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# Medieval Emotionality: The *Feeling* Subject in Medieval Literature

IN 1774 JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE'S *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*) heralded emotive subjectivity as the focal point of narrative engagement. Six hundred years earlier, Chrétien de Troyes's romances likewise established and promoted a shift in the emotional regimes of their time.<sup>1</sup> Each author conveyed a particular mode of emoting—a historically and culturally coded concept of emotional behavior, emotive function, and representation. Despite the roughly six hundred years that separate the medieval and eighteenth-century author, they share in a literary shift that came to foreground emotions not only as part of the narrative matrix, but also as functionally significant for the interpretation of the text. These emotion-signifying patterns built into the narrative shape the reader's perception of the story. The fact that we can still relate to these emotive instances two or even eight hundred years later indicates, moreover, that they form part of a textual fabric that remains meaningful despite the distance separating us from Chrétien's and Goethe's specific historical and cultural contexts.

This essay considers the representation and function of emotion within medieval European literatures and, more specifically, the interplay between the empathetic engagement of the modern reader and the emotive indicia embedded within the medieval text. It begins with a brief theoretical preamble dealing with the concept of emotion and its applicability to medieval literature, followed by a discussion of the textual location, articulation, and expression of the emotive instance, and, finally, an examination of voice and performativity as an inherent

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<sup>1</sup> I draw here on William M. Reddy's concept of "emotional regimes" to designate the reigning stance with respect to emotions at any given time in history (*The Navigation of Feeling*).

and fundamental aspect of medieval textuality. My focus throughout will be the modern reader's engagement with the medieval textual artifact, both as a material artifact and as an act of vocal performance in the past. In doing so, I hope to address both material textuality and the implications of aural performativity for generating and sustaining empathetic connections between text and reader, or between the text and an audience of listeners.

### **Literary Emotion and the Medieval Text**

When addressing emotion in literature, one immediately faces a methodological problem: how can one define emotions (a human phenomenon) within literature (a discursive construction)? Literature exists only as it is written and/or read, and hence necessarily relies on both the emotional engagement of its reader (or audience of listeners in the case of much of medieval literatures) and the emotive configurations embedded within the framework of the text. While the study of emotion has experienced a veritable explosion within the disciplines of psychology, anthropology, philosophy, and history in recent decades, there is, however, no clear consensus as to what "emotions" really are, or how one can transpose a term that refers to the physiological and neurological activity of an organism to discursive constructions that do not possess such interiority or such physicality.

Katrin Pahl has suggested that one possible way of dealing with this problem is to replace the term "emotion" with "emotionality," since the latter "can be characteristic of non-human processes or entities" (547). By shifting the focus from the historicity of the nomenclatures of emotion studies to emotionality as an apposite term to discuss the literary representation of emotive behavior, we can bypass some of the complications arising from an anachronistic terminology. Furthermore, focusing on emotionality shifts the literary critic's point of departure from the disciplines of psychology, medicine, or philosophy, where the subjects are in fact real humans with definable and discernible emotions. By conceiving of emotions as "specific manifestations of emotionality" one can then analyze the emotionality of a text—that is, the way in which emotions are manifested through words, expressions, or dialogue (Pahl 547).

The problem of how to theorize medieval emotionality remains, however, since our concept of emotions may be quite foreign to the medieval mind. However, while a historical analysis of emotion must differentiate between passions, appetites, affections, and sentiments as medieval categorizations of internal perturbations or feelings, the present essay seeks to engage these various categories, their literary representation, and readerly interpretation under the rubric of "emotion," rather than historicize the terminology. Although such a reading does not imply that the modern scholar of medieval literature should not acknowledge and seek to tease out the historical and ideological contingencies of medieval emotionality, it suggests that this can best be done by conceding our own historicity as we attempt to re-enact medieval emotionality. The goal here is not to authenticate medieval emotion, but to locate emotionality within the text produced by the medieval mind and probe how this emotionality can still resonate in a meaningful manner within a modern one.

### The Place of Emotion

Given the apparently encoded physiological aptitude of humans to experience emotions, one can assume that emotions belonged to the realm of medieval man, just as they do to the world of modern man. How medieval people experienced emotions, communicated them, and interpreted them nevertheless differs in degree and form from our own perceptions and articulations. As Stuart Airlie reminds us, the “individual subject has turned out to be historically constructed,” and so are emotions, which raises questions of the “otherness of the past, authenticity, experience and representation” (235). We run the risk of re-constructing medieval emotionality through the prism of our own preconceptions of the emotive subject, which is as culturally constructed and historically dependent as the one we seek to understand. Yet, as Rüdiger Schnell points out, the literary critic seeks not to identify the emotion of a medieval subject (which is inherently absent and obscure), but rather to understand why a particular author makes his or her protagonist exhibit a particular emotion and what it might have meant (83). There will necessarily be a great deal of presumption about the specific meaning of emotive content. Nevertheless, an empathetic interpretation of emotive behavior is contingent on a certain degree of commonality in emotional responses across time that enables the modern reader to relate, for instance, to the internal turmoil of Hamlet.<sup>2</sup> A modern interpretation will of course diverge in some degree from that of the original author—as it would, in fact, with any textual meaning regardless of the text’s cultural or historical proximity.

Given that emotions in a text are discursive constructions and only activated through the reader’s engagement with the narrative content, this fictive emotional interiority must be conveyed through language. Thus, anthropologists Lila Abu-Lughod and Catherine A. Lutz consider emotions to be fundamentally a “discursive practice,” which should therefore be approached through language:

We should view emotional discourse as a form of social action that creates effects in the world, effects that are read in a culturally informed way by the audience for emotion talk. Emotions can be said to be *created in*, rather than shaped by, speech in the sense that it is postulated as an entity in language where its meaning to social actors is also elaborated. (12)<sup>3</sup>

Barbara H. Rosenwein has similarly claimed that defining emotions as “mental construction[s]” is conducive to historicizing medieval emotions (“Emotion Words” 93). Rosenwein recommends compiling a list of “emotion words” used by

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<sup>2</sup> Obviously, texts are enjoyed for a multitude of reasons. It is likewise true that not all texts require empathetic connection and not all readers will engage in an empathetic way with a text (and in fact a reader may engage in multiple ways with the same text). Yet an empathetic involvement in an action in a given text depends on the reader being able to negotiate the emotive landscape of that text. In fact, a disruptive emotional agenda—unnatural, unexpected, bizarre, or offensive emotive behavior—will alert the reader that something is amiss in the scene, that there is more behind the character’s behavior than meets the eye, or, alternatively, jolt the reader out of an empathetic stance, as became commonplace in some twentieth-century texts (*L’Étranger*, for instance), where the goal was not to involve the reader in the narrative, but to distance him or her from it.

<sup>3</sup> Lutz in fact considers the concept of “emotion” itself to be a cultural construct (“Emotion, Thought, and Estrangement”) intimately related to the notion of a self, and particularly the Western preoccupation with and conception of the self. She therefore rejects the idea that we can determine or fully understand the emotional life of distant cultures given that the social circumstances that shaped the perception and experience of emotional life are always fundamentally different and hence inaccessible. For an argument against Abu-Lughod’s and Lutz’s theoretical stance, see Reddy.

medieval and classical authors, which can then be used by historians to examine medieval emotionality. However, while such a framework provides insight into the way in which emotions were conjectured within scholastic and monastic contexts in the Middle Ages, emotion words alone do not suffice to encapsulate the emotive content of a text. Fictive literature, for instance, does not so much theorize emotion as *depict* it. Emotional vocabularies are, moreover, notoriously unstable, and, as Rosenwein herself points out, the signifying content of the emotion words themselves is historically and culturally contingent.

The occurrence of emotion words also varies among medieval texts, with their absence or presence not necessarily an indication of emotional intensity (or lack of it) despite the fact that one tends to assume that texts laden with emotive words are highly emotive and those poor in such words less so. For instance, the apparent laconic mode of portraying emotion in the Icelandic sagas, when compared with romance, does not negate the presence of underlying emotion. Many of the sagas are, in fact, no less emotionally laden than the romances.<sup>4</sup> This difference suggests that the emotive force of a text does not necessarily require emotion words or gestures (noticeably absent in sagas, but abundant in romances), but rather what I would term “emotional signifiers” or “signposts,” which rely on scene construction, narrative arrangement, and implicit or explicit narrative signals, with which the reader (or audience) engages and to which he or she responds.

A short example from one of the Icelandic sagas should suffice to demonstrate the use of such signifiers to represent emotional intensity despite the saga’s apparent terse and dispassionate style of narration. In *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* (*Egil’s saga*), the reaction of Egill to the death of his son Þoðvarr, who drowns when his boat goes down at sea, is devoid of emotion words:

þann dag spurði Egill þessi tíðendi. ok þegar reið hann at leita líkanna. hann fann rett lík Boðuars. tok hann þat vpp ok setti i kne ser. ok reið með vt i Digranes til haugs S(kalla) G(rims). hann let þa opna hauginn ok lagði Boðuar þar niðr hia S(kalla) G(rimi). . . . Epter þat reið Egill heim til Borgar ok er hann kom heim þa geck hann þegar til lokrekiu þeirar er hann var vanr at sofa i. hann lagðiz niðr ok skaut firer loku. engi þorði at krefia hann mals.<sup>5</sup>

Egil heard the news that day and rode off immediately to search for the bodies. He found Bodvar’s body, picked it up and put it across his knees, then rode with it out to Digranes to Skallagrím’s burial mound. He opened the mound and laid Bodvar inside by Skallagrím’s side. . . . After that, Egil rode back to Borg, and when he got home he went straight to his normal sleeping-place in his bed-closet, lay down and locked the door. No one dared to ask to speak to him.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of emotion in the Icelandic sagas in general see William Ian Miller (*Humiliation* and “Emotions and the Sagas”), Sif Ríkharðsdóttir (“Translating Emotion” and “Empire of Emotion”), Kirsten Wolf, Thomas D. Hill (“Guðlaugr Snorrason”), and Auður G. Magnúsdóttir. Carolyne Larrington’s essay on emotion words in Old Norse is also useful in this context.

<sup>5</sup> *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, ed. Jón Helgason et al., 147–48, cited with page numbers in the text. The text is based on one of the three primary manuscripts, A=Möðruvallabók, AM 132 fol., in the Arnarnagðnaean collection in Reykjavík. The differences between A and the other two primary manuscripts, B=Wolffenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek 9. 10. Aug. 4to and C=AM 462 4to and 453 4to in the Arnarnagðnaean collection in Reykjavík and Copenhagen respectively, are negligible in this context. The C text can be found in volume 3, ed. Michael Chesnutt, p. 141. The B redaction (volume 2) has not yet been published.

<sup>6</sup> *Egil’s saga* 169, cited with page numbers in the text. The translation is based on a previous edition, published in 1987, but includes a number of amendments based on an unpublished rereading of Möðruvallabók by Bjarni Einarsson. I have at times adjusted the translation slightly. All such amendments are noted in the text.

The reader (or audience) is not informed of the feelings of Egill as he hoists the body of his drowned son upon his horse and rides home with the corpse. Yet no reader would be unaffected by the scene. While the narrator only recites the series of actions that follow the news of Bǫðvarr's drowning, the focal point nevertheless remains on Egill, firmly establishing him as the emotive center of the passage. The narrative focus directs the reader's attention and manipulates him (or her) into a stance of commiserative empathy.<sup>7</sup> The lack of emotive description induces the reader to visualize the scene based on his or her own internal emotive experience as well as on presumptions about the character's emotive impulses or capacity. Those presumptions are based on the empathetic capacity of the audience to commiserate with the protagonist, to project themselves into the fictive circumstances, and to navigate the signifiers that make up the narrative framework.

The effect is authenticated and intensified through narrative sequencing (a hypotactic structure in this case), in which the arrangement of signifiers within the narrative sequence imbues them with emotive meaning. Egill's taking to his bed and refusing to speak to anyone would, quite obviously, have a rather different meaning if it occurred following a different narrative event, say a battle or a wedding. The interlacing of episodes and their respective emotive signifiers or signposts act as a map that guides the reader in the interpretation of events and the characters' responses to these events, thus infusing them with emotive interiority that is, however, always preconditioned on the reader's configuration of the textual emotive signifiers.

The passage is also characterized by an aural void. The retrieval and burial of the body are accomplished in virtual silence. The text does not stage the initial reception of the news; it simply states that Egill "heard" of his son's death. We do not know who conveyed this information or where Egill was when he heard it. Nor do we learn what he might have said or done in response (or if he said anything at all). Because the entire narrative sequence that follows—the search and discovery of the body, the ride to the mound, the digging up of the mound and the placing of Bǫðvarr's body inside, the ride home, the reception of Egill by the other family members and the household at large, and finally his retreat to his bed-closet—is markedly silent, it directs attention to the sequencing of events and their impact on the characters. The hypotactic sequencing of actions, which ends with the adopted silence of the other characters as well, signals the momentous emotive significance of the event, which extends far beyond the meager textual description devoted to the drowning and the reaction of characters to the accident.

The silence, however, does more than simply invoke the imaginative involvement of the reader in conjuring the presumed emotions felt by Egill. It also signals to a reader familiar with the text's generic conventions the brooding emotions to be released through revenge and death. Yet—and this makes the passage all the more poignant—because Egill's heroic valor is useless in the face of this particular opponent, his grief lacks a proper outlet, i.e. retaliation. The cultural tradition of retaliation, blood-feuding, and *manngjöld* (Wergeld) is of course complex, involving an

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the role of empathy in reading see, for instance, Keen and Lindenberger. For elaboration on mirror neurons—considered fundamental in this process in neuroscience—see Galles and Jones.

intricate and evolving social and semi-legal structure of familial obligations of vengeance, honor, and remembrance that extend far beyond the emotive function (see Miller, “Choosing” and *Bloodtaking*; and Byock). The earlier death of Egill’s brother, Þórólfr, for example, occurs in battle, and Egill is subsequently compensated royally and publicly by King Athelstan, thus securing his brother’s honor and commemoration after his death. In this instance, the tightly woven episodic narrative of the battle, the discovery and burial of the body, and the return to the King’s hall pauses to describe Egill’s facial features in arresting detail, with the scene thus staged to provide Egill’s gestural performance maximum impact:

Egill var mikilleitr ennibreiðr brunamikill. nefit ecki langt. en akafliga digrt. [gr]anstæðit vítt ok langt. hakan breið furðuliga ok sua allt vm kialkana. halsdigr ok herðimikill sua at þat bar fra þui sem aðrer men voro. harðleitr ok grimligr þa er hann var reiðr. hann var vel i vexti. ok huerium manni hæri. vlfgratt harit. ok þykt. ok varð snemma skaullotr. (86)

Egil had very distinctive features, with a wide forehead, bushy brows and a nose that was not long but extremely broad. His upper jaw was broad and long, and his chin and jawbones were exceptionally wide. With his thick neck and stout shoulders, he stood out from other men. When he was angry, his face grew harsh and fierce. He was well built and taller than other men, with thick wolf-grey hair, although he had gone bald at an early age. (100)

The description of Egill’s appearance builds suspense and lends a powerful visual effect to the gestures used by Egill to convey his discontent to the King. Moreover, the subtle narratorial allusion to the emotive subtones of Egill’s behavior through the reference to his face becoming “harsh and fierce” when angry subconsciously enhances the mental image generated by the scene.

Facing the King, Egill leaves his helmet on and lays the sword across his knees, drawing it out halfway and then thrusting it back into the scabbard: “En er hann sat sem fyr var ritað. þa hleypti hann annari bruninni ofan a kinnina. en annari vpp i harrætr . . . Ecki villdi hann drecka þo at honum væri borit en ymsum hleypti hann brununum ofan eða vpp” (86; “As he sat, as written before, he lowered one eyebrow right down on to his cheek and raised the other up to the roots of his hair . . . he refused to drink even when served, but just raised and lowered his eyebrows in turn,” 100; trans. modified). This dramatic performance conveys both a threat and a message to the King; it is a gestural display intended to secure compensation for his brother’s death and thus guarantee the family’s—and by extension his own—honor, rather than (or in addition to) signifying an emotive interior.<sup>8</sup> In the scene involving Boðvarr’s death, by contrast, Egill’s emotions are conveyed through the swelling of his body, to the extent that his clothes burst from the strain: “en sua er sagt þa er þeir settu Boðuar niðr at Egill var buinn. hosan var streingd fast at beiní. hann hafði fustans kyrtil rauðan. þraunguan vpplutinn ok laz at siðu. En þat er sogn manna at hann þrutnaði sua at kyrtilinn rifnaði af honum ok sua hosurnar” (148; “It is said that when Bodvar was buried, Egil was wearing tight-fitting hose and a tight red fustian tunic laced at the sides. People say that he became so swollen that his tunic and hose burst off his body,” 169). This

<sup>8</sup> I do not intend to imply that Egill is not supposed to be grieving for his brother or that there are no emotions involved, but rather that the performance is as much (or more) a social performance intended to guarantee or maintain social positioning as it is an exhibition of private sorrow. Egill’s rapid recuperation after the compensation of the King indicates that the performative gesture has been successful (86–87, 100–01). For a discussion of the emotive underpinnings of the fraternal relationship see Jakobsson and Tulinius (particularly 54–82). Both rely on a psychoanalytic reading of the familial relationships in the saga.



somatic response may express the medieval perception of the body as humoral.<sup>9</sup> The “excess” emotion felt by Egill at the loss of his son can be observed quite literally in the passage as his body strains to contain the emotions evoked by the loss. The narratorial voice both feigns objectivity by attributing the description of Egill’s body to those presumably present at the scene, by stating “it is said” and “people say that,” and positions the audience alongside the fictive witnesses to Egill’s ride home so that they can commiserate with the fictive character and project perceived emotions onto the silent body of Egill. The emotional subtext is thus created by the audience as they infuse the character’s action with meaning drawn from their own conceptions of emotional interiority, behavioral codes (cultural as well as literary), and the signifying potential of the narrative framework and context.

### Emotive Performativity

A comparable scene to the one from *Egils saga* can be found in the Old French epic *La Chanson de Roland* (*The Song of Roland*), although it does not depict a father’s sorrow, but rather the mourning of a dead companion. The scene of Roland’s grief at Oliver’s death in the French epic is full of emotion words, gestures, and somatic indicia that all serve to convey the emotive force of the scene (see Ríkharðsdóttir, *Medieval Translations* 65–69). In contrast to *Egils saga*, the narrative voice in *Chanson de Roland* frequently declares the emotive state of its characters, both describing their emotions and depicting them through gestures or somatic reactions. Charlemagne himself is described as joyful (96) or angry (271 and 1834), although the most common emotion exhibited by him is sorrow or grief (830, 841, 2856, 2873, 2880, 2936, 3725, 3817, 4001).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Glyn Burgess argues that the emotional reactions of Charlemagne provide “leitmotifs” that guide the audience through the poem’s emotive landscape (*The Song of Roland* 23).

The scene of Oliver’s death marks a dramatic highpoint prior to the climax of the epic, the death of Roland himself. The scene extends across a number of *laissez* (strophes) and is placed at the height of the battle. It follows several *laissez* depicting the victories of the Franks over their Saracen opponents, thus staging it as the turning point for the Saracens (and the beginning of the end for the Franks). The scene of his death also follows, by approximately 230 lines, a quarrel between Roland and Oliver that ends with Oliver’s portentous avowal that “vos i murrez e France en ert hunie./ Oi nus defalt la leial cumpaignie,/ Einz le vespre mult ert gref la departie” (1734–36; “you will die here and France will be dishonored. / Today our loyal companionship comes to an end,/ Before nightfall, our parting will be very sad,” 1734–36).<sup>11</sup> The *laissez* in between depict the blowing of the Oliphant, which will lead to

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the relation between emotions and the humors see, for instance, Saunders and Rosenwein (“Worrying About Emotions in History”), particularly her theory of the “hydraulic” model (834–37). For a discussion of somatic indicia as emotive markers in the Icelandic sagas see Miller (“Emotions and the Sagas”).

<sup>10</sup> *La Chanson de Roland*, cited with line numbers in the text. The base text used here in Brault’s edition is the Oxford text, Bodleian Library MS Digby 23. My discussion of the emotive subtext in the scene is therefore limited to its presentation in the Oxford manuscript copy and does not presume to represent the legend of Roland in its various stages or manuscript variants. The lines cited above refer to explicit emotive words or gestures (tears, crying, grief). There are obviously multiple passages in which such emotive content is implied, and many of the emotive scenes extend over multiple lines.

<sup>11</sup> English translations are based on Brault’s facing-page translations and follow the line numbers of the French verse.

Roland's death, and shift between the scene of the battlefield and Charlemagne, as he hears the sound of the horn announcing the death of Roland and his peers.

When Oliver receives a mortal wound, however, the previously action-packed description of the battle is halted to focus on the emotive intensity of the loss Roland is about to experience:

Rollant reguardet Oliver al visage,  
Teint fut e pers, desculuret e pale.  
Li sancs tuz clers par mi le cors li raiet,  
Encuntre tere en cheent les esclaces.  
"Deus!" dist li quens, "or ne sai jo que face.  
Sire cumpainz, mar fut vostre barnage!  
Jamais n'iert hume ki tun cors cuntrevaillet.  
E! France dulce, cun hoi remendras guaste  
De bons vassals, cunfundue e chaïete!  
Li emperere en avrat grant damage."  
A icest mot sur sun cheval se pasmet.

(1978–88)

Roland looks Oliver in the face,  
It is wan, livid, colorless, and pale.  
Bright blood streaks the length of his body,  
It falls to the ground in spurts.  
"God!" says the Count, "I don't know what to do now.  
Comrade, sir, your valor, what a shame!  
There will never be anyone who will measure up to you.  
Alas, fair France, how bereft you shall remain  
Of worthy knights, how ruined and fallen!  
The Emperor will suffer a heavy loss because of this."  
Having said this, he faints upon his horse.

The scene is focalized through Roland's eyes, intensifying the emotional impact of the depiction of Oliver's body. Unlike in the understated scene in *Egils saga*, the graphic depiction—Oliver's wan face and the blood streaking down his body—serves to maximize the emotive impact. Roland repeatedly laments both his personal loss and that of France; he faints several times and weeps as he directly addresses his dying companion and later voices his sorrow in the manner of an epic commiseration of the dead. The scene is followed by his rage, as Roland furiously strikes at his pagan enemies. The verses thus display an array of emotive reactions, all of which are made explicit through verbal declarations, emotive gestures (such as weeping), and somatic effects (such as fainting).

It is significant in this context that the moment Roland condemns himself and twenty thousand Franks to death in the famous Oliphant scene (whether one takes it to be an act of *desmesure*, heroic warrior idealism, or unavoidable fate) the narrative voice avoids any emotive allusions (1049–81). The audience is thus left to infuse this passage with an emotive intensity drawn from their pre-existing knowledge of Roland's fate and the magnitude of this moment. The narrative oscillates throughout between impassive and highly emotive scenes that focus interchangeably on the heroic comportment of the protagonists (particularly Roland and then Charlemagne) and their interior emotive lives. During the extended description of Oliver's last moments and death, the scene alternates between large-scale battle scenes and intimate depictions of violence, shifting effortlessly between stunning visual depictions of the field of war (see for instance 1021–22) and glorified formulaic depictions of battle (see for instance 1199–1200), on the one hand, and static and intensely authentic visualizations of individual suffering, on the other:



Li quens Rollant, quant il veit mort ses pers  
 E Oliver, qu'il tant poeit amer,  
 Tendrur en out, cumencet a plurer.  
 En sun visage fut mult desculurer.  
 Si grant doel out que mais ne pout ester,  
 Voillet o nun, a tere chet pasmet.  
 (2215–20)

Count Roland sees his peers dead  
 And Oliver, whom he loved so well,  
 He was moved with pity, he begins to weep.  
 His face lost all its color.  
 He suffered such pain that he could no longer stand,  
 Whether he wished it or not, he falls to the ground.  
 (trans. slightly modified)

The weeping and blanching invoke familiar human symptoms of grief and quite possibly the medieval conception of humors traversing the affective body. The narrator also invokes a presumed emotional interiority in his character when he states that “tendrur en out” (“he was moved with pity”; 2217). The sentence might also be translated as “he feels compassion.” The statement presumes an affective emotive interiority, signaling the interplay between the body, affective emotions, and the cognitive processing of those emotions as pity or compassion. The articulation of such conscious interiority is in fact reminiscent of neuro-scientific conceptions of emotional processes. Being moved with pity, or feeling compassion, presumes an empathetic capacity, articulating an emotive interiority that can be “moved” or that actually “feels” a sentiment that is understood in its social context as pity. Roland’s feelings of compassion additionally evoke images of the emotive foundation for Christian pity and compassion, or what Sarah McNamer has termed “affective meditation.”

While Roland’s emotions are here directed towards his companion and are based on an ideological structure of feudal honor and aristocratic emotionality, the emotive symbolism is informed by and owes its foundation to Christian imagery of pity, or *pietà*. The fictive Roland is thus endowed with interiority as a conscious subject that generates and perceives *feelings*. The feeling of pity or compassion is directly related to empathy and is both a strong undercurrent in the epic and its dramatic force. In fact, Tony Hunt considers pity to be one of the two fundamental emotions that the epic induces in the reader (the other being fear), thereby bringing about an effect akin to the Aristotelian notion of catharsis (794–97).

Oliver’s death is preceded by the accidental (or intentional?) blow he delivers to Roland’s head, cleaving his helmet “d’ici qu’al nase” (1996; “down to the nasal”). Despite the previous quarrel, Roland’s reaction foregrounds the bond between them as he addresses his dying companion “dulcement e suëf: / ‘Sire cumpain, faites le vos de gred? / Ja est ço Rollant, ki tant vos soelt amer!’” (1999–2001; “softly and gently: ‘Comrade, sir, are you doing this on purpose? Look, it’s Roland who loves you so!’”). Their exchange invokes a gentleness and affection that starkly contrasts the imagery of war and death that surrounds them, yet infuses the passage with the emotive undertones of authenticity and the reality of the loss. The exchange reveals personal attachment (see Classen 128–32), a history of affective homosocial bonding, and differs in its emotive undertones from the later lament, which serves to commiserate the heroic valor of a dead companion (see Gilbert

29–59). This is further reinforced by the narrator's comment on the visible ties of affection between the two and the invitation to the audience to observe (and hence emotionally react to) those emotive ties that are about to be broken by Oliver's death: "Par tel amur as les vus deseved!" (2009; "See them now parting with such affection!").

The bond between Roland and Oliver signals an emotive interiority that is directly related to the concept of nobility, rather than to the concept of sentimental love. Daniel Smail notes that in *Raoul de Cambrai*, another French *chanson de geste*, the direct link between somatic gestures and nobility indicates that the literary function of gestures and somatic indicia extends beyond its emotive representation (43–44). If one adopts Smail's theoretical stance, Roland's weeping in fact signals the nobility of his character through the refinement of his feelings, a quality that will indeed come to be fully realized and celebrated in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* half a millennium later.

### Voice, Performance, and the Role of the Reader

My focus on the role of the reader here raises, of course, the issue of textual reception in the Middle Ages. While the engagement between text and reader replicates the communicative aspect of human emotions (the text must communicate a character's emotion to its reader in the same manner as our facial expression, pitch of voice, physical comportment, and words convey our emotional state to, and affect the emotional state of, our counterpart), it is nevertheless constructed and conveyed through discourse. This is complicated by the fact that medieval texts were frequently read aloud to an audience, and, even in instances of private reading, the text may in many cases have been either voiced out loud or mentally intoned. The oral delivery of the text adds a second dimension to the interpretative process, as the author's voice is embodied by its reader. As Beryl Rowland argues, even as late as in the fourteenth century "the poet's voice was still a speaking voice" (44).

In what follows, then, I address the complexity of the relationship between the manuscript, as both a textual and a historical artifact, the vocal performance of the text for its (potentially) non-literate audience, and the modern reader, whose access to the multiple and shifting "textualities" of the medieval work is through often fragmentary manuscript evidence, usually conveyed in turn through a third agent in the textual transmission: the editor. Keith Busby rightly points out the delicate balance between the reading environment of the Middle Ages and that of modernity, where much of the codicological contexts of the works are lost. This essay will not address the specific dimension of medieval textuality, reception, and transmission, but assumes that each work in its specific codicological context (or for that matter in its modern editorial context) is the basis for each singular act of reading, whether private or public.

The performative aspect of medieval literature (see Kiening and Mitchell) by necessity changes the way in which emotionality is conveyed. My earlier argument assumed a single reader's engagement with and interpretation of the built-in emotional signifiers of a given text. However, once the text is conveyed orally to an audience those emotional signifiers become both voiced and embodied. This does

not change the fact that the emotive landscape of a text is contained and conveyed through emotional signifiers that the reader must construe, but it does change the mode in which this happens. Because the individual reading the text aloud (or performing it) must interpret its emotional signifiers in order to determine the manner in which the text should be delivered, his or her reading may affect the way in which the signifiers are communicated, although a “good” reader is likely to convey the text in a manner that is conducive to the emotive content of the material being read.

One of the main sources for rhetorical tropes and oratory style (from the twelfth century onward) was book 4 of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (Copeland and Sluiter 28), which states that, to be successful, a speaker’s performative affective impression should be directly related to the effective elucidation of the emotive content of the material at hand.<sup>12</sup> While the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* is concerned with public oratory, these parameters would have at the very least influenced the way in which public reading practices developed, given the pervasiveness of classical grammar and rhetoric in medieval curricula.<sup>13</sup> As Joyce Coleman notes, the expectations clearly reveal that performers were supposed to “read deeply into texts, drawing out their drama, comedy, and pathos”—that is, able to infuse emotion into the narrative structures being vocalized (60). We will of course never know the exact conditions or conventions of such readings, nor do I mean to imply that all public reading was directly informed by classical rhetoric. The emphasis on performativity in oratory nevertheless suggests an awareness of, and perhaps even a conscious effort to cater to, the audience’s emotion (see, for instance, Copeland).

As a matter of fact, even in modern “silent” reading, we still imbue narrators and characters with “voices.” Consequently, there is a degree of aurality built into any text, and that, in turn, affects the perception of its emotive context in a profoundly personal manner. When we see a film production of a novel we have previously read and find the actors badly cast we cannot help but be aware of the fact that the visual and aural representation of those figures in the film diverges from our own conceptions. This imaginary aural realm is intimately related to the emotive force of a text, and all the more so within a medieval context, where the pitch, intonation, stress, intensity, and amplitude of the voice play a crucial role. The framework guiding this act of voicing is found in the text’s emotional signifiers and is dependent on the reader’s interpretation of them. In fact, the emotive interpretation, the voicing of the discourse, and the emotive reaction of the audience are interdependent and influence and inform one another. An emotionally charged scene may elicit a rise in the voice to convey the dramatic content, which in turn will heighten the sense of its implicit emotionality. In a performative setting this may indeed shape the emotive reaction of the audience. Then again, the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ad C. Herennium* 202–03. Copeland’s and Sluiter’s massive anthology provides an overview of the rhetorical arts in the Middle Ages (particularly pp. 66–68, where they elaborate on the components of Ciceronian rhetoric), including the primary rhetorical works cited, many of which deal with oral delivery (see for instance Martianus Capella 159–66, Boethius 201, Isidore of Seville 242).

<sup>13</sup> I will not expand further on the classical history of oratory and its intersection with the history of emotions, since the focus of the article is on the means of signifying emotive interiority and the readerly engagement with those textual (and vocal) signifiers. That said, authors may also have drawn on spiritual or ecclesiastic theorizing of emotions through alternative sources, such as Thomas Aquinas’s influential *Summa Theologiae*, or penitential and confessional literature.

emotive response of the audience may impact the way in which the text is delivered, thereby creating a correlation between the emotional reaction of the audience, the reader (as interpreter), and the emotional framework of the text.

It is thus significant that in *Egils saga* a poetic utterance, Egill's lament for his dead sons ("Sonatorrek") serves as the outlet for Egill's emotive interior.<sup>14</sup> Kate S. Heslop even considers "Sonatorrek" to be an "expressive Romantic lyric" that signals a shift from an impassive epic prose (as in the depiction of Þoðvarr's death) to the poetic language of the lament—a shift that she contends heralds the later ideological shift in the perception of the self and its expression that is often associated with the Romantics (153). "Sonatorrek" is not, however, the only early medieval Icelandic poem that expressively voices emotion, since many of the Eddic poems do contain laments that are expressively emotive (see Ríkharðsdóttir, "Empire"; Sävborg; and Hill, "*Guðrúnarkviða*"). Heslop's assertion nevertheless points to the use of poetic voice as a mode of expressing interiority as early as the first decades of the thirteenth century. Poetry thus functions as a means of expressing internal emotion without contravening the otherwise objective and unemotional narrative voice of the saga tradition. This is, of course, by no means the only function of verses in the saga, or in saga literature in general. Yet, poetry nevertheless appears to function as the exclusive *means* for emotive vocalization within the saga.

Indeed, the initial verse of "Sonatorrek" speaks movingly of Egill's struggle to articulate his emotions:

Miok ervm tregt	My tongue is
tungu at hræra	reluctant to move,
ór lopt ætt	my poem's scales
lioð þruðara	ponderous to raise.
era nu vænt	The god's prize
or Viðurs þyfi	is beyond my grasp,
ne hógdrægt	tough to drag out
or hugar fylskni.	from my mind's haunts.
(149) <sup>15</sup>	(171; trans. slightly modified)

The lines reiterate (through repetition) both the effort required to put internal emotion into words and the struggle to voice those words once conceived. This difficulty is conveyed by diverse metaphorical images, often drawn from Norse mythology: the reluctant tongue, the scale measuring poetic value that refuses to rise, and finally God's prize (poetry), which has to be teased out from the deepest corners of his mind.

The coalescence of metaphors signals a self-awareness of the act of poetic composition, which, ironically, is simultaneously the source of the imagery and the means of emotive release. The metaphors furthermore signal an awareness of the interaction between the body (which refuses to respond) and cognitive processes, as the poet figuratively rummages through his mind searching for words to express the emotions being felt. The verse in fact serves as a rhetorical portal through

<sup>14</sup> "Sonatorrek" means literally "The unbearable loss of sons." Sigurður Nordal points out that the title of the poem may contain an earlier and more original meaning that denotes retribution that will be hard to pursue (cf. "torreknað hefnir," "unviable vengeance"; *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, n. 1, 257).

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted here that the A text in *Möðruvallabók* only has the first verse of "Sonatorrek." The C text lists 24 verses.

which the grief will be articulated once the initial struggle of voicing emotions (so eloquently stated in the verse) has been overcome. The poem articulates the delicate balance between expressive and suggestive emotionality. It provides a setting or a venue where those internal emotions—previously exhibited through somatic reactions and hypotactic scene construction—can be given voice, thereby beginning the process of healing in a manner akin to the methods (dialogue and writing) of a modern psychological setting.

In the *Chanson de Roland* emotive performativity is staged quite differently. At the height of the battle, the narrative voice interrupts the glorified exultation of violence in the previous *laisses* to declare:

Tant hanste i ad e fraite e sanglente,  
Tant gunfanun rumpu e tant enseigne!  
Tant bon Franceis i perdent lor juventé!  
Ne reurrunt lor meres ne lor femmes,  
Ne cels de France ki as porz les atendent.  
(1399–1403)

There are so many spear shafts smashed and bloody,  
So many standards and so many ensigns torn!  
So many good Frenchmen lose their lives there!  
They shall not see their mothers again, nor their wives,  
Nor the men of France who await them in the mountain pass.  
(1399–1403)

The interlude follows directly upon the *laisses* describing in glorified detail scenes of the death and destruction and has the effect of manipulating the emotive state of the audience by shifting the focus from the glory of war to the reality of death. The pictorial detail of the torn ensigns blowing in the wind facilitates the visualization, which in turn engenders the empathetic stance of commiseration. The reference both to the mothers and wives—conspicuously absent in the remainder of the *chanson*—who will never again see their sons or their husbands, and to the remainder of Charlemagne's army is a dramatic manipulation that would likely have resonated with an audience familiar with the loss of men in war. If, as has been suggested, the memory of Charlemagne was being deliberately shaped here so as to convey a crusading ideology, the connotation would have been even more suggestive (see Stuckey).

The use of voice in this passage is quite unlike its use in “Sonatorrek,” where poetic articulation conveys internal emotion within the poem itself. Instead, the narrator's performative interlude halts the narrative flow in order to heighten suspense and prepare for the scene of Roland's death. Whereas Egill's poetic voice becomes the agent for engendering emotion and its expressions in *Egils saga*, emotive interiority is conveyed through the narrative voice, narrative manipulations, and the interlacing of scenes (frequently through paratactic narrative structuring) in the French epic. The difference may be a result of—or related to—the form of each work. Because *Chanson de Roland* is delivered in a metrical form, Roland's voice is conveyed through the (largely) decasyllabic verse and given equal value to that of the narrative voice itself, which would—in a performative setting—coalesce with that of the actual performer. *Egils saga* is, by contrast, mostly written in prose, and the narrative voice seeks to maintain an external and presumably objective stance. The articulation of emotive interiority is thus—unlike in the *Chanson*—reserved for the poetic voice, which, of course, does in a sense

resonate with the performative setting of emotive staging in the French epic. Both works thus articulate their emotionality through different vocal modes, yet exact their emotive impact through similar narrative manipulations of emotive signifiers or signposts: paratactic or hypotactic narrative arrangement, interlacing, scene staging and focal positioning.

### The Fictive Medieval Subject

Given the correlation between the biochemical make-up of modern man and his medieval counterpart, one can assume that many of the physical symptoms that govern our emotional reactions would have been recognizable to medieval audiences, even though they may have had different associations and cultural meanings. Our linguistic terminology is, after all, only an approximation that seeks to identify the complex system that underlies emotional processes. Emotion words thus tend to define emotional states as if these are stable and definable, whereas the words are in essence always posterior to the emotive state itself and reveal our efforts to label the physiological and mental process of emotive reactions we have just experienced. As Phoebe Ellsworth points out, “emotions, like consciousness, are a continuous stream rather than a collection of separate states” (226). Yet, because it is through the conceptual means of language that we approach these physiological processes, language can be said to underlie and define the way in which we experience those sensations and, furthermore, the meaning we bestow upon them.

This is obviously accentuated in literature, where our access to the presumed emotive interior of the fictive subject is through the discursive representation of those processes as emotional states that are recognizable to us. Ultimately, however, the question of emotionality in the texts I have examined raises the question of the inherently absent medieval subject. The psychologist James R. Averill contends that language can be perceived as the “road to conscious experience, *including feelings of emotions*” (116). If this is so, then emotions are intimately bound up with language, which is inherently variable and unstable. Averill also points out that, if language is necessary for the conscious (or reflective) experience of emotions, then the experience of emotions can be said to be fundamentally “intersubjective” (116). Rei Terada, on the other hand, rejects the prerequisite of a “subject” for emotional experience to take place and asserts that emotion is autonomous and detached from this presumed subject. Her rejection of subjectivity is grounded in the emotional experience itself—the fact that an emotion occurs prior to and before the reflective process of defining the feelings the subject is already experiencing.<sup>16</sup> In literature, however, there is no pre-existing emotional process, since any emotions existing within the text, as well as the subject to which the reader is conferring the presumed emotions, need to be conjured from the text by the reader.

If we conceive of human emotion as fundamentally communicative and intersubjective, how does the text proclaim a “subjectivity” to which we (as readers)

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<sup>16</sup> See *Feeling in Theory*. However, according to Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux, the experiencing and the conscious processing of emotions is a complex process with multiple feedback loops involving the cognitive processing of external stimuli, internal physiological input, and the simultaneous generation of neurological and chemical responses (see Damasio, *Descartes' Error*; Damasio et al., “Subcortical and Cortical Brain Activity”; and LeDoux).



respond and with which we commiserate? Is this other subject the imagined medieval past with which we engage (and which we create) through our reading? If so, this subject is fictive and re-constructed by each reader and through each reading. Only through the linguistic representation of emotionality and its narrative potential can we locate and construe the emotive interiority of the feeling subject in medieval literature.

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