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Katherine Ibbett, *Compassion's Edge: Fellow-Feeling and Its Limits in Early Modern France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 296 pp. Notes and index. \$79.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-4970-5.

Review Essay by Ann T. Delehanty, Reed College.

To many early modern European thinkers who were interested in mapping the operations of epistemological response, the passions were the prime mover in rhetoric, in theater, and, potentially, in religious experience. They allowed for the external word to reach into the inner heart of the spectators and grab hold, even prior to the spectators being fully aware of their operations. In fact, because the passions were thought to be an involuntary response to some stimuli, there was considerable fear that those passions, if left unregulated, might suspend the good function of reason and, in the wrong hands, lead to dissolute ways. Speechmakers, literary writers, and priests needed to be wholly virtuous and above reproach when engaging with their audience as they wielded such control over those whose passions they raised. Compassion, it seems, was an altogether different beast. While we might initially think that it could be included on a list of the passions, along with the likes of anger or joy, Katherine Ibbett's new work, *Compassion's Edge*, makes it clear from the very beginning that compassion was distinct from the passions in the early modern period. Rather than viewing it strictly as a natural response, she shows compassion to be subject to argument and, as such, worthy of study for its many variations during the era. Her approach views compassion as a way of "reading the other, of appraising and responding to signs of suffering that are imagined to figure a narrative" (p. 25). As such, narratives invoking compassion tell us a great deal about how different thinkers determined the "edge" between self and other, between insider and outsider, between compassion-worthy and not. Ibbett's wide-ranging and thought-provoking book is among the first to explore the nature of compassion during the early modern period and to tease out the nuances of the concept, especially as distinct from the passions.

*Compassion's Edge* is divided into six chapters. The first three chapters present copious examples of religious, philosophical, and literary thinkers' work on the idea of compassion from the late sixteenth century through the late seventeenth century. In the first chapter, Ibbett takes the reader on a tour of the work of several writers on both sides of the Wars of Religion, including Ronsard, Agrippa d'Aubigné, Jean de Léry, and Montaigne (and others), who depict the horrors of the wars as engendering a relationship of pity--or lack of pity--between spectator and scene or reader and text. The second chapter runs us through a very wide-range of thinkers (Montaigne, Descartes, Scudéry, Nicole, La Rochefoucauld, Jacques Esprit, La Mesnardière, Corneille, Rapin, Dacier) who theorized fellow-feeling in the period – ranging from viewing it as an intellectual exercise in its best sense and as a sign of weakness in its worst (Descartes), to arguing that it is a necessary element in regulating social groups (Esprit), to identifying it as evidence of one's proper relation to God (Nicole). The third chapter then takes the Reformation and Counter-Reformation head-on by running through the thinking of Jesuits, Jansenists, and Protestants (Pierre Le Moyne, Yves de

Paris, Jean-Baptiste Saint-Jure, Pascal, Moïse Amyraut, Pierre Jurieu) to detail how religious beliefs inform one's conception of compassion's reach.

In these first three chapters, Ibbett demonstrates that, contrary to what dewy-eyed idealists might hope, compassion was often invoked as a means to establish difference, to exclude, and to harden partisan lines that were in contest (especially along the lines of religious affiliation, as one would imagine) during the period. Only rarely did compassion evoke the fuzzy notion of shared humanity that inspires care and concern that we might (naïvely) hope for today. Rather, she labels compassion “a technology that governs social relations, bringing out the structural affiliations of affect” (p. 3). Determining who merits our compassion can reveal a variety of beliefs about the person who experiences the feeling of compassion, whom Ibbett calls “the compassionater” (Ibbett demonstrates a playful willingness to coin several terms throughout the book). For example, it might reveal those whom we believe to be worthy of sharing a social category with us, delineate those whom we deem to be so divided from us as to only merit a kind of distancing pity rather than a real relationship (for example, the difference between “loving someone” and “having compassion for someone”), or, it can identify those whom we believe to be worthy of salvation. In all these cases, while not necessarily overtly theorized as such by these writers (in other words, Ibbett does not assign a kind of Machiavellian hyper-awareness to their characterizations of compassion), compassion is strategic and partisan, not welling up uncontrollably from some kind of recognition of shared humanity.

In the second half of the book, Ibbett studies three specific moments that further complicate in interesting ways the already complex portrait of compassion that she has painted. In her chapter on Madame de Lafayette, which contains numerous striking insights about Lafayette's work, she argues that Lafayette's depiction of scenes of compassion within marriage are intriguingly ambiguous and that the compassion is often misplaced, which she calls “miscompassion.” This suggests that compassion can be an act of misreading and thus entail certain risks.

The fifth chapter analyzes the status of compassion during Louis XIV's reign, particularly at the moment of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. It discusses the ideal status of the king as “chief compassionater.” The king's compassion, however, takes a fairly vicious shape at this time when it becomes “violence as compassion” whereby forced conversion was viewed by some Catholics as an act of compassion towards Protestants. Ibbett addresses the Protestant response to this malicious twist as a moment both of despair, in that Protestants were swiftly de-legitimated by the king's decree, and of hope, insofar as they sought new forms of compassion in groups that went beyond the sovereign and thus rendered him less significant to their social capital. Ibbett hints that these extra-monarchic bonds might have laid the groundwork for new political models in the next century.

The sixth and final chapter looks to Montréal and the new world as its final site for its analysis of compassion. As Ibbett notes, this chapter turns not only to a new terrain but also to women as the “compassionaters.” The first half of the chapter describes the highly regulated model of compassion that the nuns were to demonstrate to their patients at the Hôtel-Dieu hospital founded in Montréal as well as attitudes towards the indigenous inhabitants that echo those towards the Protestants during the Wars of Religion. The second half of the chapter explores the *Histoire simple et véritable* of Marie Morin, a Canadian-born nun who wrote her own history of her work at the Hôtel-Dieu.

Ibbett's meticulous study of the period and impressive set of examples offers tremendous material for the next generation of scholars to consider and develop even further; it is sure to inspire further inquiry and re-readings of all of the writers that she covers. Methodologically, she has opted to collect a wide-ranging set of examples in order to give the reader a sense of the sweep of possible approaches to compassion in the period. Her encyclopedic grasp of the scholars of the period is impressive.

One of the risks of such an approach, of course, is the need to move quickly over some of the details that might help us to understand better the interplay between these writers and theorize their connections. For example, one might wonder whether genre plays a significant role in determining the manner in which compassion is presented by these authors. In particular, the case of Madame de Lafayette's *nouvelles historiques* seems particularly significant in its difference from the other works analyzed in *Compassion's Edge*. Ibbett argues, through quotations from the *Mercure galant*, that readers of Lafayette's novels were unsure about which characters merited their compassion. Ibbett draws out this uncertainty but then does not have room to theorize it thoroughly. One might potentially think through how genre determines access to the other and might, in fact, produce that ambiguity. In the case of many of the thinkers analyzed in the first half of the book, their work limits its reach to the perspective of the "compassionater." The works of La Rochefoucauld, Pascal, Rapin, or Montaigne (to name only four) do not seek to present us with the scene of compassion. Rather, these authors speak theoretically about the other. By contrast, and most especially in Lafayette's work (but also in the theatrical works Ibbett briefly analyzes), the literary work represents both parties and, in the case of the theater, embodies them.

As a result, one reason why literary works might engender a more ambiguous portrait of compassion lies quite simply in the fact that they present us with multiple vantage points. Moreover, I wonder if it might be fruitful to think through whether access to interiority, such as we find in a limited way in the *nouvelles historiques*, encourages greater ambiguity in the reader-compassionater's response. While it might not make readers more compassionate (as Martha Nussbaum has implied--Ibbett evokes Nussbaum's work on page 23), it might make them more uncertain and hesitant to judge. Put another way, it would be intriguing to divide the authors studied in the work along the lines of "prescriptive" and "descriptive" approaches to compassion. I would be curious to think through whether the "descriptive" approach to compassion (which I presume to be the literary approach) yields greater ambiguity and less hardening of partisan lines because of its inherent attention to the situation of all parties involved. In other words, if literature doesn't make you *act* more virtuously, could it perhaps make you *feel* more compassionately? Or at the very least, could literature make you feel more uncertain about your firmly drawn partisan lines?

Outside of the realm of genre, another question that pulses beneath every chapter but is not fully examined is how religious faith and reformist doctrine might condition these approaches to compassion. Indeed, one can easily imagine that the individual believer's attitude toward his or her fellow beings might be thoroughly informed by the doctrine of his or her faith. Ibbett's approach to the various thinkers is so careful to point to shades of difference between them that it leaves the reader unsure whether there is a larger link to the religious doctrine which they putatively endorsed. For example, in the first chapter, Ibbett makes the claim that "...this invention of the pitiless *spectator* is the key Protestant innovation" (p. 41). One might wonder whether the doctrine of salvation by faith alone, for example, might change the manner in which one sees the

nature of one's fellow humans and, by extension, the nature of one's compassion towards them. Along similar lines, there is a tantalizing distinction between the Catholics as relying upon the visual as a site and source of pity and the Protestants favoring a text-based source for their inspiration: "This genre of history forged Protestantism: it allowed a wider audience to bear witness to Protestant suffering, although they were not present at the scene" (p. 41). Did the notion of *sola scriptura* have any bearing on this distinction? Does the Catholic preference for the visual and the Protestant for the textual arise out of their differing conceptions of the sacramental event? Ibbett's admirable preference for nuance--no one would complete this book and think that there is an easily characterized and unified Protestant or Catholic approach to compassion--prevents her from engaging in some of the philosophical or theological "big picture drawing" that would be intriguing to see.

Despite the difficulty of drawing these kinds of general conclusions, an attempt to do so would have been very helpful for understanding the larger stakes of these varying models of compassion throughout the work. In the third chapter, which organizes itself around differences in religious perspectives, a more explicit characterization of the relationship between these models of compassion and doctrinal differences around the question of divine grace would have helped sharpen those distinctions even further. The chapter presents us with a continuum of thinkers (from Jesuit to Jansenist to Protestant) who go from moderately (but never entirely!) universalist in their approach to compassion to decidedly isolationist. In the first half of the chapter, Ibbett gives us an analysis of several Jesuit thinkers who might appear to embrace catholicity in a truly universalist sense but who still manage to limit the reach of their compassion. For example, "Le Moyne's exuberant insistence that we love one another is kept in check by a strong sense of where the limits of the 'we' might lie, and he insists on our similarities as humans by insisting on our differences from animals" (p. 104). In her analysis of Pascal, she suggests that the question of salvation is too urgent for him not to require some kind of differentiation, "Compassion cannot be universal when such rigorous and significant separation is at stake" (p. 123). And then the analysis of two Protestant thinkers at the end of the chapter (Amyraut and Jurieu) maintains that only God would be capable of true compassion. The key issue here, it seems, hinges on our ability to judge another and his or her position in relation to the divine. The exhaustive (and exhausting) debates on the nature of divine grace and its role in human salvation might have proven to be very relevant to this chapter's discussion and might even be shown to inform these thinkers' take on compassion.

*Compassion's Edge* invites its readers to contemplate the contours of an existentially alarming question: can we ever *really* care about another in a way that is not somehow self-interested or seeking another sort of gain? For the multitude of writers that the work analyzes, the answer is almost entirely (but not universally, Ibbett is careful to point out in her epilogue) "no." But all hope is not lost. Ibbett's subtle approach to outlining the nature of compassion in the early modern period turns our attention away from our existential angst and offers us significant material for future study and an exciting new addition to the study of the theorizing of human sentiment in the early modern period. Interrogating the nature of compassion is clearly a worthy pursuit that might, indeed, help us to locate those rare few who have exercised a nobler version of it.

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