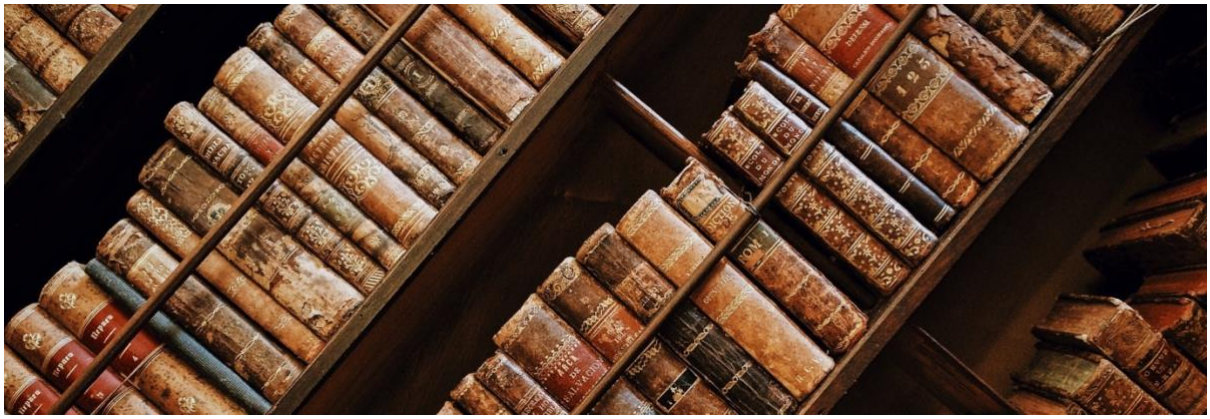

Kristine Steenbergh and Katherine Ibbett, eds. *Compassion in Early Modern Literature and Culture: Feeling and Practice.* **Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 290 pp. ISBN 9781108495394. $103.00 hardback.**

by Giulio J. Pertile

An experience at once personal and social, private and political, compassion is the most intersubjective of the affects and, at the same time, perhaps the most fraught. An enduringly appealing model for our relationship to those around us, compassion is, equally, an affect in which the limits of that relationship are put to the test—capable of cutting across lines of class, race, religion, and nation but also of demarcating those same lines with brutal clarity. For in its very immediacy, compassion is almost inevitably selective, and even exclusive, and indeed it has more than once served as the boundary line dividing "humanity" itself from its others. In all of these ways it is a form of feeling which is perhaps uniquely relevant to the early modern period, a time when emerging religious differences within Europe and encounters with peoples outside it put new pressure on modes of intersubjectivity as well as on delineations of human nature and of human community. It can hardly be a coincidence that, around this time, new modes of literary expression were emerging which enabled writers to explore the emotional contours of intersubjective encounter with unprecedented depth and acuity.

The pervasive and highly complex character of early modern compassion is the inspiration for *Compassion in Early Modern Literature and Culture: Feeling and Practice,* a collection of fifteen essays gathered and edited by Kristine Steenbergh and Katherine Ibbett. Building on previous work in medieval and early modern studies (including monographs by Susan Wessel, Sarah McNamer, Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen, and Ibbett herself) as well as on broader theoretical accounts of compassion and pity

by Lauren Berlant, Hannah Arendt, and others, the collection is a vivid demonstration of just how fruitful affect and emotion remain as means of addressing some of the most pressing questions in the study of early modern literature, culture, and history. Compassion is, however, not merely one among others in a fixed taxonomy of the emotions, but rather, as Steenbergh and Ibbett argue in their introduction, an intrinsically multi-faceted and even contradictory phenomenon—as much a "willed social practice" (11) as an emotional experience, and one which changes repeatedly in different historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts. Accordingly, their introduction also offers a brief history of concepts of compassion, from Aristotelian *eleos* via the Stoic rejection of compassion to the more positive role compassion takes on in Christianity, although varying widely across denominational differences. In the early modern period, Ibbett and Steenbergh suggest, all of these strands are activated simultaneously, as the late humanist revival of Stoicism interacts in complex ways with multiple new forms of religious devotion. Against this complex backdrop literature, which "does not simply reflect existing vocabularies, theories and emotion scripts, but actively shapes them" (13), becomes especially valuable as a means of understanding compassionate experience.

The volume has been subdivided into eight parts ("Theorizing," "Consoling," "Exhorting," "Performing," "Responding," "Giving," "Racializing," and "Contemporary Compassions") seven of which consist of two paired essays, while the last contains a concluding reflection by Steenbergh. More crudely, but perhaps a bit more practically, we might divide the essays into three broad thematic and methodological categories: the literary and philosophical, the historical, and the cross-cultural. (Most of the essays in this highly interdisciplinary volume could easily fit into two or more of these categories but grouping them in this way allows us to see the many internal connections in the volume beyond those between the paired essays within each part, which are helpfully indicated by their authors.) The literary-philosophical essays tend to draw attention to what Eric Langley, in a standout contribution to the volume, calls "both the importance and cost of emotional interaction" (199). Bruce R. Smith's essay on "The Ethics of Compassion in Early Modern England," for example, starts off the volume by reflecting on the legacy of the Stoic condemnation of compassion as "just another 'perturbation of the mind'" (29); it then zooms out to considerations of compassion's "social geography" (35) and finally to its theatrical depictions in William Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *The Tempest*. In Chapter 2 Katherine Ibbett turns to

early modern France, exploring compassion as a means of moral (and indeed social) self-fashioning. In the writings of François de Sales, Cardinal Bellarmine, and Pierre Le Moyne, compassion emerges as a "prism provided not only for a judgement on the suffering other, but also on the appropriateness of the self who metes out such an affective response" (44). Here compassion is an ambivalent phenomenon in the eyes of the contemporary scholar rather than in those of the early modern writers she is considering. Among early modern literary writers, it is, perhaps unsurprisingly, Edmund Spenser who emerges as the most suspicious of compassion. In Chapter 3 Paula Barros argues that the narrator of Spenser's little-studied *Daphnaïda* (which she situates in the context of humanist consolatory writing) lacks the "self-control that is necessary for coolheaded and efficient consolation" (71), and thus that the poem serves as a "warning against the danger of emotional contagion" (72) as exemplified in particular by the rise of the funeral elegy, where "sorrow seemed to outweigh consolation" (73).

It is in Shakespeare, however, that we find the most thoroughgoing literary engagement with compassion in relation to both its danger and appeal. Elisabetta Tarantino's essay on *Twelfth Night* (Chapter 9) draws attention to the complexities surrounding compassion in the treatment of Malvolio and the audience's response to it, shedding new light on the episodes in question by exploring the possible influence that Giordano Bruno's *Candelaio* (1582) may have had on the play. Eric Langley's essay (Chapter 10) takes its inspiration from Lucretius's famous account, in Book 2 of *De Rerum Natura*, of watching a shipwreck from the shore. Lucretius's exhortation to detachment, Langley suggests, is in fact "a response to what he knows to be the impossibility of genuine isolation within an Epicurean atomist world" (205); Shakespearean plays such as *the Winter's Tale, Pericles,* and, above all, *King Lear* thus search—like Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*—for "median positions" (207) between impossible detachment and unsustainable immersion. James Shirley's *The Sisters* (1642), the subject of Alison Searle's essay (Chapter 8), also explores the limits of compassion in its complex theatrical representation of bandits, tradesmen, and false beggars—here, however, in the context of the breakdown of Charles I's rule and the onset of civil war in England.

Searle's contextualization of compassion links her chapter to the several essays in the volume that take a more explicitly historical approach to the subject, the second of the categories I sketched out above. In Chapter 4, Stephen Pender focuses on

compassion and consolation in a medical context specifically: trust, compassion, and, indeed, friendship, he shows, were all valued aspects of the relationship between an early modern doctor and his patients, thus reversing and literalizing the classical metaphor of the good friend as a physician. In Chapter 12 Rebecca Tomlin studies post-Reformation theories and practices of compassion in a similarly specific though more concrete context—the Memoranda of St Botolph's, Aldgate, whose accounts of alms collection she reads for "material traces of the ephemeral emotions, processes and actions elicited and framed by compassion" (240) as well as of the anxieties surrounding those emotions in a newly Protestant context.

Other essays take a more "macro-historical" approach to the evolution of compassion, pity, and sympathy in this period of rapid change. In Chapter 5 Richard Meek analyzes early modern sermons to argue that "sympathy"—a term which originally referred to cosmic affinities and correspondences—was already beginning to take on the specifically human and emotional meanings of "compassion" in the 1500s, earlier than is usually assumed. In the next chapter, Kristine Steenbergh also argues for the early modern period as a moment of transition. Her account, however, focuses on a move away from the formal structures of charity and "good works" institutionalized by the Catholic Church and towards an experience of compassion as a personal and embodied practice encouraged by Reformation preachers and theologians. For Steenbergh, somewhat in contrast to Meek, these new practices of compassion remain stubbornly humoral and physiological, as suggested by the evocative and much-quoted New Testament description of the "bowels as the seat of compassion" (126). Like Steenbergh, Toria Johnson in her essay (Chapter 11) emphasizes the loss of the formal structures of charity provided by the Catholic Church and exemplified for her in *Everyman*—a loss depicted in the "heartlessness" of Thomas Nashe's London in *Christ's Teares Over Jerusalem* (1593). She concludes by reading *King Lear* as an exploration of what happens to compassion and pity "without the accompanying support of an institutional structure" (233).

The third grouping of essays consists of those that address compassion in cross-cultural and global contexts. In Chapter 7, Clarinda E. Calma and Jolanta Rzegocka discuss the multi-denominational context of Poland-Lithuania, in which the Warsaw Confederation of 1573 had guaranteed religious tolerance. That tolerance, they argue, is reflected in the depictions of compassion in Polish Jesuit drama (such as the 1727 play *Sacrum foedus* and the 1732 *Sacra fames*), which is rarely anti-Protestant and

encourages sympathy for Orthodox characters—though less so for those outside the Christian community altogether, such as the Ottoman Turks. The final two essays in the volume return to the crucial question of how far early modern accounts of compassion allow it to extend beyond Christendom and beyond Europe altogether. In Chapter 13 Matthew Goldmark puts pity at the center of Bartolomé de las Casas's description of the cruelties inflicted on the indigenous population of the Americas by Spanish soldiers; pity, Goldmark argues, is crucial to Las Casas's attempt to sway Philip II though it is also, he suggests, a means of extending and consolidating imperial power. In the next chapter John D. Staines examines compassion in relation to race in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688). Reminding us that Pierre Corneille and John Dryden shift the Aristotelian concept of detached spectatorial pity towards something more like compassionate involvement, Staines argues that Behn's "text forges ties of compassion between readers and 'our Black Hero'" (285) against the background of "the racial divide created by enslavement" (282).

Kristine Steenbergh's concluding chapter, in a section of its own (Part VIII), shifts our attention to the contemporary world, suggesting that early modern practices of compassion could provide prototypes for thinking about cross-species encounter and relation in an era of ecological disaster and mass extinction. It is an intriguing idea which would require much fuller elaboration. The introduction to the volume also gestures towards contemporary resonances, though in a slightly more skeptical vein. The first pages of the book juxtapose the contemporary rhetoric of compassion, in the context of recent elections and the pandemic, with the fact that the "public capacity for compassion appears to be severely reduced" (1) as well as with the problem of privilege that, as Lauren Berlant has shown, is endemic to this affect. Indeed, if one had to pick a single unifying thread to the volume, it would be an emphasis on just how quickly compassion runs into limits—whether these are the limits of social hierarchy, cultural and religious difference, or those imposed by the very structure of the self. Despite the ongoing appeal of compassion as an affect and an attitude, the early modern examples considered in the book leave it profoundly uncertain whether it can ever really be an adequate substitute for an ethics or a politics as such, either in the past or the present.

Giulio J. Pertile
University of St Andrews