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Exploring Roman emotions

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VON EHRENHEIM, H., and M. PRUSAC-LINDHAGEN, eds. 2020. *Reading Roman Emotions: Visual and Textual Interpretations*. Skrifter utgivna av Svenska Institutet i Rom 4°, 64. Stockholm: Svenska Institutet i Rom. Pp. 199. ISSN: 0081-993X. ISBN: 978-91-7042-186-0. Hardcover.

Despite the proliferation of publications on the history of emotions in recent years,[1] the expression of emotions in Roman culture is still not as well studied as in Greek culture. This volume is a step in the direction of addressing this imbalance. A collection of studies on the topic of Roman emotions, it is the result of a workshop that took place in Rome on 16–17 April 2014. While the workshop was on emotions in the visual culture of the ancient world, the majority of the papers presented dealt with aspects of emotional displays in Roman culture; therefore, the editors correctly made this the focus of the book. This choice has resulted in a compact and stimulating volume on interpretations of emotions in Roman

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[1]   See Cairns 2022a and Cairns 2022b for a recent overview.

visual and textual culture that will remain an essential point of reference for future scholars.

The introduction by the two editors, Hedvig von Ehrenheim and Marina Prusac-Lindhagen, sets the stage for the chapters that follow by giving the reasoning behind the volume: emotions can be used to understand "historical processes and situations" but "may require different ways of observing and reading" (10). The chapters in the volume offer such different approaches, even though they are all united in their understanding of emotions as culturally bound and expressed.

The first chapter is by Susan Matt. In "Recovering emotion from visual culture," Matt first presents a short survey of the theoretical responses that followed Johan Huizinga's 1924 call for a new history, one that would explore emotions. She shows the main problems that researchers encounter when exploring and examining emotions in the past, starting with the assumption that emotions were always the same and that a 21st-c. scholar shares the same feelings as their subject of study. In addition, she highlights the importance of visual culture as a source material but also its limitations. The chapter ends with a section of questions about how one advances the study of emotions and how best to extract meaning and understanding from the material. These are questions that are – or should be – in the back of every scholar's mind when exploring emotions in the past; they are applicable to any period, and it is very useful to have them all grouped together in such a succinct manner.

The second chapter, "'*artifices scaenici, qui imitantur adfectus*.' Displaying emotions in Roman drama and oratory," by Gesine Manuwald, starts with a brief but comprehensive survey of the different emotions that are visualized in Roman literature. She notes that these are tied to specific genres and so the bodily expressions of emotions that have survived are limited to those that served the needs of a genre. This is an important aspect that she puts forward in the later part of the chapter: that emotions could be performed and used for the manipulation of audiences. At the same time, she notes that the Roman authors advocated for more than a performance of emotions, encouraging the experience of them as well by orators and actors. A genuine emotion on display was deemed more efficacious than its mere performance.

J. Rasmus Brandt, in "Emotions in a liminal space. A look at Etruscan tomb paintings," examines closely the subject matter related to emotions in Etruscan funerary wall paintings. While banqueting and lovemaking were central to the Etruscan way of life, they were also important in the funerary sphere. In Brandt's chapter, the paintings become a lens through which the entanglement of ritual activities, "social mechanisms" (43), beliefs about the supernatural, and the pollution of death can be detected. The emotions of the depicted figures, and most importantly of the viewers and all the participants in the funerary rituals, find expression in the paintings, leading the way out of grief and anxiety to amusement, joy, and gratitude as the soul of the deceased passes from one state to another successfully, without being destroyed by the daemons, and the relatives and other mourners find comfort from their loss. Brandt demonstrates that these were elements of a broader religious/eschatological iconographic program that were fluid and could be selected and interchanged in the tomb but were still recognized as parts of a greater whole by the community.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters mostly deal with material from Pompeii. In "Humour in Roman villa sculpture. Laughter for social cohesion," Hedvig von Ehrenheim demonstrates how villa sculptures, in particular those located in gardens,

were carefully selected in order to elicit emotions of surprise, joy, and amusement in those who viewed them. The sculptures were just as carefully placed within the rooms of the countryside villa. Since the villa during the Roman Imperial period was a space of *otium*, of pleasurable free time and activities and not of work, and a place where one could entertain and host friends, the sculptures chosen "aimed to impress by showing a person's good taste… and to create an atmosphere of ease, friendship, and laughter" (73). Von Ehrenheim successfully shows how the sculptures helped create this relaxed atmosphere, which in turn helped create social cohesion and understanding between people of equal or, more importantly, unequal rank (like patrons and clients).

John R. Clarke's chapter on "Laughter in Roman visual culture, 100 BC–AD 200. Contexts and theories," is a good pendant to the chapter by von Ehrenheim, as it presents laughter mainly in contexts outside of villas, especially those that would have been frequented by the clients and slaves of villa owners: taverns, private houses of freedmen, baths. Particularly important is Clarke's use of theories defining humor, in the context of Roman paintings and graffiti, as a tool that could be used to unite a group (intragroup) or to attack a group (intergroup), but also his conclusion that "no single theoretical framework explains Roman humour" (104). This is something that applies in general to representations and expressions of other emotions in the Roman world.

The sixth chapter, "Reading emotions in Pompeian wall paintings and mosaics," by Arja Karivieri, presents a methodology for approaching visual and textual evidence when they are used together. Karivieri's focus is on images that also have inscriptions, but her way of analyzing them and differentiating between them according to how the text and the image relate to each other is novel and could have applications in other areas of art beyond paintings and mosaics. Thus, even though her case studies are some of the most famous Pompeian wall images and mosaics, her analysis and reading of them adds a new layer to their study.

The seventh chapter, "Blindness and insight. Emotions of erotic love in Roman poetry," by Thea Selliaas Thorsen, explores the connection between sight and love. Selliaas Thorsen demonstrates how love and sight are intertwined. Her case studies cover different expressions of erotic love, from the negative, hateful love in Catullus's epigram 58 or of Dido in the *Aeneid*, to the jealous love in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and the *Metamorphoses*, and the perfect love of Hero and Leander in the *Heroides*. Her conclusion is that, far from being blind, love in Roman poetry needed sight for the expression and amplification of the emotion, especially when that emotion was pleasurable and not one of negative, destructive love.

Kristine Kolrud, in "Breaking Fury's chains. The representation of anger in the Sala di Giovanni dalle Bande Nere in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence," takes the reader to a very different Roman setting – that of the understanding, reception, and use of ancient Roman visual culture in Renaissance Florence. The visualization of chained Fury was known through the writings of Virgil and had been a common motif in Renaissance iconography. In the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, the figure of Fury is accompanied by that of the Attack, and both frame the portrait of Giovanni dalle Bande Nere as Mars. The imagery is unusual, rooted in the Renaissance understanding of the Roman texts and of the positive aspects of the emotion of anger. It may be a representation of the Mars who could "be understood as a peace-bringing warrior who roots out unjust rage" (144).

The ninth chapter is by Lena Larsson Lovén, entitled "… and left his parents in mourning … Grief and commemoration of children on Roman memorials." Child mortality was

high in the ancient Roman world, and the numerous monuments set up to commemorate the premature death of a child testify to the emotional involvement of parents. Larsson Lovén examines how the medium of commemoration changed throughout the Imperial period from funerary reliefs to altars and to sarcophagi, but also how the conventions for expressing love and grief changed in the period. Larsson Lovén comes to the conclusion that despite the use of formulas, there is no doubt that parents did experience affection for their children and grief at their loss, but also grief for themselves, as they lost hope for the future.

The tenth chapter, "Trajan's tears. Reading virtue through emotions," by Johan Vekselius, starts from the emotional description of Trajan in Pliny's *Panegyric*. The tears that Trajan sheds on various occasions do not express a single emotion, but rather multiple ones, depending on the occasion. What makes them particularly valuable to Trajan's Roman viewers – and Pliny's readers – is their perception as genuine, something that brings us back to the second chapter of the book and the importance of the sincerity of visualized emotions. Vekselius convincingly shows how tears as an emotional visualization functioned within the political culture of Rome in both a positive and a negative way.

Marina Prusac-Lindhagen's chapter, "Through the looking glass. Collective emotions and psychoiconography in Roman portrait studies," presents first a theoretical framework and then its implementation in her study of Roman portraits of the 3rd c. CE. The theoretical analyses of the different approaches to artworks (Freud's psychoiconography, *Strukturanalyse*, and emotion history) is of particular importance, as they are characterized by clarity and succinctness. Prusac-Lindhagen's case studies come from imperial portraiture, which showcases best how collective emotions could be expressed and manipulated.

Far from a typical epilogue, in the last chapter, "Epilogue. Final considerations and questions regarding visual and textual emotions," Jan N. Bremmer presents readers and scholars with a set of considerations and questions that arise from the papers but are also absent from the essays of the volume. His contribution is a testament to the strengths of the book but also to the current gaps in the field and in our knowledge that can only profit from further questioning and research.

The volume has an array of strong chapters that will make it indispensable reading for any scholar of the history of ancient emotions. First among these are the chapters by Matt and Bremmer. In different ways, both collect and summarize the questions one must ask when approaching the topic, while at the same time making clear the constraints that bind modern researchers.[2] The first is one of definition: how one defines an "emotion" is crucial to understanding how the emotion is expressed. While Paul Ekman's theory of basic emotions that are universal was very influential in early research on the history of emotions,[3] with its consequence that emotions are similarly expressed across different cultures and different times, scholars researching emotions in the ancient world have since moved away from this theoretical model to one that aims to understand emotions that are tied to a specific culture, and, within that culture, their manifestations in specific contexts.[4] Once emotions are defined by cultural specificity, however, one needs to (a) step

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[2]   See also Cairns 2021a.

[3]   Ekman 1975; Ekman 1984.

[4]   For this scholarship shift, see, for example, Chaniotis 2012b.

away from what is familiar and "feels" right in one's modern society, and (b) study the emotion as something different and unknown. Matt and Bremer's papers offer two complementary, short guidebooks for navigating this *terra incognita*.

The papers that discuss the expression of emotions within specific literary genres offer examples of how Roman emotions were culturally defined, constrained, and depicted, but also used. These papers are a useful addition to the small but growing scholarship on emotions in Roman literature. The chapters on visual material culture are even more important. While the study of the expression of emotions in Roman literature is becoming more common,[5] emotions in Roman art are still under-studied. One exception is perhaps in the sub-field of children's studies, especially outside of the city of Rome.[6] The papers by Brandt and Clarke in this volume are welcome additions to their previous work on emotions in Etruscan and Roman art,[7] but also thought-provoking essays on how to approach other complexes. The papers by von Ehrenheim and Karivieri are just as important for understanding the function of Roman houses and villas as the masterful edited volumes by Longfellow and Perry, and Haug, Hielscher and Lauritsen,[8] while the paper by Prusac-Lindhagen offers a different theoretical model for understanding Roman sculpture. In fact, this volume is one of only three recent publications where the display of emotions in Roman visual material culture is examined, the most important being the paper by Viktoria Räuchle in the 2021 volume edited by Douglas Cairns, *A Cultural History of the Emotions in Antiquity*.[9] As with the other papers in that volume, however, Räuchle discusses both Greek and Roman material culture and is selective in her choice of case studies and functions, meaning it reads more like a general discussion than the very specific case studies presented by von Ehrenheim and Prusac-Lindhagen in the volume under review. Furthermore, the different theoretical frameworks used by the authors here and the in-depth analysis of the case studies make these papers essential reading.

There is only one criticism I would make of this volume: that the chapters are not thematically arranged. Papers on literary depictions of emotions are followed by papers on visual culture, while the two papers on emotions in the funerary sphere (by Rasmus Brandt and Larsson Lovén) are placed near the beginning and the end of the volume, respectively. Only the papers discussing displays revealing emotions and eliciting emotional responses from Pompeii (by von Ehrenheim, Clarke, and Karivieri) are grouped

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[5]   See recently Konstan 2021; Scodel and Caston 2021; Chaniotis and Steel 2021, although all three papers also deal with Greek textual culture.

[6]   See recently Pudsey and Vuolanto 2021, although their work begins with the study of papyri rather than visual representations of children.

[7]   See esp. Brandt 2014a; Brandt 2014b; Brandt 2014c; Clarke 2007.

[8]   Longfellow and Perry 2017; Haug et al. 2022.

[9]   Cairns 2021b; Räuchle 2021. Even the recent – and last – publication deriving from Angelos Chaniotis's groundbreaking project, The Social and Cultural Construction of Emotions: The Greek Paradigm (funded by the European Research Council between 2009 and 2013), did not include any papers dealing with Roman material culture from the Roman Greek East. The only paper dealing with visual material culture was that of Frankfurter, but even that was focused on early Christian material rather than Republican or Imperial Roman. See Chaniotis 2021 and Frankfurter 2021. This is in contrast to the earlier volumes, where Roman visual material was discussed to some extent in Chaniotis 2012a and Masséglia 2012. The other publication that discusses Roman visual material is Gorostidi Pi's (2019). Its focus, however, is on the epigrams accompanying the reliefs.

together. This is a very small remark about an otherwise beautifully produced, thought-provoking, and very useful volume that will be essential reading for anyone working on the history of emotions in ancient Roman art for years to come and, one hopes, will inspire more researchers to examine the display of emotions in Roman material culture not only in the region of Italy, as in this volume, but also beyond.[10]

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[10] So far, papyri seem to have attracted more scholarly attention than any other medium: see, for example, Kotsifou 2012a; Kotsifou 2012b; Kotsifou 2012c; Kreinecker 2012; Dickey 2016; Clarysse 2017; Pudsey and Vuolanto 2021; Sarischouli 2020; Tait 2021.

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