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Andrea Frisch, *Forgetting Differences. Tragedy, Historiography and the French Wars of Religion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, « Edinburgh Critical Studies in Renaissance Culture », 2015. X + 174 pp. Notes, and index. ISBN 978-0-7486-9439-6

Review Essay by Corinne Noirot, Virginia Tech University

In remarkable continuity with *The Invention of the Eyewitness: Witnessing and Testimony in Early Modern France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), which examined a major shift in conceptions of history, Andrea Frisch offers in her latest book a rigorous analysis of the “rhetoric of amnesia” corollary to the 1598 royal amnesty. In the aftermath of the France’s protracted civil wars known as the Wars of Religion, royal edicts mandated forgetting past conflicts and grievances (*oubliance*) as a way of urging French subjects to forget their differences, chiefly, confessional ones. Tightly connecting literary, political, and cultural history, Frisch shows how late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers (1560-1638) dealt with the forbidden representation of France’s troubled present or recent past: this study, in the author’s own words, “highlight[s] ways in which the royal policy of *oubliance* [...] shaped representations of French national history in both historiography and tragedy into the seventeenth century, eventually leading to a reformulation of the way in which the matter of history should ‘move’ its audience” (p. 15). Ample sources complement a rich corpus ranging from Ronsard to Corneille. Jean Bodin’s *Methodus* often appears as a backdrop, if only to represent a strand of humanist historiography that seeks factual breadth and dispassionate distance. Save for Matthieu’s chronicles and Garnier’s tragedies, studied in some depth, the primary sources are largely paratextual, since Frisch is investigating theoretical responses to *oubliance* as a constraint to, and justification for, related practical shifts among intellectual elites. Critical influences range from Denis Crouzet on representations and manifestations of civil conflict, to Timothy Reiss on the politics of tragedy, and Thomas Pavel on the aesthetics of French Classicism.

Moving beyond the notion of a unilateral impact, even though a linear evolution is traced throughout the book, its conclusion defines *oubliance* as a strategy for national reconciliation interpreted as an injunction to reframe, rather than to erase, the past--although ideological suppression became palpable under Louis XIV and Frisch’s frequent use of the term ‘foregrounding’ defines the hardening of absolutism as the study’s looming horizon. As is often the case in studies of Renaissance literature, generic boundaries do not hold, and Frisch judiciously recapitulates her findings not in terms of a comparison between historiography and tragedy as ‘scientific’ versus ‘poetic’ implementations of *oubliance*, but in terms of audience response in connection with reconciliation and traumatic history. She concludes on a study of emotions related to the articulation of “rhetorical distance” (p. 172) and the development of a trans-generic “discourse of the tragic” (p. 173). These questions tie all five chapters together, and they are ultimately conceived of as providing an “extended genealogy” for the core aesthetic traits of neoclassical drama (p. 174).

Chapter one, “Learning to forget,” serves as a general introduction for interrogating the (re)construction of tragic national history. The four subsequent chapters each examine the “rhetoric of amnesia”—reconciliation through the act of forgetting—present in various textual practices dealing with memories of the civil war. A genre-centered and chronological organization justifies the outline: juridical and official literature of the civil wars (chapter two); national historiography (chapter three); humanist tragedy (chapter four), and neoclassical tragedy (chapter five).

Frisch examines how amnesty represents an attempt on the part of royal justice to move beyond the practice of pardon or royal clemency, as shown in chapter two: “Clemency, Pardon, and *Oubliance*.” Historiographers and panegyrists sought to buttress royal authority following the *Édit de Nantes*, after decades of its unraveling. François II’s 1559 edict continued to try to enforce royal pardons, structurally based on a Catholic (penitence) and economic (remittance) model. The cycle of vengeance could no longer be curtailed by flailing allegiance to the *roi tres chrestien*, nor to the transactional conception of *rémission* in the context of the Reformation (e.g., Calvin on Grace). And since it was impossible to force all parties involved to forgive, the incapacitated monarchy commanded the people to forget. The general “failure of juridical institutions in the face of civil war” (p. 37) is further highlighted in discussions of St. Bartholomew’s Day, “an event of which there shall be no official memory” (p. 38). A penetrating discussion of Antoine Loisel’s 1582 “De l’amnestie ou oubliance des maux...” follows, focusing on mandated amnesia as a chance to restore peace and love. The second part of the chapter analyzes “The parallel lives of Julius Caesar and Henri IV” (p. 41). Royal historiographer Pierre Matthieu takes center stage here, especially his *Histoire des derniers troubles* (1594-1606), quoted throughout the chapter. The genealogical strand in French historiography competed with a discontinuous *translatio* narrative begun with the Pléiade. This allowed for the rehabilitation of the example of Caesar—previously viewed as tyrannical (e.g., Amyot)—as embodying the conquering ruler. Funeral orations and “parallel lives” of Henri and Caesar (Antoine de Bandole, Duc de Sully, Nicolas Chrestien, Denis Latracey) praise their virtue as conquerors, erasing the new king’s ties not only with heresy but also with civil war itself: behold the greatness of Henri (*Henri le Grand*), the first to obey the law and the peace edicts.

The construction of “a communal forgetting that extends far beyond a merely juridical amnesty” (p. 65) also implied rethinking the very writing of history. Chapter three examines conciliatory strategies among historiographers of the Wars of Religion writing under the *oubliance* policy. Most of these late humanist authors disavowed passions as a dangerous mode of reception for post-traumatic times—although trauma theory is not exploited in the book. A tragic lexicon nonetheless remains, as if compassionate emotions could also unite the public. Pibrac, Beloy, and de Thou among others struggled with the imperative not to reignite memories of the wars, since neither silence nor propaganda suited their didactic drive, in line with the Ciceronian idea of *historia magistra vitae* (p. 67). Accordingly, Jean Bodin promoted a disinterested, dispassionate historical voice, gaining authority through emotional distance and the service of truth. La Popeliniere’s version of neutrality retained the idea of pedagogical profit while eschewing political disengagement. His skeptical ethos did not prevent him from defining posterity as the primary addressee for his histories, itself contingent and distanced from the

events recorded. Palma Cayet, *chronographe du roi* under Henri IV, likewise justifies writing about the civil wars by insisting on the king's will to serve posterity and prevent sheer oblivion. Aware that they were working with volatile material, historiographers struggled to find the appropriate distance. Pierre Matthieu, for instance, was falsely dispassionate, as his authorial interventions amply show. Construing God's will as a fatalistic force shaping the course of events, he issued a neo-Stoic warning, turning to tragic *pathè* in the face of inconstancy. Emphasizing the reader's survival, Matthieu offers a "rhetoric of spectatorship" that "replaces the rhetoric of vicarious experience" (p. 85-86). Pierre Matthieu's account of the assassination of Henri IV is also used to demonstrate that such a turn to tragic history aimed to compensate for the waning of exemplarity. In the mid-seventeenth century, Baudouin and Mézeray still felt the risk of reopening old wounds, and therefore both authors emphasized horror as the only appropriate, and distancing, response (p. 90). Once the civil wars became framed as a horrific *spectacle* of which the reader was solely a spectator, not an actor, the wars were "placed outside the purview of the audience's political agency" (p. 92). From action to affect, the role of emotion in historiography underwent a deep shift between 1550 and 1650, as the distance between the reader and the object of the account increasingly bolstered absolutist power.

The discussion of the audience's emotional response continues in chapter four: "Tragedy as History: from the *Guisiade* to Garnier." It centers on the tragic mode as intended to move the reader or spectator. After a reminder of the Theater-of-the-World commonplace and the complicated and controversial status of tragedy, Frisch contrasts various paratextual reflections on the nature and function of tragic poetry in the sixteenth century. Of the many examples in this section, some deserved a more in-depth examination. Multiple positions are presented: Ronsard and Jodelle believed tragic poetry was out of place in the midst of civil warfare; Sorbin's militant prosopopeia, in contrast, aimed to incite an impassioned response; and Grévin regarded tragedy as the realm of truth and a school of virtue, in line with cyclical conceptions of history attuned to the vicissitudes of fortune. Representations of a higher justice and punishment, in turn, are favored in acutely polemical historical accounts such as Le Masle polemical *Brief discours...*, Laval's tendentious histories, or Chantelouve's 1575 "tragedy," all sought an active political response (mostly revenge) and blamed Coligny. Matthieu's 1589 *Guisiade* equally instrumentalized tragic bloodshed and "contravene[d] the politics of *oubliance* by exhuming the anti-royalist extremism of the era of Henri III" (p. 116). La Taille's 1562 *Remonstrance...*, illustrated the humanist conundrum before 1598 by exploiting pity for the orphan king and the ubiquity of the tragic lexicon, present in juridical as well as historical and poetic discourse. His use of tragic pathos illustrates a conception of emotion as a prelude to action (p. 118).

In contrast to polemical writers, La Taille "aims to reconcile a warring people by means of a shared affective bond to the monarch" (p. 118); even his emphasis on horror sought to purge violence and reinstate a community. In contrast, Robert Garnier's tragedies dwelled on lamentations and never-ending violence in order to incite a rapprochement through common suffering. A jurist by profession, Garnier construed affect as action. His readers were invited to witness political dysfunction and a form of rhetorical "inconclusiveness" that echoed the impotence of the parliaments during the wars (p. 122). Garnier's *Porcie*, for example, shows no resolution: no final act of justice erases the contradictions voiced in the play. As shifting perspectives preclude a univocal moral lesson, hopelessness ensues. Le Roy similarly staged a

mosaic of viewpoints in order to faithfully echo the truth, while Serres multiplied accounts of indiscriminate disasters and murders so as to represent the tragic nature of the ongoing conflicts and their fundamental lawlessness (p. 127). Garnier's tragic rhetoric ultimately conveys a horrified stance in the face of national tragedy. For him, emotion possesses efficacy, but not one that is pedagogical in nature--it only provides the consolation afforded by close commonality and proximity of experience. Far from sparing the audience, as advocated by Polybius, Garnier's "songs of grief" implicate the public deeply by projecting contemporary miseries onto the past and inviting a "communal lament" (p.131-32).

Turning to tragedy to examine its rapid growth in France between 1560 and 1660, the final chapter: "From emotion to affect," applies Pavel's notion of the genre as an "*art de l'éloignement*" to theoretical statements on tragic poetry. Chapter 5 further documents the shift from proximity to distance after the reign of Henri IV delineated in Chapter 4 from the audience's more active engagement to a more passive enjoyment. The divide between history and tragedy increases, as the willingness to foster political engagement decreases. A lexicographic study of the verb *émouvoir* (*à*), initially transitive rather than intransitive (to *move* someone to act, to action), highlights the shift between a humanist rhetoric of passions turned outward and geared toward active civic engagement, to a neoclassical position turned inward, more disengaged, not seeking to incite responses in the public sphere but simply to touch universally. The evolution of *émouvoir* follows theoretical conceptions of the rhetorical *movere*, still strongly connected to poetic emotion under the Pléiade and in La Taille's *De l'art de la tragédie*, which retains the martial connotations of the verb. The potentially violent consequences of choosing contemporary tragic subjects lead La Taille to recommend historically distant arguments for tragic poetry. Still believing in the power of tragedy and the rhetoric of the passions, this author was less in favor of detachment than he was "afraid of provoking a too-impassioned response from his audience" (p. 149). In contrast, French neoclassicism came to favor a form of illusionism geared toward a contained affective response, effectively restricting the spectator's sphere of action. Neoclassical distance emphasized being touched, in contrast to being moved (p. 151-52). In the mid seventeenth century, therefore, catharsis became a distancing form of pity and fear (as theorized in Racine), whereas humanist rhetoric implicated the audience more intimately. Even the powerful dedicatees are spared under Louis XIV, while fear was used as a warning in Garnier or La Taille. The myth of French universalism, Frisch argues most convincingly, was largely built upon the de-historicized, de-personalized aesthetics that sought to make tragic emotion an innocuous, unifying force. Containment became a defining trait of drama when absolutist power more or less used the theatre to circumscribe affective responses (p. 159). Such gradual "abstraction of history and historical difference" (p. 163) did wind up defining neoclassical theater, so much so that for Racine, tragic characters needed simply to be "different," not necessarily distant in time.

As far as general quibbles are concerned, one can always lament the lack of a particular reference or two, but Frisch's bibliography is vast. Some key arguments may appear buried in the discussion, and the corpus she has chosen is never fully justified. The significance of some Classical references could be made more explicit, as in the case of the shipwreck topos or the influence of Polybius. But the strength of the argumentation stands out. Chapter endnotes are concise and comprehensive, elevating the dialogue. One notable strength of the book is its internal cogency and synthetic power, displayed through countless tie-ins and contrastive sign-

posting. Frisch's conclusions, moreover, are always insightful and compelling recapitulative, and often replete with theoretical bravura, as in the deft ways she deals with the dialectics of proximity and distance.

All in all, Frisch does delineate "a profoundly political transformation of the reception of history" involving reflections on tragedy (p. 17). Her study demonstrates how treatment of the civil wars went from reframing to repression and from judicial clemency to the suppression of collective memory. Associated emotions went from conciliation and communality to containment and consensus so as to better serve the absolutist monarchy. "An all-encompassing rhetoric of amnesia in the wake of the conflicts helped both to erode the Renaissance Humanist culture of memory and to lay the foundation for a neoclassical discourse of timeless universality" (p. 164). The intertwined "rhetoric of historical distance" and "discourse of the tragic" rigorously teased out in *Forgetting Differences* had much to do with the shift toward undeniable ideological circumscription.

Corinne Noirot  
Virginia Tech University  
cnoirot@vt.edu

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