



Writing without fear about early medieval emotions

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For a long time even the political history of the early Middle Ages was belittled. In my Western Civilization class in college, my professor had us read about the Germans invading Rome, then skipped to the Investiture Controversy. ‘What happened in between?’ I asked. ‘Just a lot of violence,’ was the answer.

Thanks to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, who was influenced by the anthropologist Max Gluckman, and then thanks to the new generation that Wallace-Hadrill taught by word and text, we have come to see the peace in the violence.¹ Anthropologists were the first to give us the tools to make sense of the acephalous polity, and we’ve made splendid use of them. Merovingian Francia, we now realize, worked by consensus; the Carolingians, far from forging a state, were forever negotiating to stay in power; and the ‘feudal anarchy’ of the post-Carolingian period worked through informal mechanisms of dispute resolution.² We know how to think about early medieval politics.³

We are less lucky with medieval emotions. In the first place, there is no Max Gluckman to give us the firm guidance that we would like to have. In 1981, when Paul and Anna Kleinginna tried to come up with a

¹ J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, ‘The Bloodfeud of the Franks’, in *The Long-Haired Kings*, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching 11 (Toronto, 1982; repr. of 1962 ed.), ch. 6, first published in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 41 (1959), pp. 459–87, drawing upon M. Gluckman, ‘The Peace in the Feud’, *Past and Present*, no. 8 (1955), pp. 1–14. See more recently the essays in G. Halsall (ed.), *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West* (Woodbridge, 1998).

² The new historiography is vast. I limit myself to one selection per period: for the Merovingians, P. Fouracre and R.A. Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France: History and Hagiography, 640–720* (Manchester, 1996); for the Carolingians, S. Airlie, ‘Private Bodies and the Body Politic in the Divorce Case of Lothar II’, *Past and Present*, no. 161 (1998), pp. 3–38; for the post-Carolingian world, S.D. White, ‘Debate: The “Feudal Revolution”’, *Comment 2*, *Past and Present*, no. 152 (1996), pp. 205–23.

³ I speak of the Anglo-American academic tradition of which I am a part. I do not suggest that all the important work on early medieval politics began with Wallace-Hadrill and remained Anglo-American ever afterwards. Were there space here for a more nuanced approach, the work in particular of German-speaking historians of the post-war generation would need to be highlighted; one recent exemplar must here suffice: B. Jussen (ed.), *Ordering Medieval Society: Perspectives on Intellectual and Practical Modes of Shaping Social Relations*, trans. P. Selwyn (Philadelphia, 2001), part III.

'consensual definition' of the word emotion, they had to navigate eleven clearly different positions on the matter, from definitions that privileged cognition to those that emphasized physical mechanisms.⁴ And the Kleinginnas were writing before the social constructionists had added their powerful voices to the din.⁵

In the second place, we are not sure *why* we should care about emotions. We *had* to find a way to talk about the political forms of the early medieval period because politics and the state were (and remain) the chief subjects of history. Are emotions a traditional field? In many ways they are. Open Huizinga: he is talking about the zig-zagging emotions of the late Middle Ages.⁶ Bloch speaks of emotions alongside 'disasters of life'.⁷ In Jolliffe's *Angevin England* the *ira regis* figures as a real political force.⁸ Nevertheless, few historians have looked at the matter squarely. Nor are we alone in having avoided direct focus on the subject. As late as 1984, psychologists were calling the study of emotions a 'new field', and a survey made by two anthropologists two years later noted that 'interest in "the emotional" has burgeoned in the last decade'.⁹

The reasons for that burgeoning are not hard to fathom. Interest in gender, family, and other 'soft' topics was gaining legitimacy. The social constructionist view of emotions, which became influential in the 1980s, released emotions from biological determinism and recognized their 'social relational, communicative, and cultural aspects'.¹⁰ More recently, some theorizing on emotions has even given them a role in political life: William Reddy thinks that politics is at bottom the power to privilege certain feelings over others, arguing that 'emotional control is the real site of the exercise of power'.¹¹ If Reddy is right (and he is at least partly right), then even the most traditional of historians will want to study

⁴ P.R. Kleinginna, Jr and A.M. Kleinginna, 'A Categorized List of Emotion Definitions, with Suggestions for a Consensual Definition', *Motivation and Emotion* 5 (1981), pp. 345–79.

⁵ For social constructionism see R. Harré (ed.), *The Social Construction of Emotions* (Oxford, 1986).

⁶ J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Garden City, NY, 1954), p. 10: 'All things presenting themselves to the mind in violent contrasts and impressive forms ... tended to produce that perpetual oscillation between despair and distracted joy, between cruelty and pious tenderness which characterize life in the Middle Ages'.

⁷ M. Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L.A. Manyon (Chicago, 1961), p. 73. Further on Bloch, see S.D. White, 'The Politics of Anger', in *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of An Emotion in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY, 1998), pp. 127–31.

⁸ J.E.A. Jolliffe, *Angevin Kingship*, 2nd edn (New York, 1963), pp. 87, 101, 102, discussed in White, 'Politics of Anger', p. 129.

⁹ C. Lutz and G.M. White, 'The Anthropology of Emotions', *American Review of Anthropology* 15 (1986), pp. 405–36; for the psychologists, see K.R. Scherer and P. Ekman (eds.), *Approaches to Emotion* (Hillsdale, NJ, 1984), p. xi, where the editors note that 'after many years of neglect during which time only a few scholars were concerned with emotion ... emotion has become a vital, almost fashionable topic in the social and behavioral sciences'.

¹⁰ Lutz and White, 'Anthropology of Emotions', p. 405.

¹¹ W.M. Reddy, 'Against Constructionism: The Historical Ethnography of Emotions', *Current Anthropology* 38 (1997), pp. 327–51 at 335.

emotions in history. The question is no longer, really, *whether* we should study them, but *how*.

We need first to stop worrying so much about theoretical take. Carolyne Larrington alerts us here to the two basic schools of emotional theorists and their consensus on the issue of 'action readiness'. The 'physiological' versus 'socio-political' fight is pretty much over by now. Nearly everyone agrees that there is a biological substratum to emotions that simply cannot be denied, but emotions themselves are extremely plastic. Given the myriad shades, levels, admixtures, notions, and social uses of emotions, it is very hard to maintain, except at an abstract level, that emotions are everywhere the same. That does not mean that we cannot see in other emotional structures similarities to our own. But it does mean that 'our' anger is not the same as that of Henry III, just as his form of administering a realm is not the form practiced by Tony Blair.

There are a few other useful points that we may take from the theorists: that emotions are part of human communication; that they, like thoughts, have an appraisal function and thus cannot be considered primarily 'irrational'; and that they are expressed within socially constructed narratives, both imaginary and unfolding in the real world.¹²

I say real world; but we should not have the illusion that somehow we can get to 'pure', unmediated emotions: being non-verbal and complex, they resist formulation.¹³ That's part of what is so interesting about them: they are continually in the process of being shaped. In their very expression they are social products. Nor is this just because they are verbal expressions of the nonverbal. Tears, laughter, and other physiological symptoms remain nonverbal, but their expression, too, is mediated by cultural rules, as Larrington points out.¹⁴

Let us not be too simple-minded about those rules. They exist in some ways to be broken. Every society has its deviants; and deviance can be seen as essential to the very rules that it defies. In the Bedouin society studied by Lila Abu-Lughod, men were expected to be passion-free, but one man, Rashid, showed unashamed and intemperate passion for his new bride. Does that mean that at last we see the 'true emotions' of

¹² Scherer and Ekman, *Approaches to Emotion* constitutes a nice overview; for the role of emotions in narrative, see K. Oatly, *Best Laid Schemes: The Psychology of Emotions* (Cambridge, 1992).

¹³ On this point, see Reddy, 'Against Constructionism', who coins the word 'emotives' to refer to the ways in which emotions demand their own reformulation the moment that they are expressed. It is not necessary to adopt emotives in order to accept the point that even the most intimate emotions, expressed privately and perhaps even to ourselves alone, are nevertheless shaped to make sense to us and therefore never 'pure'.

¹⁴ Hence I do not find Schmidt-Wiegand's distinction between spontaneous gestures and conventional gestures entirely convincing. Rather, I see these gestures as part of a continuum of social mediation, with 'spontaneity' at one end and 'ritual' at the other. See R. Schmidt-Wiegand, 'Gebärdensprache im mittelalterlichen Recht', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 16 (1982), pp. 363–79, at 365.

Rashid?¹⁵ We certainly see in his behavior some obsessive acts and reckless disregard for social mores. But Rashid was acting out the very behaviors that abided within the rules for passion-free men. If the Bedouins had no Rashids, how could they know or test the boundaries of their own rules? Besides, rules are complicated and sometimes contradictory. In our own culture we presumably find anger and displays of temper to be 'out of bounds', yet 'angry young men' have considerable cachet.

The second issue is how we get at these illusive, approximate and contradictory things. I see nothing wrong with conceiving *part* of our task to be analyzing treatises and the like on emotions (or the vices, to which they were often assimilated). Guy Halsall argues elsewhere in this volume that 'attitudes towards the feeling of anger' have nothing to do with their social uses, and Catherine Cubitt asks, 'How far did ... spiritual teaching shape individual responses?', expecting, I think, the answer, 'Not very far at all'. But in fact a whole mini-industry of emotions studies in the United States is about just such attitudes and standards; this is 'emotionology', the study of advice manuals that began proliferating in the nineteenth century to prescribe emotional standards.¹⁶ Emotionology itself is exceptionally narrow, referring only to manuals for modern, middle-class audiences.¹⁷ But it is nevertheless useful to know that emotionologists are quite convinced that standards were *not* separate from real norms and that eventually many were internalized. I admit that the latter point is problematic, for different communities internalize (and, indeed, understand) such things in different ways. But the first point has got to be immediately right: the representation of emotional standards is itself a social product. Of course in the Middle Ages, as Cubitt points out, most sources about standards (from Dhuoda's *Handbook* to scholastic *summae*) are unusually 'indebted to earlier texts and established topoi'. But this has never stopped the *intellectual* historian from establishing points of continuity and change. As Mary Garrison argues elsewhere in this issue, the existence of topoi need not deter the historian of emotion.

A seemingly more significant problem for the early Middle Ages consists in the other sorts of sources available. If all our sources are either normative or formulaic and if none (or few) are intimate, what authentic emotions can be derived from them? But this question assumes that intimate sources are authentic. We are back to the myth of 'genuine'

¹⁵ This seems to be what Abu-Lughod thinks; see L. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley, 1986), pp. 90–7.

¹⁶ P.N. Stearns with C.Z. Stearns, 'Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards', *American Historical Review* 90 (1985), pp. 813–36.

¹⁷ The Stearnses thus scornfully relegate courtly love to the garbage heap of 'intellectual history'. See 'Emotionology', p. 830.

emotions; but these, as I have said, are never adequately represented. Sometimes, of course, emotions seem quite genuine and reasonable to us, as in the case of Einhard's grief over the death of his wife. But these sorts of feelings are not separate from, but rather part of the same continuum as crocodile tears, which themselves conform to certain norms. We must keep in mind the possibilities: sometimes emotions seem straightforward (but may not be); at other times they may be utterly repressed; and at all times they are shaped by *topoi* or conventions. The psychiatrist, the anthropologist, and the historian of twentieth century in-your-face emotions are just as beset by these problems as the medievalist. I am willing to say that *every* document and text that we have reveals social practice. If emotions figure in those documents (and even if they do not) we have the right to ask what emotional structures are revealed by them *in their proper context*, taking into account all we can about the linguistic, social, economic, intellectual and political processes and structures that make up that context, while not neglecting the audience and the range of ways in which it might have received the texts in question.

The problem is not that we lack sources. It is that we lack framework. The only one that exists today is that given ballast by Norbert Elias, who argued for a 'civilizing process' that began in the medieval courts but gained its head in the absolutist states of the post-medieval period.¹⁸ Despite numerous critiques of this theory, it is terribly attractive and has had enormous staying power.¹⁹ This is in part because it is so helpful to *most* Western historians – I include here Modern European historians and historians of the United States. The civilizing process makes the Middle Ages an uncomplicated foil against which modernity may be easily defined: the 'simple' Middle Ages gives way to complex and interdependent structures, the 'uninhibited' medieval man becomes the refined courtier, the 'childlike and pure' emotions of the Middle Ages are vanquished by modern internalized constraints.

This is the grand narrative that emotionology – which is about increasing restraints on the emotional lives of Americans – fits into very comfortably. But when it comes to the Middle Ages, we are left with a bleak picture. In the Middle Ages (says the narrative) there were no restraints on anyone except for a small and privileged elite. Some medievalists – Jean Delumeau is one – work comfortably within the grand narrative of the civilizing process. In Delumeau's view, there were no real emotional controls until the late Middle Ages, when the *contemptus*

¹⁸ N. Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. E. Jephcott (Oxford, 1994), p. 319.

¹⁹ The critical bibliography is cited in G. Schwerhoff, 'Zivilisationsprozeß und Geschichtswissenschaft. Norbert Elias' Forschungsparadigma in historischer Sicht', *Historische Zeitschrift* 266 (1998), pp. 561–606.

mundi of the monastery was (unfortunately) unleashed (through preaching) upon the world at large.²⁰ The *Annales* school, too, with its interest in irrational *mentalités*, blends into this same historiographical stream.²¹ Others of this ilk are evoked by Stuart Airlie elsewhere in this issue.

But many of us medievalists would like to challenge this narrative, and emotions study may turn out to be our best weapon in the fray.²² Already most of the articles in *Anger's Past* explicitly or implicitly modify the story. The point that they make – and that we *all* need to make – is that constraint as such is not, cannot be, the underpinning of time's forward march. Constraint is the great constant because culture is the great constant. But what *sorts* of constraints there have been, what kinds of emotional shapes they have demanded, and what outlets they have provided: those questions may indeed lead us to answers that (at last) end the strange term 'middle' ages and give meaning (indeed multiple meanings) to a period once dismissed as unworthy of a course in Western Civilization.*

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²⁰ J. Delumeau, *La peur en occident (XIVe–XVIIIe siècles). Une cité assiégée* (Paris, 1978) and *idem, Le péché et la peur. La culpabilisation en occident (XIIIe–XVIIIe siècles)* (Paris, 1983), in English as *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th–18th Centuries*, trans. E. Nicholson (New York, 1990).

²¹ See S. Clark, 'French Historians and Early Modern Popular Culture,' *Past and Present* 100 (1983), pp. 62–99.

²² In fact, Elias' main sources are books of manners, which (like modern advice manuals) are not the sort of sources that early medievalists have to hand. The challenge to Elias – in so far as it will be made by medievalists – is going to have to be made at the level of emotions, not of manners.

* I should like to express my gratitude to Catherine Cubitt for arranging this debate.

Download Citation | On Feb 26, 2003, Barbara H. Rosenwein published Writing without fear about early medieval emotions | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. It will be argued that emotions interacted with, and helped to communicate, a number of key themes in Albert's *Historia*, three of which are discussed here: crusader piety; Christian brotherhood; and power. At the same time, through a comparison with contemporaneous narratives of the First Crusade, it will be suggested that the emotional content of Albert's *Historia* is not without historical value, for it offers a window onto wider social and cultural conceptions of emotions in the 12th century. View. Show abstract. From Classical to Medieval. Four Issues for Medieval Philosophers. B. Augustine. Faith, Certainty, Divine Illumination. Historians mark off medieval civilization as starting with the downfall of the Roman Empire and ending with the founding of the Renaissance, roughly from the years 400-1500. This range of time itself falls into three distinct periods, each of which impacted developments within medieval philosophy. The first period is the early middle ages, from around 400-1000. Often called the "Dark Ages", it is characterized by difficult times in the aftermath of the Western Roman Empire's collapse, including localized rule, decreased trade, mass migration, and feudalism. "Writing without Fear about Early Medieval Emotions," *Early Medieval Europe* 10 (2001): 229-34. "Commentaire" to Eliana Magnani S.-Christen, "Le don au Moyen Age: Pratique sociale et representations: Perspectives de recherche," in *Bulletin du Centre d'Études médiévales - Auxerre* 4 (2000): 75-76. First delivered orally at Auxerre (France), 1 April 2000. "Emotional Change, Emotional Communities, and the Globalized World," *International Conference on Emotions in a Globalized World*, New York, United Nations, Feb. Writers need to know how to make readers feel emotion. There are techniques, tips, to create emotion in a reader, to make them feel while they read. I wrote an article on the importance of creating emotions in readers, but I've noticed that writers are looking for specifics on how to accomplish that. So, this article complements that first one, presents practical tips on how to stir the reader's emotions. Readers like to be touched, moved, by story. Readers can fear and feel joy and be excited and know grief. They can laugh and cry, shiver and rage. All from reading a story.