



Richard Meek. *Sympathy in Early Modern Literature and Culture*. **Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 298 pp. ISBN 9781009280266. \$110.00 hardback.**

Building on a run of recent work arguing that in early modern England “emotions were increasingly seen as things that individuals do rather than forces that act upon them,” Richard Meek’s *Sympathy in Early Modern Literature and Culture* makes a specific and compelling case for sympathy’s inclusion in this affective landscape, charting the period’s “innovative” use of sympathy words across a range of written materials, including prose fiction, sermons, female complaint poetry, drama, and political writing. The importance of fellow-feeling in early modern England has already been argued for, both as a framework for defining personal and community identity and as a recurring motif of the period’s literature, but sympathy has previously been excluded from these studies as a separate but adjacent concept. In critical terms, the early modern understanding of “sympathy” has long been understood to refer only to physiological or natural like-ness. Meek’s contribution to this field of work is in

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providing such a thorough account of sympathy's regular inclusion in early modern texts working to theorize, test out, or pin down the messy field of sensation produced when subjects emotionally encounter and engage with one another. Perhaps the highest praise that I can offer in this review is to say that though I myself have been inclined to discount sympathy from discussions of early modern compassion in the past, this book has challenged and opened up my thinking.

Meek begins this study in earnest with a turn to Elizabethan prose fiction, using John Lyly's *Euphues*, Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, and Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde* to track a growing tendency to use sympathy language in order to articulate the affective weight and sensations generated by love and friendship. Tracking the use of sympathetic language here is a useful way not just of extending sympathy's reach, in this period, beyond physical likeness and into the realm of emotional mutuality: this chapter is particularly effective in claiming sympathy as "the result of a complex and overlapping combination of automatic and considered responses" (56). Chapter two extends this discussion through a consideration of late-Elizabethan sermons, charting the increasing representation of sympathy as not *just* "physical and physiological," but "emotional and imaginative" as well (74). Meek's concept of "emotional correspondence" (81) is a helpful way of thinking of the dynamics at play here: the readings of these sermons highlight emotional response as something that can be explicitly cultivated, but equally these texts show that this type of emotional correspondence can lead to social exclusion—precisely through prompting communities of emotional inclusion elsewhere.

Chapter three focuses its attention on the first print appearances of the word "sympathize," positioning its deployment in female complaint poetry of the 1590s as evidence of authors testing and exploring possible models of emotional transmission. Here we can see the action, activity, and mutuality embedded in compassion, with Meek returning again to ideas of emotional correspondence to argue that these literary representations present compassion as "a process of borrowing and exchange rather than a simple transference from text to reader" (112). Chapter four's focus on drama (including Christopher Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*) extends this study's interrogation of compassion's darker edges, noting that the action required by and for pity—projection, self-recognition—also necessarily implies agency: a decision to act, feel, and connect. Chapter five, which considers sympathy's appearance in social and

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political writing of the Jacobean period, attends specifically to the emotional dynamics at play between king and subjects, considering not just the possibility of a sovereign extending sympathy downwards, but also exploring the language around subjects offering sympathy to their king. Using the example of the death of King James's eldest son Prince Henry in 1612, Meek's discussion of Christopher Brookes' *Two elegies* reminds us that compassion sometimes reinforces hierarchies even as it seeks to break them down. We might notice too, in these expressions of a nation's collective sympathetic grief, that this is a genre of emotion that stretches towards communality even as it requires degrees of individual imaginative agency. This chapter's interest in the conflict and complexity of cross-class sympathy extends the book's earlier examination of sympathy as a possible producer of social exclusion and hierarchy, but also importantly builds out the complexity surrounding this emotional field. In a final turn, Chapter six offers an extended consideration of Caroline thinking around the weapon-salve, which was thought to use principles of natural sympathy in order to cure wounds from afar. Moving between Francis Bacon's *Sylva sylvarum*, William Foster's *Hoplocrisma-spongus* and Robert Fludd's response to Foster, this chapter offers up an excellent case study for the conflicting sympathetic systems this book seeks to cohere, charting the interplay between the natural philosophical concept of sympathy, and its affective figuration. These increased instincts to juxtapose these sympathetic models, Meek argues, clearly position the early modern period as a definitive moment in sympathy's cultural history. This is an era, he suggests, during which sympathy's complex potential was both explored and extended in order to accommodate more "emotional, interpersonal, and imaginative" possibilities (217).

This brief overview of chapters cannot fully capture the sheer breadth of materials considered in the course of this study: a study which takes a methodological approach that both champions the value of literary texts in constructing a history of emotions, but also presents a convincing picture of a wide-ranging emotional landscape. This book firmly positions the early modern as an era that saw writers, working across genres, repeatedly reaching for a collection of compassion words to understand their modes for connection, and to describe the world around them—both what was and should be present, and what was lacking. In this study, Meek persuasively argues that the history of an emotion must capture both patterns of universal or natural instincts, and the broad range of nurtured, cultivated, and culturally specific work that seeks to represent, understand, and support those

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instincts. This book will be a great asset to scholars of early modern emotion, and its expansive coverage of primary materials, of various genres, offers numerous pathways into the subject.

History of emotions scholars focusing on this period have each, in various ways, argued for what Meek calls “the plurality and complexity of early modern emotional experience” (255). It strikes me that sympathy’s unique contribution to this still-vibrant field of enquiry is its juxtaposition of the physicality that earlier scholars attributed to the passions, and the sociability that more recent work has identified in early modern affective encounters. That this period can hold the older understanding of sympathy as a kind of physical, natural affinity, even as it works to develop a more imaginative and affective model, should clearly signal how profoundly compassionate experience weighed upon early modern subjects. This was intellectual, artistic, cultural, but also physical, labor. It was also messy and difficult to pin down—adding extra freight to an already loaded field of feeling.

At the close of the first chapter, in a useful discussion of William Alexander’s supplement to Sidney’s *Arcadia*, Meek reads the material as an exploration of “the mysteries of emotion and the problems of expression” (70). It strikes me that this phrasing is a particularly effective way of describing the challenges that emerge in any modern scholarly attempt to capture early modern frameworks of fellow-feeling. There are, as this book evidences, very many words that early modern subjects used to signal this particular experience of emotional interconnection and the freight or weight it generated: words like pity, compassion, sympathy, empathy, rue, and ruth. As Meek points out, it is very often the case that we see these words grouped together—*pity and compassion* is an especially popular one—in what he calls “verbal coupling” or “bisociation”. This linguistic habit surely signals the slipperiness of this kind of emotional experience, acting as a recurring reminder that for the authors grappling with this concept, a single word seems never to capture fully or pinpoint the sensation they are pursuing. But these tendencies toward verbal coupling should also make clear the importance of acknowledging the degrees of distinction that these words attempt to convey. This study takes great care in bringing sympathy more fully into discussions of early modern compassion. It highlights many moments in which the term comes in to ornament or extend meditations on *pity* and *compassion*—the words that are typically used in this study as umbrella terms for a broader field of sensation. This book seems less concerned with the individual identities of these umbrella terms,

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though they are also developed extensively in their own right in this period. Instead, this study focuses more on the fact that the period seems intent on using more and more words in its ongoing attempt to capture a single (though infinitely complex) field of feeling. Perhaps future scholarship, following Meek's methodological lead, will attend to the interplay between these words, as well as the emotional-linguistic hierarchies they create.

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