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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 Leslie Tuttle, Louisiana State University

One of the greatest intellectual satisfactions a book can provide is to help its readers see familiar terrain anew. Katherine Ibbett's *Compassion's Edge* does just this. Students of the seventeenth century know the period as the "century of saints" in which Catholic Reformation piety made care for the poor and sick an urgent spiritual mandate. Charles Le Brun's striking drawings of faces subject to the various passions are etched in our minds, evidence of the era's fascination with the corporal reality of emotion. We recall Joan DeJean's description of the late seventeenth century as a period of "emotional regime change" in which old words for feelings were displaced by an effusion of new ones as domains from literature to philosophy to medicine sought ever-more granular understanding of how feeling prompted thought and action. [1] *Compassion's Edge* braids these diverse ideas together to explore a specific moment in the history of the emotion we now call "compassion," which modern neo-liberalism tends to celebrate as both a universal human experience and an antidote to the world's ills. Think again, Ibbett would say. Despite the seeming centrality of fellow-feeling to major trends in seventeenth century French culture, Ibbett shows us, what we would call "compassion" is both harder to find in the seventeenth century French world and more controversial than we would imagine it to be.

The writers—including philosophers, theologians, playwrights and novelists—that Ibbett surveys were astute readers of classical works and impressive observers of human behavior. Both kinds of evidence informed them that humans who witness the suffering of other humans experience an interior movement, which often went by the name of "*pitié*" before the word "compassion" came to join and eventually eclipse it. Yet while they generally acknowledged that such a natural reaction occurred, our seventeenth-century guides were not uniformly convinced it was a useful or worthy response. Many saw it as a weakness, and others as a self-interested response, aimed primarily at reminding the observer to avoid the same misfortune. However they explained the reasons for this inner movement, Ibbett emphasizes how early modern writers set out to transform this elemental response in some way, often to harness it within specific social or, tellingly, confessional boundaries to achieve what she calls an "affective policing of a divided France"(p. 26). This then becomes the central argument of Ibbett's stimulating book: although the discourses examining and eliciting pity and compassion multiplied seemingly *ad infinitum* from the late sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries, the fellow-feeling these texts construct was deliberately partial. Defining compassion drew boundaries by instructing readers to feel for some people and, sometimes explicitly, not to feel for others. In one of many apparently rueful modern analogies, she calls this the "gerrymandering of emotional communities"(p. 116).

From this argument stems what to me seems the major historical intervention of this book: Ibbett places the religious wars, the agonizing compromises of the Edict of Nantes, and the ultimate

failure of that compromise at the center of the “emotional regime” of seventeenth-century France (to borrow a term from William Reddy).[2] Rather than focusing on the court and its structures for disciplining emotional expression, Ibbett suggests that if we hope to understand the period’s elevation to Christian duty of a universal charity for distant, unknown people, its embrace of an absolutism which sought to direct subjects’ affective responses, or its engagement with the moral value and aesthetics of emotion more broadly, we must keep an eye out for the “persistently painful residues”(p. 2) of the sixteenth century.

Ibbett finds these residues in places both expected and unexpected. Expectedly, they emerge in debates about precisely for whom we ought to feel compassion. It is shocking but ultimately not surprising to read the Capuchin Yves de Paris reflecting, circa 1661, on the global duty of compassion and the universal language of emotional expressions like tears, and then turning around to call France’s Protestant minority “une malheureuse secte qui ne subsiste que par un excès de tolérance”(p. 110). Yves de Paris’ partisan compassion, just one of several iterations of the theme that Ibbett explores, helps to explain how, in the era of the Revocation, the French state’s brutal treatment of the Protestant minority could be rewritten as a compassionate gesture, a kind of tough love for which Protestants would soon be grateful. In this vein, Ibbett provides in chapter five an utterly chilling analysis of a 1687 pamphlet titled *Le triomphe de la religion sous Louis le Grand*, a short work filled with figures and emblems produced in connection with an event at the Jesuit *Collège de Louis le Grand*. Pausing to decipher a document most might pass over as flowery propaganda, she notes that it compares Protestants to diamonds, which gain beauty through violent treatment; and compares Protestant children to corals, who gain value only by being ripped away from the beds where they grow (pp. 169-172). Did French people buy this paradiastolic translation of repression into compassion? Ibbett acknowledges that perhaps they did not; nevertheless, the text illustrates how rhetorically sophisticated forms of “affective government” sought to compel Catholic emotional conversions alongside Protestant religious ones.

Ibbett further explores the confessional nature of seventeenth-century French compassion by addressing consistent attention to Protestant evocations of the theme. *Caritas* was, after all, both an emotion and theological issue. For Catholics, compassionating and then doing unto others illustrated the divine plan for, and ultimate saving value of works; for Protestants like the mid-century theologian Moïse Amyraut, on the other hand, too great a faith in human compassion arrogated to man qualities of mercy that were uniquely divine. Judging by Ibbett’s reading, Protestant theologians were generally no more willing than Catholics to extend compassion across confessional lines, but Ibbett points out that their situation became radically different. After 1680, Protestant writers like Élie Benoist, Pierre Jurieu and Pierre Bayle were forced by circumstance to evoke a transnational form of Protestant compassion which, Ibbett suggests, prefigures the internationalist language of humanitarianism. This new form of compassion was constructed by media that crossed national and linguistic boundaries and created solidarities outside national sovereignty. Ibbett’s conclusion that compassion was not, in the first measure, about universalism prompts an all too brief observation that key elements of “modern” horizontal, universalist claims that are sometimes ascribed to a secularizing Enlightenment are better understood as emotional by-products of the religious strife of the late seventeenth century (p. 181).

Less expectedly, Ibbett also finds the emotional residues of the sixteenth-century national trauma in fiction, asking productively in chapter four why it is that the Comtesse de Lafayette’s novels of

marriage are set either on the eve of or in the midst of the religious wars. She proposes that Lafayette's intricate studies of compassion's misfire between spouses, set against a backdrop of confessional division, is connected to the broader problem of compassion in the France of confessional compromise. Perhaps, she suggests, Lafayette was working out an "aesthetic and ethical stance" that proposes being an "attentive...bystand[er]" to emotional upheaval without surrendering to compassion's erasure of difference or distance between self and suffering other (pp. 156-8).

Linking the history of emotions, as Ibbett does, to "l'histoire événementielle" of the religious wars and their memory in later generations provides a reassuring chronological anchor in a field that focuses on an all-too slippery object – emotion—and that has sometimes struggled to be historical, that is to meaningfully and accurately pinpoint change over time. Methodologically, Ibbett's work seems to me to fall into the vein of the work Barbara Rosenwein, focusing (as Rosenwein would put it) on the creation of emotional communities that privilege certain kinds of emotional expression over others in ways that change over time, not in a linear fashion from spontaneous to controlled à la Norbert Elias, but still in relation to identifiable socio-historical conditions. [3] Ibbett's sources rarely, as she acknowledges, include the "emotives" or first-person emotional claims on which scholars like William Reddy focus (p.4). In general, a reader of this fine book takes a rich and illuminating tour of seventeenth-century intellectuals writing about the origins or psychic machinery of fellow-feeling and the moral question of how we ought to act on our feelings about others, rather than encountering compassion as told by compassionaters themselves. Nevertheless, I invoked Reddy's idea of an "emotional regime" in relation to Ibbett's picture of compassion because, it seems to me, she is implying the close relationship of this theorizing of compassion to the fragile stability of French politics in the period and to the difficulty of inhabiting an uncommitted position in this emotional space. Perhaps she will have more to say here. In general, Ibbett's project is not primarily focused on the methodology germane to doing a history of emotion. Ibbett clearly believes that tracing the troubling limitations of compassion as a concept is an urgent project at this historical moment and I am inclined to grant her that.

## NOTES

[1] Joan DeJean, *Ancients vs. Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1997), esp. ch. 3, "A Short History of the Human Heart."

[2] For a helpful guide to the developing methodologies of the history of emotion, see Jan Plamper, William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein and Peter Stearns, "The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein and Peter Stearns," *History and Theory* 49:2 (May 2010): 237-65. Reddy discusses the concept of an "emotional regime" on pp. 242-44.

[3] *Ibid.* Rosenwein explains the concept of "emotional communities" on pp. 252-3.

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