The role of wrath in modern social movements

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People in medieval times condemned wrath, says Shreve, but believed it could have a moral aspect.

Wrath is commonly considered to be an inhuman, violent, and irrational vice which can frequently overcome self-control. As one of the seven deadly sins, the advantages to wrath are hard to come by.

Emily Shreve, doctoral candidate and first-year writing instructor for Lehigh's English department, disagrees. The work of interpreting wrath, she says, is also the work of understanding social justice.

Shreve's recent presentation on "Medieval Discourses of Wrath and Contemporary Social Movements" in the Humanities Center looked to medieval texts as a starting point to understanding questions of wrath and its relationship to social justice.

Reading in Middle English, Shreve recited a section of the poem Piers Plowman, in which Wrath is introduced:

Thenne awaked Wrathe, with two whyte eyes
And with a niuilynge nose, nippynge his lippes.
'I am Wrathe,' quod that weye

She then recited the modern English version:

Then awakened Wrath, with two white eyes
And with a running nose, gnawing at his lips.
I am Wrath, said that man

Piers Plowman, an allegorical poem written by William Langland in the late 14th century, focuses on how people can best live in the world.

"While wrath was feared and condemned in the medieval period, it forced people to think of its moral aspect, as in the image of God's wrath," Shreve said. "Piers Plowman occasionally assumes a proactive position on anger—and the trickiness in considering it with the whole community in mind."

Langland, writing in a period of social upheaval surrounding the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in England, considered stimulating forms of righteous wrath. Will, the protagonist in Piers Plowman, hopes to work for justice but is unsure of the right way to do so. Langland's sympathy with the sufferings of the poor and his irate satire of corruption are shown through the thoughts and actions of Will.

While wrath and anger were largely considered to be synonymous in the medieval period, there lies a distinction in their modern-day definitions. Today, wrath is considered to be an emotion full of unruly passion—one that inappropriately turns to violence or other impulsive actions. Society views anger differently: anger is an emotion which can be used to teach, awakening knowledge in oneself.

Still, the path to social justice in the medieval period remains the same today. "First comes confusion," Shreve said. "Next is wrath, and often only after that moment of anger can come a realization of the injustice."

Shreve's interest in medieval wrath continues into the present, with her hope that the recognition of anger might help give way to the larger goal of opening up conversation and eventual understanding. In fact, Shreve said, her studies come when "recent events have produced anger in many members of the campus community, which often goes unrecognized or unarticulated.

"We as a community need to acknowledge our impulses to anger—in verbalizing the statement: 'I am angry.' This acceptance is important for our campus. If anger swirls around unacknowledged, it will return in an unproductive manner," Shreve said.

"Thomas Aquinas believed that the presence of anger was a sign of hope," she added, referring to the influential 13th century Christian theologian and philosopher. "He said that to be angry is to believe that justice is possible."

Shreve's research was made possible by Lehigh's Humanities Center Summer 2013 Research Grant. In her dissertation, she plans to examine other medieval aspects of wrath, coming to a conclusion which could shape discussion of its role in contemporary social movements.

She recognizes the moral ambiguity of anger.

"I won't encourage you to riot," she said.

"But I will encourage you to remember the famous phrase from the movie *Network*—"I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!"

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