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Editors' Introduction

# Facing Up to the History of Emotions

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This special issue of *postmedieval* brings together several strands of medieval and medievalist work in the history of emotions, with a focus on literary, historical and cinema studies. It asks how we may best 'face up' to work that has been done already in these fields, and speculates about work that might yet be done, especially by medievalists working across medieval and postmedieval sources. In the idiom 'facing up,' we evoke the impulse to assess and realize the place of medieval studies in the burgeoning field of emotions research. We also conjure our conceptual focus – the expressive human face – as a complex and intriguing source for reading emotions in the past. Whether the face is taken as textual or visual, literal or conceptual, represented or embodied, it is, like the emotions, critical in Western understandings of humanity itself.

Conceptually, psychologically, and artistically, the face is perceived as being at the forefront of many human interactions and emotional practices. These range from the larger, universalizing claims of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom the face is the 'primordial signifier' that guarantees human relationships with each other and with the divine (Levinas, [1961] 1979), to the dizzying arrays of facial emoticons that compete for our attention on our smart phones when we



attempt to send a message about dinner time. In between these extremes, in terms of our everyday social and cultural practices, the face is often the primary means by which we negotiate the relationship between sameness and difference, across divisions of race, ethnicity, age, gender, and temporality. Sometimes the face is the sign of otherness; in other contexts, it serves as a cultural mirror by which we measure conformity to ideals of beauty or recognizable character types.

Questions of identity, whether individual or collective, are inevitably bound up with questions of emotion and affect. The face is not only a powerful conceptual site for theorizing human relationships, past and present, or a site for the representation of emotion: it is itself a catalyst for feeling. For Levinas, the conceptual ‘face-to-face’ (*face à face*) is first and foremost a form of social encounter, in which the face itself is essentially naked: vulnerable, and without defence (Levinas, [1961] 1979). Drawing on Western cultural traditions, Levinas founds his ethical philosophy on the moment of encounter as recognition of an “Other” face, through which one is able to reflect with greater responsibility on the Self. In a 2010 essay, ‘Meditations on the Face in the Middle Ages (with Levinas and Picard),’ Michael Edward Moore charts the ‘many points at which Levinas’ thought reflects an entanglement with ancient and medieval traditions’ (Moore, 2010, 20). The essays in this issue highlight many more, although with less emphasis on points of connection in medieval and modern philosophies, and more on the cultural valences of the face: medieval and/or postmedieval. At the same time as we acknowledge the (inevitable) influence of Levinas on our conceptualization of this special issue, we also acknowledge our debt to Deleuze and Guattari’s writings on ‘faciality’ (the processes by which we apprehend faces); Erving Goffman’s on ‘face-work’ (which insists similarly on the social embeddedness of the face); and Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit’s on the primacy of cinematic form.<sup>1</sup> One of the goals of the essays collected in this special issue is to move with, but also *beyond*, philosophically-oriented models of conceptualizing the capacity of the face to communicate silently, and to challenge the influential theories based on psychological research which we outline below. In ‘facing up to the history of emotions,’ we hope to show how the face may be theorized by attending to facial expression and gesture as a historically-determined form of behavioral ‘practice.’

The essays in this issue show that the face is meaningful as a site of emotional expression primarily when there is *someone there to see* – and record – its movement and change, no simple task for the historian. The face is the site where body and mind work together, the site where social expectations and individual practice meet through a combination of prescription and instinct: the learned or cultivated *habitus*. Our sense of ‘practice’ is drawn from the work of cultural historian Monique Scheer (2012), who proposes a subtle anthropological model for studying emotional behavior. Scheer draws

1 See Levinas, ([1961] 1979), Deleuze and Guattari (1987), and Bersani and Dutoit (2004).



on Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus* to suggest that individual emotional behaviors take place in relation to other local, cultural, and social expectations and practices, while still having the capacity to change and affect such practices. It is a fluid model that can account for cultural change as well as variations in styles and individual expressions. It is primarily a *social* model, too, one that many historians and theorists of emotion are finding very useful indeed. Literature and art are important parts of the lived (and always changing) *habitus*.

In the study of human emotions, appreciation of the face as a site of and for feeling is extremely long-lived. There is an extensive and detailed history of scientific and medical attentions to the face as a location of spontaneous emotional expression, which stretches from the classical period through the work of Charles Darwin to modern neuroscientific and psychological research. A number of the contributors to this special issue cite psychologist Paul Ekman's highly influential theses about the universality of certain human facial expressions. Many historians of emotion are keen to point out the limitations of his method, but Ekman's ideas circulate widely in the life sciences and elsewhere. His theory holds that human facial expressions are cross-cultural and innate, instantly and identically legible even to those who have never seen a film or read a novel.<sup>2</sup> One interpretation of Ekman's approach is that emotions are notoriously difficult to pin down and identify, but if we can find or 'see' them anywhere, it is almost always, or at least most evidently, on the face, where the dialectic between what is individual and what is social – that which is recognized by others – is played out. The face gives the emotions away, according to the US television crime drama 'Lie to Me' for which Ekman was a consultant. The series' main character, Dr. Cal Lightman, based on Ekman himself, was a human lie detector, an experienced reader of the truths implicit in certain gestures and facial 'micro-expressions' (Baum, 2009–2011).

Ekman's basic model of reading faces as unambiguous signifiers of feeling becomes problematic when we introduce historical and cultural dimensions, both to the consideration of emotions, and to the question of the face. Does a smile or a frown 'mean' the same thing across cultures? Or in the eleventh century as it does in the twenty-first? Attention to multi-temporal, cross-cultural histories of facial expressions and their interpretations complicates popular theories of universality. In this special issue, we insist that, because emotions may be historicized, there must also be a history of facial expressivity. Re-interpreting recent ethnographic and psychological studies of human facial expression, Kim Phillips argues in her essay in this collection that the expressive face is always subject to cultural construction: 'It stands to reason,' she concludes, that, like emotions, 'facial expressions [...] also have a history' (Phillips, 2016).

2 See, for example, Ekman (1971, 1992).



Philippa Maddern, reflecting on Ekman's theories and their pervasive influence, shows that there is still a substantial and unreconciled division between those who see the face as a reliable and unchanging index of timeless and unchanging emotions, and those who see the face as an important register of social, cultural, and ethnic differences in emotional practices. The problem of reconciliation is not easily overcome by cross-disciplinary collaboration and/or interdisciplinarity: there are, of course, many scholars from both the sciences and humanities in the first group who also, and in a related way, insist that the history of emotions is an impossible discipline, founded on a radical misconception. They argue that emotions are essentially unchanging, except in so far as they have evolved along with other aspects of human development, and that when we compare the different meanings of a smile, for example, we are describing only *representations* of emotions, or variable conventions about what is fitting or suitable in different social and cultural contexts. For such theorists, the face is often the most persuasive site on which to mount such an argument. Implicit in such practice is the sense that the face is somehow immune to or shielded from historical and cultural difference: that its muscular movements are powered by neurological impulses that are not only stable across races and cultures, but are constitutive of being human, and thus universal.

One of the most obvious ways to measure and chart this theory is to use black and white images of faces, stripped of cultural determinants like color, hair, tattoos, and piercings, to help categorize and taxonomize a set of emotional expressions that might be stable across cultures: these are the sorts of images that Ekman presented to the participants in his studies. In August 2015, a special issue of the Newsletter of the International Society for Research on Emotions, *Emotions Researcher*, staged a 'face off' (a four-person debate) between 'Basic Emotions Theory' (BET) psychologists who follow Ekman's findings, and those who espouse psychological constructionist and behavioural ecologist views.<sup>3</sup> The critics of BET pointed to the methodological and conceptual problems of its approach, not the least of which is the fact that experimental readers and subjects are often far from unanimous about how a photographed face can and should be named as representing a singular emotion (Cordaro et al., 2015). It is also easy to isolate and identify different cultural expectations of facial gestures in different societies and ethnic groups. Consequently, it is not hard to imagine that the historical picture must be equally complicated.

The first volume published in Oxford University Press's Series 'Emotions in History' was an English translation of Jan Plamper's 2012 work, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* (2015), originally printed in German as *Geschichte und Gefühl: Grundlagen der Emotionsgeschichte*. The book attempts to provide a thorough review of the main lines of contemporary argument (and disagreement) about the history of feeling, from the life scientists, psychologists, and evolutionary theorists who argue for the stability of human emotions, to the cultural theorists and anthropologists who insist on the importance of cultural,

<sup>3</sup> See Cordaro et al. (2015).



historical, and ethnic differences in emotional behaviors. Plamper's concentration on changes in philosophical thinking about emotions over time helps furnish the case for difference, one distinct from the prevalent view in the life sciences in particular: historical study, by its very nature, insists on revealing variety and complexity in cultural patterns over time. Plamper's dissection of universalism, via a sustained critique of Ekman, seeks to move studies of bodily expression beyond the face. And yet, as Plamper's account shows – he appeals to Charles Le Brun's vivid drawings of expressive human and animal faces during the seventeenth century, and the nineteenth-century photographic archives of the French neurologist Duchenne (Montagu, 1994; Duchenne, [ 1862] 1990) – the critical and scientific histories of attending to the face as an index of human psychological states is crucial to the writing of emotions history.

Our own starting point for this collection, by now, is clear. We assume that emotions *do* have a history, and that the various social practices associated with the face and faciality help to constitute that history. That is, the emotions are not Ideal Forms, disconnected from bodies and societies; nor are they simply the result of biological or neurological wiring. Moreover, they are knowable *primarily* through their historical and cultural manifestations. In this special issue, we pay particular attention to the surviving evidence of literary, documentary, and artistic records, as well as the conceptual dimensions afforded by less purely 'historical' but no less important disciplines for thinking about the relationship of the face and the emotions to the past. Medievalism and cinema studies, as demonstrated in the essays by Louise D'Arcens and C. Stephen Jaeger, offer alternative ways of thinking about both the medieval and the postmedieval 'face' and the way that faces from the past elicit emotional responses in the present.

Not all our contributors approach their material from the same perspective, of course, but working through these essays has confirmed our sense of the value of thinking about emotions as forms of practice: neither purely affective nor purely linguistic; neither unchanged nor unchanging; neither purely individual nor purely social. This is one of the insights to emerge from work done through the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions (CHE), which sponsored this special edition and two, two-day conference-workshops (known as 'collaboratories' in Centre parlance) on this general theme, 'Faces of Emotion' (December, 2012), from which the majority of the essays published here have been drawn, and 'Reading the Face' (May, 2015). Both events aimed to foster interdisciplinary discussions of the theme by involving the work of psychologists, curators, and artists, with some extraordinary outcomes: the final panel of the second conference featured the moving juxtaposition of James Simpson, the Harvard medievalist, talking about recognition and the face in Virgil's *Aeneid*, followed by Indigenous artist Bindi Cole, talking about her video installation 'We All Need Forgiveness,' in which a range of faces say 'I forgive you,' repeating this phrase, mantra-like, as it takes



4 Video of installation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kk32EX09Rog>.

on different and often increasingly powerful resonance that is both political and personal.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike other centers for research on emotions, CHE focuses primarily on European history and culture between 1100 and 1800. Our researchers are drawn mostly from the fields of history, literature, music, performance, art, and politics. Our agenda has been very broad from the beginning (our very generous funding runs from 2011–18). One of our aims has been to think about the emotional continuities and discontinuities between medieval and early modern Europe, and also between those early formations and the settlement history of Australia, especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many of our outreach events have also invited public and community response to emotions, through topics such as memory, heritage culture, music, and performance. These approaches fit squarely with the aims and ideals of *postmedieval*, not least because they bring the history of emotions into dialogue with medievalism studies.

Another distinguishing feature of CHE has been its willing embrace of the close relationship between history and literature. But further than the use of ‘literary’ texts as historical evidence for the emotion – the work of medieval historian Barbara Rosenwein (2006, 2015) might be a useful example here, or that of William M. Reddy, who draws extensively on the poetry of the troubadours and *trouvères* in his *The Making of Romantic Love* (2012) – researchers in our center have argued for a more distinctive value of literature. No longer seen as ‘exceptional,’ or as only the expression of cultural élites, or as the simple or transparent translation of feelings into language, we regard literary and dramatic texts as giving powerful form to emotions and feelings, as finding alternative ways of exploring affective states without merely naming them. That is, we see literature, in particular, as doing more than simply contributing to a lexicographical index of emotion. Literary texts notoriously avoid the direct statement or naming of emotions, preferring metaphoric, metonymic, allegorical, and symbolic language, language that takes risks, that skirts around emotions, and that is not afraid to experiment. Mary Flannery shows how this is exactly what Lydgate does when he extends Ovid’s text, expanding the metamorphosis of Philomela into a bird with a focused meditation on her emotional response to the transformation of her face. Philomela retains her individual humanity, even without her human facade; liberated from societal judgments of the blushing female face, her experience of shame is transformed into joy, expressed in (bird) song.

Most of these papers consider historical change and transformation in some way: from the large sweeps of cultural history invoked by Maddern and Jaeger, to the more closely focused comparison between novel and film of *The Name of the Rose* in D’Arcens; from the influence of trade and economics on the representation of religiously and ethnically ‘other’ faces in Phillips’ work on western visual and textual media from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, to



the very material change of Philomela from woman to bird. A big theme in these essays is otherness, a (Levinasian) encounter with the/an ‘other’ face, be it animal (Flannery), racial (Phillips), temporal (D’Arcens), or historical (Maddern, Jaeger). The primary encounter modeled by these essays is with the face of the medieval past: perhaps figured most evocatively in the dramatic confrontation of modern viewer with the ‘gargoyle-like,’ ‘medieval’ face of Salvatore in the film adaptation of Eco’s novel (D’Arcens, 2014).

*postmedieval*’s concern with medievalism and the history of emotions fit this issue perfectly, although the conjunction of medievalism and emotional history is relatively new. As D’Arcens’ work shows (2014), there is a long history of emotional response to the Middle Ages in the west, and medievalism itself is a site for exploring emotions about the past in post-medieval eras. It may also serve as a catalyst for thinking about emotional change, when we ‘think with’ medievalist sources. Jaeger’s essay underlines the persistence of medieval emotional models into the present, as the face of the beloved woman offers (male) redemption. Modern cinema carries forth many of the historical and cultural conventions about the female face with which medievalists and literary scholars are most familiar: Chrétien’s Lancelot in love, mesmerized by the image of Guinevere’s face – bloodstains in the snow – anticipates the zealous devotion of the cinematic camera to women’s faces, and the potential violence of its gaze.

Medievalism itself is becoming more popular as an institutional disciplinary formation in departments of English in particular. History departments have been slower to take up its invitation for speculative thinking, though medieval history flourishes. As Phillips observes, history and literature occupy different disciplinary grounds and starting points, but the study of emotions is rich territory for thinking about their critical histories and about the shaping of interdisciplinary work in the present. Emotional history is a natural fit with medievalism and also with historiography, as past emotions inevitably invite comparisons with modern structures of feeling and the various investments we bring to our study of the past, as we think these essays show powerfully.

The urgency of thinking through the meaning of emotional and cultural change has been one of the drivers of CHE, and it was given initial impetus by the inspirational leadership of the medieval historian Philippa Maddern at the University of Western Australia. Philippa both guided and energized the arduous process of the initial bid and grant application, and, as Director, she led the first years of the center with characteristic enthusiasm, profound intellectual curiosity, and abiding concern for the next generations of scholars in the fields of medieval and early modern studies in Australasia. Her premature death from illness in 2014 deprived the world of a great scholar and humanitarian. We are pleased to remind the readership of *postmedieval* of the subtlety and engagement of her scholarship with the opening essay of this special issue, which we gratefully dedicate to her memory.





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