sup>73</sup>

And despite economic success, relying on the sale of his bodily labour power was as, if not more, akin to fellow post-war working-class Irish emigrants than to new middle-class Irish fans and commentators in two respects: the considerable risk of temporary or longer lasting injury through bodily intensive labour;<sup>74</sup> and the lack of control over employment conditions, being 'expensive pieces of meat' vulnerable to sale, possibly internationally.

In this respect, we should, finally, heed Sandvoss's points that sports fandom positions 'the fan within social, cultural, economic and technological macro structures and transformations of contemporary life',<sup>75</sup> and that any critical questioning is 'created through the economic and social forces which already structure the conditions of modern industrial living [so that] fandom cannot function as a space for the creation of new social norms'.<sup>76</sup> If Keane questioned the amateurish, pre-modern governance of Irish soccer and the bourgeoisification of English soccer while being a hero of the Irish diaspora in Britain as a successful Irishman abroad, and if he could be deemed to embody a new post-Independence, postcolonial self-reliant and combative masculinity, he (the imaginary 'he' of fan projections) has also legitimated, by embodying a standard ideological fantasy

73 K. Early, 'Blinded by his light', *Village*, 15 June 2007, <[http://www.village.ie/Sports/Athletics/Blinded\\_by\\_his\\_light/](http://www.village.ie/Sports/Athletics/Blinded_by_his_light/)> (accessed 15 February 2009).

74 D. Hannigan, *The Garrison Game: the State of Irish Football* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1998) pp.102–18; and Tom Humphries, 'Trapped on fast train to Nowheresville', *Irish Times*, 8 February 2003, <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/sport/2003/0208/1044549986130.html>> (accessed 15 February 2009) have traced the exemplary injury-blighted career declines of former Irish full and youth internationals, Davy Langan and Liam George, respectively.

75 Sandvoss, *Fans*, pp.112–13.

76 *Ibid.*, p.151.

of neo-liberal economic commentary, the self-motivated, value-for-money economic labour unit striving to maximize his own productivity and that of his colleagues. And although framed by an implicit code of masculine banter, his remarks about players – even his 'pieces of meat' observation – served to reproduce the 'performance principle' whereby the higher an athlete in the 'pyramidal social structure of the feeder system', the more 'expendable' and subject to 'empathic neglect or even empathic abuse'<sup>77</sup> he becomes – irrespective of his substantial financial rewards.

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- 77 A. G. Ingham, M. A. Chase and J. Butt, 'From the Performance Principle to the Developmental Principle: Every Kid a Winner?', *Quest*, vol. 54, no. 4 (2002), p.309.

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