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Worrying about Emotions in History

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Review Essay
Worrying about Emotions in History

BARBARA H. ROSENWEIN

AS A MEDIEVALIST, I have cause to be worried about emotions in history. I do not worry about the emotions themselves: people in the past, as now, expressed joy, sorrow, anger, fear, and many other feelings; these emotions had multiple meanings then (as they do today); they had their effects on others and were manipulated in turn (as ours do and are). What medievalists—indeed, all historians who want to get their history right—must worry about is how *historians* have treated emotions in history. The purpose of this article is to survey the historiography of emotions in Western history and to suggest some fresh ways to think about the topic.

IT MAY BE OBJECTED THAT, for the most part, historians have not treated the subject of emotions at all. Despite numerous calls for their study, starting at least as far back as 1941 with a famous article by Lucien Febvre, most historians have shied away from the topic. Why indeed should they have essayed it? As an academic discipline, history began as the servant of political developments.¹ Despite a generation's worth of social and cultural history, the discipline has never quite lost its attraction to hard, rational things.² Emotions have seemed tangential (if not fundamentally opposed) to the historical enterprise.

When Febvre called for histories of emotions in 1941, he was not so much repudiating the political focus of history as recognizing something that, perhaps,

I dedicate this article to the memory of my father, Norman Herstein (1921–2002). This article was written during a year of research (1999–2000) supported by a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship and subvented by Loyola University Chicago. I am grateful to both. I wish to extend warm thanks to Esther Cohen, Mayke de Jong, Lynn Hunt, Piroska Nagy, Daniela Romagnoli, Tom Rosenwein, Daniel Smail, Stephen D. White, and members of the *AHR* Board of Editors for reading and commenting on this article in draft. At the behest of Allen Frantzen, I presented one version of it as a lecture for the Loyola Medieval Studies program; I would like to thank him, Theresa Gross-Diaz, and other members of the audience. Finally, I thank my graduate students—Kirstin DeVries, Frances Mitilineos, Jilana Ordman, David Roufs, and Sonya Seifert—for cheerfully worrying the topic with me throughout a year-long course.

¹ For a brief summation, see Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover, N.H., 1997), 5.

² Less than forty years ago, when the *Journal of Social History* was founded, its founder, Peter Stearns, bewailed the fact that social historians were acting as handmaidens to political history; see *Journal of Social History* 1 (Fall 1967): 4. (Stearns figures prominently in emotions historiography, as will be noted below.) But even as late as 1994, Lyndal Roper's study of subjectivity in the early modern era, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London), 5, had to fight "our own attachment to the story of the rise of individualism and rationality." This bias is an aspect of history's gender: see Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical*

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