

EMOTIONS IN MEDIEVAL ARTHURIAN LITERATURE

Body, Mind, Voice



Edited by Frank Brandsma, Carolyne Larrington and Corinne Saunders

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D. S. BREWER

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Introduction

FRANK BRANDSMA, CAROLYNE LARRINGTON
AND CORINNE SAUNDERS

Feeling the Fear

As Gawain rides towards the Green Chapel, the sound of someone grinding a huge axe rings through the silent snowy landscape and signals that this is where he may expect to be beheaded. The Green Knight welcomes him, praises him for keeping his promise to receive in his turn the blow he dealt his opponent a year ago in Arthur's court, yet also urges Gawain not to struggle or argue. With a wisecrack – once *his* head is off he can't restore it – the hero promises to stand still and bares his neck: 'And lette as he noȝt dutte / For drede he wolde not dare' (He behaved as if he did not fear at all, he would not cower for dread).¹ Gawain, it is suggested, dreads the axe, even if he will not show it. As the Green Knight swings the huge blade, Gawain sees it coming:

Bot Gawayn on þat giserne glyfte hym bysyde,
As hit com glydande adoun on glode hym to schende,
And schranke a lytel with þe schulderes for þe scharp yrne.
(ll. 2265–7)

(But Gawain glanced sideways at the axe
As it came hurtling down in a flash to shatter him,
And he shrank a little with his shoulders from the sharp edge.)

And who wouldn't shrink from a blow like this? Even today, a modern reader can share Gawain's anxiety, the tension in the shoulders, and perhaps even his instinctive movement. The text builds up the suspense in this scene in a simple yet very effective way, unobtrusively presenting the emotions of the hero, moving the audience from feeling curious about what will happen next to sharing Gawain's fear.

¹ All translations are the editors'. All citations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are from the edition in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* 'Pearl', 'Cleanness', 'Patience', 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', ed. M. Andrew and R. Waldron, 5th edn (Exeter, 2007). Here ll. 2257–8.

When this story is told to children, they very much enjoy the scarieness of the beheading. It is never hard to find a volunteer Gawain when the beheading scene (two near misses and one soft touch) is enacted in the classroom; in one session, the tale-teller actually spent quite some time after the performance 'beheading' a whole line of young spectators, all of whom wanted to see and feel the axe swooshing towards their necks, just like Gawain. The emotions in play with the children (and their play-emotions) were easy to recognize and study: both empathy and aesthetic responses to terror were at stake. To explore medieval emotional responses to the scene of Gawain's near-beheading is much more complicated. For, as this book will demonstrate time and again, we have only the text to work with. The only available resources for discovering and understanding emotions of the past are the texts (and images) that have come down to us. Working with these sources, in this book specifically Arthurian romances, raises all kinds of issues: of methodology, of medieval conceptions of and terminology for feelings, of the gap between modern and medieval emotional regimes and communities, of the constructed nature of the emotions in literary texts, to name just a few of the obvious challenges. Before turning to medieval literature within its culture, however, we need to recognise the larger philosophical formulations of emotion that have developed since the medieval period.

Emotion and Philosophy

How do we express the feeling of a feeling? What is emotion? How do mind, body and affect connect? Philosophers have returned to such questions again and again over centuries, with some vastly different conclusions; but they have often focused on the opposition of mind and body, stated memorably by Thomas Hardy: 'Why should a man's mind have been thrown into such close, sad, sensational, inexplicable relations with such a precarious object as his own body!'² Hardy's question makes clear how far such Cartesian dualism is fuelled by ancient notions of the body as fragile, flawed and unstable, though Descartes was unforgiving in his view of earlier theories. Descartes's theory of the emotions, expounded in his late treatise *Les Passions de l'âme* (1649), laid the ground for much twentieth-century philosophy and psychology of the emotions. Emotions, Descartes argued, were felt in the mind rather than the heart: they had physical causes, occurring as a result of agitation of the 'animal' (lower or material) spirits, but were *felt* in the soul, the term used by Descartes to signify the mind (consciousness), and perceived precisely at the point where he imagined the soul as joined to the body, the 'pineal

² *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. M. Millgate (London, 1984), p. 265.

gland'.³ Emotions were contingent, dependent on sensory circumstances; they had physical causes, and they led to physical effects, but the experience of the emotions was mental, a private event. Emotions and sensations were as much aspects of mental experience as volitions – mental actions. Descartes's theory is considerably more complex than Cartesian caricatures of the 'mindful body' or body as machine suggest – but it also clearly reifies the mind–body distinction. These ideas underpinned later explorations of emotion. Spinoza extended Descartes's naturalistic emphasis in his exploration of human psychology, placing 'affects' or emotions, principally desire, joy and pain, as both modifications of the body and the ideas of such modifications.⁴ Locke adopted Descartes's notions of sensation and reflection in the mind. Hume emphasised the causal connections of emotions and distinguished between impressions and ideas of emotions: the mind was a perceiver or observer.⁵ The idea of contingency – the link between physical cause and manifestation – was most famously taken up by the nineteenth-century psychologist William James, who opposed the Cartesian mind–body split in identifying emotions as perceptions of bodily processes; assessments of physical experience:

Our natural way of thinking about these standard emotions is that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression. My thesis on the contrary is that *the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion.*⁶

Since James, Descartes's conception of emotion as mental event has been variously questioned and refined, most often with a continuing emphasis on mind. Thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum have focused on the cognitive aspects of emotions: her approach reiterates Cartesian mind–body dualism, but opposes the traditional contrast drawn between emotions

³ R. Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1985), I: 325–404; see especially Part 1, articles 25–9 on feeling in the soul, and articles 30–32 on the pineal gland.

⁴ B. Spinoza, *Ethics* (1677), ed. and trans. G. H. R. Parkinson, Oxford Philosophical Texts (Oxford, 2000), part 3, 'On the Origin and Nature of the Affects'.

⁵ J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), ed. P. Nidditch, in *The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke* (Oxford, 1975): see especially Book 2, chapters 1–7, on simple ideas, exploring sensation and reflection, and chapters 9–11, on faculties of the mind; D. Hume, 'An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding', in *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1777), ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1975): see especially Part 2; this work revises *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1978): see especially Book 2 on the passions. Hume also published this material separately as one of four Dissertations, 'Of the Passions' (1757).

⁶ W. James, 'What is an emotion?', *Mind* 9 (1884), 188–205, at pp. 189–90 (emphasis in the original).

and rational thoughts, emphasising the role of judgement or appraisal in emotions.⁷ This perspective finds its opposite in the behaviourist understanding of emotions as purely bodily, made up of stimuli and learned response.

Recent philosophy, drawing on the phenomenological approaches of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, has to some extent turned back to the work of James, to develop his radical emphasis on the bodiliness of emotions:

The structure of our relationship with the world cannot be adequately conveyed in terms of any account that imposes a clear boundary between self and non-self or bodily and non-bodily upon all experience.⁸

Philosophers have drawn on contemporary neuroscience to employ the idea of the 'affect program', the neural circuit that initiates emotional response. The term 'affect' brings back the body: it signals an instinctual reaction to some kind of stimulation before cognitive processes produce a more complex emotion.⁹ Affect may, of course, be produced through cognitive processes, or may stimulate cognition that produces further affect. Affects, emotional and visceral concerns, have come to be seen as crucial in shaping human responses. The writing of Gilles Deleuze, particularly his work with Félix Guattari, has promoted this 'affective turn': Deleuze takes up and develops Spinoza's concept of affects, particularly as elaborated in Henri Bergson's work on the relation of body and spirit, which emphasised the physical quality of affection. For Deleuze, the distinction between affect and emotion becomes crucial in marking the corporeal, instinctive aspects of the former, which is dependent on an individual's particular place in space and time: the concatenation of social and cultural influences on individual experience.¹⁰

⁷ See M. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2001). Nussbaum takes a long cultural perspective, spanning disciplines from classical and medieval philosophy to contemporary neuroscience, and draws on a wide range of literary and artistic examples to argue for the ethical power of emotions, particularly compassion and love, as 'intelligent responses to the perception of value' (p. 1).

⁸ M. Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being: Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality* (Oxford, 2008), p. 94. The phenomenological approach is underpinned by the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty: see especially Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London, 1962); see also P. Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford, 2000), and R. C. Solomon, *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life* (Indianapolis, 1993).

⁹ Affect program theory is developed by P. Griffiths, *What Emotions Really Are: The Problem of Psychological Categories* (Chicago, 1997); see also Griffiths, 'Is emotion a natural kind?', in *Thinking about Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotions*, ed. R. C. Solomon (Oxford, 2004), pp. 233–49.

¹⁰ See G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi, vol. 2 (Minneapolis, 1987; first published as *Mille plateaux, capitalisme et schizophrénie*, vol. 2 [Paris, 1980]), and H. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. Scott Palmer, Library of Philosophy (London and New York, 1911), first published as *Matière et mémoire* (Paris, 1896).

Especially striking are the recent theories of cognitive neuroscientists, in particular, Antonio Damasio, who has argued that emotion is essential to cognition and moral judgement, and that brain and body are closely and inextricably linked.¹¹ Whereas cognition – non-emotional processes of memory, perception, action, attention, problem-solving – was traditionally the focus of neuroscience, affect has more recently come to the fore. Until quite recently, emotion was associated with the lower neural strata of the brain, seen as primitive and non-cognitive, but, while the subcortical parts of the brain are indeed involved in emotion, it is now known that the situation is more complex, and that emotional and cognitive circuits work together. Emotions can be stimulated by sensory experience or by the flow of mental images in the memory. This leads in turn to chemical changes in the brain systems, sending commands to other parts of the brain and to the body, both through the bloodstream and through neuron pathways, leading to feelings and to the consciousness of them, the feeling of a feeling. Damasio looks back to James to argue that the body is the theatre of the emotions – but to add that the brain also plays a key role:

Regardless of the mechanism by which emotions are induced, the body is the main stage for emotions, either directly or via its representation in somatosensory structures of the brain.¹²

Though Damasio's notion of 'Descartes's error' is reductive, his theory is crucially different from Descartes's notion of emotions as private mental events. Most exciting is Damasio's exploration of emotion – body and brain – as enabling cognition and playing a key role in rational/intellective processes – a radical new idea of the embodied mind:

[T]he comprehensive understanding of the human mind requires an organismic perspective ... not only must the mind move from a nonphysical cogitum to the realm of biological tissue, but it must also be related to a whole organism possessed of integrated body proper and brain and fully interactive with a physical and social environment.¹³

Research in neuroscience such as Damasio's is beginning to show sound physiological bases for emotional reactions: for example, the possible existence of 'mirror cells' in the brain, which react not only to directly experienced emotional triggers but also to representations of emotional reactions.

¹¹ See A. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness* (London, 2000).

¹² Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, p. 287.

¹³ A. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York, 1994; repr. London, 2006), p. 252. The book in fact scarcely mentions Descartes, but is written against the notion of a simplistic mind-body split.

Medieval thought offers remarkable parallels to contemporary theories, parallels that are only beginning to be explored, as Saunders' chapter in this book makes clear. The theory of the four humours current in the Middle Ages underpins a concept of a mind–body continuum that resonates with current conceptions of the embodied mind. Within the fallen world, emotion was both a bodily passion and a mental experience, and affect was understood to play a significant role in thought, moral judgement, intention and the shaping of the self. The interrelation of voice, mind and body was recognized and explored long ago, within the very different thought-world of the Middle Ages. These three conceptual domains have informed and structured the chapters that follow.

The Affective Turn in Medieval Studies

With the work of medieval historians such as Barbara Rosenwein, Piroska Nagy and others, the study of medieval societies has followed the 'affective turn' which had already become apparent in wider Western cultural contexts.¹⁴ Rosenwein coined the influential term 'emotional communities' to describe 'groups in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value – or devalue – the same or related emotions'.¹⁵ Rosenwein's test cases, drawn from the sixth and seventh centuries, were predicated on the idea of 'textual communities', evidenced through individual dossiers of materials comprising 'conciliar legislation, charters, hagiography, letters, histories, and chronicles'.¹⁶ Rosenwein fully acknowledges that 'texts may be insincere, make things up, mislead and even lie' (p. 28), but argues that emotion is always a matter of interpretation, by the person who is feeling and by the one observing.¹⁷ Nevertheless, some degree of distrust in the 'made-upness' of literary texts remains among medieval historians. Although historians have often made use of literary texts in their investigation of emotion, they have also tended to regard the presentation of emotion in highly fictional texts with suspicion, as bearing an exaggerated – or at least unverifiable – relation to actual historical behaviours.¹⁸ And it is certainly true that literary texts complicate our understanding of medieval emotions at the same time

¹⁴ See, for example, B. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY, 2007), *Le sujet des émotions au moyen âge*, ed. P. Nagy and D. Boquet (Paris, 2009), *La chair des émotions, Médiévales* 61, ed. D. Boquet, P. Nagy and L. Moulinier-Brogi (2011), and, dealing with the eighteenth century and later, W. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2001).

¹⁵ Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities*, p. 2.

¹⁶ Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities*, p. 26.

¹⁷ Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities*, pp. 27–8; quotation from p. 28.

¹⁸ See, for example, *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages*, ed. B. Rosenwein (Ithaca, NY, 1998) and special issue of the journal *Early Medieval Europe* 10 (2001).

as they mediate emotion in very different ways from non-literary texts. In particular, the genre of romance attends closely to the private and the individual, rather than the public and political, subject matter of epic and *chanson de geste*. Literary texts draw attention to normative behaviours, often modelling appropriate reactions within the text to guide the audiences' responses, and they comment on bizarre or inappropriate reactions. In the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, for example, the fictive 'Sir John' visits the exotic island of Dodyn in the Far East, where, when a man seems to be on the point of death, his family kill him, and then:

And after that thei choppen all the body in smale peces and preyen alle his frendes to comen and eten of him that is ded ... And alle tho that ben of his kyn or pretenden hem to ben his frendes, and thei come not to that feste, thei ben repreued for eueremore and schamed and maken gret doel, for neuere after schulle thei be holden as frendes.¹⁹

(And after that they chop the body all into little pieces, and invite all his friends to come and eat the dead man ... And all those of his kindred or who claim to be his friends, if they do not come to that feast, they are disgraced for evermore and are shamed, and they who were not there to eat him, are greatly disgraced, and they lament a great deal, for never again afterward shall they be regarded as friends.)

This behaviour, the social context, the consequences for those who fail to participate in the normative ritual conform to very different norms from those current in medieval western Europe; the narrative problematizes, but also relativizes, human feelings and actions. The Mandeville-narrative in part takes its cue from the accounts of Franciscan travellers to the Far East, such as Odoric of Pordenone, and from the encyclopaedic writings of Vincent of Beauvais, but at the same time the author gestures at European norms by inventing a systematically converse praxis. For, through the cannibal funeral feast, the dead man's family celebrate his life and invite his friends to participate in the mourning process; to miss the funeral feast is as shameful as failing to do due honour to the dead in Western culture, an observation that the Mandeville-author adds to the ethnography of Odoric of Pordenone at this point.

Literature, then, if read with appropriate methodological orientations, can tell us much about emotional norms within different medieval societies at different times: the courtly, the learned, the bourgeois, from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, and all across Europe, participate in ever-changing, intersecting and differentiated emotional communities. Literary texts, in particular romance texts, not only represented characters as experiencing emotion and reacting emotionally to the behaviour of others within the text, but they also, intentionally, evoked and played upon emotion in the audiences who heard and saw them performed or

¹⁹ *Mandeville's Travels*, ed. M. C. Seymour (Oxford, 1967), pp. 146–7.

read. The so-called ‘basic emotions’ of anger, disgust, happiness, fear and surprise, the events and perceptions that elicit them, the somatic responses and the behaviour that results from them, the social contexts which allow us to read and interpret them, are all well evidenced in romance and other literary texts. And a whole range of subtler emotions such as resentment, *Schadenfreude*, vicarious shame, or nostalgia may also be delineated or suggested in literary contexts, more often perhaps than in other kinds of documentary source.

Arthurian Literature and the Comparative Study of Emotion

As early as Ælred of Rievaulx, stories about King Arthur were closely associated with emotional responses in their audience. Ælred’s *Speculum caritatis* was written five or so years before Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, the first surviving biography of Arthur, appeared. In Book II.17, Ælred notes how the hardships of attractive and admirable characters (*amabilis ... mirabilis*) in tragedy or epic can move the audience to the point of weeping, though this response is not to be equated with a genuinely felt love for the fictitious character (*hinc fabulosum illum*).²⁰ This discussion leads into the famous anecdote in which the novice whom Ælred is addressing admits that he too remembers having been moved to the point of tears (*memini me nonnunquam usque ad effusionem lacrymarum fuisse permotum*) by stories of King Arthur.²¹

Arthurian literature, then, in its fixed points of love and loss, its emphasis on enchantment and the supernatural, and its emotional extremes, offers a remarkably fruitful corpus for the study of medieval emotion in literature; the stories of Arthur, his queen and his knights are transmitted and translated across the major European languages, offering unparalleled opportunities for comparison and contrast, for variation and local innovation, and for reconfiguration of emotional behaviours and responses, both within texts and on the part of audiences. Emotion, as Andrew Lynch notes, is not a medieval word; medieval languages map the domain through such terms such as ‘felyng’ or through precise words for particular emotional experiences. ‘What were the consequences, for instance, of having *Middle English* feelings, as distinct from Anglo-Norman, Welsh, French or Latin ones?’, asks Sarah McNamer in a recent essay, a question which this book seeks to unpack in a range of Arthurian contexts.²² Which are the words that mediate emotions in the languages

²⁰ Ælred of Rievaulx, *Speculum caritatis*, PL 195, cols. 565B–565C.

²¹ See J. Tahkokallio, ‘Fables of King Arthur: Ælred of Rievaulx and Secular Pastimes’, *Mirator* 9.1 (2008), 19–35, for insightful discussion into Ælred’s arguments here.

²² S. McNamer, ‘Feeling’, in *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, ed. P. Strohm (Oxford, 2007), pp. 241–57, at p. 248. See also McNamer’s book *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia, 2009).