Angers Past and Present

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Abstract

Thomas Dixon makes the important point that modern anger is nothing like the seemingly parallel phenomena (ira, mēnis and so on) of the past. He proposes to show how different it is by employing what he calls an anatomical-genealogical approach – tracing components of the present idea of anger to their antecedents. He criticises my own work on anger as ahistorical because I use the singular term rather than the plurals that the subject demands. I find his critique unconvincing and his approach problematic. I suggest that we explore past notions of anger (and other emotions as well) in their own lived contexts rather than by separate components.

Keywords

anger – emotions – history – emotion words – history of emotions

As in his pioneering book *From Passions to Emotions*, Thomas Dixon warns us not to universalise our emotional vocabulary and experiences.¹ Modern anger, he points out, looks and feels nothing like the seemingly parallel phenomena of the past, and ‘the reification of “anger” as a singular transhistorical emotion should be avoided’. His is a salutary reminder that the modern age is not the measure of all things human and that even our own anger takes many forms.

Dixon faults most historians for knowing this but not taking it to heart. He suggests that my own work, both in *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages* and my forthcoming *Anger: The Conflicted History of an*

1 Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Emotion, is guilty of essentialising anger.² Yet even Dixon is obliged to put the word ‘anger’ into the title of his article – if only to alert readers to his subject. Moreover, toward the end of his contribution, he softens his stance a bit, allowing that we may indeed participate in a ‘shared humanity’ that might make it possible for us to understand angers (in the plural) of the past.

As Dixon knows, all words are chameleons, and historians must always deal with their changing meanings. When we talk about the medieval state, just as when we talk about anger, we certainly don’t mean anything that ‘looked or felt’ anything like the modern entity. No historian imagines that *anything* in the past was ‘defined and theorised in modern terms’. If they did, they would have to change professions, for what would be the point of studying the past if it were exactly like the present?

The real question is how to deal honestly with the past and nevertheless, by necessity, use the (admittedly limited) vocabulary that we have today. Dixon’s solution is to employ what he calls an anatomical-genealogical approach. He isolates ‘components’ of the *present* idea of anger, then seeks their antecedents in the past. Components include such factors as ideas of revenge, metaphors like heat and fire, moral evaluations, and facial and bodily gestures. So, for example, in pursuing the genealogy of ‘revenge and blood-lust’, Dixon looks at *mênis* and the ‘wild joy of war’ in Homer, at *orgê* in Aristotle, and at *ira* in Seneca in order to show how *different* from ‘our’ experience of anger were the mental states implied by these terms.

The problem is that by isolating elements such as ‘revenge’ – as an anatomist would the skeletal system – Dixon tends to remove them from the contexts in which they were embedded. Homer’s *Iliad* valorised bloodlust (though a recent book argues the opposite),³ Aristotle considered the notion of revenge perfectly normal and often virtuous, and Seneca was anxious to avoid *ira* (and revenge) altogether. By isolating the bones of revenge from the veins of moral attitudes, Dixon’s method tends to reify the components themselves, snatching them from their lived environment.

In my view, a history of anger (or angers, if you wish) needs to be more than a collection of the separate histories of its various elements. I prefer to explore how different groups thought about and wielded the feelings that reasonably fall within the penumbra of ‘anger’ and (very much unlike Dixon) to show how

2 Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Anger’s Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Anger: The Conflicted History of An Emotion* (London: Yale University Press, 2020).

3 Emily Katz Anhalt, *Enraged: Why Violent Times Need Ancient Greek Myths* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

many of those attitudes continue to echo today – in our ideas about virtue and vice, anger management therapies, scientific studies, bodily gestures and so on. I do not put Seneca together with Homer, therefore, but rather with Neostoics, Martha Nussbaum, and some current anger-management therapists, all of whom reject anger. In the course of discussing this group, ideas (such as revenge), metaphors, the contexts of their moral stances, facial and bodily gestures, and many other components come up organically rather than separately.

One of those ‘other components’ is the need for therapy, an aspect of anger’s anatomy that Dixon appears to neglect. Seneca practised nightly self-reflection: had he flared up in anger during the day? If so, what were the circumstances? He must never make the same mistake again. The sixteenth-century Neostoic Johann Weyer, a physician, proposed that each day be punctuated by nine exercises meant to stave off anger. These included repeating maxims about anger’s deleterious effects, meditating on models of emotional restraint, looking in a mirror when angry in order to be dismayed by our ugly and contorted face, and bringing in a personal trainer – a friend – to monitor our behaviour.⁴ Clearly the sixteenth century, with its endemic religious wars, was seen as an age of anger in need of strong medicine. By contrast, Nussbaum, writing just a few years ago, relies on our own good sense to do our therapy for us, explaining how we may switch from wishing for payback to undertaking constructive action. Modern anger-management therapists Howard Kassinove and Raymond Chip Tafrate, by contrast, advocate ‘conditioning’: instead of vowing never to let a certain event to cause anger, they stage the event over and over again until it becomes banal – and therefore less maddening – for their clients.⁵

This anti-anger stance is one tradition. It coexists – and did so in the past – with others quite opposed to it. Even now, when Nussbaum advocates repudiating anger, others, like Rebecca Traister, are celebrating women who are ‘good and mad’.⁶ For Nussbaum, anger is vicious and counterproductive; for Traister, it is moral and energising. Medieval churchmen, for their part, managed to embrace two different attitudes towards anger at the same time. They used the same word, *ira*, for both. Yet they had entirely different moral and experiential

4 Johann Weyer, *De ira morbo*, in *Ioannis Wieri Opera Omnia* (Amsterdam: Petrum vanden Berge, 1660), 770–875.

5 Howard Kassinove and Raymond Chip Tafrate, ‘Anger Management for Adults: A Menu-Driven Cognitive-Behavioral Approach to the Treatment of Anger Disorders,’ in *Anger-Related Disorders: A Practitioner’s Guide to Comparative Treatments*, ed. Eva L. Feindler (New York: Springer, 2006).

6 Rebecca Traister, *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Anger* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

implications. One sort of *ira* was the evil anger that grew on the poisonous tree of vices, spawning brawls, insults and many other evils – the anger that Bosch's table-top painting portrayed. The other sort was the good *ira* that was rightly roused against sin and that brought in its wake salutary repentance and changes of heart.

We have inherited all of these traditions along with many others. Dixon calls himself a pluralist because he sees many varieties of anger. I, too, am a pluralist, but my stress is on the fact that human social groups (even today) foster many different and sometimes clashing ideas, modes of expression and moral judgements regarding anger-like feelings – even when they live at the same time and in the same vicinity.

But whether we approach the topic by dividing it into its separate components or by looking at it as an integrated whole of attitudes, behaviours and uses, both Dixon and I agree that historians have much to add to current discussions of anger.