Medieval emotions

Julien Le Mauff

Basing her anthropological history on a rich body of source material, Régine Le Jan explores interpersonal relationships in the Early Middle Ages, arguing that they constitute one of the socio-political specificities of the Latin West.

Reviewed: Régine Le Jan, *Amis ou ennemis? Émotions, relations, identités au Moyen Âge* (Friends or enemies? Emotions, relationships, and identities during the Middle Ages), Paris, Seuil, collection "L'Univers historique ," 2024, 528 p. and 8 pl., 27,50 €.

Régine Le Jan's new book, focused on the study of friendship and enmity, maintains that feelings and affects shaping relationships between individuals participated in "the construction of the values and ideals that make a society" and served a genuine "identity function" in the Early Middle Ages (p. 19). In taking this position, her argument draws, firstly, on the idea of the "relational person" proposed by the British anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, a Papua New Guinea specialist. To conceive of a person not as an isolated individual--an island--but as constructed through relationships forged over their lifetime makes it possible to claim that "relationships precede being" and that they result in multiple identities that coexist within single persons who can henceforth be "considered 'divisible'" (p. 15). In this way, Le Jan helps to introduce this concept into medieval history, building on Jérôme Baschet's initial efforts several years ago, as part of a new approach to the history of personhood in the Middle Ages.[1]

---

[1] Jérôme Baschet, *Corps et âmes*, Paris, Flammarion, 2016.

Le Jan considerably enriches the concept of relationality, conceiving it as encompassing every kind of relationship between individuals, including kinship, marriage, alliances, clientelism, competition, mediation, and so on. One can also include relationships based on otherness and exclusion (of foreigners, for example) and situations in which love turns into hate and cooperation into strife (p. 191). Even images and narratives arising from the "intersubjective, socially defined relationship between narrative and reading" (p. 270) participate in a relationality formed through fictional and (especially) religious arrangements.

This guiding thread allows Le Jan to consider a dizzying array of examples, while also connecting and incorporating them into a comprehensive approach to the society that existed between the sixth and eleventh centuries. Her study thus presents itself as an impressive monograph devoted to expressions of affectivity between individuals and their manifestations in the Early Middle Ages, as well as their expression in social situations and the moral significance assigned to affects. In this way, Le Jan's book continues the work of Ute Frevert, Barbara Rosenwein, and an entire trend dedicated to the study of "emotions" (like Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy) and "sensibilities" (such as Alain Corbin and Hervé Mazurel). Le Jan shares these scholars' concern with gauging the distance between historic and contemporary affective expression, as well as between interpretations--being aware, as Mazurel puts it, of "the ambiguities of continuity." In her book, Le Jan focuses on the Middle Ages' earliest period (the sixth to the eleventh centuries), of which she is an acknowledged specialist.[2]

Doing historical anthropology today

To grasp the heart of Le Jan's argument, it is worth recalling how historians, and especially medievalists, have embraced anthropology. Since the early twentieth century, thanks to such landmark works as Marc Bloch's *Les Rois thaumaturges* (a book that recently celebrated its centennial), medieval history has gradually incorporated

---

[2] While she makes the most of this chronological framework, it could be considered regrettable that she excludes the twelfth-century rediscovery of major ancient texts on friendship (notably the *Nicomachean Ethics*), which has been the focus of recent studies (notably Bénédicte Sère's *Penser l'amitié au Moyen*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2007). It is surprising that these works are not cited, even though the Aristotelian conception of friendship is addressed in the opening pages (and its eclipse, during the period under consideration, implied).

the contributions of the social sciences. After the Second World War, and particularly in the 1970s, historians such as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Jacques Le Goff, and Carlo Ginzburg reinforced this trend. Structuralism and functionalism, moreover, provided a generation of medievalists with a way to organize their thoughts and attempt to systematize them.

Le Jan has drawn extensively on Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Elementary Structures of Kinship* in developing her views on early medieval family relationships, which she examined in the state doctorate that she defended in 1993: *Famille et pouvoir dans le monde franc*[3] (Family and Power in the Frankish World). And while the application of anthropological models to medieval sources has since undergone a critical turn,[4] Le Jan continues to align herself with "historical anthropology," though she has revised her models considerably.

In addition to the concept of relationality, Le Jan draws heavily on Philippe Descola's notion of ontology, as he has conceptualized it since *Beyond Nature and Culture,*[5] though she does not go into detail about what this endorsement of Descola's framework implies. Of his four major models characterizing human societies, Descola claims that *analogism* is applicable to the western Middle Ages--as well as to ancient Greece, imperial China, Hindu India, West Africa, and pre-Colombian Mesoamerica. For Descola, analogism refers to discontinuities between humans and non-humans that are both physical and internal. At the same time, analogism connects all beings by way of various signifying networks through relationships based on hierarchy, resemblance, correspondence, and composition. The decision to characterize the European Middle Ages as an analogical ontology is based on Descola's reading of Arthur O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* (1936), a book that has been very influential in the history of ideas in the English-speaking world over the twentieth century. As examples, Descola refers to many organicist motifs, as well as interlocking scales, such as microcosms and macrocosms--concepts that were widely used during the Middle Ages.[6]

---

[3] Régine Le Jan, *Famille et pouvoir dans le monde franc (VIIᵉ-Xᵉ siècle). Essai d'anthropologie sociale*, Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 1995.

[4] Philippe Buc's reflections on the concept of ritual come to mind, though in this instance they are somewhat hastily dismissed (p. 14). Philippe Buc, *Dangereux rituel. De l'histoire médiévale aux sciences sociales*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2003.

[5] Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Paris, Seuil, 2005.

[6] See *Par-delà nature et culture* as well as *Les Formes du visible*, Paris, Seuil, 2021.

At the risk of being somewhat schematic (though other medievalists, before her, have also been influenced by Descola[7]), Le Jan embraces the idea that the western Middle Ages were characterized by an analogical ontology, applying it to the entire period she studies as well as to the "Church-Society that united the high medieval cosmos." In doing so, she emphasizes both the correspondence between the "here below" and the "beyond" and hierarchical social structures encompassing society in its entirety that are underpinned by analogical notions (p. 18). Le Jan sees this as a way of grappling with medieval society's *identity*, though her use of this term is unfortunately imprecise, resulting in unprovable assertions, such as the claim that the specificity of medieval identities lies in their "pluralistic" nature (p. 18, 238) or her assertion that the "identity of peoples" (p. 217) has historical reality. Le Jan's conceptually vague use of the notion of identity overlaps with her habit of referring to imprecise totalities ("medieval societies" and "the ancient order"). Indeed, the historicization of emotional expression itself implies an inclination towards generalization.

Emotive sources

Even so, Le Jan's attempt to explain the role of affectivity and the emotional dimension of collective and individual relationships in the Early Middle Ages offers a rich panorama of medieval sociability rooted in (public and private) forms of social organization and the places (profane as well as sacred) from which power is exercised. Her sources allow her to illustrate the "relational" character of medieval lives, particularly narratives (chronicles, annals, and "lives") and personal and official correspondence. More precisely, the book presents three successive trajectories, each encompassing the entire period and each devoted to a different line of inquiry.

The first question is: how do love and hate, where their expression is documented, explain medieval society's "cohesive and distinct" values? Manifestations of love and friendship participate, according to Le Jan, in a genuine "social pact." This insight also encompasses the way in which conceptions of honor--a form of capital as real as it is symbolic--and revenge can structure social relationships between aristocratic and warrior elites. But religion is also based on relationships and

---

[7] In addition to Jérôme Baschet (*Corps et âmes*), see Florent Coste, "Philippe Descola en Brocéliande," *L'Atelier du CRH* n° 6, 2010.

manifestations of friendship. The characterization of relationships and identification of friends can continue even after death (p. 84-96). This can be seen, for example, in the death annals of monasteries, which welcomed dead benefactors, such as at Fulda, beginning with Abbot Hrabanus Maurus in the ninth century. The practice of the commemoration of deceased friends in memorial books became widespread, with some of the latter containing tens of thousands of names.

The second part of the argument is specifically devoted to the various forms of relationships of friendship and hatred. It seeks both to gauge the emotional depth behind formal expression and to render their meaning explicit by examining them in contexts characterized by intense social constraint. Le Jan's analysis shows the extent to which, for Gregory of Tours, hatred is a feminine emotion (p.120) and how noblewomen, from Queen Brunhilda to Dhuoda, are described as being hated as often as they are said to feel hatred. At times, Le Jan's use of textual sources can be puzzling, as when she advances the hypothesis that Queen Clotilde, the wife of Clovis, the King of the Franks, was seeking revenge in her actions against the Burgundian king Sigismund and his wife. She bases this claim on Gregory of Tours' account, which admittedly "instrumentalizes … female characters in relationships of competition and domination between related families." If this is so, how can this narrative be used to assert that "the framework of revenge" is "possible, even probable" (p. 125)?

Le Jan also explores the way in which relations of familiarity (including kinship relations but also communal and patron-client relationships) are formed and nurtured, demonstrating, for instance the role of hatred as a cohesive forced in conspiracies and military alliances (p. 170-172). While such bonds can be undone, otherness--that is, relationships with enemies--make it necessary to characterize relationships, to build a rapport with the other. When friendship turns into hatred or hatred turns into friendship, this could simply be a strategy, or a trick undertaken by false friends. The sources are full of false reconciliations that mask traps--though this is no doubt hardly unique to the Middle Ages.

The medieval political of friendship

Finally, part three explains the stakes and political dimension of this "relational" approach to the medieval West. This third trajectory develops some of the most fruitful lines of inquiry and hypotheses, as when it emphasizes the importance of go-betweens in the forging and preservation of friendships, notably in maintaining peaceful relations between rivals. Le Jan attaches particular importance to the idea of "coopetition," identifying several instances of competitive equilibrium between aristocratic clans and at the Merovingian court, as well as monastic foundations of the same period (i.e., the seventh century).

Situating these games of friendship and alliance in an analogical, religious, and hierarchical ontology that is unique to the Middle Ages increases its distinctive character, notably thanks to parallels between the love-hate antonym and antinomies peculiar to Christianity (heaven-earth, light-darkness, inner-outer). Finally, following the fragmentation of the Carolingian empire, the affective economy of interpersonal relations became increasingly organized around the growing importance of love-*caritas*, a higher theological virtue that began to connect affective and carnal expressions to spirituality.

Yet to the very end, what Le Jan most emphasizes is the fluidity of bonds, their negotiability, and the importance of mediation. She especially highlights the importance of women as go-betweens. Under the Ottonian dynasty women in the imperial family would reach out to political elites, which explains why a church official as prestigious as Hincmar of Reims regularly addressed them (p. 361). Through their interventions they played a similar role in royal families, softening the often conflictual relationships between secular and religious authorities, as in the case of Matilda of Tuscany, who mediated between her cousin Henry IV, the King of the Romans, and her friend Pope Gregory VII, at the height of the Investiture Controversy (p. 371-373).

The extremely ambitious monograph that is *Amis ou ennemis?* is thus supported by an array of evidence of undeniable richness for anyone interested in interpersonal relationships and their emotional implications in the Middle Ages' early centuries. If the demonstration does not fully prove the book's thesis concerning the period's "ontological" specificity, it at least shows that the era's sources are replete with affective expressions, in narratives and testimonials relating to friendship as well as enmity, and to their nuances and intermediary roles. The book proves, in this way, the

fruitfulness of its heuristic anchoring, while also calling for new reflection on the conditions of possibility for a genuine historical anthropology of the Middle Ages.