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Katherine Ibbett, *Compassion's Edge: Fellow-Feeling and its Limits in Early Modern France*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, 304 pp, 6 x 9, 2 illus, \$79.95 U.S., (cl) ISBN 9780812249705.

Review essay by Kathryn Norberg, University of California, Los Angeles

As a social historian of early modern France, I welcome Katherine Ibbett's new book, *Compassion's Edge: Fellow-Feeling in Early Modern France*. Having worked on charitable giving and charitable institutions in the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, I feel that Ibbett's analysis fills a gap in our otherwise extensive knowledge of hospitals, asylums and other institutions of "good works" created in the seventeenth century. The scope and effectiveness of these institutions is pretty well known and the religious orders or charitable benefactors who administered them have been described not just by students of social assistance but also by historians of women, religion and medicine [1]. We have come a long way from Foucault's first sketch of the "great confinement." We know a lot about the charity in early modern France, but less about the emotions and rationales from which it sprang. Ibbett's book provides an analysis of what compassion meant to seventeenth-century French thinkers and how its definition changed over time. I think her conclusions could make historians of charity if not completely change their views, at least shift their interpretations more towards what Ibbett calls "the edge." To be clear, Ibbett's book does not focus on the outcome of compassion, charitable acts and institutions. Only in the last chapter does she consider the Montreal hospital and the nuns who staffed it. Otherwise, Ibbett finds compassion in some unexpected places: in the theater, in novels, and in representations of the "absolute monarch." Our understanding of the charitable impulse is richer for it. I particularly appreciate the way that Ibbett grounded her analysis in the Protestant/Catholic conflict from the Wars of Religion to the abolition of the Edict of Nantes. Surely, it is the ferocity and longevity of the Catholic persecution of Protestants that most shock our sensibilities. Even sympathetic figures like Madame de Sevigné cheered the Revocation and turned a blind eye to the violent repression that followed. For the heretic, early modern French men and women felt no compassion even though they resembled each other in many ways. But here lies the "edge" of which Ibbett speaks.

Catholicism encouraged seventeenth-century benefactors to feel for the less fortunate, but "fellow-feeling" was not empathy or identification. It was characterized by distance, by a reinscription of otherness on the body of the unfortunate. For example, the rule that governed the nuns of the Montreal hospitals encouraged them to have compassion, but mainly for each other. "Affective union" between the sisters or (at most) the French settlers was encouraged, while "fellow feeling" for the "savages" less so (pp. 208-12). Ibbett discusses the Jesuit *relations* which describe the horrific punishments visited by the Iroquois on their victims and the grisly deaths of Jesuits martyred by the "pitiless savages." The importance of martyrdom in the

literature of New France points to a broader quality of “charity” that Ibbett neglects. Sometimes, “charity” and “penance” coincided. Marie of the Incarnation’s relationship with her Amerindian girls was both “compassionate” and “penitential.” She devoted herself to the girls but was repelled by the smell of the bear grease with which they covered themselves. Her revulsion elevates her compassion but also, like compassion itself, underscores the chasm that separated nun from savage.

Ibbett gives us a way to understand this paradoxical relationship between nun and savage or donor and recipient. Always, Ibbett tells us, ‘compassion’ marks difference. Like toleration, compassion is not without borders which are, Ibbett observes throughout the book, fiercely defended. In addition, compassion, especially of this early modern French sort, has “a strained relationship to action,” that is to charity or above all, to political change (p. 224). Ibbett does see in the “fellow feeling” that bound the sisters of the Montreal hospital, something warmer and reciprocal, but still insists that not much in the way of alleviation of suffering or social impact was to be expected from seventeenth-century compassion.

Throughout *Compassion’s Edge* (with two exceptions) Ibbett relies on texts [2]. What if one looked at images? Reading *Compassion’s Edge*, I thought repeatedly of one set of prints by the famous printer, artist, publisher and author of scientific and technological texts, Abraham Bosse (1604-1676). Bosse’s series of seven prints entitled *Les Oeuvres de la Miséricorde*, (henceforth Works of Mercy) haunted me while reading *Compassion’s Edge* [3]. I was constantly referring to the images because they seemed so closely related to Ibbett’s analysis. The themes –mercy and compassion—do seem congruent. Seventeenth-century authors often used compassion, charity and mercy almost interchangeably (p.101). Yves de Paris’ treatise, *The works of mercy* is analyzed in *Compassion’s Edge* (p.107) [4]. I don’t want to suggest that Yves de Paris or any of the other authors discussed in *Compassion’s Edge* influenced Bosse directly. Yves de Paris’ essay postdates Bosse’s prints by more than a decade and most of the texts analyzed by Ibbett were written by Catholics [4]. Bosse was raised a Protestant. Nevertheless, he still created many prints for a Catholic audience and produced at least one other, apparently adulatory etching of a Catholic hospital, “L’Infirmierie de l’Hopital de La Charité.” Whatever Bosse’s religious beliefs, the composition and details of the *Works of Mercy* reflect Ibbett’s analysis of “compassion’s edge.”

I will only focus on the first of the seven prints, “Nourrir ceux qui ont faim”(Feed those who are hungry)[5]. The image depicts a wealthy couple and their servant succoring the poor, by distributing bread to the hungry. The print stages a “spectacle of suffering” which many of Ibbett’s authors considered a spur to compassion. We see the hungry represented by adults, children, and an old man with a crutch. Their benefactors, an extremely well-dressed couple, gaze upon them from afar on the threshold of their château. Like us, the couple sees the “spectacle of suffering” staged on the formal porch of a country home, framed like a proscenium arch by the building and trees, before a backdrop of a formal garden. One is reminded that Bosse devoted quite a few prints to the theater.

Bosse was also a prolific fashion illustrator. The charitable couple in “Feed those who are hungry” are very elegantly dressed, the wife in lace and her husband in a dramatic plumed hat, *canons* (lace stockings) and wig. In their splendor, they observe the needy from the opposing

edge of the image. A servant woman in the middle acts as an intermediary, assisting and sheltering her master and mistress by distributing bread to the needy. Here compassion is literally, to echo Ibbett's description, "an arm's length pursuit" (p. 7).

Compassion, Ibbett argues, creates distance and "reinforces divides" (p.1). The distance, both spatial and social, between Bosse's benefactors and the hungry could not be greater. In fact, it is so baldly depicted that one suspects Bosse of irony or sarcasm. Maybe Bosse or his publisher sensed this for changes were made to "Feed the poor" [6]. In what appears to be later press runs of the etching, the woman in the center of the image has been transformed into a charity lady, complete with black hat and sober attire. The patrons too have been "dressed down." The man has lost the plumes from his hat and his wife, now stripped of her laces and ribbons, wears a simple dress and the black scarf favored by Madame de Miramion, Mlle Le Gras, and other charitable women. Women are now official conduits of compassion, tasked with serving the poor, but only in limited, unpolitical ways. The distance between rich and poor has not been narrowed, only made less frivolous, more self-conscious and sober.

Had I not read *Compassion's Edge*, I might not have noticed these changes or the dispassionate atmosphere that prevails in Bosse's etchings. Carl Goldstein finds the benefactors represented in *The Works of Mercy* "emotionless" and without intensity (p. 5). He attributes this lack of affect to a lack of technique or error. But perhaps Bosse meant it that way. Perhaps he created a kind of affective echo of early modern compassion. Perhaps he too saw compassion not as passion but as a cautious and carefully considered stance, one that we now recognize thanks to *Compassion's Edge*.

NOTES

[1] To cite only a few of the important works that deal with old regime charity, Colin Jones, *The Charitable Imperative: Hospitals and Nursing in Old Regime and Revolutionary France* (London: Routledge, 1989); Jacques DePauw, *Spiritualité et Pauvreté à Paris au Dix-Septième Siècle* (Paris: Boutique de l'histoire, 1989); Susan Dinan, *Women And Poor Relief in Seventeenth-Century France: The Early History of the Daughters of Charity (Women and Gender in the Early Modern World)* (London: Ashgate, 2006); Tim McHugh, *Hospital Politics in Seventeenth-Century France: The Crown, Urban Elites and the Poor* (The History of Medicine in Context) (London: Routledge, 2007).

[2] The images included by Ibbett are important. The first, which figures on the cover of the book and in its first paragraphs show "compassion" as imagined by Charles Le Brun. The second is an ex-voto painting of the Montreal hospital.

[3] Ibbett does refer in passing to Bosse's series when she discusses the Montreal hospital and the role of women in charity: (p.200).

[4] Le Blanc believes that all of Bosse's major prints were created in the period between 1632 and 1648. While she considers that the technical expertise demonstrated in the *Acts of Mercy* prints makes the series one of Bosse's latest, Yves de Paris' treatise of the same name dates from

1662. (Marianne le Blanc, *D'Acide et d'encre: Abraham Bosse et son siècle en perspectives* (Paris : CNRS Editions, 2004), 64-65.

[5] You can see « Nourrir ceux qui ont faim » the first etching in the “Œuvres de la Miséricorde” at http://art.rmngp.fr/fr/library/artworks/abraham-bosse_les-oeuvres-de-misericorde-nourrir-ceux-qui-ont-faim_eau-forte_burin-estampe.

[6] Carl Goldstein, *Print Culture in Early Modern France: Abraham Bosse and the Purposes of Print* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 118-21.

[7] The revised “Feed the Hungry” etching can be viewed on the Getty Museum website <https://www.gettyimages.fr/detail/illustration/woman-offering-bread-to-poor-feeding-hungry-one-of-seven-graphisme/700723071>

[8] Goldstein, *Print Culture*, 5.

Kathryn Norberg
University of California, Los Angeles
knorberg@ucla.edu

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