

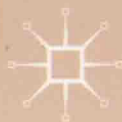
THE NEW MIDDLE AGES



The INNER LIFE of
WOMEN *in* MEDIEVAL
ROMANCE LITERATURE

GRIEF, GUILT, *and* HYPOCRISY

Edited by Jeff Rider and Jamie Friedman



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IN MEDIEVAL ROMANCE
LITERATURE

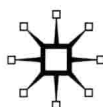
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CHAPTER 1

THE INNER LIFE OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL ROMANCE LITERATURE

Jeff Rider

Contemporary theories of emotions suggest that they are complex schemas that have three principal components or aspects, three faces.¹ One of these components has long been recognized, is founded in human biology, and is presumably largely the same for all human beings (and shared to various degrees with animals). "According to the biological idea," writes Keith Oatley, "emotions derive from genetically based neural and hormonal programs of response. . . . From the biological perspective emotions are seen as largely fixed, as given, as natural." "If there were no cross-cultural commonality," he and Jenkins write elsewhere, "if all emotions were culturally idiosyncratic, it would be hard to see how any emotional understandings could be possible between people of different societies. . . . Humans are genetically provided with a start-up program of innate patterns, distinctive abilities, and biases."²

Emotion also has "a cognitive element," however, "combining raw feeling . . . with judgment and perception, through which an individual evaluates, labels, and controls his feelings. . . . a substantial consensus exists that emotions are not simply biological reactions but also involve an interplay between body and mind."³ According to this way of thinking, emotions enable us to think more quickly and efficiently than we could do otherwise, allowing us to synthesize great masses of information despite gaps in our knowledge and to reduce them to manageable "feelings." They induce certain basic states that orient us toward useful action in certain ways. They help us evaluate complex situations, discern and prioritize our interests and concerns, and choose between possible

courses of action, although such evaluations are not, of course, always accurate.⁴

The third component of emotion is social. Emotions, that is, are both socially constructed and play a social function, have social effects, are, as Robert Solomon puts it, "*subjective engagements in the world.*"⁵ "Emotions described as 'socially constructed,'" writes Oatley, "are put together from parts that derive mainly from culture. Repertoires of emotions, according to this approach, are like languages Comparably, it is argued, each culture has patterns of emotions that are somewhat distinctive, that derive from societal practices, and that convey meanings and effects to members of that culture."⁶ Or, as Rosenwein puts it, "No one is born knowing appropriate modes of expression, or whether to imagine emotions as internal or external, or whether to privilege or disregard an emotion. These things make up the 'feeling rules' that societies impart."⁷ As Solomon points out, moreover, "an emotion . . . is in essence 'political'—that is, it has to do with our relations with other people" and thus the expression of emotions also, as Geoffrey White notes, "works to create or reproduce social identities and relationships."⁸

Our emotional life is thus, in fact, as much an outer life as it is an inner one: "emotions," as Ronald de Sousa puts it, "face both in and out."⁹ Shaping and shaped by cognitive processes and social conventions and relations, emotions bring certain things to our attention in certain ways and their expression does certain things. This all-encompassing nature of emotion has been well expressed by Richard A. Shweder and Jonathan Haidt, who write,

the "emotion" (e.g., sadness, fear, or love) is not something independent of or separable from the conditions that justify it, from the somatic and affective events that are ways of feeling or being touched by it, from the actions it demands, or the like. The "emotion" is the whole story: a kind of somatic event (fatigue, chest pain, goose flesh) and/or affective event (panic, emptiness, expansiveness) experienced as a perception of some antecedent conditions (death of a friend, acceptance of a book manuscript for publication, a proposition to go out to dinner) and their implications for the self (e.g., as loss, gain, threat, possibility), and experienced as well as a social judgment (e.g., of vice or virtue, sickness or health) and as a kind of plan for action to preserve one's self-esteem (attack, withdraw, confess, hide, explore). The "emotion" is the entire script. It is the simultaneous experience of all the components, or, perhaps more accurately, the unitary experience of the whole package deal.¹⁰

The expression "emotional life" as it is used here thus refers to the entire life of a human being conceived as a combination of biological, cognitive,

and social components. Emotions are precisely where inner and outer life meet and open out onto one another, and "emotional life" should thus be understood as an expansive rather than reductive term.

Emotions, writes Reddy, are one of the most important "kinds of thought that lie 'outside' language, yet are intimately involved in the formulation of utterances . . . and when we speak of our emotions, they come into a peculiar, dynamic relationship with what we say about them." He suggests that that we think of speaking or writing—or dancing—about emotions as a form of "translation" and proposes that "the most important facet of emotional expression" is that attempts to formulate or "translate" "thought material" that "lies 'outside' language" and "exceeds attention's capacity to translate it into . . . talk in a short time horizon,"—attempts that he refers to as "emotional utterance[s]" or "emotive statements" or "emotives"—"already initiat[e] changes in this material before it is fully formulated"; the emotional utterances "have a direct impact on what they are supposed to refer to"; the thought material "emerges from the act of uttering in a changed state." "Emotional expressions," in sum, "can thus be considered as utterances aimed at briefly characterizing the current state of activated thought material that exceeds the current capacity of attention. Such expression, by analogy with speech acts, can be said to have (1) descriptive appearance, (2) relational intent, and (3) self-exploring and self-altering effects."¹¹ The relation between emotions—pre-linguistic thought material—and language that Reddy is proposing here seems much like the relation between thought and sound that Saussure proposed as the origin of language: just as thought and sound articulate one another to produce language, so do emotions and language articulate one another to produce emotional utterances or emotive statements.¹² That is to say that we both shape and learn about emotions by talking about them.

It should thus be no surprise that narrative is one of the most important "normative social institutions and routine practices"¹³ through which people become emotionally aware and learn the cognitive and social uses of emotions and how to identify, construct, and perform them.¹⁴ If, as Michael Stocker has suggested, emotions should not be "thought of in terms of emotional mountains and canyons" but as "normal and entirely common and ubiquitous, . . . diffuse, pervasive, and long lasting, forming our background, as well as the tone, the color, the affective taste, the feel of activities, relations, and experiences," then one can understand how narrative—as a complex, overdetermined descriptive continuum that ties events to a *before* and an *after* in a complex manifold of relations—is particularly well-suited for the representation of our dynamic, ubiquitous emotional life.¹⁵ If, indeed, as Shweder and Haidt suggest, emotions are

"interpretive schemes of a particular script-like, story-like, or narrative kind that give shape and meaning to the human experience"¹⁶—that is, if emotions have an essentially narrative form—there is every reason to believe that narrative is, in fact, *the* privileged institution and practice for this educational process since it has the same form as emotions.¹⁷ One might even go so far as to say that, insofar as they orient us toward or prepare us for action (either internal or external) and link this action to a cause or set of causes and an outcome or set of outcomes, emotions *are* narratives—and that narratives, therefore, always have an emotional tone and structure.¹⁸

Literature is in turn one of the most important tools humans have had for the preservation and dissemination of narrative, perhaps the most important tool for doing so up until the nineteenth century, and it has thus played an important role in this process of education and enculturation over time. As Oatley and Jenkins write,

The principal way in which we become conscious—at least conscious of ourselves—is in giving ourselves and others accounts in narrative form. . . . Written narrative literature, from ancient times to the present, concentrates on our emotional lives and their problematics—as if story telling and story listening have always been attempts to understand these matters. The activity is satisfying because stories provide possibilities of vicarious action and pieces of solutions to the problems of how to act and how to be a person in the society that is depicted. Publicly available stories give members of society common exemplars of action and emotion. They help us to reflect on and become part of the cultural tradition in which we live.¹⁹

Literature, even nonfictional literature, does not, of course, contain and communicate emotions or emotional experiences themselves but represents emotions, their sources, their evolution, and their effects, what Peter and Carol Stearns have termed an "emotionology": "the attitudes or standards that a society, or a definable group within a society, maintains toward basic emotions and their appropriate expression,"²⁰ or what Peter Stearns has referred to elsewhere as "emotional standards—the 'feeling rules' or emotionology that describes socially prescribed emotional values, and often the criteria individuals themselves use to evaluate their emotional experience."²¹

The representation of emotion in literature is subject, moreover, both to what one might call social or external constraints and to generic or internal ones. "The representation of emotional standards," as Barbara Rosenwein notes, "is itself a social product"²² and is to some degree determined by the emotionology of the author and the public he or she

imagines. If I want my public, for example, to understand that my hero is angry, I must represent her anger in such a way that my public recognizes her emotion as such, and if I wish them to believe that she is a reasonable and perhaps even virtuous woman and that her anger is justified, I have to motivate her anger in a way that the public finds reasonable and acceptable. The representation of emotion in literature thus reflects and is determined by the ambient emotionology as well as purveying and shaping it; the representation of emotion plays with and on—but also according to the rules of—that emotionology.²³ Literary representation of emotional experience is likewise limited or determined, as Deploige observes, by the literary standards inherited and shared by the author and his or her public:

When medieval authors used a certain discourse genre, they wanted—already merely by choosing that specific genre—to treat clearly delimited themes, to communicate specific values, to promote specific ideas. As a consequence, they became very much interested in some very specific emotions, while remaining silent on other, though not socially less important, emotional expressions in their environment. Written texts are moreover—and certainly in the Middle Ages—also characterized by literary traditions and customs and by dateless *topoi* that did not really reduce the barrier between the text and the reality behind it. Historians studying emotions are thus confronted with selective and genre-specific textual representations of emotional representations, with two levels of possible manipulations and misunderstandings, and thus with a kind of squared representation problem.²⁴

Moreover, as Deploige also reminds us, literature not only represents and purveys emotional standards but also produces emotions in its audience through its “provocation of the human imagination,” and this experience is a source of pleasure.²⁵

Narrative literature thus offers us a privileged, but complex, means of studying past emotional standards, styles, or regimes—past emotionologies.²⁶ This literature, even when it is nonfictional, does not offer us real emotions or real emotional experience. It offers us a normative, culture-specific, but creative, emotionally provocative, and pleasurable representation of the sources, experiences, values, and behaviors (and their consequences) associated with a normative, culture-specific set of emotions. This literature teaches—one might even say promotes—emotional standards and styles. It suggests how people might live well, or at least successfully, in the particular fictional, historical, or actual world it presumes and describes.²⁷ But it also offers its audience the opportunity to grasp these standards more-or-less consciously, to identify and manipulate