

1 Introduction

Human existence was precarious in many ways in antiquity: success could swiftly turn into misfortune, health into illness and death, with disastrous consequences for the most important social network in this era, the family. These misfortunes could be difficult to cope with, and adversity, calamity and death therefore had to be made intelligible emotionally. By verbalising fear – in the form of stories of demons, witches, ghosts and wild animals – it could be endowed with a concrete shape.

The argument of the book proceeds from the assumption that the act of narrating stories helps us to make sense of our lives and the world we live in; in narrative, we articulate our emotions, thoughts and opinions, voice our hopes and desires, our anxieties and fears. We achieve this by arranging the disparate events of experience into a meaningful whole, i.e. by organising them into a plot according to well-established cultural patterns. Here we propose to study this process, the verbalisation of emotion in ancient Roman narrative, and its potential therapeutic effects. We have chosen to focus on narratives centering on what we believe to be some of the basic fears of Roman culture: threats against the survival of the family on the one hand, and the hidden dangers of the urban environment on the other.

The material selected for analysis consists of stories derived from a variety of authors, most of them flourishing under the Roman Empire. They are incorporated into diverse literary genres, from novels to works of natural history. In this respect, they belong to a literary context, embodying a literary vision and design. Nevertheless, these stories can be viewed as originally folkloric ones, as they have either been identified as such in prior scholarship, can plausibly be so characterised following a comparison with oral narratives from later periods, or through some other means.

The stories singled out for in-depth study, a limited number of key texts, have been chosen, firstly, on the basis of their oral origin, and secondly, for their focus on fear. These fears emanated from various threats – threats to human existence, both in this life and the hereafter – and were embodied by supranormal beings on the one hand, and natural creatures on the other. All of these stories have affinities with the traditional legend of later periods, or the modern urban legend, which have been regarded as vehicles for the expression and transmission of folk beliefs and popular anxieties. Some of them have never been analysed as items of ancient folklore, adding to our

existing knowledge of the culture of the non-elite. We have adopted a three-fold approach to the narratives selected for examination:

- a. a close reading of the texts in terms of Roman social history;
- b. an analysis of the emotions verbalised in the texts and elicited in the audience;
- c. a discussion of the stories as therapeutic tools.

Since the stories themselves do not offer sufficient information on which to build an in-depth analysis of emotions, we use the sustained accounts in ancient philosophy as an interpretative backdrop against which the stories are read. Although philosophy represents elite perspectives in many respects, the extent to which these accounts developed in dialogue with popular understandings is often understated.

1.1 Methods and Theory

The basic method used in this book is that of close reading, i.e., careful, repeated reading of texts in order to gradually unravel their meanings.¹ These meanings were arguably shared in Roman culture, though not necessarily by all, and they were in a sense familiar to people, on an implicit level if not properly articulated.² The aim of our close readings is to tease out these meanings, and employ them in constructing an analytical model for the verbalisation and therapy of Roman fears, seen against the backdrop of Roman social history.³

Thus, we use close reading to analyze all three aspects we study in the texts. Concerning the scrutiny of the stories in terms of social history, we examine each text sequentially, i.e., we read it sentence by sentence to see how the narrative is structured, and what facets of Roman social history it appeals to. In this context, we pay attention both to the explicit wording in the stories, and to the associations evoked by particular motifs, modes of description, etc.

If these associations are implicit, they are only recoverable through an intertextual reading, in which the stories are read with and against other ancient sources to tease out their implications. The concept of “intertextuality” implies that all texts – both written and oral – are absorptions and transformations of earlier texts,⁴ and intertexts provide the cultural background against which individual texts become intelligible as they resonate with the meanings of a larger tradition.⁵ We have worked from the particular to the general, since an individual motif in the stories has triggered an investigation of other contexts in which it occurred in Roman culture, and of the ways in which it was exploited there.⁶ The texts referring to these contexts are then our intertexts.

As for studying the verbalisation of emotion, the close reading of the texts proceeds along two lines: firstly, through a reading of the text to identify emotion words (either nouns, verbs or adjectives) constituting the explicit level of the verbalisation of emotion, and secondly, a reading to discern crucial motifs in the stories, be they characters, aspects of settings, etc., which are then interpreted intertextually to reconstruct their emotional charge in Roman culture.

In the first case, ancient philosophies of the emotions, from Aristotle onward, are a particularly rich comparative material, both because they articulate the nuances of emotion words (sometimes in an admittedly pedantic and scholarly way), and because they more or less openly address the beliefs of members of the non-elite, frequently in a polemical vein. In the second, the reading incorporates intertexts drawn from a wider range of written, often literary, sources in which these emotional charges are actually spelled out.

Regarding the therapeutic functions of the stories, we use the close readings in terms of social history and emotions to isolate elements of the stories that could possess therapeutic significance. We do this by juxtaposing these earlier readings with ancient therapies of the emotions on the one hand and corresponding modern therapies on the other, in order to discern the therapeutic strategies at work in the texts. This mixture of ancient and modern therapeutic perspectives has been favoured methodologically for two reasons: firstly, because ancient therapies furnish specifically ancient points of view whereas applying modern perspectives may be anachronistic, and secondly, because ancient and modern therapies are not as mutually exclusive entities as you might expect.

Ancient philosophies are actually quite alive and well in contemporary psychotherapy. Modern cognitive-behavioural therapy relies heavily on the ideas of ancient Stoicism,⁷ for example, and other forms of cognitive therapy have adapted the Socratic method of constant questioning, drawing universal conclusions based on concrete cases, and admitting the impossibility of full knowledge, to the exploration of important issues and life goals.⁸ In a more philosophical vein, Martha Nussbaum's *The Therapy of Desire* (1994) and *Upheavals of Thought* (2001)⁹ sparked a recognition of the continued relevance of ancient philosophies and therapies of emotion in our own time. We agree with the standpoint that the ancient philosophers have much to teach us, but we also think that in order to elucidate the efficacy of their therapeutic methods, we have to draw on modern therapies which help identify and articulate certain implicit assumptions.

It is obvious that an ancient and a modern therapeutic method will never map onto each other perfectly; too much has happened in the intervening

two thousand years or more for that to be possible. Instead, we use modern therapies to tease out the therapeutic implications of the ancient ones. This fusion of ancient and modern therapies is the result of our own analysis, and could not be said to represent any uniquely “ancient” perspective on therapy. Similarly, just as in Nussbaum’s *The Therapy of Desire*, material derived from extant ancient philosophy has been applied to a new and different context, in her case to the philosophical education of a semi-fictitious female student of philosophy,¹⁰ in ours to stories of oral origin not previously examined in terms of their therapeutic functions. In the selection of ancient and modern therapies that are brought to bear on each particular case, we have not preferred any one school of thought over others. Some recur more often in the discussion, but this is because they happen to fit with the therapeutic strategies we discern in the stories.

The theoretical approach adopted in this book derives from research on emotion in many different fields, including anthropology and ethnology, sociology, history, ancient history, and psychology. The basic premise on which the entire study is based is that ancient Roman emotions have to be understood on their own terms. Even though we generally speak of them in English translation for the benefit of readers not fluent in Latin and Greek, we have to keep in mind that Roman emotions were not necessarily identical to our modern Western emotions. In fact, they seldom are.¹¹ They were often defined differently, both in themselves and in relation to other emotions. Hence, examining the verbalisation of emotions in the narratives requires attention to their culture-specific meanings, and to culture-specific ways of linking them.

In concert with most ancient and many modern philosophies, we view emotions as far from divorced from reason. We also regard emotions as intrinsically tied to values. This makes ours a cognitivist account; though we do not deny that the elicitation of emotion could well bypass conscious thought, the types of fear and other emotions we discuss would not be fully comprehensible without reference to thought. Such a point of departure is also necessary for the success of the forms of therapy discussed in this book: emotion must be to some extent subject to reason in order for it to be possible to reflect on and change.

1.2 The Structure of this Book

Representations of Fear is divided into four parts, beginning with *Introduction and Background* (Chapters 1 & 2). Chapter 1 describes the purpose of

the book as outlined above, and includes a programmatic statement on the emotive-therapeutic approach taken to the material. Chapter 2 discusses the characteristics and functions of folklore generally, the state of knowledge on ancient oral traditions, and principles for the identification and interpretation of folklore in ancient literature.

The second part of the book, *Coping with Emotions*, opens with Chapter 3 treating the prior research on emotion and fear that has inspired us in our work, with a particular focus on the history and anthropology of emotion. Since these subfields assume that the expressions and evaluations of emotions are culturally specific, they square well with the ancient testimony which clearly demonstrates that ancient emotions were not necessarily construed in the modern Western way. This forms the theoretical backbone of the book.

As mentioned above, ancient philosophy – with its focus on emotions and how to deal with these – forms an interpretative backdrop against which the stories of oral origin are read. Chapter 4 consists of a delineation of ancient conceptions of emotion, drawn from ancient philosophy from Aristotle to the Epicureans and Stoics. Here we also treat ancient therapies of emotion, focusing on Aristotelian catharsis, Epicurean antidotes to empty fears, and Stoic therapy. We use these perspectives in the subsequent chapters, in concert with modern ones, to explain how the narratives might have functioned therapeutically.

The analysis is divided into two overarching parts according to the common themes we have discerned in them. The first – *The Family under Threat* – deals with stories in which the survival of the family is a persistent theme (Chapters 5, 6 & 7). The second part – *Loci of Fear in and outside the City* – treats man's relation to his urban surroundings (Chapters 8, 9 & 10).

Chapter 5 discusses the relationship between envy and fear in stories of child-killing demons and witches found in Diodorus Siculus, Ovid and other authors, while situating the narratives in the context of Roman demography and family ideals. We suggest that the stories could be used to externalise both threat and blame for the death of a child or young wife, in the manner of modern narrative therapy in which a “problem” is separated from the “self” by giving it an independent status. This analysis extends the argument advanced in earlier research that these creatures served as scapegoats. We also propose that the stories functioned as a form of preparation for future ills, consistent with Cicero's description of the Stoic practice of *prerehearsal*.

Chapter 6 continues the theme of the vulnerability of the family in an examination of stories of negligent nurses found in Ovid and Aelian, and the ways in which they represent fear, grief, regret and remorse. Trading on the ambivalent status of the nurse in Roman society, the narratives seem to suggest

that the figure of the nurse was a focus of emotion in Roman culture; she was a “sticky object” in Sara Ahmed’s sense,¹² tending to attract emotion more easily than other social roles. We advance the view that the figure of the nurse was “good to think with”¹³ because she revealed the extent of the emotion management required to uphold the common practice of wet-nursing, on the part of both parents and nurses.

Chapter 7 again concentrates on the vulnerability of the family, but shifts the focus to stories of young men being seduced by witches and man-eating demons in Apuleius and Flavius Philostratus. The dangers involved in succumbing to passion and lust for unknown women are lucidly illustrated, and we argue that the narratives could have functioned as a vehicle for an Epicurean-style therapy on the one hand, by putting the dangers of passion before the eyes or, viewing them from another point of view, as instruments of tragic-like catharsis.

Chapter 8 discusses the emotional topography of the Roman city and its surroundings, describing the emotions elicited by specific places, such as cemeteries, crossroads, roads and inns. Inspired by the concept of “rhythmanalysis” introduced by Henri Lefebvre and Catherine Régulier,¹⁴ we place special emphasis on the temporal cycles affecting the emotional experience of a place, particularly the shift between day and night. That different places after nightfall evoked fear resonates with similar findings by human geographers such as Rachel Pain.¹⁵

Chapter 9 examines ghost stories in Apuleius, Valerius Maximus, Plautus and others, in relation to the fear of being left unburied. We discuss the fear of ghosts as an expression of superstition according to the elite point of view, and the reverence shown in burying restless ghosts. The philosophical therapies for the fear of death advanced by Epicureans, Stoics and Cynics, all boiling down to some form of “death is nothing to us”, are then contrasted to the consolation offered by the folkloric stories: if all else fails and you do become a restless ghost, follow the examples given in these stories, and you will be buried eventually.

Chapter 10 delves into the dangers of the city, in stories from Aelian and Pliny the Elder of octopuses emerging through city sewers or climbing over trees to feast on salted fish; these are complemented by a similar story in Pliny of a killer whale feasting on raw hides in the port of Ostia. We discuss the symbolism of the octopus and the fear and disgust elicited by it. We argue that the gluttonous octopus is cast as a symbol of human behavior, being an embodiment of the vice of intemperance or luxury, and propose a Stoic therapy – coupled with modern narrative therapy – which questions both the

pleasure of submitting to it, and the tendency, then as now, to assign blame for it to individuals.

Finally, the book closes with a final discussion of the therapies of fear advanced in the stories: Chapter 11. Here we bring the emotive-therapeutic argument to a new level, focusing on the general processes of verbalisation and therapy we judge to be at work. We suggest that scapegoating and attributing blame to sticky objects are two complementary procedures that are resorted to in distinct situations. Scapegoating seems to be the favoured procedure in cases of sudden misfortune, whereas attributing blame to sticky objects is preferred when a higher degree of personal responsibility is ascribed to the victim. We also maintain that the therapeutic power of the stories lies in their ability to provide a space for reflection on the difficulties in life. This ability is partly dependent on the nature of narrative itself, and partly on the use of particular narrative techniques. Distancing and identification are singled out as important tools for achieving a therapeutic effect.