Introduction: Studying Literature Studying Emotion

This book sets out to integrate literary insights with work from neuroscience, psychology, philosophy, and elsewhere in order to contribute to the ongoing interdisciplinary research program in emotion. Drawing on those sources, but stressing the particular value of literature, it treats the general structure of emotion, both egoistic and empathic, as well as particular emotions including romantic love, mirth, grief, guilt, shame, and jealousy. It also takes up the increasingly important connection between emotion study and ethics, proposing some general principles for understanding this connection both within and outside literary works.

Research in emotion has advanced remarkably in the past two or three decades. Our understanding of human feeling and motivation is incomparably greater than it was forty years ago. This advancement is due largely to the work of research scientists. These scientists have, to a great extent, been operating in the general context of cognitive science. One of the main lessons of cognitive science is that understanding the human mind requires the integration of work from a broad range of disciplines. For example, linguistics is advanced by the study of metaphor while itself contributing to genetics; philosophical reflections orient anthropological investigations that themselves suggest topics for neurological study. Many of the great successes of cognitive science come from the fact that the research programs it has put forward are interdisciplinary. Cognitive science has forced researchers in traditional disciplines to explore other techniques of examining a given topic, incorporating other data, other theories, other approaches, and other hypotheses. Yet verbal art is largely absent from this interdisciplinary study of emotion – despite the fact that millennia of storytelling present us with the largest body of works that systematically depict and provoke emotion, and do so as a major part of human life.

In keeping with this final point, the first chapter argues that literature provides a vast and largely unexplored body of data for emotion research. On hearing this general idea, experimental psychologists sometimes reply that literature is not data. It is just anecdotes. But this is a bizarre response. Certainly, one cannot establish a science based on a researcher's private tales. But the existence and vast emotional influence of literary works are simply not private tales. Put crudely, saying, "There is a vast body of literature. It arises in all cultures at all time periods. It repeatedly produces emotions in readers. Some works have been particularly remarkable in their effects, provoking mirth or sorrow in readers or listeners from many times and places," is simply not comparable to saying, "I had an uncle once who cured his rheumatism with daily application of Jack Daniels." In fact, the dismissal of literature as a body of data is the unscientific view. It, in effect, says, "There is a vast area of human emotional life – real communicative products that both depict and induce emotional response, often across cultures and historical periods; however, we are going to ignore it."

Of course, a psychologist may respond that none of this means claims about emotion in literary works are necessarily correct. It does not even mean that the representations of emotions are "right." This is true. But this only means that in literary study, same as in psychology, neuroscience, and elsewhere, the data require interpretation. The depiction of Romeo and Juliet's love has been moving readers and audience members for centuries and in different countries. The data are that this particular play, with these words, these events, and these characters, has produced this recurring effect. Interpreting these data is the difficult part. Indeed, it would be a very bad interpretation to claim that the play is effective because it simply gets the emotion right. If that were true, then every well-done psychological survey of trauma would produce the effects of tragedy, and every report of an fMRI scan treating amygdala activation would thrill the reader like a horror film. Discounting literary data in the way just mentioned is really a matter of discounting an inadequate account of these data.

Such discounting is particularly unfortunate since (as argued in Chapter 1) literature is a body of data that is unusually well designed to solve problems that plague emotion research – problems with surveys, diary methods, interviews, mechanical tests (such as skin conductance), and so on. Indeed, it provides important data at several levels, some more abstract (such as genre), others more concrete (most importantly, individual literary works). One of these levels is (partially) explored

in *The Mind and Its Stories*. That work isolates three cross-cultural narrative genres. It goes on to argue that these genres can be understood only by reference to cross-cultural emotion prototypes, and that those prototypes, in turn, tell us something about human emotion systems. The present work concentrates on individual works.

Of course, the value of discussing individual literary works is not entirely a matter of generating hypotheses about emotions generally. Though the theory of emotions is the main concern of the following pages, each chapter also aims at revealing some of the richness of individual literary works. Poets and playwrights are not (generally) scientists. Their insights into emotion are particular insights, insights about this character in these circumstances. Here, we return to interpretation. The interpretation an experimental scientist gives to his or her data serves to put those data into some sort of order. Or, rather, this interpretation serves to reveal an organization in the data that we would not have seen otherwise. The same point holds for literature. Our interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* or *Hamlet* – that is, our analysis of the play in relation to hypotheses about emotion – should serve to reveal an organization in those works that we would not have seen otherwise. The difference between *Hamlet* and some experimental data, in this regard, is that the patterns of Shakespeare's play have human, experiential interest beyond their consequences for a theory of emotion. Literature is a part of human life. Indeed, literature is central to human life. Telling and hearing stories may take up as much or more of our time and as much or more of our emotional energy than our primary engagements in real life. Indeed, that centrality is part of what gives literature ecological validity in the study of emotion. For this reason, advancing our interpretive understanding of these influential and widely admired literary works is an important, if still secondary, goal of the following pages.

Given that the following chapters will be treating individual works, it is important to address a misunderstanding that some readers have had about using literature as data for an account of emotions. Specifically, there are two obvious ways in which one might approach emotion in relation to a single work. One way involves determining individual readers' responses to the text. The other involves interpreting the text itself.

Focusing on individual readers is certainly valuable. However, there are several problems with making this the single guiding approach. First, one could argue that its results are only as good as the

interpretive skills of the individual test subjects. When I teach a work by Shakespeare – or one of the great Sanskrit dramatists, or a Persian poet – my students may begin with a response that is primarily a matter of disorientation and incomprehension. My hope is that this changes after we have finished studying the work. Would we say that their spontaneous incomprehension is a reasonable reflection of the emotional insights of the work? In these cases, it seems clear that a fuller understanding of the work is required to tell us anything useful about its emotional implications.

Even when we focus entirely on spontaneous reactions to a work, probably millions of people have responded to *King Lear* with emotion, people from different backgrounds, different societies, and in different historical periods. Test subjects are necessarily far fewer in number and far less diverse. Indeed, they are often a set of undergraduates from European or North American universities. This limitation is not insignificant or inconsequential. It is likely to bias our analysis toward the attitudes and propensities of a fairly narrow group.

More importantly, it is difficult to say just what the responses of these test subjects mean – or even precisely what their responses are, in the case of emotion. Specifically, even when testing spontaneous response, at least two problems arise. One comes in the representation of the emotion states of test subjects. The second concerns the isolation of the causes of those emotions. We are often somewhat inarticulate about our emotional states (when they go beyond simple cases of fear, anger, disgust, and a few others). Moreover, our objective tests are currently rather crude in such identifications. One may suspect, for example, that most readers feel something like hopeful enthusiasm and an empathic version of romantic longing when Romeo and Juliet meet and tentatively express their mutual affection. But just how is one to isolate this emotion, even as a mere label, either in self-reports (without biasing the study by introducing this complex idea) or in objective tests (e.g., fMRI scans)?

Moreover, if one comes up with a way of doing this, how is one to isolate the aspects of the text to which the response refers? Eye tracking is one option, but that does not tell us what the test subject was imagining at the point when he or she experienced the reported feeling. Even if we manage to fix the cause on some part of the text, we cannot be sure of precisely what the reader is getting out of the text. There are many subtleties, many complex connections in the text. These presumably have effects on readers. Few readers, however, are able to articulate anything

like what these are. Our sensitivity in this case is not unlike our sensitivity to grammar. We understand sentences through grammar, but we find it almost impossible to formulate grammatical principles – or even to articulate features of language that bear on such principles. For example, in English, we form regular plurals by adding [əz] to words ending in sibilants, [z] to words ending in voiced nonsibilants, and [s] to everything else. Ordinary English speakers simply cannot tell us that this is what they are doing. They will add [z] to "dog" and [s] to "cat," but they won't be able to tell you what features of "dog" and "cat" determine this response. To do that, we need to analyze the words, and we need to analyze them with a certain sort of knowledge that is not simply a part of spontaneous understanding. In short, people find it almost impossible to interpret what guides their (fairly clear-cut) grammatical responses to such simple issues as regular plural formation. We have little reason to believe that people would, in general, be any better at interpreting what guides their complex emotional response to a literary work.

Again, the empirical study of reader response is very valuable. The point here is not at all to dismiss such research, but rather to suggest that interpretive study focusing on literary texts is at least as important. Indeed, if anything, it is more important, since it is more fundamental and its consequences are broader.

For these reasons, the following chapters will focus on the text itself, trying to reveal some of the subtleties of its "suggestions" or "dhvani" (as the Sanskrit theorists put it).[1] As just indicated, the presumption in these chapters is that such subtleties do affect readers' responses. Of course, not all the subtleties affect all readers' responses. Indeed, different readers will be affected by different resonances. However, again, these differences presumably balance out over large numbers. If they did not, the widespread emotional engagement produced by some works (e.g., *Romeo and Juliet* or *Hamlet*) would be anomalous. It would amount to a coincidence across sometimes millions of people. The noncoincidental basis for repeated emotional response is presumably to be found through careful interpretation of the work.

As already indicated, the first chapter articulates an argument for the value of literature in the study of emotion. The first half of the chapter presents reasons why literature may serve as a particularly valuable body of data in that it responds to some of the main problems with

[1] See Hogan 2003, 45–75, and Oatley "Suggestion."

standard research in the field. It is important to stress that this does not mean it displaces standard research. Rather, literature is a valuable site for interdisciplinary study that integrates psychological, sociological, neurological, and other approaches in the context of nuanced, complex depictions of human emotional experience – specifically, depictions that have had deep and enduring emotional impact across time periods and cultures.

As this reference to interdisciplinarity suggests, an understanding of literature and emotion cannot be derived from the literary works alone. Thus a researcher should generally invoke features of a story or character insofar as they at least partially converge with broader research trends.[2] Of course, the same point holds for psychological surveys or fMRI scans; they too are disambiguated in light of convergent research from a variety of fields using a variety of methods. Indeed, emotion research on any particular object, using any particular approach, can hardly produce advances in our understanding of emotion unless it is integrated with work on emotion treating on other objects and using other approaches. Thus the following chapters draw extensively on emotion research from a range of fields outside literary study. At the same time, however, the integration of literary features with this empirical research may challenge standard views in a number of ways. These challenges range from such simple matters as foregrounding underresearched emotions (e.g., mirth), to suggesting that ambivalence and conflict among emotion systems may be greater than researchers have commonly inferred, to differentiating the range of emotions (and emotional ambivalences) that operate in ethical response, to stressing aspects of emotional experience that are rarely recognized in mainstream empirical research (e.g., the effects of emotion on our experience and understanding of space and time). Moreover, literary narratives often provide frameworks for synthesizing the otherwise somewhat fragmented research findings on any given emotion. This synthesis itself should provide insights beyond the individual findings considered separately.

[2] Readers of this book have rightly pointed out that a concern for such convergence is increasingly emphasized in work by literary theorists and research scientists interested in literature. Widely cited figures in this area would include, most obviously, E. O. Wilson, as well as Brian Boyd and Denis Dutton. Such an emphasis is particularly pronounced among writers interested in literature and evolution. Evolution figures prominently in the following chapters, yet this does not mean that the following chapters themselves converge with evolutionary psychology. For some points of divergence, see Hogan "For Evolutionary" and chapter 8 of Hogan *Cognitive*.

In order to enhance the possibilities for convergent and synthetic theorization, Chapter 2 presents an account of emotion structure that draws extensively on current empirical research. This chapter articulates a multicomponent theory of emotion that – in keeping with the vivid particularity of stories (including, of course, performed stories) – stresses perceptual concreteness, both directly sensory and imaginative. This theory lays the groundwork for the following treatments of individual emotions. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the relation between ethics and emotion.

Chapters 3 through 8 take up a small number of individual literary works, examining them in connection with particular emotions. The first of these chapters treats romantic love, focusing on work by Li Ch'ing-Chao ("the greatest poetess of Chinese Literature" [Hu 28])[3] and Sappho,[4] as well as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. This chapter considers what is almost certainly the most common emotion treated in enduring and popular literary works cross-culturally. This chapter also begins to suggest the central place attachment will hold in the course of the following analyses.

Chapters 4 and 5 address the two extremes of grief and mirth, also pervasive concerns in literature. The point is obvious in the case of mirth, owing to the proliferation of comedies and farces. As to grief, John Archer points out that "Whether a person lives in an individualistic or a collectivist society, the experience of bereavement generates a need to communicate thoughts and feelings to others." These lead to "the generation of the many literary works concerned with grief" (35). Chapter 4 explores grief in relation to writing by the highly influential, late-eighteenth/early-nineteenth-century Japanese poet, Kobayashi Issa, along with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The treatment of mirth begins with the tradition of Chinese joke telling, turning from there to Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*.

[3] Treating work from China in this context has the advantage of opposing a common stereotype about Chinese society – that "the Chinese are uninterested in love," as Jankowiak puts it (166). Jankowiak points out that this mistaken view is bound up with the fact that "the remarkable continuity of romantic love found in Chinese literature has been little appreciated" (167). Jankowiak's comments are particularly valuable on the interrelation between literary imagination, personal aspirations and values, and practical behavior in China (see 182).

[4] The stature of Sappho is undoubtedly already well known to Western readers. Nonetheless, readers wishing to learn more about the extent of her influence may consult Robinson or Reynolds.

Up to that point, the ethical concerns raised in Chapter 2 have not been developed theoretically (though they do come up repeatedly in the particular literary analyses). The remaining chapters address the varieties of moral feeling. Chapter 6 focuses on guilt and shame. The chapter also gives some attention to jealousy. It considers guilt particularly in relation to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and one of Wole Soyinka's plays. It then addresses shame in the fifteenth-century Noh drama, *Kagekiyo*, and in Shakespeare's *Othello*, taking up the relation of jealousy to shame in the latter.

Chapter 7 explores attachment in greater detail. Specifically, it examines the interrelations among attachment, disgust, and moral feeling in relation to a poem by Rabindranath Tagore and Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. This chapter moves from moral emotions bearing on oneself to moral emotions bearing on personal relations.

The final chapter addresses empathy more fully, extending the treatment of moral emotions to intergroup relations and politics. It begins with a brief discussion of ethics and evolution – a topic of active discussion in a number of fields. It goes on to analyze different varieties of empathy, focusing particularly on the difference between compassion and pity. In order to develop this analysis, the chapter focuses on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Aimé Césaire's rewriting of that play.

The afterword briefly takes up a distinctive aspect of the relation between literature and emotion. Rather than drawing on literature to explore a particular emotion, this chapter draws on literature to explore how literature and literary study themselves affect emotional propensities. Specifically, through an examination of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, it considers how literary stories may alter our spontaneous emotional responses to the world and to ourselves, and our imaginative elaboration of those responses. In each case, that response is mediated in important ways by the dialogues we enter into when sharing our emotional and interpretive responses to individual literary works. Literary criticism is itself part of that dialogue.

As is no doubt obvious, there is a pattern to the selection of literary works. First, the following chapters explore one Shakespeare play in connection with each emotion. There are three reasons for this. First, taking a work by a one author in each chapter helps provide continuity. Second, Shakespeare is simply the best-known writer in world literature. In this way, his work provides a useful reference point for a large number of readers. Focusing on any other author in all of the chapters would have limited the range of readers familiar with the literary

texts being considered. Finally, Shakespeare does appear to have been uniquely celebrated for his insight into the human mind and social relations. This celebration is found among both literary critics and scientists – as in Keith Oatley's recent characterization of Shakespeare as "The Psychologist of Avon" (see "An Emotion's Emergence").

On the other hand, Shakespeare was obviously a European man writing in the late sixteenth–early seventeenth century. We presumably wish to draw conclusions about emotion that are broadly valid – not confined to a particular historical period and culture location. Given the focus on detailed interpretation, it is not possible to present a broad overview of works in each chapter. However, it is at least possible to select works that are from different periods or cultural traditions. As to temporal distribution, other examples range from the seventh or sixth century B.C.E. (Sappho) to the twentieth century C.E. (Soyinka, Césaire), including instances from the nineteenth century (Tagore, Issa), the fifteenth century (*Kagekiyo*), the twelfth century (Li), and a tradition extending back to at least the third century (Chinese jokes). The geographical distribution ranges from Japan (Issa and *Kagekiyo*), through China (Li and Chinese jokes), South Asia (Tagore), and Europe (Sappho), to the Americas (Césaire).

The only exception to this pattern occurs in the afterword, which draws on just a single work. There are two reasons for this. First, the afterword is necessarily more limited in its scope. It serves to outline some aspects of a research topic complementary to that treated in the main text. However, it necessarily cannot examine that topic in equal detail (without doubling the size of the book). Second, and more important, virtually every literary work depicts emotion, but very few deal with the effects of literature on emotion. Thus the choices were limited.

As already noted, recent decades have witnessed a remarkable flowering of research in and understanding of emotion. Some writers have even taken to speaking of an "affective turn." Literary study has certainly been drawn into this work. However, the vast pool of data supplied by literature remains underutilized in emotion research. It is my hope that this book – along with its precursors by Martha Nussbaum, Keith Oatley, and others – will make some contribution to changing that situation. More exactly, it is my hope that this book will have some effects on four levels. First, it will help advance our understanding of emotion in general and of the particular emotions it examines. Second, it will further clarify the nature of ethical emotion. Third, it will help

contribute to the integration of literary research into emotion research (including the part that treats moral feeling). Finally, it will increase our understanding and appreciation of the particular literary works it takes up, most of which have already proven themselves to be emotionally and ethically significant for a broad range of people in different places and at different times.