

Centre for the History of the Emotions

HISTORY IN BRITISH TEARS

Some Reflections on the Anatomy of Modern Emotions





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I. Introduction: Huizinga, Elias, Febvre

Although the history of emotions is a relatively young discipline, it already has a recognised canon of major works, and the earliest of these was by a Dutchman. It is appropriate, then, that I should open today's conference, which marks a new beginning in the history of emotions in the Netherlands, by mentioning that book: Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*.

Published almost a century ago, in 1919, Huizinga's work evoked a late-medieval world of vivid and extreme emotional feelings – of joy and rage; grief and tenderness – all expressed with childlike directness and simplicity. Norbert Elias, twenty years later, developed a comparable picture in *The Civilizing Process*. Both works assumed a division between emotion and intellect, and saw the historical development of modernity as a process in which the former gave way to the latter, with unfettered expressivity being supplanted by civility; emotional incontinence conquered by rationality, repression and control. If Europeans in the Middle Ages experienced their lives through intense and violent passions, denizens of the modern world, by comparison, seemed to live in an anaesthetic age.

More recent generations of historians of emotion have been unconvinced by this picture. Aside from its overly schematic nature and controversial periodisation, it is also contradicted by recent philosophy and psychology, which teach that emotions have their own rationality, that they are propositional, cognitive attitudes. As William Blake put it long ago, 'A tear is an intellectual thing'. Emotions and their expression, in tears, sobs, smiles or laughter, represent much more than the leaking out of irrational impulse or of primitive sensibility. Since the 1970s, two American philosophers, Robert Solomon and Martha Nussbaum, have had particular success in reviving the Aristotelian and Stoic view that passions and emotions of the mind are embodied judgements about the world rather than mere physiological feelings. Disgust, fear, and envy are forms of belief, construing their objects as dirty, dangerous or desirable, respectively. Neuroscientists and psychologists have joined the modern chorus denying the antagonism between intellect and emotion which had become standard fare for scholars between the mid-nineteenth and midtwentieth centuries, and historians have learned their lesson too.

Another of the early contributors to the canon of the history of emotions, the *Annales* historian Lucien Febvre, is generally judged almost as guilty as Huizinga and Elias of reinforcing the emotion-intellect dichotomy and projecting it back into history; almost as guilty, but not quite. Febvre questioned the more sweeping generalizations within Huizinga's work, and in his 1941 essay, 'La sensibilité et l'histoire', asked how the historian could reconstitute the emotional life of the past in a more discriminating manner. There was more recognition here of the social complexity of emotions and of their history.

While certainly not endorsing anything like the cognitive or intellectual view of the emotions, there is a sense in Febvre that emotions need to be taken seriously, as complex mental attitudes comprising much more than automatic bodily responses. Febvre was interested in the way that the performance of emotions followed ritual-like patterns and could spread, by a sort of contagion, from one member of a community to another. Febvre's 1941essay was an invitation to his fellow

historians to get to work on this fascinating new field of history; to examine representations of emotions and sensibility in conduct books, court records, paintings, sculpture, music, and novels. 'I am asking for a vast collective investigation to be opened,' he wrote, 'on the fundamental sentiments of man and the forms they take. What surprises we may look forward to!'

2. Emotionology; emotives; emotional communities

But, at the time of Febvre's death in 1956, this vast investigation and these great surprises still lay in the future. Jean Delumeau's historical studies of fear were published in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Then in the mid 1980s the American psychologist-historians Carol and Peter Stearns introduced the concept of 'emotionology' and began to publish books and articles investigating the rules of emotional expression and control that had obtained in different historical periods, especially in America. Studies along these lines were produced on jealousy, anger, and 'American cool'.

'Emotionology' was the first in what has now become quite a bulky conceptual toolkit for historians of emotion. William Reddy's influential 2001 book, *The navigation of feeling*, added considerably to the historiographical apparatus, offering definitions of several concepts, including 'emotional regimes', 'emotional navigation', 'emotional refuge' and 'emotional management'. The idea which has most often been taken from Reddy's work, however, is the idea that certain utterances referring to emotional states (such as 'I was angry with you' or 'I have always loved you') should be thought of as 'emotives', that is as statements both describing and also potentially transforming the emotions of those involved. Reddy's term 'emotive' is a variation on the philosopher J. L. Austin's idea of 'performative' speech acts.

Now, to the Stearns's 'emotionology' and Reddy's 'emotives' and 'emotional regimes', we can add Barbara Rosenwein's 'emotional communities', in which groups are bound together across time and space through shared emotions and a common 'emotional style'. In some of the most recent work in the field the idea of 'emotional styles' has been supplemented with an attention to place and material culture through concepts such as 'emotional spaces' and 'emotional arenas'. And all of these historiographical innovations have not taken place in a purely theoretical vacuum. They have been put to work investigating in detail the emotional, social and political dynamics of medieval religious communities, of the French revolution, of Italian unification, of American nation-building, of the lives of soldiers in the two World Wars; and of individual feelings and expressions in history, including melancholia, anger, lust, and homesickness; smiling, weeping and flinching.

So, historians have, more than half a century on, finally responded to Lucien Febvre's rallying call for a vast collective endeavour unearthing the history of emotional life. Research groups have been formed, and centres founded, in Britain, in Germany, in Australia, in Sweden, and now also in the Netherlands. My colleagues and I at Queen Mary, University of London have set up a blog and an international email list devoted to the history of emotions. In 2011 alone there have been about twenty-five international conferences on different aspects of the history of the emotions. Some of our colleagues in Berlin are, this very day, having a symposium on 'Feelings in the City: Emotions and Urban Space' while we are discussing the Dutch and their emotions here.

It is notable that both the events happening today are about placing the emotions, whether in urban as opposed to rural space, or within the geographical, cultural and imaginative boundaries of a nation. One of the most interesting aspects of emotional experience is that it is so acutely sensitive to location. Cathedrals and chapels, clinics and cinemas, theatres and art galleries, bedrooms, living rooms, courtrooms and classrooms have all proved to be emotional arenas. Within these spaces, whether sacred or secular, emotions have been brought into existence by the enactment of communal narratives, visual representations, medical theories, and moral codes.

Various emotional styles of experience and expression have historically become associated with particular peoples and nations. We need think no further than national stereotypes of French sensibility, German efficiency, or Italian passion to see this. Today's conference gives us the opportunity to think about the national emotional style of the Dutch in pre-modern times, and to ask how and why the Dutch, like the British in fact, came to be perceived, by themselves and others, as cool, calm and collected.

3. An anatomy of modern emotions, with reference to British tears

The culture of sensibility in eighteenth-century Europe, with its efflorescence of emotional extravagance, including within its scope both men and women, the religious and the secular, and Northern as well as the more Mediterranean temperaments and types, poses a challenge to any general theory of the history of emotional expression and restraint. It is therefore a fruitful topic for a closer study of the anatomy of modern emotions. It also happens to be one of the topics of my own current research, which is an historical exploration of British tears. The project is one of cultural and intellectual history, investigating in detail particular instances of British weeping, as well as the rise and fall of the idea that the British were possessed of inactive lachrymal glands and a stiff upper lip.

The eighteenth century has a special place in the history of tears, and tears have a special place in the history of the eighteenth century. In this part of my lecture I want to use some tearful episodes from the eighteenth century to illustrate the way that emotions of the past can be subjected to a kind of historical anatomy, delicately separating out from each other bodies, places, beliefs, and narratives: the stuff that emotions are made of. I thought that, given our location today about a kilometre from the Mauritshuis, an anatomy lesson might be an appropriate approach to our subject.

We should not assume we know what it meant or how it felt to shed a tear in the eighteenth century just because we have shed tears ourselves. For a start, some of the weeping of that period was a more strenuous and sustained bodily activity than we are used to today. This was particularly true of the tears wept by English Methodists and other religious revivalists of the period. In 1745, for instance, Sampson Staniforth, a twenty-five year-old soldier from Yorkshire, was stationed in Ghent during the War of the Austrian Succession. It was the middle of the night and he was standing sentinel at a dangerous post. He was in a state of spiritual agitation:

As soon as I was alone, I kneeled down, and determined not to rise, but to continue crying and wrestling with God, till He had mercy on me. How long I was in that agony I cannot tell, but as I looked up to heaven I saw Jesus hanging on the cross. At the same moment these words were applied to my heart, "thy sins are forgiven thee." My chains fell off; my heart was free. All guilt was gone, and my soul was filled with unutterable peace.

Sampson Staniforth was a recent convert to Methodism and his violent crying and wrestling was typical of Methodist converts, especially those who had come under the influence of George Whitefield. This sort of weeping was a bodily as well as a spiritual struggle.

Another of Whitefield's converts wrote of an occasion when he sought mercy from God praying in a church:

I fell down before the Lord, with bitter cries and tears, till my strength failed me, and it was with difficulty I could walk out of the room.

The sermons of George Whitefield, who was known as 'The Weeping Prophet', elicited copious tears not only from the thousands who heard him, but also from himself. A contemporary wrote of Whitefield that: 'sometimes he exceedingly wept, stamped loudly and passionately, and was frequently so overcome, that, for a few seconds, you would suspect he never could recover'. On one occasion at the start of his career, preaching to coal miners near Bristol, Whitefield observed their black faces streaked with the white traces of tears. His ability to get an audience sobbing was greatly admired by the actor David Garrick.

In short, the leaders and participants in eighteenth-century Methodism wept frequently and violently – also sighing, trembling, shouting, falling down, and rolling around. This happened sometimes in private, while praying and wrestling with God, and sometimes in public, whether on a hillside listening to a sermon, or in a church or chapel.

William Hogarth's 1762 image satirising Whitefield and his sort, entitled 'Enthusiasm Delineated', provides a wonderful resource for the historical anatomist; depicting the way that bodies were moved by Whitefield's preaching, the location and material culture through which its effects were achieved, and also suggesting both biblical and more sceptical narratives for the interpretation of tears. The image includes both a representation of a penitent thief whose tears are being bottled by God – evoking Psalm 56 – and a weeping Whitefield in the pulpit. But the image also seeks to associate the tears of enthusiasm with credulity, superstition, fanaticism, lust, convulsions, and ultimately insanity. Here, Hogarth was saying, were people weeping like crazy.

Hogarth and other educated despisers of religious enthusiasm were nonetheless admirers of the more gently moistened eye of the literature of sensibility in both its Christian and secular forms. Readers of novels such as Henry Mackenzie's *Man of feeling* (1771) shed their tears in different places and with different physical props. For them it was the activity of reading rather than praying or preaching which provided the occasion for tears, and the narratives with which they were associated were more likely to be linked with moral sympathy and pious resignation than with

violent spiritual upheavals. The tears of the man of feeling were accompanied by kisses rather than wails, and took the tears of the New Testament, rather than the lamentations of Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah as their most powerful precedent.

Indeed, the New Testament provided exemplary accounts not only of the tears of Jesus, shed over the grave of Lazarus and over the sins of Jerusalem, but also the tears of Mary Magdalen, St Peter and St Paul, who had enjoined the Christians in Rome to 'weep with them that weep'. From Richard Steele's *Christian Hero* in 1701 to Vicesimus Knox's writings in the 1780s and 1790s, there had been a general eighteenth-century consensus among English divines that the tears of Jesus over Lazarus – one of which was said to be preserved in an Abbey in France – were marks of tenderness and compassion which should be seen as a divine pattern for those who would imitate Christ. There was even a sermon preached to King George III on the subject, in 1762. Reverend William Mason preached that the 'sacred fountains' of Christ's tears were not signs of private grief, but were 'generous, social, sympathetic tears'.

But by the 1790s grave suspicion had been cast even on this more moderate kind of weeping, through its association with the French Revolution. The experience of one British woman in Paris can help introduce us to this moment. On 26 December 1792, a thirty-three-year-old Mary Wollstonecraft caught a glimpse of Louis XVI on his way to be tried for treason. Wollstonecraft wrote of her experience in a letter to a friend in London, from which I will quote a few highly suggestive sentences:

About nine o'clock this morning, the king passed by my window, moving silently along (excepting now and then a few strokes of the drum, which rendered the stillness more awful) through empty streets, surrounded by the national guards, who, clustering round the carriage, seemed to deserve their name. The inhabitants flocked to their windows, but the casements were all shut, not a voice was heard, nor did I see any thing like an insulting gesture. — For the first time since I entered France, I bowed to the majesty of the people, and respected the propriety of behaviour so perfectly in unison with my own feelings. I can scarcely tell you why, but an association of ideas made the tears flow insensibly from my eyes, when I saw Louis sitting, with more dignity than I expected from his character, in a hackney coach going to meet death, where so many of his race have triumphed. My fancy instantly brought Louis XIV before me, entering the capital with all his pomp, after one of the victories most flattering to his pride, only to see the sunshine of prosperity overshadowed by the sublime gloom of misery.

These tears, according to Wollstonecraft's own account, were produced by a highly complex mental representation involving, as she says, an 'association of ideas' which connected the mute majesty of the French people, crowding behind those closed windows, surging forward like powerful but silent impulses, themselves in need of containment, with a grand historical idea of the demise of a whole royal dynasty. These tears were indeed intellectual things. They signified a worldview, an historical narrative, and were brought forth by a particular metaphorical reading of the experience in its immediate surroundings.

Other early sympathisers with the Revolution, as well as its opponents, had also reacted with tears. In a famous and highly-charged debate between Charles James Fox, who sympathised with the French Revolution, and his friend Edmund Burke in parliament in 1791, both men wept. But the shifting responses to the French revolution and the style of sensibility with which it had become connected meant that tears now started to lose their credibility.

Critics of the tearful extremes of the literature of sensibility had been warning, since the middle of the eighteenth century, that this movement was encouraging self-indulgence, decadent sensuality and unrestrained passions. Such figures saw themselves vindicated by the events of the French revolution, which were perceived as having been caused by a sentimental ideology of humanitarian sympathy. As the revolution progressed, the idea became entrenched that the rivers of tears which had flowed through the literature of sensibility had now become the rivers of blood which flowed out of the French Revolution. James Gillray's cartoon 'The New Morality' expressed a similar view, depicting 'Sensibility', one of the three muses of the revolutionaries, weeping over a dead bird, conjuring up memories of a famous painting by Greuze, and again suggesting that a culture of tears had led to the violence and bloodshed being witnessed in France.

The culture of sensibility, and its associated flow of tears, were thus posthumously discredited, and on all sides political writers hurried to disassociate themselves from it. In doing so, they frequently evoked one of the public spaces that has most often been associated with weeping, the theatre. Along with preachers, prophets, and politicians, it was great actors such as David Garrick and Sarah Siddons who were the most celebrated producers of tears of the age. Weeping now became not only French, but a kind of theatrical performance.

So, for instance, letters to newspapers in 1791 speculated that Fox's tears in parliament were part of a 'crying fashion' that had been 'imported from the French'. One correspondent wrote that the French 'in the whole business of the Revolution, have shewn themselves great masters of stage effect'. Another wrote that tears were often laudable, 'effusions of a manly mind', evidence of 'sensibility not known to the brutes', but implied that Fox's tears were those of a hypocrite and not to be trusted.

Prior to her own unexpected tears over Louis XVI, Mary Wollstonecraft had responded to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790, by lambasting him for his sympathetic tears over Marie Antoinette and his apparent indifference to the plight of the sick, the poor, and the enslaved: 'Such misery demands more than tears', she wrote, accusing Burke of 'infantine sensibility.' Soon afterwards Thomas Paine would attack Burke in similar terms, accusing him, in his tears over the French queen, of pitying the plumage but forgetting the dying bird, and describing his 'tragic paintings' as designed to produce 'through the weakness of sympathy, a weeping effect.'

So, no wonder Mary Wollstonecraft was perplexed by the tears that ran down her own cheeks at the sight of the doomed French King two years later. Not only did they suggest 'weakness of sympathy' for a dynasty she despised; they also represented a style of moral and political response, a kind of 'infantine sensibility' that she had herself condemned in Burke; and finally it was a reaction

more characteristic of the female characters in feminine novels, whose tendency to lachrymosity she deplored, than of the kind of bracing rationalism which she now advocated for modern women.

There is no doubt, then, that tears are intellectual things, that they are embodied, that they are social, and that they are produced in particular places, by particular objects, and with highly variable meanings. The fascination of tears, to me, is that they are produced both textually and physiologically – both by stories and by the body – both by thoughts and by the lachrymal glands. In each age, different texts collaborate with different bodies to produce tears with different meanings.

4. Beyond "the emotions": Using history to free ourselves from psychology

But I want to ask finally what these tears have to do with emotions. The answer might seem obvious: tears are expressions of emotion, they form part of a repertoire of universal and basic emotional expressions. Well, no.

My own starting point as a historian of emotions, about a decade ago, was the realisation that the category of 'the emotions' had a history, and a surprisingly short one, only being adopted as a subject for systematic study during the middle of the nineteenth century. It became one of the central categories of a new scientific psychology associated with Charles Darwin, William James and others at the end of the nineteenth century, eclipsing as it did so a more differentiated mental typology of 'passions', 'affections', 'feelings' and 'sentiments'.

It is quite possible, and I would say preferable, to discuss eighteenth-century and earlier attitudes to tears and feelings without invoking a category, 'the emotions', which only became a subject of systematic philosophical, medical and scientific study in the nineteenth century. I have written about the history of the term 'emotion' at some length elsewhere, but in the eighteenth century it had a range of meanings, including any kind of physical disturbance or agitation, or a commotion among the people. For some authors, the 'emotions' were the external signs of inward feelings.

The overall point of the intellectual history of the 'emotions' as a category is that we should not assume that the domain of eighteenth-century tearfulness (nor even of sensibility or sentimentality) and our modern domain of the 'emotions' or the 'emotional' map closely or on to each other. Nor should we assume that our modern term 'emotions' and eighteenth-century 'emotions' are synonyms.

To pay attention to the history of the language of mind is of an importance beyond the merely historical and etymological. Human mental life is theory-laden, through and through. To believe that my passions are movements of my appetite, which is the lower part of my soul, in incipient rebellion against both God and reason, as a result of the Fall, is to experience life entirely differently from someone who believes their emotions are produced by the neural activity of the limbic system in collaboration with the more cognitive brain-centres and as a result of evolution by natural selection. The relationship between theory of mind and mental life is so close that the two are

impossible to separate. Our beliefs, including our beliefs about our own mental life, are constituents of that life.

The importance of this for the history of emotions cannot, in my view, be overstated. Languages, beliefs and narratives are at the core of mental life in all its forms. To return to our anatomical metaphor, words provide the skeleton rather than the skin; they provide the structure rather than merely a covering or container. Even to start by labelling the phenomena to be studied as 'emotions' is, because of the history of that word, to close off certain avenues of investigation. Some humanities scholars today go further than merely using the language of 'the emotions' and sign up to some particular modern theory of affect or emotion, drawn from psychoanalysis, cognitive science, or neuropsychology, before embarking on their historical studies. But to do that is to give up at the outset on the possibility of reconstituting the affective life of the past and to undertake instead a fishing expedition for data in support of modern psychology.

As a way to reinforce these concluding thoughts, let me introduce you to long-forgotten medical, philosophical and theological writer on the passions, Thomas Cogan. Cogan was an English physician whose early life had been spent as a dissenting minister and preacher, mainly in the Netherlands. He was forced to return to England during the revolutionary wars in 1795, and between 1800 and 1813 he published a series of works on the passions. Cogan is one of the few authors of the period who offered explicit and detailed definitions of the terms 'passions', 'emotions' and 'affections' in his works.

'Emotions', for Cogan, 'according to the genuine signification of the word, are principally and primarily applicable to the sensible changes and visible effects which particular passions produce upon the frame'. In other words, for Cogan, 'emotions' were the 'external signs' of inward passions and affections. On his usage, then, sobs and sighs were not expressions of emotion but were themselves 'emotions'.

Cogan's works, written in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, also provide an interesting insight into evolving British attitudes to tears. Cogan stated that the 'violent transports of passion' and 'violent emotions' – including weeping – were more characteristic of the 'rude and infantile' stages of society – both in antiquity and among 'savage nations':

The expressions of sorrow, which were familiarly exhibited among the ancients, would in modern days be considered as marks of insanity; such as rending the garments, lifting up the voice and weeping aloud, covering the body with sackcloth and ashes, the observance of fasts with rigid and protracted severities.

As with the rationalism of Wollstonecraft and Paine, and their distancing of themselves from Burke's sensibility, so in Cogan we see a medical and philosophical revaluation of tears as marks of an infantile society, even of insanity.

Such views were to be reiterated later in the nineteenth century as British imperialism, British science, and British stoicism gradually increased alongside each other. British people became more

likely than ever to see tears as childlike, effeminate, and foreign, whether as a dangerous French 'crying fashion', as signs of primitiveness and savagery, or perhaps as evidence of a volatile Celtic temperament.

These developments were cemented by Charles Darwin, whose work was instrumental in, first, establishing the idea that tears, sighs, grimaces, flinches, frowns, shrugs, and the like all fell under the category of *The Expression of the Emotions* (the title of his 1872 book on the subject), and secondly in giving his scientific imprimatur to the idea, that unlike 'savages' and continental Europeans, 'Englishmen rarely cry'.

So, let me now conclude.

My historical desire to reconstitute the mental life of those who wept in the past has meant putting to one side the post-Darwinian idea of weeping as one of a repertoire of automatic and basic emotional expressions. Instead I have been led to explore weeping as a natural sign, a token of sympathy, an act of lamentation, or a gift from God. In the language of the eighteenth-century authors I have been considering today, tears could be signs of 'tender passions' or the 'softest sentiments of humanity'; of 'awful adoration' or 'lively faith'; of 'fervor' or 'affection'; of 'instinctive tenderness' or 'melancholy enthusiasm'. To start by treating tears as expressions of emotion would have been to place an insuperable obstacle in the way of this historical understanding of weeping as a public moral, religious, political and intellectual activity.

To generalise this point, I would suggest that the historian of the emotions interested in any period before the founding of modern psychology in the late nineteenth century, needs similarly, as a prerequisite to their historical work, to suspend their belief in 'the emotions' as described by recent science. This point has been forcefully stated by Penelope Gouk and Helen Hills, who write: 'Our starting point is that "the emotions", unchanging within human nature, transcending historical conditions, do not exist.'

It is worthwhile to return again to Lucien Febvre, and a 1938 essay of his on 'History and psychology'. Here, despite his own strong commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration, he asserted that 'the science of contemporary psychologists can have no possible application to the past' and that psychological anachronism was 'the worst sort of anachronism and the most insidious and harmful of all' since each human group in the past had its own proper mental system, which worked to produce individual experiences in its own way. So, I wish to conclude in the spirit of Febvre, by suggesting that putting aside the categories and theories of modern psychology is a prerequisite for those who wish to reconstitute the affective life of the past, which was produced by other theories and other worldviews, by other narratives in other spaces.

And in liberating the history of the mind from psychology we can also liberate ourselves. To reconstitute whole alternative theories and structures, mentalities and sentiments, is to demonstrate the historical contingency of our own prevailing psychologies and thus to indicate the possibility of escape from them too. History can perhaps liberate even psychology itself from the

confines of its own prevailing theories and categories. If that is the aim of a new generation of historians of the affective life, then what surprises we may still have to look forward to!

But let me give the final word on this neither to myself nor to Lucien Febvre, but to Thomas Cogan. Cogan represents a bridge both between the Netherlands and Britain, and between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the extract I will end with, Cogan is writing about national manners and customs, in a passage that emphasises two key ideas: the connection between thoughts and feelings, and the culturally constructed nature of sentiments and affections:

But the diversities of opinions and manners, with their correspondent predilections and aversions, exceed enumeration. It is these diversities which furnish the amusement derived from the perusal of travels; and as no two nations on the globe correspond in every instance, the peculiarities of each illustrate in a striking manner the truth of our observation. They indicate the inconceivable variety of sentiments and affections, which incidentally take place among beings of the same species, inhabitants of the same sublunary system, conversant with similar objects, and possessing similar powers of mind.

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History of the Emotions Centre and blog at Queen Mary, University of London www.qmul.ac.uk/emotions emotionsblog.history.qmul.ac.uk/

History of emotions international email list www.jiscmail.ac.uk/historyofemotions

MPIB History of Emotions Research Center, Berlin www.mpib-berlin.mpg.de/en/research/history-of-emotions

ARC Centre for the History of Emotions, Australia. (Europe 1100-1800) www.emotions.uwa.edu.au/

CHEP: Cultural History of Emotions in Premodernity (and their 2011 conference) chep.idesam.umu.se/ www.chep2011.bilkent.edu.tr/

EMMA: Les émotions au moyen âge emma.hypotheses.org/