

Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature
Travel Bursary Report—Nov. 2014

I am grateful to the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature for their generous travel bursary. This grant enabled me to spend September, and October 2013 studying manuscript collections and artifacts in England and France on my postdoctoral project on the medieval cult and relic of *La sainte larme* (Holy Tear of Christ). The cult originated from the Gospel account in John when Jesus wept with Mary Magdalen on the death of Lazarus. The apocryphal story about an angel collecting the tears in a vial explains how they were preserved for a millennium. In the eleventh century Emperor Michael Paphlagonian offered Geoffroi Martel d'Anjou a relic as a reward for his bravery during the Crusades. Geoffroi chose the lachrymatory with Christ's Tear and instituted the cult and abbey-church of the Holy Trinity in Vendôme. This became the most celebrated of several churches in France claiming to hold tears of Christ.

While most studies of medieval relics stress their important role in fortifying individual and collective piety, and their healing capacities, my project focused on the *emotions* associated with *La sainte larme*, both in its story of origin and its medieval and early modern reception. Christ's tear, an ephemeral bodily excretion, is the exemplary case because it encapsulates religious piety *and* feeling. Pilgrims believed that the Holy Tear could restore sight, heal diseases of the eye and aid secular and spiritual felons to 'see' the error of their ways. Do we have evidence that worshippers focused on Christ's empathy for Mary Magdalen or his sorrow over Lazarus's death? Further, is emotion in this cult invested in Mary, who carries the burdens of sorrow and compassion in Christian tradition? The extant manuscript evidence: religious verse, ecclesiastical registers, and archaeological evidence provided promising lines of enquiry to determine the emotional significance of the relic.

I examined fourteen medieval manuscripts, and charters, registers, and rare books that either described the origin of the legend and pilgrimage cult or contained personal or communal prayers for the relic's intercession. I also scrutinized *ampullae*, pilgrim badges, and material objects depicting the Tear. At the Bodleian library, one of the medieval manuscripts I consulted appeared to be connected to the abbey church of the Holy Trinity Vendôme. It is an unsolved mystery how this elaborate manuscript came up for sale and arrived in England in the early eighteenth century when the cult was still strong in France. Another, a French Book of Hours, added a prayer to the *Sainte larme* on its second last folio followed by one to the *Sainte suaire*. In the Duke Humphrey library, a rare book on the Office of the Holy Tear with a bookplate signed 'Francis Douce' seems to have been printed from an earlier manuscript. In London, the British Library supplied manuscripts and the seal of Geoffroi Martel. The Fonds français and latine in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Richelieu) held ecclesiastical manuscripts, charters and registers, which proved invaluable for a sense of the historiography of the Tear. Inside the abbey-church of the Holy Trinity in Vendôme, I was able to examine early modern chancel wall carvings depicting the Tear motif. Valérie Coiffard, Animatrice du patrimoine de la ville de Vendôme, was most helpful and assisted me with secondary materials.

The Society's support proved invaluable on many levels. The text, manuscripts, badges and seal I examined produced some surprising finds that were not revealed by a search of online catalogues and descriptive entries of manuscript collections. Among

several unusual finds, a key discovery was the content of the Bodleian Rawlinson manuscript, which contains a catalogue of miracles associated with the Tear. The miracles use the same words as prayer verses I found in several manuscripts in Paris. In fact, there is a consistent lexicon in all devotional verse addressed to the Tear. While we cannot draw any certain conclusions from this evidence, it suggests that devotion to the Holy Tear was established enough to have its own liturgical idiom.

In situ access to original materials strengthened and enriched my understanding of the contexts for this particular relic cult and the degree that it mirrored the empathetic emotion Jesus displayed on the death of Lazarus. Manuscript evidence suggests that the predominant supplications to the Tear involved remedies for ophthalmological complaints, or material remedies such as relief from drought. Visits to Chartres Cathedral to view the *Sainte chemise de la vierge* and the Burgundian tomb sculptures (*Les pleurants*) at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dijon complemented my research on the Holy Tear by inviting questions about medieval depictions of devotion and grief. The alabaster sculptures of clerics in postures of prayer and weeping contrasted with manuscript evidence of a limited range of emotional expression in written prayers and accounts of the Tear.

As a result of my research on *La sainte larme* the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions (Europe 1100–1800) invited me to present a paper at a study day on 'Relics and Emotions' at the University of Melbourne in March 2014. In March 2013, ARC CHE at the University of Melbourne held a symposium titled 'Feeling Things: A Symposium on Objects and Emotions in History' where I presented preliminary research on the Tear. The continuation of my research has two strands: the ophthalmological miracles attributed to the relic in the context of the history of medicine, and the role *La sainte larme* played in the sixteenth-century French Wars of Religion.

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Dr. Helen Hickey
University of Melbourne
Parkville VIC 3010

Attachments:

<http://historiesofemotion.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/feeling-things-symposium.pdf>

http://www.historyofemotions.org.au/media/121125/relics-and-emotions-program_lowres.pdf

<http://historiesofemotion.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/objects-and-emotions-symposium-abstracts.pdf>

<http://historiesofemotion.com/2013/03/06/feeling-things-objects-and-emotions-in-history/>

<http://www.historyofemotions.org.au/events/relics-and-emotions-study-day.aspx>