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Introduction: Emotion, Morality, and Exemplarity in Old English Literature

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Scholarship on emotion in medieval literature has flourished in the past two decades.¹ In terms of emotion in Old English literature, works by Alice Jorgensen, Leslie Lockett, Antonia Harbus, and Ruth Wehlau, to name a few, have opened up generative and exciting lines of enquiry, encouraging us to change and critique how we read Old English literature.² Lockett's study on the hydraulic model, for example, has transformed how scholars approach the presentation of emotion in Old English literature. While the study of emotions is a broad church, encompassing scholarship from the fields of, for example, Cognitive Sciences, Anthropology, and Philosophy, the articles in this Special Issue follow an approach more frequently taken up by disciplines within the Humanities: the articles here are predominately concerned with what Erin Sebo *et al* have recently described as 'the complex interaction between emotion and culture' and with how 'social attitudes and cultural forms (genres, tropes, customs, etc.) affect the experience and expression of emotion'.³

By exploring the presentation, translation, and effect of emotional characters, language, and lexis, the study of medieval emotions has not only provoked fresh and provocative readings, but it has also encouraged us to read across the (often-imposed) boundaries within the surviving corpus of Old English literature: stylistic, formal, religious

¹ See, for example, works in the bibliography by Barbara Rosenwein (2007, 2016), Sarah McNamer (2015), Frank Brandsma, Carolyne Larrington and Corinne Saunders (2015), Stephanie Downes and Rebecca F. McNamara (2016), Sif Rikhardsdottir (2017), Glenn D. Burger and Holly A. Crocker (2018), Rita Copeland (2021), and Rafał Borysławski and Alicja Bembien (2021).

² See also Alice Jorgensen's forthcoming book, *Emotional Practice in Old English Literature* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2024), and Rafał Borysławski's current National Science Centre funded project on fear in Old English literature, 'The Poetics and Politics of Fear in Old English Literary Tradition'.

³ Sebo *et al.*, p.8.

and secular, and generic. Such horizontal reading (as discussed by Francisco J. Rozano-García in this Issue) is necessary, as while certain categories of text (such as heroic or religious) may uphold a particular attitude to an emotion (e.g. sadness), such attitudes do not exist in a vacuum – rather, they are drawn from the well of contemporary cultural, social, and moral norms.⁴ These essays all engage with this principle, either by comparing texts or genres not typically compared in literary studies but which may have informed the emotional understanding or response of an audience, or by considering the multiplicity of moral and exemplary habits of thought, and modes of thinking, that were informed by various social and cultural inputs and demands. This Special Issue thus follows Barbara Rosenwein’s influential thesis that the representation of emotion in medieval texts can be understood as methods of communication and as norms of ‘emotional communities’ (within and without the textual world). Additionally, the articles here (to a greater or lesser degree) are also rooted in the supposition that the presentation of emotions in texts and emotional texts can – and presumably did – seek to instigate, control, or destabilise particular emotional responses (discussed especially by Harriet Soper’s contribution to this Issue).

This Special Issue contributes to the emotional and affective turn in the field of Old English studies by offering a snapshot of current research from emerging and established scholars. More specifically, this Issue seeks to address and probe the intersection of emotion, morality, and exemplarity across a range of Old English works in prose and verse, comprising both translations and original Old English compositions. The intrinsic relationship between emotions and morality has long been noted, as has the exemplary, advisory, or cautionary treatment of emotion in Old English literature. Similarly, the extent to which Old English literature is concerned with demonstrating the processes of controlling (or regulating) the internal emotional and mental lives of their characters, and by extension their audiences, is

⁴ ‘Introduction’ to Jorgensen, 2015.

well documented.⁵ As the essays in this volume by Alice Jorgensen and Simon Thomson show, such internal control is imperative for safeguarding social and cultural stability. Of course, a demonstrable desire to control emotions necessitates the question *why* certain emotions ought to or need to be controlled. This question in turn directs us towards issues of morality and exemplarity: what do Old English texts reveal regarding appropriate use of, responses to, or warnings against certain emotions? How important is exemplary emotional behaviour for the moral health of the self (body and soul), the community, and the attainment of knowledge or Truth (the latter often linked with spiritual health)? By the same token, in what ways can emotions be morally efficacious? What can the intersection of emotion, morality, and exemplarity reveal about the societies and cultural contexts which produced the Old English texts under consideration here? The articles in this Special Issue address such questions and concerns – some explicitly, some implicitly, some provocatively.

The seven articles collected here approach the intersection of emotion, morality, and exemplarity from diverse yet complementary perspectives. Some common considerations which emerge throughout the collection include: how texts model exemplary emotional reactions to particular situations for their audiences; the insight gained when tracing verbal and lexical parallels describing emotions across genres; how the manifestation and regulation of emotions is linked to moral purpose and spiritual health; and how historic and contemporary emotional discourse about Old English poetry in particular has shaped its reception. The articles have been ordered in a way that will hopefully allow the reader to more readily apprehend such thematic and textual links, stimulating further conversation and debate.

The issue opens with an article by Alice Jorgensen, who explores the relation between emotion, morality, and agency in Wærferth's Old English translation of Gregory's *Dialogues*. Focusing on the stories told about Italian saints in the conversation between Gregory and

⁵ See for example Jorgensen, 2015, and Mize, 2013.

Peter, Jorgensen compellingly reveals how the emotions of the saints functioned to counterbalance miracles by demonstrating the saint's humility; propel action aligned with God's will; and reveal the synergy between God and saint. While the actions of saints are often beyond the reach or capability of most lay people, Jorgensen outlines how the *Dialogues*' presentation of saints struggling against certain emotions offers an exemplar on how Christians may similarly manage their own daily passions. Building on the work of Barbara Rosenwein and Kees Dekker, Jorgensen deftly reveals how emotions may motivate and morally colour actions and how full agency over controlling and expressing emotion is limited due to the Fall: nonetheless, such perceived lack of power can be channeled productively by entering into a struggle against unwanted emotion, which may be an opportunity for spiritual growth. Jorgensen stresses the importance of the compulsive nature of saintly emotion – as the saint's emotions are tied to God, they cannot contain them. She cites the example of righteous anger, a topic examined in detail by Francis Leneghan in this collection. Jorgensen's exploration of emotion, exemplarity, and agency in this understudied text bears fruit for wider questions of textual traditions: noting the *Dialogues*' interest in the psychological aspects of the holy, its use of emotion, and its interest in exemplarity and in personal spiritual development, she draws links not only between the *Dialogues* and Mercian literature, but provocatively questions whether the *Dialogues* may have influenced the later Alfredian translations.

The second article, by Rachel A. Burns, also examines emotions in dialogic texts, the Old English poetic *Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*. While Jorgensen is interested in the emotions displayed by saints in the stories within Wærferth's *Dialogues*, Burns' focus is on the dialogue form itself and on the human emotions displayed by Saturn. In her article, Burns reads the *Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* against the Old English translation of Boethius' *Consolatione philosophiae*, before skilfully outlining how the *Dialogues* adapt Classical

dialectic methods to show the power of discursive activity in moderating emotions. In this way, Burns also engages implicitly with ideas of exemplarity explored elsewhere in this Special Issue. Burns goes on to argue that Saturn's search for emotional satisfaction can be read as a model for dialectic closure, before revealing the insights to be gained from putting *Solomon and Saturn I* and *Solomon and Saturn II* in dialogue with each other. Burns achieves this metatextual reading first through an exploration of the two texts' distinct treatment of anger, and then reads both texts against each other, demonstrating how an individual's emotional state may be moderated and improved through dialogue. Interestingly, Burns' reading reveals that while anger is a vice it is nonetheless part of God's providential oversight and an emotion that Saturn ought to struggle to have agency over – reverberating productively with Jorgensen's article. Burns' article may also be read fruitfully against Francis Leneghan's article on righteous anger, which comes next in this Special Issue.

In his article Francis Leneghan examines righteous anger in *Beowulf*. Comparing striking verbal parallels between *Beowulf*, *Genesis A* and other biblical poetry, Leneghan makes the compelling argument that the apocryphal Fall of the Angels tradition informed the *Beowulf*-poet's use of the motif of a wrathful God at war against rebellious demonic enemies. Leneghan reinterprets *Beowulf*'s oft-discussed anger, arguing against the idea that the *Beowulf*-poet intended him to be understood as monstrous. Instead, Leneghan argues, *Beowulf* ought to be understood as adopting the role of God's righteous avenger. This reading naturally has profound consequences for our understanding of two of the most well-discussed episodes from the poem: *Beowulf*'s battle with Grendel in Heorot, and with Grendel's mother in her mere. Leneghan's article resonates powerfully with both Jorgensen's article on agency and saintly emotions, and with Burn's discussion on anger. Akin to Jorgensen's article, Leneghan touches upon the notion that emotions (here, anger) can be harnessed or deployed to serve a morally beneficial function. While not explicitly stated in his article, it could also

be extracted that perhaps the moral colouring of emotions (especially perhaps anger) lies not with their expression or the emotion itself but with the source, cause, or intent of the emotion. Moreover, Leneghan's observations demonstrate the value of exploring the presentation and use of emotions across texts as a productive means of revealing fresh insights into even a most well-discussed text.

The next article, by Harriet Soper, further reveals the value of reading texts, and textual corpora, against each other when examining emotion. Soper uses the Psalms (themselves moral and exemplary texts) to explore the presentation of emotions in the Exeter Book *Riddles*. More specifically, Soper considers how the Psalms function as emotional scripts for the *Riddles*, which in turn (given their focus often on non-human objects) create new forms for emotional experience. Using Cassiodorus' analysis of the Psalms to approach the *Riddles*, Soper posits that certain Riddles function along Cassiodorus' definitions of demonstrative, judicial, and deliberative oratory, which are themselves interested with emotional dynamics. Drawing on the work of Rita Copeland, Mary C. Flannery, and others, Soper plucks an important thread running through this issue: that Old English poetry (and prose) functions to instigate emotion rather than simply reflect it. Soper's contribution is also valuable for exploring how emotional experiences are not the preserve of humans. Soper's analysis further confirms that to identify and examine when texts make surprising use of emotion, often toying with accepted moral and behavioural norms, it is necessary to understand the social and cultural background against which they arise.

Francisco Javier Minaya Gómez showcases a lexical approach to the study of emotions in the next article in this Issue. In his examination of the expression of two emotional responses in the *Old English Martyrology*, WONDER and AWE, Minaya Gómez queries what educational role these emotions played in the emotional community of the text's conceived audience, and whether a secular dimension can be identified. He questions whether

WONDER and AWE in the *Old English Martyrology* are purely religious and derived from appraisals of morality. Drawing upon a variety of lexical tools, Minaya Gómez establishes that the *Old English Martyrology* models distinct exemplary emotional reactions to miracles for Christians and non-Christians; moreover, his research prompts us to question the link between the emotion of wonder and morality. Minaya Gómez's research into this understudied text reveals interesting lines of potential further enquiry into (for example) its depictions of both emotional agency and of affective experiences from God – issues which could place the *Old English Martyrology* in fruitful conversation with other articles in this issue.

The final two articles in this issue harmonise well together, challenging us to reconsider how easily we emotionally identify with Old English poetry (Francisco J. Rozano-García), and putting such questioning into practice in a provocative reading of unhappy figures in Old English poetry (Simon Thomson). In his article, Francisco J. Rozano-García moves the spotlight from emotions, morality, and exemplarity in Old English literature to how our own emotions as scholars – and our moral or ethical understanding of them – may impact (and impede) our critical evaluations. He focuses on the Old English Elegy, arguing that it is an artificially formulated genre, a result of the influence of Romantic poets and ethnonationalist anxieties. Acknowledging that scholars today are aware of the limitations of the title 'Elegy' when applied to the small corpus of Old English poems grouped under this designation, Rozano-García cogently outlines the implications of such a grouping for our field. Using anthologies and critical editions of Old English poetry from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he outlines how the genre 'Elegy' is an artificially formulated one, which drew on elements from the eighteenth-century German Elegy combined with nineteenth century English nationalistic nostalgia. This formulation, Rozano-García argues, fosters a modern perception of shared emotional, affective, and psychological discourses with these

Old English poems which potentially leads to the misreading of emotions in these texts. In his article, he pushes back against this generic grouping by offering a study of what he calls the horizontal intertextuality of Old English poetics. As with other articles in this issues, Rozano-García advocates reading a variety of texts alongside each other, prompting us to read against our conditioned affective responses to certain texts.

The final article in this issue by Simon Thomson similarly encourages us to question and probe our affective responses, this time in relation to sad, or unhappy, figures in Old English poetry. Rather than provoking empathy, Thomson argues instead that such figures ought to be read as othered and associated with fragmentation and dissociation. Drawing together many of the threads woven throughout this issue concerning the self, the mind, the spirit, and communities, Thomson examines unhappy figures in *Beowulf*, *Elene*, *Solomon and Saturn II*, and *The Fortunes of Men* (among others) and proposes that such figures are often presented as a threat not only to themselves but to the social systems of which they are intrinsically part. Focusing on the aural reception and participatory nature of Old English poetry, Thomson suggests that the listening audience, when confronted with unhappy figures, are encouraged to call into being a sinful self and then reject it through a process of abjection. In proposing such a reading, Thomson prompts us to re-think what effect unhappy figures in Old English poetry were supposed to have upon their audiences: in posing this question, Thomson encourages us to move beyond an empathetic reading of sadness.

As this introduction has shown, the articles in this issue speak well to each other, revealing concerns related to the intersection between emotion, morality, and exemplarity. The articles fruitfully demonstrate how much there is still to learn from even well-studied texts – such as *Beowulf*, the Exeter Book *Riddles*, the so-called ‘elegies’ – when placed in conversation with texts not traditionally studied alongside them. When read together, it will be clear that these articles are more than the sum of their parts: the research on display

probes, interrogates, and offers provocative new ways of reading emotion in Old English literature.

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