

Wonder and Skepticism in the Middle Ages

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This book considers one of the less obvious (but arguably more important) passions – wonder – and the ways in which that emotion intersected with skepticism in the Middle Ages. Through an in-depth analysis of medieval responses to marvels, it thus builds upon earlier studies of wonder, most notably Caroline Walker Bynum’s seminal article on the topic, and a rich tradition of doubt scholarship.⁽¹⁾ In this book, Keagan Brewer makes a convincing case for rejecting broad-brush generalisations, such as that the Middle Ages was a period of universal credulity, and instead offers a far more multifaceted and variegated picture, whereby there existed a range of possible responses to wondrous phenomena, with wonder and skepticism by no means mutually exclusive.

Wonder and Skepticism in the Middle Ages is divided into eight chapters, the first of which outlines the book’s parameters, key research questions and methodological approach. Regarding the latter, Brewer has borrowed from a variety of scholarly fields, including the history of emotions, reception studies, psychology and even mathematics. An overview of recent interpretive frameworks developed by emotions historians – such as Barbara Rosenwein’s ‘emotional communities’, William Reddy’s ‘emotional regimes’ and Monique Scheer’s ground-breaking study of emotions as a kind of practice – will doubtless aid the uninitiated reader. Responding to reception studies (more commonly associated with the visual arts, literary studies and psychology), Brewer sets out to examine audience responses to wondrous stories, and therefore consciously prioritises first-person evidence, while remaining sensitive to the relative paucity of such evidence and its methodological challenges (pp. 3–4). This introductory chapter also usefully defines some key terms which may be unfamiliar to readers – such as ‘global skepticism’, ‘local skepticism’ and ‘trivialism’ – and identifies three categories of wondrous phenomena: magic (*magica*), miracles (*miracula*) and marvels (*mirabilia*), with the latter selected as the primary focus. Wonder and disbelief, Brewer argues, were not necessarily polar opposites; rather, there existed a ‘belief-doubt continuum’ (pp. 9–10) – a spectrum of possible stances which lie somewhere between outright belief and disbelief. Following a detailed overview of Bayesian probability, upon which this idea is based, it is suggested that there was a strong desire to avoid uncertainty among medieval commentators on marvels. A helpful table of Latin terms for wonder and doubt (with approximate English equivalents) follows, before a section entitled ‘Retrospective biases’, in which Brewer effectively pitches his work in opposition to two faulty suppositions: that belief in wonders meant medieval people were less intelligent and more gullible than their modern counterparts; and that marvels

were abundant in the Middle Ages.

Chapter two then seeks to define wonder, and demonstrates that it played a crucial role in transforming new phenomena into knowledge. The analysis is divided into two parts. The first synthesises modern scientific views of wonder, from Charles Darwin to Joan Onians, in order to highlight this emotion's evolutionary importance (especially its role in learning), neurobiological foundations and connections to other passions, such as fear. The second, longer part, addresses medieval conceptions of wonder, and identifies five definitional features which recurred throughout the Middle Ages:

'(1) wonder is of the novel; (2) wonder creates excitement; (3) wonder is of the unexplained; (4) wonder creates a desire to understand the new thing and its causes; and (5) experience dulls wonder' (p. 26).

A string of philosophical and theological texts, including those by Augustine of Hippo, Gregory the Great, Gerald of Wales, Gervase of Tilbury, Adelard of Bath, Roger Bacon and Thomas Aquinas, are used to elucidate these five definitional points, and to highlight an important distinction between medieval and modern perspectives: wonder was not always a positive emotion in the Middle Ages.

With medieval views of wonder established, a related emotion (fear) is the focus of chapter three, where *Wonder and Skepticism in the Middle Ages* starts to hit its stride. In fact, this represents one of the most accessible and informative examinations of medieval fear currently available in English. The fear of demons, hybridity, monsters and the apocalypse all receive attention, and Brewer plausibly posits that such fears were exacerbated by several societal conditions, above all rurality, monasticism and religiosity. It becomes clear in this section that fear could have both a didactic and an entertainment function. Frightening stories were valuable vehicles through which sermonists provided moral instruction to their flock, but they were simultaneously a cohesive force, capable of binding members of a community together through mutual enjoyment.

Several of these points are developed further in chapter four, where it is suggested that written marvels, like fearful stories, served as a form of entertainment. Brewer first examines the evidence for physical objects which inspired wonder in observers – mechanical chickens, clocks, devices used by magicians and illusionists, giants' bones, architecture and so on – before demonstrating that marvels texts came to play an increasingly prominent role as courtly entertainment, particularly at the court of King Henry II of England. The chapter ends with an engaging discussion of the role of monsters and marvels in travel literature, where it is suggested that authors of travelogues faced something of a dilemma between representing the reality of the journey and meeting their audience's expectations to hear about unusual marvels. Brewer's insights will therefore be of value to those more generally interested in exploring the blurred boundaries between 'history' and 'fiction' in medieval sources.

Following this, chapter five turns to the religious significance of wonder and represents one of the strongest elements of the book. We might imagine that religion, through its ability to explain the inexplicable, would decrease wonder, but, as Brewer demonstrates, this was not the case. Wonder was an integral aspect of medieval Christianity, since wondering at the marvels of the faith was essentially a marker of piety. After all, though theoretically distinct, *miracula* and *mirabilia* frequently overlapped, and Christian doctrine was replete with wonders, such as Creation and the Eucharist. Even wondering at natural phenomena was valid, providing God was recognised as the true architect of the marvel. Like fear, then, wonder was a device deployed in sermons to engage audiences, elucidate theological concepts and increase faith in Christianity. For example, saints' relics were an effective way of evoking wonder from audiences, especially at public ceremonies, where they were likely to succumb to 'emotional contagion' (p. 116).

The next two chapters are particularly innovative. Chapter six analyses evidence which could improve a marvel's truth quality and thus overturn skepticism. The credibility of the reporter, their manner and

gestures, the wide reporting of a marvel, its similarity to other wonders, deference to God's omnipotence and written authority, and the viewing of physical evidence all impacted upon the perceived verisimilitude of a wonder. For Brewer, the fact that authors alluded to evidence supporting marvels suggests that skepticism was a common initial reaction to wondrous phenomena. Chapter seven extends this discussion of evidentiary frameworks by first assessing the importance attached to sensory experience in determining a wonder's veracity. Declarations that a marvel had been personally inspected by the author were valued higher than second-hand reports. Of importance here, Brewer contends, is not whether audiences actually believed these interjections, but that the authors associated truthfulness with personal inspection. Therefore, the senses, and particularly sight, were important for validating marvels, though they were by no means considered infallible, and some individuals – including Augustine of Hippo, Gervase of Tilbury and Frederick II of Germany – even conducted experiments to determine the validity of wondrous phenomena. Brewer then develops one of his central arguments: while there is little evidence for the existence of 'global skeptics' (those who believed no truths were attainable) in the Middle Ages, there did exist 'a sort of Christian skepticism' (p. 191), whereby humans could not hope to comprehend certain truths due to the mysterious nature of God's will. The book ends with three stories from Gervase of Tilbury's *Otia Imperialia*, a summary of arguments and consideration of a broader question: did writers only include marvels they thought to be true? A substantial amount of evidence seems to suggest so. Even if they did not, Brewer's study clearly demonstrates that medieval commentators did not treat wondrous occurrences uncritically.

A major strength of this book is its grounding in a large corpus of primary evidence. Brewer has assembled a plethora of illuminating (and often entertaining) examples to support his arguments, as in the case of the textual traditions surrounding the green children of Woolpit (pp. 6–8) and the discovery of King Arthur's giant bones (pp. 82–3). This is supplemented by an intimate knowledge of the historiography, which is interwoven throughout. Nevertheless, there are some notable omissions. The chapter on fear, impressive as it is, would have benefited from the inclusion of the work of Peter Dinzelbacher and Jean Delumeau, especially since some of the latter's ideas chime with Brewer's own interpretation of fear and wonder as mechanisms for theological edification and belief control.⁽²⁾ Furthermore, while Brewer does engage with Dominik Perler's contribution to the collection of essays *Rethinking the History of Skepticism*, Perler's earlier, more expansive monograph study of skeptical debates in the Middle Ages is surprisingly overlooked.⁽³⁾

The arguments presented in *Wonder and Skepticism in the Middle Ages* are balanced and generally convincing, though they are not always surprising (as in the case of wonder's entertainment value or fear's importance for belief control); and given that the book has entered into an increasingly competitive market, it might have benefited from some bolder overarching conclusions. It will not make us rethink our theoretical approaches towards exploring medieval passions, and while admittedly it was probably never designed to do this, there were at least two opportunities to make a more direct intervention in the history of emotions. In the introductory chapter, Brewer sets out the following line of argument for chapter two:

'I argue that this emotion [wonder] has changed little over time in its primary definition, because of its function in evolutionary terms as an emotion geared towards learning, but that the stimuli and expression of wonder change according to sociocultural context' (p. 17).

Several parallels between medieval and modern perspectives are noted in chapter two, such as wonder's ability to create pleasure (p. 37), yet this intriguing argument does not receive the attention it deserves, and its wider ramifications are left unexplored. For example, the dominance of cultural-historical approaches, which emphasise the social and cultural specificity of emotions, has resulted in a general reluctance to chart continuities and changes in the emotional landscape of western Europe over a broad chronological arc.⁽⁴⁾ In contrast to this, the evidence presented in chapter two seems to suggest that there is (dare I say) a 'basic' quality to the emotion of wonder that transcends specific historical and cultural contexts, and the suggestion that the stimuli were culturally specific, rather than the emotion itself, strikes me as a particularly perceptive distinction. To my mind, these highly significant findings could have been the driving force of chapter two.

In addition, more might have been said about the potential for neuroscience to advance our understanding of medieval emotions, for this has been a divisive issue among historians. While some have stressed the pitfalls of ‘neurohistory’, others have contended that it can offer a useful, if imperfect, window onto the affective lives of people in the Middle Ages, particularly when combined with a cultural-historical approach.⁽⁵⁾ Brewer’s study seems to point in a similar direction.

One of the few points on which I remain unconvinced regards the alleged centrality of apocalyptic thought to crusade ideology. We are told that the appeal of apocalyptic messages among the faithful was one of the reasons behind the successful preaching of the First Crusade (p. 61), and that: ‘Belief in apocalyptic imminence was a recurrent feature of the crusading movement from its beginning through to the thirteenth century’ (p. 62). This sense of longevity is misleading. There is, indeed, a strand of historiography which emphasises the eschatological tones of crusade sources, but this view is far from universally accepted; and even the most valiant attempts to identify apocalyptic ideas in the sources tend to rely on an overly broad definition of *apocalypsis*. The examples assembled by Brewer are valid and interesting, but they are not necessarily representative of the majority of the sources pertaining to the crusades.

However, these minor quibbles should not overshadow Brewer’s thought-provoking discussion of wonder, skepticism and marvels. *Wonder and Skepticism in the Middle Ages* aims to ‘continue an established conversation, while providing novel contributions in its explorations of medieval epistemological trends, belief and disbelief’ (p. 4). In this, it undoubtedly succeeds.

Notes

1. C. W. Bynum, ‘Wonder’, *American Historical Review*, 102 (1997), 1–26.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. P. Dinzelbacher, *Angst im Mittelalter: Teufels-, Todes- und Gottese Erfahrung: Mentalitätsgeschichte und Ikonographie* (Paderborn, 1996); J. Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th–18th Centuries*, trans. E. Nicholson (New York, NY, 1990).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. D. Perler, ‘Does God deceive us? Skeptical hypotheses in late medieval epistemology’, in *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background*, ed. H. Lagerlund (Leiden, 2010), pp. 171–92; D. Perler, *Zweifel und Gewissheit: Skeptische Debatten im Mittelalter* (Frankfurt am Main, 2006).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Scholars are starting to rectify this deficiency: see P. N. Stearns, ‘Modern patterns in emotions history’, in *Doing Emotions History*, ed. S. J. Matt and P. N. Stearns (Chicago, IL, 2014), pp. 17–40; B. H. Rosenwein, ‘Theories of change in the history of emotions’, in *A History of Emotions, 1200–1800*, ed. J. Liliequist (London, 2012), pp. 7–20, 207–12; B. H. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600–1700* (Cambridge, 2016).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See J. Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction*, trans. K. Tribe (Oxford, 2015), pp. 270–6; J. Bourke, ‘An experiment in “neurohistory”: reading emotions in Aelred’s *De Institutione Inclusarum* (Rule for a Recluse)’, *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, 42 (2016), 124–42.[Back to \(5\)](#)

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