CHAPTER 5

Affective Memory across Time: The Emotive City of Christine de Pizan

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An account of emotions in the Middle Ages, especially an account linking emotion and cognition, must negotiate two potentially competing ideas of how emotions have moved throughout time. On the one hand, it must take into account the long human evolutionary timeline of cognitive theory, in which, to quote Paula Leverage, “the time lapse between the Middle Ages and the twenty-first century is insignificant in terms of the evolution of the human brain . . . the neural hardware is the same.”¹ On the other hand, it must trace the briefer and more conspicuously dramatic course of historical change, undertaking a nuanced interpretation of the specific ways in which the ‘software’ of culture has enabled this purportedly unchanging hardware to express itself.

The implications of negotiating these two timelines are considerable, as they underpin two opposing approaches to how the past relates to the present. Embracing the longer, evolutionary timeframe underpins a ‘universalist’ approach that emphasises continuities in the emotional experiences of the past and present. Some, such as Aranye Fradenberg, have pointed to the potential for such an approach to move beyond an ‘alterist’ subscription to historical periodisation, in order to develop an ‘epistemology of contact’ between the Middle Ages and the present.² Others have cautioned against its promotion of a neuro-reductionism that uses neurobiology as a rigid ordering system for the emotions and does not sufficiently acknowledge the deeply contextual nature in which emotions are elicited and understood. This latter position, which favours the shorter timeline’s focus on the social and historical contingencies of emotional life, and the ways in which emotions are discursively structured and understood within historical contexts, is summed up by Barbara H. Rosenwein’s argument that “to assume that our emotions were also

¹ Paula Leverage, Reception and Memory: A Cognitive Approach to the Chansons de Geste (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 110.
the emotions of the past is to be utterly unhistorical.”

Rosenwein has argued forcefully for the complexity of medieval ‘emotional communities’ and discourses, contra the dominant perception that emotional self-consciousness and restraint are modern phenomena. The historicists’ sceptical stance on neuro-emotionalism is put most bluntly by Daniel Gross, who argues

we do not just naturally express emotions converging on our amygdala or whatever, but rather . . . are constituted as expressive agents by what the philosophers of the Scottish enlightenment called “social passions.”

The possibility of a rapprochement between the two positions is flagged, however, in Jane Chance’s envisaging of an “evolutionary literary studies” which “might embrace a necessary . . . reductionism” that enables modern readers to recognise emotional and cognitive commonalities with medieval people, but which “refus[es] mere reductionism in empirical approaches,” always reflecting critically on its engagement with the cognitive sciences. Such an approach calls for a definition of ‘emotion’ that simultaneously registers its transhistorical, experiential physicality and its historical specificity. Borrowing definitions developed by aesthetic theorists Carl Plantinga and Greg Smith, then, I am defining emotion as a cognitive-physical sensation which is object-directed and, as such, structured within a belief system to which the emotional subject is responding.

This balancing of human commonality and historical specificity offers a helpful way to grasp the cognitive-emotional complexity to be found in the work of Christine de Pizan (1365–c.1429), in particular Le livre de la cité des dames (henceforth The Book of the City of Ladies) (1405). With an œuvre punctuated by anguished self-portraits in which she laments the hardships of widowhood and womanhood, and by passionate denunciations of textual and cultural misogyny, Christine has frequently been regarded by twentieth- and twenty first-century readers as a strikingly proximate figure. The opening scene

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