



The psychology of emotion and study of the medieval period

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‘What I am after is not hard and testable in the narrow empirical ways of a certain style of social science’ warns the legal historian W.I. Miller, a pioneer in the field of the history of emotion.¹ Miller is, in places, dismissive of psychology and the insights it has to offer, yet the psychology of emotion is a growing field and discoveries made in it can be illuminating for medievalists. What follows is an outline of three particular aspects of psychology of emotion and some suggestion of how these might be productive for thinking about emotions in texts of the medieval period.

Current psychological theories of emotion fall broadly into two groups: universalist theories or theories of basic emotion, and componential theories. Theories of basic emotion ultimately derive from Darwin.² Essentially they argue that the ‘basic emotions’ are common to all members of the human species across different cultures and times and are genetically transmitted.³ Advocates of componential theories maintain that emotion can be reduced to bundles of different elements. These elements belong to three distinct systems: the physiological or bodily, e.g. turning pale; the cognitive (in effect, thinking and reasoning), e.g. recognising an insult; and the expressive or behavioural, e.g. making a verbal challenge. The ways in which these elements combine to produce recognisable emotions are determined both by social context and by language, and are highly variable.⁴ In the 1980s this social constructionist position became dominant, and, in a weak version, remains so in anthropological and historical thinking about emotion.⁵

¹ W.I. Miller, *Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort and Violence* (Ithaca, NY, 1993), p. 133. See also W.I. Miller *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA, 1997).

² C. Darwin, *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals*, current edn (Chicago, IL, 1965).

³ K. Oatley and J. Jenkins, *Understanding Emotions* (Oxford, 1996) is the best introduction to the study of emotion in psychology. See here pp. 49–50.

⁴ A. Ortony and T.J. Turner, ‘What’s Basic about Basic Emotions?’ *Psychological review* 74 (1990), pp. 431–61. Oatley and Jenkins, *Understanding Emotions*, pp. 120–2 and references there.

⁵ See for example the essays in *The Social Construction of Emotions*, ed. R. Harré (Oxford, 1986).

Meanwhile, the theory of basic emotions has made a comeback through the influence of the new evolutionary psychology. This approach argues that emotions are based on genetically-transmitted mechanisms which have evolved to cope with situations encountered by primates for hundreds of generations.⁶ Basic emotions such as anger, disgust, happiness, surprise, sadness and fear, it is somewhat controversially suggested, produce facial expressions which are cross-culturally recognisable, and also cause other physiological symptoms of arousal: increased heart rate, sweating and so on, though these symptoms are not necessarily specific to individual emotions.⁷

The psychological study of the developmental aspects of emotion has gradually moved away from asserting that children's development represents the triumph of rationality over emotionality, or the learning of self-control through the development of a theory of mind ('if I were him I should not like that to be done to me, and therefore I should not do it myself'). Cross-cultural psychology suggests that this kind of cognitive-developmental theory is very much less relevant outside Western middle-class environments, and researchers now posit that emotion itself is a basis for moral and social behaviour.⁸ Emotion need no longer be opposed to rationality, but rather interacts with it.

Understanding emotion as working in tandem with rationality has enabled the identification of two key concepts: the cognitive appraisal and evaluation which produces the emotion, and the state of 'action readiness' which results from the emotion. Componential theorists see appraisal as a summing up of all the features the subject perceives within the situation: is this pleasant or unpleasant? Is it relevant to me? Is it important? Can I do anything about it? Such features are both culturally

⁶ R.M. Nesse, 'Evolutionary Explanations of Emotions', *Human Nature* 1 (1990), pp. 261–83; J. Tooby and L. Cosmides, 'The Past Explains the Present: Emotional Adaptations and the Structure of Ancestral Environments', *Ethology and Sociobiology* 11 (1990), pp. 375–424.

⁷ The classic account of cross-cultural identity of facial expressions is P. Ekman and W.V. Friesen, 'Constants across Culture in the Face and Emotion', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 17 (1971), pp. 124–9. P. Ekman and W.V. Friesen, 'A New Pan-Cultural Facial Expression of Emotion', *Motivation and Emotion* 10, 2 (1986), pp. 159–68 add contempt to the list of basic emotions; Ekman's theory is extensively critiqued by J.A. Russell, 'Is there Universal Recognition of Emotion from Facial Expression?' *Psychological Bulletin* 110 (1994), pp. 102–41. J. Cacioppo, G.C. Berntson, J.T. Larsen, K.M. Paehlmann, and T.A. Ito, 'The Psychophysiology of Emotion', in M. Lewis and J.M. Haviland-Jones (eds.), *Handbook of Emotions*, 2nd edn (New York, NY, 2000), pp. 173–91 suggest that arousal is positive or negative but not a distinctive indicator of specific emotions.

⁸ P. Rozin, L. Lowery, S. Imada and J. Haidt, 'The CAD Triad Hypothesis: A Mapping Between Three Moral Emotions (Contempt, Anger, Disgust) and Three Moral Codes (Community, Autonomy, Divinity)', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76 (1999), pp. 574–86. Here, p. 574, Rozin *et al.* take the concept of three moral codes from M. Shweder, N.C. Much, M. Mahapatra and L. Park, 'The "Big Three" of Morality (Autonomy, Community, Divinity) and the "Big Three" Explanations of Suffering', in A. Brandt and P. Rozin (eds.), *Morality and Health* (New York and London, 1997), pp. 119–69; N.H. Frijda, 'The Laws of Emotion', *American Psychologist* 43 (1988), pp. 349–58. Reprinted in J. Jenkins, K. Oatley and N. Stein (eds.), *Human Emotions* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 270–87.

and situationally variable. Basic theorists argue that the most important feature of the situation is its relevance for current goals: the maintenance of status or honour, desire for sexual activity and preservation of the self from physical harm, for example. Both types of theory recognise a state of 'action readiness': the emotion produces a preparedness to act, detectable fleetingly on a physiological level (as a facial expression, for example) and prioritises actions and responses from the culturally-available repertoire. Tears, for example, may be part of the repertoire available to males in certain cultures, but not in others: contrast the readiness with which King Arthur weeps in Arthurian romance with the fatal consequences for the malicious Skamkell in *Njáls saga*, killed for insinuating that the hero Gunnarr wept when he was ridden down by Skamkell's brother.⁹

Cross-cultural psychologists have recently begun to delineate the occurrences of two principal clusters of 'moral emotions', the shame-embarrassment-guilt triad and the 'hostility triad' of contempt, anger and disgust.¹⁰ Anger, in this formulation, is not simply an aggressive response to frustration in the achievement of a goal, but has evolved into a moral emotion, provoked by 'insults, transgressions and rights violations against the self or those close to the self'. Paul Rozin and colleagues have recently mapped the hostility triad onto three moral domains, delineated by ethics of autonomy, community and divinity, respectively. They find that offences against autonomy elicit anger, offences against community elicit contempt, while offences against divinity elicit disgust. Their mapping stimulates productive thinking about the emotional basis of social orders: 'the human moral world involves strong feelings as well as reasoning ... there are universal and culture-specific linkages between the affective and cognitive aspects of morality.'¹¹

How might these formulations of emotion – as involving physiological bases, cognitive processes, and experiential, and therefore culturally variable, systems – help us to identify and understand emotion in medieval culture? First, both types of theory accept that several basic emotions, notably disgust and anger, have somatic markers. Rozin has shown a strong cross-cultural consistency for the major elicitors of disgust: chiefly, food, body products, animals, contact with death and corpses, and violations of the exterior envelope of the body, exposure to which elicits retching and nausea. Other researchers have demonstrated the physiological bases for anger which cause the characteristic flushing

⁹ See for example T. Malory, *Works*, ed. E. Vinaver (Oxford, 1971), pp. 522–3, 685, 710; *Njáls saga*, ed. E.O. Sveinsson (Reykjavík, 1954), chs. 53–4.

¹⁰ See M. Lewis, 'Self-Conscious Emotions: Embarrassment, Pride, Shame, and Guilt', in Lewis and Haviland-Jones *et al.* (eds.), *Handbook of Emotions*, pp. 623–36, here p. 624. For contempt, anger and disgust see Rozin *et al.* 'The CAD Triad Hypothesis'.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 575, pp. 585–6.

noted in many texts.¹² Reference to somatic indices in historical or imaginative texts encourages readers to infer the presence of an emotion on the basis of our own experience of similar bodily changes. Perhaps attention to the bodily can allow us to approach a little closer to the 'real' emotion, or as Stuart Airlie puts it, the experience beyond emotional display as part of a symbolic and theatricalized communication system.¹³

Second, the concepts of appraisal and action readiness help to explain the ways in which emotion is embedded within the texts we scrutinise. Emotion does not occur without a proximate cause, and it results in some action; it often appears in the text to explain motivation: 'emotions arise out from the interaction of situational meanings and concerns'.¹⁴ Third, medievalists may learn much not just from constructing the history of a single emotion, but also from mapping co-occurrences and contrasts between different emotions: work on the hostility triad is suggestive in this regard.

The discussion which follows draws on imaginative rather than historical literature; as such, it does not refer to the real or the material in quite the way that Stuart Airlie advocates in this issue. While I do not wish to argue that heroic literature – *Beowulf* or the family sagas – is 'intimate' in the way that Catherine Cubitt means in her introduction, imaginative literature does permit the author access to the protagonists' interior processes, processes which are of course imagined, but not randomly so.¹⁵ Failing a large number of autobiographical texts from the early medieval period (though both Augustine and Guibert de Nogent suggest themselves for investigation), imaginative literature is a valuable source of information about medieval affect.

Terms for emotion in medieval writing can encode somatic descriptors: for example, OE *gebolgen*, *bolgenmod* and ON *þrunginn möði*, *þrútinn*, denoting 'swelling', 'bulging', the physiological effects accompanying anger. During their fight, both *Beowulf* and *Grendel* are characterised as *bolgenmod* or *gebolgen*, worked up to the pitch of anger necessary for sustained aggression and violence against another. To some extent the physiological symptoms of anger can be exaggerated or stylised, but they are none the less recognisable both to us and to the characters within the texts who are depicted as aware of normative standards.

¹² P. Rozin, J. Haidt, C.R. McCauley, 'Disgust', in Lewis and Haviland-Jones *et al.* (eds.) *Handbook of Emotions*, pp. 637–53; F.J. Elmadjian, M. Hope and E.T. Lamson, 'Excretion of E and NE in Various Emotional States', *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology* 17 (1957), pp. 608–20.

¹³ See Miller, *Humiliation*, p. 103; cf. S. Airlie in this volume and G. Althoff, 'Ira Regis: Prolegomena to a History of Royal Anger', in B. Rosenwein (ed.) *Anger's Past* (Ithaca, NY, 1998), pp. 59–74. See also my 'Diet, Defecation and the Devil: Disgust and the Pagan Past', in N. MacDonald (ed.), *Medieval Obscenities* (forthcoming).

¹⁴ Frijda, 'The Laws of Emotion' (1998), p. 274.

¹⁵ Cf. S.D. White, 'The Politics of Anger' in Rosenwein (ed.), *Anger's Past*, pp. 127–52; Miller, *Humiliation*, pp. 93–114.

In *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* the sons of Ragnarr learn of their father's ignominious death. Each son reacts differently: one, paring his nails with a knife, cuts his finger to the bone without showing pain; another squeezes the gaming-piece he is holding so hard that blood shoots out from under his fingernails. It is the eldest brother and chief strategist, the disabled Ivarr the Boneless, who shows the normal range of reactions: 'his colour was at times red, at times livid, and then he would suddenly become very pale, and he was so swollen that his skin was all bruised from the ferocity within his breast'. On hearing a report of the brothers' reactions, King Ella, who was responsible for Ragnarr's death, comments that Ivarr is the brother he most needs to fear. Ella reads Ivarr's emotion, correctly as it turns out, as predicting swift vengeance for his father; displaying the proper range of somatic indicators signals 'action readiness'. In *Fóstbræðra saga*, by contrast, the psychopathic Þorgeirr is described by the author as showing no affect whatsoever when he learns that his father has been killed. In a pseudo-learned passage, the author asserts that God hardened Þorgeirr's heart to give it courage and so it contains little blood: 'his face did not grow red because there was no anger running through his skin. Nor did he grow pale because no rage was held in his breast. Nor did he grow blue because there was no anger flowing through his bones.'¹⁶

Emotion episodes are embedded in a context where appraisal and action readiness are clearly identifiable. During Beowulf's fight with Grendel, the poet carefully stages the hero's appraisal of the situation. Beowulf intently watches the monster's *modus operandi*; witnessing the horrific death of Hondscioh creates in him the anger which is necessary to sustain violence.¹⁷ We may note how Hondscioh's murder is framed in terms of some primary elicitors of disgust: the violation of the body envelope, the references to body fluids, the ingestion of forbidden food-stuffs. Since he is not himself a habitually angry man (unlike Heremod elsewhere in the poem, who is inappropriately *bolgenmod*), Beowulf's aggressive behaviour needs to be elicited not only by immediate appraisal, but also to be sustained by the memory of a social act: Hroðgar's formal handing over of the hall to Beowulf, so that Grendel's attack becomes an intrusion into Beowulf's personal domain. Important, too, is Beowulf's earlier boast, a speech act which locks the fulfilment of his vow to cleanse Heorot into the discourse of honour and shame; memory of his *afenspræce* bolsters his aggressive energies during the fight. Action readiness is created both by immediate events and by the recollection of recent

¹⁶ Miller, *Humiliation*, pp. 101–8; *Beowulf*, ed. F.C. Klaeber 3rd edn. (Boston, MA, 1950), ll, 709, 723; *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, eds. G. Jónsson and B. Vilhjálmsson, 2 vols. (Reykjavík, 1943), I, 95–148, here pp. 137–8; *Fóstbræðra saga* in *Vestfirðinga sögur* eds. B.K. Þórolfsson and G. Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1943), ch. 2.

¹⁷ *Beowulf*, ed. Klaeber, ll. 734b–45. Cf. W. Davies's remarks about heroic anger in 'Anger and the Celtic Saint', Rosenwein ed. *Anger's Past*, pp. 191–202, especially p. 197.

actions; though it follows genetically-determined basic patterns, the occurrence of emotion is locally shaped by cultural and social norms.

The investigation of emotion clusters, the mapping of inter-relations between the self-conscious emotions and the hostile emotions, for example, could effectively delineate moral domains. In *Beowulf* the hostile emotions can be distinguished using the schema suggested by Rozin and colleagues. Anger is produced by an attack against the autonomy of the self, or upon persons or property very closely identified with the self: the retainer, Hondsioh; the hall, formally entrusted to Beowulf by Hroðgar; one's lord (the only killing Beowulf undertakes outside the monster fights is in revenge for the death of Hygelac); the dragon's attack on Beowulf's own hall. Disgust is produced by the graphic description of the behaviour of Grendel; as Izard writes, 'disgust may create a motivation to get rid of the object through attack and destruction'.¹⁸ Disgust, tellingly, is absent from the description of the dragon, who is understood as behaving as dragons will when robbed of their treasure. Contempt is evidenced in the speech Wiglaf directs at the ten cowards who have accepted their lord's gifts and then failed to render assistance at need. Wiglaf's personal autonomy has not been threatened; it is the violation of community ethics which impels him to employ the language of interpersonal rejection, consigning the wrongdoers to a social outgroup.¹⁹

Much more could be said about the parallel tracks along which the psychology of emotion and (literary-) historical investigation are running at present. For example, cross-cultural psychology has recently provided strong support for the contention that romantic love is near universal, and consequently was not invented in Provence in the twelfth century; psychologists of emotion still admit historical and literary texts as supporting evidence in a way that often betrays little awareness of the complex questions of representation and fictionality.²⁰ Yet narrative – fictional and historical – lies at the heart of the way in which we engage with emotion, whether as psychologists or as medievalists; as Oatley and Jenkins write: 'Conscious understanding of our emotions involves becoming more knowledgeable about the narratives that we and others tell about the self and its doings'.²¹

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¹⁸ C.F. Izard, *The Psychology of Emotions* (New York and London, 1991), p. 265.

¹⁹ *Beowulf*, ed. Klaeber, ll. 2501–08a (death of Hygelac); ll. 2550–1 (attack upon dragon); ll. 2864–91 (Wiglaf and cowards).

²⁰ Cf. W.R. Jankowiak and E.F. Fisher, 'A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Romantic Love', *Ethos* 31 (1992), pp. 149–55; Oatley and Jenkins, *Understanding Emotions*, pp. 55–8. For psychologists on emotion in literature see G. Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment* (Oxford, 1985) and Oatley and Jenkins, *Understanding Emotions*, pp. 20–1.

²¹ Oatley and Jenkins, *Understanding Emotions*, p. 373.