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Medieval and Early Modern Emotional Responses to Death and Dying

Rebecca F. McNamara and Una McIlvenna

In 1405, Henry IV sentenced Richard Scrope, Archbishop of York, to be executed for high treason for his participation in a rebellion against the king. Contemporary English chronicler Thomas Walsingham recorded the death of Scrope, including the curious detail that the Archbishop's 'severed head was seen to smile serenely'.¹ Walsingham and other chroniclers go on to recount miracles associated with Scrope's death, including crops growing abundantly where the execution had taken place. Over three hundred years later, English writer James Hervey penned the religious tract *Meditations Among the Tombs* (1746), in which he conjured for his readers bodily depictions of the dead, whose bare skulls 'grin horribly'.² Here a 'haggard Skeleton' with 'clattering Hand' and 'stiffened Jaws' is imagined to warn the reader of impending death – a message meant to resonate more deeply than thunder. With the smiling heads of the dead, these two premodern writers incite particular emotional responses in their readers. One image of death is designed to invoke joy and hope, the other, fear, but both aim to guide the reader to a life devoted to faith in Christ in order to prepare for the afterlife. What we might perceive today as macabre or gruesome uses of the corpse reveal the contrasts of past emotional responses to death to our own, and in the opposing intentions of the authors they also illuminate the variety of premodern affective responses to death and dying. This variety forces us to reject any universalising notions of the emotions that death could inspire, either in the past or the present. This special issue of *Parergon* offers nuanced case studies of how people responded to death and dying in the medieval and early modern period to demonstrate that, despite its inevitability, death produces different emotions depending on the specific historical and cultural moment. Moreover, they reveal how scholars can begin to locate and identify those emotions when the discourses around, and attitudes towards, death have changed so profoundly from the past to the present day.

People in medieval and early modern Europe experienced death and dying differently from the way we do today: the dead formed a more significant social 'presence' for medieval

¹Alicia Marchant, 'Narratives of Death and Emotional Affect in Late Medieval Chronicles', this issue, p. 16, citing Thomas Walsingham, *The St Albans Chronicle: The 'Chronica Maiora' of Thomas Walsingham, Volume II: 1394–1422*, eds John Taylor, Wendy R. Childs, and Leslie Watkiss (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), p. 455.

²Eric Parisot, 'The Work of Feeling in James Hervey's *Meditations among the Tombs* (1746)', this issue, p. 7, citing James Hervey, *Meditations among the Tombs* (London, 1746), p. 56.

and early modern Europeans, who typically experienced the deaths of family and community members in far greater numbers than their modern counterparts.³ Rituals of commemoration and remembrance were informed by changing institutional practices within the Church and the royal courts, and they also varied according to local customs. Conceptions of the body and the soul were different, too, influenced by current theological thinking and lay and learned medical practice. The way the dead were categorised varied – certain types of death were criminal or sinful, others were ‘good’ and noteworthy – and this affected responses to the dead and their surviving families and communities. Emotions were also intrinsic to how people in medieval and early modern Europe prepared for death, said goodbye to loved ones, commemorated their dead, and meditated on life after death. But although death is universal and inescapable, can we say that these are the same emotions we expect to find today in situations of death and bereavement? Which emotions were foregrounded in the past, and how were they expressed and contextualised in historical moments? How did these emotive responses shape literature, art, popular opinion, the press, bonds between community members, the state?

The field of the history of emotions is well placed to address these affective issues by placing such questions in the context of historical understandings and practices of emotions related to death and dying. Begun by historians drawing from the research of anthropologists, psychologists, and neuroscientists,⁴ the history of emotions as a methodological approach has expanded through the work of additional scholars from history, literature, material culture, art

³Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall, ‘Introduction: Placing the Dead in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe’, in *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 1–16 (p. 2).

⁴Key contributions to the formation of the history of emotions include: Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, ‘Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards’, *American Historical Review*, 90 (1985), 813–36; William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Barbara H. Rosenwein, ed., *Anger’s Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Barbara H. Rosenwein, ‘Worrying about Emotions in History’, *American Historical Review*, 107 (2002), 821–45; Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006). A more recent contribution is Jan Plamper, *Geschichte und Gefühl: Grundlagen der Emotionsgeschichte* (München: Siedler, 2012), in English as *The History of Emotions: An Introduction*, trans. Keith Tribe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

history, and performance studies.⁵ As humanities scholars working in the history of emotions, we are not convinced by Paul Ekman's identification of what he terms 'basic emotions',⁶ nor do we seek to trace a teleological 'civilizing process' along the lines of Norbert Elias.⁷ Rather, we are interested in new ways of thinking about how emotions were conceptualised and practised in the past, what effects emotions had on communities, institutions, literature, art, and ritual, and how these subjects themselves shaped emotions. Above all, we insist that emotions are historically embedded – they are uniquely informed by time, place, and culture.

The history of emotions related to death and dying has not yet been comprehensively addressed, though this area of study has much to offer long histories of cultural practice and artistic creation and can also inform present day studies of death and dying (thanatology).⁸ Though the present Special Issue of *Parergon* cannot fully fill this gap it brings together a range of disciplinary approaches to show how the lens of emotion contributes to our understanding of death in the premodern world and, also, how processes and rituals of death and dying shaped emotional practice in the past. Arranged chronologically from the thirteenth

⁵Scholars who have utilised the history of emotions for medieval and early modern literary studies include, for example, Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson, eds, *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); for Art History, John Oinans, *Neuroarthistory: From Aristotle and Pliny to Baxandall and Zeki* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); for Performance Studies, Bridget Escolme, *Emotional Excess on the Shakespearean Stage: Passion's Slaves* (London: Bloomsbury/Arden Shakespeare, 2013). Interdisciplinary scholarship in the history of emotions continues to expand, particularly through research clusters such as the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions, Europe:

1100–1800; the Queen Mary, University of London Centre for the History of Emotions; the History of Emotions Research Centre at the Max Plank Institute of Human Development; and EMMA (Les Émotions au Moyen Âge).

⁶Paul Eckman and Wallace Friesen, *Pictures of Facial Affect* (Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1976); Paul Eckman and Richard J. Davidson, eds, *The Nature of Emotion: Fundamental Questions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Paul Eckman and Daniel Cordaro, 'What is Meant by Calling Emotions Basic', *Emotion Review*, 3 (2011), 364–70.

⁷Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (1939; rev. edn Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought and Art in France and the Netherlands in the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, trans. Frederik J. Hopman (1919; New York: Doubleday, 1924).

⁸Journals of thanatology include *Death Studies*, *Omega – Journal of Death and Dying*, *Grief Matters: The Australian Journal of Grief and Bereavement*, *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, *Mortality Journal*, *Living with Loss*, and *Illness, Crisis and Loss*.

to the eighteenth centuries, and drawing contributions from social and cultural historians and literary scholars, this range of articles allows case studies to portray the great variety of historically contextualised emotional responses to death and dying. Under investigation are topics that appear firmly rooted in a Europe of the past, such as the didactic *ars moriendi* ('Art of Dying') genre, and others that are still perceived as problematic issues today, such as suicide, chronic illness, and appropriate public and private comportment around death. The articles collectively demonstrate how emotional responses to death and dying were formative for the self, family relations and community structures, didactic and artistic media, and government policy in medieval and early modern Europe.

This collection specifically does not focus on a particular emotion, for a singular emotional focus would limit the range of possible enquiry. Rather, the articles demonstrate the variety and complexity of responses to death, showing how they are related to larger cultural frameworks of appropriate emotional behaviour and ethical or moral ideals. But even within this range, certain emotional responses are highlighted, including grief, fear, joy, hope, and compassion.⁹ Though these studies seek to historicise emotion – that is define emotion by its particular local frames of reference – they contribute to the long history of emotional responses to death, and in light of these findings they might offer a fruitful line of enquiry into what historical constructs shape modern emotional responses to the end of life.

Central to the study of death in the medieval and early modern period is the crucial issue of death's implications for the Christian afterlife. A recurring theme in these articles is the didactic opportunities that death presented, specifically, the importance of learning how to die a 'good death'. Juanita Feros Ruys addresses the didactic aspects of death most thoroughly in her exploration of the late medieval *artes moriendi*. By tracing this genre's development from early pastoral care tracts to later humanist texts, Ruys finds that the emotional focus of these texts was initially rooted in the fear of dying unprepared, but later writers integrated technologies of learning by experience to allay fear. At each stage, preparing for death in the *artes moriendi* was undertaken with the ultimate aim of securing salvation after death, though the instructive aspects of reflecting upon dying provided spiritual guidance for the everyday life of the living.

⁹Of these emotions, fear has inspired much historical research. See Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (London: Virago, 2005); Michael Laffan and Max Weiss, eds, *Facing Fear: The History of an Emotion in Global Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

The reports of deaths in late medieval English chronicles also provided didactic opportunities for their readers, as detailed by Alicia Marchant. The manipulation of time by chronicle writers could be used to distort the realities around the deaths of significant historical figures, encouraging different emotions in the reader from those likely experienced by contemporaries. Examining the portrayal of the 1405 execution of Richard Scrope, Archbishop of York, across several fifteenth-century chronicles, Marchant suggests that the chronicle writers reshaped their narratives, particularly by rearranging chronological events, to foreground readers' reflection upon the consequences of rebellion and to suggest divine intervention in the events of Scrope's life and death. Rather than eliciting mourning and grief, such recasting emphasised the hope and joy of Scrope's salvation, and it urged readers to contemplate divine judgement and the larger fate of humanity facing end times.

The didactic opportunities afforded by death are also examined in Eric Parisot's examination of feeling in James Hervey's 1746 *Meditations among the Tombs*. The decline in the critical reception of Hervey's text, from its first publication to the early nineteenth century, corresponded with changing spiritual and literary tastes, as evangelical religious inclinations diminished and sentimentalism gained ground. But Parisot re-contextualises *Meditations* within its original devotional context, showing that this text sought to refigure the grief and sorrow that accompany death as an impetus to religious charity characterised by pity and compassion. This use of affective writing as a spur to sociable action, in turn, prefigures Gothic, sentimental fiction's aims to cultivate social morality and generosity.

Every society has norms concerning how its members respond, both publicly and privately, to the death of another, and several of the articles in this issue explore how those norms changed according to specific contemporary religious, social, or political beliefs. Suicide in medieval Europe was a sin and a crime, but Rebecca F. McNamara shows that English coroners' inquest juries and crown courts attempted to explain this traumatic act by depicting self-inflicted death in the context of physical and mental infirmity. Though many of these deaths were still ruled *felonia de se* (suicide), descriptions of suffering and infirmity sometimes allowed for responses of compassion to the dead or the families they left behind. The letters close of Edward I, McNamara finds, make policy-style statements on the treatment of those suicides who were suffering from infirmity, policy which reveals a compassionate approach by the Crown to those suffering from illness and their bereft heirs. To find such compassion in ostensibly 'emotionless' legal texts is not only surprising, it also calls into question the position held by some modern scholars that medieval society utterly rejected those who had died by suicide as damned.

This concern for those who are left behind after a death, namely, the grieving family and friends, is also the focus of Naama Cohen-Hanegbi's case study of a *consilium*, or medical consultation, by a fifteenth-century Paduan physician. It reveals that, in the eyes of early modern medical professionals, excessive grief was regarded as a potentially dangerous medical issue. Examining Bartolomeo Montagnana's account of and advice to an ill patient who was grieving over his daughter's death, Cohen-Hanegbi correlates this account to Galenic understandings of healthy and unhealthy emotional states. These emotional states are shown to have been interrelated with spiritual characterisations of the soul as physicians strove to maintain patients' health. Intriguingly, Cohen-Hanegbi reveals that physicians could play a key role as social agents for setting the norms of grief.

Amy B. Oberlin also considers social norms related to mourning, focusing on eighteenth-century responses to English royal funerals. As the funerals for the monarch became increasingly private and removed from public view, there was a concomitant growth, Oberlin argues, in affective language in the publicly printed letters of condolence between the people and the new monarch. These affective dialogues did not replace the public funeral, but they facilitated engagement between the monarch and a wider audience of subjects, which ultimately supported political purposes. While the sentiments expressed may not always have been sincere, it is clear that the appropriate level of grief expressed through language was changing and expanding. Furthermore, Oberlin argues, an examination of the changes in emotional language used by early political newspapers can shed light on the growing culture of sensibility in the early eighteenth century.

This collection is notable in that there is no uniform reliance by the authors on a single theorist or group of theorists. McNamara and Cohen-Hanegbi both cite the work of pioneering historian of emotion William M. Reddy, but for the most part the authors find scaffolding for their analyses of emotion in an array of work by historians and literary scholars. Cohen-Hanegbi and Oberlin both draw on scholarship by social historians who have considered the work of emotion in creating social stability in late medieval Italy and eighteenth-century England, respectively. Carol Lansing, Sharon T. Strocchia, and George McClure have all brought emotion to bear on their analyses of the civic ideal in late medieval Italian communes. Cohen-Hanegbi links this work with Reddy's concept of the emotional regime, suggesting that consolation writings influenced the development of a new model of grieving which 'gave rise to an emotional régime which glorified private and intellectual

mourning practices'.¹⁰ Oberlin finds the work of Stephen Pender, Julie Ellison, Christian Maurer and Laurent Jaffro, Jennifer C. Vaught, and G. J. Barker-Benfield applicable to her analysis of the shift in early eighteenth-century England to grief as a 'proper affective comportment of the highest members of society' which was tied to an expanding affective rhetoric as part of the 'progression of the culture of sensibility'.¹¹ Monique Scheer's development of emotion as practice (via Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus*) – that is, emotion as culturally situated and associated with physical and mental processes and experience – is pressed into service by McNamara to analyse portrayals of suicide framed by sickness and the 'compassionate' actions performed by the Crown in response to petitions for the return of suicides' chattels in the time of Edward I. Ruys draws on scholars who have theorised self-fashioning in medieval Europe, especially Ineke van 't Spijker, to show how technologies of experience, which combined affective and imaginative processes, affected the shift in the *ars moriendi* genre from fear to other kinds of emotional (or emotion-less) states that were more conducive to preparing its readers for a good death. Marchant's study of fifteenth-century English chronicle writers' manipulation of time related to narratives of death, and the emotional effects of these strategies, is indebted to Roland Barthes, but she also notes Patrick Hogan's analysis of related processes of narrative rearrangement to produce emotional effects in modern literature. And in describing James Hervey's conception of grief in *Meditations among the Tombs* as an acutely felt experience 'without the consolation of heavenly reunion',¹² Parisot refers to scholars who have mapped out seventeenth- and eighteenth-century conceptions of heaven and hell, such as Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, E. Derek Taylor, and Philip C. Almond. Taken together, the diverse bibliography of this Special Issue demonstrates the elaboration of the use of emotions as a theoretical approach to the past since the history of emotions began to gain a foothold just over a decade ago. It shows the multidisciplinary nature of emotions scholarship, emphasising especially the dialogue between historians and literary critics, and it also points to future directions in the history of emotions and studies of death and dying.

¹⁰Naama Cohen-Hanegbi, 'Mourning under Medical Care: A Study of a *consilium* by Bartolomeo Montagnana', this issue, p. 10.

¹¹Amy B. Oberlin, "'Share with me in my Grief and Affliction': Royal Sorrow and Public Mourning in Early Eighteenth-Century England', this issue, p. 31.

¹²Parisot, in this issue, p. 10.

Many of the articles disclose the ways in which responses to the end of life have shaped particular genres or categories of record. The *artes moriendi*, coroners' records, Italian *consilia*, medieval chronicles, and graveyard poetry and prose can all be seen as instigated and organised by death and dying. Some of these texts, such as historical chronicles and legal records, may be considered unexpected places in which to find emotions, as their generic conventions do not permit a free display of emotion. But processes of feeling have social, political, and spiritual implications, and we urge scholars to continue to view their sources – even those that seem most objective – with an eye for the ways in which these were both shaped by and informed emotions.

This collection of articles also reveals the many ways in which changes around the affective aspects of death and dying could develop, particularly in written accounts. Ruys's exploration of the *artes moriendi* over a two-century period demonstrates that this was a genre that continued to evolve to meet the emotional needs of its readers. Parisot's study of Hervey's *Meditations* also reveals that emotional reactions to 'graveyard prose' were just as subject to the vagaries of fashion as any other literary genre: the overwrought mortuary sentimentalism, so popular in the mid-eighteenth century, was perceived as excessive by the close of the century. People could be made uncomfortable by what they perceived as inappropriate displays of grief or sentimentality, whether it was too little or too much. And Oberlin traces a growing acceptance of 'literary' mourning as the most appropriate alternative for the expression of grief as an expanding print culture began to take precedence over public, ceremonial funeral displays.

Violence forms an undertone in the articles of McNamara and Marchant, both of which refer to violent or traumatic forms of death. In each of these cases, the implication of suffering influenced emotional responses to the death, though the response by the English Crown to a suicide suffering from sickness is very different from the hopeful, even joyful, response to the religious martyr undergoing execution. Historians have elsewhere treated responses to violence in premodern Europe, sometimes incorporating emotional responses, by noting that violence 'moved' people.¹³ Indeed, the study of premodern violence has received

¹³Richard W. Kaeuper, ed., *Violence in Medieval Society* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000); Mark D. Meyerson, Daniel Thiery, and Oren Falk, eds, '*A Great Effusion of Blood*?' *Interpreting Medieval Violence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Robert Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture* (London: Reaktion, 2005); Esther Cohen, *The Modulated Scream: Pain in Late Medieval Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Warren C. Brown, *Violence in Medieval Europe* (Harlow:

increasing attention from scholars of emotion,¹⁴ and we propose that such work can be productively incorporated with studies of death and dying.

There are still fruitful avenues for future research into the emotions related to death in the medieval and early modern period, particularly around gender and religion. The rite of fatherhood and ideals of emotional restraint associated with masculinity are referenced by Cohen-Hanegbi in her analysis of medieval Italian consolation genres' advice for emotional restraint in styles and manners of mourning. She finds that these models for restrained, gendered consolation were integral to wider goals of stable social formation in the Italian communes. But the issue of gender is an area that deserves further treatment in the history of emotions related to death and dying. Similarly, Reformation theories of the soul and the afterlife should be taken up by historians of emotion as ideas that had profound consequences for how Europeans were encouraged to feel about their dead and the rituals and customs that they designed and modified to process those new responses. Each study in this Special Issue reveals the vibrant religious beliefs that underpinned the ever-changing behaviour of premodern Europeans around death: Ruys explains how the 'fear of God' was sometimes seen as a positive motivational emotion in the late medieval *artes moriendi*, while Oberlin's study of the changing traditions of early modern English royal funerals discusses how fear of the Catholic Jacobite 'menace' contributed to the rise of sensibility. Even across this broad chronological scope, religion is seen as a primary force that drives change in belief and expression of emotion around death and dying.

These articles offer new critical approaches to understanding death in premodern Europe, and this Special Issue of *Parergon* makes an important contribution to the field of thanatology in that regard. While the field of thanatology is a vibrant one, most studies focus on contemporary issues relating to death and dying – such as palliative care and assisted suicide – through the narrow lens of modernity. This Special Issue offers historical contexts in

Longman, 2011); Julius R. Ruff, *Violence in Early Modern Europe 1500–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Stuart Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Mitchell B. Merback, *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

¹⁴Stephanie Downes, Andrew Lynch, and Katrina O'Loughlin, eds, *Emotions and War: Medieval to Romantic Literature* (Palgrave, 2015); Andrew Lynch, 'Reading "Violence" in Later Medieval English Narrative Contexts', in *Representing War and Violence in the Medieval World*, eds Johanna Bellis and Laura Slater (forthcoming); Charles Zika and Jenny Spinks, eds, *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400–1700* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming).

which to place these emotive issues that humans have grappled with for centuries. Cohen-Hanegbi's article, for example, concludes by pointing out definitions of grief in the most recent *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), focusing on what is now known as excessive grief, and by considering who offers therapies for grief, and of what those therapies consist. As Cohen-Hanegbi points out, her case study of a fifteenth-century Italian physician's *consilium* illustrates the pervasiveness of these concerns: they are 'fundamental, ongoing questions'.¹⁵ But it also underlines the highly enculturated nature of emotions related to death and dying, making past emotions seem foreign by illuminating their multidimensional, historical contexts.

The articles by McNamara, Ruys, and Parisot were developed from papers presented at *Danse Macabre: Emotional Responses to Death and Dying from Medieval to Contemporary Times*, a Study Day organised by the Sydney node of the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions, Europe 1100–1800. Students and scholars from the humanities and social sciences, practitioners working in clinical counselling and psychology, and members of the public attended this well-received event. The range of participants and the engaged discussions were indicative of the salience of this topic for historical enquiry and its relation to present-day issues including palliative care, bereavement support, and funerary and memorialisation practices.

The common thread running through this Special Issue is the idea that our medieval and early modern ancestors used death as a moment in which to learn – ascertaining how to better live in this life as well as how to prepare for the afterlife. This is because death, despite its universality and inevitability, has always served as a locus of beliefs and traditions, which are themselves ever in flux. The broad scope of material and periods covered here provides case studies that we hope will encourage scholars to continue asking how death and dying have shaped the past. Moreover, we urge scholars to consider how emotions worked in the medieval and early modern world, in what places and texts we can look for them, and how the emotional experiences of our forebears complicate our notions of history.

affiliations?

Rebecca F. McNamara, The University of Sydney

Una McIlvenna, Queen Mary, University of London

¹⁵Cohen-Hanegbi, this issue, p. 25.