A recent trend within intellectual history has focused on emotions as categories of study and shown that they have been variously understood since Antiquity as having an anomalous ontological status in being located in the body, while affecting and being affected by thought.¹ In some of the most influential studies on the emotions in post-Cartesian thought, Robert Solomon, Jon Elster and Thomas Dixon have shown the prevalence of the Platonic separation of mind and body, rationality and irrationality. Dixon has enriched and successfully challenged the simplified accounts provided by Solomon and Elster, demonstrating that, in the influential theological traditions developed by Augustine, Aquinas, and a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English-speaking psychological writers, the passions, affections and sentiments were not always presented as irrational. However, the writers Dixon has discussed tend to emphasize the separation between mind and body, and thus (with the exception of Charles Bell (d. 1842)) see the passions, affections and sentiments as either mental or bodily states.²

In this essay, I seek to contribute to the current understanding of the historical categories related to the modern term ‘emotions’ (‘passions,’ ‘accidents of the soul,’ ‘affections of the mind,’ ‘perturbations’) by focusing


² “Emotion: The History of a Keyword in Crisis,” Emotion Review 4:4 (2012): 338–44. I thank my colleague Thomas Dixon for letting me read a copy of this article in advance of its publication. I would also like to thank Vivian Nutton for his very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay, and to Colin Jones for his encouraging feedback on the final draft.
on the period 1250–1700, not covered in Solomon’s, Elster’s and Dixon’s account, and using entirely different sources: medical texts. My sources emphasize the mind-body connection to such an extent that, even when they refer to anger, joy, fear or sadness as being caused by evaluative perceptions, they present these as physiologically-based processes, manifesting as movements and alterations of the spirits in the brain. As I will show, they tend to draw on an Aristotelian understanding of the passions which is at odds with Solomon’s portrayal of a historical binary opposition between emotion and rationality.

In what can be seen as one of the most influential recent attempts to do away with the Cartesian separation between rationality and emotion, and between the mind and the body, Antonio Damasio evokes folk-wisdom ideas (which we might have heard from “our grandmothers”), such as that “grief, obsessive worry, excessive anger, and so forth would damage hearts, give ulcers, destroy complexions, and make one more prone to infections,” arguing that, rather than rejecting them as “folksy,” it is worth considering and investigating in scientific ways the “basis for such human wisdom.” In focusing on the non-Cartesian scientific explanations of the harmful and beneficial effects of anger on health which prevailed in medieval and early modern medicine, I seek to respond to Damasio’s suggestion that we need to understand the circumstances and the extent to which psychological disturbances can cause diseases in the body. I hope that my discussion of medieval and early modern medical sources will help to counteract the limited knowledge shown in modern debates on emotions of how similar categories were explained in pre-modern science.

I will show the pervasive influence prior to 1700 of the Aristotelian definition of the passions as movements of the embodied soul causing alterations in the body in response to a perceived good or evil. Such understanding of the passions as cognitive-physiological events, located in the mind and the body simultaneously, is found not only in the seminal writings of Thomas Aquinas (discussed in Lombardo’s essay in this

4 I use the term ‘embodied’ to convey the Aristotelian view that the soul does nothing without the body. In De anima (1.1, 403a16–18), Aristotle emphasizes the importance of the material state of the body by noting, for instance, that we are more prone to experience passions at the faintest stimulation, if our “body is already in a state of tension resembling its condition when we are angry.” See The complete Works of Aristotle, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), I, p. 643. David Konstan aptly translates Aristotle’s definition of the passions in De anima (1.1.403a25) as “reasonings set in matter.” Konstan, The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks, 44.