Medieval Sensibilities: A History of Emotions in the Middle Ages

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It is impossible to understand any human society without exploring its emotional rhythms, from the most dramatic to the most subtle. For too long, historians have ignored this simple truth… Yet in the Middle Ages, emotions were everywhere. They could be found not only deep within the heart but far beyond it: they were present in the churches, in the palaces, in the shacks, in the markets, and on the battlefields (p. 1).

These cautionary words confront the reader of Medieval Sensibilities: A History of the Emotions in the Middle Ages. The initial lines of the introduction reveal the agenda of Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy that history as a discipline has long neglected the 'simple truth': the significance of emotion in reconstructing the past. Reintegrating emotionality into medieval life serves as the raison d’être of this book and throughout its nine chapters the development of emotion is charted over a 1000-year period, from its Christianization in the fifth century monasteries up to its widespread diffusion by the 15th century. Aimed at both the academic and general market, the 364 pages that comprise Medieval Sensibilities represent nothing less than a masterpiece of scholarship as Boquet and Nagy’s interdisciplinary approach has ensured that history is one discipline of many that stands to gain from the insights of this book.

The fundamental message of Medieval Sensibilities is not a new one, however. Historians have long been aware of the importance of emotion. Indeed, Boquet and Nagy themselves state that the intellectual debt of their work is owed to the pioneers of conceptual history (Begriffsgeschichte). In the history of the history of emotions, Lucien Febvre (1875–1956), a founder of the Annales school, is commonly viewed as the first to highlight the importance of tracing the concept of emotion in history.[1] Following Febvre, the Annalist scholars of the 1970s and 1980s sought to integrate emotion within their ‘history of mentalities’, and since the 1980s it has been figures such as Raymond Williams, Peter and Carol Stearns, William M. Reddy, and especially Barbara Rosenwein, who, working within interdisciplinary circles, have developed the most sophisticated frameworks for understanding emotion.[2]

This intellectual setting has shaped the writing of Medieval Sensibilities. First published in French as
Sensible Moyen Âge in 2015, it was received enthusiastically and promptly awarded the Augustin Thierry Award by the Académie Française in 2016. In 2018 the text was translated into Italian and English – the translation of the latter being undertaken by Robert Shaw and duly awarded the French Voices Award administered by the FACE foundation. The authors of Medieval Sensibilities, Damien Boquet (Aix-Marseille University) and Pirofska Nagy (Université du Québec à Montréal), both have dedicated their scholarly careers to championing the history of the emotions. Individually, their previous publications have explored a diverse array of themes from medieval conceptions of shame and pleasure to the affective mysticism practiced within monastic contexts. Beyond their individual pursuits, though, lies a long history of collaboration. In 2006 Boquet and Nagy co-launched the first French project on the emotions in Medieval Europe, Les Émotions au Moyen Âge (EMMA). The primary objective of EMMA is ‘to question the so-called emotional immaturity of medieval societies’, a thesis formulated by (the now notorious) Johan Huizinga, and subsequently popularised by Norbert Elias. More broadly EMMA aims to completely reconstruct the place of emotion and its connection to historical anthropology. During the 12 years the project has been running, Boquet and Nagy have partnered to author or coedit no fewer than nine publications that have been aimed towards this very objective.

This does not include Medieval Sensibilities, which should be regarded as the culmination of this initiative. Indeed, the specified purpose of Medieval Sensibilities underscores its relationship to EMMA:

This book proposes a cultural history of affectivity for the medieval West. It aims to prove the essential importance of emotions in history – and a fortiori in the Middle Ages – and also to offer an emotion journey through a thousand year epoch… it is an anthropological history: a history of humankind, of the human being as a whole, and of shared singularities (p. 7).

The authors of Medieval Sensibilities clearly have a remarkable conception of their work’s self-identity and contemporary relevancy. Medieval Sensibilities is truly bold in taking both a chronological and thematic approach: covering a thousand years from 500–1500 AD, a period Boquet and Nagy argue witnessed a Christianisation of emotion and the ability to be affected by this emotion, ‘affectivity’. By taking such a longitudinal assessment of the Middle Ages, Boquet and Nagy chart the emotional variations across time and space in Medieval Europe in an effort to dismantle Huizinga’s problematic teleological paradigm. This book therefore aligns itself with the social constructionist camp of historiography and its desire to reshape previous outdated narratives of the Middle Ages shows its commitment to updating historical methodology for the 21st century; a task Boquet and Nagy have not shied away from during their careers. The methodological expert par excellence, Barbara Rosenwein, chosen to write the foreword to this text, praises this volume for both its close alliance to the goals of EMMA but also for going beyond this project. This is true. Medieval Sensibilities does indeed build on what has come before but also, like Febvre, it confidently serves as a manifesto for the history of emotions, outlining the history of the discipline, where it is going presently, and where it has the potential to go in the future.

What follows in Medieval Sensibilities are nine carefully crafted chapters, averaging 20–30 pages in length to create a balanced and meticulously planned volume. The first two chapters, ‘The Christianisation of emotion’ (pp. 9–27) and ‘The city of desire: the monastic laboratory’ (pp. 31–48) are principally concerned with philosophical and theological definitions of emotion in the Christian West. Boquet and Nagy, through a rigorous examination of the terminology used to express emotion (‘disturbance’ (perturbatio), ‘excitement’ (commotio), and ‘affection’ (affectio)) reveal that it was Lactantius (c. 250–c.325) who took aim at the pre-existing but negative Stoic definition of affectivity (p. 19). Following Barbara Rosenwein’s methodology in meticulously defining ‘emotion words’ in currency in the Middle Ages, Boquet and Nagy dissociate themselves from other studies of emotion by linking the development of emotion to a Catholic anthropology in which love (amor, caritas or dilectio) of God was experienced as a profoundly emotional connection.

Medieval Sensibilities argues it was Augustine, christened the ‘father of medieval affectivity’, and his City
of God which represented a turning point in Christian theology by connecting emotion to original sin and salvation. Augustine’s innovation was to subsume the emotions within the cognitive faculty of the will and his preference for the more neutral and less-negatively loaded terminology for emotion, affectus, showed that the emotions were envisaged an neither good nor bad, but dependent upon whether they were ‘ordered’ to the right purpose; the right purpose being the love of God. It was the Desert Fathers, men such as St Anthony (d.356), Pacomius (d. 346), Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399) and John Cassian (d. 435) who Boquet and Nagy argue initially experimented with ordering their emotions towards God through their ascetic practices in the Egyptian desert, and helped to formulate a model of emotion that would be refined by Pope Gregory the Great (c. 530-c.604) and applied to the entire Church (pp. 39-40).

Following these two introductory chapters, the focus shifts to granular case studies of the Frankish world. Here, the authors make use of Rosenwein’s concept of the ‘emotional community’. Viewing the medieval world through the lens of the emotional community is useful, Boquet and Nagy explain, because it ‘allows the peculiarities of each community within a multicultural and evolving context to be taken into account and for their diversity to be thought of in terms of emotional practices, without straitjacketing this world into a grand, unitary thesis that might efface its principal traits’ (p. 49). The lull towards a grand unifying thesis was the trap that Huizinga and his proponents fell into and is a fate that Boquet and Nagy are at pains to evade. It is here, however, that it becomes strikingly apparent that each chapter of Medieval Sensibilities could easily have been expanded into books themselves. This third chapter, for example, aims to charter the sensibilities within the barbarian kingdoms. As is the case repeatedly throughout the book, Boquet and Nagy sidestep this issue by not studying each location individually but preferring to focus on specific, yet generalisable, case studies. By looking at the particular emotional community of the Frankish kingdom and its sources – the writings of clerics and monks – the authors apply a micro-historical approach to their sources.

As Boquet and Nagy suggest, looking at the Frankish kingdoms as an emotional community helps to bring to the fore the moral codes of behaviour that both men and women equally had to abide by and work within. In Carolingian society it was Alcuin (c.735–804) who epitomised the transition taking place in the courts of Europe which involved the strengthening the importance of love and friendship (pp. 63–8). Whilst this society based on bonds of friendship and love faded away at the courtly level with the collapse of the Carolingian Empire, in the monasteries the emotional community survived and underwent renewal between the tenth to twelfth centuries as monks at this transitional stage in history represented the intellectual elite and took over the role of theorising on the emotional union between man and God.

Within this context the authors of this volume argue that the 12th century, therefore, was ‘neither a turning beginning nor a turning point’, but rather ‘witnessed a seeping of this goal of love into even the smallest cracks of monastic thought and practices, where it reached dizzying heights’ (p. 86). A major strength of Boquet and Nagy’s longitudinal assessment of the entire Middle Ages is that they can precisely measure developments across time. These changes during the 12th century were accomplished by the monastic orders, predominantly the Cistercians, who not only took up Augustine’s ideas but built upon the thought of previous generations. Here, Medieval Sensibilities skilfully connects the philosophical theories of affectivity developed by Aelred of Rievaulx (d. 1167) and Richard of Saint Victor (1110–73) to the practical Augustinian concepts of shame and order (ordo). Shame of the body and of sin, for these writers could possess utility if ordered correctly. This ‘good’ shame, what we might refer to as modesty or reserve, was part of the process of focusing the powers of the soul towards desiring God over the temporal things of the earth. Thus, Boquet and Nagy reveal how these three apparently isolated developments – affectivity, the concept of shame and the Augustinian ordering of emotion – each came together, developing side-by-side within monastic spirituality.

Boquet and Nagy next trace the coterminous development of love and the emotions of the elite throughout the 11th to 13th centuries in ‘The ethics and aesthetics of aristocratic emotions in feudal society’ (pp. 104–29). The connecting thread undergirding this chapter to its antecedents is the concept of love. The authors’ treatment of the difficult concept of courtly love is welcomed here because Boquet and Nagy
adroitly show the clear relationship between aristocratic emotion and that of wider Christian emotion. The three elements of courtly love they identify: the moderation of emotion, the experience of joy, and lastly, the inaccessibility of the beloved, are all seen to be features of Christian theology that have been transplanted onto courtly romance (pp. 111–12). It is within the genres of poetry and vernacular literature that these emotions could be applied to elite male friendships at a point bordering on the homoerotic. Romances such as the Song of Roland epitomise what Boquet and Nagy refer to as ‘homo-affectivity’, a term that could be taken as a synonym for ‘homosociality’, a word developed within queer, gender and literature studies to describe same-sex friendships based on emotional closeness that border on eroticism.[12] Although there has been a flood of literature treating the subject of masculinity in medieval Europe, literature that Boquet and Nagy engage with [13], the select cases they employ demonstrates their unceasing conceptual precision since Medieval Sensibilities questions both the genre and literary models of courtly love and corroborates poetic and literary tropes with accounts of intense masculine emotion in the chronicles of the period. Even though there is undoubtedly less existing evidence for it, the omission of female homosocial relations in this chapter is noticeable and would have been an interesting addition.

It is helpful to think of chapter six, ‘The emotive nature of man’ (pp. 130–57), as an extension of the discussions of the monasteries into the schools and universities of medieval Europe. Here, Boquet and Nagy trace the impact of the introduction of new Arabic science and medicine in the popular De anima or ‘On the Soul’ genre of texts which aimed to explain the connectivity between the body and soul. In this vein, Boquet and Nagy’s findings reflect, and build upon, the research of two scholars, Alain Boureau and Bernard McGinn, who have both shown that a clear theme of the 12th and 13th centuries was the increased scientific and mystical enquiry into the relationship between body and soul.[14] What Boquet and Nagy do so brilliantly is to illustrate that by the point of the introduction of Aristotelian thought in the late 12th and 13th century a rich foundation of scholastic discussions on the soul had been laid. Thomas Aquinas in particular, Boquet and Nagy argue, was significant as his Summa theologiae (c. 1265–74) was held to be the ‘first treatise on the passions’ and the first fully systematic treatment of emotion (p. 153).

The final third of Medieval Sensibilities seeks to cover emotion between the 13th and 15th centuries within the realms of politics, mysticism and communities. In politics, Giles of Rome’s On the Government of Princes (De regimine principum), written between 1277–9, was the most disseminated political handbooks of the Middle Ages. Since Giles of Rome was a student of Thomas Aquinas, the text reveals, ‘how the theory of the passions descended from the university to the princely courts’ (p. 163). As Boquet and Nagy elegantly show through case studies on Louis IX and Henry II, whilst the emotions of elites did obey rules, emotion itself acted as an important signifier of action and persuasion: ‘Emotions were more than a communication tool for the power among themselves: they marked discontinuities and drove political events’ (p. 180).

If princely emotion surveyed the elites, the penultimate chapter, ‘The mystical conquest of emotion’ (pp. 181–214), traces the experience of emotion for mystics. An important similarity though between the elite princes and the mystics is that both groups worked within and reshaped the cultural norms and values of emotion that they belonged to. Despite women being largely absent from the historical record before 1200, this changed between the 13th to mid-15th centuries which witnessed the feminisation of religion as women created spaces for themselves within public and religious life. To show this transformation the authors utilise Reddy’s concept of the ‘emotive’[15], a linguistic tool that is of great use to analyse texts yet it has been critiqued for its tendency to ‘privilege words over other forms of emotional behaviour’. [16] Since the surviving evidence for these communities are written sources, namely hagiographies, such as those of Mary of Oignies (1177–1213) and Lukardis of Oberweimar (1262–1309), the concept has great usefulness. Lukardis, who suffered from debilitating illness transformed emotions of pain and guilt into a psychosomatic vision of the passion of Christ. Mary on the other hand was driven to ‘crucify her flesh’ in imitation of Christ. Consequently, by examining how the emotions the two women felt and expressed which responded and transformed each other Boquet and Nagy argue reveals the ‘emotional navigation’ of these two women between different emotional states.
The subject of the final chapter of Medieval Sensibilities, ‘Common emotion’ (pp. 215–47), features the emotions of the illiterate. Again, utilising the concept of the emotional community, the authors of Medieval Sensibilities throughout this chapter aim to show how on the one hand emotions aided the forging and entrenchment of groups, yet, on the other, emotion, when transplanted onto the categories of religion and ethnicity could lead to societies in which violence is codified and ritualised. The flagellant groups which swept across Italy during the 1290s, for example, demonstrate a group identity fashioned from a ritualised public spectacle of self-harm, driven by the emotional levers of guilt and the desire to imitate Christ. Following Robert I. Moore, Boquet and Nagy argue that the Middle Ages can be called a ‘persecuting society’. Drawing on case studies from the First Crusade, the Cathar movement and the violence against the Jewish community in Girona in the 1290s, Medieval Sensibilities thus complements existing scholarship on the crusades, popular heresy, and antisemitism. This chapter, and Medieval Sensibilities as a whole, restores emotion and agency to mass movements; emotion being understood as the ‘affective contract’ that united the people to those who governed them: a power that could be made use of ‘to create, join, or divide communities and society’ (p. 247).

In 2010, Barbara Rosenwein, stated that ‘the ideal history – which seems far away right now – will not be a history of the emotions but rather an integration of the history of emotions into “regular” history’. Boquet and Nagy’s volume represents an important step closer to this eventual goal. Interdisciplinary research into the emotions is longstanding and this book represents a distillation of the conversations happening within this field. The use of a range of conceptual frameworks – the emotional community and emotive – currently being developed among current scholars underpins Boquet and Nagy’s pursuit to methodologically challenge current scholarship on the emotions. By covering over a millennium of history the chronological breadth of this text is simply monumental and it is testament to the efforts and research of its authors that the varied chapters of Medieval Sensibilities come together as a cohesive whole; each chapter linking to the last and developing what has previously been established. As a result, this pairing has approached the writing of this history of emotion with alacrity and have produced a persuasive narrative of how the medieval concept of emotion underwent a 1000-year evolution: first incubated within the monastic microcosm and then diffused into all facets of Christian life. Boquet and Nagy, therefore, not only go a long way to problematise the Middle Ages and dismantle the teleology erected by Huizinga and Elias but, in the process, their book shows that the challenges in reconstructing emotion are germane but surmountable. It is because of these reasons that Medieval Sensibilities currently represents the most nuanced and readable account of the changes and continuities which shaped the affective life of Medieval Europe.


Rosenwein, ‘Foreword’, Medieval Sensibilities, x.


‘horizontal homosociality.’ In opposition what could be thought of as the ‘vertical homosociality’ first proposed by Sedgwick (based around aggressive hegemonic masculinity reinforcing dominant social groups and masculine behaviour), horizontal homosociality on the other hand points to ‘relations that are based on emotional closeness, intimacy and a non-profitable form of friendship.’ See Nis Hammarén and Thomas Johansson, ‘Homosociality: In Between Power and Intimacy,’ SAGE Open Access (2014), p.5. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013518057 [7]


[15] Reddy has defined the emotive as ‘an attempt to call up an emotion that is expressed; it is an attempt to feel what one says one feels’ in Plamper, Reddy, Rosenwein, and Stearns, ‘The History of Emotions,’ p.240. See his original definition in William M. Reddy, The Navigation of Feeling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.128


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