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WHO CRIES?:

TEARS AND OTHERNESS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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Honor Scholar Program, Class of 2018

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Introduction

Simultaneously private and public, the act of crying can perform a number of functions in our society. Crying can represent the internal emotional state of a single person, a communal experience of shared emotions, or a performative display of raw ‘authenticity’. Some people cry at happy events; others only cry at the news of death or tragedy. Even when it is experienced or generated privately, the act still carries public value—friends and even strangers often feel empathy for an individual who weeps. An example of the connective and communicative value of tears can be found through entertainment. In mediums such as films and plays, tears can be produced on demand, but they still hold the same ability to invoke empathy in viewers. Anne Hathaway’s tearful performance as Fantine in the film adaptation of Les Misérables (2012) won her an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress. As Hathaway sings the iconic “I Dreamed a Dream,” her chin slightly quivers to eventually let out an uncontrollable sob, demanding her viewers to cry with her. Critics and fans alike praised Hathaway’s performance for its ‘authenticity,’ claiming that ‘her emotions feel real.’ Although clearly these tears were manufactured by Hathaway for the role, they nonetheless had a profound impact on audience reception. This is arguably because of the medium in which Hathaway was performing—film—which allowed viewers to not only hear emotion in her voice (as is common in stage productions of Les Mis), but to actually see the production of the tears in her eyes (see Figure 1.1).

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1 Hooper, Les Misérables (2012)
Figure 1.1 Hooper, *Les Misérables* (2012). Anne Hathaway delivers a tearful performance of Fantine. For the viewer, Hathaway’s musical performance is not only auditory but also visual through Hathaway’s tears.

Figure 1.2 Raddato, “Ağlayan Kaya, Spil Dağı” (2015). Mount Sipylus in the Manisa Province, Turkey receives much attention from tourists and locals who believe the spirit of Niobe is captured through the rock formation.
Hathaway’s performance allows for an experience not available through Les Mis’ original print medium; readers could imagine their own interpretation of a weeping Fantine, but they could not share in a common sight of one. Written by French novelist Victor Hugo in 1862, the original story of Les Mis spans over fifteen years capturing a glimpse of France’s history, while examining themes of moral philosophy, politics, justice, religion, and love. Perhaps it is due to these timeless elements that this emotional story of redemption has been able to adapt to various mediums such as stage and film across cultures. However, such an analysis is unsatisfying; many stories that include timeless themes do not get retold. A large part of the stage play—and therefore the film’s—success in retelling Hugo’s story is undoubtedly the actors’ and actresses’ ability to relay emotion to the audience. Hugo creates an emotional story of tearful characters on paper, and actresses like Hathaway are able to deliver the emotion through their manufactured—but nonetheless believable—tears on screen. The visual representation of internal emotions allows stories to exist beyond their own time and culture; tears’ own ubiquity helps the present understand—and sometimes even feel—the past culture’s emotions.

Furthermore, Hathaway’s deliverance of Fantine’s emotion is a rather modern example of tears sustaining old stories. Surviving pieces of art and literature from antiquity suggest that humans have been using tears to relay emotion for several thousands of years. According to the accounts of Homer and Ovid, in the classic Greek myth of Niobe, the titular character dishonors Leto, the mother of the divine twins, Apollo and Artemis. Niobe claims that she herself—with her fourteen
children—is actually superior to Leto whose only children are the twin deities. When Apollo and Artemis hear about the insult, they kill all of Niobe’s children. In deep grief over her children’s death, Niobe pleads to the gods to end her pain at Mount Sipylus. Feeling pity, Zeus transforms Niobe into a rock so that she may no longer “feel” emotion. However, even as a piece of stone, Niobe continued to cry; her endless tears poured into a stream as she mourned over her dead children, and her story reminds the audience of a mother’s eternal love.

To this day, many people believe that the natural silhouette of a rock formation on Mount Sipylus resembles Niobe (see Figure 1.2). To add to the illusion, the formation seeps rainwater through its porous limestone, causing sightseers and locals alike to believe that Niobe is actually still crying for her children.3 Even with the geological explanation behind the stone’s ‘tears’, people are willing to bend—or at minimum ignore—fact to continue the legacy of Niobe; tears’ ability to capture the zeitgeist of an ancient myth overpowers the validity of scientific facts, at least in an instance about maternal love. Indeed, as will become apparent in the later part of this paper, tears do not always outweigh scientific validity, adding to the ambiguous and constantly changing nature of tears. In fact, as common with many phenomena, science has illuminated and shaped our understanding of tears.

The seemingly trivial act of crying has long perplexed scholars of various disciplines beyond classics and literature. The first scholarly investigations were scientific and considered only the physiological purpose of tears, while later humanist theorists contemplated the cultural influences on crying as a social

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3 As appears in Homer, *Iliad* xxiv, 603-17; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* vi, 155 ff.
practice—but all such contemporary studies share a common assumption about the innate *humanness* of weeping. In literature, for example, crying has been almost exclusively theorized as being a uniquely human activity that connects one person to another. Yet, while many scholars have devoted critical work on the connective capacity of human weeping, few studies have examined *how* tears effectively communicate a wide range of connections, thoughts, emotions, and even fears, among varying human (and perhaps even non-human) social groups. Thus, centering around the question of tears’ ability to convey meaning, this current study will explore tears’ power while considering what it means to be an innately human activity. Furthermore, making a case for the value of historical literature, this study will principally examine tears in the British Isles during the Middle Ages.

**Overview of the Study on Tears**

Although it seldom receives much thought, the production of tears is nonetheless a daily physiological function of our bodies. Tears may signal nothing more than basic physical discomfort, perhaps from cutting onions to combatting unwelcomed debris. However, they may also signify an endless number of human feelings, from grief and joy to empathy and surprise. In an outward reflection of internal emotion, tears publically illustrate intangible feelings. In response to irritation, tears clean and lubricate the eyes. And while physical tears have already demanded research and consideration, our understanding of crying as a social
performance is constantly changing. As one of the founding contributors to the discussion, Charles Darwin once asserted that the purpose of tears was solely for lubrication of the eyes and the nostrils; Darwin dismissed the idea that crying could perhaps have more symbolic meanings suggestive of internal emotions. Rather, Darwin believed that all types of tears were limited to their biological function to clean and lubricate the eye. Over a century later, scholars have continued to investigate the complexity of tears. In the 1980s, William H. Frey proposed that perhaps like urinating and defecating, the act of crying was intended to remove waste or toxins from the body. In terms of emotional tears, Frey contemplated that crying allowed humans to feel better because of the removal of built up chemicals from emotional distress. In another study, Frey et al. found that the chemical composition of tears varies from tear type. Although similar, tears caused by emotion differ subtly in their chemical make-up from tears caused by irritation, suggesting an intrinsic difference between the two and their purposes. While differing in their final findings, Darwin and Frey both led the way in physiological research of tears.

Eventually the focus shifted to more social and psychological perspectives—with questions considering how tears differ among cultures and sexes. Begun by Frey’s work, decades worth of research in this arena has consistently investigated gender differences in tears among various cultural groups—and even with studies as

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4 Traditionally much of the study on tears has been largely in the field of evolutionary biology; see n. 4-6. More recently, as will be evident later in this study, many social scientists and scholars have considered tears in their respective fields.
recent as 2011, the conclusions remain the same: women on average cry more than men.\(^8\) It is important to note that although such studies commonly use the term ‘gender’, it would be more precise to understand these ‘gender’ differences in terms of ‘biological sex’. Older studies do not make this distinction, and many of the newer studies do not take the time to clarify such differences. Nevertheless, such research guides us to either subconsciously or consciously believe that tears are innately feminine. Even research that does not aim to find a more tearful sex ultimately suggests gendered conclusions. In 2012, Laan et al. examined crying in connection to attachment styles, collecting their data from self-reports of crying proneness, as well as studying their respondents’ crying in response to hearing songs about attachment. Laan et al. found that individuals who are overly dependent in their relationships cried more frequently than their more independent counterparts. Among these types of attachment styles, women consistently cried more than men.\(^9\)

While Laan et al.’s findings do not explicitly consider sex, they nonetheless affirm and perpetuate gendered biases; their findings not only erroneously contribute to the idea that women cry more than men, but also that crying relates to dependence—and in a largely individualistic culture, dependence comes with even more stigmatization. Moreover, Laan et al.’s study does not—and should not—promote such gendered conclusions. Indeed, the study rightfully offers that between independent and dependent people, the latter group generally cries more often, but this is not enough grounds to say that one sex cries more than another. In other

words, it is not that women cry more than men, but that dependent individuals cry more often—and in a patriarchal society, women are more likely to be in positions of dependence than men. With such considerations, Laan et al.’s conclusion becomes more of a correlation, rather than a determined causation that scientifically declares one sex to be more biologically tearful. I should mention that the intrinsic gendered ideology or biases evident in Laan et al.’s study are indeed impossible to completely avoid, but a study focused on gendered performances deserves much more careful considerations and awareness of the way gender exists in our contemporary society. Such cautious observations of contemporary ideologies of not only gender, but other relevant social constructions would benefit today’s studies on tears.

Thus far we have briefly explored the ways science has approached tears, and even with intrinsic biases, the validity associated with modern scientific research nevertheless promotes the idea that the production of tears is largely feminine. Based on many of the accounts we have examined, the production of tears, like many gendered actions, is feminized by association—in this case, the association prompts both a positive association with women, and a negative association with men. For women, the production of tears stirs a positive association, because it fits the traditional Western ideology that women are fragile, emotional, and in need of assistance; a crying woman, after all, often characterizes such motifs in popular culture. On the other hand, tears receive and give a negative association for men because it challenges the equally traditional and problematic idea that men should be strong, apathetic, and independent. For men, then, the production of tears threaten such impossible standards.
Furthermore, if we question why tears are able to subscribe to and threaten such ideologies, we can start to grasp the cyclical relationship between tears and today’s gendered biases. In other words, tears are only able to threaten the Western standards of men because the production of tears is already feminine, and thus it must also signal fragility, emotion, and dependence—or in short, female weakness. Thus, both of tears’ positive and negative associations root back to the pervasive idea that tears are weak. Such an idea seems to be inescapable in the contemporary world. Even with the counter rhetoric that tears do not indicate weakness, tears still hold the connotation—or more precisely, the stigma—associated with weak femininity. Ironically, this notion ignores the scientific research that tells us that crying is a physiological function nondiscriminatory of sex. The question becomes, then, why or how crying is conflated with weakness. Indeed, our cultural representations in entertainment confirm that women cry more frequently than men, but this is not synonymous nor similar to say that crying is a sign of weakness. Thus, the ‘weak’ stigmatization of crying must be more complicated than a suggestive linear relationship between frequency of crying and sex, especially if we take into consideration the physiological findings. It is not so much that crying is an act of weakness, but that women are traditionally seen as the weaker sex in a patriarchal society such as ours—and if tears are related to women, tears must be weak, too. In other words, it is not the act of crying that makes women weak, but women that make crying weak.

Aside from gendered foci, a study from this year returns to the fore the aged-old idea that the production of emotional tears—or weeping—is innately human. In
“Why Only Humans Shed Emotional Tears”, Gračanin et al. analyze the function of emotional tears with an evolutionary lens tracing today’s ocular crying to the vocal distress calls of infant mammals.\textsuperscript{10} Interestingly, the psychologists approach their study with considerations of tears featured in literature and religious texts of antiquity and the Renaissance (it is worth noting here that the researchers exclude the medieval period in-between the two they examine). The scholars initially applaud some of the awareness regarding tears from these early periods, stating that such observations “nicely illustrate the early pre-scientific awareness of tearful crying as a behavior that distinguishes humans from other beings (whether real or fantasy creatures)”.\textsuperscript{11} However, the researchers ultimately imply that these observations are inconsequential since they were not produced from systematic studies. The process of discerning the value of scientific inquiry and literary observations based on systematic study becomes an apparent pattern in the later parts of Gračanin et al.’s own study. And while some of the assessments are rightfully made, others stand on less firm grounds. For example, the researchers disprove ancient literary artifacts that offer “anecdotal descriptions of weeping animals”, with the reality that “contemporary scientists” find emotional tears to be uniquely human, and since the latter group proves their findings with systematic studies, their findings should be taken more sincerely.\textsuperscript{12}

Indeed, the researchers refreshingly review examinations of tears outside the traditional realms of science, but their ultimate assertions leave much to be desired.

\textsuperscript{10} Gračanin et al., “Why Only Humans Shed Emotional Tears,” (2018),  
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 2.  
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 2.
Gračanin et al., after their review of Homer’s account of loyal horses, dismiss the possibility of weeping creatures (i.e. non-human animals), because “the only more systematic study on this topic [...] failed to yield even a single observation of a weeping animal”. And thus, Gračanin et al. arrive at the focal point of their study: “The apparent uniqueness of human weeping suggests that tears might represent a functional response to adaptive challenges specific to the hominid lineage.” It seems appropriate to clarify here that I do not pretend to argue a case against the assertion that weeping is a uniquely human activity. Rather, I attempt to highlight the trivialization of the rich, nonscientific observations of tears available in ancient literature. In addition, I acknowledge that Gračanin et al.’s study offers critical psychological, biological, and anthropological insights beyond the contemporary idea that tears are connected to emotion.

Through their study, Gračanin et al. offer three principal conclusions. First, Gračanin et al. find that weeping promotes connection and social relationships. As an example, the researchers turn us to “distress or separation calls” performed by human infants. Gračanin et al. note that although such vocal calls are also made by other infant mammals and birds, the human infant couples its call with physical tears, making the otherwise vocal/auditory experience ocular as well. The psychologists cite that human infants make distress calls when they experience pain, discomfort, or the absence of the mother. In response to these cries, the mother reacts at various

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14 Ibid., 3.
15 Ibid., 4.
16 Ibid., 3.
17 Ibid., 4.
speeds depending on urgency, as mothers are “particularly good at recognizing their own child’s cry and can distinguish between cries associated with the different triggers”. According to Gračanin et al., the tears’ connective capacity are able to physically reunite infant and mother. However, while infant crying is reliably loud (as it needs to grab the attention of the mother), adult crying tends to become more quietly visual and ‘safe’ with age.

Gračanin et al.’s second finding principally draws on this evolution of ocular tears; the researchers conclude that the development of the production of tears within a human lifecycle allow tears to maintain their ability to signal, while ridding risky factors. The production of loud cries not only calls the attention of the mother, but also risks the attention of the enemy. Thus, as an infant transitions through developmental phases and eventually becomes an adult who is aware of its surroundings, they replace their instinct to produce loud, vocal cries with more silent, ocular ones. Such changes in crying allow the adult to control who can—or more precisely who cannot—witness them crying, since the more silent developed production is primarily visible through the face. Furthermore, such control limits the possibility of unwanted observers or enemies of the adult human.

For their third and final conclusion, Gračanin et al. shift their foci to the functional value of adult crying with special focus on the intra- and inter-individual effects of tears. Adding to the more traditionally scientific studies, the researchers

19 Ibid., 10.
20 Ibid., 10.
21 Ibid., 7-11.
22 Ibid., 17-22.
approach their third finding with anthropological studies and historical and literary writings of ritual weeping. And rather than narrowing their focus by geography or period, the researchers offer a brief summary of ritual weeping across cultures and periods. Before their examination of such accounts though, Gračanin et al. explain that the intra-individual functions of tears can be primarily understood as a sort of “catharsis” or “emotional recovery”. On the other hand, the inter-individual functions, as the name suggests, involves a “signaling to others the need for succor”. The inter-individual function of adult crying also causes “disruption” of the present action of the other as they witness and turn their attention to the crier. Indeed, such definitions do not account for all people and all situations. Recent studies actually argue against the cathartic powers of crying, citing individuals with depression and anxiety, who are likely to cry more frequently than those who do not suffer from such conditions, but do not always find benefit in crying.

Furthermore, while these two functions of crying are distinct, their results are not necessarily exclusive of each other; a crier may reach a point of catharsis after they have finished crying, not as a direct outcome of producing tears, but because of the indirect assistance they received from those who witnessed the crier. In addressing the ambiguity of whether the outcome directly results from the intra- or inter-individual effects of crying, Gračanin et al. credit the overlap between the two effects to “the basic human need for social connection”. The findings from the

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23 Ibid., 17.
24 Ibid., 17.
26 Ibid., 17.
27 Ibid., 19.
anthropological accounts of ritual weeping amplify the significance of such connections. Based on multicultural accounts and writings of ritual weeping, the psychologists assert that crying not only provokes, but also *conveys* prosocial intentions, grounding their third conclusion: “the most important functions of crying are in the inter-individual domain rather than in the intra-individual domain”.  

While their findings are impressive and provoking of much thought, Gračanin et al.’s use of anthropological and literary (although they do not label it as so) considerations are the principal contributions to this current study. As previously mentioned, although Gračanin et al.’s study could benefit from a closer look at nonscientific studies, they nonetheless illuminate the potential in ancient literature and historical texts. Furthermore, aside from the points of my earlier reservations and critiques, Gračanin et al.’s final conclusion—and the method and reasoning it necessitated—raise many questions. Indeed, the researchers conclude with an acknowledgement that “Culture is not a fixed given—it is rather dynamic”, yet their methods do not reflect such understanding.  

As briefly mentioned earlier, the anthropological accounts that lead to the final conclusion are diverse in geographical location, culture, and time period. And while such broad observations could be helpful because they offer multiple—and possibly distinct—accounts, the study could be more generous in its elaborations. The benefits of an anthological examination of a culture lies in the opportunity for close study of that culture. Yet, brief examinations of a multitude of cultures’ ideologies of tears and emotions amounts to a rather

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28 Ibid., 24-25.
29 Ibid., 25.
comprehensively weak conclusive understanding. Thus, instead of thinking that a study on one precise culture or time period is limiting, we should appreciate the richness that precision can offer.

I do acknowledge that researchers like Gračanin et al. were primarily conducting a scientific study grounded on traditional scientific methods, but if researchers take on the work to consider nonscientific inquiries, they have the responsibility to approach them with the necessary methodologies. In other words, the humanities and social sciences deserve the same amount of attention and significance; one would not approach the findings of a biochemical study with only anthropological methods—to do so would be irresponsible. If researchers want to consider the cultural significance of tears through literary and historical texts, they should at minimum approach these disciplines with their respective methods. Furthermore, a well-planned consideration of literature would reveal many opportunities unavailable in psychology or even biology. To elaborate, as we have witnessed with the study by Laan et al., it is impossible to completely separate contemporary researchers from their inherent ideologies, especially when conducting experiments with today’s humans as subjects. What science cannot offer, literature can and does. A literary analysis offers a means to study the cultural significance of tears apart from our contemporary ideologies. Historical literature, especially from centuries before our own, preserves its own ideologies—or the lack thereof—in text and illustration. In terms of tears, a study of literature and history offers contemporary scholars to examine tears’ meaning and significance aside from our ideologies. As evident by the studies we have previously examined, we either
consciously or subconsciously think that tears are uniquely humanly and perhaps even feminine, because we all subscribe to a shared ideology that reinforces such thought. In time periods other than our own, this shared ideology does not seem to exist, offering an understanding of tears that is untainted by today’s biases.

This, of course, is not to say that there is no value in culturally-rooted understandings of tears; culturally-rooted analysis offer insight about that culture. Although our contemporary understanding of tears is grounded in a misconception, our understanding nonetheless reveals that our culture tends to think women are weak and are nurturing creatures. These culturally distinct interpretations of tears are a testament to tear’s own propensity for social manipulation—but they are equally prone to be manipulated as they are to manipulate; as much as we can manipulate tears to convey meaning, tears can manipulate us. Manifestly in our contemporary world the production of tears is a social performance that indicates a feeling, but latently, the literal tears become tools to socially control those who cry—or even more radically, to control those who witness the crier. In line with Gračanin et al.’s suggestions that crying provokes prosocial interactions, perhaps criers too are aware of their tearful dispositions and use their tearful behavior as a means of control. For instance, if women are the traditionally ‘weaker’—and by implication the more tearful—gender, it would not be too much of a stretch to wonder if they have developed a readier tendency to cry as a means of recuperating power in a society in which they are powerless. After all, many Western patriarchal films depict women as such coy creatures with unlimited tears at their dispenses to control innocent bystanders, most of whom coincidentally happen to be men. In many ways, then,
there seems to be a reluctant awareness and erasure of tears’ power in our current culture. We label tears as weak, because they offer marginalized identities a chance to recuperate power. But in a period where we tend to project weakness rather than power onto tears, examining tears’ authority is rather futile. However, tears have always seemed to have held power, and a thoughtful study that explores this authority proves to be compelling. If our current culture cannot offer an avenue to study the power of tears, we must turn to periods before our own.

Indeed, Gračanin et al. briefly trace tears back to the Renaissance period and even antiquity, but they disregard the rather tearful period in between: the Middle Ages. To further comprehend how tears have changed in meaning over time and culture, we can trace tears back to early Western literature and illustration, for as it so happens, early Western cultures’ understanding of tears were not exactly weak. In addition, from the first sculptures of Saints to paintings of Jesus Christ and Nicodemus, many of the European medieval culture’s remnants that feature the act of crying do so with revered male figures.30

**Tears in the Middle Ages**

As the middle of the three traditional periods of Western history (classical antiquity, the medieval period, and the modern period), the Middle Ages dates from the fifth to the fifteenth century. It is commonly accepted that in the history of Europe, the medieval period begins with the fall of the Western Roman Empire (ca.

30 A sculpture of St. Martha weeping exists inside the St. Lazarus, Musée Rolin, Autun. A crying Nicodemus holds the body of Christ in Descent from the Cross, ca. 1430 CE, Museo Nacional Del Prado.
476 CE) and ends with the beginning of the Renaissance (ca. 1485).³¹ In terms of geography, the term may refer to the historical period of the Continent, but as one can image due to the lengthy timeline, the medieval period spans over many distinct cultures and peoples. Thus, for the purposes of this study, I narrow my discussion of the Middle Ages primarily to the British Isles unless specified otherwise.

Furthermore, there are several ways to consider the vast timeline of the medieval period. Many scholars approach England in the Middle Ages as three sub-periods: Early (ca. 600-1066 CE), High (ca. 1066-1272 CE), and (ca. 1272-1485).³² In this study, however, I divide the tumultuous period with the historical event of the Norman Conquest of 1066. Prior the Norman invasion and at the start of the fifth century, the Germanic-speaking Saxons serially invaded the British states, forming Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the area of present-day England. Around the seventh century, the Anglo-Saxons experienced Christian conversion. By the ninth century, due to Viking invasions and Danish settlers, Norway had conquered most of England.³³

In 1066, William II, Duke of Normandy, invaded and successfully conquered England, claiming himself as the rightful heir to the throne, marking the beginning of the Late Middle Ages.³⁴ In addition to cultural shifts such as changes in language that happened day to day consequential of the Norman Conquest, the late medieval period continued to experience many grand changes. In particular, the battles

³² Ibid.
³³ Ibid.
³⁴ William II would later restyle his name as King William I.
between England and France led to the Hundred Years’ War, with France coming out victorious and marking the beginning of the end of the Middle Ages.\footnote{Greenblatt and Abrams, “Period Introduction Overview” (2002).}

Perhaps due to its rich, eventful history, the term ‘medieval period’ appropriately often evokes vivid images of epic battles, heroic lords and thanes, and even primitive pagans struggling valiantly against Christian conversion. It is less commonly known that the European Middle Ages were also rich in the language of emotion and introspection. Keeping in mind the two sub-periods I previously established, I will now begin the exploration of tears in the British Isles. I will work in reverse chronology to first examine the tears in the British Isles post-Conquest, ending with a consideration of tears pre-Conquest. Doing so will allow me to ease the modern reader in following the unfamiliar culture that may seem to increase in obscurity with time. Reverse chronology will also be used in the larger structure of this study, as we move from the primary texts found in the thirteenth century Lambeth Homilies to the eleventh century Marvels of the East manuscripts. Ending with an examination of tears in the British Isles pre-Conquest will also give the modern reader the lasting chance to explore the ultimate origin of the majority American culture—the culture of the Anglo-Saxons.

**Tears Post-Conquest (ca. 1066-1485 CE)**

Similar to the classical stories and myths before them, medieval tales portrayed emotions with tears. First printed in 1485 by William Caxton, the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table feature many male characters
who weep.\textsuperscript{36} King Arthur weeps when he realizes he must go into battle against his best knight and friend, Sir Lancelot. In the same tale, Sir Gawain cries at the announcement of Queen Guinevere’s imminent execution for her transgressions. The legend of King Arthur and his knights is merely one example of a piece of medieval literature that ties together the historical past and the present popular culture that feature tears to invoke the audience with emotion. And although the tears in Arthur’s legend are fiction, they nonetheless contribute to the long discussion of tears as they provide a historical and rather legendary account of revered men who cry. Rather than being seen weak because of their tears, King Arthur and his knights are further admired. In the case of King Arthur, his publically-performed emotions enhance or reaffirm his reputation as a gentle and kind king.

Although a specification of gender may seem anachronistic for the medieval period, it is important to mention that texts from this tearful time also largely featured women who cried. In reverse chronology from the legend of King Arthur, \textit{The Book of Margery Kempe} (ca. 1430 CE) is one of the earliest significant representations of female weeping.\textsuperscript{37} Debated among medieval scholars as either an autobiography or confession of faith, Kempe’s mystic narrative exemplifies a well-documented act of weeping provoked by divine revelations. However, unlike King Arthur’s tears, Kempe’s own bouts did not produce reverence (as this paper will later further discuss). Furthermore, while Kempe’s autobiography was well disseminated

\textsuperscript{36} Malory, \textit{Le Morte d'Arthur.} (W.W Norton & Company, 2002).
\textsuperscript{37} Kempe and Lynn Staley, \textit{The Book of Margery Kempe}, (Norton, 2001). Although the \textit{Book} was first published in 1501, many scholars agree the text was written in ca. 1430 CE.
and received much attention, her ‘tears’ were not the first to receive religious meaning.

Approximately 200 years prior to Kempe’s accounts of tears, an anonymous homilist recorded a peculiar set of tears with religious significance. These tears are unique not because they were the first record of religious tears, but because they still remain largely unexamined. The anonymous homilies of MS London, Lambeth Palace, 487 (ca. 1185-1225 CE) classifies four types of tears in a sermon on Psalms: *lacrimae compunctionis*, tears that are like salt-water produced for a man’s own self-compunction; *lacrimae compassionis*, tears that are like snow-water cried from the compassion felt for fellow Christians; *lacrimae peregrinationis*, tears that are like well-water wept from weariness in this world; and *lacrimae contemplationis*, tears that are like dew-water cried for the longing for heaven.38 While the sermon does not elaborate more on these tears, it does suggest that crying held many rich meanings in the medieval period after the Norman Conquest of 1066 CE. Indeed, the significance of tears during the latter half of the medieval period, as exemplified by King Arthur, Kempe and the Lambeth Homilies, could perhaps be a consequence of the influence of European or Anglo-Norman culture. Thus, these examples cannot speak for the entirety of the medieval period, especially the early beginnings of the Middles Ages on the British Isles.

38 In Morris ed., *Old English Homilies and Homiletic Treatises*, (Greenwood Press, 1969), item XVII, 155-58. This and all subsequent translations are my own.
Tears Pre-Conquest (ca. 500-1066 CE)

To get an even closer look to the origin of our current American culture, we will now examine the period the Anglo-Saxons. Continuing to move backward in time from our own historical moment, we can perhaps identify the earliest attested examples of weeping in medieval Western Anglophone culture. Prior to the Conquest, the Anglo-Saxons seem to have had a different approach to tears, at least based on their preserved texts. In *Beowulf* (ca. 1000 CE), the titular character condemns King Hrothgar when the later sheds tears from grief. Beowulf claims that King Hrothgar should not dwell in his emotions when he could instead find vengeance. As a prominent piece of early medieval literature, *Beowulf* provokes a sense of hesitation towards tears, and these tears are not loaded with religious meaning. It seems that in the process of constantly defining and redefining normalcy due to religious conversion and wars, the Middle Ages were also redefining tears. In line with the time period of Christian conversion, the tears of pre-Conquest England were still largely influenced by pagan ideals. In addition, the tears were used to promote the traditional ideals of kinship and battle.

Following the Conquest, the Anglo-Normans seem to have manipulated tears to tell their stories—or meet their needs; the Normans influenced tears to promote Christian conversion. The Middle Ages were constantly reimagining tears. In the early beginnings, the early medieval period disregarded tears as we saw through Beowulf and King Hrothgar. In the early thirteenth-century up to the early-fifteenth-century, the period associated tears with the divine as exemplified by the anonymous

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39 Beowulf, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV. British Library.
homilies and Kempe. In the later-fifteenth-century, the late medieval period saw tears as tokens of reverence as we examined with King Arthur. To a great degree, the social function or interpretation of tears—even the tears depicted in literature, which we must only cautiously approach as a representative of historical “reality”—reflects the deeper values of a culture, and the study of medieval tears reveals valuable insights about a tumultuous period in human history.

**Contemporary Study on Medieval Tears**

Many scholars have undertaken the task of examining the presence of tears in the art, literature, and religious writings of the Middle Ages. Likely well-versed in or at least suspecting of the relationship between tears and social context, most of these scholars consider gender roles and other contemporary social expectations in their work. For example, some scholars choose to contribute to the discussion of tears by focusing on religious social settings, while others limit their focus by geographical location. In many ways, the wide-ranging and diverse academic studies of tears mimic the ambiguous nature of the topic. In general, however, the majority of studies focus on the representation of tears and weeping in the art and literature of continental Europe, leaving much work left to be done on crying in the British Isles.40 Furthermore, such scholarship attests to tears as representative of distinct emotions

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40 Literary scholars have paid much attention to tears in the medieval period. However, majority of the studies have focused on continental Europe, rather than limiting their focus to the British Isles. For more general studies on crying in continental Europe in the Middle Ages, see Broomhall, *Ordering Emotions in Europe, 1100-1800* (BRILL, 2015); Broomhall, *Gender and Emotions in Medieval and Early Europe* (Taylor and Francis, 2016); see especially Classen, “Crying in Public and in Private” in *Crying in the Middle Ages* (2012), 230-48.
and values among cultures, and such cultures define and understand tears in various ways.

In the diverse and growing discussion of tears, Elina Gertsman’s collection of interdisciplinary essays deserves much attention.41 While no single work maintains a similar focus within in the collection, the act of weeping in the medieval period ties the pieces together to provide a comprehensive view of tears in the Middle Ages. Organized into three parts (tears and image, tears and religious experience, and tears and narrative), each essay diverges in critical standpoints. However, majority if not all of the of the essays also acknowledge tears’ connection to religion and piety, gender, and/or authenticity. In her introduction, Gertsman encapsulates the powerful, yet contradictory disposition of tears:

Tears were considered to be a powerful and efficacious liquid; they could cure ills and release souls from purgatory; they pointed to holiness and identified falsity; they were seen as an excess of humors and as signs of sanctity; they were shed in affective devotion and spiritual imitation of holy figures; they were companions to visionary experience and agents that obscured vision.42

With such a description of the use and symbolism of tears, Gertsman preludes tears’ significance during the period between twelfth and fifteenth centuries. The essays in Gertsman’s collection particularly consider the ways tears were used as a source of power among social groups during the latter half of the medieval period. Of the twelve essays and one coda, the contributions of four essays are the most appropriate for this current study.

41 Gertsman, Crying in the Middle Ages, (2012).
42 Ibid., xi.
Tears and Image

Among one of the first essayists featured in Gertsman’s collection, Mariam Bleeke considers the socio-religious aspect of tears through images and other means of ocular experience. In “The Eve Fragment from Autun and the Emotionalism of Pilgrimage,” Bleeke examines tears as presented in carved images and its effects on the audience.\(^{43}\) Geographically turning us to Autun, France, Bleeke considers the viewing experience of pilgrims who came to the church of St. Lazarus to view the twelfth-century Romanesque sculpture of Eve. While many scholars before Bleeke studied the physical sculpture of Eve by questioning why the statue ‘cries’, Bleeke queries what Eve’s apparent weeping does to the pilgrim viewer who has journeyed from afar to revere the relics of St. Lazarus. In answering her own question, Bleeke finds that images of weeping figures could invoke emotion in the viewer, making the pilgrim even more intimate with the divine. Bleeke further notes that “these emotional reactions on the Holy Land pilgrimage were frequently experienced by or at least attributed to women”.\(^{44}\) Here, Bleeke addresses the nuance of written details stating that ‘all pilgrims’ cried at the sight of Eve (and Mary Magdalene and Martha whose statue forms appear in close proximity to Eve’s own statue), but also the special regard given to female pilgrims who “shrieked as though in labour, cried aloud, and wept”.\(^{45}\) Bleeke notices the subtle, yet intentionally gendered precision that leads people to believe that women were the primary criers; in other words,

\(^{43}\) Bleeke, “The Eve Fragment from Autun and the Emotionalism of Pilgrimage,” in *Crying in the Middle Ages* (2012), 16-34.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 26.
\(^{45}\) Ibid., 26. Also appears in Craig, “Stronger than Men,” 169.
although everyone cried at the sight of grieving religious figures, there was a heightened concern for crying women.

Gertsman’s collection continues to follow the theme of image analysis; the collection next takes us to fourteenth-century Italy with Judith Steinhoff’s own examination of representations of grief in paintings in her “Weeping Women: Social Roles and Images in Fourteenth-Century Tuscany.” Acknowledging that European medieval societies knew how to manipulate and control crying, especially crying done by women, Steinhoff is interested in the presence of weeping women in these scenes.46 In addition to examining iconic pieces such as Giotto di Maestro Stefano's Lamentation (ca. 1357-1359), Steinhoff also considers the then-current legal statutes that controlled women’s behaviors, especially behavioral expressions of lament. Such statues governed and regulated the ‘appropriate’ conduct of grieving. Whether it be conduct at funerals or roles in the preparing of burials, “the regulations addressed precisely who could express grief, and how, when, and where they could do so”.47 However, the laws principally aimed to regulate women, as they were seen as the gender that needed more regulation. While no one was allowed to express sorrow with loud cries and public tears, women were additionally not allowed to leave the house during a funeral procession. As Steinhoff mentions,

[Such laws] indicate that strong emotion was expected, and even required to be expressed by women, but only within precisely controlled parameters [...] The statutes tried to circumscribe those behaviors and prevent mourners from transgressing the boundaries in ways that might have threatened social peace

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47 Ibid., 47.
and stability—or allowed women’s presence to be too prominent in the public sphere.48

Steinhoff’s analysis of the legal statutes not only reveal that medieval women were heavily regulated, but her analysis also confirms that the medieval period saw tears as powerful tokens. Crying women needed regulation because their powerful tears would expand their presence in the public sphere; without tears, women would remain silent and unnoticed. Furthermore, in case the monetary penalties were not threatening enough to ensure success of these statutes, the governing body used visual illustrations to promote women’s adherence to the laws. It is no wonder, then, that even the women in the paintings adhere to the laws of fourteenth-century Siena. Steinhoff’s analysis suggests that visual representations not only instructed medieval women on the proper ways of grieving, but also acted as an additional layer of social control in maintaining “society’s conflicts about women”.49 Similarly, priests and other religious leaders would use early medieval images of Christ crying at the cross to solicit the viewer to take part in the weeping, provoking emotive devotion.50

Tears and Religion

 Appropriately following this brief introduction of religious leaders’ manipulation of tears, Gertsman guides us next to part two of her collection featuring essays focused on tears’ relationship with religion. Whereas religion was a peripheral

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48 Ibid., 48.
49 Ibid., 49.
50 Ringbom, “Devotional Images and Imaginative Devotions,” (1969). This type of devotion is much like today’s empathy. The sight of tears—or the cause of them—often connects the viewer to the initial crier, creating the social experience of weeping together.
consideration in the essays of part one, the essays in this next section provide a precise focus on tears and religious experience. In “He Cried and Made Others Cry”, Linda G. Jones also acknowledges the contrasting attitudes toward crying in religious contexts. Unlike the previous essayists who have examined such attitudes principally in a Christian culture, Jones examines such contrasts in medieval Islamic preaching. In particular, Jones finds a “proscription against” and “enjoinment to” the shedding of tears as prompted by two hadiths (sayings) of Muhammad. In the first, Muhammad meets a family during a burial of their Jewish female relative, and he claims, “You are crying over her, and she is being tormented in her grace”. In the second hadith, Muhammad uses the sighting of a solar eclipse to remind his followers against pagan superstition, claiming this transgression is similar to adultery and would anger God. In doing so, Muhammad instills fear in his followers and states, “If you knew that which I know you would laugh little and weep much”. In both cases, the hadiths draw upon the central idea of “God-fearingness” that the Qur’an defines as the state that an ideal relationship between humans and God should be centered.

Moreover, in the case of the first hadith, crying over the death of a relative is seen as a sign of publicly rebelling against God’s will that summoned the person to the afterlife. In other words, the hadith believes death is God’s will, and crying is a direct sign of rebellion or ingratitude towards the divine command. Not only does

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51 Jones, “He Cried and Made Others Cry,” in Crying the Middle Ages (2012), 102-35.
52 Ibid., 103.
53 Ibid., 102.
54 Ibid., 103.
crying indicate one’s defiance, but it also divulges one’s disobedience to God as fellow community members can witness the deviant’s physical tears. And to ensure that disobedient crying was not encouraged, Muhammad claims the dead is being “tormented” by the livings’ crying. The second hadith is much more elaborate in its ascription of meaning onto tears. Not only does it adhere to the teachings of ‘fearing God’ in that Muhammad prompts his followers to quite literally weep at the thought of God and his punishments, but it also aligns with the divine concept of substitution (badal). For an example, Jones turns us to the consumption of wine. A forbidden drink for Muslims on Earth, wine is promised in bounty in the paradisal afterlife. Jones finds similarities between this type of substitution and an inverted form between tears and laughter in Q 9:82 which reads, “‘Let them laugh a little: much will they weep: a recompense for the (evil) that they do’”. By inversely positioning laughs to tears, Jones finds that this promise claims that those who laughed about their sins on Earth will weep in the afterlife. And conversely, those who have cried much on Earth will be rewarded with much laughter in paradise. In contrast to the teachings of the first hadith, then, the second hadith encourages crying as it indicates a ‘God-fearing’ individual who will be rewarded in the afterlife.

As we have just seen, these two hadiths capture the contrasting attitudes towards shedding tears in Islamic Spain. Not surprising, then, were the anxieties towards the authenticity in tearful performance, as crying was seen as both a sign of sincere piety as well as suspicious deception, especially in regard to religious

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55 Jones notes that although the divine concept of substitution is not Qur’anic it nonetheless “is consistent with Qur’anic eschatological discourse,” 110.
56 Ibid., 111.
(dis)obedience. The ambiguous disposition of tears further extends to the contradictory teachings of then-current religious leaders. Not only did preachers warn against crying, but they also deliberately provoked weeping among congregations for “collective ritualized weeping” customary for ceremonies during times of drought. Tears not only communicated religious signals among followers on Earth, but also between heaven and Earth. The central belief in weeping ceremonies’ potency to prompt rain—symbolic of God’s mercy on his people—is largely based on the idea that humans can communicate with God via tears. What is not explicitly stated, however, is the notion that God, too, can use tears to communicate with humans. If Muslims are to understand Muhammad as a prophet—or God’s messenger—Muhammad’s hadiths become words of God. The hadiths that encourage and condemn crying become a form of God’s own communication to Muslims about tears. This social control in the guise of mere communication not only dictates how a Muslim should lead their life, but also determines a sincere follower among heretics. Thus, tears promote exclusivity; at the same time that the God-commanded tears indicate true followers, they exclude all non-believers. In the next essay in Gertman’s collection, we will witness how tears work as connective agents, complicating the exclusive disposition of tears.

Rachel S. Mikva expands the discussion of religious crying to Judaism in “Weeping as Discourse between Heaven and Earth” as she considers the medieval rabbinic texts of Midrash vaYosha. Like other scholars, Mikva acknowledges the

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57 Ibid., 103.
ways crying acts as an expression of feeling, but her contribution to the discussion is largely based on her argument for tears’ ability to represent relationship, especially between heaven and earth. In starting her essay, Mikva echoes and expands on what we have already explored through Gračanin et al. Mikva, too, considers the connective capacity of tears, only without the gendered overtones; she cites an example of a crying infant whose tears are often thought to be indicative of a yearning for food, drink, or comfort, but in reality, whose cries are satisfied with the presence and attention of its caregiver. The person, summoned by the infants’ tears, may bring food and drink, but also the person itself—the infants’ cries are ultimately for the purpose of bringing its caregiver near.\textsuperscript{59} To focus us back to her principal question of the connective capacity of crying in religious settings, Mikva applies this parental intuition to God. Basic caregiver intuition tells us to pick up a crying child, and Mikva finds this similar to God’s reaction to ‘crying’ followers found in religious texts. Many biblical references give reason to believe that “God will hearken to tears”.\textsuperscript{60} In Exodus 15, the newly-freed Israelites are trapped between the Sea of Reeds ahead of them and the Egyptians behind them. Seemingly without solution, the Israelites and their leader weep to stir “The mercy of the Blessed Holy One”.\textsuperscript{61} Indeed, this example with the Israelites more strongly supports the idea that tears evoke divine mercy, rather than relationship, but relationship and mercy share a commonality of attachment.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 159.  
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 156.  
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 156.
Attachment, as Mikva finds, may include mercy, but it surely reflects relationship. Among many of her examples and text analyses, Mikva’s work with Akedah, the Hebrew term for the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22, offers the most comprehensive analysis to suggest tears’ aptitude to represent relationship between the divine and the human. Drawing parallels between the altar for the sacrifice of Isaac and a canopy for a martial ceremony, Mikva follows the tears in this religious story. The first mention of tears during Abraham’s preparation to sacrifice Isaac is when the later requests that his ashes be given to his mother, Sarah, so that “she may tearfully be reminded of [him]”. Isaac, now thinking of his mother, asks Abraham what they will do with the loneliness felt by their son’s death. In this moment, Abraham states that like the many times God comforted them in their loneliness prior to having their son, God will offer comfort once more. Eventually Isaac imagining his mother’s tears leads to Abraham’s shedding his own upon the bound Isaac and onto the wooden altar moments before he picks up the knife to kill his son. God, moved by Abraham’s loyalty, speaks to the inquisitive angels and defends his decision in creating humanity for had he not, Abraham could not “unify [God’s] name in this world”.

Perhaps the tears moisten the wood beyond a dryness capable of being set ablaze, or perhaps the tears evoke a mercy in God that causes the divine intervention that saves Isaac. While the latter is the religious conclusion we are to make, the tears nonetheless saved Isaac, and Mikva argues it is because of tears’ ability to reflect attachment. Although the first mention of tears is imaginary, it causes Isaac to reflect

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62 Ibid., 161.
on his relationship with his mother, which prompts Abraham—albeit with Isaac’s question—to think of his past and future relationships with his wife, his son, and God. Parents often undertake this process of rethinking past memories while envisioning new ones during the marriage ceremonies of their children. Appropriate for this analogy is Mikva’s earlier comparison of a sacrificial altar to a marriage canopy. In this case, Mikva finds Isaac to be the young man about to wed God, and although the marriage would be tragic, it nonetheless is “a testament to intimacy and relationship”.

Furthermore, relationship or at least the evidence of it in Abraham’s family moved God to spare Isaac’s life and reflect on his own divine attachment to his creation, Abraham. Thus, in the martial ceremony God becomes the female partner with the ‘reproductive’ capabilities that populates the earth. Abraham’s—and in extension Isaac’s—loyalty transforms Isaac’s outcome. However, Mikva clarifies that “personal transformation” and the “phenomenon of attachment […] between heaven and earth” may be related but are not same. The impact of tears cannot remain inside a single person in a relationship for when one party has changed, the relationship, too, will change in response to the first party. In the example we have just seen, Abraham impacts God and this strengthens the communication between earth and heaven. Thus, as Mikva concludes, “Fearful tears at the sea may stir divine mercy, but the soul-shaping tears of Abraham transform the covenant”.

In many ways, the most blatant commonality among Bleeke, Steinhoff, Jones and Mikva’s essays is structured religion. As the center of medieval society, religion

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63 Ibid., 162.
64 Ibid., 168.
65 Ibid., 168.
grounds many other aspects of medieval studies, and tears seem to receive the same
treatment. Conversely, then, tears reveal the ubiquitous process of religiously
defining cultural norms of medieval Europe. Once thought of as “powerful and
efficacious liquids”, the tears studied in the four essays found their power in
Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. However, religion—as important as it is—is not the
only common consideration among the essays that we have just examined. All of the
essays consider gender and the anxiety it produces in connection to tears, the most
explicit case perhaps being Steinhoff’s examination of gendered laws.

Furthermore, in terms of femininity or masculinity, like in our own culture,
tears in the medieval period may have been associated with women, but tears were
not necessarily feminine per say. Indeed, tears could be feminine, but not in the way
we understand femininity today. What is more certain is the powerful disposition of
tears in the Middle Ages. Unlike our contemporary understanding of tears as weak,
the medieval period largely regarded tears as powerful. Gertsman herself seems to
have noticed this universal anxiety towards powerful tears as she considers the
healing properties of tears. In her introduction, Gertsman briefly mentions that tears
were thought to heal the body’s wounds during the medieval period, with tears
receiving their efficacy of healing from “Christ’s blood and Mary’s tears”. 66 The
critical point in this analysis comes next as Gertsman suggests why and how tears
could be feminine, but certainly not weak. In the process of conflating his blood with
her tears, Christ is feminized—not only because his bodily fluid is compared to that
of his mother’s, but also because the object of fluid from the porous body is already

66 Ibid., xii. See Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, “Holy Medicine and Diseases of the Soul.”
a feminine concept according to Galen (ca. 129-210 CE). As a physician and medical researcher of antiquity, Galen’s understanding of anatomy was chiefly influenced by the then-current theory of humorism, which declared women’s bodies as more cold and wet than male’s bodies. This logic led to the idea that women were already ‘physiologically’ more prone to ‘wetness’—and in extension, tearfulness—and thus, it is no wonder that tears were constantly sought out in women’s bodies. In other words, rather than being feminine, tears were associated with objects, such as water, that held feminine connotations. Even in Mikva’s essay where women are not readily present, tears are divulging another feminine object: a maternal relationship between Abraham and God. Although God often takes a masculine pronoun and epithet of ‘Father’, Mikva’s analysis suggests that God is the female ready to wed Isaac who waits for him at the altar. It is God who created Abraham who would procreate generations of followers.

In conclusion, Gertsman’s collection offers a geographically and religiously comprehensive understanding of tears in the Middle Ages. Occasionally admired and frequently ridiculed, tears from the female body never failed to draw attention; the powerful nature of tears demanded women in the medieval period to be acknowledged. In the case of a previously alluded example, Margery Kempe’s excessive weeping demanded others to notice her, and weeping eventually became a trope for female mystics in the medieval period. Furthermore, even if the attention

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68 Gerstman, xiii.
was at times negative, women were nonetheless able to garner public attention with their tears. In a period where tears were principally present in revered, masculine figures, medieval women were able to observe tears’ authority and recuperate their presence with their own production of tears.

Yet, as women were receiving attention because of their tears, the public’s scrutiny of tearful women also increased. Perhaps in response to the female mystics and their weeping, tears eventually became a symbol for one’s piety or the lack thereof, especially among women. Intrinsically intimate between the divine and the human, worship—and one’s commitment to the divine—became visible with tears. To be overcome with sorrow or joy at the thought of the divine—so much so that one would weep—signaled piety among other believers; tears allowed the personal to become public. The sight of tears welcomed others to acknowledge and share in the devotion of the crier as we have witnessed from the essays in Gertsman’s collection. In all cases and all religions that we examined, tears were used to control something or someone, namely women as they gained presence in the social sphere with their recognition of tears’ power.

But in much the same way that tears could control social groups, they could also be controlled. Indeed, many religious leaders in the medieval period often saw bodily expressions, such as tears, to be objects that could be manipulated—or created on command.69 And since tears made piety visible and defined genuine contrition, the authenticity of such a signal was critical in societies that valued religion. Much of the anxiety resides in the fear of individuals whose religious devotions did not—or

could not—provoke tears, but who could compensate by manipulating their body to weep on command. Such individuals partake in what contemporary sociologists often call ‘performance work’, which considers individuals as actors who ‘perform’ and display the socially-meaningful action, in this case weeping to suggest piety. To refer back to a prior example, at the same time that crying became a trope for female mystics like Margery Kempe, it also became a reason for suspicion. In her *Book* alone, Margery recounts the many people who questioned and invalidated her crying, making her constantly weary of her own tearful bouts. Where some admired and favored Margery’s public display of devotion, others detested and disapproved it claiming that her tears were purposefully faked to distinguish herself as God’s chosen one.

More serious were the warnings from religious leaders like St. Peter Damian (ca. 1072 CE), a Benedictine monk and cardinal of Pope Leo IX. In his selected writings, St. Peter Damian cautions against fake tears, by claiming that fake tears “did not come from heavenly dew, but had gushed forth from the bilge-water of hell”. 70 Seemingly dramatic and a bit fictitious, Margery’s experience in truth accurately reflects the larger medieval period’s anxiety towards forced-tears, especially among female Christians. Thus, it is fair to say that the connection between weeping and women is equivocal at best and erroneous at worst—microcosm of the larger discussion on tears. In such a way, then, tears were manipulated to perpetuate gendered difference. To speak about gender—especially in the way we understand

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gender today—of the medieval period is anachronistic. However, if we appropriately consider the ancient and medieval theories that were already making distinctions between men and women, approaching gender differences in the medieval period becomes justifiable. In particular, we can turn to the ancient theories of natural elements and medicine that determine women and men as distinct groups.

**The Porous Body**

As previously mentioned in association with Galen, medieval medical theories largely developed from the earlier ancient theories of humorism. First developed by ancient Greek and Roman physicians and philosophers, the theory of the humors was advanced by the Greek physician, Hippocrates of Kos (ca. 460-370 BCE), to largely frame medicine, hence often called the four humors of Hippocratic medicine. Hippocratic medicine principally revolves around the four humors: black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood. Furthermore, each type of humor is associated with a natural element: earth, fire, water, and air respectively.71 Although the humors were also paired with seasons, ages, organs, qualities, and temperaments, these correspondents are less important in the consideration of tears and gendered difference than the elements. During ancient and medieval times, it was believed that every human body was made up by a balance of these four humors. In “Watery Offerings: Women and Water in the Middle Ages”, scholar Hetta Howes argues that “Men and women were partly differentiated by their humoral composition: Women were believed to be slightly more watery and therefore more phlegmatic, whereas

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men were more hot and dry, associated with fire and a slight excess of yellow bile”.

Howes’ argument does not seem like a stretch, especially when considering the early construction of the porous female body. According to contemporary scholar Elizabeth Grosz, this concept is still long-standing today. In Volatile Bodies, where Grosz explores the relationship between mind and body, she claims that “the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as cracked or porous vessel”.

This concept of female porosity and its stigmas were prevailing ideas even in the twelfth century. Porosity—or open holes—suggests a ‘lack’ in women that is not evident in men. Furthermore, the liquids—such as tears—that leak from the female body only further qualifies the female as inferior to male.

However, the negative association women received due to their ‘porosity’ eventually improved with the help of the embodied religious practice known as imitatio Christi. Imitatio Christi rose to its height of popularity around the middle of the fifteenth century in both England and on the Continent, and as the Latin title suggests, the practice involved imitating Christ’s behavior to nurture a more intimate connection with his divine person—ultimately leading to a more pious life for the individual Christian practicing it. A commonly practiced example is fasting; a

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73 Grosz, Volatile Bodies (1994).
75 Howes, “Watery Offerings”.
Christian may fast to imitate the example of Christ in the wilderness, and as a reward the Christian is thought to gain religious understanding. For women, engaging in this religious practice became easier in the later medieval period. According to Howes, around the fourteenth-century, “women were beginning to understand that they could perform imitatio Christi simply by reflecting upon their own femininity”.77 By examining any of the visual art of their time, women realized the similarity between their own and Christ’s body. In paintings of him suffering, Christ is often bleeding from open wounds or sweating from his sufferings, all reflective of female porosity. And in the much the same way that modern historians have come to see this similitude, medieval women also recognized and utilized this sameness to deepen their relationships with Christ, elevating their standings in their communities in the process.78 Thus, women’s associations with tears improved; society no longer saw women’s tears as solely criminal. Tears could now indicate women’s ‘sameness’ to Christ. As an addendum, it is important to note that the negative and positive associations and their origins are neither chronological nor causal, but indicative of the ever-changing ambiguity of tears.

**Tears in Lambeth 17**

At times negative and transgressive and at times positive and pious, tears have always further subjugated or celebrated specific groups of identities. Many scholars, such as the essayists in Gertsman’s collection have chosen to explore this subjugation

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77 Ibid.
78 Ibid. For a historian who explores this subject, see Caroline Walker Bynum in *Jesus As Mother*, (1982).
intersectionally through gender and religion, focusing on how tears have acted as social control on women often because of their religion. Lacking in the discussion is a focused study on the relationship between men and tears, if there exists one at all. Indeed, the most influential religious leaders who shape their respective cultures—and in effect the significance of tears—were men, as exemplified by Muhammad’s hadiths and followers. And according to the current discussions, such men were seldom—if ever—on the receiving end of tear’s significance. Muhammad gave tears’ meaning, and such meaning affected the worship-styles of his followers. However, Muhammad does receive tears’ meaning in that his declarations do not explicitly affect the interpretations of his own tears. Whether Muhammad cries or abstains from crying, his position in society remains the same—he will always be the prophet for Muslims.

Offering an avenue to study men’s relationships with tears, the anonymous Old English homilies of MS London, Lambeth Palace, 487, colloquially known as the Lambeth Homilies, features four types of tears that are uniquely related to men. While I do not pretend to suggest a strangeness of Lambeth 17’s exclusive focus on men since the period may have called for gendered examples, especially in the context of religious texts, the masculine focus is nonetheless idiosyncratic. We should also keep in mind that not only have nearly all the other medieval texts that we have so far examined featured tearful women, other homilies in the Lambeth collection feature women as well, only without this specification of the four tears. Of the nineteen homilies in the collection, only Homily 17 mentions the following tears: lacrimae compunctionis, tears that are like salt-water produced for a man’s own self-
compunction; *lacrimae compassionis*, tears that are like snow-water cried from the compassion felt for fellow Christians; *lacrimae peregrinationis*, tears that are like well-water wept from feeling weariness in this world; and *lacrimae contemplationis*, tears that are like dew-water cried for the longing for heaven.79

Scholarly access to the Lambeth Homilies still largely relies on Richard Morris’ 1868 edition of transcription and translation of the manuscript. Furthermore, although Morris’ work is dependable, his work does not mention his apparatus and only includes few textual notes, leaving today’s scholars with many questions. Perhaps due to this limited access, very few scholars have documented their studies on the collection, let alone Lambeth Homily 17, Sermon on Psalms. Many of the scholars that do undertake the task, examine the collection for linguistic purposes, finding interest in the preservation of the language at the cusp of the change from Old English to Middle English.80 For the purposes of this study, however, the contents of Lambeth 17 are the primary focus. Gertsman mentions the Lambeth tears in her introduction, citing each tear's correspondence with its natural water-type, but makes no suggestions as to the source or significance of the material.

In her study of affectivity in the Middle Ages, Ayoush S. Lazikani provides a more comprehensive contribution as a part of her larger examination of the affective language in the Lambeth and Trinity Homilies.81 Her findings are held together by

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79 Morris., (n. 10 above).
the idea that the homilist gave the tears both “conceptual” and “somatic” sense. Lazikani, thus, considers the tear’s affectivity and their relationship with the human body. For sake of clarity, it is worth quoting Lazikani’s description of the tears in full:

Briny tears for sin, 'se water', are characterized by bitterness. Bitterness is, after all, a hallmark of genuine contrition. Tears of compassion, 'snaw water', are produced by a warm heart ('wlache heorte'). Compassion is associated with heating in the body—and imaged as a warming connection between two separate entities, as the sun touches snow. Tears born from weariness with the world, 'welle water', are endowed with spatial depths, being drawn from the 'heortes rotes': ennui is felt in the rooted depths of the heart. Tears of longing for Heaven indicate the soul's desire to move upwards, as the Holy Spirit seeks to draw us up. Like rain or dew, the exiled soul belongs in the sky.82

In her analysis, Lazikani sees crying as a way to manage pains associated with a ‘longing for Heaven’ or ‘weariness with the world’. In such a way, Lazikani picks up on what may be inherently obvious that it is not obvious at all: the pain that causes one to cry. Indeed, the homilist provides four separate scenarios where a Christian man may cry, further associating those tears with types of natural waters. The homilist even introduces the tears as “boð þe fuwer waters þa þe beorð ðihatæn us on to weschen þurh ysaiam þe prophete pus queþende. beoð iweschen and w[u]nieð clene” [the four waters in which we are commanded to wash and become clean] but does not provide from what ‘we’ are to be cleansed.83 Here, Lazikani seems to assert that the cleansing is from the pain of such scenarios. In other words, what may be intended and not explicitly stated is that these four types of crying are methods of managing affective pain in a cathartic way. In comparison to the ways tears act as

82 Ibid.
83 Morris., (n. 10 above).
social control on women, tears were a technique that men could use to cleanse themselves from pain’s blight, at least in the early thirteenth century. In such a way, the Lambeth tears presents a more independent alternative to the traditional method of ‘cleansing’ away one’s sin; rather than being ‘cleansed’ from sin by a priest, one could cleanse themselves—or more precisely, men could cleanse themselves. Although there is evidence that female midwives might have been able to assist with baptisms, this role was still largely held by male priests. The homilist even limits the self-cleansing method to Christian men, as it only addresses men and their Christian brethren. Perhaps, then, the peculiarity of the homily is that it offers the power to forgive sin to non-clerical positions, although it still maintains the gendered nature of the role. In other words, this type of independent self-management or a self-cleansing gives more agency to men, while it lessens the need for religious figures to “forgive” one’s sin.

While no women are mentioned, in many ways, this idea of tears as a cleansing tool borrows largely from the feminine concept of water and its cleansing properties. In much the same way that water can transform from a liquid to a solid state, it can initiate transformation in the objects and people near it. Even medieval Christian theology promotes washing one’s sins away with water in a baptismal ritual. In the Biblical book Luke, scripture recounts the story of a sinful woman who washes Jesus’s feet with her own tears—her tears acting as a substitute for water. And while the woman does not seem to be cleansing herself, the effects of her weeping over

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Jesus’ feet does manage her ‘pain’. Jesus forgives her sins and declares her ‘saved’. Her pain as a sinful woman—visible by the reputation that precedes her—is relieved and gone.

Furthermore, although the Lambeth tears exclude women from the option of managing pain with tears, it still presents an additional understanding of the relationship between women and tears and the larger realm of gender and tears. The verses in Luke may also just be another text that imposes watery associations onto women, but its conclusions are more liberating: it offers women the possibility to transform their identities. In the medieval period, a sinful woman could hardly control the ways people perceived her; all she could possibly do was attempt to gain Christ’s acceptance and forgiveness so that she may, if nothing else, be considered “saved” or “pious”. This religious opportunity allowed women to rid themselves from the negative associations of tears. With the story of the sinful woman from Luke, a medieval woman could mediate and imagine cleansing Christ’s feet with her own tears. The result is transformative: a woman with nothing can no longer be invisible. Christ, and his male followers, cannot turn away from a weeping woman, even if she is a sinner. Her tears are not only an exterior sign of an interior sentiment but also an apparatus that completely transforms her identity.

For powerless individuals like women—or more precisely, individuals whose powers were stripped away from them—tears were opportunity as much as they were misfortune. If tears are understood as tokens of social control for underrepresented identities, they are also tokens of separation between the oppressor and the

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85 Ibid., verses 47-50.
oppressed. And while many scholars have examined the relationship between tears and disadvantaged identities, these arguments are peripheral to their main findings—and often only consider the identity of gender. Furthermore, many—if not all—of the existing works on medieval tears only consider the act of weeping among humans. Indeed, medieval literature and illustration limits scholars to study tears among men and women as these predominately religious texts purposefully feature people to modify and enhance Christian behavior in their audience. Thus, if tears are both innately human and also means of separation, those who do not exhibit tears can be considered as the Other, or inhuman. In this next section, this paper will analyze a race of humanoid creatures in an attempt to consider how tears were employed to create Otherness by defining itself as an innately human quality.

**The Donestre in The Marvels of The East**

Often known as the *Beowulf* manuscript in reference to the well-known epic poem, the Cotton MS Vitellius A XV manuscript consists of several works written in Old English and Latin, one of which is *The Marvels of the East*.86 Also referred to as *The Wonders of the East*, the text dates back to approximately 1000 CE, with many different works of various sources, including St. Augustine and Virgil.87 However, paleographical evidence suggests that a single scribe mostly likely wrote the bulk of the work, intending these seemingly various and dissimilar works to be produced as

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86 *Marvels of the East* (f. 103v-f. 104r), Cotton MS Vitellius A XV. British Library. The *Marvels of the East* text also survives through two other manuscripts Cotton Tiberius B. V, and Bodley 614.
a complete whole. In terms of content, the collection features tales of barbaric creatures often with magical capabilities. Alongside the Old English are illustrations of these secular creatures, a rarity in the Anglo-Saxon period. Although there is no preface nor explanation in the beginning of the manuscript, each short work frequently details four pieces of information: the name of the beast or its race, its physical description, its location, and its diet. The geographical locations of the featured creatures vary from continent to continent, far beyond the borders of the world known by the Anglo-Saxons. For instance, many of the creatures are said to come from Eastern regions, such as Babylon, India, and Persia. In terms of appearance, many of the creatures exhibit physical deformities with extra heads and/or limbs, enlarged body sizes, and often a combination of human and animal characteristics. Furthermore, some creatures also deviate from European norms in terms of language and diet. For example, the donestre race of people were known to speak every human language and consume other humans (see Figure 7.1).

As one of the few Othered beings that weep, the donestre provide a fascinating avenue to study the power of tears. Described to be half human and half-lion, the donestre would use their polyglot abilities to lure any traveler and devour all but the traveler’s head, which the donestre would then weep over and mourn. Many scholars have found reason to examine the tale of the donestre, especially because of their ability to speak every language. Andrew Scheil argues that the ominous representation of multilingualism represents the intrinsic difference and potential

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89 Wright, “Donestre and Panotii from the ‘Marvels of the East’”.
deceit of language itself. Others, like Rosalyn Saunders focus on the unique etymology of the word-form, donestre, finding that it “is unattested and occurs only in the Wonders manuscripts”. Saunders finds the naming unusual, as the text does not provide a translation nor an explanation, contrary to the pattern set by other names and word-forms of the other creatures. And while Saunders does examine the donestre race and the process of it being Othered, the donestre’s ability to weep is only a small component of her argument.

Furthermore, it is this act of weeping that distinguishes the donestre from other creatures featured not only in the manuscript, but also in the larger collection of medieval literature. As previously alluded, literature and illustration of the Middle Ages often only attributed tears and the production of tears to humans, most commonly in religious contexts. However, the tale of the donestre not only features a secular story, but an Othered being so removed from human society that its human race is often forgotten or erased. Few scholars have given attention to the reason behind the donestre’s tears. Nicholas Howe discerns the donestre’s actions as an attempt to resemble the more-human traveler, considering the creature quite literally becomes one with the traveler’s flesh. In doing so, the donestre is attempting to rid of its ‘foreign’ and become the ‘familiar’. However, as Howe argues, the donestre weeps at his own realization that the process of becoming familiar can never

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91 Saunders, “Becoming Undone”, 3.
92 Ibid.
be complete, as another “elsewhere”—or another foreign—must exist. Thus, the donestre weeps in regret of his actions and in fear of remaining the Other. 

Figure 7.1 Details of a Donestre consuming a human traveler. As seen in the *Wonders of the East*, England, 4th quarter of the 10th century, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV, f. 103v. Illustration provided by the British Library Database.

As an Othered creature, the donestre’s depiction with tears is odd. According to Howe’s argument, it seems that the donestre only cries when it realizes its difference from the rest of human society.\(^9^4\) Indeed, the donestre’s cannibalism acts as a barrier of difference. However, when considering that his multilingualism enables the donestre’s cannibalism, the later seems less erroneous. In other words, the fear of the donestre is not simply his partaking in anthropophagy, but rather his ability to speak and lure his prey. Theses abilities add tension to the otherwise animalistic presentation of the donestre. In the illustration, a reader can easily identify the outward physical difference between themselves and the cannibalistic creature; the donestre nakedly towers over a traveler. His nakedness immediately signals difference. Clothing—or costume—are more than just apparel for warmth, they are distinctions in cultures and societies. Even among the same culture, clothing reflects various estates and occupations, even in the Middle Ages. Among distinct societies, clothing reflects cultural variations in climate, needs, and style. However, the donestre—with his naked body—does not reflect such materialistic signals; he breaks the audience’s norm of presentation and interpretation. However, his naked body also signals sameness. Rather than clothing, it is the donestre’s bare body that one can interpret. His lack of attire reveals his genitals, which are identical to that of a human man. In fact, the illustrator of the original image must have intended for the audience to make this connection. Of his whole body, the donestre’s genitals receive the most ink and detail, suggesting significance in this resemblance.

\(^9^4\) Ibid.
The creature continues to play outside of human expectations. Once his physical appearance categorizes him as an Other, he speaks. At this point, rather than being inherently different and identifiable, the donestre manipulates his Othered body and his similar language; he can speak human languages, suggesting a sense of similarity between human and creature. The donestre bends expectations once more when he consumes the traveler after having gained their trust. Yet, fearing the donestre—and inherently seeing him as an Other—is not simply because of his diet. Rather, it is because he exhibits both sameness and difference between him and man.

Susan Schibanoff explores this idea of the similar Other in “Worlds Apart” Orientalism, Antifeminism, and Heresy in Chaucer’s Man of Law’s Tale”. Although her argument centers around how individuals may be Othered based on religion, culture, and gender in a later medieval text, her analysis nonetheless provides a useful lens in examining the donestre of an earlier period. In her explanation, Schibanoff coins her own term—“the rhetoric of proximity”—to explain a “dangerous closeness”.95 Rather than distance that one may expect between the Other and oneself, the proximity situates the Other in threatening closeness, creating a sense of similitude. In such a way, the Other is feared not because of its intrinsic difference, but because of its intimate similarity that threatens conversion. In the case of the donestre, his closeness is not only his language, but also his ability to express emotion with tears. Indeed, in many ways the donestre is similar to the medieval reader, and perhaps even more to the modern reader whose access to language is unlimited. Nevertheless, the donestre and the medieval human share undeniable

similarities. For starters, and most important to his paper, is their ability to release and present their emotive thoughts.

Thus far we have examined the ways European medieval culture projected meaning onto their tears. As an external symbol of internal emotion, tears were used to connect humans to humans. The donestre’s ability to weep not only challenges the narrative that weeping is an innately human activity, but tears’ connective capacity. If the donestre is Othered because of his similitude, the presence of this tears are unable to connect him to humans. In an effort to deny similitude of this creature, the human viewer treats his tears differently than the tears of humans. Furthermore, if the donestre is weeping, he must be expressing a type of emotion—and he is. As mentioned earlier, scholars like Howe believe the donestre’s tears divulge his internal remorse of eating the travel, and more importantly at his own realization that he will never be a human—he will never be accepted by the people he meets.

The question remains, then, why humans will not accept this creature of the human race. From the perspective of the modern human reader who takes on the traveler’s gaze, the donestre’s diet may be the most alarming. But this characteristic of the donestre and our reaction to it is reflective of our current culture’s immediacy to deplore cannibalism, and label one as a deviant when preying on other humans. And while cannibalism was also uncommon in the medieval period, the donestre’s multilingualism would have been an additional, and perhaps greater, source of fear. During a period of battles and conversions of not only religion, but also culture and language, having the ability to speak every language would be rightfully unusual. Language, even in the early eleventh-century, indicated one’s position in the society
in terms of class—and perhaps more importantly in terms of lineage. By this, I refer to the reason behind many battles of the period: claims to the throne based on “rightful” genealogy. Speaking Old English or Anglo-Norman or French, let alone the other various languages of the rest of the globe, would have indicated one’s allegiance to a certain cultural group. But the donestre does not easily fit into a group—humans cannot easily categorize him based on his language. Thus, the donestre remains as an Othered creature whose tears—and emotions—lose meaning.

**Conclusion**

In much the same way that water weaves in and out of its surroundings, the study of tears transcends time, cultures, and disciplines. It is difficult to produce a firm, cohesive conclusion on the study of bodily waters. Even in its nature, water is free-flowing with no fixed shape, making it nearly impossible to exact on any of its points. Similarly, the study of medieval tears diverges in many directions. However, as many scholars have proven, the study of tears deserves much attention. Thus far, the most discursive writings show that tears were not only a means of communication or a symbol of affective piety but were also tools of social control through various mediums; whether they were of statues or literal tears shed by mystics, tears were controlled by privileged identities to further limit minority identities, especially in the public sphere.

As I have shown, although the signification of tears is radically contingent upon historical and cultural context, we can safely make at least one over-arching claim about their social function: they are fundamental *definers of community*. Tears
have been both exclusive and inclusive, depending on the crier and the context. Tears determine who is excluded from social categories like “man/woman”, “self/Other”, “devout/impious”, etc., and they serve to draw spectators in or repel them. It is this community-building (or destroying) function of tears that has led to their tight regulation in the historical contexts we have examined.

Furthermore, an analysis that considers both modern and medieval perceptions on tears has proven to be useful. With foci on the physiological and biochemical aspects, modern studies contribute to our scientific understanding of tears. However, as we have examined, such studies are hindered by today’s ideologies, and the methods for these studies do not successfully encourage a complete separation between researcher and their biases, leading to our understanding of tears as weak and feminine. An examination of tears in a culture that is distinct—but nevertheless related to ours—further revealed today’s contemporary ideologies. The British Isles in the medieval period did not seem to regard tears as weak, but rather as tokens of power. And although we cannot take medieval literature or art as records of factual history, they in some way are more accurate than history itself. Literature and art preserve the ideologies—or the lack thereof—of their own culture without the purpose of doing so. In other words, whereas history aims to capture the larger society and its history, literature primarily aims to tell a story. In such stories, however, are the preservations of conscious and unconscious thoughts and values reflective of a society. Thus, although literature is not history—and nor does it aim to be—it can and does offer insights on the ideological investments of a culture, nation,
religion, and social group. In this way, the literature on tears may record a *truer* version of the history on tears than history ever can.
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