Pleasure and Pain: Introducing Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Iberian Studies

Núria Silleras-Fernández
(University of Colorado Boulder)

Omne que non ha amor
nunca puede bien faser,
nin bevir a ssu sabor,
nin aver bien nin plaser.

El amor ha gran virtud,
Dios lo quiso dar tal graçia.
A los buenos da salud,
faselos ssalir a plaça.

A los rreys fas olvidar
los rregnos e su valía
por fama e pres ganar
e provar cavallería

Poema de Alfonso Onceno, stanzas 383–385
(Victorio 1991, 117–118)

These few stanzas from the *Poema de Alfonso Onceno* express one of the most intense emotions humans feel and write about, love, which is closely tied to both pleasure and pain. Love is presented as completing and improving mankind ("omne que non ha amor/nunca puede bien faser") and as a source of pleasure. Rodrigo Yáñez, the likely author of the poem, could not have chosen a better subject to illustrate the complexity and power of love in the medieval era than Alfonso XI of Castile (1311– 1350).[1] A poem that recounts the king's life and deeds from the difficult years of his minority (1312–1325) to his major military achievement, the conquest of Algeciras in 1344, had to mention the woman who made him forget his obligations and "olvidar los rregnos" (to forget his kingdoms). The ruler transformed the noblewoman Leonor de Guzmán into his concubine queen, relegating his legitimate queen, Maria de Portugal, and their son and heir, Pedro (1334–1369), to secondary, diminished roles (Janin 2021, 160–164, González Crespo 1991, 202–203, and Silleras-Fernández 2021, 317–319).

Alfonso XI himself is credited with composing a *cancionero* (songbook) poem for Leonor, in the poetic genre that would later flourish across Iberia. Thus, even a ruler such as Alfonso XI appears actively engaged in both the pursuit of love and the crafting of verse, practices that reflect an emergent model of masculinity shaped within the emotional community of the royal court (Silleras-Fernández 2024, 26–32). Barbara Rosenwein defined "emotional community" as "social groups that have their own particular values, modes of feeling, and ways of expressing those feelings," adding that those groups "share the same or similar valuations of particular emotions, goals, and norms of expression" (Rosenwein, 2015, 3; 2002, 4; 2010, 528–30, and 2006)

[1] The poem has a total of 2450 *cuartetas* (quatrains). There is no agreement regarding who wrote the *Poema de Alfonso Onceno*, despite the fact Rodrigo Yáñez inserts himself in stanza 1842 (Victorio 1991, 27–28).

Rosenwein's proposal aligns with what Pierre Bourdieu defined as a (sociological) field: a "field of forces" with rules and objectives in which different agents (people) compete for resources (economic, social, and cultural capital). (Bourdieu 1993).

For his part, William Reddy proposed a model based on "emotional regimes" (political regimes) that enforced and disseminated dominant social norms (Reddy 1997 and 2001). The obligation to conform could cause "emotional suffering" when forced to feel in restricted and specific ways, and as a result, some seek "emotional refugees," which were supposed to provide relief from suffering by offering "safe release from prevailing emotional norms." For instance, Alfonso XI's poetry writing could be considered an emotional refuge for an emotional suffering (love) that, in theory, he should not have been provoked by a concubine, given the emotional regime in which he lived. Of course, theory is one thing, and practice, another; and a monarch appointed by God himself to rule was well positioned to define and challenge certain norms.

Therefore, the court, the king, and his concubine constituted an emotional community in which gender and social standing played defining roles, and which was a space ruled by a set of norms and expectations: a sort of consensus regarding how emotions should be perceived and performed, and which established limits regarding what was acceptable and for whom. This echoes Peter Stearns and Carol Stearns "emotionology," which is to say, "the attitudes or standards that a society, or a definable group within a society, maintains toward basic emotions and their appropriate expression" (1985, 831). Going back to Alfonso XI, in the composition he wrote for Leonor, he repeats this refrain:

Yo con cuidado d'amores
(vos lo vengo a dezir),
que he d'aquesta mi señora
que mucho deseo servir . . .
(Dutton, 1991, VII–VIII)

We should understand the king literally. When he stated, "mucho deseo servir," he meant it. He served her from shortly after their first acquaintance in 1327 until his death in 1350 and generously provided for their ten children, eight of whom were still alive at the monarch's death. (Ballesteros Beretta 1932, 630). One of the chronicles of the time reinforces this view, attesting to how Alfonso trusted Leonor in all his affairs, constituting her as a partner in power: "el rrey fiaua mucho della, ca todas las cosas que se avien de fazer en el rreyno todas pasauan sabiendolo ella, e no de otra manera, por la fiança que el rrey ponie en ella" (Catalan 1977, I, 487). But their love story ended in pain when the king unexpectedly died of plague during a military campaign in Gibraltar. At that point, and as a mere concubine, Leonor lacked the protection that the office of queenship granted or a family powerful enough to confront the new ruler, Pedro the Cruel, and his mother, Maria de Portugal, Alfonso's legitimate wife. They imprisoned her, and a year after the death of Alfonso XI, she was executed.

Nevertheless, their story did not end here. Leonor's eldest son, Enrique, Count of Trastámara, revolted and, in 1369, personally killed his half-brother, Pedro the Cruel, to become King of Castile. This is the origin of the Trastámara dynasty, a family that took the peninsula by storm and united the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon dynastically under Isabel I of Castile and Fernando II of Aragon (r. 1474-1516), "the Catholic Monarchs." And this is why Leonor was remembered and celebrated as the foremother of a new royal dynasty, just as the *Poema de Alfonso Onceno* affirmed,

Siempre nombrada será,
et su bondad e valor
por espejo fincará.

At any rate, the moral of the story is clear: passions were unescapable, even for rulers who were advised against excess and encouraged to read *specula principum*, the genre of princely "mirrors" devoted to self-improvement and government, and that enjoined self-restraint.

What better than this historical love story between Leonor and Alfonso, which was recorded in poetry and prose, to open a special issue on the pleasure and pain of emotion?[2] If our current twenty-first-century sensibilities let us feel some proximity to medieval concepts of love and loss, it is most likely because "romantic love" in the European tradition is traditionally tied to courtly love and to the compositions of the twelfth-century troubadours and *trobairitz* of France, who wrote about the fin'amor (true or refined love). As William Reddy proposes, this poetry assumed an enduring model: true love, or "selfless care and devotion to another," involving reciprocity and exclusivity as a way of controlling while embracing sexuality. Thus, for Reddy, "love breaks with sexuality while embracing it" (Reddy 2010, 34 and 2012).[3]

Nevertheless, the historical continuity that some scholars attribute to the Western concept of romantic love should not lead us to regard emotions as universal biological constants. On the contrary, emotions are historically contingent, shaped not only by cultural norms but also by social structures, gender, and political forces (Ahmed 2014). This introductory article begins with a brief reflection on what emotions are and how they were conceptualized in premodern times. It then offers an overview of the ten contributions that follow, authored by scholars who engage with history, gender, literature, and cultural studies. Together, these essays span the diverse landscape of Iberian literatures, languages, and histories from the medieval period to the early modern era. In sum, this special issue seeks to foreground emotion as a productive analytical category, one that enables a more nuanced understanding of the past and its cultural production.

Passion and Emotions, Etymology and Meaning

Emotions are culturally embedded: they are not simply felt or experienced, but learned and performed, functioning as deeply overlearned cognitive habits. Accordingly, they are now examined across a range of intersecting disciplines, including philosophy, history, literature, psychology, and neuroscience. Yet in the medieval and early modern periods, the word "emotion" did not even exist, as "passion" was preferred. Even though language is not required for the experience of feeling, it is crucial for rendering that experience intelligible. In this sense, language is constitutive of emotional life: it shapes, organizes, and interprets our feelings by endowing them with culturally specific meanings.

Emotion is a relatively modern term. In English, the word "emotion" first appeared in 1579 in the *Oxford English Dictionary,* meaning "social agitation," while it is currently defined as "a state of arousal that can be experienced as pleasant or unpleasant" (Dixon 2003, 18; and

[2] Cohen-Hanegbi and Nagy in their study of emotions and pleasure in medieval times, define pleasure as "either and emotion, either spiritual or sexual, as pleasure experienced through the senses or the rational mind, and it may be either lauded or decried" (2018, XV). See also Rosenwein 2021, 8 and for an exploration of emotions on Iberina context, Doubleday 2013, Liuzzo Scorpo 2018, Berlin 2021, Sabaté 2025, and Silleras-Fernandez 2024.
[3] Love and desire were, of course, popular subjects in Andalusi poetry and also influenced Western poetry, see Menocal 1987 and 2000, and Silleras-Fernandez 2024, 24.

Rosenwein, 2006, 3). On the other hand, "affect" is documented in English since the fourteenth century.[4] In Spanish, "emoción" arrived much later. It is first documented in the Dictionary of the *Real Academia de la Lengua Española* in 1843, while its current iteration is defined in a way that resembles the OED, as "alteración del ánimo intensa y pasajera, agradable o penosa, que va acompañada de cierta conmoción somática", to which a second definition adds "interés, generalmente expectante, con que se participa en algo que está ocurriendo." (Delgado, Fernández, and Labanyi, 2016, 7).

In premodern times, the term used was passion, from *passio* in Latin and *pathē* in Greek, that is, suffering. Theologians spoke of "passiones animae" (suffering of the soul), with the Passion of Christ as a paradigmatic example, while in medieval texts, physicians preferred "accidentia animae" or "passiones animae," that is, accidents of the soul. Covarrubias, in his *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* (1611), refers to "passion," making precise reference to Cicero and "animae perturbatio," and to Christ's suffering: "la muerte que el hijo de Dios Iesu Christo, Dios y hombre, padeció por pagar nuestros pecados" (580). In addition, Covarrubias also gives a second meaning as "tomar passion de algo, tener pesadumbre" to which he adds that "apasionado el que tiene pasion o aficion." (580). In Covarrubias, "affect" (afecto) is defined as "passion of the soul" (passion del alma) impacting the body and making an individual move to "compassion y misericordia, a ira y a vengança, a tristessa y alegria…" (compassion and misericord, rage and vengeance, sadness and happiness). Thus, passion and affect were the "thinking words" in early modern times, and passion was seen as "suffering" and as an "accident," already situated in the realm of what must be constrained or avoided altogether (Covarrubias 1616, 17). Emotions or passions went beyond internal feelings, as they were used to negotiate relationships and hierarchies, encompassing social and political forces and contributing to the cultural practices of the medieval and early modern eras.

Still, passions were not merely psychological states; they were physical and moral experiences involving both the body and the soul, or as neuroscience has now shown, bridging body and brain. Influenced by ancient philosophers, especially Aristotle (384–322 BCE), Galen (129–216), and the Stoics, and by Christian theology, two important figures, a Church Father, Augustine of Hippo (354–430), and a theologian like Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) – both saints – viewed emotions as natural responses that needed to be guided by reason and faith.[5] From a more scientific/medical perspective, the humoral theory linked emotions to equilibrium and bodily fluids, associating temperament or mood with the balance of the four humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile, which were also tied to temperaments, sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic. Late medieval medicine also differentiated between pleasure (delicia) and joy (gaudium) and situated pleasure and pain within "the experiential realm of the emotion" (Salmon 2018, 40).

At the same time, emotions possessed a profoundly social and religious dimension. To feel right was integral to the ideal of being a good Christian, as believers were instructed to cultivate the three theological virtues (Faith, Hope, and Charity) alongside the four cardinal virtues inherited from Antiquity: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance. To these were joined other affective

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[4] Wendy Truran defines affect theory as a "dynamic field of scholarship that explores bodies, worlds, and forces that move and motivate things in a relational existence," while for Nico Frijda and Klaus Scherer affect is "a category of mental states that includes emotions, moods, attitudes, interpersonal stances, and affect dispositions." (Truran, 2022, 26 and Frijda and Scherer, 2009 10).

[5] Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* defined *pathos* as "The emotions are all those affections which cause men to change their opinion in regard to their judgements, and are accompanied by pleasure and pain; such as anger, pity, fear, and small similar emotions and their contraries." (Plamper 28).

dispositions, such as love, compassion, humility, and penitence, all of which shaped the ethical and devotional life of the individual. Conversely, emotions associated with the Seven Deadly Sins (Pride, Envy, Greed, Wrath, Lust, Gluttony, and Sloth) were to be carefully regulated and restrained. Literature, visual culture, and devotional practices played a central role in fostering and guiding such emotional formations, often encouraging an intense affective engagement, particularly in relation to Christ's suffering during the Passion. In this context, emotions were not understood as merely private or interior states, but as moral and spiritual acts that bound body and soul together, while simultaneously situating the individual within a broader communal and devotional framework.

Pleasure and Pain in this Special Issue

The articles that follow show the strong connection between pleasure (spiritual, sexual, or intellectual) and pain (physical, mental/spiritual, or metaphorical), at times two sides of the same coin, in all its complexity, from medieval times to the early modern age. By considering both the lived experience of emotion and the effects emotions have on individuals in relation to others, they explore joy, delight, and happiness, as well as sorrow, grief, tears, and physical torment, and situate these states within historical, social, literary, or theological contexts. Obvious common threads emerge across the different contributions as they engage with emotions and affect theory to exemplify how emotions, as much as gender, were performed, recorded, regulated, and tangled to what Barbara Rosenwein defined as "emotional communities" and William Reddy named "emotional regimes." The articles are written under the framework of Iberian Studies, as they cover several linguistic, literary, cultural traditions, and religious faiths of the Iberian lands, from Andalusi (Hamilton) to Catalan texts (Liuzzo Scorpo, Berlin, and Lledó-Guillem), including canonical and non-canonical works written in Castilian (Miguel-Prendes, Liuzzo Scorpo, Pinet, Vicente, Lledó-Guillem, Aladro), and focusing on historical characters, like Queen Catherine of Aragon, who is being considered from the perspective of emotions (Earenfight), as well as modern Spanish alchemical and religious discourses (Slater).

This special issue is organized chronologically. The first five articles focus on medieval literary texts. In "Hatred and Loathing in al-Andalus," Michelle Hamilton explores how Andalusi scholars and poets like Abū ʿUmar Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Rabbih (860–940), in the court of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III, and Abū ʻĀmir ibn Gharsīyah al-Bashkunsī, who was active in the Taifa of Denia, developed a "discourse of hate" intended to negotiate identity and political legitimacy through the *shuʿūbiyya* debates. These polemics demonstrate how emotional regimes were inherited and adapted to stabilize social order in fluctuating political environments. Next, Sol Miguel-Prendes's "Pleasure and Wonder in Juan Manuel's *Libro de la caza,"* shifts the focus to hunting treatises and centers on the "muy grant plazer" (great pleasure) and "wonder" experienced during falconry. Here, medieval concepts of "pleasure" are seen as either an "absence of pain" or a general state of humoral well-being. Antonella Liuzzo Scorpo's "Shifting Emotions: Grief, Sorrow and Delight in Medieval Iberian Historical Narratives" studies how thirteenth and fourteenth-century Castilian and Aragonese chronicles presented emotions, like grief, sorrow, and delight, were seen not just as personal feelings but as rhetorical instruments used to legitimize political authority, frame ideas of belonging, and justify military actions, such as revenge. By analyzing episodes of parental bereavement and military victory, she demonstrates that medieval writers viewed grief and delight as a dynamic continuum rather than binary opposites.

In "Silence, Breath, Sigh: Emotional Preludes of Voice," Simone Pinet researches the "aural void" and non-verbal sounds that precede speech in medieval Spanish literature, namely

silence, breath, and sigh. Focusing primarily on the *Poem of the Cid* together with the *Libro de Apolonio and the Libro de buen amor*, she discusses how a sigh can characterize a hero's "measured" virtue or signify a physiological return to life. Pinet argues that these sounds function as "emotional preludes" that attune the audience to the character's internal state and facilitate a communal "deictic listening" experience. The medieval section closes with Henry Berlin's "Reading Corella's Riddle: The Seriality of Emotion in the "Cobla de dos senys" who turns to the Catalan writer Joan Roís de Corella (1435-1497). Berlin presents this poem as a riddle, the meaning of which depends on whether it is read horizontally (as contentment) or vertically (as discontentment). Rather than presenting a simple contradiction, the poem uses "serialized reading" to mirror the temporal, ever-changing nature of lived emotional experience, demonstrating that literature can hold open an "anti-absolutist space" for complex feelings.

If the first five articles were an exploration of what the emotional turn can offer in the study of the Middle Ages, the last five follow a similar course in the Early Modern period. Marta Vicente's "Bathing in Tears: Transgressive Readings of Emotion and Sainthood in Sixteenth Century Spain" examines tears as a material and transformative expression of affect in the mystical writings of the major sixteenth-century Spanish mystics, Teresa de Ávila and Juan de la Cruz. Vicente engages with the embodiment and physicality of emotions, arguing that tears serve as bridges between the human and the divine, functioning as a sort of "sacred language" that purifies the soul and reshapes spiritual landscapes. While Teresa's mysticism is relational and "bathed in tears" of joy or sorrow, Juan's path is more ascetic, using tears to prepare a space of "nothingness" (*nada*) for divine union. Tears, for Vicente, have the power to transform "despair into hope, suffering into healing, and, at times, make miracles possible."

Next, Vicente Lledó-Guillem's "Pain, Anger, and Productive Revenge in Early Modern Defenses of the Catalan Language" offers an incursion into language and linguistics that bridges the medieval and early modern periods. He analyzes four early modern texts that defend the Catalan language by forming an emotional community, two written in Catalan that opposed the dominant emotional regime and two written in Castilian that accept it. By focusing on joy and sadness, anger, and the desire for vengeance, Lledó-Guillem illustrates how authors such as Jaume Gassull (ca. 1450–1515) in *La brama dels llauradors* and Cristòfol Despuig (1510–1574) in his *Los col·loquis de la insigne ciutat de Tortosa* reacted to the devaluation of the Catalan language with anger and a desire for vengeance, which they then transformed into "productive transitions" –constructive intellectual defenses against linguistic substitution. Lledó-Guillem reads them against two works written in Castilian: Martí de Viciana's *Libro de las alabanças de las lenguas Hebrea, Griega, Latina, Castellana y Valenciana* (1574) and Diego de Cisteller's *Memorial en defensa de la lengua catalana para que se predique en ella en Cataluña*. In Lledó-Guillem's view, modern Spanish politicians might learn from these early modern strategies to transform linguistic conflict into cultural pride.

The next two articles by Theresa Earenfight and Jordi Aladro examine the lives, actions, and works of women – a queen, a noblewoman, and a mystic – through the lens of emotions. Earenfight's "Shoulders to Cry on: Catherine of Aragon and Marguerite of Austria" explores the "parallel lives" of two powerful early modern women, Catherine of Aragon and Marguerite of Austria/Habsburg, linked by family ties (they met as sisters-in-law for a period) and shared tragedies. Earenfight focuses on how Catherine and Marguerite maintained a deep personal bond across geographical distances through the exchange of symbolic gifts, such as an intricately carved boxwood rosary and a music manuscript featuring Dido's lament. These objects served as encoded messages of emotional support and collective mourning during periods of political turmoil and

personal heartbreak, such as widowhood and infertility. Similar to Vicente's analysis of Teresa de Ávila and Juan de la Cruz, Jordi Aladro's contribution poses an analogous problem as he engages the embodiment and physicality of emotions transformed into lashes and penance, as Carvajal brought the Christian passion to her body. Aladro's "Placer místico y dolor erótico en la obra y vida de Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza (1566/68−1614)" examines the life and poetry of Luisa de Carvajal, arguing that her unique mystical experience is the result of an "unhealthy" ascetic education characterized by extreme physical penance. Aladro analyzes how childhood trauma and corporal punishment imposed by her guardians led to a lifelong fusion of religious ecstasy and eroticism. Carvajal's work is presented as a personal testimony where her desires for martyrdom and her identity as a "prisoner of love" for Christ are expressed through images of physical restriction and pain.

John Slater's "Alchemical and Theological Hermaphrodites, Their Eros and Ethics" closes this special issue, situating us in the terrain of alchemy and science. Slater analyzes the use of the "hermaphrodite" as a metaphorical figure in early modern Spanish alchemical and religious discourses. While alchemists used the two-sexed entity to symbolize the Philosophers' Stone, theologians employed it as a "modal heuristic" to explore divine creation, natural variety, and gender-related sacramental doubts (such as marriage and ordination). The article highlights how these two fields shared a common "figurative regime" to speak about balance, perfection, and the unruly power of symbols. Slater discusses the "torment of art" (*vexationes*) in scientific experimentation and the "reader's delight" found in complex alchemical imagery. He also notes that theologians viewed the "heat of passionate love" as "painful," leading to tears.

In sum, these ten thought-provoking articles each and collectively chart new directions for the study of emotion in medieval and early modern cultures. By foregrounding emotion not as a secondary or purely subjective phenomenon, but as a historically situated and culturally mediated framework, the volume opens up innovative avenues of inquiry into the lived experiences, social practices, and intellectual traditions of the past. Approaching texts, practices, and historical actors through the critical lens of emotion allows scholars to recover dimensions of meaning that have often remained obscured or underexplored. Moreover, this perspective not only invites the examination of previously neglected material but also encourages a renewed engagement with well-known texts. Read through this lens, canonical works reveal new layers of complexity, prompting fresh questions about affective expression, regulation, and interpretation across time. In this way, the study of emotion does not merely add another thematic category; rather, it reshapes our understanding of medieval and early modern cultures, illuminating the intricate interplay between feeling, thought, and social order.

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