

Ibbett, Katherine. *Compassion's Edge: Fellow-Feeling and Its Limits in Early Modern France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. ISBN 978-0-8122-4970-5. Pp. 304. \$79,95.

Katherine Ibbett cuts through the fluffy stereotypes of compassion to masterfully reveal the “severe face” of this emotion in *Compassion's Edge: Fellow-Feeling and Its Limits in Early Modern France*. One of the launching points of *Compassion's Edge* is that compassion itself carries “persistently painful residues from France’s sixteenth-century wars” (2). As such, compassion’s edge has been honed and sharpened on the whetstone of violence and political rallying cries: compassion becomes not an outreached helping hand, but rather “a sifting mechanism, operating on a spectrum of inclusion and exclusion” (4)

dividing Catholic from Protestant in myriad ways, but also positing questions regarding not only who is worthy of compassion, but who is *capable* of compassion. The edge of compassion, Ibbett argues, draws the line between group identities and solidifies the divides of social difference. And yet this edge is not merely a limit: it is multiple and polyvalent.

For Ibbett, compassion can pivot on its historical-linguistic particularity; Ibbett notes that “the early modern adjectives *pitieux* and *pitoyable* indicated both someone who likes to show pity but also someone who should be shown it” (2). The slipperiness between the pitier and the pitied also shows that compassion is not the simple winnowing force that it was leveraged to be. Another pivot point turns on the question of gender: compassion as an evaluative tool could either be a marker of “weak and womanly pliancy” (65), or of masculine, stoic cool-mindedness. Compassion may be an affectively potent weapon, useful as rhetorical strategy in political appeals. But because compassion risks bandaging the gap between oneself and the other, compassion’s proximity may therefore “erodes its ability to act politically” (10). Compassion may be contagious or cooling, it may foster indifference or excite passions, it may encourage evaluation or dissolve rationality. Ibbett takes a cue from affect theorists to re-think the Cartesian mind-body divide, and views compassion as “having a more social, more bodily and more cognitively significant status than [rigidly overdrawn Cartesianism] would suggest” (22).

In six chapters, Ibbett brings us on a journey through the “hinterlands” of compassion. She marshals an impressive array of well-known (and obscure) literary examples, compelling texts and unique archives. This constellation of lovingly handled texts reveals not just Ibbett’s erudition, but also highlights that the “the early modern [...] is not the birthplace of rationalist subjectivity as much as a moment when various assumptions about the relation of emotion to reason, or to body, or to self, had not yet hardened into familiarity” (22). Compassion itself is not just an object of study, but also a *mode*. The practice of reading thus offers a model for compassion: “not sentimental or contagious, but rather reserved and reflective” (25). The emotional and

cognitive processes that we associate with reading, as simultaneously affectively receptive but cognitively distant, provide Ibbett two major advantages: firstly, reading as an open-ended practice allows us to sense a different variety of compassion than our contemporary, overly empathetic variety. Secondly, this mode of distant-but-close analysis allows Ibbett to shine a light on compassion's mediation, whether presented through texts, letters, or spectacles. She expands on this convergence between "reading texts and reading people" (54) highlighting that it is not enough for the pitiful spectacle to strike us affectively; we must also think of the pitiful spectacle as being *read*. Montaigne's willingness to "try out the same but different story again and again" (56) allows him both to read (and re-read) a text to inhabit both the position of vanquisher and vanquished. In so doing, he plays with compassion, but also exercises compassion (literally performing it, and training it, and developing it). For Ibbett, this flexibility yields a tripartite model of "bystander, emoter and reader, who can observe with shared sympathy and whose lack of partisan action is a form of 'bien meilleure grace'" (59).

In "Pitiful Sights: Reading the Wars of Religion," Ibbett analyzes the deployment of pitiful spectacle by Catholics and Protestants alike. Catholics relished in the genre of the *histoires tragiques*, including detailed descriptions of famine and violence, a "woman who strangles her children because she has nothing to feed them" to "a family who stitch themselves into their sheets and wait to die" (36). This heavy-handed pitiful spectacle counts on compassion's edge to "chivvy the reader into the proper affective stance" (37). In Protestant hands, a similar depiction of pitiful spectacle is joined to an attention to the experience of spectatorship, raising the questions of "who sees what, and how" (42). It is not enough to replicate in text the horrors of war; the Protestant tales also indict the unfeeling (and inactive) *witness* to the horror. The imagined position of the pitiless spectator, Ibbett argues, is a strategic and rhetorical Protestant invention, and yet another example of how compassion can be leveraged to draw and redraw lines. "We recognize the enemy other by their lack of emotion faced with scenes that *ought* to bring about pity, scenes in which the ordinary affect of human intimacy is denied" (47). Compassion has a cruel edge.

The second chapter, “The Compassion Machine: Theories of Fellow-Feeling, 1570-1692” treats the intertwined nature of moral theory and dramatic theory to consider where the boundaries between self and other ought to lie, and how the theater form, with its injunction to *feel*, both challenged and modeled compassion. The point of departure is the Aristotelian formulation, which called for tragedy to drum up pity and terror. The theoreticians cited in this chapter are all familiar names to seventeenth-century studies (Descartes, Nicole, Madeleine de Scudéry, etc.). And yet, by bringing all of these voices to the same conversation, Ibbett is able to offer a bird’s eye perspective on what she calls the “compassion machine”: the ways that “seventeenth-century pity emerges from a machine that properly configured the precise relation between judgment and emotional response” (97). The appropriate and proper distancing between pitier and pitied was at stake. For someone like Descartes, “the pleasure of the theater derives from the spectator’s distance and detachment from the spectacle; the ideal compassion, likewise, must be regulated by distance (66). This is the kind of distancing force that La Mesnardière would celebrate, urging the necessity of the *règles classiques* and the “structural distance between spectator and suffering” (86). Other thinkers such as Corneille and René Rapin advocate for the theater’s moving away from this cleaned-up distance and imagine theater as replete with friendly fellow-feeling (90) or even being so powerfully swayed by the spectacle that “feeling for and with the other dissolves the boundaries of the self” (94).

The question of distance as well as the boundary lines drawn between Protestants and Catholics is the subject of the third chapter, “Caritas, Compassion, and Religious Difference,” in which Catholic and Protestants question the limits of *caritas*, the notion of universal love. Against the litmus test of universality, compassion meets its limits, and Ibbett contends that in this “gerrymandering of fellow-feeling” (102) we can see the early modern splintering between compassion and pity.

One of Ibbett’s strengths is attending not just to the “edge” of compassion, or the strong ways in which compassion is leveraged, but

also to unearthing the “productive aesthetics of that helpless compassion” as well as the “scarcely perceptible spaces for gestures of fellow-feeling carved out behind compassion’s edge” (5). Ibbett’s fourth chapter, “Pitiful States: Marital Miscompassion and the Historical Novel” treats the aesthetics of compassion. In one of the most compelling readings, Ibbett underscores that the *Princesse de Clèves* only features one moment of mutual compassion, in which the princess’s famous “aveu” confessing her love for another man is followed by her plea for pity; her aggrieved husband M. de Clèves meets her supplication with his own plea for her to be compassionate towards him. And yet, their desire for mutual compassion is never met. The novel is replete with moments of what Ibbett calls “miscompassion” and therefore Ibbett wagers that Lafayette “asks us to think [...] of all that has come between 1559 and 1678” and in so doing, the novel’s use of the historical context of the religious wars, the proliferation of miscompassion, and the abrupt and uneasy ending that only offers peace “in a space apart” (156) all contribute to a complex, and subtle form of pity. This brand of pity “observes and regulates its objects rather than responding to them, urging an attentive and active regard without responding to suffering in the way that sufferers seem to solicit” (157).

In the fifth chapter, “Affective Absolutism and the Problem of Religious Difference,” Ibbett looks at compassionate rhetorics around the 1685 Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Ibbett situates the history of the king-as-compassionater/judge, and takes up Racine’s *Esther* as a literary case study. While Catholics were able to hijack the Revocation through rhetorical massage and “praised the Revocation as a compassionate act,” Protestants deployed compassion to “shift the traditional structures of sovereignty, looking to build a new politics out of relation between ordinary people” (182). Even Racine’s play shows the slipperiness of compassion and how the very position of king-as-compassionater can “leave an uncomfortable emotional-epistemological residue: to understand that pity can mask revenge (and that kings can be taken it by it) is to understand that pity can be just a performance” (193).

In a fascinating final chapter, “Compassionate Labor in Seventeenth-Century Montreal,” Ibbett analyzes the diaries of Marie Morin, superior of the Hôtel-Dieu hospital from 1693-96 and 1708-11. The profession of early modern nun-as-nurse posed the question of compassion as regulated and as “an infinitely renewable emotion even as it performs its exceptionality” (22). Even though the rule books that Ibbett analyzes forbid the nun-nurses from touching each other emotionally or physically, Morin’s writings on compassion center on the word “caresse.” Morin documents the fostering of fellow-feeling—or in this case, sisterly-feeling—through the “*caressing* form of community, a community that is able to single out individuals.” The sisters as settlers and as care-compassion givers must also work to support each other, and Ibbett traces Morin’s documentation of “compassion from the ground up, an affective bricolage made possible by contact between individuals known to one another” (220).

While Ibbett declines to make explicit presentist analogies, possibly for fear of “dating” the book, I believe that the text’s relationship to contemporary crises in compassion is begging to be made, and the engaged reader can easily do so herself. The only two small addenda that I could imagine for this quite comprehensive text would be a reflection of compassion’s temporalities: while much discussion hinges on the “distancing” required (or abolished) by compassion, it would be fascinating to have an extended engagement with the problem of the relative repeatability or ephemerality of compassion, which Ibbett does allude to briefly in the final chapter. Secondly, it would be worthwhile to consider this historical-cultural polyvalency of compassion with regards to disability—how were appeals to compassion deployed by the disabled veterans, or even the disabled recipients of religious charity? These are very minor jumping-off points, however. One of the most exciting aspects of this work lies in its reach: this book can and should appeal to affect theorists and political theorists alike in addition to early modern French studies, for it is a compelling reminder that emotions, themselves, are endowed with potent histories.

Jennifer Row, University of Minnesota Twin Cities