



PROJECT MUSE®

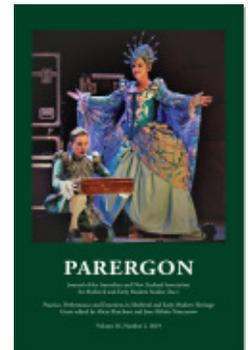
Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History ed. by
Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles (review)

Katie Barclay

Parergon, Volume 36, Number 2, 2019, pp. 207-208 (Review)

Published by Australian and New Zealand Association of Medieval and Early
Modern Studies (Inc.)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pgn.2019.0075>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/742753>

Shrove plays and verse narratives, the discussion of imagery continues with the essay by Schultz McFarland. The two Bruegel prints discussed are both ‘depictions of broad farces performed at Carnival and other festivals’ (p. 135), so this essay links with Classen’s immediately preceding it. However, where Classen explores how ‘efforts to establish social control within the framework of marriage were [...] given a meaningful, though playful, image through theatrical performance’ (p. 133), Schultz McFarland examines how Bruegel’s work embodies his ‘pointed, but veiled, criticisms of the political and religious upheavals’ (p. 135) of the mid-sixteenth-century Spanish Netherlands.

The volume is concluded by essays on early modern drama in Bavaria, Spain, and Russia. William Bradford Smith investigates ‘the role of Jesuit theater in articulating and shaping the ambitions of Maximilian I’ (p. xii) and how such drama portrayed the discord between Catholics and Protestants. Ivy Howell Walter explores the musical interludes of *La discordia en los casados* and how these ‘highlight the central themes of the play, cite classical intertexts, foreshadow, create a sense of foreboding, and underscore the play’s didactic message’ (p. xiii). J. Eugene Clay’s essay on how the works of Dimitrii, the Metropolitan of Rostov, ‘pioneered new forms of [Russian] theater and of religious education’ (p. xiii) rounds out a volume of work that is solidly satisfying without being spectacularly innovative or challenging.

ELEANOR BLOOMFIELD, *University of Auckland*

Downes, Stephanie, Sally **Holloway**, and Sarah **Randles**, eds, *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History* (Emotions in History), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018; hardback; pp. 272; 31 b/w illustrations; R.R.P. £65.00; ISBN 9780198802648.

Some things matter: families put them pride of place on the mantelpiece or stored in the attic, too valuable to dispose of but not quite of use in the everyday. Some of these items make it into art galleries, museums, and archives, particularly if they are considered to hold some sort of value. Why humans hold onto particular objects as heritage, and how they relate to the everyday objects that shape our lives, is a topic of increasing interest, not least for post-humanists, seeking to redraw where agency lies, and those in material studies, interested in how the physical world helps produce our experience. Emotions are part of this story, but where does emotion lie? In the human and their imaginative engagement with the material world, or in the object, ‘sticky with emotion’ as Sara Ahmed might say, travelling over time as part of an artefact’s meaning? *Feeling Things* is a timely contribution to this debate, bringing perspectives from the history of emotions to medieval and early modern objects.

An edited collection, this substantial volume combines an introduction and methodological survey with eleven chapters, and a reflective conclusion. The book is divided into three thematic sections: ‘Potent things’, which explores ‘sacred’ objects (those that pertain to the spiritual world or connect a user to the divine);

‘Binding things’, where objects come to hold the emotions of their producers/users; and ‘Moving things’, that seeks to explore how the emotions of objects are shaped through movement across space and time. The set of essays is beautifully curated, and each chapter reflects not only on a different type of object but often different theories for their interpretation, and impressively different human relations with them. The ‘binding things’ section, for example, explores touch, reading, and handling of books, the physicality of the writing process, including its tears and ink blots, artificial limbs as a remaking of the masculine body, and encapsulation of maternal love in made objects for foundlings. Emotion here is not just what is ‘felt’ abstractly (if feeling can ever be abstract) but the ways that feeling is manifested in and through physical engagements with the material world, and how that feeling then becomes part of what an object is and means. In a similar manner, each of the essays in the final section explores, if never quite resolves, the ways that moving across time—perhaps surviving as an object—brings the multiple emotional layers of an object to the present. In contrast, the potent objects of Section 1 are marked by an attentiveness to their materiality—to glittering surfaces, gold and gilt, carvings in relief, or soft fabrics. It is an approach almost antiquarian in its pursuit of detail, but one that requires the reader to think more seriously about why texture, tone, and materiality matter.

The theorization of emotion and objects in the book reflects larger thinking in the field, and a methodological essay offers an intelligent survey of current work, which is brought out in later essays. Thus we encounter object-orientated ontology—the ‘vitality of things’, thing theory, objects as agentic components of emotional communities, affect theory, embodiment, affective economies, affective fields, Jane Bennett, Sara Ahmed, Bruno Latour, and more. The popularity of theories of affect, rather than those of emotion, is suggestive of the need or desire to capture the emotions of objects with a recourse to substance but not to language. It is a decision—a necessity—that puts this collection at a contradistinction to a history of emotions that has tended to focus on words as a critical juncture in the production of meaning. But as a book largely written by historians (rather than, say, scholars of literary studies where affect has been so prominent), affect is grounded by an attention to materiality, in much the way as others’ works attend to words. As such, it is perhaps not a collection that offers a distinct new method for engaging with objects and emotions, but it raises intelligent questions about those that we do use, and, when read in full, constantly challenges the reader to consider yet another perspective on what thinking with materiality might do for the emotions scholar. It is interesting as a whole, but it is also a collection that has produced some essays of remarkable quality, a pleasure to read.

KATIE BARCLAY, *University of Adelaide*