Option Name: **Passions of the Past: Emotions in Old English Literature**

Option Short Title: Passions of the Past

Lecturer Name and Email Address: Alice Jorgensen jorgena@tcd.ie

ECTS Weighting: 10

Semester/Term Taught: Hilary (tbc)

**Learning Outcomes:**

On successful completion of this module students should be able to

- apply relevant theoretical models of emotion to literary texts
- discuss aspects of late Anglo-Saxon emotional culture
- analyse selected Old English poetry and prose
- show appreciation of selected methodologies for historical cultural study
- reflect on their personal response to culturally and temporally distant materials

**Option Learning Aims:**

- examine the methodological and theoretical challenges of studying the emotions of different times and cultures
- give students an insight into the currently growing and lively field of emotions history
- examine the relevance of contemporary categories, above all emotion, to the past
- read some (potentially) moving and intriguing Old English texts
- provide space for personal response and reflection
- raise questions about the ethical functions of literature

**Option Content:**

Can we know what people felt in the distant past? Do texts from a thousand years ago have anything to offer emotionally to us now, and if so are our emotional responses of any critical value? Is ‘emotion’ the wrong category to use anyway? Anthropologists such as Michelle Rosaldo, Catherine Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod have emphasized the cultural and linguistic specificity of emotions. On the other hand, Paul Ekman has argued for a set of universal ‘basic emotions’ associated with facial expressions that are recognizable across cultures; and recently researchers in the humanities have gratefully seized on the idea of ‘mirror neurons’ to argue that emotions can be communicated through biological mechanisms in the brain that are universal to humanity. It is, in particular, advances in neuroscience and cognitive science that have lent confidence to the recent explosion of research in emotions history – significantly boosted also by large research grants, such as the several million dollars awarded to the Australian Research Council Centre for Excellence in the History of the Emotions.

This module will examine issues in the historical study of emotion through a focus on Old English literature. We will look at a series of short readings, which will be provided both in the original language and in translation, to consider some specifics of Anglo-Saxon emotional culture, methodologies for study, and our own response. Topics will include the highly personal use of *The
Wanderer by W.H. Auden; the emotions of shame and love; affective piety; performative concepts of emotion; the problem of vocabulary (do modern English words match up with Old English ones?); and the Anglo-Saxon concept of the Mod, which encompasses both emotion and thought. We will focus mostly on texts that modern readers typically find engaging, such as the elegies, but will also consider texts we may find disconcerting or repellent, such as The Battle of Brunanburh, or that belong to unfamiliar genres such as the saint’s life. Throughout we may wish to bear in mind Martha Nussbaum’s argument that one of the ethical functions of literature, and one of the great advantages of a liberal arts education, is the stimulation of empathy and thus moral concern for the Other.

Assessment Details (Including component percentage(s):

Note that both of these exercises will be due for submission on or before the final essay submission date, following the end of the module. Preparation for both will be built into weekly work.

30% Personal response to an Old English text in the form of EITHER a reflection on your reaction, relating it to theoretical models encountered in the course, OR a piece of creative writing (2000 words)

70% Critical essay (4000 words) developed from a class presentation.

Preliminary Reading List:


