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Performance and Performativity

Katie Barclay

Studies of emotion are closely tied to debates on the nature of selfhood and identity. What is the person that feels? What motivates emotion (is it just learned behaviour)? And how is emotion used to create different facets of identity (do emotions make you male or female, Protestant or Catholic, or just human)? Answering such questions has required scholars to not only address models for feeling, but to consider how they relate to the self that emotes. For early modern scholars who often work with selves that are conceived quite differently from the present day, this has perhaps been particularly vital. One model for understanding this relationship is that put forward by performance theorists.

Dramaturgical models of the 'self' were most famously articulated by the anthropologist Erving Goffman who thought that social reality was created through interactions between individuals within 'situations'.[1] In these 'situations', individuals presented the most appropriate version of themselves required to achieve their aim in a particular social context ('a performance'). This might involve putting on the 'right' outfit, saying the 'right' things, gesturing and moving appropriately and displaying knowledge, education or class as desired by the actor. It also involves emoting appropriately, and Goffman used the example of air hostesses who were trained to be caring, calm and pleasant when working regardless of their personal circumstances or 'feelings'. Here emotion was a form of work. This is not to say that everybody conforms to social norms (some people may play 'the rebel' or 'the goth', for

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[1] E. Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959)

example), but that people wish to display a particular social identity in a particular context, and they do this through their performance. Not every performance is successful; Goffman was aware that people could fail in their presentation of the self – such as when a socially mobile working-class woman did not 'pass' as middle-class at university, or when a teenager's act of rebellion brought laughter rather than anger from parents. As people adapted their performances depending on context (such as whether they were at home or at work), individuals in effect had multiple 'selves'.

More recently, Judith Butler developed this model with her concept of 'performativity', where the repetition of culturally normative gestures generates the gendered self.[2] By this, Butler refers to the everyday taught behaviours and actions that people perform unthinkingly, but which signal to others gender and other facets of identity. It extends Goffman due to its denaturalization of the body and emphasizes the ways that even parts of the human performance that appear 'innate' or 'biological', and emotion here is an important example, are performed practices. In many respects, this model is not dissimilar to that proposed by social practice theorists, such as Monique Scheer, discussed in the previous chapter. The self, and emotion as an act of self, become things that we 'do' and which, through doing, construct identity.

This raises questions about what the 'self' is, and specifically what motivates action and emotion. Goffman provides a model of an autonomous self that sits with the Western philosophical tradition, and distinguishes between a 'human' self that makes decisions about

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[2] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999)

how to present itself and a 'social' self that is formed through performance, fully recognizing that such distinctions can be blurry in practice. For Butler, 'the self' does not pre-exist its performance, but is constituted through performance. The self is therefore inherently unstable, 'becoming' through action. This actively rejects the idea of an autonomous self and promotes a self that is socially constructed and made through interaction with others. Elizabeth Ermath has attempted to split the difference by modelling a self that pre-exists the 'discursive' (the performance) but that cannot be articulated outside of its performance.[3]

These considerations are important when exploring emotion because they speak to how and why people emote. For Goffman and Ermath, human beings feel in response to material stimuli, but their performance of that emotion is both a learned behaviour and dependent on context. For Butler, Gilles Deleuze and other theorists in that vein, emotion is almost entirely a social phenomenon, with the biological another prop in the performance.[4] Importantly, for all these theorists, emotions are not passive, but active in the construction of identity. Emotions are performed because they 'do something'; they both communicate the self and create it. Moreover, as emotions are performed they become implicated in wider communicative strategies, able to shape the world and not just reflect feeling. This body of work is closely related to, and underpinned by the same theoretical framework as, William M. Reddy's concept of the 'emotive'.[5]

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[3] Elizabeth Ermath, 'Agency in the Discursive Condition', *History and Theory* 40 (2001), 34–58

[4] G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum, 1994)

[5] William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

Performance theory is not just useful for helping to understand how emotions work – what it is we study – but has implications for how we work with historical sources to access both emotion and the self. Emotions are created through articulation during a performance. That articulation can happen in writing, in the making of music or art, in verbal expression or played out on the body itself through gesture, countenance or other physical acts. Early modern scholars generally have to work with texts, or other physical artefacts, because they are unable to access the live performance of emotion in the long dead. This has often been viewed as fundamentally limiting for our ability to access the emotion of the historical subject – the source is viewed as the trace or representation of an inner feeling that the historian cannot access. But, if emotion is formed through its articulation (and is not prior to its performance), then surviving textual forms provide a key source of evidence to the making – the performance and so the experience – of emotion in the past. As forms that are implicated in the making of emotion, historical sources are no longer just representations of, but the social practice of, emotion. Sue Broomhall provides an example of this in her work on how the records of charitable establishments are themselves the emotional practices of institutions, conveying their intentions, desires and investments.[6]

This is not to suggest that scholars can access the fullness of the early modern experience of emotion, given that so much of the performance of emotion – like so much human experience

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[6] Sue Broomhall, 'Beholding Suffering and Providing Care: Emotional Performances on the Death of Poor Children within Sixteenth-Century French Institutions', in *Small Graves: Death, Emotion and Childhood in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Katie Barclay, Ciara Rawnsley and Kim Reynolds (Houndmills: Palgrave, Forthcoming)

– may not have been captured in the historical record. Nor does it deny that historical sources are complex creations, shaped over time, by genre rules, and often incorporating multiple authors in their making. Unpicking whose emotions were in play in any given historical record will likely continue to be an important part of debate and discussion. However, the important contribution of performance theory is enabling us to recognize that these problems are not novel to our interaction with the past. That human beings cannot feel what the other feels, but only experience their performance of emotion in the present, remains a central topic within philosophical debate around the nature of the self and other. For some, this inability to experience what the other experiences creates a fundamental boundary between humans that requires intimacy to be built largely on trust. More hopeful philosophers, such as Deleuze or Hélène Cixous, reject such concerns, seeing the self as reflexive and made through the interaction with the other, unable to exist without it.[7] In both cases, emotion is something that is performed and that we engage with through performance. The difference between our engagement with living individuals and those in the past is only that scholars of the past have more limited sources for accessing that performance.

In essence then, this is a method that challenges the distinction between representation and experience in the historical source. All sources, even fictional accounts, are a product of the experience of the author, for the creation of all textual forms are a form of performance. Representation remains only as the domain that actors draw on in their creation of the self. The historical source then is both a part of the performance of emotion for the creator and, in some instances, a representation that others can draw on in their own future performances. It

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[7] Sal Renshaw, *The Subject of Love: Hélène Cixous and the Feminine Divine* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009)

does not, of course, solve any problems for historians of the 'voiceless', those who left no evidence of their own making (however mediated). But, perhaps, we might have hope, like Cixous and Deleuze, that if the self is formed through interaction with the other then the voices of the voiceless might at least partly be found in the works of those who represent them. Taking this approach, Hannah Newton productively recovers the emotions of dying children in records written by parents, whilst Claire Walker uncovers the emotional investment of nuns through their ritual practices.[8]

Further reading

Naomi J. Miller, 'Forcible Love: Performing Maternity in Renaissance Romance', in Maternity and Romance Narratives in Early Modern England, ed. Karen Barnford and Naomi J. Miller (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 137-53.

Miller explores maternal love as a performative act that reinscribes and reinvents maternal identities in early modern England.

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[8] Hannah Newton, 'Rapt Up with Joy': Children's Emotional Responses to Death in England, 1580-1720', in *Small Graves: Death, Emotion and Childhood in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Katie Barclay, Ciara Rawnsley and Kim Reynolds (Houndmills: Palgrave, Forthcoming); Claire Walker, 'The Bones of a Martyr: Jacobite Ritual in an Early Modern English Convent*', in *Emotion, Ritual and Power in Europe: 1200 to the Present*, ed. Katie Barclay and Merridee Bailey (Houndmills: Palgrave, forthcoming)

Victoria Turner, 'Performing the Self, Performing the Other: Gender and Racial Identity Construction in the Nanteuil Cycle', *Women's History Review* 22, no. 2 (2013):182-96

Part of a special issue on performing the self, Turner uses this theory to rethink medieval selfhood in relation to gender and race, highlighting the porousness of such labels in the period and their significance of medieval society.