

## The History of the Emotions:

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## REVIEW ARTICLE

# The History of the Emotions: Past, Present, Future

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Lynn Enterline (2012), *Shakespeare's Schoolroom: Rhetoric, Discipline, Emotion*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Ute Frevert (2011), *Emotions in History—Lost and Found*, Budapest and New York: Central European University Press.

Susan J. Matt (2011), *Homesickness: An American History*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Richard Strier (2011), *The Unrepentant Renaissance: From Petrarch to Shakespeare to Milton*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

‘So far, all that has given colour to existence still lacks a history’ – so wrote Friedrich Nietzsche in his 1882 *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, most often known in English as *The Gay Science*. In this book, Nietzsche issues a call for a more vivid, probing, and emotional form of history-making, one that takes the ‘conditions of [human] existence’ as a crucial philosophical starting point rather than assuming such conditions are fixed and never-changing. ‘[W]here’, he asks, can ‘you find a history of love, of avarice, of envy, of conscience, of piety, of cruelty?’, and if we were to find such a history, what would it look like?<sup>1</sup>

In the last decade or so we have seen a great rush finally to tackle Nietzsche’s question head-on, to write a wide-ranging history of emotions that looks at the contours of feeling across a dizzying

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variety of times, places, cultures, and contexts. No fewer than four major international centres for the study of the history of emotions have emerged in about as many years, including the Centre for the History of the Emotions at Queen Mary, University of London; the Languages of Emotion Cluster of Excellence at Freie Universität Berlin; the Centre for the History of Emotions at the Max Plank Institute, Berlin; and the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions (Europe 1100–1800) in Australia. While in critical studies academics have pointed to an ‘affective turn’ in recent years, in the discipline of History it might more accurately be deemed an emotional onslaught.<sup>2</sup>

Which is not to say that this shift is unwelcome, at least from this reviewer’s perspective. As someone who encountered more than a few sceptical responses when I decided in the mid 2000s that I wanted to do my doctoral work on sadness in Renaissance England, it seems that academic turns (like everything else, apparently) are like buses – you wait forever for yours to turn up and then two (or three, or four) come at once. Yet, as recently as 2005, Peter Burke suggested that the history of emotions had suffered, ever since Nietzsche’s nineteenth-century call, from a perpetual ‘failure to take off’. It lacked coherence as a field, its aims and methods remained hazy, its evidence base uncertain, its overall contribution to the field contested.<sup>3</sup> Although a handful of major historical tomes had appeared during the twentieth century outlining emotional *longue durées* and corresponding epistemic shifts – most notably Johan Huizinga’s *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919), Norbert Elias’s *The Civilizing Process* (1939), and a smattering of publications from the *Annales* school, whose chief proponent, Lucien Febvre, had asserted in 1938 that without emotions ‘*there will be no real history possible*’<sup>4</sup> – a systematic response to Nietzsche’s call had never emerged.

A couple of things seem to have precipitated this rather dramatic shift from a continued ‘failure to take off’ in 2005 to the rapid expansion of emotions research firmly in place by 2013. The first is that emotions research has proven particularly appealing to funders in the last few years, with several of the centres listed above taking shape under the aegis of major grants. The financial buoyancy of humanistic emotions research has much to do with its ability to crossover to – or at least make connections with – scientific research on contemporary emotions and their manifestation and use across various cultures. In this way the traditionally poorer humanities have been able to tap into some of the financial resources usually reserved for scientific research, attracting the attention of historians and cultural studies

scholars interested in questions of affect and willing to rebrand themselves, at least in part, as historians of emotion. The second catalysing factor is that scholars working in this area have begun to systematically take up and put pressure on questions of methodological rigour and approach, steadily putting forward a number of key methodological tools aimed at theorising emotions research across historical period and place. Such efforts have helped dispel (misguided) assumptions that emotionally-inflected histories are by nature unruly and uninteresting, drawing on a motley assemblage of source materials in an idiosyncratic and uncritical way.

Methodology has become such a central concern of historical emotions research in past years that some reflection on its development may be helpful. Peter N. and Carol Z. Stearns were the first scholars to take up the issue in a focused way, proposing the term 'emotionology' in 1985 as a tool for distinguishing between social attitudes towards emotions, a subject which they argue *can* be fruitfully studied by the historian, and the actual experience of emotion, which they argue cannot. The 'emotionologist' concerns herself, they suggest, with the way that a culture talks about particular emotions, paying attention to how feelings are valorized, marginalised, scientifically defined, or religiously encoded. Historians should begin by looking at the emotionology of a period and then consider, to the extent that it is possible, how contemporary expressions of emotion compare to the dominant emotionological framework of that period.<sup>5</sup>

The Stearnses, particularly Peter, have followed this approach in several different studies of twentieth-century America, but medieval historian Barbara Rosenwein has suggested that it may be less applicable when studying more distant historical periods, particularly given the Stearnses' emphasis on avoiding what they see as elite sources (for example, those associated with the courtly love tradition). As an alternative conceptual tool Rosenwein coined the term 'emotional communities' in 2002, which she defines as 'precisely the same as social communities – families, neighbourhoods, parliaments, guilds, monasteries, parish church memberships', with the proviso that 'the researcher looking at them seeks above all to uncover systems of feeling'. The idea of emotional communities attempts to break up the monolith of 'popular culture' and acknowledge the different strands of thinking (and feeling) that coexist in any given society, at any given time, as well as to emphasise the socially-oriented nature of much of emotional experience and expression. Within this framework courtly love literature is of reasonable concern as it directly engages with

a particular emotional community, albeit an elite one. The extent to which this community influences or in fact encompasses other ones, such as the peasantry, would further be a valid question for study.<sup>6</sup>

A third key methodological tool that has been added to this debate is William Reddy's concept of 'emotives' and 'emotional regimes', first introduced in 1997 and developed in his 2001 *The Navigation of Feeling*. Reddy's 'emotives' draw on ideas from J. L. Austin's landmark work in speech-act theory to address the role expression and representation play in shaping emotional experience. Emotives, Reddy argues, are both descriptive and performative, simultaneously reflecting the experience of a non-verbal emotion as well as actively constructing, shaping, and performing it through language. This multi-directional process, straddling essentialism and constructionism, means that the personal and the social are in constant dialogue, and that the researcher can examine this interplay through careful analysis of the language that emerges from such negotiations. By studying emotives, Reddy argues, researchers can begin to detect the historical rise and fall of different 'emotional regimes', which he understands to be the emotional 'normative order' enforced by '[a]ny enduring political regime'. Emotions are thus simultaneously personal and political, creating meaning for individuals but also contributing to an overarching emotional culture shaped by reigning systems of power.<sup>7</sup>

The cumulative impact of these methodological debates has been a steady increase in attention given to emotions history across most periods and subject areas, and a resultant rise in emotions-related publications over the past several years. Considering the extent to which questions of approach have come to define the field in general, it is at once surprising and somewhat reassuring to find that the four books under review in this essay talk about methodology very little, if at all. Ute Frevert's *Emotions in History – Lost and Found* offers a concise and very readable introduction to the history of modern European emotions, touching on questions of method in the opening chapter but moving on quickly to her discussion of the history of honour, shame, and empathy in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and the ways in which social attitudes towards gender shaped this history (especially in Germany and France). Frevert, currently the Director of the Max Plank Centre for the History of Emotions, gave the 2009 Natalie Zemon Davis Annual Lecture at the Central European University in Budapest, and *Emotions in History* has emerged from that research. Written in an accessible and engaging style, the book seems aimed at a broader readership than many others in the field, avoiding detailed discussion of historiographical questions and instead framing

its analysis within the context of modern scientific and social scientific research into biological essentialism versus cultural constructionism. Frevert references are made to contemporary politics, current events, and current psychological research, emphasising a sense of relevance to an interested but perhaps non-specialist reader by connecting questions about past emotional experience to those about the use and meaning of feeling in more modern times.

Frevert argues that while the cultural prominence given to emotions such as honour and shame has disappeared over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that ascribed to other emotions, including empathy and compassion, has markedly increased, resulting in the emotional 'lost and found' alluded to in her subtitle. 'The historical economy of emotions . . . presents itself as dynamic and mobile, both enacting and reacting to cultural, social, economic and political challenges' (p. 13), she argues, focusing in particular on how gender has proven a key part of this historical emotional economy. The broad scope of the book might lead some to assume that it is more of a popular account, but careful study of the footnotes, filled with primary and secondary reading, leaves no question about the depth and density of Frevert's research. In her conclusion she allows her engagement with specialised academic questions and concepts to become more explicit, emphasising the significance of 'social subcultures' in emotions history and warning against homogenising historical narratives (pp. 206–7). Arguments about emotionology, emotional regimes, and especially emotional communities are present in *Emotions in History*, even if Frevert avoids direct discussion of them, focusing instead on the evidence underpinning her study, which as a whole emphasises the 'emotional provisions and requests' political and cultural institutions make on the societies they help shape (p. 211).

Though different in size and scope, Susan J. Matt's *Homesickness: An American History* bears notable similarities to Frevert's book in terms of aims, approach, and tone. Like Frevert, Matt avoids extended discussion of methodology or historiography in the field, limiting her comments to a few sentences about the relevance of emotions history generally: 'While generations of scholars long assumed that emotions were "tangential" to the fruitful study of the past, historians of the emotions argue that they are central to historical narratives'. Hers is a study, she writes, of 'how society shapes personality and how emotions shape history', with the history in question being that of the colonization, development, and expansion of the United States as a nation, and the way in which sustained migration and attending feelings of homesickness have been an integral part of this process (p. 9).

Matt's sweeping history begins in the seventeenth century, when European colonists crossed the Atlantic and began establishing settlements along America's east coast, and ends in the twenty-first century, when new technologies such as Facebook and Skype are changing the way in which people communicate with loved ones far away. In between these two bookends Matt covers Native Americans' forced migration, the medicalisation of 'nostalgia' among homesick soldiers during the Civil War, the pursuit of the Western frontier, the experience of immigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the growth of the interstate job transfer in the 1950s and 1960s.

Matt's central thesis is that the American perception of homesickness has changed significantly over time, reflecting parallel changes in the national understanding of community, family relationships, and social mobility. While anguish about being separated from one's family and home was seen as natural for much of this history, Matt argues, the rise of mass industrialisation and professionalisation in America turned homesickness into a childish affliction, reflective of personal weakness and immaturity. The idea that 'the past is irrevocably lost' is a 'hallmark of modern consciousness' (p. 253), she suggests, with modern social codes requiring an 'ethic of cheerfulness' (p. 39) towards the prospect of continued migration, especially when done in the name of advancing economic prospects. Matt's study is filled with primary quotation, her own scholarly voice carefully linking these articulations together into an encompassing and compelling historical narrative. In her deep engagement with the materials of her period Matt's book suggests a way through challenges in emotions research by simply attending to the available evidence in as much detail and breadth as possible – an approach not unlike that often seen in some of the major twentieth-century studies of emotions and *mentalités* mentioned earlier. While Matt implicitly addresses emotionology, emotional communities, and emotional regimes in America, she does not – like Frevert – label them as such, choosing to avoid these technical terms and to focus instead on language more native to the period she is discussing.

More theoretical and historiographically engaged are the final two books up for review in this essay, both of which come from English rather than History departments. The first, Richard Strier's *The Unrepentant Renaissance: From Petrarch to Shakespeare to Milton*, argues persuasively for a scholarly understanding of the European Renaissance 'as more bumptious, full-throated, and perhaps perverse than that which has prevailed in a good deal of recent literary

scholarship' (p. 2), claiming that literary scholars and historians have too often characterised the period (especially in its English context) as a time of cautious obedience and cultural conservatism. Although *The Unrepentant Renaissance* is not strictly focused on the history of emotion, it does take emotional repertoires as the focus of its first section ('In Defense of Passion and the Body') and it also includes a critique of existing Renaissance emotions scholarship in its introduction. Here Strier argues convincingly that long-standing interest in the medical side of Renaissance emotion has become a kind of rigid 'new humoralism' (a play on literary studies' 'new historicism' of the 1980s and 1990s), overshadowing other, non-Galenic approaches to emotional experience and resulting in a skewed picture of Renaissance emotion as valuing self-control above all else (pp. 17–18). The emotional regime of the Renaissance, Strier rightly argues, was a mixed one, at times emphasizing restraint and repression but very often celebrating exuberance and excess. In an interesting connection back to Nietzsche, Strier takes as inspiration the spirited work of Jacob Burckhardt, the nineteenth-century progenitor of cultural history whose scholarship Nietzsche admired. Pace Burckhardt, *The Unrepentant Renaissance* attempts to re-inject the (English) Renaissance with some of the more vibrant 'colours of existence' Strier feels have been systematically disregarded in recent scholarship, which he suggests has favoured more 'dark and dour' shades (p. 17). In order to pursue this alternate (or unrepentant) history Strier employs a form of rigorous literary historicism that is similar to Frevert and Matt in its emphasis on extensive primary reading but different in its close, sustained, and analytical reading of its central texts, offering detailed and enlightening discussion of the representative strategies they use as they construct and deconstruct emotional experiences in both their narratives and their readers.

Less strong in its critique of previous scholarship, but more pronounced in its employment of theoretically-inflected methods, is Lynn Enterline's *Shakespeare's Schoolroom: Rhetoric, Discipline, Emotion*. Like the 'new humoralists' Strier critiques, Enterline sees emotion as a deeply embodied experience, although she understands this form of embodiment as shaped more by childhood experiences at school than beliefs in medical humoralism. In the humanist classroom, Enterline argues, young scholars learned the arts of rhetoric, aimed at creating verbal experiences that moved the minds and emotions of its listeners. Such schooling involved what Enterline calls 'habits of personification' and 'habits of alterity' (pp. 7–8), requiring students



to perform convincingly the emotions they described in their Latin recitations if they wanted to avoid corporal punishment from their schoolmasters. Such affective alterity, Enterline argues, ‘encouraged in pupils a highly mediated relation to emotion’ (p. 25), a process that she sees as linked to psychoanalytic theory’s understanding of ‘affect’ as ‘moments of opacity in emotion’ that are disassociated from their cause and non-linear in their manifestation (p. 28). In this way, close reading, historicism, and psychoanalytic theory shape Enterline’s study in equal measures, focusing on how cultural structures like the humanist schoolroom not only taught people ideas about *what* to feel, but also inculcated behaviours and practices that shaped *how* to feel.

In the case of Shakespeare, Enterline argues that his strict training in the humanist schoolroom enabled the vivid, affective rhetoric he is known for in his writing. Like Strier, however, Enterline sees this seemingly oppressive system of self-mastery and scripted emotional performance as producing a highly subversive form of Renaissance subjectivity. In her chapters on love and eroticism, character and cruelty, and woe and the classics, Enterline analyses how the rhetorical performance of passion, often in a markedly extreme form, offered a socially condoned means of bypassing religious and philosophical rules about self-control and emotional restraint. Furthermore, the imitative role-play involved in humanist learning destabilised the kind of rigid masculinity argued for in earlier studies of Renaissance pedagogy. By teaching students to ventriloquise the passions of classical figures such as Hecuba or Ovid’s shape-shifting gods, Enterline argues, schoolmasters unwittingly promoted a more fluid, distributed approach to identity and gender than has previously been realised. Drawing on psychoanalytical works such as Freud’s ‘A Child is Being Beaten’, Enterline proposes that ‘the grammar school’s training – its demand for imitation paired with the constant threat of violent punishment – could exacerbate the split in identity and incoherence in gender norms that humanists claimed their curriculum would put in place’ (p. 150). While Enterline’s study maintains the trend in this review essay of not employing any of the most prominent methodological terms in emotions research, it is nonetheless explicit and rigorous in its use of psychoanalytic and gender theory to shape the arguments and terms of reference in its analysis.

Though only four studies of many that are currently emerging in and around the field of the history of emotions, the books considered here are suggestive of a continued lack of consensus about how

emotions history should be done. Despite the development of a rather formidable methodological toolkit over the past twenty-five years, the field remains diverse in its practices and no doubt fractious about the relative value of these varying approaches. Perhaps this is a positive development, though, reflecting the variety and vibrancy of a field that seems at once unable to define itself or to stop growing. In a set of interviews with Stearns, Rosenwein, and Reddy in 2010, Jan Plamper identified a desire among all three scholars to see the future of emotions history ‘not as a specialized field but as a means of integrating the category of emotion into social, cultural, and political history.’<sup>8</sup> In order to achieve such a thorough integration – not just in History but in English and other humanities disciplines as well – a wide range of approaches, and the resulting arguments about method and rigour that they inevitably prompt, will be both necessary and welcome. From historical empiricists to literary formalists to psychoanalytic theorists, scholars are becoming increasingly enthusiastic about exploring cultural history ‘from the inside out’, in finding new colours in the ‘conditions of existence’ that inflect the history of everything else.<sup>9</sup> It seems, then, that we have at last taken off as a field, and in more directions than one.

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#### Notes

1. Nietzsche, Friedrich (2001), *The Gay Science*, Bernard Williams (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 34–5.
2. Leys, Ruth (2011), ‘The Turn to Affect: A Critique’, *Critical Inquiry* 37, pp. 434–72; Clough, Patricia Ticineto and Jean Halley (eds) (2007), *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, Durham: Duke University Press.
3. Burke, Peter (2005), ‘Is There a Cultural History of the Emotions?’, in Gouk, Penelope and Helen Hills (eds) *Representing Emotions: New Connections in the Histories of Art, Music and Medicine*, Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 35–47, at pp. 37–9. Amusingly, Nietzsche calls the section in which he discusses emotional history ‘*Something for the industrious*’ (34).
4. Febvre, Lucien (1973), ‘Sensibility and History: How to Reconstitute the Emotional Life of the Past’, in Burke, Peter (ed.) and K. Folca (trans.), *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre*, London: Harper and Row, pp. 24–5, his emphasis.
5. Stearns, Peter N. and Carol Z. Stearns (1985), ‘Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards’, *The American Historical Review* 90:4, pp. 813–36, at pp. 824, 830.

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6. Rosenwein, Barbara H. (2002), 'Worrying about Emotions in History', *The American Historical Review* 107:3, <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/107.3/ah0302000821.html>, at par. 35.
7. Reddy, William M. (1997), 'Against Constructionism: The Historical Ethnography of Emotions', *Current Anthropology* 38:3, pp. 327–51; Reddy, William M. (2001), *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, at 124.
8. Plamper, Jan (2010), 'The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns', *History and Theory* 49, pp. 237–265, at p. 237.
9. Matt, Susan J. (2011), 'Current Emotion Research in History: Or, Doing History from the Inside Out', *Emotion Review* 3:1, pp. 117–124.