

# Politicizing the Past in Agrippa d'Aubigné's *Tragiques*

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**Summary:** This essay explores the politicization of the past in Protestant poet-soldier-historian Agrippa d'Aubigné's epic poem, *Les Tragiques* (1616). More exactly, Aubigné's poetic overhaul of accounts of Protestant martyrdom in the epic's fourth book, "Les Feux," is understood as a means of enhancing reader engagement with the early history of the French Reformed Church. Focusing on traits that were characteristic of the Protestant martyr in Aubigné's sixteenth-century source text, the accounts analyzed here demonstrate the poet's potential to give new life to past acts of martyrdom for a seventeenth-century readership. Aubigné's martyrological writing rouses readers' emotions and demands renewed attention to the role of martyrdom in shaping the French Reform, suggesting an attempt to make martyrdom once again an operative element in the sociopolitical landscape of early modern France.

**Keywords:** early modern French literature - Agrippa d'Aubigné - *Les Tragiques* - epic poetry - Protestant martyrdom.

**W**hat does it mean to 'politicize' subjects, histories, and memories—or, more broadly, the past? If politicizing is the process whereby issues come to public attention and reach the political agenda, then politicizing the past is to rekindle the relevance of issues vis-à-vis a new public. And moreover, if politicizing is inherently partisan and relies on the distortion of so-called facts, then politicizing the past is to alter or twist issues to make them appear *just so*—that is, to have an intended impact on a certain audience to the benefit of a certain group of people.

For Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné (1552-1630), an ardent Calvinist, Huguenot soldier, and writer, politicizing the past was part and parcel of the partisan imperative that defined his life and work. The Protestant minority to which Aubigné belonged was, to paraphrase literary scholar David Quint in *Epic and Empire*, the loser in the decades-long conflict with Catholics that historians have coined 'the French Wars of Religion',

for lack of a term that embodies their complexity.<sup>1</sup> Aubigné wielded his pen much like he wielded his sword in battle, acting in the interest of the Reformed Church and movement, with passion and purpose. For Aubigné, the personal was political, whether in the heat of battle or in verse, whether reflecting on losses suffered by Protestants or looking toward the French Reform's possible futures.

Nowhere is this politicization of the past more evident than in Aubigné's seven-book epic, *Les Tragiques* (1616). Published nearly two decades after the 1598 Edict of Nantes succeeded in quelling warfare in France, albeit largely in theory, Aubigné's *Tragiques* encapsulates the rise, fall, and due rewards of the Reformed Church and movement. Each of the epic's seven books transports readers to different places and times, from the roots of Catholic corruption in Rome to the home of a Protestant mother who, a product of France's religious wars, cuts up her own child and eats him on a platter. The scenes that Aubigné paints bleed through the pages, revealing a version of the past that is unapologetically partisan and demands reader involvement in navigating the sociopolitical landscape of early modern France.

The epic's fourth book, "Les Feux," engages with a specific aspect of the history of the French Reform that Aubigné draws from a specific sixteenth-century text. "Les Feux" is a book of martyrs whose accounts Aubigné models after Protestant printer and historian Jean Crespin's (c. 1520-1572) *Histoire des martyrs*, the first Protestant martyrology to appear in the French vernacular.<sup>2</sup> Published in Geneva in 1554, the *Histoire des martyrs* quickly became the official martyrology of the French Reformed Church, undergoing significant expansions across seven French-language editions (Tucker 2). Crespin's martyrology was immensely influential among sixteenth-century Protestants, circulating widely and achieving near canonical status for its utility as an instructional tool and a source of inspiration for Protestant families and communities (Maynard 41).<sup>3</sup> Crespin presented accounts of martyrdom in the *Histoire des martyrs* systematically, in an unembellished and thus highly accessible style of writing. Typically, each account provided the martyr's name and profession, followed by the circumstances of his or her arrest, condemnation, confession of faith, and execution. In the late sixteenth century, Crespin's descriptive, matter-of-fact language resonated with French Protestants, whose experiences of persecution mirrored those of the martyrs from their recent past.

Aubigné, however, writes for a seventeenth-century audience imbued with a sense of wartime chaos, with the widespread massacre of Protestants during the Wars of

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<sup>1</sup> Quint coins the term 'loser's epic' in relation to an epic tradition that focuses on historical narratives of the defeated, with Aubigné's *Tragiques* serving as an early modern example of "anti-Virgilian" epic namely in that it "speaks from the side of the losers," who are in this case French Protestants (133).

<sup>2</sup> Crespin's martyrology underwent multiple name changes from one edition to the next. *Histoire des martyrs* is the title I have chosen to refer to Crespin's martyrology in a general sense.

<sup>3</sup> David Watson also asserts that Crespin's martyrology "achieved almost canonical status" (1).

Religion eclipsing the patient endurance of death that Crespin's martyrology conveys.<sup>4</sup> And yet Crespin's accounts are an integral part of a *version* of the history of the French Reform that Aubigné's epic poem tells—a version that portrays the French Reformed Church and the Protestants whose martyrs are its pillars as victors and champions of justice for whom the fight was not lost. To this end, Aubigné politicizes the “saison flamboyante des martyrs,” as Frank Lestringant aptly calls it, merging the traditional martyrology and the epic to move new readers, and to revive feelings of inspiration that the Protestant minority once drew from the accounts of its martyrs (44).

In merging the epic and the martyrology, Aubigné transforms the language of traditional martyrological writing from descriptive and prescriptive to language that is poetic and rhetorically charged in ways that would be ideal for moving seventeenth-century readers. Aubigné rewrites the accounts of martyrdom that circulated in the *Histoire des martyrs*, overhauling them with an illustrative energy and emotional appeal that Crespin's unadorned prose simply could not match. Aubigné deliberately blurs the lines between the language of the martyrologist and the language of the epic poet to shape the reader's understanding of the past.

This process and our poet's aims become apparent upon closer study of the accounts of Protestant martyrdom in “Les Feux.” Of singular importance is Aubigné's attention and fidelity to what David El Kenz identifies as “the main marks of the martyr” that Crespin prescribed and were indeed requisites of each account in the *Histoire des martyrs* (El Kenz 129).<sup>5</sup> As Nikki Shepardson confirms, these readily identifiable traits in Crespin's martyrology came to define the rhetoric of martyrdom in the late-sixteenth century—a rhetoric that highlights the martyr's willingness to sacrifice all earthly things for eternal reward, a sense of conviction in matters of faith, and the display of constancy in torment and in death.<sup>6</sup> Since these characteristic traits or ‘main marks’ of the martyr were integral to the Protestant martyrological tradition, they figure

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<sup>4</sup> Although it is not within the scope of this essay to examine publishing history, it bears noting that the reception of Crespin's martyrology and Aubigné's epic poem differed greatly. The frenzy that the *Histoire des martyrs* incited shortly after it began circulating, including a legal matter in which it was copied without approval, support scholars' claims that the martyrology was an immediate success (Gilmont 170). By contrast, Aubigné's epic poem was scarcely acknowledged by writers and the reading public in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Indeed, as Valerie Worth-Stylianou writes in the introduction to her English translation of Aubigné's epic, “there is no evidence that his (Aubigné's) own age knew or read it (*Les Tragiques*)” (17). In fact, it was not until the nineteenth century that readers would take interest in Aubigné (Schrenck, 53). The lagging enthusiasm for our poet during his lifetime and after *Les Tragiques* publication may well have furthered the poetic energy that he instills in “Les Feux,” as discussed here.

<sup>5</sup> The martyr must shed blood; religious doctrine must be the cause for condemnation; the martyr must be tried and sentenced by a judge or tribunal; and, finally, the martyr must show constancy at all times.

<sup>6</sup> In her book *Burning Zeal*, Nikki Shepardson describes the rhetoric of martyrdom as a rebirth, or a renewal of the language of suffering. Shepardson confirms that one of the main purposes of this language was to “strengthen the (Reform) movement from within” (14). She also discusses its capacity to inspire potential Reformed sympathizers or even recruit followers.

prominently in Aubigné's book of martyrs and, likewise, form the basis of my reading of "Les Feux."

In what follows, I explore Aubigné's distinct approach to the notion of sacrifice and reward, conviction, and constancy. I begin by describing each trait in relation to the Protestant martyrological tradition, and then introduce an account of martyrdom in "Les Feux" that demonstrates how Aubigné enhances its potential to affect his readership. Finally, I offer reflections on these accounts of martyrdom that are crucial to upholding my argument that Aubigné, in politicizing the past in his book of martyrs, sought to bolster seventeenth-century perceptions of this vital part of the history of the French Reformed Church and reenergize the Reform movement.

### **Sacrifice and Reward**

Celui qui conservera sa vie la perdra, et celui qui perdra sa vie à cause de moi la retrouvera. (*Nouvelle Edition de Genève*, Matthieu 10.37-39)

The biblical motifs of sacrifice and reward, as expressed, for example, in the Book of Matthew, fueled early modern martyrological traditions, both Catholic and Protestant. Protestants, however, interpreted these motifs differently than Catholics. Whereas Catholics believed that the perfect sacrifice that was Christ's death on the cross could be imitated by their martyrs, Protestants asserted that this sacrifice was unique and inimitable (Johns 245). The death of the martyr was thus the central event in the Catholic martyrology, mirroring Christ's sacrifice and serving as a pretext for the practice of venerating martyrs. Contrarily, in the Protestant tradition the martyr's death was a testament to his or her Christ-like virtues.

Crespin's *Histoire des martyrs* demonstrated this understanding of sacrifice—words of praise and mention of reward in the afterlife for having lived according to Protestant principles of belief outshined the martyr's death. What Crespin's language of sacrifice would have encouraged readers to admire was not the martyr's self-sacrificial act per se, but rather the religious convictions and qualities that had made said martyr worthy of eternal life.

In "Les Feux," Aubigné also foregrounds the praiseworthy and Christ-like virtues of Protestant martyrs. Following Crespin, he harnesses the celebratory language that praises Protestant martyrs and seeks to inspire admiration and awe in his readers. Aubigné differs from Crespin through the display of his rhetorical skills in poetic renditions of acts of martyrdom in which he seeks to enhance the emotional impact of the martyr's sacrifice and anticipated reward.

This is perhaps most apparent in Aubigné's 73-line account of Jane Grey, a martyr whose story would have been well known to the seventeenth-century reader.<sup>7</sup> Her account reveals Aubigné's unique approach to the theme of sacrifice and reward by way of his heightened attention to stylistic details that amplify the portrayal of her virtues. In fact, Aubigné's account of the martyrdom of Jane Grey introduces the motif of sacrifice and reward in reverse order. That is, he first asserts Jane's victory, then offers praise of her proven superiority, and follows the mention of her reward of salvation with that of her sacrifice:

Or l'autre avec sa foi garda aussi le rang  
D'un esprit tout royal, comme royal le sang.  
Un royaume est pour elle, un autre Roi lui donne  
Grâce de mépriser la mortelle couronne  
En cherchant l'immortelle, et lui donna des yeux  
Pour troquer l'Angleterre au Royaume des Cieux (*Tragiques* IV.207-12)

In accordance with a Protestant understanding of sacrifice, the martyr's death is not the central event. Rather, Aubigné draws the reader's attention to Grey's faith and signals it as the key to her success and elevated status ("sa foi... le rang")—a status that he also attributes to her character ("son esprit"), which he implies by way of the comparative conjunction "comme" is secondary to her status as a royal ("royal le sang"). Aubigné then denotes her reward as a kingdom ("un royaume"), but creates an atmosphere of suspense with his use of an indefinite article and other vague descriptors like "autre" before finally confirming that her reward is in fact eternal life in God's kingdom ("Royaume des Cieux").

Following the notion of exchange that the verb 'troquer' implies, Aubigné portrays Grey's sacrifices as a series of exchanges between her trials on earth and her rewards in heaven. His use of enumeration and juxtaposition, figures of amplification and comparison, bring to the surface the contrast between mortal and martyr and emphasize in no uncertain terms the magnitude of Grey's sacrifice:

Prisonnière çà-bas, mais princesse là-haut,  
Elle changea son trône empour un échafaud,  
Sa chaire de parade en l'infime sellete,  
Son carrosse pompeux en l'infâme charrette,

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<sup>7</sup> Jane Grey was England's infamous "nine days Queen," and the subject of much interest in France, for her character, her writings, and, of course, her execution (Snook 47). The story of Jane's martyrdom gained momentum in France, as well, and would remain a source of inspiration for the French well after the sixteenth century, even around the time of the French Revolution, as paintings of her suggest. Highlighting her erudition and religious zeal, Paul F.M. Zahl aptly describes her as a "bookish child prodigy turned Reformation legend" (57).

Ses perles d'Orient, ses brassards émaillés  
 En cordeaux renoués et en fers tous rouillés. (*Tragiques* IV.215-20)

Yet again Aubigné conveys a broad, complex notion of sacrifice to his seventeenth-century readers. Some of Grey's sacrifices are material, like relinquishing exotic pearls ("perles d'Orient") and adornments ("brassards émaillés"), while others are physical, such as enduring imprisonment and judicial torture ("prisonnière ça-bas; l'infime sellete"). Hence for Aubigné, there are numerous dimensions to the martyr's sacrifice. Moreover, by enumerating them, Aubigné seems intent on stirring the reader's awe and admiration of Grey's sacrifice, saturating the page with her acts of selflessness in choosing to abandon material goods and personal comfort for the sake of her faith.

Alongside the enumeration of Grey's sacrifices, Aubigné relies on juxtapositions to communicate the immense strength of will and character that separates mortals from martyrs. Aubigné contrasts decidedly positive, desirable items and qualities like beautiful skin and luxurious jewelry with negative images and associations that coincide with Grey's path to martyrdom, such as the torture and execution phases. The fact that she willingly relinquishes the good for the bad, and on so many occasions, serves to reinforce Grey's firmness of mind and her awe-inspiring demonstration of the extent to which martyrs embody the Protestant notion of sacrifice. Similarly, Aubigné's use of juxtaposition in this instance allows him to better guide the reader toward an enthusiastic and supportive attitude of Grey's act of martyrdom and the history of Protestant sacrifice more generally.

In addition to figures of style, Aubigné enhances reader engagement with the account and the motif of sacrifice by including Grey's own words. And though he specifies that these were written and not spoken—"Avec ces mots écrits :..."—Aubigné presents them as if Grey were speaking to the reader, much like our poet does throughout "Les Feux," using the second personal singular pronoun 'tu' in what reads as a direct address (*Tragiques* IV.233). It is curious that Aubigné focuses on orality and not literacy, effectively changing what Grey had actually written to create an imagined speech, especially since this martyr and queen was known for her writings. But an authorial intervention such as this is not an uncommon occurrence in "Les Feux." In fact, Aubigné seems intent on making martyrs speak in "Les Feux," and in this way veers significantly from Crespin's cautious style and non-interference approach.<sup>8</sup> By changing the type of delivery from writing to speech, Aubigné adds performative force to the already engaging first-person perspective of Grey's account, thereby evincing yet again a desire to revitalize and politicize martyrological writing—to inspire feelings of

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<sup>8</sup> As compiler and editor of the martyrology, Crespin altered his accounts of Reformed martyrdom in the *Histoire des martyrs*. However, a major difference between Crespin and Aubigné is that Crespin modified accounts largely for the sake of readability, and did not change aspects of the account as significant as the type of speech delivery.

admiration for Grey, and all Protestant martyrs, who approached the 'dernière épreuve' and ultimate sacrifice with poise. Jane Grey was beheaded in 1554.

### Conviction

In addition to the language of sacrifice and reward, Aubigné also revitalizes and politicizes the martyr's display of religious conviction that almost always figures prominently in the traditional Protestant martyrology. In Crespin's *Histoire des martyrs*, the martyr's demonstration of religious conviction was a stipulated proof that preconditioned his or her inclusion in the martyrology. In the sixteenth century, the term 'conviction' meant to convict, convince, conquer, or prove, and thus held a judiciary sense among Crespin's readers—it was understood as the action by which one proves either the guilt of someone else or his or her own innocence in a legal setting ("Conviction"). Religious conviction, of course, provoked especially high-stakes conflicts between Catholic authorities and Protestants whose souls and salvation depended on their firm commitment to what they believed to be true in the eyes of God.<sup>9</sup>

For Protestant martyrs who had been condemned to death, the demonstration of religious conviction could take place in settings as varied as a jail cell or an execution site, but often occurred during a trial or a court-ordered torture. In the *Histoire des martyrs*, the martyr's conviction appears to the reader as a verbally articulated adherence to Protestant beliefs. This verbal manifestation of the martyr's firmness of mind and strong beliefs was a means of proving innocence rather than guilt, and, by extension, defying judicial persecution. Hence, the display of conviction was twofold. On the one hand, martyrs' words and actions communicated their unfaltering beliefs. On the other hand, their conviction provided a counter argument to the verdict of guilt shared by Catholic authority figures like Parlement judges and magistrates, as well as those of an anti-Protestant perspective.

In "Les Feux," accounts that underscore conviction serve to further the persuasive and political dimensions of this characteristic feature of the martyrology and the history of Protestant martyrdom. Aubigné seems to use displays of conviction as a means of challenging Catholic authority to effect a shift in the reader's perception of the martyr's condemnation from guilty heretic to wrongly accused victim of judicial persecution. When addressing the martyr's conviction, Aubigné typically emphasizes aspects of the account that may bolster the martyr's own authority and credibility. He also poeticizes the martyr's direct discourse in a way that renders his or her display of conviction markedly more violent in tone than what readers find in Crespin's *Histoire des*

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<sup>9</sup> This notion of "high-stakes conflicts" comes from Martha Nussbaum's discussion of religious conviction as distinct from other beliefs, as it concerns what she refers to as "the ultimate questions," meaning questions of life, death, and salvation (168).

*martyrs*. This, of course, enhances the martyr's arguments, critiques, and justifications in the presence of judges and other Catholic officials, and in turn, increases the likelihood of moving seventeenth-century readers toward an understanding of the martyr as anything but criminal.

The account of the martyrdom of Anne du Bourg, one of the first high profile executions in Reformation France,<sup>10</sup> offers a case in point—that is, it reveals Aubigné's manipulation of the motif of conviction to effect a shift in the reader's perception of Bourg from a guilty heretic to wrongly condemned victim of persecution. The preface to Bourg's well-known act of martyrdom is a mere eight lines, but as early as the outset indicates Aubigné's intention to boost the martyr's image and sway the reader's attitude toward him:

Entre ceux dont l'esprit peut être traversé  
De l'espoir du futur, du loyer du passé,  
Du Bourg aura ce rang : son cœur pareil à l'âge,  
A sa condition l'honneur de son courage,  
Son esprit indompté au Seigneur des Seigneurs  
Sacrifia son corps, sa vie et ses honneurs.  
Des promesses de Dieu il vainquit les promesses  
Des Rois, et, sage à Dieu, des hommes les sagesses. (*Tragiques* IV.543-50)

In these introductory remarks, Aubigné encapsulates between “l'esprit” and “Son esprit” the qualities inherent to Bourg's character, moving from the primordial experience of faith to the high esteem in which his contemporaries held him. Aubigné specifies that these traits were given to him by God, an idea that he emphasizes using the superlative-like structure “Seigneur des Seigneurs.” Our poet also denotes the elevated rank that Bourg earned from God for his honorable and courageous conduct in becoming a martyr. Importantly, Aubigné then gestures toward the kind of power that Bourg's noble character and God-given, God-like spiritual nobility afforded him, which is to say the power to effectively have “vainquit” kings and men. What Aubigné means by ‘vanquished’ is not physical defeat, but rather a verbal, argument-oriented type of victory that the rhyme coupling of “promesses” and “sagesses” convey. In this way, Aubigné seems to want to bolster the reader's opinion of Bourg by highlighting the singularity of his person, while also foreshadowing the martyr's demonstration of rhetorical skill with which he defeats his enemies and proves his conviction.

Following this prefatory material, Aubigné asserts the previously suggested authority of the martyr when he hands the account over to Bourg and makes him a

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<sup>10</sup> Bourg's status as a social elite is singular. The social elite, in general, represent a small portion of any given Protestant martyrology. Here Aubigné turns to Bourg and speaks first of his social status in what may well be an effort to instill his book of martyrs with an authority figure.



speaking character: “En allant à la mort, tout plein d'autorité / Il prononça ces mots : [...]” (*Tragiques* IV.551-52). Aubigné's readers experience the majority and remainder of the martyrological account as if Bourg, who exudes an unflinching confidence as Protestant ‘port-parole’, were telling it himself in real time. This uninterrupted speech serves first and foremost to relay Bourg's conviction. But Aubigné also adds an air of authenticity to Bourg's sense of conviction through sustained direct discourse, a powerful and engaging narrative mode that furthers his persuasive aims.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the poetic refashioning of Bourg's speech—an at once authorial intervention and embellishment that is unique to “Les Feux”—dramatizes and thus amplifies reader engagement. Hence, Bourg's violent critique of the judicial persecution of Protestants reverberates with clarity and force.

Through the voice of our poet-martyrologist, Bourg challenges in no uncertain terms the judges who have condemned him to death:

[...] O Dieu de vérité  
Montre à ces juges faux leur stupide ignorance,  
Et je prononcerai, condamné, leur sentence. (*Tragiques* IV.552-54)

By way of the juxtaposition between an all-knowing God and the enemy's ignorance, Bourg appears to question the reasoning behind his own condemnation, as well as the intelligence of the judges who have charged him with heresy. The repetition of three highly negative lexical items in close sequence, “faux,” “stupide,” and “ignorance,” renders Bourg's criticism all the more violent. Moreover, the modification of the noun “ignorance” with the synonymous adjective “stupide” hyperbolizes an already sharp accusation of ineptitude on the part of Bourg's persecutors. These lexical items designate the absence of truth (“vérité”), and, by extension, the absence of any connection with God and His omniscience (“Dieu de vérité”).

The stylistic devices and direct discourse in Bourg's account of martyrdom are decidedly impactful, providing readers with evidence of his conviction and further means by which to move them. This becomes increasingly evident as Aubigné, through Bourg, elaborates his critique of judicial figures. Indeed, after claiming that the judges who tried him are incapable of acquiring knowledge, Bourg goes on to declare them unfit to deliver a sentence on his behalf, and instead delivers his own sentence:

Vous n'êtes, compagnons, plus juges, mais bourreaux,  
Car en nous ordonnant tant de tourments nouveaux

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<sup>11</sup> Following Bourg's martyrdom, rumor quickly circulated that he had recanted before his execution at Place de Grève. Such rumors were not uncommon. Bourg was also criticized for having relied on the consolation and advice of a woman in a neighboring prison cell before fully embracing his role as martyr. Grounds for this critique were based on the fact that Bourg exhausted all of his appeals before accepting his death sentence.

Vous prêtez votre voix : votre voix inhumaine  
 Souffre peine en donnant la sentence de peine,  
 Comme à l'exécuteur le cœur s'oppose en vain  
 Au coup forcé qui sort de l'exécration main. (*Tragiques* IV.555-60)

In this accusatory speech, Bourg criminalizes the actions of judges. He begins with the familiar “ne plus... mais” formula that Aubigné employs throughout *Les Tragiques* to assign new roles to well-known figures. These judges are not judges, but rather executioners (“mais bourreaux”). According to Bourg, the innovative methods of torture (“tant de tourments nouveaux”) that the judges approve for use expose the inhumanity of France’s feigned upholders of justice (“voix inhumaine”). The literary device anadiplosis, or the repetition of part of a clause at the beginning of a successive clause, highlights the plural possessive pronoun “votre” that designates the judges’ lack of humanity. Turning to the verb-adverb pair carried over from the enjambment at line 557, the reader’s focus turns to notions of “peine”. Bourg first mentions “souffre peine,” with “peine” denoting the judge’s absence of feeling in condemning Protestants to death. At the end of this same line, Bourg repeats “peine” with “sentence de peine,” which designates the pain of the martyr. All suffering, Bourg concludes, stems from the abominable hand of justice (“exécration main”).

The final portion of Bourg’s poeticized monologue denotes political ties as the motivating factor for the judges in question, and not matters of faith. For the poet who has shown himself as fully committed to conveying the martyr’s conviction as valid and his condemnation unjust, these closing remarks are worth noting:

La crainte vous domine, ô ! Juges criminels,  
 Criminels êtes-vous, puisque vous êtes tels.  
 Vous dites que la loi du Prince publiée  
 Vous a lié les mains : l’âme n’est pas liée ;  
 Le front du juge droit, son sévère sourci  
 Dût-il souffrir ces mots : *le Roi le veut ainsi ?* (*Tragiques* IV.567-72)

Aubigné’s use of apostrophe in an emotionally charged address creates a feeling of anticipation before presenting a more precise picture of the circumstances of Bourg’s condemnation (“ô !”). Indeed, rather than addressing theological points of contention that one would expect to be the underlying motivation for imprisonment, Aubigné unravels political conflicts between Protestant-leaning members of the nobility and the Catholic King. Using figurative language to highlight this part of Bourg’s address as significant, Aubigné presents an image of judges’ hands that the law has tied together and rendered useless (“lié les mains”), which he then places in opposition to the soul that it is not tied or constrained in any way (“n’est pas liée”). Aubigné thus rebukes judges for the inefficacy that they brought upon themselves by viewing the “loi” as

more binding, or powerful, than the “âme”. Aubigné also repeats the second-person plural pronoun “vous” five times in only four lines, including an instance of anaphora in which the “vous” and “êtes” of the first clause are reversed in the second, thereby amplifying the accusatory, violent tone of Bourg’s reproach.

In Bourg’s address to the judges who tried him and ordered his execution, Aubigné’s poeticization of direct speech intensifies the martyr’s required display of conviction, as well as the accusations of unjust motivations that render his counterargument to his own condemnation all the more powerful. Aubigné, who ultimately controls Bourg’s discourse, differs from Protestant martyrologist Crespin in his use of polemical language and figures of style, as well as in his attention to how the martyr verbally resists Catholic authority, denounces the persecution of Protestants, and demonstrates his commitment to the French Reform. Having delivered his speech and shown his conviction at Place de Grève in Paris, just before Christmas in 1559, Anne du Bourg was strangled and burned.

### Constancy

When the martyrologist communicates the martyr’s conviction, it almost always entails a conflict between the steadfast beliefs of the martyr and the authorities who condemned him or her to death. A closely-related concept that is also typical of the Protestant martyrology—Crespin having prescribed it as one of the martyr’s required traits—is constancy. While conviction demonstrates an ability to argue for a faith-based cause, constancy is a firmness of mind that demonstrates the martyr’s unwavering faith. From the Latin ‘constantia’, meaning “steadiness, firmness, . . . (and) perseverance,” in ‘ancien français’ the term came to mean a “persévérance dans l’exécution d’un dessein” and a “fermeté d’âme” (“Constantia”; “Constance”). Contrary to conviction, the martyr does not need to pronounce a single word in order to effectively communicate his or her constancy.

The martyrologist often celebrates the martyr’s constancy in reference to his or her imprisonment and torture. For Crespin, the fact that condemned Protestants held true to their beliefs, especially through extreme pain and suffering, provided proof of constancy, even when they were unable to speak, exerting “an incontestable authority over the will” (Davies 56). For his sixteenth-century reader, such signs of constancy accentuated the martyr’s subjectivity. Crespin’s reader would have understood the willingness of an individual to subject himself or herself to violence as the ultimate display of subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> The martyrological trait of constancy was thus a potentially

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<sup>12</sup> Some scholars have argued the opposite. Elaine Scarry, for example, maintains that the pain of torture, rather than allowing the martyr to engage in non-verbal communication, “destroys a person’s self and world,” thus rendering subjectivity impossible (85). And while it is true that torture severely restricts sentient beings from experiencing and acting in the world just as they had done before the onset of pain,

persuasive means of garnering additional support for the French Reform or moving readers to sympathize with their cause, among other emotive possibilities.

In “Les Feux,” constancy figures as an ideal motif for Aubigné to enhance reader engagement and politicize accounts of Protestant martyrdom. Because signs of constancy are largely non-verbal, Aubigné possesses a significant degree of authorial freedom in conveying the martyr’s strength of will. His accounts create an intimate and heroic portrait of the martyr’s mental toughness and resilience. An illustrative example of Aubigné’s treatment of constancy can be found in the lengthy martyrological account of three family members, Phillipe de Gastine, Richard de Gastine, and Nicolas Croquet.

At the outset of the Gastine account, Aubigné conjures the martyrs from the dead, a tactic that is fundamentally epic and poetic, and tells readers that he aims to create a looking glass through which they may view the martyrs’ collective constancy:

Vous, Gastine et Croquet, sortez de vos tombeaux  
Ici je planterai vos chefs luisants et beaux ;  
Au milieu de vous deux je logerai l’enfance  
De votre commun fils, beau miroir de constance. (*Tragiques* IV.719-22)

Aubigné addresses the martyrs directly, calling the adults by name and asking them to rise up from their graves (“sortez de vos tombeaux”). Importantly, he makes his narrative presence known, embracing the first person singular ‘je’ to reassert his authority as poet, which is to say his complete control over the reader’s access to the past. Aubigné also confirms his intention to provide readers with an authentic, mirror-like portrait of constancy—or, as he poetically describes it, he is like the gardener who arranges (“je planterai”) glistening and beautiful leaders (“chefs luisants et beaux”) so that the readers of “Les Feux” may better perceive the luminous reflections of their constancy (“mirouer de constance”).

Aubigné chooses the youngest of the three martyrs, Richard,<sup>13</sup> to give his seventeenth-century readers their first point for reflection on constancy in this intimate and striking tableau. But before evoking the trials that Gastine endured, Aubigné addresses his imprisonment, comparing it to a kind of schooling or mental training:

Dans l’obscur prison, par les claires raisons

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*accepting* and *willingly* enduring pain for the Protestant cause and faith speaks volumes. A choice is made in accepting and enduring pain, ergo subjectivity is confirmed.

<sup>13</sup> According to Jean-Raymond Fanlo in his critical edition of *Les Tragiques*, Richard de Gastine may have been young, but it appears that he was a married man at the time of his imprisonment, and therefore not a child in the sense that Aubigné’s account leads readers to believe (538). It is only a hypothesis, but Aubigné may have portrayed him as younger than he actually was to underscore the extent to which martyrs are divinely inspired—meaning the incredible, almost unbelievable powers that their faith grants them.

Il vainquit l'obstiné, redressa le débile,  
Assuré de sa mort il prêcha l'Évangile. (*Tragiques* IV.724-26)

In the obscurity of prison (“l’obscure prison”), Aubigné tells readers, the young Gastine gained access to obscurity’s antithesis, the lights of reason (“les claires raisons”). As Aubigné’s antithetical and metaphorical light-shadow image suggests, the future martyr learned by doing, by enduring. Similarly, Aubigné denotes Gastine’s demonstrated perseverance in overcoming an obstinate force (“vainquit l’obstiné”), and that he found self-assurance in death (“Assuré de sa mort”), as well as its antithesis, life, in Reformed theology (“il prêcha l’Évangile”). For Aubigné, then, to suffer the pains of imprisonment was to learn the word of God and, importantly, develop the mental toughness characteristic of the Protestant martyr.

In addition to the connection between Gastine’s imprisonment and mental training on his path toward martyrdom, Aubigné also signals a shift in the meaning of imprisonment from punishment to freedom. This change in perspective, as Aubigné implies, is only possible through sheer willpower and is therefore proof of constancy:

La coutume rend douce une captivité,  
Nous trouvons le chemin bref à la liberté :  
L’amère mort rendra toute amertume éteinte ;  
Pour une heure de mort avoir vingt ans de crainte ! (*Tragiques* IV.775-78)

Here Aubigné integrates the notion of time with pain to render Gastine’s imprisonment an admirable experience. The terms “coutume” and “captivité” communicate a prolonged period of time, which Aubigné then juxtaposes with the image of a short path to freedom that the martyr finds in death (“le chemin bref... à la liberté”). Aubigné suggests that the pain of a bitter death is desirable in that it is relatively short-lived (“L’amère mort”), and that death allows the martyr to put a definitive end to suffering (“rendra... éteinte”). Indeed, a mere hour of pain extinguishes twenty years of fear (“une heure de mort... vingt ans de crainte”), should the martyr prove capable of finding freedom and not fear in pain.

Near the middle of this same tableau, Aubigné turns to notions of constancy while enduring the pains of torture: “S’ils vous ôtent vos yeux, vos esprits verront Dieu ; / Votre langue s’en va : le cœur parle en son lieu” (*Tragiques* IV.847-48). Aubigné highlights the martyr’s ability to assign new and positive meaning to an otherwise grim experience—that is, the constancy of Protestant martyrs was such that the prospect of having their eyes and tongues removed granted them effective communicative capacities. The removal of the eyes, Aubigné specifies, would allow the spirit to see God (“vos esprits verront Dieu”), just as the removal of tongues would allow the heart to speak in the absence of words (“le cœur parle en son lieu”). Aubigné further vivifies these already graphic descriptions by way of consonance, which creates an alluring

rhythm or tone. The repetition of the consonant ‘v’ in line 847, which carries over to line 848, has a hastening effect that Aubigné may have intended to enliven the seventeenth-century reader’s mental image of martyrs’ abilities to see and speak even after their organs of speech and hearing had been removed. By conveying the martyr’s constancy in this way, Aubigné shows evidence of wanting his seventeenth-century readers to be awed by the constancy of Protestant martyrs and the divinely-inspired powers it grants them.

After a series of tableaux in which Aubigné celebrates the three martyrs for their firmness of mind, he concludes his account on the Gastine family with a moving scene that centers on the mentality of martyrs just before death. In essence, Aubigné creates a dialogue between the young Gastine and his father in which the son, in an instance of role reversal that is commonplace in *Les Tragiques*, offers a lesson in moral strength to the older Gastine. The father opens the dialogue by expressing a deep sense of sadness and distress at the prospect of not having taught his son to die:

C’est donc en pleurs amers que j’irai au tombeau,  
 Mon fils, mon cher espoir, mais plus cruel bourreau  
 De ton père affligé : [...]
   
 [...]
   
 Regretterai-je donc le soin de te nourrir ?  
 N’as-tu pu bien vivant apprendre à bien mourir ? (*Tragiques* IV.927-29;  
 IV.931-32)

The older Gastine is understandably conflicted with regard to his duties as martyr and as father. On the one hand, he questions whether or not his own resolution to die a martyr (“j’irai au tombeau”) also makes him his son’s executioner (“mais plus cruel bourreau”). On the other hand, he questions whether or not he has fulfilled his duty as father and taught his son the skills he needed in life to properly accept death if called upon by God to die for his faith. Aubigné then juxtaposes the older Gastine’s anxieties, which he also enumerates to create anticipation, with the son’s concise but powerful response: “L’enfant rompt ces propos : ‘... mon esprit est un fourneau de feux :... Aller faire mourir la mort avec ma mort !’” (*Tragiques* IV.933 ; 940 ; 944). The young Gastine’s succinct reply, which clearly foregrounds the son’s constancy, but also his maturity that seems to exceed that of his father, makes the older Gastine’s lengthy and drawn out woes appear childish. Moreover, Aubigné has the young Gastine liken his spirit to fire and suggests that it is more powerful than death, thus further inciting feelings of astonishment over the martyr’s willpower and faith. Aubigné confirms that the son’s lesson in constancy was successful, telling readers that they walked confidently and willingly toward death. Philippe de Gastine, Richard de Gastine, and Nicolas Croquet were hung at Place de Grève in Paris in 1569 for having exercised their faith inside their home.

## Conclusion

The constancy that members of the Gastine family embody, as well as their impassioned language and articulate reflections on the trials and sufferings of martyrdom, would surely stir many readers' emotions. Aubigné, by instilling this account of martyrdom with poetic energy, and the martyrs themselves with heightened poise and zeal, creates a dynamic interaction between the reader and the flesh and blood mortar of the French Reformed Church. Aubigné brings martyrdom from a bygone era to his reader in such a way as to make this past feel urgent, like an immediate present.

Aubigné's martyrological writing, a veritable politicization of the past, is inventive in this way, yet adheres in many important respects to its source, Crespin's *Histoire des martyrs*. Indeed, a major point of interest in the present essay has been the means by which our poet draws renewed attention to the characteristic traits of Crespin's strictly-defined Protestant martyr. By focusing on these traits, it has been my aim not so much to compare the works of Aubigné and Crespin, but rather to show how the poetic overhaul of *who martyrs were at their very core*, according to the French Protestant martyrological tradition, could maximize the emotional impact of sixteenth-century accounts of martyrdom on later audiences. Aubigné's politicization of the 'saison flamboyante des martyrs', the setting ablaze of the past in the fiery pages of "Les Feux," forges an alternate version of this vital part of Protestant history and identity that his epic poem negotiates. The Gastine family, alongside Anne du Bourg and Jane Grey, appear in *Les Tragiques* as admirable and valiant heroes, crossing partisan divides and temporal boundaries to give voice to the Protestant minority and effect lasting change in how their history would thereafter be perceived.

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