



Cruit Éireann  
Harp Ireland

September 2025

# Harp Perspectives

Dord Muice ar Seachrán –  
Satirising harpers in 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland

Deirdre Nic Chárthaigh

the arts  
council  
a chomhairle  
ealaíon

funding  
traditional arts

Welcome to *Harp Perspectives*, Cruit Éireann, Harp Ireland's online journal. One of our strategic aims is to establish thought leadership across the harp sector by building up a body of thinking about the harp and harping through a historical and contemporary lens.

*Harp Perspectives* is a conversation about harping and features key informants, harpers and non-harpers, sharing their authentic views and ideas. We believe that this combination of scholarly research and personal insights will highlight the harping legacy inherited from our tradition bearers and help forge a contemporary harping identity, secure in its understanding of its origin and how it wishes to evolve.

In our September edition, to coincide with the ICTMD Symposium – Irish Harping: Legacy and Living Traditions – at University College Galway, Deirdre Nic Chárthaigh offers us a rare insight into the bardic poetry that satirised harpers in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Our thanks to each of our contributors for their willingness to add their voices. Their contributions will no doubt enrich and inform our thinking.

Aibhlín McCrann

Editor

Septemebr 2025

*Harp Perspectives* is the Cruit Éireann | Harp Ireland online journal. Views expressed in any article published belong to the author only. Cruit Éireann | Harp Ireland accepts no liability or responsibility for the validity or accuracy of the information provided.

# Dord muice ar seachrán – Satirising harpers in sixteenth and seventeenth century Ireland

## Deirdre Nic Chárthaigh\*

### I

In a margin of the fifteenth-century vellum manuscript UCD A7 a seventeenth-century hand has jotted down a short syllabic poem beginning *Athraigh gléas, a Ghiolla Íosa* [‘Change your tuning, Giolla Íosa’]. The poem begins with the poet beseeching a harper, who is addressed as ‘Giolla Íosa’, to tune his out-of-tune harp:

Athraigh gléas, a Ghiolla Íosa,  
ainmhín tig is téid ’na ruaig;  
lámh ar do chruit, cáir a haithghléas,  
bhudh náir duit an t-aithghréas uaid!

Ag sin thíos an téad ar míghléas  
a mheic Dhonnchaidh dhearbhas cruas;  
a-táid mná is daighfhir dod dhéagsain,  
airigh mur tá an téad-soin thuas.

Change your tuning, Giolla Íosa, it comes unevenly and then goes in  
a rush; place a hand on your harp, it ought to be re-tuned; another  
composition like this would bring you shame!

See below the out-of-tune string, O son of Donnchadh who guarantees  
harshness; women and noblemen are watching you, take notice of the  
state of that upper string!<sup>1</sup>

---

\* I am grateful to Seán Donnelly, Llewelyn Hopwood and Barry Lewis for reading and discussing aspects of this paper with me. All errors and inconsistencies are my own.

<sup>1</sup> Deirdre Nic Chárthaigh (ed. & transl.), ‘Athraigh gléas a Ghiolla Íosa: dán ar dhroch-chláirseoir, *Ériu* 73 (2023), pp 32–33.

The poet goes on to describe the adverse effects of Giolla Íosa's harp playing, which is so terrible that even farmyard animals cannot bear to listen to it:

Don ghléas chuire ar do chruit mbrisde  
ba an achaidh ní anaid siad;  
íoc na bú nach fuil dá bhfiadhain,  
tú do chuir ar iarraidh iad.

Because of the tuning you put on your broken harp the cows of the pasture do not stay put; compensate for the cows that are not to be seen for you are the one who has caused them to wander.

Do sheinm gharbh, a Ghiolla Íosa  
as í do sgaoil an scor each ...

'Your rough playing, O Giolla Íosa, is what has caused the horses to bolt ...

In the final quatrain, the poet likens Giolla Íosa's harp playing to a number of harsh sounds: *búireadh dá bhuain a caisléan* ['bellowing echoing from a castle']; *cliabh cnó dá chur a n-arg* ['a basket of nuts being poured into a chest']; and *céad cú a gcrothaibh a slabhradh* ['one hundred captured dogs straining on their chains'].

Little is known about the provenance of this poem. The harper who is being criticised is addressed as *Giolla Íosa, mac Donnchaidh* ['Giolla Íosa, the son of Donnchadh'] and, later, as *an Caoch Mac Cearbhaill* ['the 'Blind' Mac Cearbhaill']. Where, when, and indeed if ever Giolla Íosa mac Donnchaidh Mheic Cearbhaill existed is impossible to say. The poem is anonymous in the only manuscript in which it has been preserved, and, although composed in strict *dán díreach* metre, and therefore probably the work of a professional poet, its language contains some late, post-classical features. It is likely, then, that this poem was the work of a bardic poet who flourished towards the end of the Early Modern Irish period.<sup>2</sup>

---

2 The linguistic period of Early Modern Irish spans roughly from the middle of the thirteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth century.



## II

Short, satirical poems on harpers seem to have been in vogue in late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth-century Ireland. *Athraigh Gléas, a Ghiolla Íosa* is strikingly similar in language, theme, and form to a handful of other satires on harpers and accompanists from that period. These include *A fhir iomtha an aosa téad* ['O man who rivals the harpers'], a short poem attributed to the renowned bardic poet Eochaidh Ó hEódhasa (c. 1568–1612), in which an unnamed *reacaire* is satirised for his poor recital of a poem and harp accompaniment,<sup>3</sup> *Saoi le searbhas Eóin mac Eóin* ['Eóin son of Eóin is a sage of bitterness'],<sup>4</sup> an anonymous poem on a harper who is addressed simply as 'Eóin mac Eóin', and *Searbh an chrág-sa tháinig tar tuinn* ['Harsh is this hand which has come from overseas'], a short anonymous poem on an unnamed harper.<sup>5</sup> To these we might add two quatrains which have been identified as belonging to a longer satire on a bad harper which was once preserved in the Book of the O'Connor Don but is now lost,<sup>6</sup> a poetic dispute between Donnchadh Mac Labhra and the harper Giolla Muire Caoch Mac Cartáin,<sup>7</sup> and a single quatrain on a bad harper attributed to the Ulster Lord Maghnus Ó Domhnaill (c.1490–1563).<sup>8</sup> In addition to their close thematic relationship, these poem have a number of linguistic and metrical features in common; they are all syllabic, they are generally short (usually ranging from one to seven quatrains), and many are in loose *Ógláchas* metres.

In contrast to the many references to sweet-sounding harps found in the larger corpus of bardic poetry, these short satires offer us a rare insight into what was considered to be *bad* harping in Early Modern Ireland. One of their most striking features is their use of rich imagery. Animalistic auditory imagery is used to particular effect in these poems, with the harpers' music often being compared to the bellowing, grunting and barking of common farmyard or wild animals. In *Saoi le searbhas Eóin mac Eóin*, the harper's playing is described *mar chráin ag crónán dá cluinn* ['like a sow crying for her litter'], and *mar chreim dá chlamhchon ar chnámh* ['Like the gnawing of two mangy dogs on a bone']. The poet also refers to *tafann a lámh* ['the barking of his hands']. *Tafann* ['barking'] is used again in *Searbh an chrág-sa táinig tar tuinn*, in which the poet criticizes *tafann trom an mheóir mhuill*, ['the heavy bark of the [harper's] slow-

3 This poem has been edited (without translation and notes) in *Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge* 19 (8) (1909), p. 365. I am currently preparing a new edition.

4 Thomas F. O'Rahilly, *Measgra Dánta I* (Dublin and Cork 1927), pp 7–8. Translations of this poem are my own.

5 O'Rahilly, *Measgra Dánta*, pp 66–7. Translations of this poem are my own.

6 Ní Mhurchú, S., 'Varia: I. Ní chluinim sin a chláirseach: a lost poem from the Book of the O'Connor Don', *Ériu* 67 (2017), pp 215–6.

7 Thomas F. O'Rahilly, *Measgra Dánta*, pp 8–14.

8 O'Rahilly, *Dánfhocail: Irish epigrams in verse* (Dublin 1921), p. 78.

moving finger’].<sup>9</sup> In *Athraigh gléas a Ghiolla Íosa*, the harper’s music is likened to *dord muice ar seachrán* [‘the drone of a stray pig’] and, as we have seen, to *céad cú a gcrothaibh a slabhradh* [‘one hundred captured dogs straining on their chains’].

Animal invective is, of course, a feature of Irish satire more generally and, as McCaughey has shown in a case study of the poets of Scotland and Ireland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, ‘the use of animal terms is not haphazard but fairly strictly patterned and structured.’<sup>10</sup> Animals alluded to in satirical verse tend to be wild or common farmyard animals, as opposed to the ‘nobler’ animals often evoked in panegyric bardic verse, such as stags, hounds and swans.<sup>11</sup> References to the harp in bardic poetry reveal a clear distinction between what were clearly perceived as ‘noisy’ and ‘sweet-sounding’ animals: bad harping is usually compared to the barking of dog or to the grunting of pigs and hogs, while good harping is almost exclusively likened to the sound of birds.<sup>12</sup> This distinction is unambiguous in *A fhir iomtha an aosa téad*, in which the harp accompaniment of a *reacaire* is described as *nuall seanchon ar seachrán* [‘like the cry of an old stray dog’], and is contrasted with the far more favourable *foghar eōin ainglidhe* [‘sound of an angelic bird’].

Another striking feature of these satires on bad harpers is their imaginative descriptions of the adverse, if not catastrophic, effects of bad harp playing. In the larger corpus of bardic poetry, there are numerous references to the beneficial effects of beautiful harp playing; the harp has the ability to send people to sleep, to sooth women in childbirth, to heal wounded warriors and, as shown by a recent article in this series by Seán Donnelly, to anticipate lovemaking.<sup>13</sup> In the poem *A Niocláis noct an chláirsigh*, for example, the playing of Nioclás Dall Mac Piarais is said to have a number of rejuvenating qualities:

9 ‘Good’ harpers, on the other hand, are often praised for their quick-moving fingers. In the poem *Cia an saoi lé seinntear an chruit*, for example, the harper Tadhg Ó Cobhthaigh is praised for *lúth luaimneach a mhéar mearbhras* [‘The vigorous speed of his swift nimble fingers’]. This poem has been edited in Deirdre Nic Cháirt haigh, ‘Cia an saoi lé seinntear an chruit: a bardic poem to a harper’, in Helen Lawlor and Sandra Joyce (eds), *Harp Studies II* (Dublin 2024), pp 39–56.

10 Terence McCaughey, ‘Bards, Beasts and Men’, in L. Breatnach, K. McCone and D. Ó Corráin (eds), *Sages, saints and storytellers* (Maynooth, 1989), pp. 102–21. On the use of animal invective in Early Irish satire see Róisín McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satires* (Dublin, 2008), pp 33–9.

11 See Eleanor Knott, *The Bardic Poems of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn I* (London, 1920; 1922), p. liii.

12 In the elegy *A chláirsíoch Chnuic Í Chosgair*, for example, harp music is compared to *guth cuach a gcéiteamhain* [‘the voice of the cuckoos in May’] and to *glór eala ó fhionnsrothaibh* [‘the voice of the swan on bright streams’]. Bergin, O. (ed. and transl.), *Irish Bardic Poetry* (Dublin 1970), poem 15, quatrains 7 & 9.

13 Seán Donnelly, ‘Playing the Irish game and the Irish harp: two pleasurable accomplishments, 1590–1790’, *Harp Perspectives* (2023), p. 5.

Balsam cobhartha cédfadh,  
liaigh don teidhm nach taisbéantar,  
cosg fiabhrasa ré bel mbáis,  
do mhér niamhdhasa, a Niocláis

Balm to heal the senses, physician of the hidden sore, cure of the fever  
at death's point – such is thy finger, O Nicholas.<sup>14</sup>

The effects of the harp music described in the satirical poems are altogether more chaotic. We have already seen how, in *Athraigh Gléas, a Ghiolla Íosa*, Giolla Íosa's terrible tuning caused the cows and horses to bolt. To make matters worse, the poet suggests that Giolla Íosa will have to provide compensation for the animals that have gone missing: *íoc na bú nach fuil dá bhfiadhain, tú do chuir ar iarraidh iad* ['make compensation for the cows that are not to be seen for you are the one who has caused them to wander']. In *Saoi le searbhas Eóin mac Eóin*, the harper has caused such a racket that he has disturbed the dead: *sás marbh do mhosgladh a huaigh / cosgradh cruaidh ná n-arm n-amh* ['the rough hacking of the raw weapons (i.e. fingers) causes a corpse to rise from a grave'].

Often, bad harp playing has a negative effect on the health of those who hear it.<sup>15</sup> In *Saoi le searbhas Eóin mac Eóin* the harper's music is painful to the ears (*ó n-a chlos is céasta cluas* [an ear is tormented from hearing it]), while in *A fhir iomtha an aosa téad*, the harp playing has the rather more drastic effect of sending the poet to his deathbed:

Deithneas mall do mheóir thuisligh  
is í an ghrafann ghreannmhair-sin;  
tug a loighe mh'éaga inn,  
a théada croidhe caoirthinn.

What an odd grunting is the sluggish speed of your clumsy finger;  
its rowan-heart strings have sent me to my deathbed.

14 Bergin, Osborn (ed. and transl.): *Irish Bardic Poetry*, Dublin, 1970, poem 25, quatrain 12.

15 This idea may derive from the medieval belief that sound was physical and could be physically harmful. See Llewelyn Hopwood, *Sound and Control in Welsh Poetry (c. 1300–c. 1600)*, Unpublished DPhil thesis, Corpus Christi College, University of Oxford (2023), pp 48–50.

The toxic effect of bad harp playing is also suggested by the multiple references to the poisonous plant henbane found in these poems. As Fergal Kelly has pointed out, ‘henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*) is notorious as a poisoner of hens and other poultry: in French it is called *mort aux poules* ‘death to hens’ (also *mort aux oies* ‘death to geese’). The Irish word for this plant is *gafann* (*gaphann*), and there are references in early texts to its ill-effects on people.’<sup>16</sup> The effect of bad harp playing is likened to the poisonous effects of the henbane in many of the satires on harpers. In the poem *Searbh an chrág-sa tháinig thar tuinn*, the henbane is referred to repeatedly:

Searbh an chrág-sa tháinig tar tuinn ...  
do chuir sí an gafann as suim ...

‘Harsh is that hand that has come from abroad ... it has rendered the henbane superfluous.’

An méar meadhóin gidh siobhlach ...  
do b’uras damh a rádh re tamall  
gur sa ghafann fuair a úthairt.

‘I have been able to tell for a while that the wandering middle finger acquired its grunting noise from the henbane.’

Na cúig méir sin is seirbhe ná an gafann  
ar n-a bhfabhairt san domlas ae,  
sul do chuala mé a ngrafainn  
truagh nach bodhar do bhí mé!<sup>17</sup>

‘Those five fingers are more bitter than henbane dipped in the bile of liver; it is a pity that I was not deaf before I heard their screeching!’

In a single quatrain found in two manuscripts, a number of musicians (presumably harpers) are cast as ‘the sons of the henbane’:

---

16 Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin, 1997; 1998), p 184.

17 O’Rahilly, *Measgra Dánta I*, pp 66–7.



Aithne dhamh geinealach Ghafainn  
le sinntear gach seanghrafinn,  
mic Caorthainn, mic Gotha Ghairbh,  
mic Mormónta, mic Mustaird!<sup>18</sup>

‘I am acquainted with the descendants of Henbane who play every old disagreeable noise: the sons of Rowan, the sons of the Rough Slander, the sons Wormwood, the sons of Mustard!

### III

Although we do not know when exactly most of these poems were composed, we can, on the basis of language, style, metre and manuscript context, place them somewhere in the second half of the sixteenth century or in the first half of the seventeenth century. How, then, might we account for the emergence of these satires? Were they intended to ridicule actual, individual harpers, or were they composed in jest?

However humorous some of these poems are, there are good grounds for considering them in the broader context of the decline of the bardic profession. Against this backdrop, they seem to reflect a cultural anxiety against the emergence of a lower class of musician, at a time when appreciation for the elite high-status harping of the old Gaelic order was in sharp decline. These poems were composed in a period of conquest and colonization, in which the harper, like the *file*, faced cultural alienation and professional retrenchment. There are a number of satires from this period that bitterly lament the devaluation of traditional bardic learning. In the well-known seventeenth-century poem *Mór do-ghníd daoine dhíobh féin*, the poet Fear Feasa Ó’n Cháinte satirizes those *bhíos gan iúl* [‘who are without knowledge’], and who cannot recognise a good poem when they hear one:

Adeirid do dhrécht shnoighte  
bhíos gan easbaid ullmoighte;  
’s nach fuair tár do thogha ar sgoil  
is dona an dán an dán soin.<sup>19</sup>

They say of a well-wrought, carefully prepared composition, in which the best of our poets found no fault: ‘that poem is a bad one’.

18 O’Rahilly, *Measgra Dánta I*, pp 67. Translation is my own.

19 Standish H. O’Grady, *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the British Library [Formerly British Museum]* (1926, 1992), pp 555–56. Translation is my own, following O’Grady.

In the same poem, Ó'n Cháinte laments the lack of appreciation for 'good' music:

Adeir fer fedghoile díobh  
risan gceol bud cheol d'airdríogh;  
ní chuala serbas acht sin  
nemblas uada ar na hoidib.<sup>20</sup>

Of music that were fit for a king, another whistling one of them says:  
'I have never heard such discord!', accusing the very masters of  
tastelessness.

Like *Mór do-ghníd daoine dhíobh féin*, it is possible that the harp satires reflect a reaction against the replacement of the elevated music of the learned, professional harper – music that had flourished for hundreds of years within structures of high Gaelic society – with that of a lower-class of musician. Like poems on the decay of poetry, these satires may bear witnesses to an attempt to maintain the status quo; to distinguish the trained, hereditary professional harper from those who were seen as having no claim to the profession. This might be inferred from the opening of the poem *A fhir iomtha an aosa téad* ['O man who rivals the harpers']; here, the poet makes an explicit distinction between the unlearned *reacaire* ridiculed in the poem and 'proper' harpers (*an aos téad*), with the former clearly posing a threat to the later.

#### IV

The Early Modern Irish satires on harpers find parallels in the literary traditions of other Celtic languages. A number of satires on the harp, and on the related *crwth*, survive, for example, in Middle Welsh. Although composed in the fourteenth century, and therefore a good deal earlier than our Irish satires on the harp, these Welsh poems are, in many ways, very similar to the poems discussed above. They draw heavily, for example, on animalistic auditory imagery. In a fourteenth-century *awdl* on the bishop of Bangor, the poet, Iorwerth Beli, satirizes the bishop's musicians who play a 'harsh willow *crwth*' which sounds 'like squealing piglets':

Tra fu'r prifeirdd heirdd, hardd weision – cerddiawn,  
Cyflawn o dryddawn ymadroddion,  
Nid ef a berchid berchyllson – debig  
Grwth helig terrig, tor goluddion.

---

20 O'Grady, *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts*, pp 555–56. Translation is my own, following O'Grady.

While the beautiful chief poets [lived], fair servants of correct music,  
/ full of greatly gifted phrases, / the harsh willow crwth, with broken  
guts, / was not respected – noise like squealing piglets.<sup>21</sup>

This poem similarly reflects an anxiety about the decline of traditional bardic music: the bishop's musicians are being targeted as inferior entertainers, whose instruments are 'different from (and by implication much harsher-sounding than) the instruments of authentic bardic tradition'.<sup>22</sup> To add insult to injury, these musicians are being rewarded by the bishop for playing English tunes, even though they appear to be Welsh themselves (ll. 47–8). Similarly, in another fourteenth-century composition, the poet Iolo Goch satirizes leather, cat-gut or metal-strung harps which were becoming fashionable at the time, and replacing the 'high-status wooden-framed horse-hair strung harp of bardic tradition'.<sup>23</sup> The poet compares the sound of the instrument to 'the 'wild neighing, false roaring / of a yellow mare for stallions' (*Gweryrad gwyllt, rhuad gau, / Gwilff felen am geffylau*), to 'geese squabbling over territory' (*Gwyddau yn dadlau am dir*) and, amusingly, to a 'noisy, crazy Irishwoman' (*sonfawr Wyddeles ynfyd*').<sup>24</sup>

It has been argued that these Welsh examples have 'more to do with the social circumstances of the sound source – the crythor himself – than with the sound' and that 'the focus on the profession instead of the instrument is key' to understanding them.<sup>25</sup> It may be the case that the social circumstance of the harper is also key to understanding the satires that emerge on Irish harpers at the turn of the sixteenth century. It is, perhaps, not so much their musicianship that has incited such a bitter response, as the threat that they represent to a conservative, hereditary caste of bardic musicians.

---

21 N. G. Costigan, R. Iestyn Daniel and Dafydd Johnston (eds), *Gwaith Gruffudd ap Dafydd ap Tudur, Gwilym Ddu o Arfon, Trahaearn Brydydd Mawr ac Iorwerth Beli* (Aberystwyth, 1995), p. 151; quoted and translated in Hopwood, *Sound and Control*, p. 187.

22 Sally Harper, *Music in Welsh Culture before 1600: A Study of the Principal Sources* (Aldershot 2007), p. 42.

23 Harper, *Music in Welsh Culture before 1600*, p. 43.

24 Dafydd Johnston (ed), *Iolo Goch: Poems* (Llandysul, 1993), 130–32.

25 Hopwood, *Sound and Control*, 234.

## Deirdre Nic Chárthaigh\*

Dr Deirdre Nic Chárthaigh is a lecturer in the Department of Irish and Celtic Studies in Trinity College Dublin. Her research interests include Early Modern Irish prose, Bardic Poetry and the Irish manuscript tradition. She previously worked on the [MACMORRIS](#) project in Maynooth University and held an O'Donovan scholarship and a Bergin Fellowship at the School of Celtic Studies in the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. She is a member of the working group of the [Léamh](#) project since 2018.

