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Jennifer Tamas, *Le Silence trahi. Racine ou la déclaration tragique*. Collection *Travaux du Grand Siècle* no. 47. Geneva: Librairie Droz S.A., 2018. 261 pp. Bibliography, indices (proper names, plays, and characters in Racine, plays other than by Racine), table of contents. €41.15 (pb). ISBN 978-2-600-05870-4; €39.21 (pdf). ISBN PDF: 978-2-600-15870.

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Jennifer Tamas's *Le Silence trahi. Racine ou la déclaration tragique* demands a certain kind of reading: the patient, suspensive kind. Offering an anatomy of verbal silence in the writing of this best-known of the major seventeenth-century playwrights Jean Racine, *Le Silence trahi* explores how the unsaid becomes for Racine a dramaturgical ordering principle. Whereas traditional scholarship treats silence as a product of the lack of speech, or as the failure of speech, Tamas teases out a dynamic relationship between speech and its impossibility, whose tense logic creates the essence of Racinian tragedy.

This synopsis might suggest that Tamas's work is of greatest concern to a narrow group of readers—those well-versed in seventeenth-century French tragedy and its critical legacy, and specifically readers of Racine. And many readers of *H-France* may not immediately see the significance of Tamas's work for research questions beyond those exploring the rhetoric and poetics of the highest genre in the canon of the so-called “grand siècle.” *Le Silence trahi* nevertheless has specific application to scholars interested, from any philosophical or methodological register, in what words can and cannot do. This might include historians of theater and students of performance studies as well as scholars who, as trained historiographers, continue to question the problem and possibility of the archive's silences. Additionally, Tamas's book offers a test case as to what literary studies can do. At once deeply committed to a certain tradition of French scholarship and slyly innovative in its modes of exploration, *Le Silence trahi* offers something of a new way of reading Racine, but more significantly, exemplifies an important reminder of how to read the literary.

At first glance, the book's title says it all: the tragic in Racine emerges out of a tension between characters' refusal, reluctance, inability to speak and the eventual disclosure, revelation, “declaration” of their truths. Tamas thus enters into a long-standing discussion among scholars of French theater and Racine in particular regarding the importance of speech in tragedy, as she outlines in her preface. Seventeenth-century tragedy, owing much to the rhetorical tradition, is traditionally read as a highly codified, regulated art of oral declamation in which props, movement, and all but a certain prescribed set of gestures and stances play almost no role. Over the past twenty years scholarship has done much to complicate this question, and recent work in

the field of seventeenth-century studies has argued for renewed attention to the embodied nature of Racine's plays in particular. [1] Tamas takes a different tack. Beginning by tracing the question of silence and speech in Racine scholarship from Leo Spitzer's 1928 essay on the "muted" or dampened effect of Racine's style through the work of literary critics in the last half of the twentieth century who consequently delved more deeply into the rhetorical and stylistic stakes of seventeenth-century poets, Tamas validates this critical tradition's approach but adjusts its terms: silence is not just a theme, or an effect of speech. [2] The unsaid is truly a motor for the tragic event. That is, if characters are unable or refuse to speak, it is ultimately the breach of this refusal or reticence, and the actions surrounding the final declaration, that incite and shape tragic events. Racine is distinct in his adaptation of Greek tragedy in that he creates "zones of silence" (p. 232) that turn characters away from the gods and toward a confrontation of their own "crises existentielles" (p. 232). Throughout the work, silence is a broad and multi-faceted concept. It includes all the forms and modes of arrested speech; to name a few examples: the pregnant pauses of slight reticence (p. 38); the duologic tension between the servant eager to elicit their master's truth and the latter's "indincible horreur" (p. 99); the revealing silence of love undeclared and therefore unreciprocated (p. 136).

The territory for this investigation seems at first quite traditional: the close attention to particular soliloquies and dramaturgical moments harken back to the mode of close reading which saw a resurgence two decades ago, on the heels of the New Historicism movement. [3] Because of this optic, and while the bibliography is up to date, it is interesting there is no theoretical apparatus and very little historical situating within the text. Either of these contexts might have engaged readers coming from outside the field. As it is, scholars from outside the field must make a leap of faith that this investigation will have a pay-off beyond an understanding of Racine's own commitment to the power of the unsaid. Additionally, Tamas also presupposes a reader familiar with the poetics of alexandrines; the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action; and Greek mythology which was the basis for Racine's neoclassical tragedies and with which his first audience was generally very well acquainted. And Tamas doesn't wrestle with other scholars who read Racine differently; for this reason, the book can feel somewhat sealed from current scholarship in the field.

This appears to be a deliberate choice, since what Tamas seems to be reaching for is deeply embedded within Racine's exploration of human nature when confronted by distress, whether political or amorous. It is in this sense that the book is deeply philosophical; Tamas acts in some ways as an interpreter of Racine's own philosophy of silence and action. It is also perhaps for this reason that the book unfolds as it does.

There are some important signs that this study departs radically from other monographs and that it does so deliberately and on its own terms: for one, its organization. Most studies in theater history or literature which purport to offer a comprehensive account of a playwright would be organized either chronologically or thematically, with the plays themselves as units of analysis. Tamas's book eschews this structure. Seeming deliberately to refuse "readings" of discrete plays, the book's structure follows its argument about the tension between silence and speech as the motor behind Racine's tragedies. From opening chapters on the temporalities and spaces of silence, the book moves to an exploration of "silence et action" (chapter three), investigation and inquisition (chapter four), "l'urgente nécessité de se déclarer" (chapter five), and finally "la reconnaissance interdite," (chapter six). This organization allows Tamas to offer a kind of survey of silence's dynamics among Racinian characters, and a narrative account of how dramas

integrate delay and the stifling oppression of space, to position not the word but “des silences *agissants*” (p. 94) as the true motor behind tragedy.

As the argument follows the arc of silence’s intervention into the unfolding of Racinian tragedy through the struggles of its characters, Tamas appears to be searching for something other than a definition of tragedy itself. Her surveying mode includes references to Racine’s correspondence and all thirteen of his plays. Even his comedy *Les Plaideurs* is treated—albeit only once and quite briefly, as a send-up of trials, and so which explores the accusatory power of language (p. 133). In a move illustrative of the argument’s method, this example opens up an examination of scenes in which the royal presence creates a courtroom scene out of diverse confrontations, as in *Mithridate*, *Phèdre*, *Bajazet*, and *Athalie*. Thus the goal of the book is to establish an understanding of something like Racine’s philosophy of language insofar as it is guided by the affective and social necessity of perilous speech, not to enter into questions about the nature of tragedy itself.

Tamas weaves an account of reticence and disclosure through the examination of myriad rhetorical figures, as well as such familiar *files thématiques* as the tension between love and political duty, the legacy of war, and especially recurring character dilemmas including the problem of suicide, the definitive example of silence as tragic action. Indeed, characters and character are at the heart of Tamas’s concerns, from the role of confidants to that of lovers. If another critique of this book might be that we never get a full sense of the theatricality of Racine’s plays—of the arc of any one play or the meaning of any performance—it is because the play is not the unit of examination; it is rather the Racinian persona’s tormented, verbose yet stifled rhetorical march toward catastrophe. It is through this insistence on characters and their speech that I think Tamas is also trying to unlock Racine’s own preoccupation with the fragile power of disclosure, a preoccupation which sets him apart from other thinkers of the time and permeates his own life, which Tamas exposes through analyses of vignettes from his correspondence; my favorite is his account of a crush he has on a young woman whom he only sees at church; the spell he casts upon himself is broken when he breaks his mute distance, and talking with her, finds her much less entrancing (p. 51).

This might be frustrating for a reader expecting an easy take-away. Instead *Le Silence trahi* is lyrical, philosophical, and arrestingly intimate. Tamas assumes that we know the plays as well as she does, omitting publication dates or even the most cursory of plot summaries or character sketches. It turns out, however, that we don’t need to know them at all to appreciate this book; nearly every page contains a meditation on what silence can do and mean, and therein is the interest for readers outside of this field: how is it possible that word-driven art like dramatic poetry depends, at every turn, on the foreclosure of its articulation? To what extent is the unsaid, artfully negotiated and considered, more powerful than the word, contrary to decades of research by linguists and philosophers of language?

Why would historians read this book? I am not sure they will, but they should, for a number of reasons. First, Tamas refuses any instrumentalization of the literary text; a move familiar to historians which makes those of us trained in literature cringe. That is, for Tamas, Racine’s poetry is not representative of any one truth; it cannot be taken as valid evidence for something external to it. Its argument is revealed from within. Second, this return to a patient, philosophically driven study of poetry might be our saving grace. We are entering the much-needed era, I hope, of slow: slow food, slow science, slow philosophy, and now slow reading.[4]

Jennifer Tamas's exposure of Racine's own inquiry in the power of silence suggests a model of slow literature--the kind that demands not just patience but persistence on the part of its readers.

NOTES

[1] Sylvaine Guyot, *Racine ou le corps tragique* (Paris: PUF, 2014). Ann Régent-Susini, "Quand dire, c'est taire? : l' 'effet de sourdine' racinien, stylistique, et / ou rhétorique?" *Exercices de rhétorique*, 1(2013), <https://journals.openedition.org/rhetorique/95> (accessed 4 June 2019). Hélène Bilis, *Passing Judgment: The Politics and Poetics of Sovereignty in French Tragedy from Hardy to Racine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

[2] Leo Spitzer, "Die klassische Dämpfung in Racines Stil," *Archivum romanicum* 12 (1928): 361-472.

[3] For example, Tamas's model of the unsaid as agent could be placed in productive dialogue with Christopher Braider's notion of the "indiscernible," in *Indiscernible Counterparts: The Invention of the Text in French Classical Drama* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

[4] Journalist Carl Honoré is seen as having initiated the wave of "slow" movements with his *In Praise of Slowness* (Toronto: A.A. Knopf Canada, 2004). Along with the slow food movement which followed Honoré's book, within the academy we have also seen Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2016), as well as the Slow Science movement (<http://slow-science.org>) and one of its manifestos, Isabelle Stenger's *Another Science is Possible: A Manifesto for Slow Science* (London: Polity Press, 2017), and Michelle Boulous Walker, *Slow Philosophy: Reading against the Institution* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017)

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