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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 by Marc Bizer, University of Texas, Austin

Katherine Ibbett has proposed a unique, thought-provoking study grounded in the history of emotions but more particularly focused on where French writers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries set the limits of compassion as “ways of describing and responding to social or religious difference” (p. 7). In so doing, these writers “drew on the language of compassion to describe something particular about their group identity” (p. 7). The history of emotions is inherently tricky. What is an emotion, historically speaking? How do we study them, given the necessarily limited sources, which are inevitably figurative or printed, while emotions are, at the core, nonverbal and even precognitive? Against the backdrop of the Wars of Religion and their aftermath, in a climate where powerful feelings (known as “passions”) were viewed with great trepidation, it is on the fluid and dangerous borders of compassion that Ibbett sets her sights. Her perspective is, as she often stresses, philological.

For this review, I feel most able to discuss the first two chapters of *Compassion's Edge*. As she outlines in her very clear introduction, Ibbett explores in the first chapter, “Pitiful Sights: Reading the Wars of Religion,” “the topos of the pitiful spectacle that punctuates writing from the period of the wars on both the Catholic and Protestant sides” (p. 26). The second chapter, “The Compassion Machine: Theories of Fellow-Feeling, 1570-1692,” analyzes “secular structures of compassion as they were explored by writers of moral and dramatic theory from the late sixteenth to the late seventeenth century” (p. 45). These chapters overlap chronologically, with the first covering the much shorter time frame of just the Wars of Religion, but they also adopt a different approach, with the second devoted to the theory of compassion whereas the first analyzes the uses of compassion during the experience of the Wars.

In chapter 1, as Ibbett rightly points out, “the pitiful spectacle ... bound Catholics and Protestants apart” (p. 32), yet they shared a language whose origins lay in the rhetorical guidelines governing both prose and poetry whose objectives were, for these readers of Quintilian, to move an audience toward a course of action. Furthermore, Ibbett notes, “in the first decade of the wars, a moderate Protestant invocation of pity was almost indistinguishable from the language employed by [Catholic] Ronsard ...” (p. 40). Ibbett perceptively suggests how the “pitiful spectacle” constitutes a genre that “seeks to shape an ideal readerly community composed of people “on side with the writer” (p. 37). It is therefore tragic (more on this concept later) that since “it is France herself that is the object of pity,” both sides were unable to agree to stop the bloodshed [1]. In his religious epic *Les Tragiques*, Agrippa d'Aubigné establishes a dual-compassion (and dual-spectator) model. On the one hand, he declares to his Huguenot readers, “Vous n'estes spectateurs, vous estes personnages” and advocates for “austere and distanced

appraisal [as] the model Protestant response” (p. 45). On the other hand, however, it is the Catholic (frequently Catherine of Medici) who presides as pitiless spectator of the “tableau pitieux du royaume en général” (“Au lecteur,” p. 134). Indeed, according to Ibbett, Protestants have as a *titre de gloire* the invention of the figure of the “pitiless spectator” (p. 43). For them, France itself even appears as a pitiless cannibalistic mother who eats her own children for reasons of self-preservation, which leads to terribly conflicting emotions where the pitiless mother “is pitiable and worthy of pity, ‘pitoyable et farouche’” (p. 48).

Although Ibbett transitions to a very perceptive analysis of Montaigne’s account of the pitiful spectacle, a more cogent narrative detailing how the varying relationships between “pitier” and “pitied” relate to the greater historical context seemed lacking. To my mind, it seemed strange that despite the scattered yet persistent references to the genre of the *histoire tragique*, to the “spectacle” of the Wars of Religion, to d’Aubigné’s epic *Les Tragiques*, but also to Andrea Frisch’s recent book [2] (which convincingly demonstrates how intertwined the history of the Wars of Religion and the genre of tragedy were), there wasn’t more detailed and sustained consideration of contemporary notions of tragedy, one of whose central concerns (according to Aristotle) is precisely with pity. The evolving relationship between pity and compassion is a leitmotiv running throughout Chapters 1 and 2. At the same time, this semantic history is complicated by the fact that the distinction between pity and compassion is “non-existent” (p. 68) and “mostly broadly interchangeable” (p. 81). Yet “in writing about the theater, a new sense of semantic distinction begins to appear” (p. 81).

This sidestepping of tragedy (and theater) continues even in chapter 2, “The Compassion Machine,” where the author offers a fascinating analysis of texts such as René Descartes’ *Les Passions de l’âme* and Pierre Nicole’s *Traité de la comédie*. Although these texts (and the analysis) are rife with references to theater [3], the question of tragedy is not taken up until the second part of Chapter 2. To be sure, there is strength in not placing theater and/or tragedy front and center, precisely because it gives the study greater scope, yet this approach carries with it the disadvantage that it rather weakly draws ties to a genre mentioned in so many of these texts and for which the questions of compassion and pity are so central. It would have been less discomfiting to this reader had the author delineated these issues more clearly and persistently in her otherwise lucid introduction and in the pertinent book passages [4]. Furthermore, one might also ask, in a study that moves seamlessly between considerations of how theatrical representations and texts elicit, configure, and manage compassion, what sort of edge or boundaries exist between readers and spectators, how contemporary texts handle the distinction, and whether compassion might be more of a concern in reading or spectating.

That said, Chapter 2 does break new ground by tracing how a wide swath of authors handled the problem of “compassion ... as a response dependent on distinctions” (p. 69), in particular how the boundaries between self and other are negotiated in the perception of the other’s suffering. Again, the distinctions between the terms “pity,” “compassion,” and “commiseration” in different texts, so fluid in the period, are hugely important. Ibbett makes the fascinating argument that the classical idea of the role of spectator being that of the “observer rather than the participant in the experience of the other,” one who “views the suffering of the pitied from the outside,” gives way (in René Rapin) to a situation where “feeling for and with the other dissolves the boundaries of the self” (pp. 93-4).

This last remark raises the question of the boundaries between passion and compassion. In her introduction, Ibbett had carefully and clearly distinguished between the passions, omnipresent in seventeenth-century thought, and compassion. Whereas the former were understood as “something one undergoes despite one’s judgment or will,” whose categorization and control “was central to moral and political discourse” (p. 3), the latter is precisely subject to judgment or will. Yet surely in seventeenth-century thought, passion and compassion could not have constituted completely separate categories, if only because compassion is viewed as a means of regulating fellow-feeling, which inevitably exposes one to emotions such as sorrow and fear. “In the case of Rapin,” as Ibbett herself notes, “French emotion ... spills over into everything” (p. 94). Similarly, did some of the perceived characteristics of emotion, which Aristotle originally “considered ... to entail a form of evaluation” (p. 3), spill over into compassion? Finally, one could also ask whether debates on the limits of compassion reflect precisely the aforementioned obsession with controlling emotion in general.

Compassion’s Edge, then, is a ground-breaking study that opens fertile territory for future investigation.

NOTES

[1] Daniel Menager argued that Ronsard’s incomplete *Franciade* was a famous literary casualty of these irreconcilable communities. See Daniel Menager, *Ronsard: Le Roi, le Poète et les Hommes* (Geneva: Droz, 1979), Chapter 1.

[2] Andrea Frisch, *Forgetting Differences: Tragedy, Historiography, and the French Wars of Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

[3] See for example “For Descartes, this distancing theater serves a model for how we should experience the world: our response to events in general should be more like our literary or theatrical response” (p. 67).

[4] Especially given that she begins Chapter 2 by stating that her goal is to “trace a seventeenth-century story about tragedy, ethics, and pity, showing how a particular Aristotelian formulation about pity comes to structure a century’s reflection on both tragedy and moral life” (p. 60).

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