Anger as a Spiritual, Social and Mental Disorder in Late Medieval Swedish *Exempla*

*Marko Lamberg*

**Introduction**

In their quest to describe human faults and vices – and in order to promote their opposites, moralities and virtues – ancient and medieval theologians gradually invented the famous list of the so-called seven deadly sins. There did occur a certain variation in the composition of these listings, but *orgē* or *ira*, “wrath” or “anger,” was always among them from the fourth century onwards. Consequently, historians have utilised such conceptualisations when studying mentalities and emotions of the past.

In particular, anger has received a lot of attention because all human cultural evolution – the civilizing process, to use the classical term coined by Norbert Elias – can be regarded largely as a tale of socialisation, pacification and control of aggressive and violent behaviour – anger management, to use a modern psychological concept, one which has also been adopted in popular vocabulary. Indeed, it would be difficult to understand human culture and human history without the influence of strong negative emotions such as wrath, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “vehement or violent anger; intense exasperation or resentment; deep indignation.” Anger, in turn, is defined in the same source as something “which pains or afflicts, or the passive


feeling which it produces; trouble, affliction, vexation, sorrow.” As we can see, these modern definitions stress the nature of anger as a mental disorder – it upsets a person’s inner balance, may cause social turmoil and potentially leads to sin or crime.

Of course, wrath or anger can have a great variety of more or less different definitions depending on who tries to describe them. Likewise, strong emotions can be described with the use of several other concepts as well. In modern everyday speech, anger is often connected to aggression and sometimes even understood as synonymous with it, but to psychologists, anger is an emotion, whereas aggression is behaviour – all anxiety or loss of temper does not lead to violent deeds or even to outbursts of strong words.

In late medieval Swedish language anger was usually described as wredhe, which has the same etymology and virtually the same meaning as wrath in English; in modern Swedish it is written vrede. An affiliated term, hate, was and still is expressed by the word hat. Medieval Swedish also had the term anger, which of course originated from the same root as anger in English and which still exists in modern Swedish as ånger, but it already meant – as it still means – “anxiety” or “sadness,” even “remorse.” These interesting similarities and differences between English and Swedish show how people speaking Germanic languages have, during the course of time, used basically the same words when describing nuances in symptoms and reactions that were related to each other. It is not always easy to discern boundaries between different emotional states, which is why the semantic fields of these words are nowadays not identical in affiliated languages.

As the lists of seven deadly sins prove, anger was certainly seen as a disorder within medieval culture. It was, in a practical theological context, basically a spiritual disorder because it threatened one’s salvation, but it could also be regarded as a mental disorder because it affected one’s thoughts and mental wellbeing as a whole. But did the contemporaries actually perceive a spiritual problem – a sin – also as a mental problem? If so, how did they speak of the mental consequences of anger? Moreover, despite the difference between emotion and behaviour, anger can also be regarded as a form of social disorder:

---

3 “Oxford English Dictionary,” accessed 31 January 2012. http://www.oed.com (access to the full online features requires a subscription). “Wrath” and “anger” are also given other but relatively similar descriptions in this source.


5 “Fornsvenska lexikaliska databasen,” accessed 31 January 2012. http://sprakbanken.gu.se/fsvldb/. This is an online dictionary of medieval Swedish; the explanations are given in modern Swedish.