



Pity in Fin-de-SiÈcle French Culture: Liberté, Égalité, Pitié

Gonzalo J. Sanchez

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The scrutiny of pity as a cardinal altruistic attribute has emerged in the last two decades as a significant common denominator in disciplines ranging from philosophy to social psychology and comparative literature to gender studies. Pity is a term and concept of tremendous importance to a historian and interpreter of the humanities and social sciences. It is a prism through which to examine how given cultures attach value to nonrational components of social life and of human flourishing. Sánchez describes how an appeal to a reader's sense of traditional pity in the writings of French philosophers, pedagogues, social theorists, and novelists interacted, in the sociopolitical sphere of the de-siÈcle, with the interest in studying and promoting this very virtue as a principle of social attachment.

This study brings to light striking parallels from one de-siÈcle to another, highlighting the extensive rhetorical and emotive investment of various French disciplines in both probing and promoting pity. In doing so, a number of French thinkers and writers, both major and subsequently ignored, forged a cognitive theory of sentiments that intriguingly presages contemporary theories. They also codified a discursively and rhetorically doctrinaire pity that was reflected in pedagogy, especially female education; political philosophy and psychology; literary criticism and fiction—in ways that are still instructive for us today.

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