

H-France Review Vol. 8 (August 2008), No. 103

Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*. Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 2006. xv + 228 pp. Map, chart, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-4478-4; \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8014-7416-3.

Review by Bonnie Effros, Binghamton University, State University of New York.

For anyone who has ever picked up a medieval saint's Life, the copious tears shed at a monastery at the passing of a particularly well-loved abbess or the wrath of a holy man against those who exhibit disobedience to God's will are both familiar tropes. Aside from answering student questions about the seemingly exaggerated nature of these displays, however, few of us have likely paused to take stock of what these passages were trying to communicate to their readers. They always seemed too much a part of the standard baggage of saints' Lives—rather than some of their more interesting exceptions—to merit prolonged attention.

Barbara Rosenwein's thoughtful study, however, has changed all of that. She gives weight and credence to the emotions conveyed in early medieval texts and asks what it is that we learn from them. Although the Middle Ages are distant to us, there is a surprising amount of continuity with the forms of emotional expression still in use today (p. 32). In short, Rosenwein concentrates on the constellation of terms used within "emotional communities" to make a convincing argument that we should not dismiss them as mere topoi; emotion words were instead specific to genre, period, and place, and were used by early medieval authors to convey important messages about the individuals or events depicted to their readers (pp. 26-8).

Rosenwein opens her book with a short and simplified introduction presenting prevalent views and the vocabulary of emotions operating in the ancient world. This background represents the base from which the trends she views developing in the early medieval west grew. Touching briefly upon Homer, Plato and Aristotle, she suggests that successive authors had unique interpretations as to whether emotions were rational and whether they were states to be regretted or controlled. Aristotle was particularly interested in how emotions like love, envy, and pity interfered in decision making (p. 35). Stoic philosophy also receives special attention in Rosenwein's introductory survey due to its notable impact on Christian thought; the Stoics judged passion negatively and believed that it was necessary to exercise reason when there were warning signs that emotions were on the way (p. 39). Latin authors like Galen who modified Stoic ideas in the west believed that one could exercise mental self-control to reign in unruly emotions (p. 41).

In the Christian context, it seems that there was no single or uniform reception of emotions words or concepts. Rosenwein provides detailed inventories of the vocabulary of authors like the fourth-century ascetic Jerome, who was responsible for translating the bible to the Latin Vulgate; she surveys which words he most frequently used and how their meaning or association changed in a Christian context from the way they were employed by pagan predecessors (p. 45). Under the watchful eye of monks like John Cassian, emotions became not just a prelude to sin but vices themselves and tied to the flesh. In a sense, the work of the desert saints and monastic authors made the disapproval of Plato and the Stoics harsher (p. 47). Yet, not all authors, even those impressed by the ascetic feats of the self-abnegating desert holy men, bought into this idea wholeheartedly. Augustine of Hippo counseled that one should judge emotions by how they were directed. Tears, for instance, could suggest love of God just as they

could signal the end of a romance. It was the object to which they were directed that made all of the difference (p. 50).

In subsequent chapters, Rosenwein settles down to a more focused discussion of the specific early medieval emotional communities that she has studied in detail. Her first target is funerary epitaphs surviving in the cities of Trier, Vienne, and Clermont between 350 and 750. Although their numbers are limited (she estimates there to be 1500 extant, usable inscriptions for all of Gaul in this period), she believes that they shed light on contemporary norms in the expression of emotion with relation to death. Their variations suggest individual decisions about word choice (p. 59). Although some readers may already be familiar with the collections Rosenwein has chosen for her discussion, the emotional angle she creates provides additional insight into the significance of these brief texts for historians. Nonetheless, her argument attributing slight differences in the vocabularies used in the cemeteries of each city to the existence of various emotional communities is not entirely convincing (p. 77). The number of epitaphs is simply too small and the weight of personal choice in these decisions too great among an increasingly illiterate population prone simply to echo the content of stones in close proximity to those of their families.

Rosenwein's succeeding chapter narrows in on the prolific author and late sixth-century pope, Gregory the Great, whose writings transformed emotions from vices into the seven deadly sins rooted in pride. Few emotions were positive to an author who praised Job as a model of behavior for his readers. The only good emotions were those that elicited tears; fear provided a direct path to God (pp. 81-4). Here, too, Rosenwein's approach sheds new light on even very familiar texts like Gregory's *Dialogues*, which were instrumental in shaping western Christians' understanding of the afterlife. Her observation that Gregory manipulated emotions to justify his religious authority is very useful (p. 89); it adds nuance to our understanding of how the significance of heavenly rewards or punishments might be conveyed to readers more effectively. This way, the Christian faithful saw not just the end result of good works or sin but also could experience the emotional process vicariously through those who were described as undergoing judgment for their deeds at that very moment.

Contrasting significantly with Gregory's ascetic temperament is the roughly contemporary work of Gregory of Tours and Venantius Fortunatus who were friends and moved in the same set of overlapping communities in Gaul in the late sixth century. Although the literary style of the two clerics has usually been seen as dissimilar (Fortunatus being more talented at flattery whereas Gregory being at the ready with satire), Rosenwein argues that both men shared a belief in family bonds as normative and valued friendships even if they praised them in very different ways (pp. 110-13). While Fortunatus was particularly skilled at praising these relationships, Gregory focused on the fury and odium that divided partnerships when they went sour (pp. 123-24). She observes that authors of the period, including the nun Baudonivia who composed a *Life of Radegund of Poitiers* at the end of the century, were far more comfortable treating emotions than was Gregory the Great. She attributes their "broader emotional palette" to the proximity of earthly and heavenly kingdoms and their distance from an ascetic way of life (pp. 127-28). It is here that one wishes that Rosenwein had explored more extensively the high praise given by all three writers to the ascetic feats of others and why their appreciation for these kinds of behavior did not influence their vocabularies to a greater extent.

With the conquest of the Frankish kingdom of Austrasia and the torture and execution of Queen Brunhild by the Neustrian king Chlothar II in 613, Rosenwein posits that this emotional community was substituted with one in which love, sweetness and family feelings were replaced by a more restrained emotional style. In part, this change was due to the Irish monk Columbanus' influence on the court; although the monastic reformer himself did not avoid emotion words altogether, he certainly took a more ascetic approach to their application (pp. 130-31). Rosenwein also suggests that the courtiers and bishops of the time—like Desiderius of Cahors, Amandus of Maastricht, Jonas of Bobbio, and others—were increasingly wary of effusive emotional expression and replaced it with emotion words that

showed deference, religious feeling, and fraternity (p. 137). While Rosenwein broadly refutes the impact of genre in her discussion, might it not be fair to ask whether some of the shifts in vocabulary are due at least in part to the type of writings from which Rosenwein draws her examples? Could not some of the changes owe less to a climate in which emotion was associated with spiritual weakness--particularly female weakness (pp. 149-50)--and more to differences between the kinds of words and conventions applied to saints' Lives and poems versus those more appropriate to letters?

The final section of the book deals with the last decades of the seventh century in which Rosenwein has identified a new emotional community. Although this community was less tightly clustered and shared no common court or urban base, the elites of this period were more closely bound to one another than to a specific region. Using a collection of saints' Lives, martyr texts, and a vision, Rosenwein suggests a resurgence of passions in these works that colored all sorts of human interaction. Although love is not the foremost of these texts--not surprisingly since many of the texts focus on violence against the clergy and the uncertainty of the afterlife--the figures in these works are portrayed expressing their feelings graphically and unabashedly (pp. 174-75). One text, the Life of Sadalberga, which focuses on anxiety rather than rancor, seems to be the exception and forms the basis of what Rosenwein calls a hidden emotional community or subcommunity based in Langres (pp. 187-88). One wonders here too whether some of the differences in emotion words chosen by authors might more aptly be described as the product of genre or the stylistic precedents authors imitated in their writings.

Rosenwein concludes that emotions provide a different and productive way of thinking about community in the early Middle Ages--one that crosses the boundary between lay and religious communities and offers a more diverse social group than kin. Although she rightly points out that the discussion of emotion in these texts remains focused on norms and codes rather than actual feelings (p.193), this should not cause us to underestimate the importance of her findings. Rosenwein has constructed an original approach to early medieval texts that is both thought provoking and useful; it will without doubt inspire many future imitators.

Bonnie Effros
Binghamton University, State University of New York
beffros@binghamton.edu

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172