Public Humanities (2026), 2, e119, 1–5
doi:10.1017/pub.2026.10251

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

ARTICLE

De Ira

Elizabeth Boyle

Department of Early Irish, Maynooth University, Ireland
Email: elizabeth.boyle@mu.ie

(Received 05 July 2026 UTC; revised 05 July 2026 UTC; accepted 16 July 2026 UTC)

Abstract

This braided essay brings together contemporary concerns, personal memoir, and medieval studies. Specifically, it responds to a feeling of anger regarding current political situations, by meditating on medieval Irish instances of, and reflections on, that emotion. The whole exemplifies the technique of the braided essay which I used to larger-scale effect in an earlier book, *Fierce Appetites*, and implicitly makes the case that a different register—and particularly an emotional honesty—is permissible in "public" writing in a way that would not usually be accepted in traditional academic discourse.

Keywords: emotion; Irish; Latin; medieval studies

When Cú Chulainn, the central character of many medieval Irish saga narratives, gets angry, he gets *really* angry. Often, his anger becomes so all-encompassing that he experiences something called his *ríastrad*, his "contortion," or "distortion," which Thomas Kinsella memorably translated as a "warp-spasm," in which Cú Chulainn's hair stands on end so sharply that "you would swear a fire-speck tipped each hair." One of his eyes squeezes shut and the other opens "wider than the mouth of a goblet," and he bares his jaws and peels back his lips so far that his gullet is visible.[1] These days I feel like that most of the time, and it is exhausting.

I cannot even begin to tell you how enraged I am: when someone tells me that so-and-so was a "Celtic goddess" (no, she wasn't!), or that some random thing is a "pagan tradition" (no, it is not!), and that I would know this if I read the "ancient Irish myths" (no, I would not!). There are many overused terms in relation to medieval Irish culture, and "mythology" is one of them: very little of the narrative literature which survives from medieval Ireland—and it is medieval, not pre-Christian, not prehistoric—is mythological, no matter how many people insist on claiming that it is. After decades of publishing in scholarly venues, to absolutely no effect whatsoever on the stubbornly ingrained popular belief that everything in Ireland is older than it actually is, I hoped that writing for that most elusive audience—the "general public"—might dissipate my rage, even if it failed to change a single mind. Spoiler alert: it did not, in fact, dissipate my rage.

[1] Kinsella 1970, 77.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Time is deep and memories are shallow. Societies become particularly forgetful at times of change, of rupture, of death. During one time of crisis and forgetting, namely the coronavirus pandemic of 2020–22, I decided to rewrite my 20-plus years of research knowledge as "something for a general audience." This was the birth of what would become my book, *Fierce Appetites* (Penguin, 2022), a collection of 12 braided essays, which interwove the stories of 2020 with the story of my life and the stories of medieval Ireland[2]. Medieval history meets memoir, in the hope that history would give me perspective on my life, or my life would give me perspective on history. I wrote one essay for each month of 2020, and each month had a theme—Grief in January because my father died; Ageing in August because I turned 40 that month—which allowed me to explore the ways that theme appeared in medieval texts or was embodied by particular medieval individuals.

So let me write a chapter for this month. It is June 2026, and I am angry. I am angry because of the rising tide of anti-immigrant sentiment. I am angry because of the inaction of governments across the world on the issue of human-inflicted climate change, and I am angry because of the inaction of the Irish government in relation to the housing crisis in Dublin. I am angry because of Donald Trump's policies in the United States, where my partner lives, and I am angry because of the effects of Brexit in the United Kingdom, where most of my family live. I am angry because artificial intelligence (AI) developed by rapacious tech companies is diminishing people's capacity to understand what is real, and because social media algorithms are undermining people's ability to differentiate between the anecdotal and the statistically significant. I am angry all the fucking time, and I cannot keep on baring my jaws and allowing one of my eyes to pop out of my head while the other falls back into my skull.

St Patrick always comes across as a rather quarrelsome and defensive individual in his own writings, with his bitching and moaning about the ecclesiastical hierarchy in Britain and those who have told his secrets for their own ends. His seventh-century biographers extend that impression. One of them, Tírechán, claims that Patrick had an encounter with two *magi*, pagan "wizards," one of whom Patrick cursed with the words: *Domine mi, iece a me canem qui oblatrat faciem tuam et me; eat in mortem*, "My Lord, cast out from my presence this dog, who barks at your face and at me; may he go to his death." When we dehumanize our enemies, regarding them as less-than-human, as dogs, as scum, we are on a very slippery slope, but Patrick's God obliged and flung the wizard into the air, so high that his body froze in the altitude, and then God dropped his corpse back to the ground like a stone.[3] Likewise, because anger is not the preserve of a single religion or a single people, when two other wizards heard that Patrick has crossed the River Shannon, heading towards Mag Aí, they grew angry on behalf of the young women that they thought would be preyed on and brainwashed by these incoming foreigners of a different faith. They feared that their foster-daughters would "make the ways of the holy man their own," and so, in their indignation, they "brought the darkness of night and dense fogs" over the whole plain.[4] Fear of the foreign, fear of the new, fear of change. The foster-daughters convert to Christianity in spite of their foster-fathers' rage.[5]

In a medieval Irish sermon on the *Ten Commandments*, the author states under the sixth commandment—"Thou Shalt Not Kill"—that there are five kinds of homicide. This includes homicide by *fúath*, "hatred," because, the homilist writes, quoting the first epistle of John,

[2] Boyle 2022.
[3] Bieler 1979, 132–3.
[4] Bieler 1979, 138–9.
[5] A classic study of anger in relation to hagiography from the Celtic-speaking world is Davies 1998.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"*is duine-marbthach in t-íí dobeir fúath*"; *ór do-marb sé a ainmm fén*—"'he who hates is a murderer' for he has slain his own soul." Another kind of homicide is *marbad na tengad*, "killing by the tongue," which includes backbiting and giving evil counsel which leads to death.[6] There seems to be a lot of killing through hatred and killing by the tongue at the moment. Killing through keyboards and killing by tapping on phone screens. Killing by bot farms that fuel division. The misogyny, the racism, the transphobia. It's relentless, and I do not know what to do with my anger towards those who have created this reality.

The former punk turned reactionary John Lydon (aka Johnny Rotten from the Sex Pistols) famously said "Anger is an energy." Last month, I was at the launch of Sally Hayden's *This is also a Love Story*, a book which reveals stories of love—romantic, familial, platonic, and altruistic—in places of conflict, disaster, and oppression. Hayden reports, from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Uganda, Rwanda, and Ghana, just some of the many things that people do for others, even in the most dangerous of circumstances[7]. Innumerable flickers of light punctuating the expansive darkness. In the audience at the launch are two older women, both retired former employees of Ireland's national broadcaster RTÉ. We struck up a conversation, and they told me about some of the more hard-hitting stories they had worked on over the years—clerical sexual abuse of children; mother and baby homes—and one of them said to me: "I did not want to make people sad; I wanted to make them angry." She repeated Lydon's phrase to me: Anger is an energy.

Anger is underrated as a motivating force. An excess of it can lead to impotent rage, or paralysis, but a healthy amount can be enough to drive you onwards (other good motivating forces include pettiness and professional envy: these work particularly well when it comes to forcing oneself to write). The historically ill-informed are not my enemy. I need to understand that. Anger is an energy, but it cannot be the end point. I need to work through it, write through it, and find something at the other end. Sally Hayden writes of a kind of love that is action: the hard work of protecting the weak, searching for the missing, and rebuilding a broken society[8]. The sixth- or seventh-century Penitential of Finnian states that wrath (along with envy and backbiting) is a "great and capital sin." The Penitential quotes Scripture saying "the anger of man worketh not the justice of God" and suggests that sins should be cured by their contraries—love for one's neighbour will cure envy; restraint of the tongue will cure backbiting; and "patience must arise for wrathfulness."[9] By that logic, I just need patience: change will come. But I want to make change come more quickly. I want change now.

One course of action to me is to write: to show that history is complicated, that there is a diversity of stories, that medieval Irish literature is not monocultural, monolithic, or ancient. Why does it even matter, you may ask, amidst the bigger issues of inequality, xenophobia, and hatred? The answer is the uses to which the rhetoric of Irish history and culture are put. Not just those anonymous social media profiles that talk of a "true Gaelic race," or "Ireland for the Irish," or "our culture" (which is always opposed to "their culture," no matter who "they" are). Increasingly, racist Irish voices (often bought and paid for by racist American voices) can bypass the problematic history of the Catholic Church in Ireland and reach for what they call the "pagan," the "indigenous" (a most problematic term), and

[6] Atkinson 1887, 250 (text), 484 (translation). I have altered Atkinson's translation slightly here, mostly just to modernise the English.

[7] Hayden 2026.

[8] Hayden 2026.

[9] Bieler 1963, 84–5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that is when they look to what they call "mythology." I am angry about this false image of a white pagan Ireland, which malevolent forces champion in order to make people think that they have a reason to hate their neighbour, who has come here to work or study, or who has sought refuge—just as St Patrick described himself as a refugee. If you actually read what they call "ancient mythology," you will see that it is a sophisticated medieval literature, dynamic and subject to constant rewriting, shaped by numerous literary influences both Irish and non-Irish, including Latin and Greek and Hebrew and French texts, as well as by the contemporary political and ethical concerns of their authors: medieval Irish literature is itself a monument to the fluidity of human culture, the movement of people and stories across time and space, right down to the part where medieval Irish writers claim that the Irish language was itself created on the Plain of Shin'ar in southern Mesopotamia.

The seventh-century Penitential of Cummean has an entire section on anger. Like the later homily on the Ten Commandments, the Penitential also describes hatred as a form of murder. It states that "he who utters in anger harsh but not injurious words shall make satisfaction to his brother and keep a special fast." If the anger is silent, but expressed through facial expression or a flushed complexion, he should fast for a day. If, however, he merely feels incensed in his mind, with no visible external sign, he must make amends to those who provoked his wrath.[10] I do not think Cú Chulainn would understand the concept of anger that has no visible external sign. When the violent cruelty of the women of Ulster towards a foreign woman, Derbforgaill, led to her tragic death and to that of her husband, Lugaid, Cú Chulainn became so apoplectic that he slaughtered 150 of the women.[11]

Towards the end of the *Táin*, when the warrior Fergus, whose loyalties have been so tried in the conflict between the men of Ulster and their opponents, slices the top off some nearby hills in an attempt to redirect some of his violent energy, Cú Chulainn observes that *Iadais crú chridi. Conscar bara bith*, "blood seals up the heart; anger destroys the world."[12] I do not want my heart to be blocked with rage. I do not want the world to be destroyed. Anger is an energy, and the world needs action. So I smooth down my hair and push my eyeball back into its socket. I close my mouth and open up my laptop and write.

Elizabeth Boyle is a Lecturer in Early Irish at Maynooth University, Ireland. She is a literary and cultural historian of Ireland, focusing on the seventh to twelfth centuries CE. She is the author of *History and Salvation in Medieval Ireland* (Routledge, 2021) and *Fierce Appetites* (Penguin, 2022).

Author contribution. Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing: E.B.

Conflict of interests. The author confirms no competing interests.

References

Atkinson, Robert, ed. and trans. 1887. *The Passions and Homilies from Leabhar Breac*. Royal Irish Academy.
Bieler, Ludwig, ed. and trans. 1963. *The Irish Penitentials*. Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.
Bieler, Ludwig, ed. and trans. 1979. *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*. Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.
Boyle, Elizabeth. 2022. *Fierce Appetites*. Penguin.
Davies, Wendy. 1998. "Anger and the Celtic Saint." In *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages*, edited by Barbara H. Rosenwein, 191–202. Cornell University Press.

[10] Bieler 1963, 120–1.
[11] Marstrander 1911, 201–18.
[12] O'Rahilly 1976, line 4079.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Hayden, Sally. 2026. *This Is Also a Love Story: Searching for Good in a Divided World*. Harper Collins.
Kinsella, Thomas. 1970. *The Táin*. Oxford University Press.
Marstrander, Carl, ed. and trans. 1911. "The Deaths of Lugaid and Derbforgaill." *Ériu* 5: 201–18.
O'Rahilly, Cecile, ed. and trans. 1976. *Táin Bó Cúailnge Recension 1*. Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

Cite this article: Boyle, Elizabeth. 2026. "De Ira." *Public Humanities,* 2, e119, 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10251

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10251 Published online by Cambridge University Press