The history of the emotions: a debate

Introduction
Catherine Cubitt

That the history of the emotions is a rich seam for study is amply demonstrated by the contributions to Barbara Rosenwein’s collection of essays on the social uses of anger, reviewed by Guy Halsall in this issue (pp. 301–3). Halsall questions how far anger can be viewed as purely a social construction, thereby posing the basic question of the extent to which emotions are socially and culturally constructed, the basic premise of most of the authors in Anger’s Past. Of all the emotions, anger is perhaps the one for which the social and public functions are most strongly defined. Public expression of anger is a social tool which can be used to bring about desired changes in a person’s social environment. But what of more intimate emotions, such as love and grief? While grief shares a public role with anger, its mainsprings – the loss of attachment and bereavement – may be more constant and unchanging. Although the expression of grief may vary according to society and period, does its essence? When Einhard mourns for his wife, should the historian seek for the similarities between his emotions and ours or for the differences? These questions are raised particularly acutely in the case of parental love and mothering, a subject discussed by Pauline Stafford in this issue (pp. 257–71).

Historians of all periods face the question of the transcultural or unchanging nature of the emotions. What problems specifically face the historian of the early Middle Ages? The first and most pressing difficulty is the paucity of sources for the period, which is at its most pronounced with regard to everyday experience and private expression, the preferred territory of the historian of the emotions. An emphasis on the public function and social expression of emotion is perhaps inevitable when confronted with such near total silence on private feeling. Further, the

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sources which we have for both public and private feeling are usually deeply indebted to earlier texts and established topoi. While formulaic expression can be used to voice authentic feelings, the early medieval reliance upon second-hand words brings an additional layer of complexity to the already vexed question of the relationship between texts and actuality. Several authors in Rosenwein’s collection, most notably Paul Hyams, consider the depiction of the emotions in religious and moral texts. How far did such spiritual teaching shape an individual’s responses? Dhuoda’s *Handbook* bears the imprint of theological advice, but did her husband, Bernard, pay any attention to the demands of church teaching? The overwhelmingly ecclesiastical origins of early medieval sources makes the search for lay emotion particularly elusive, and it is clear that the norms for the laity and for the religious, particularly the intensively disciplined life of monks, diverged.

The lack of sources makes the task of uncovering change over time particularly difficult, and all too often early medieval historians have been tempted to write the history of the more obscure aspects of their period in terms of continuity and sameness, while relying upon disparate evidence from widely varying periods. Again, the limited and problematic nature of the sources creates difficulties – how should their silence upon certain issues be interpreted? There is a parallel here with the supposed rise in violence in the eleventh century, where historians have debated whether the greater record of violence in this period is a reflection of a change in the nature of the record or a change in the nature of society.

But the difficulties facing the historian of emotion in the early medieval period should not be allowed to outweigh the rewards. As Catherine Peyroux reminds us, ‘When we write histories of the past in which feeling is omitted, we implicitly disregard fundamental aspects of the terms on which people act and interact, and we thus deprive ourselves of important evidence for the framework of understanding in which our subjects conducted the business of their lives.’ Investigating emotion makes us question the assumptions we bring to early medieval texts – I myself have already presumed a distinction between public and private in the expression of feeling that many would question. Little and Davies show that monastic and saintly cursing was not associated in the medieval mind with anger, an assumption otherwise easily made. A number of authors uncover the intimate connection between anger and honour. A study of the expression of love would not only reveal changes in the nature of sexuality but also illuminate the social functions of friendship, another little researched but basic aspect of early medieval social relations. The emotions and their expression have always served to delineate gender difference (a subject only touched upon by Rosenwein

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in her conclusion) and the gendering of early medieval emotion will no doubt be a particularly fruitful field for study.

Barbara Rosenwein, Stuart Airlie, Mary Garrison and Carolyne Larrington consider these and other questions and put forward possible agendas for research.

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