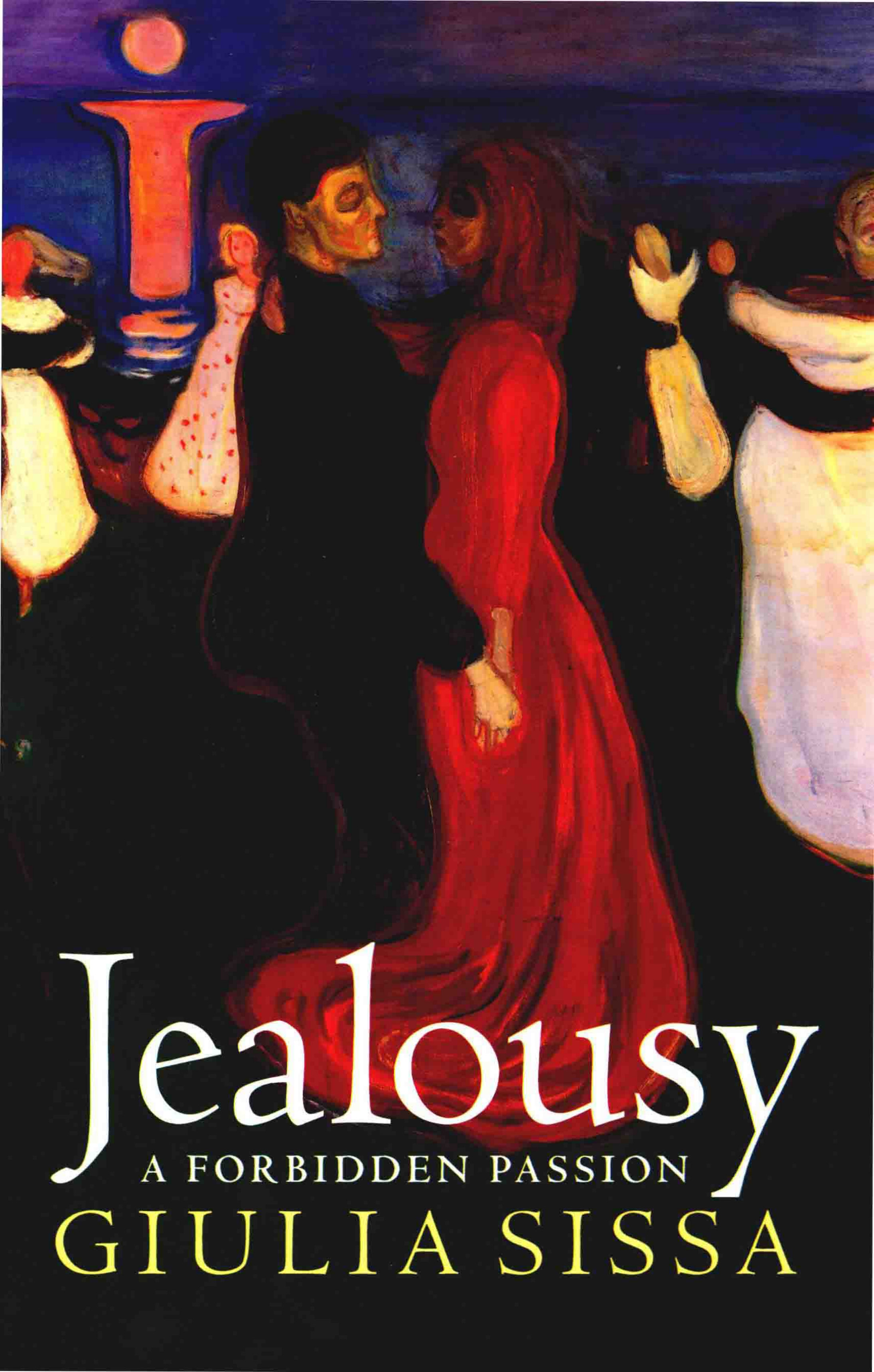

Jealousy

A FORBIDDEN PASSION

GIULIA SISSA

'Forget self-help books. With her passionate and altogether compelling defence of erotic anger as the lifeblood of amorous relationships, Sissa rescues jealousy from the moralists, the philosophers, and an industry devoted to amplifying shame in the guise of therapy. Giving us much more than a history of jealousy, Sissa enlarges the lover's discourse with her capacious intelligence.'

BROOKE HOLMES, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

Amorous jealousy is not a monster, as Shakespeare's venomous Iago claims. It is neither prickly and bitter fancy nor a cruel and mean passion, nor yet a symptom of feeble self-esteem. All those who have experienced its wounds are well aware that it is not callous, nasty, delusional and ridiculous. It is just painful.

Yet for centuries moralists have poured scorn and contempt on a feeling that, in their view, we should fight in every possible way. It is allegedly a disease to be treated, a moral vice to be eradicated, an ugly, pre-modern, illiberal, proprietary emotion to be overcome. Above all, no one should ever admit to being jealous.

So should we silence this embarrassing sentiment? Or should we, like the heroines of Greek tragedy, see it as a fundamental human demand for reciprocity in love? By examining its cultural history from the ancient Greeks to La Rochefoucauld, Hobbes, Kant, Stendhal, Freud, Beauvoir, Sartre and Lacan, this book demonstrates how jealousy, far from being a 'green-eyed' fiend, reveals the intense and apprehensive nature of all erotic love, which is the desire to be desired.

We should never be ashamed to love.

GIULIA SISSA is Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Classics at UCLA. Among her many books are *Greek Virginity*, *The Daily Life of the Greek Gods* (with Marcel Detienne) and *Sex and Sensuality in the Ancient World.*

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JEALOUSY

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INTRODUCTION

I am Beside Myself with Anger...

Love gives us pleasure. Love makes us suffer. What turns exaltation into distress, trust into anguish, serenity into despair, is very often jealousy.

A sullen and sorrowful fantasy; a cruel and petty passion; the confession of a secret indignity; a forced feeling of how little one is worth; the agony of an indigent and miserly creature who is afraid to lack; a symptom which betrays a distrust in one's own merit and reveals the superiority of a rival; an anxiety which usually hastens the very evil it dreads; an emotion so base that it has to be hidden; a foolish pride, a feeble love, a wicked heart and a ludicrous bourgeois absurdity; a prejudice created by education and enhanced through habit; a pathology of the imagination; the projection of an unconscious penchant for infidelity; repressed homosexual urges converted into paranoia; a failing phallus, problematic narcissism, deep self-hatred, poor self-esteem, insecurity, envy.

Blame is unleashed. Contempt roams free. Laughter resounds. No one would boast of being jealous. 'Pride, like other passions', claims François de La Rochefoucauld in one of his famous *Maxims*, 'has peculiarities of its own; while we are jealous, we feel ashamed to confess our jealousy, but when it is past we are proud of it and our capacity to feel it.'[1]

That says it all.

How many of us, during the course of our lives, could swear to never having experienced such shame? I, for one, must plead guilty. It is terrifying to call myself jealous. To the extreme numbness which comes upon you when a love eludes you and a life together disintegrates, jealousy adds the burden of humiliation. All the connections, familiar and unnoticed, which have bound together the habits and the hours suddenly dissolve. All the mundane small gestures of everyday intimacy remain, suddenly, in suspense. And even if this love was more of an ephemeral liaison than a common life, that does not prevent us from being thrown into disarray. Lies destroy confidence. The more we are surprised, the more we suffer. Our material, social or professional conditions may not change dramatically – that much we know – yet nothing will ever be the same as it once was. There will be nothing more. And, in addition to nothingness – the shame.

I have known this shame. In the midst of the anguish, however, I also felt a strong sentiment of injustice. Why should the victim (for such one is) of an infidelity also have to bow down before this additional suffering? Whether he or she turns, in search of consolation, to philosophy or appeals to the various therapies of the soul, anyone who admits to being jealous will be very ill-received. The repertoire of available ideas is monotonous. The great pontiffs of the social sciences, of moral philosophy, of political theory and of psychology compete in speaking ill of amorous jealousy. It comes as no surprise that one hides, blushes, denies and proclaims with one voice: Jealous? What, me? Never!

I wanted to rebel against this nonsense. I wanted not only not to be silent, to attenuate or to embellish my jealousy but to recognize it for what it is – without euphemisms, without denials, without any kind of kitsch Stoicism. And I wanted to think jealousy historically. What, I asked myself, has happened to our experience of love that we have come to be ashamed to admit to what is, above all, a form of suffering? Has it always been improper to assert one's erotic dignity?

Duelling is no more, and crimes of honour have been outlawed. Adultery is no longer the end of the world, seduction is practised openly and desire circulates widely. We enter freely into erotic contracts. All of this is marvellous. But, in this casual and plural euphoria, the jealous – and, above all, jealous women – are alone. The disapproval once attached to sex has now been transferred to love. Love is a desire for reciprocity, in the singular. Love is the desire for desire. Love is therefore jealousy – but you must not say so.

Jealousy is a forbidden passion.

It has not always been so. It has become so. I have, therefore, dared to attempt what the great eighteenth-century philosopher Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, had intended to do – had begun but never finished – namely to write a history of jealousy.[2] In doing so I discovered a curious fact. The ignominy which moralists of all stripes have attributed to the emotion itself is, on reflection, the predictable response to a massive cultural repression. We are ashamed only because we are made to feel so. We are afraid to look bad because we have been intimidated. We are afraid of ridicule because we have been ridiculed. We conceal our feelings because we lack the strength to suffer cruel comments, condescending advice or knowing smiles. Shame is a social passion.

Like all emotions, whose cultural subtleties we understand better and better, jealousy calls for careful thought. I'm not the first to become interested in it. Far from it. The philosophical and literary representations of jealousy are both immensely rich and very ancient. If we look at jealousy from the perspective of the seventeenth century we will discover that this emotion, for which La Rochefoucauld offers a brilliantly condensed description, is characterized by an altogether peculiar feature. On the one hand, unlike other states of mind such as courage or emulation, about which one is eager to brag, jealousy is a source of embarrassment, which demands discretion. 'We are ashamed to confess [*avouer*] that we are jealous', he wrote. The difficulty with this confession depends upon social perception. Of this La Rochefoucauld was well aware. 'The reason why the pangs of shame and jealousy are so bitter', he noted, 'is that vanity cannot help us to bear them.'[3] Later, Stendhal echoes this maxim and adds: 'to let oneself be seen to harbour a great unsatisfied desire is to allow oneself to be seen as inferior, an impossible thing in France, except for those who are beneath contempt, and it is to expose yourself to all manner of mockery.'[4] Vanity, for Stendhal, was a French national passion. Self-love precedes love. The shame of jealousy silences us.

And yet, on the other hand, unlike emotions such as envy which are always indecent, jealousy makes you talkative – when we remember a bygone experience or envision hypothetical situations. Inadmissible in the present, jealousy becomes praiseworthy, even honourable, in the past and in the conditional. Ignominious and respectable, abject and heroic, a shameful defeat and a surge of dignity. The experience of those who feel jealous changes over time and, above all, in the very expression of their feelings. It is unspeakable when it occurs, yet commendable from a distance. That is its paradox. And this paradox invites historical reflection.

Jealousy can be a triumph. There was a time when a self-respecting person, especially a woman, was expected to take pride in responding to amorous infidelity. The situation was the same – the loss, real or feared, of the singular desire of a beloved to another person – but the framing of the affect, the form it took in both thought and language, was entirely different. Jealousy was erotic anger.

What occurs is an injury: there is a breakdown, one feels disappointed, betrayed, humiliated, dishonoured, abandoned and derelict, but one takes the liberty to admit it and has the courage to speak it loud and clear. Multiple emotions concur in this complex state of mind: the pain of suffering a slight; the pleasure of planning a vengeance; the eagerness to discuss the injustice; the sympathy of all onlookers. This is how it was in ancient Greece. And this amounts to what the ancient Greeks understood as anger (*orgê*). Eros made that anger all the more excruciating. We will not start, therefore, from the premise that jealousy, being akin to envy and emulation, is invariably felt as a disadvantage in an unwanted competition and that sexual or romantic jealousy are merely specific forms of that pre-defined emotion, which is familiar to us.[5] We will look at a situation, and at the affective experience of that situation, in its cultural context. This will demonstrate that anger is what we happen to call 'jealousy'.

A history of amorous jealousy is a history of anger.

Anger was the unbound, dramatic, resounding passion of jealous women *à l'antique*. Grandiose and fully acknowledged, this passion was also noble, worthy of goddesses, warriors and queens. To be able to see this, we have to reread the classics, in Jacques Lacan's words, without 'blinders'. In ancient Greece, he wrote, women 'had a role that is veiled for us, but that is nevertheless eminently theirs in love: quite simply the active role. The difference between the woman of Antiquity and the modern woman is that the Ancient woman demanded her due – she attacked men.'[6] The woman he probably had in mind, the woman who casts aside every social mask, and destroys everything for a man who was everything for her, is Medea.[7]

Medea will take us to ancient Greece.

There we shall see the richness of a thought which values the expression and the recognition of pain. Anaesthesia, Aristotle tells us, is stupid, cowardly and fit only for slaves. Those who refuse to be covered in mud know how to become angry when it is right and necessary. Before Medea turns her anger on her own children, everyone sides with her as the aggrieved wife. We will have to wait until the Stoics before this passion is transformed into something horrifying, monstrous and inexcusable. In the hands of the Roman Stoic philosopher and playwright Seneca, Medea's story becomes one of simple cruelty. Medea herself is reduced to nothing more than a furious and reptilian, jubilant and cloying creature. The tragedy sets before our eyes only the caricature of failed wisdom. Centuries later, Pierre Corneille's seventeenth-century version offers up a Medea who, although similarly 'all wicked', is yet capable of attracting the sympathy of a Christian audience. She has been so oppressed, and her just wrath is so eloquent, that it is easy to grasp her reasons. Nonchalant and insensitive, Jason couldn't care less. Although he doesn't have the last word, he does give voice to a new sensibility, one which will no longer understand erotic anger.

The jealousy of the moderns becomes something else. Competition with a rival acquires more importance. The nature of anger changes radically. Exclusive attachment relies, in the words of Denis Diderot, on the assumption 'that a being which feels, thinks and is free, may be the property of another being like himself.'[8] Jealousy now becomes an agonistic confrontation which provokes an automatic reaction of anger, whose effectiveness remains doubtful and whose claims are abusive. 'Delicate lovers', as Diderot says, 'are afraid to admit it.'[9] In the euphoria of the Enlightenment, French philosophers multiply their condemnations, of which we are the heirs. Immanuel Kant came up with the argument, now familiar, yet absurd, that all erotic relationships are the mutual use of sexual organs and faculties, and consequently that they transform people into things. An object of desire is therefore only an object/thing, ready for use, destined for exchange, available on the market, liable to be acquired, owned and put to work. The idea of 'sexual object' is one of the most compelling premises for our intolerance of jealousy.

Marxism is responsible for the subsequent consecration of the analogy between the possession of a woman and private property. It is a thesis which, although Jean-Paul Sartre rejected it, became for Simone de Beauvoir a guiding principle of feminist thought.[10] The 'objectification' of women has since become canonical, to the degree that it crops up regularly in the daily press. The 'hatred of the bourgeois' inspires the denigration of jealousy. The bourgeoisie are accused of having turned love into a property transaction. This social connotation is particularly damning. Not many people have ever been proud of being called 'bourgeois'. Greed, narrow-mindedness, conventionality and boredom: the bourgeoisie conjures up images of all these unsavoury attitudes. It is unsophisticated, distasteful, and – capital sin – laughable. So is jealousy.

The modern critic of amorous jealousy re-enacts, ironically, a very old aristocratic scorn. As the marquise de Rétel, in Charles Duclos' *Considerations on the Manners of the Present Age* of 1752, jokingly observes, 'We are not as jealous at Court as we are in the City. Jealousy is no more than a ludicrous bourgeois absurdity [*un ridicule bourgeois*].'[11] The imaginary noblemen of Diderot's *The Indiscreet Jewels* share the same uncharitable views. The desire for reciprocity in the singular seems to be worthy of a money-seeking parvenu underclass. And yet erotic anger is actually very much part of aristocratic sensibilities. At the very beginning of Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' epistolary novel *Dangerous Liaisons*, Mme de Merteuil announces to M de Valmont that her tenured lover is about to marry a young woman. 'I am in a rage...,' she writes. 'But I calm myself and the hope of vengeance soothes my mind.'[12] It is this furious ire (*fureur*) that sets in motion the intrigue of disingenuous adultery, corrupted innocence and self-serving strategies that fill this unabashedly unromantic romance. The marquise de Merteuil and the vicomte de Valmont are the paradigm of cerebral libertinage – yet they act because Isabelle cannot endure a highly predictable slight, her beloved's defection to a younger woman. Has she fallen prey to *ridicule bourgeois*? Not so simple. Laclos readily recognizes amorous susceptibility when he claims that 'jealousy is born out of the love of beauty'.[13] In the same vein, Montesquieu reflects that 'Love wants to receive as much as it gives; it is the most personal of all interests. It is there that one compares, that one counts, that vanity mistrusts and is never adequately reassured.'[14] Intelligence and anxiety go together. The nobility know how masterfully to manoeuvre between infidelity and jealousy, passion and calculus, pride and revenge, but they smother those frightfully common bourgeois with an imaginary disease. And we democratic moderns have followed in their footsteps. It has come to be assumed that the man who makes money and accumulates goods has also to be someone who buys women. We confuse singularity with property.[15]

What a misapprehension! What in fact we desire when we desire is not to possess another person but to arouse that person's *desire* for us. We try to become the *object of* their sexual interest and/or their profound amorous attention. It is reciprocity that makes recognition, gratitude and erotic dignity possible. From Euripides to Stendhal, from Sappho to Proust, from Ovid to Isabelle de Merteuil or Catherine Millet, it is literature and psychoanalysis – more than philosophy – which has taught us these simple truths, which we experience in every way in our ordinary love lives. We expect to be preferred by whomsoever our desire fastens itself upon, even if only partially or briefly. We do not like being treated like an interchangeable, meaningless, replaceable presence. The unfaithful may be jealous. The wives of polygamous husbands, whatever they may say, comply with a prohibition against reciprocity. And even contemporary individuals who form free, contingent, polyamorous relationships are not necessarily immune from the revelation of unforeseen vulnerability. Pleasure for all is great, as long as it is really for all.

There are a few domains in which love appears to be legitimately jealous. Freudian psychoanalysis has opened up a heuristic perspective on normal jealousy. French phenomenology, namely Jean-Luc Marion, invites us to think that jealousy is nothing but daringly enduring love, faithful to itself.[16] Jealousy also finds favour in the eyes of evolutionary biologists, who are now reconsidering the previously shared hypothesis that women are allegedly jealous of their partner's affection while men are troubled more by sexual infidelity.[17] The results of recent experimental research allow for a welcome revision of stereotypical assumptions. In fiction and in life, women are keenly responsive to the loss of physical, sensual, erotic love – unless they are prohibited from expressing their jealousy. Love is jealous. But what for the ancients was a wrong to be righted, and for modern lovers an inadmissible failure, has become for us a folkloric legacy, a moral flaw, a political error. To the injunction against the admission of jealousy has now been added one against *being* jealous, often coupled with the demand that we listen patiently to all our lovers' confessions. Jealousy is now the most obscene emotion of all.

Today, in books and on blogs and websites, we are told that jealousy is a symptom of insecurity, a plea for approval or a mental disorder. All the mirages of a certain idea of the independent individual, confident in him- or herself, swollen with self-esteem – arrogant, in a word – come together in a set of psychological clichés, forever tinged with a tone of reproach. The insinuation is always that you are exaggerating. In the psychological register, if only you would learn to trust; if you loved yourself more (or, alternatively, less); if you had not been jealous of your little sister; if you had not gone through a bad Oedipal phase; if your parents had made you more secure; if, even better, you had had no parents at all – then you would definitely be immune from pain. In a more upbeat version, if only you could bring yourself to believe that you are incomparable, unrivalled, unbeatable, then you would be blissfully happy. Or, in the ethical mode, if only you got the point that desire is a rational choice, you would shed your stupidly high expectations. They don't love you? Why would you care? When we talk about amorous jealousy, all of a sudden the world comes to a standstill. Attraction, arousal, infatuation, seduction, passion, adultery: nothing ever happens. For, as everyone knows, there are no young and beautiful and charming people in the world. Of course, nobody would dream of flirting with your husband (or wife, or lover, or occasional mate), who, in any case, is, as we all know, sex blind, indifferent to sensuality, insensitive to admiration and unable to feel desire. It is all in your head. It is all in your past. It is always *your* problem. Enough!

Jealousy is normal. The more realistic one is, the more jealous one will be.

Jealousy is something that comes about. It comes as a surprise. And in most cases there is indeed a cause: an event sweeps you off your feet. Unlike the censorious, who are always ready to cry paranoia, those who have experience of love know full well its actual freedom of movement. Lovers are always fearful, as Andreas Capellanus, author of a famous twelfth-century treatise, *On Love*,[18] put it, because they – and especially women – are fully aware of how mobile the desire of another person can be. At different times and in different situations, infidelity (and male infidelity, in particular) is, quite simply, commonplace. In ancient Greece, in Ovid's Rome, in Stendhal's Europe, always in Paris and, finally, throughout the Western world, desire leads the game. This, of course, suits me perfectly, as long as it is I who decide how, and with whom, to play. My own infidelity is entirely innocent; my lover's is intolerable. The erotic excursions which I allow myself are wholly insignificant; the adventures of my beloved are always ominous.

In the wisdom of love, we know that we never know. It is now time to recount the history of that wisdom.

— 1 —

BEING MEDEA

The ancients fully understood the experience of sorrow, humiliation and the violence caused by the sexual inconstancy of one's beloved, a desertion which places us, against our will, in a position of loss, grief, disillusion, disadvantage and unwanted rivalry. This complex situation, and the passionate reactions that it triggers, formed a powerful narrative.[1] We encounter it in stories, in poems, in the theatre and in philosophical theories of love. To appreciate how significant it was, we doubtless have to recognize its agonistic pugnacity, but first and foremost we have to grasp its affective and narcissistic coherence. If we do so, then we will discover that, in ancient Greece, serious jealousy was anger. It is a distinctive kind of anger – *orgê* – in which *eros*, sensual love, plays an essential role. Jealousy is erotic anger.

Aristotle, as is often the case, is the best cultural interpreter. It is he who offers the most illuminating definition. *Orgê* is the perception of an unjustified offence, which one suffers but intends to avenge. It is a deep pain, because we are forced to swallow our pride at being treated as someone negligible, worth little or nothing (*oligôria*); but it is also a pleasure because it arouses in us the hope of retaliation.[2] Passive and active, painful and pleasant, this seemingly impulsive and thoughtless fury requires, in fact, a chain of thoughts about what actually took place, in what position we now find ourselves, and how we feel about this whole predicament. We are also eager to take action. Anger involves events, affects and agency. Something has befallen me, and I have to respond. It is a paradoxically reasonable and, above all, noble passion. Whereas, in Aristotle's eyes, irascible individuals exaggerate, people who never get angry whatever befalls them deserve only a stinging rebuke: their behaviour reveals not a placid nature but the temperament of a slave.[3]

An aristocratic passion

To find ethical qualities in anger may seem to be inconceivable, dangerous and pre-modern. We have passed the era of vengeance; we live in societies governed by law and respect for the freedom to love whom we want, when we want. Before we get too agitated about this, however, let us look a bit more closely at how Aristotle speaks about anger.

Whatever the degree of violence involved in the act of vengeance, what really matters is the social and emotional dialectic: I expect to be respected. I expect this for reasons that have to do not only with my status but also with my actions. Because of what I have done for the sake of a person, I am entitled to demand recognition and gratitude. Instead of receiving what I am due, however, I receive only contempt. I am ignored; what I hold most dear is belittled, or I am mocked. I cannot just sit still and mope. An insult is a challenge. An obligation has been breached. I have to overcome it: my honour is at stake. For Aristotle, this is why we praise those who, neither being excessively irascible nor allowing themselves to be carried away by passion, know how to be angry as one ought to be (*dei*), following reason (*logos*). Their character is serene (*praos*, *atarachos*). Since they tend to forgive, you would think they lean towards indifference. But they are not indifferent. On the contrary, their virtue consists in experiencing *orgē* for good reason, against those with whom anger is reasonable, at the right time and for as long as it should.[4] Those who never get angry prove themselves unable to meet all these requirements. They are, literally, insensitive, stupid and slavish.

> Those who do not get angry for reasons for which one needs to be angry seem to be fools [*elithioi*] as well as those who do not get angry against those against whom one ought to be angry, or when necessary. Indeed, it seems that they do not feel anything [*ouk aisthanesthai*] and do not feel pain [*ou lupeisthai*]. And it seems that a man who never gets angry cannot defend himself, because it seems that to be dragged through the mud, or not to worry about (the way others treat) his family is worthy of a slave [*andrapododes*].[5]