

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.

Response Katherine Ibbett, University of Oxford

It's an odd experience to have written a book about an emotion – compassion – that I argue points, in its early modern instantiation, to a past that is not fully settled and, then, to be asked to write about that material *again*. In responding to these rich and wide-ranging responses, I feel as if I too, like the problematic fellow-feeling I describe in *Compassion's Edge*, am experiencing the return of an ideal not yet fully realized. Like the concepts of toleration and compassion whose failures I sketch out in the book, a book itself is sometimes better in theory than in practice. And yet, along the way, even as the whole doesn't quite match up to the hopes we have for it, something useful happens, something able to bring things or people together differently. I'm grateful to the four reviewers for their readings, and for their imaginings of what might lie beyond the book's own edges.

Kathryn Norberg's inquiry into the visual dimensions of my argument prompts me to return to two images that were central to the earliest glimmer of my interest in this question, Georges de La Tour's two paintings of Saint Sebastian and Saint Irene. In his earliest iteration of this scene, from the 1630s, the injured Sebastian is attended by an actively helpful Irene, who is reaching in to pluck the arrows from his wounds; in his return to the scene at the end of the 1640s, La Tour shows a different relation between the two, in which Irene and a group of attendant women no longer reach in to help but instead are posed at arm's length from him, with each woman making a mournful yet seemingly helpless gesture: face buried in hands, hands reaching out but no longer (or not yet) actively tending to the body. The difference between these two images of a response to suffering – the one actively engaged, the other a tableau of an emotion – prompted the reflection on spectatorship in my first book on tragedy, and the same rift between charitable intervention and emotionally engaged observation was still very much with me as I wrote *Compassion's Edge*.

Norberg's absorbing reading of Abraham Bosse's series on the works of mercy is a wonderful example of another visual road this book did not take. In telling the story of compassion's failures, *Compassion's Edge* opens up what I call the affective undertow of the history of toleration. The different ways in which Protestants begin to draw on and distinguish between the terms of fellow-feeling (pity, compassion and so on) is central to the project. Bosse would certainly have been an intriguing figure in this regard: a Protestant, he nonetheless – as in the series Norberg so well describes – took up Catholic commissions, and represented specifically Catholic practices. I'd have loved to have worked Bosse into the book in order to think further about this tension between religious identity and emotional vocabulary, and for a brief time he was on the to-do list. Other roads not taken are those leading to La Tour's fellow Lorrain Jacques Callot's images of war, and in a very different visual tradition the Le Nain brothers, whose strikingly Eucharistic images also think through questions of poverty and charity. And since the book has come out and I've had occasion to see the cover so many more times, I've been wishing I'd made more of the edges of the

compassionate face, in Le Brun's iteration of that; in the drawing which is reproduced on the cover, the crosshatching marking the face's borders as it turns to the presumed object of suffering is softer than the lines which draw that edge more harshly in the later and more often-reproduced eighteenth-century edition of Le Brun's passions series, so that, as with the La Tour paintings, the difference between the two versions serves as a heuristic for thinking through the edge that divides our own concerns from that of our concern for others.

Marc Bizer's reading suggests, however, that even if my past musings about tragedy prompted the development of this book, they are not sufficiently explicit – the book is not sufficiently *tragic* – to be able to account for the generation of emotion and discourse about emotion in this period. He's right to pinpoint the work of Andrea Frisch as key to these discussions, and as I hope my announced debt to her work makes clear, I admire her work enormously; if I inched away from the significance of late sixteenth-century discussions of tragedy in this book, I think it's in part because I felt she had so thoroughly and recently dealt with tragedy's complex positioning in the years after the religious wars. But it's also that, if tragedy has for a long time been a privileged site for thinking through the emotions in literary and philosophical scholarship, I wanted to trace instead the way in which the Aristotelian pairing of pity and terror – coupled in both the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* – moves from writing about tragedy (about which there are nonetheless a good few pages) into other domains, like the writing of the *moralistes*, and even Protestant histories of the period: Elie Benoist's 1690s account of the siege of La Rochelle as an event which gave “pity and terror” to the Protestant community suggests how far that tragic vocabulary moved over the course of the century (pp. 173-79). But the book also, I think, suggests how writing about tragedy began to move away from the “machines,” as Rapin terms them, of pity and terror, and comes to generate analysis of other sorts of affective states. Where Ann Delehanty wants to see a firmer analysis of literary genres and their borders, I wanted instead to give a sense of compassion as a mode, a stance, a set of vocabularies, that moved across genres. I very much wish, though, that I'd made more of compassion's *media*: it strikes me now that the pamphlet, and the emotional worlds it both responds to and urges on, is central to the argument about affective absolutism that I make in chapter 5, and I would like to think more about this pamphlet affect in later work.

Delehanty is right that in the work on the novel I don't take up the question of interiority (although we first met in a seminar on precisely that question!); perhaps again in an unarticulated memory of the staged responses of La Tour, I was attached instead to thinking of fictional compassion as something akin to a gesture, and to tracing its staged repetition across a number of carefully choreographed scenes. There's not much of a compassionate self in the texts I read, or at least not in the ways I read them; the figures I worked through in the chapter on the novel seem to me to forestall that sort of subjectivity and the kind of ambiguity Delehanty imagines might arise from that, their swiftly-passing emotions noted and named in set-pieces that seem almost like heraldic renderings of attributes rather than richly interiorized emotional states. That's why, as Lesley Tuttle rightly notes, I steer closer to Barbara Rosenwein than William Reddy in the methodology of the history of emotions. My work is more drawn to Rosenwein's deciphering of a dense clustering of terms, and Reddy's speech-act *emotives*, emotions voiced and exercised in the first person, are largely absent from this material. They do, however, crop up in a piece I've written more recently on the compassionate self of counter-reformation spirituality. [1] I also steered shy of Reddy because his argument is pitched so firmly towards a particular history of sentimentalism and sensibility that I was keen to write against, eager for seventeenth-century emotionality to be not just or not only a sentimental gallop towards the eighteenth century. But Tuttle is right

that Reddy's concept of emotional regime has real purchase here, perhaps especially in the material she qualifies as "chilling," stemming from the exercise of what I term "affective absolutism" in the years after the Revocation.

Delehanty also calls for an attention to the differing relations to salvation that might modify or nuance some of the distinctions I make in chapter 3. I set out writing this book thinking firmly and admiringly of Sarah McNamer's work on medieval compassion, and her complaint about "the recurrent absorption of emotion by the rubric of religion and its consequent invisibility or presumed unavailability to the history of emotion as such." [2] But although the "headline" theological distinctions of this period are undoubtedly also affective distinctions – as any reader of Pascal feels viscerally – my focus in regrouping writers on *caritas* in chapter 3 was rather on their relation to the Aristotelian observation of the relation of pity to fear, and on the different configurations of vulnerability and self-interest that emerge from an engagement with that tradition. Throughout *Compassion's Edge*, religious identities look something more like a form of sociality or community than like a theological position. I found it productive to set aside the labels I already had for these writers (Le Moyne, Saint Jure, Yves de Paris, Pascal, Amyrault, Jurieu), and to find instead their common ground as well as their contestations of a shared set of terms.

In *Compassion's Edge*, compassion appears both as a textual tradition and as a transitory gesture that cannot be fully accounted for by that tradition, like the actions of the nurses I look at in the last chapter to which Tuttle responds. In some of the material I covered, compassion is a set formula recycled into a range of different texts; in others, mostly but not only fictional, compassion appears as a real-time reaction to an event, as a gesture arising even where least expected, such as the surprising if very occasional kindnesses of the other side in the religious wars. I would have liked to think more through this transitory and almost phenomenological experience of emotion, and along the way I have met scholars taking up this challenge in English material, notably Eric Langley in his forthcoming work on sympathetic contagion. [3] But this exercise reminds me that textual exchange is also a sort of gesture to the other. These reviews certainly – and appropriately! – cast a coolly assessing eye on my book, but I'm struck by their proper care and generosity in so doing and grateful to them and to H-France for giving me the occasion not only to come back to the book, but also to think through what comes next.

## NOTES

[1] "The Compassionate Self of the Counter-Reformation," currently under review as part of *Early Modern Compassion: A Cultural History*, ed. Kristine Steenbergh and Katherine Ibbett.

[2] Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 5.

[3] Eric Langley, *Ill Communications: Shakespeare's Contagious Sympathies* (forthcoming, Oxford University Press).

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