



For literary scholars, *Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Stories for an Uncertain World* provides an engaging, witty, and useful contribution to the field by illustrating the shared concern of deliberative agency in these most celebrated tale collections. Hanning's framework also paves the way for further scholarship on uncertainty and deliberation in other of Boccaccio's and Chaucer's works, such as the *Filostrato* and *Troilus* (Criseyde and Pandarus are exemplary cases of pragmatic prudence).

Jessica R. Honey, *University of East Anglia*  
doi:10.1017/rqx.2023.598

*Compassion in Early Modern Literature and Culture: Feeling and Practice.*

Katherine Ibbett and Kristine Steenbergh, eds.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. xii + 306 pp. \$99.99.

---

Compassion, both in the present and, as this stimulating volume makes plain, in the past, is no simple matter. Contemporary thinking about compassion, from Hannah Arendt to Lauren Berlant, has tended to view compassion warily. Privileging the sentiments of the one experiencing compassion, compassion today, so say these thinkers, is a private matter, largely sundered from the preoccupations of politics or society. At best, this modern compassion registers as smugly condescending; at worst, it reaffirms the structures of inequality responsible for generating suffering. In our present day, when climate change has supercharged suffering, as human impacts upon our world have accumulated to the point where even sober assessments of coming global changes terrify, such apolitical compassion holds little hope as a spur to critical action. More is sorely needed, but is compassion up to the task?

As Kristine Steenbergh and Katherine Ibbett write in their introduction, a review of compassion in the past suggests that it might be. The early modern period knew a compassion characterized by "confusion and diversity" (10); early modern compassion could "multitask" (2). By uncovering both the varied traditions of early modern compassion and by thinking through how the early modern era's own upheavals impacted how these traditions were reimaged, the editors hope to offer inspiration for rethinking and refiguring our modern practices of compassion.

The fourteen contributions from literary scholars are set into seven moments of dialogue, with the respective chapters directly engaging with one another on some aspect of compassion. These range from "Theorizing" in part 1 to "Racializing" in part 7, with exchanges on "Consoling," "Exhorting," "Performing," "Responding," and "Giving" in between. This paired structure is both welcome and provocative, avoiding the incoherence that typifies many edited volumes and generating real insights that might otherwise remain unspoken. For instance, in their paired contributions, Clarinda Calma and Jolanta Rzegocka, in their chapter on Jesuit theater in Poland-Lithuania, and Alison

Searle, in her analysis of James Shirley's *The Sisters*, frame their arguments in part in response to the other's characterization of the relationship between political authority and religious diversity. As a result, their respective claims are more effectively drawn out, even as the possibilities of comparison and contrast are highlighted and circumscribed. Similarly productive contrasts are offered in many of the other pairings.

As a study of the history of an emotion, the volume highlights how differentiated discourses around compassion have been. In terms of distance and difference from modern ideas of compassion and in terms of variety in the ideas of compassion in the early modern era, the authors do this very well. What is less well developed is the notion of "practice," announced in the subtitle and taken up in the introduction. Only Steenbergh rigorously employs Monique Scheer's concept of emotional practices, so that for much of the volume it is more fitting to speak of the discourses around compassion. And in these discourses about compassion, diversity and difference feature prominently, bolstering the editors' claim of the present value of the work: to unsettle ideas about some supposed essence of compassion.

What many of the contributions have in common is a frame lent to their analyses by Ibbett's own seminal study of the work of compassion performed in seventeenth-century France, as fellow-feeling was invoked both to generate bonds of community and justify the boundaries of exclusion. What many of the contributions also have in common is a view of a long sixteenth century, with its institutional, political, and intellectual upheavals, as richly generative of creative adaptation and innovation. Ranging in subjects as diverse as canonical texts of intellectual and literary history (Smith, Staines), advice books (Pender), epistolary practices (Barros), Protestant sermons (Meek, Steenbergh), the theater (Calma and Rzegocka, Searle, Tarantino, Langley, Johnson), and in geographies as far-flung as London parishes (Tomlin), Spanish America (Goldmark), and France (Ibbett), compassion is shown to be far from any plain and simple feeling. What the authors suggest, as Steenbergh articulates in the volume's closing consideration, is that compassion is capable, perhaps, of far more than its modern critics give it credit.

On the whole, the volume offers rich materials for the sort of reconsideration of compassion as feeling suggested by the editors. Whether this volume can inspire the sort of present-day action invoked by the editors remains to be seen.

Sean Dunwoody, *Binghamton University, SUNY*  
doi:10.1017/rqx.2023.633