Marguerite Bouchart was around forty years old in 1489 when her husband decided that they would move away from the village they had lived in for most of their married life. As Marguerite explained in a letter of supplication asking for the king’s pardon and remission, the move was against her will. Because “it was such a strange thing for her to make a new household, she became as if completely out of her good sense and understanding, and being in this grief and displeasure” she tried to prevent people from moving her things out of her house. In what at first seems to be a rather petty act of defiance, Marguerite took a container of onions from the cart of movable goods, threw most of them in a nearby body of water, and cut up some others to eat right away. Marguerite’s husband responded by yelling at her and began to beat her. She, “not knowing what she was doing,” stabbed him with the knife she had been using to cut the onions, giving him a wound that proved fatal. Marguerite’s use of the phrases “not knowing what she was doing” and, especially, “as if completely out of her good sense and understanding” placed her story in the context of madness caused by “grief and displeasure.” The selection of these phrases by the composers of Marguerite’s letter is significant, because they could have chosen to frame her behavior in the context of domestic disputes that do not mention madness as a possible reason for a wife to kill her husband. Many of the elements of her narrative appear in other remission letters about spousal homicide. Her husband was beating her while she was holding a knife in her hand for the legitimate purpose of cutting an onion.

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1 Archives Nationales Series JJ book 220 folio 52v number 90 (henceforth abbreviated as AN JJ 220 fo 52v no 90): “quil lui estoit chose fort estrange faire nouveau mensage quelle en fut comme tout hors debon sens et entendement et elle estant en ceste douleur et desplaisir.”

2 AN JJ 220 fo 52v no 90: “ne savoit quelle faisoit.”
which characterizes her actions as accidental, and before her husband died, he had forgiven her for the accident, thereby mitigating Marguerite’s guilt. Instead, the composers of her letter chose to view Marguerite’s actions as rooted in a temporary lack of sense and understanding. They were the actions not merely of a woman upset at leaving her home, but of a woman whose emotional distress at a situation she could not control had driven her out of her mind. The discourse of madness in this remission letter provided a space within which Marguerite could act upon her emotions of sorrow and frustration in a violent and unacceptable way. The language of extreme emotions Marguerite deployed, such as her “grief and displeasure” that caused her to “become as if completely out of her good sense and understanding,” makes clear the intimate conceptual connection she made between emotion and madness.

Emotions “worried” Marguerite and the composers of her letter, who saw them as dangerous and potentially damaging. Barbara Rosenwein has proposed that we as historians should also “worry” about emotions in history, particularly in the Middle Ages, and offers the term “emotional communities” to help “uncover systems of feeling: what these communities (and the individuals within them) define and assess as valuable or harmful to them; the evaluations that they make about others’ emotions; the nature of the affective bonds between people that they recognize; and the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate, and deplore.” The question of emotions and of enacting emotional responses has been “worrying” medievalists for some time, partly in response to Johan Huizinga’s image of a Middle Ages filled with “childish emotions” and Norbert Elias’ suggestion that the sixteenth century saw the development of the “civilizing process” that caused people to repress

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3 See Natalie Zemon Davis, Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-century France (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 77-110, where she discusses the themes of accidental violence provoked by a beating in stories of women killing their husbands. Although she is discussing a later period than this, the themes are already present in remission letters from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. See also Claude Gauvard, "De Grace Especial": Crime, état et société en France à la fin du Moyen Age (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1991), 2 vols., vol. 2, 573, who argues that domestic violence accounts for only two percent of the letters of remission. Interestingly, the percentage is much higher within cases citing madness as a reason for the crime.