

*H-France Forum*

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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

Response by Andrea Frisch, University of Maryland

I am deeply honored that the editors of H-France selected my recent book for this issue of the Forum. It is indeed a privilege to receive multiple thoughtful responses to one's work, and to be afforded the opportunity to respond in turn. I thank all four of the reviewers for their time and their generosity.

*Forgetting Differences* is at bottom about cultural memory, a vast field that has been extensively mined; one of the main aims of the book is to pinpoint the distinctiveness of the terrain of the memory of France's Wars of Religion within this field. The study was inspired by the soldier-poet Jean de la Taille's 1572 contention that, in spite of the fact that the wars constituted a quintessentially tragic event, they were not to be used as subjects for tragic theater.[1] The idea that the French monarchy's call to "extinguish" memories of the wars could have an impact on theories of poetry was not in itself surprising (observations like this have been the mainstay of New Historicist studies of poetic literature for decades); what interested me, rather, was what statements like La Taille's could tell us about the particular ways in which contemporaries interpreted the command that memories of the wars remain "estainctes et assoupies" (as several edicts of pacification issued during the wars, including the Edict of Nantes, formulated it).[2]

Ullrich Langer is right to underline the variety of the materials addressed in the book; he is also right to question the degree to which the response to the call to extinguish memories of the wars was systematic. My characterization of conditions after 1598 in terms of a "régime of *oubliance*" was meant to foreground the apparently limitless purview of the policy; indeed, I point out that it was the very sweeping generality of the articles in question (which target the memory of "toutes choses passées d'une part et d'autre") that inevitably led to multiple interpretations.[3] The specific interpretations upon which *Forgetting Differences* is focused do not of course exhaust the range of responses to the policy, but they do showcase major trends that, I argue, were influential in the following century and beyond.

After having undertaken extensive reading in both the primary and secondary literature about the wars, I began my own study of *oubliance*--the term used by *parlementaires* and historians in the period to designate the royal policy of amnesty--with a digital search of key terms in virtually all available documents of the period 1550-1650. This led to a necessarily "interdisciplinary" and heterogeneous set of data that had to be sorted and contextualized. Official historiographies of the wars were an obvious source for reflections on how the past conflicts could be recounted despite the call to abolish memories of them. What I looked for here were statements of a programmatic or theoretical nature about the writing of history that were crafted as a response to the prohibition on "renewing the memory" of the most significant event of the previous half century. Discoveries such as André de Nesmond's 1600 parliamentary address on amnesty (along with Antoine Loisel's better-known 1582

remonstrance on amnesty and royal legislation), as well as the overlap between historiographers and *parlementaires*, compelled me to accord a place of privilege to the parliamentary milieu, to which the tragedian Robert Garnier, another major figure in the study, also belonged. Pierre Matthieu, *historiographe du roy* under Henri IV, was also a tragedian. These material intersections, together with a shared vocabulary of tragedy, to which I had been sensitized by Jean de la Taille's remarks, were the threads that enabled me to articulate the relations among the apparently disparate discourses studied in the book (royal legislation; *remontrances*; royal biography; historiography, theory of tragedy, and tragic poetry). Thus if, as Corinne Noirot notes, the corpus is never fully justified in explicit terms, I admit to partaking in the historian's fantasy of having followed the implicit logic of the sources themselves, to the best of my ability.

French historians, parliamentarians, and tragedians of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries recognized the paradoxical nature, from an epistemic point of view, of the command to erase memories of the wars. All of the material studied in the book concedes the persistence of memories of the wars and the difficulty of forgetting the deep wounds they inflicted. Moreover, jurist-historians in particular were eager to distinguish their professional methods from those of royal propagandists and were not inclined to omit material they understood was well known to their readers. "Extinguished" memories, therefore, were not memories that were no longer written or talked about; they were, instead, memories that were designed to avoid eliciting a volatile response. This way of construing the royal policy of amnesty situates *oubliance* as a transaction between readers (or spectators) and representations of history.

The core argument of *Forgetting Differences* (ably summarized by Corinne Noirot) is that the attempt to construct an official memory of the French Wars of Religion that would not reignite conflict produced a significant body of literature (both poetic and historiographical) that spurned humanist modes of reception according to which history was a source of models for civic action. In their place, writers overtly concerned with reconciliation proposed protocols of reception that encouraged a strong emotional response which, crucially, remained distinct and indeed divorced from political action. As Ullrich Langer remarks, this is the characteristic mode of reception theorized within French neoclassical tragedy. For Guillaume Peureux, the link between attitudes towards the memory of the Wars of Religion, on the one hand, and the rise of neoclassical tragedy, on the other, seems tenuous due to the span of time involved. While I certainly would not argue that the legislation of memory after the Wars of Religion was the sole driver of the evolution of either tragedy or national historiography in seventeenth-century France, I do believe that *Forgetting Differences* shows that attempts to record the history of the wars had a significant impact on the direction taken by both of these discourses well into the seventeenth century. The repeated characterization of the wars as the very paradigm of tragedy necessarily made conceptions of the tragic central to representations of the wars; for the same reason, the wars were an inescapable reference point for practicing tragedians. The virtually uninterrupted publication of the tragedies of Robert Garnier up through at least 1620 (a full bibliography of the many printings is sorely needed) kept his prefatory meditations on France's civil wars in view well after his death. Agrippa d'Aubigné's polemical poem about the wars, *Les tragiques*, was first published in 1616 and then again in 1623; and, as I note in the book, many historians situate the end of the Wars of Religion in 1629, with the Peace of Alès--not so far from 1630 after all. Certainly, the fact that Louis XIV styled the 1685 Revocation of the Edict of Nantes as the best way to "effacer entièrement la mémoire des troubles"

suggests that this way of framing the national relationship to the Wars of Religion remained influential throughout the seventeenth century.[4]

Of course, not everyone was interested in downplaying the incendiary potential of memories of the wars, as Kathleen Long rightly insists (though one cannot easily generalize in this regard with respect to Catholics v. Protestants). She cites as a signal example Agrippa d'Aubigné, whose ghost clearly hovers over *Forgetting Differences*. Long is justified in implying that I am telling the story of the victors; indeed, one of the central aims of the book is to trace the genealogy of what would become dominant modes of relating to the national past in France. But, in contrast to Long, I do not see the enterprise of forgetting differences after the Wars of Religion in terms of silencing or censorship. Seventeenth-century royal historians such as Jean Baudouin or François Mézeray recount the history of the wars in painstaking and gruesome detail. This is precisely the point at which the phrase “forgetting differences” comes to mean something other than ceasing armed conflict: as the book shows, Baudouin explicitly denies the temporal continuity between the civil-war past, on the one hand, and his and his readers’ present, on the other; moreover, he posits a single, unified perspective on that past (which he attributes simply to “France”), thereby implicitly denying the existence of different points of view on the wars. [5] Mézeray--a Catholic whom the Protestant apologist Elie Benoist singled out for his even-handed treatment of the history of religious conflict--consolidates that unified perspective in terms of tragic emotions, which he explicitly prescribes for the reader: “Vous aurez sans doute bien souvent les larmes aux yeux, quand vous lirez tant de tragiques événements: vous serez touché de pitié au récit de quelques-uns, vous fremirez d'horreur à la vue de quelques autres, vous aurez de l'étonnement de voir qu'en une cause où tous ont la Religion pour prétexte, il y ait si peu de Piété & de Foy, tant de barbarie, de perfidies & de massacres.”[6] Mézeray’s privileging of a purely emotional response allows him to elide specific questions of guilt or innocence (“everyone” was using religion as a pretext for violence). Moreover, his emphasis on horror, pity, and surprise downplays potential continuities between the perfidious past and the morally refined present, and reduces religious disagreement to a pretext for barbarous behavior.

As readers of H-France might know, on April 13 of this year, the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, and the president of the Fédération protestante de France, François Clavairoly, unveiled a plaque commemorating the Saint Bartholomew’s Day massacre of August 1572. The plaque reads:

*Le 24 août 1572 et les jours suivants,  
Paris a été le théâtre  
DU MASSACRE DE LA SAINT-BARTHELEMY.  
Après l'Amiral Gaspard de COLIGNY,  
plusieurs milliers de protestants furent assassinés du fait de leur religion.*

*“Jour qui avec horreur parmi les jours se compte,  
Qui se marque de rouge, et rougit de sa honte.”*

Agrippa d'AUBIGNÉ, *Les Tragiques* [7]

Everything about the plaque works to maintain a safe distance between the act of commemoration and the violence of the Wars of Religion. The passive voice of the official declaration comes as no surprise--just as “mistakes were made,” protestants were assassinated. Obviously, it could not be a question of identifying perpetrators by name; but

there is no acknowledgement of human agency here, much less any indication that this was an instance of French on French violence. Some might feel that this aspect of the presentation is counterbalanced by the presence of a quote from none other than Aubigné's *Tragiques*. Yet those tall enough to read it--the plaque is located 3m50 above ground, in a striking physical manifestation of the rhetorical distance I am describing--will be made to understand that the horror, the blood, and the shame Aubigné describes there are attributes of the *jour* itself, rather than of the human actors who sanctioned the massacre or of those who took part in it. This day, long past, carries the entire burden of the massacres, which are thereby completely divorced from the beliefs, the institutions, and the practices of the human beings that made them possible, and that could potentially link them to life in the present.

While this way of framing the reader/spectator's relationship to the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacres (and, by extension, to the Wars of Religion) illustrates precisely the state-sanctioned form of distanced reception whose early genealogy is the subject of *Forgetting Differences*, it is, as Kathleen Long reminds us, quite uncharacteristic of Aubigné's *Tragiques* as a whole. Indeed, I am not convinced that the hostile reception of Aubigné's works was due primarily to his subject, since he was not alone in recounting some of the most searing events of the Wars of Religion. It was rather Aubigné's *style* that was seen as particularly distasteful by partisans of the neoclassical aesthetic of distance. This aesthetic is characteristic of some of the most enduring monuments of French literary culture (I refer in particular to the tragedies of Corneille and Racine). By focusing on the impact of the politics of *oubliance* on the representation of national history, *Forgetting Differences* tracks one of the more subtle ways in which the legacy of the Wars of Religion shaped those monuments and the culture that continues to celebrate them.

Given the persistence of the French tendency to forget differences, it is heartening that Anne Hidalgo evoked "[l']unité entre les Parisiens qui se connaissent et se reconnaissent comme différents" at the April unveiling ceremony.[8] And given certain interpretations of *laïcité* that equate religious expression with fanaticism, it is important that François Clavairoly urged a genuine commitment to "le dialogue interreligieux," expressing the wish that "la lecture du texte si évocateur de cette plaque... résonne dans l'esprit du passant quel qu'il soit comme une alerte, et l'invite à devenir sentinelle à son tour, au service de la paix et de la justice." [9] Perhaps this wish would be more likely fulfilled had the plaque quoted a different passage from the *Tragiques*:

Voyez la tragédie, abaissez vos courages,  
Vous n'êtes spectateurs, vous êtes personnages. [10]

#### NOTES

[1] La Taille, Jean. "L'Art de la tragédie" [1572] in *Saül le furieux; La famine, ou les Gabéonites*, ed. Elliott Forsyth (Paris: Didier, 1968), 33.

[2] Edit de Nantes, available at [http://elec.enc.sorbonne.fr/editsdepacification/edit\\_12](http://elec.enc.sorbonne.fr/editsdepacification/edit_12)

[3] Ibid.

[4] Edit de Fontainebleau. Paris: François Muguet, 1685, 5.

[5] *Histoire des guerres civiles de France. Ecrite en italien par H.C. Davila. Mise en français par Jean Baudouin.* Paris: Rocolet, 1642. Préface, n.p.; FD 88-91.

[6] De Mézeray, François Eudes, *Histoire de France depuis Faramond jusqu'au règne de Louis le juste....* Tome troisième (Paris: Chez Denis Thierry, Jean Guignard et Claude Barbin, [1651] 1685). Préface, n.p.; FD 91-4.

[7] “Dévoilement de la plaque en hommage aux victims du massacre de la Saint-Barthélemy,” Web blog post. *Protestants.org*. N.p., 13 April 2016. Web. 23 June 2016.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Aubigné, Agrippa. *Les tragiques* [1616]. ed. Frank Lestringant (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 82.

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