Writing Martyrdom: Agrippa d’Aubigné’s Reconstruction of Sixteenth-century Martyrology

KATHERINE S. MAYNARD
Washington College

At the centre of his epic poem Les Tragiques (1616), the Huguenot poet Agrippa d’Aubigné (1552–1630) recounts the fates of several Protestant martyrs. Before embarking on this poetic martyrology, the poet faces a dilemma: which Protestant martyrs should be included in the poem and which should be excluded? How to choose? In the beginning of the fourth book of the poem, entitled “Les Feux,” the poetic narrator engages in a debate with his own conscience on this very subject. His conscience expresses concern that the poet will treat these equally-deserving Huguenot heroes unequally and for the most fleeting of reasons: the appropriateness of their names to poetic style:

J’ay peur que cette bande ainsy par toy choisie
Serve au style du siecle, et à sa Poésie
Et que les rudes noms d’un tel style ennemis
Aient entre les pareils la diffèrece mis. (33–36)

In response, the poet reassures his conscience by promising to write another work to honour God—one that we can recognize as d’Aubigné’s Histoire universelle (1618)—which will include all of the Protestant martyrs:

...je veux
Quand mes fruits seront meurs luy payer d’autres vœux,
Me livrer aux travaux de la pesante histoire
Et en prose coucher les hauts faictes de sa gloire:

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The pledge that d’Aubigné makes to himself as a writer also carries repercussions for his reader. By implicitly sending the reader of *Les Tragiques* to his future work the *Histoire universelle*, the author conjoins the two texts. This linkage coincides with recent critical assessments about the concurrent composition of *Les Tragiques* and *Histoire universelle*.³ D’Aubigné composed both works over a long period of time, but left little hard evidence of exactly when each section of each work was composed. Armand Garnier and others have long believed that the composition of *Les Tragiques* was completed well before the *Histoire universelle* (in part because of the passage in “Les Feux” cited above). More recently, André Thierry and Jean-Raymond Fanlo have argued that d’Aubigné wrote the two works together.⁴ Thierry notes that the two works complement and complete each other and suggests reading both at the same time for a more holistic approach to d’Aubigné’s writing.⁵

Interestingly enough, though, a reader of *Les Tragiques* who turns to d’Aubigné’s *Histoire universelle* to learn more about Protestant martyrs might well be disappointed. This is especially the case for the earliest martyrs, those described in chapter 10 of the second book of the *Histoire universelle*, entitled “De plusieurs martyrs jusques à l’an 1560.”⁶ Contrary to the promises of *Les Tragiques*, the names of the martyrs in this chapter, among them many of the same martyrs who figure in the first half of “Les Feux”—John Hus, Jerome of Prague, James Baynham, Jean Frith, Thomas Cranmer, Thomas Hawkes, Thomas Norris, Thomas Bilney, William Gardiner, Anne Askew, Jane Grey—do not shine more brightly than the names of kings in the *Histoire universelle*.⁷ Instead, the *Histoire universelle* is only a summary of its source text, Jean Crespin’s *Histoire des martyrs*. D’Aubigné is often forthright about his sources in the *Histoire universelle*, but, in this case, he seems to leaf through Crespin’s book as he writes.⁸ The information that d’Aubigné relates can usually be found easily in the large title headings in the *Histoire des martyrs*. These headings separate the tales of each martyr, and, with the exception of some changes with respect to geography, the author transcribes them in the exact order that Crespin placed them. What is more, the author acknowledges that Crespin’s book covers everything that he discusses in the *Histoire universelle* (“…avant l’année 1562 à laquelle ce livre touche, ce recueil contenoit ce que vous verrés au chapitre suivant”) and even attempts to excuse himself for the brevity of his own reduced work: “Ne s’offense mon Lecteur, s’il trouve mesmes choses escrites ailleurs plus generalement….”⁹ Here the word “generalement” retains its sixteenth-century definition of “completely;” it reveals the author’s awareness of the limitations of his version of events.
The references to the *Histoire des martyrs* found in chapter 10 of the *Histoire universelle* have the effect of displacing the reader of *Les Tragiques* a second time. Here the reader discovers that the real story can be found not in the *Histoire universelle* but in Crespin’s *Histoire des martyrs*. The interplay between the three works stresses the complex nature of the complementarity that exists between *Les Tragiques* and the *Histoire universelle*. While André Thierry claims that d’Aubigné’s two texts complete each other, this approach is largely illusory, as Jean Raymond Fanlo remarks:

...Même si telle allusion des *Feux* renvoie avec précision au caractère exhaustif de l’*Histoire universelle*, le martyrologe du livre 11 de l’*Histoire* n’est lui-même qu’un squelettique résumé de l’*Histoire des martyrs*, et ne saurait constituer la somme attendue...L’écart qui sépare les deux textes et que les sépare de leur modèle commun, l’*Histoire des martyrs*, accuse l’impossibilité d’une somme d’histoire ecclésiastique, politique, et poétique.11

The distance between the poem, the history, and the martyrrology gives rise to a complicated interplay between the writer and the reader, between source and derivative. As will become clear, both of d’Aubigné’s texts are more beholden to their source text, and in different ways, than to each other.

By granting the *Histoire des martyrs* a central role in both *Les Tragiques* and the *Histoire universelle*, d’Aubigné demonstrates his recognition of the authority of the work and an appreciation of the often iconographic depictions of martyrdom found within it. The *Histoire des martyrs* carried a particular weight at the moment of the composition of the *Histoire universelle* and *Les Tragiques*. Although it was a work in progress throughout the second half of the sixteenth and into the early seventeenth centuries, by the time d’Aubigné began borrowing from the *Histoire des martyrs* for his own compositions, the work, edited many times by Crespin and his continuator Simon Goulart, would have been a substantial one-volume in-folio edition.12 Whereas the smaller earlier editions of the book, published in the mid-sixteenth century, were aimed at a clandestine audience, by the end of the century the book’s larger format allowed for its display next to the Bible in Protestant households.13 This source book, then, was not just any book: it was a religious text that, while it certainly did not replace the Bible, did have a significant place in Protestant daily life.

The importance of the source text makes it all the more critical to look at d’Aubigné’s own strategies as both its reader and its re-writer. This study will concentrate on d’Aubigné’s use of the *Histoire des martyrs* as he writes about those Protestant martyrs who were executed before 1560, that is to say, the martyrs described in chapter 10 of the *Histoire universelle* and in the first half of “Les Feux” (roughly lines 61–510). Considering both the self-conscious, readerly translation of
Before writing his own martyrology in the Histoire universelle, d’Aubigné had to read his source text, but he seems to have been far from exemplary in this regard. A comparison between chapter 10 of the Histoire universelle and the original source reveals that d’Aubigné’s reading of the work can only be described as superficial and even hasty. In his edition of the Histoire universelle, André Thierry has commented on several instances in which d’Aubigné makes errors by accidentally combining two names and by listing the same martyr more than once (often due to gross misspelling). These errors become more frequent as the chapter draws to a close and the pace of the chapter accelerates. This lack of care seems to play a part in the moments when the author seems preoccupied with closing one year and moving on to the next: “Et puis de ceste annee nous n’avons que Denis Le Vair de la basse Normandie et Pierre de la Vau en Languedoc…”; “Il ne reste pour fin de l’annee que Florent Venot, Leonard Gallimard, Anne Audebert et Claude Thierry.” For all the respect d’Aubigné expresses for the source text, his chapter on martyrs reads like an (inaccurate) checklist. Naming the martyrs is something to get through rather than be relished.

The cursory summary of the text might be surprising; d’Aubigné elsewhere in the Histoire universelle often demonstrates a poetic and visual sensibility when presenting events. In chapter 10, however, the number and the scope of the martyrs take precedence over both evocative imagery and accuracy. It would, of course, be unrealistic to expect d’Aubigné’s accounts to be as detailed as Crespin’s and, if nothing else, d’Aubigné’s chapter on martyrs reveals the difficulties of reducing a vast work like the Histoire des martyrs into a shorter version. It also reveals the difficulties of transferring Crespin’s material from martyrrology to history. Faced with the task of relating the contents of all of the martyrs in the work, d’Aubigné’s choice to list the martyrs might have been the most reasonable option for him as an...
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historiographer. The *Histoire des martyrs* does not invite a cover-to-cover reading. In spite of editorial attempts to link the various martyrs together, the narrative in the *Histoire des martyrs*, the narrative of the Reform movement itself, is often obscured by the myriad tales of individual martyrs.\(^{20}\) Although its content is quite different from the vernacular commonplace books printed in the second half of the sixteenth century, Crespin’s book conforms to the conventions of a commonplace book in its presentation.\(^{21}\) The organization of the book depends on headings which announce the name of the martyr, his/her origin, and sometimes a brief description of the events that are related in the notice below. The headings, greater in size and of a different typeset than the rest of the text, impose a break between the different tales of martyrdom. They serve as an imposed conclusion to the previous tale and act as both an introduction and a quick summary to the next. This structure encourages two different types of reading. The first is to skim the headings, as d’Aubigné seems to have done while composing the *Histoire universelle*; the second is to limit the focus to a smaller number of tales of individual martyrs found under the headings, a method, as we shall see, which seems to dictate the composition of *Les Tragiques*. In the second case, the tales of martyrs do not necessarily need to be read together to be understood. Most can stand alone, outside of the original sourcebook. The *Histoire des martyrs* functions as a work that highlights individual tales more than a complete narrative; and that quality, along with the work’s length, imposes certain limitations on the historian.

The structure and length of the *Histoire des martyrs* might explain d’Aubigné’s lackluster summary of the martyrs, but I would like to argue that this summary is not the real story pertaining to martyrs in the *Histoire universelle*. The more important story focuses on the role that the martyrs and the *Histoire des martyrs* itself played in inspiring its early Protestant readership. The author’s reiteration of the content of the source book pales in comparison to his description of the ways in which the book contributed to the growth of the Reformation.\(^{22}\) For the purposes of this description, what the book does (or did) is more important than the exact details of what it says. In chapters 9 and 10 of the *Histoire universelle*, as a part of the narrative about Protestant martyrdom before 1560, d’Aubigné describes the ways in which readers reacted to the *Histoire des martyrs* and how their own experiences of reading shaped their actions. At the end of the chapter 9, which focuses on the origins of the Reformation, d’Aubigné concludes an episode on the Vaudois by explaining how this example serves to demonstrate the little sparks (“étincelles”) that led to the larger fire (“de si grand feu”) for Christians throughout Europe.\(^{23}\) The multitude and variety of the original movement (demonstrated not only by the
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Vaudois, but also by earlier examples already mentioned in the book) bolstered the courage and faith of those who followed, who found inspiration in both the number of sacrifices and the diversity of the movement: “...cette confession se vit en mesme temps signee de tant de sang, parmi tant de nations differentes à la fois.” Yet, the constancy of those who professed their faith was so incredible that even those who witnessed the events could not believe what they were seeing: “...tant de constances esmerveillables parurent, que les spectateurs mescroyent leurs yeux d’avoir vue, et les escrivains d’avoir fidellement rapporté.” The spectators, even those recounting what occurred, it seems, could not believe their own eyes; instead, textual proof of what they had seen guaranteed and confirmed the sightings:

Il advint que pour confirmer la verite de ces choses estranges, ceste Religion estant receuë principalement par les hommes de lettres, il y eut fort peu de siege de Justice en France, où il n’y eust quelque Officier favorisant ceste Doctrine : par le moyen de ceux-là, ceux qui compilerent le gros livre des Martyrs garentirent leurs rapports par les actes et procès entiers tirés des greffes....

For these spectators, seeing was not believing, at least not in and of itself: the spectacle of martyrdom needed to be reinforced and confirmed by the text, in this case, by a specific and sanctioned text, the *Histoire des martyrs*, which had the benefit of being based in juridical truth.

This passage reveals a paradoxical circularity of how “truth” is made. The miraculous nature of martyrdom, with its “constances esmerveillables,” casts doubt on its own validity; Crespin’s text (among others) is a necessary reinforcement to “confirmer la verite de ces choses estranges.” But, of course, the juridical truth, carefully preserved by these partisans of Protestantism at work in the judicial system and meticulously recorded by Crespin, is first and foremost established by the eyewitness experience. As André Tournon and others have demonstrated, the eyewitness experience was essential to determining guilt and innocence in both civic and criminal cases in Early Modern France; it was in fact a key way of determining the truth. As configured by d’Aubigné, the *Histoire des martyrs*, with the care in which it recorded witness testimonial and legal proceedings, not only stands as proof of the martyrdoms it reports; during the years of its composition, as the numbers of martyrs increased, it also rendered credible the martyrdoms that took place outside its pages. For those who observed the final moments of the martyrs, the *Histoire des martyrs* preserved truth, both juridical and religious, for early Protestants.

The poet-historian returns again to the subject of the impact of written martyrologies including Crespin’s book at the end of chapter 10 as he pauses to reflect on the effect that the martyrs held on their spectators: “Ceux de toutes les grandes
villes voyoyent à l’oeil tous les jours de quoi adjouster foi aux nouvelles et livres qui leur racontoyent les choses esloignees, si bien que de ces cendres devint une poudre menue qui s’espandit en beaucoup de lieux.28 Here, the process described in chapter 9 seems to be reversed: d’Aubigné evokes a circularity that points to the interdependence of reading (i.e. written accounts of martyrdom) and seeing (i.e. viewing an actual scene of martyrdom). Whereas chapter 9 claimed that the spectators of martyrdom needed Jean Crespin’s book to serve as proof that what they had just seen was indeed real, the spectators described in chapter 10 believe what they read in books because they have seen something similar themselves. The pre-1560 reader of the Histoire des martyrs experienced two levels of eyewitness accounts: one, an immediate, personal vision of the martyr on the scaffold, and the other, a documented chronicle of other accounts that lent power and credence to her own firsthand experience.

This reader is not the same kind of witness as the martyr himself. The etymology of the word “martyr” (from the Greek martys meaning “witness”) reminds us that the martyrs themselves are witnesses to their faith. In their case, witnessing is thus both juridical and symbolic. The martyr is in fact a witness to God’s greatness within the worldly legal system and without: “Il faut la sentence du mauvais juge pour que le martyre des justes soit validé.”29 This initial act of witnessing is necessary for those who follow and it is, of course, the raison d’être of Crespin’s martyrology, which is largely a compilation of witness testimonial of things seen, as Frank Lestringant has noted.30 Initially, for those who observe the martyrs, witnessing amounts to being there. Yet, the act of witnessing a martyr will ultimately be mediated by the text. First, the miraculous lived experience of being present during the martyr’s demise is confirmed textually with other, similar examples; later, this same lived experience will eventually become text itself. As a result, as d’Aubigné himself describes, textual production and proliferation become essential to Protestant martyrologies.31

Yet, in chapter 10 of the Histoire universelle—as d’Aubigné the historian describes the miraculous effects of these early Protestant martyrs and the texts that preserved their tales—the experience of witnessing martyrdom is a thing of the past. The majority of Protestant martyrs were executed during the most significant expansion of the Reformed movement in Europe, toward the end of the reign of François I and during the reign of Henri II.32 As d’Aubigné reads and re-writes the Histoire des martyrs at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century, he does so with a sense of nostalgia. The community once united and energized by the acts of the martyrs has lost the momentum described in the Histoire universelle.33 D’Aubigné’s readers no longer had access to the eyewitness experience that was so
powerful to the first readers of the *Histoire des martyrs*. Only the textual traces of the experience remained.

Situated well in the past, the tales of these first Protestant victims in the *Histoire universelle* seem to respond to the didactic goal expressed in the author’s preface to the work: “…rendons venerable notre genre d’escrire, puisqu’il a de commun avec le Theologien d’instruire l’homme à bien faire et non à bien causer.” This stated goal of the history emphasizes the importance of doing (faire) over speaking (causer), and it betrays a hope on the part of the author to move his readership to action. Yet, as we have seen in d’Aubigné’s own description of the effects of martyrdom, writings about these martyrs were not enough to move their readership to action. Texts about martyrs seem able to function only in a context where the text is accompanied by a reality and vice versa.

To be moved to action, the readers were in need of a witness experience as well as a text, an experience, as we shall see, that in some ways is provided by the *Histoire universelle*’s sometime complement, *Les Tragiques*.

**LIKE THE HISTOIRE UNIVERSELLE, Les Tragiques** records the flagging energy of the Protestant movement at the turn of the century. The first page of the notice “Aux Lecteurs” expresses this lack of energy through the demands of its (imagined) future readers: “Nous sommes ennuyéz de livres qui enseignent, donnez-nous en pour esmouvoir, en un siecle où tout zèle Chrestien est pery…” The zèle that the martyrs inspired in the early days of the Protestant movement has been lost, and d’Aubigné’s alter ego, the *Larron Promethee*, promises to deliver *Les Tragiques* to the public in hopes of reviving it. Within *Les Tragiques*, the tales of the martyrs play a key role in the revival. The *Histoire universelle* describes how those communities who experienced martyrdom in their own towns found confirmation and courage in the stories that they read in Crespin and thus were moved to unite as a community of suffering. The tales of the martyrs in “Les Feux” serve to re-create an eyewitness experience for those who are deprived of real life scenes of martyrdom.

From the first line, “Voicy marcher de rang par la porte sacree…Les vainqueurs de Sion…” (vv. 1–3), d’Aubigné stages the scenes of martyrdom he presents, weaving deictic elements into his accounts and introducing the book as “un tableau pour exemple” (v. 22). At certain points, the reader is configured as the main viewer, for instance, when d’Aubigné introduces James Baynham: “Là on vid un Bainan” (v. 91). In other instances, the reader is invited to follow the gaze of God himself: “Dieu vid en mesme temps…deux precieux tableaux/ deux spectacles piteux, mais specieux et
beaux” (vv. 147–52); “Mais l’œil du Tout-puissant fut en fin ramené/ aux spectacles d’Europe, il la vid…” (vv. 347–49). Jean-Raymond Fanlo, when commenting on the first group of martyrs that appear in “Les Feux,” has quite accurately noted that “on comprend que les premiers tableaux de Feux puissent se passer de discours: la description parle, et, pour le lecteur comme pour le spectateur, l’œil écoute.”

While many studies focus on the visual aspects of d’Aubigné’s writing, specifically, his use of enargeia, it is important to note that “Les Feux” creates a series of descriptions that appeal to different senses, recreating an entire sensory experience. These descriptions require a usage of the Histoire des martyrs that differs greatly from d’Aubigné’s use of the same source in the Histoire universelle. There is, as in the case of the Histoire universelle, a reduction in the amount of information borrowed from the source. In a strategic fashion, the poet tends to cut out most of the material devoted to each martyr in the Histoire des martyrs, most often focusing on only one page of the tale of the martyr (usually the last or the penultimate page of the notice). In the Histoire universelle, d’Aubigné aims for a complete list of martyrs; in Les Tragiques, he selects instead passages that offer the most potential for vivid imagery. Whereas Crespin includes details about the martyr’s life and deeds that lead up to the final moments, d’Aubigné’s translations focus on the moment of death and draw the reader into the realm of esmouvoir.

The passages devoted to the martyrdoms of Anne Askew and Jane Grey serve as examples of how the author of Les Tragiques strives to create a moving sensorial experience from the pages of the Histoire des martyrs. Askew and Grey are the first two martyrs discussed at length in “Les Feux,” with 104 lines devoted to Askew (vv. 153–257) and 77 lines to Grey (vv. 207–80) and, even more remarkably, they are the first martyrs to speak. Both women also receive substantial notices in the Histoire des Martyrs, where their tales are accompanied by several pages of documents and accounts of their interrogations. In the case of Askew, d’Aubigné omits the letters found in the Histoire des Martyrs in which Askew discusses issues of doctrine. His interest lies not in historical or doctrinal accuracy as much as in the figure of courage and constancy Askew portrays, “Oeil fiché au ciel” (v. 169). The poet cuts and adds to Crespin’s original account to better set the scene: he condenses the long original interrogation on doctrine (during which Askew proves herself to be versed in the Bible and in Protestant beliefs) and the lengthy account of her imprisonment into a graphic retelling of the tortures that Askew’s captors forced her to undergo. While the future martyr remains silent, the reader is asked to hear the sounds of the torture:
The speech that Askew pronounces as the flames devour her, in which she proclaims death’s powerlessness over her, reads like a tragic soliloquy and offers something else for the reader/spectator to hear:

Où est ton aiguillon? Où est ce grand effort?  
O Mort, où est ton bras? (disoit elle à la mort). (195–96)

In the act of reading, the reader has seen and heard the martyr’s final hours, becoming the eyes and ears of justice.

In his re-telling of the martyrdom of Lady Jane Grey, d’Aubigné develops in detail the physical aspects of Grey’s final moments. As is the case for Askew’s portrait, there is another substantial and strategic reduction of the source text. In Crespin’s Histoire des martyrs, the section devoted to Lady Jane Grey’s martyrdom includes many documents: a transcription of a theological discussion between Lady Grey and Dr. Feckham, the abbot of Westminster; a copy of a letter she wrote to a former tutor who had lost his way; a note that Grey wrote in a copy of the Greek New Testament for her sister; a transcription of the words she uttered when she was led to her death; an account of her final moments; and finally, a letter that she wrote to a guard at the Tower of London. Of all the documents presented in Histoire des martyrs, only the account of the execution and a few lines of the letter to the guard are retained in Les Tragiques. The editing eliminates the discussion of the political circumstances surrounding Grey’s execution—as well as the rudimentary discussion of Protestant doctrine that occurs when Grey talks to Feckham.

If d’Aubigné’s account of Anne Askew’s martyrdom focuses on the sight and sounds of her last moments, Jane Grey’s martyrdom emphasizes the sense of touch. The poem describes Grey’s small, delicate and feminine hands, “ses mains et maigres et menües” (v. 229), “ses main nües” (v. 230), in contrast with her masculine courage: her “Coeur plus que d’homme” and compares her modesty to Julius Caesar’s. These delicate hands write a text that has the power to convert her persecutors:

Ces doigts victorieux ne graverent cecy  
En cire seulement, mais en l’esprit aussy:  
Et faut que son geolier captif de la captive  
Bien tost à la mesme cause, et mesme fin la suive. (251–54)

If Jane Grey has a magic touch, though, she also has the right to refuse to be touched physically by others:
Achevant ces presents l’executeur vilain
Pour la joindre au posteau voulut prendre sa main :
Elle eut horreur de rompre encor la modestie
Qui jusqu’au beau mourir orna sa belle vie :
Elle apprehenda moins la mort et le couteau
Que le salle toucher d’un infame bourreau. (255–60)

The emphasis on the sense of touch in Jane Grey’s story counterbalances the emphasis on hearing in Anne Askew’s story. With the inclusion of these other senses, the effect of these accounts on the reader goes beyond the visual.

Askew and Grey are not exceptional to “Les Feux”: many of the martyrs’ tales, particularly those that depict the group of martyrs mentioned early in Les Tragiques (Hus, Wycliff, Baynham, Frith, Cranmer, to name a few), appeal to the senses of the reader. Thus the “images bien connues” of the martyrdom of Hus and Jerome of Prague (vv. 61–72) constitute a narrative punctuated by such vivid visual elements as the two martyrs who are dragged through the streets wearing paper crowns. Yet the account also appeals to the reader’s sense of smell by evoking decomposing bodies, “le puant monceau des charongnes des grands” (v. 69). Other scenes appeal to the sense of touch, like the descriptions of the cold and hunger of “Gerard et sa bande” (vv. 77–84) who walk naked through the streets of London in the dead of winter. Similarly, Thomas Norris is depicted as making the trek to his site of execution barefoot on a path of thorns. Other accounts rely heavily both on visual elements and on the aural qualities that are brought to the fore with d’Aubigné’s use of wordplay and homonyms. An oft-cited example is Thomas Hawkes (in French, “Haux”), whose martyrdom is one of both sight and sound, and whose name forges a cratylistic link with his deeds. While including visual elements, these descriptions go beyond the scope of sight. The act of reading is not just about seeing either the text itself or the images it evokes. Reading also includes hearing, feeling, and smelling. In essence, “Les Feux” offers a textual approximation of reliving the experience.

“Les Feux” is a result of the transformative process that takes place when Jean Crespin’s presentation of these martyrs, which relies on documents and eyewitness testimony, undergoes d’Aubigné’s sensorial re-writing. Through the increased attention to the sensorial experience, d’Aubigné asks his reader to become a new kind of witness: a textual witness. It is important to recall that the testimony of a witness in sixteenth-century France was based on all sensorial experiences, not just on sight. In his treatise on witnesses, De Tractatus de testibus et eorum reprobatione (1568), Nelli presents the fundamental rule of witness testimony as including all of the senses: “le témoin doit déclarer ce qu’il a perçu physiquement, en spécifiant le ou les sens
par lesquels s’est effectuée la perception: j’ai vu, j’ai entendu, j’ai touché....”46 In the beginning of the 1564 *Actes des martyrs*, Crespin suggests that martyrdom can be experienced, seen and heard, by reading:

> Si on veut donc d’un vray profit jouyr,  
> Ce n’est assez, & de voir & d’ouyr,  
> Car au penser est l’utilité toute.  
> Et qui se vient en ce lieu addresser,  
> Pour voir, ouyr, & non pour y penser,  
> Voyant, oyant, il ne voit, & n’oit goutte.47

Reflection is the true requirement of understanding the acts of the martyrs; a believer does not need to be present physically to see and hear. If understood properly, the text can stand in for the witness experience.48 Indeed, the text might even contribute to the reader’s understanding by organizing and analyzing material in a coherent way. On this point, d’Aubigné seems far more hesitant. While he often configures himself as a witness in the context of his *Histoire universelle*, his own “avantage naturel” as an historian is the fact that he has been present at so many of the events he recounts as a “veritable tesmoin des yeux et des oreilles” for his history.49 The fact that he has been there, that he has seen certain events that he describes, grants him the authority to write. Perhaps correspondingly, he intentionally describes events that are closer to the present in more detail, instead of events that occurred in the past:

> J’ai osé generaliser mon Histoire, m’attachant avec expressitude aux choses plus proches de temps et de lieu ; aux esloignees plus legerement. Me soit en cela autant permis qu’aux peintres, qui n’oublient aucune proportion ni symmetrie dans le cœur de leurs tableaux ; et tracent dedans les bords les rapports et circonstances à petits traits non mesurez.50

In “Les Feux,” however, the poet brings these events of the past into focus; the past becomes present experience. What is more, the poet, unlike the historian, demonstrates to the reader how these events should be interpreted. As Catherine Randall Coats has noted, “D’Aubigné mandates the response he desires, and ensures that he will obtain that response by only using material designed to provoke it.”51 The reader of “Les Feux,” as a reader-witness to the martyrdoms that occurred decades before, experiences these martyrdoms in a contradictory way; they are at once mediated by the poet’s choices and interpretation and presented as the real thing, a first-hand encounter with the past.
BY FINDING INSPIRATION in the key moments of his source and turning those moments into powerful vignettes that appeal to the senses of the reader, d’Aubigné creates an unusual accompaniment to *Histoire des martyrs*. As we have seen, in the beginning of “Les Feux” the poet implicitly sends his reader to his own work, the *Histoire universelle*. If the conscientious reader of the *Histoire universelle*, guided by the author’s lead, will find his or her way back to the *Histoire des martyrs*, a Protestant reader in the early seventeenth century would have already been familiar with d’Aubigné’s source. It might seem far-fetched to imagine a reader looking at the *Histoire des martyrs* and the poem side-by-side, but it is reasonable to imagine that the episodes described in the *Histoire des martyrs*, by virtue of the book’s multiple editions and its status as a nearly canonical text, were easily accessible to a reader of “Les Feux” in the early seventeenth century. Even if a reader did not own a copy of the text, he or she might carry in his or her memory an imprint of the tales told in Crespin’s book.

If the *Histoire des martyrs* and “Les Feux” are considered side-by-side, though, as d’Aubigné himself might have done, a curious pattern appears. When located in a later edition of the *Histoire des martyrs*, d’Aubigné’s borrowings for “Les Feux” follow a loose organization. The *Histoire des martyrs* is divided into books (*livres*). Within the books from which d’Aubigné uses source material for the pre-1562 martyrs who appear in “Les Feux,” his choices often seem to be dictated by the location of the martyr within the book. In books II, IV, and V, d’Aubigné selects martyrs listed consecutively in the books, and usually selects a few martyrs from the beginning of the book, one from the middle, and then a small group of martyrs at the end. Not only does this pattern contrast with the all-encompassing structure of the *Histoire universelle*; it reveals a contrary pattern of reading. On the one hand, this pattern makes the author look like a lazy reader, like someone who is merely skimming the book for the good parts. On the other, d’Aubigné’s poetic depictions of the martyrs fit into the *Histoire des martyrs* like illustrations. The moments that d’Aubigné chooses to describe are spread out fairly evenly throughout the book and touch upon some of the most striking moments in Crespin’s very long text. On their own, d’Aubigné’s vignettes recreate a sensory experience rhetorically in order to move the reader of *Les Tragiques*. When the vignettes are read with the *Histoire des martyrs*, they serve as rhetorical illustrations for the source book itself, much like woodcuts that appeared in the *Histoire des martyrs*’ English counterpart, John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*.

In Foxe’s book, a large number of the woodcuts are narrative in nature and provide a pictorial accompaniment to the individual tales of martyrs, reflecting the
specific narrative of the martyr they depict. These are often the same narrative moments on which d’Aubigné focuses in “Les Feux.” In fact, of the first sixteen individually-named martyrs described in the first part of “Les Feux” (vv. 61–318), twelve of them appear as woodcuts in the 1570 edition of the Acts and Monuments. In this edition of Foxe’s work (which coincidentally saw a tripling in the number of illustrations when compared to the previous edition), 149 illustrations are found in the book’s 2,300 pages; thus, only a fraction of the martyrs’ tales were illustrated. The fact that so many of d’Aubigné’s martyrs exist as illustrations in Foxe is certainly worthy of note, in particular since there are also many correspondences between the ways in which both authors depict martyrs. Both Foxe’s illustrators and d’Aubigné treat the burning of Wycliffe’s bones, John Hus in a paper hat, Bilney thrusting his hand into a candle, and James Baynham walking barefoot. Both also illustrate the burnings of John Frith, Anne Askew, William Gardiner, Thomas Hawkes, and Thomas Cranmer. It would be irresponsible to explain this overlap with the suggestion that d’Aubigné was inspired by Foxe’s book (or that he even had access to it). Instead, d’Aubigné and Foxe’s aesthetic choices reveal a developing iconography related to specific martyrs, a similar attraction to prominent martyrs, and a sensibility for tales with illustrative potential.

Aston and Ingram have described the function of Foxe’s woodcuts as “…part of the authenticating process: picture verifies adjacent text; there is a ‘go and see for yourself’ challenge to doubters.” But if, as Aston and Ingram seem to suggest, the image renders the text more immediate, the later readers of Foxe’s book, like those of Crespin’s, no longer had opportunities to “go and see” for themselves. According to the descriptions of martyrdom in the Histoire universelle, an early (pre-1562) reader of the Histoire des martyrs could only believe the miracle of martyrdom if his/her eyewitness experience was seconded by its textual accompaniment or vice versa. This combination was critical to the momentum of the Protestant movement. In the case of Foxe’s later readers, the picture and the text had to suffice as an approximation of an eyewitness experience. The narrative woodcuts replaced the visual and sensory component of that experience. Similarly, the martyrdoms of “Les Feux,” rewritten in a context where observing the act of martyrdom belongs to the past, function within the framework established in the Histoire universelle. “Les Feux” attempts to replace the true eyewitness experience and to combine it with the source text to move and mobilize those who read it. Instead of being paired directly with the Histoire universelle, “Les Feux” becomes more poignant and evocative when read with its actual source, the Histoire des martyrs. The author of the Histoire universelle marvels at the effects of the Histoire des martyrs; the poet of “Les Feux” strives to
recreate those effects and to reactivate the message that the earlier martyrs spread so efficaciously. In the years after its initial publication, at a moment when readers could not personally witness martyrdom, the *Histoire des martyrs* could benefit from a visual accompaniment, or even better, the kind of sensory accompaniment that “Les Feux” offers.

It is important to recall that the presence of illustrations in Foxe’s book is quite exceptional for a mid-century martyrology. Jean Crespin’s book exemplifies instead “the discernible movement against the illustration of religious books” spearheaded by John Calvin in the mid-sixteenth century. Such illustrations represented a danger that Crespin knew how to avoid:

> Crespin avait averti le lecteur du danger d’idolâtrie : l’*Histoire des Martyrs* n’est pas un reliquaire destiné à susciter la dévotion des fidèles ; c’est une parole vivante recueillie de la bouche même des agonisants et immortalisée par l’écriture. Pas d’illustration, sauf au frontispice ; pas même ces vignettes un peu raides et répétitives qui scandent à la manière d’une litanie le *Book of Martyrs* de John Foxe…

Without the woodcuts, however, Crespin’s book lacks a major component of its potential effect. If Foxe’s work “owes its polemical force to the combined witness of word and woodcut,” the witness experience for the readers of Crespin ends when there is a lack of new martyrs. If d’Aubigné’s representations of martyrs in “Les Feux” have the effect of supplementing his unadorned source, he, like Crespin, avoids the pitfalls of images by translating sensory experiences into words. In this, d’Aubigné arguably does Foxe one better by evoking a spectrum of sensations in “Les Feux”; the effect for which he strives would create a more complete and reliable sensation of “being there” for his readership.

D’Aubigné’s writings on martyrs stand as compelling proof that “Early Modern martyrologists are aware that they must foster particular methods of reading and interpretation in order to render their martyrs persuasive.” As a writer of both history and poetry, d’Aubigné provides evidence of two different readings of the same source text. In the *Histoire universelle*, d’Aubigné is a student of the effects of martyrologies. He demonstrates how the *Histoire des martyrs* reinforced the actual witness experiences of its readership, giving a sense of community and purposefulness to early Protestants. In “Les Feux,” d’Aubigné demonstrates that he has not only read Crespin’s martyrology, but that he is capable of mimicking its effect on his own readership. Together d’Aubigné the poet and Crespin the martyrologist preserve a witness experience that serves to confirm and renew the Protestant faith. By temporarily resuscitating Jean Crespin’s martyrs, d’Aubigné remains true to his own goals, and to Crespin’s.
Notes

1. I am indebted to both the Folger Shakespeare Library and Washington College for their generous support toward the composition of this article.

2. All quotations from *Les Tragiques* come from Jean-Raymond Fanlo's edition of the work Agrippa d’Aubigné’s *Les Tragiques* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1995), vol.1. Unless otherwise noted, the verse numbers after each quotation refer to verses in “Les Feux,” the fourth book of the poem. Fanlo’s text of reference is Manuscript T 158 of *Les Tragiques*, found in the Archives Tronchin at the Bibliothèque publique et universitaire in Geneva. This manuscript appears to be the last version that d’Aubigné worked on before his death. There exist some variants between the manuscript and the two earlier printed editions (1616 and 1627?), but for the arguments presented here, the effects of the variants are minimal. A complete discussion of the editions and variants can be found in the second volume of Fanlo’s edition of *Les Tragiques* (pp. 745–789).

3. In the case of both works, the dates of publication do not indicate the dates of composition. *Les Tragiques* was not published until 1616, but d’Aubigné claims to have begun composing the poem after being injured at the battle of Casteljaloux in 1577. In addition, d’Aubigné talks about *Les Tragiques* in Book xii1 of the *Histoire universelle*, in a section on the impact of Protestant writings in the year 1593. André Thierry draws the conclusion that “Il faut donc penser que des copies manuscrites de ce qui était rédigé furent diffusées un quart de siècle plus tôt.” See volume 7 of his edition of the *Histoire universelle* (1626) (Geneva: Droz, 1981), p. 291. As for the composition of the *Histoire universelle*, d’Aubigné seems to have started early drafts in 1588, publishing it for the first time in 1618. Lack of documentation makes it difficult to establish exactly when the author wrote each section of his two works; Jean-Raymond Fanlo offers his hypotheses throughout second volume of his edition of *Les Tragiques*.


7. Because the spelling of the names of the martyrs tends to be irregular in d’Aubigné’s work and in his source, the *Histoire des martyrs*, I have chosen to return to the English spellings for English martyrs.

8. In this case, d’Aubigné might have used books II through VIII of any post-1582 edition of the *Histoire des martyrs*. In the 1582 edition, the first edition where Simon Goulart served as editor, the book was rearranged to have ten books, with a new first book about the origins of the Reformation. The order of the martyrs differs slightly from earlier editions, and in each case where there exists a discrepancy between earlier editions (for instance, the 1564 edition) and the post-1582 editions, d’Aubigné follows the later editions. For simplicity’s sake, unless otherwise noted, citations and references to *Histoire des martyrs* here will be based on the 1884 edition: Jean Crespin, *Histoire des martyrs persecutez et mis à mort pour la verité de l’Evangile* (1619), ed. Daniel Benoit and Matthieu Lelièvre, 3 vols. (Toulouse: Société des Livres religieux, 1885–1889).


12. The project began somewhat modestly: Crespin published the first two books in 1554, and then added a third (1556), a fourth (1561), and then a fifth before compiling them together for the first time in the seven-book 1564 edition. See Jean-François Gilmont, *Jean Crespin: Un éditeur réformé au xvi è siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 1981), pp. 174–6. The last edition he oversaw directly was the 1570 edition, which had grown to eight books. Simon Goulart published his first continuation of the work in 1582. That edition counts ten books; a later 1597 edition by Goulart contains twelve. The edition that is most widely available to us, an 1884 reprint of the 1619 edition by Daniel Benoit and Matthieu Lelièvre, is not dramatically different from the one d’Aubigné would have used. As we have seen, there has been some debate over the exact edition d’Aubigné might have used since none of the studies of his libraries have revealed a copy of the work, but any of the later editions of the work would have offered a similar experience of reading.


14. Indeed, d’Aubigné’s use of his source offer a window into the process of constructive reading described by Neil Rhodes and Jonathan Sawday: “…it was the very multiplicity of printed books that rapidly schooled their readers in how to read. The reader had to learn how to participate in the construction of a text, searching it in ways that the author might never have anticipated, yoking ideas together which were to be located at different points in the work…. ” See Rhodes and Sawday, “Introduction: Im-

15. Garnier thinks that d’Aubigné’s treatment of the martyrology reveals that it was read poorly, “lu d’ailleurs très hativement et résumé un peu à la diable” (p. 203).


19. Amy Graves has demonstrated, for instance, the ways in which d’Aubigné applies both dramatic and painterly techniques to create historical tableaux in his account of the Saint Bartholomew’s Day massacre, in “Memory, Tragedy and History: The Poetics of Agrippa d’Aubigné’s Account of the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre,” Renaissance Journal 2.4 (2005), pp. 30–48.


21. Ann Moss notes that gathering information under heads was the most prominent practice of the commonplace-book: “The feature that distinguished the commonplace-book from any random collection of quotations was the fact that the selected extracts were gathered together under heads” (Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996], p. v). She also suggests that commonplace book had far-reaching effects on the “arrangement and presentation of printed books...designed to sell in a more popular market” (p. 210). It can be argued, I think, that the ubiquity of such works on the market created a set of readerly expectations with respect to this particular format.

22. Nikki Shepardson has studied the overall effect of martyrologies on Protestant communities: “While these collections held the martyrs as examples of correct behavior in the face of persecution, they also described the persecution and ensuing martyrdoms as evidence of God’s favour and aid. Within the pages of the martyrologies, the martyrs’ faithfulness served to edify the community. But most importantly, the martyrs’ public profession of faith, which displayed their convictions above all worldly ties, strengthen and emboldened the ‘cause’ and the new community in its struggle to survive and grow.” (“The Rhetoric of Martyrdom and the Anti-Nicodemite Discourses in France, 1550–1570,” Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme 27.3 [2003], p. 38).


24. D’Aubigné, Histoire universelle, vol. 1, p. 206. Daniel Ménager remarks that d’Aubigné does not distinguish the Albigensians from the Vaudois, seeing them as two branches of the same movement. See his “Les origines de la Réforme d’après les premiers cha-


33. The author’s preface indicates that the dates of the Histoire universelle largely correspond to the life of Henri IV (1553–1610). Henri is in many ways the inspiration for the Histoire universelle: “Je commence mon œuvre à la naissance de Henri quatriesme, justement surnommé le Grand…” (vol. 1, p. 10). Henri’s actions are the basis for the Histoire universelle, a fact that the author stresses as he recounts an early exchange he had with the king where he implored Henri: “Sire, commencez de faire et je commencerai d’escrire” (d’Aubigné, Histoire universelle, vol. 1, p.11).

34. Lestringant refers to the era of the martyrs as “l’âge d’or de l’Église combattante, que symbolise la floraison des bûchers allumés dans toute l’Europe,” in La cause de martyrs, p. 88.


37. This study is certainly not the first to consider d’Aubigné’s use of tableaux in Les Tragiques. Michel Jeanneret suggests that d’Aubigné’s tableaux have little to do with the pictorial, and represent instead “la recherche d’une norme, la quête de l’intelligible” (“Les tableaux spirituels d’Agrippa d’Aubigné,” Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance 35 [1973], p. 236). Similarly, while explaining the paradox of the image in d’Aubigné’s work, Olivier Pot describes the tableaux as having a taxonomic function, serving more as models or examples than as visual components. See his “Les tableaux des Tragiques ou le paradoxe de l’image,” in Poétiques d’Aubigné, pp. 103–34. Both studies rely on a neo-Platonic schema to explain the existence of the tableaux, as does Daniel Ménager’s article “Calvin et d’Aubigné: vocation prophétique et vocation poétique,” Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme 11.1 (1987), pp. 15–28. Ménager insists more than the others on the fact that d’Aubigné’s use of imagery is inconsistent with his Protestantism. Other studies of note pertaining to the deictic


40. Woman and child martyrs are favourites of d’Aubigné. He even depicts Richard de Gastines as a boy (“Les Feux” 721–944), although he was an adult when martyred.


43. Jean-Raymond Fanlo has discussed the role of the hand in the passage as well: “Toute la fin du supplice va être une variation sur le motif de la main et une célébration de ses pouvoirs expressifs....” (*Tracés, Ruptures*, p. 387).


45. The passage has been discussed at length by both Frank Lestringant (*Agrippa d’Aubigné, Les Tragiques* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986], p. 87) and by Olivier Pot, who demonstrates how the name of this martyr serves d’Aubigné’s rhetorical strategies (“Les tableaux des *Tragiques* ou le paradoxe de l’image,” p. 118).

46. As quoted in Tournon, p. 136.

47. This poem appears at the beginning of the 1564 edition found at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington (Jean Crespin, *Actes des martyrs deduits en sept livres, depuis le temps de Wviclef & de Hus, jusques à present. Contenans un recueil de vraie Histoire Ecclesiastique, De ceux qui ont constamment enduré la mort és dernier temps, pour la verité du Fils de Dieu.* [Geneva: L’ancre de Jean Crespin, 1564]). Andrea Frisch had noted that in this passage “hearing and seeing a martyrdom, whether in person or via the written record, does not suffice; one must contemplate that to which the martyr’s testimony refers....” (*The Invention of the Eyewitness* [Chapel Hill University of North Carolina, Department of Romance Languages, 2004], p. 145).

48. Frisch has noted that this phenomenon occurs in part as the text begins to take precedence over the oral deposition in sixteenth-century legal proceedings. She mentions, for instance, that in his accounts of the New World, Crespin’s contemporary Jean de Léry “...executes...a testimony whose end is to put the witness’s experiences before our eyes, so that we may also see what the witness has seen” (Frisch, p. 131).

51. Coats, p. 123.
52. In later editions, the books serve as chapters, not as separate volumes, but before 1564 the books were sometimes published separately as “parties.”
53. For instance, from Crespin’s book II, d’Aubigné selects the first martyrs, Wycliff (vol. 1, 103–113), William Thorp (vol. 1, 115–134), Jan Hus (vol. 1, 137–185), and Jerome of Prague (vol. 1, 185–196), skipping over just a few pages in between. Crespin devotes several pages to each, providing ample material for the poet. The rest of book II is largely ignored (with the exception of the account of Thomas Norris) until its end when one finds a handful of martyrs that also appear in “Les Feux”—Bilney (vol. 1, p. 279), Baynham (vol. 1, pp. 282–283), and Frith (vol. 1, pp. 299–294). A similar pattern is repeated in book IV where the number of martyrs increases and individuals become less distinct. The poet chooses the fourteen from Meaux (vol. 1, pp. 493–500) and then, after skipping short passages on Pierre Bon-pain and Roger of Norfolk, finds Anne Askew on the next page (vol. 1, pp. 501–513) along with her four followers (vol. 1, pp. 513–514). He selects a consecutive batch of martyrs from the centre of the book (Gardiner [vol. 1, pp. 581–585]) and the five from Lyons including Alba (vol. 1, pp. 585–597)). Then the poet skips 125 pages until he reaches the penultimate martyrs in the book, Louis de Marsac and his cousin (vol. 1, pp. 725–736). The exception to this pattern in book IV is Florent Venot (vol. 1, p. 540).
54. Other illustrations are more generic and could correspond to any number of martyr tales. Ruth Samson Luborsky, among others, has identified three categories of woodcuts found in Foxe: larger cuts that reflect the narrative, smaller non-narrative repetitive cuts of martyrs, and finally marker cuts, those that connote a change in subject matter or a summary of a previous section. See Luborsky, “The Illustrations: Their Pattern and Plan,” in John Foxe: An Historical Perspective, ed. David Loades (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 67.
55. Deborah Burks, “Polemical Potency: The Witness of the Word and Woodcut,” in John Foxe and His World, ed. Christopher Highley and John N. King (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 263. In fact, most of the martyrs that d’Aubigné describes in Les Tragiques were illustrated in Foxe’s earlier editions as well. I have chosen to focus on the 1570 edition of the Acts and Monuments because it marks a definitive development in the use of woodcuts in Foxe. Its 105 woodcuts (which appear in 150 occurrences since some woodcuts were used more than once in an edition) doubled the number of woodcuts from the 1563 edition, and set a standard for the editions to follow (Luborsky, “The Illustrations: Their Pattern and Plan,” p. 69). A complete catalogue of the images in Foxe can be found in Ruth Samson Luborsky and Elizabeth Morley Ingram, A Guide to English Illustrated Books (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998), vol. 1.
56. None of the documents left to us about d’Aubigné’s library mentions either Crespin’s or Foxe’s book. These catalogs were composed at the moment of the poet’s death in 1630, however, and d’Aubigné probably left most of his books behind when he fled


58. Andrew Pettegree, “Illustrating the Book: A Protestant Dilemma,” in *John Foxe and His World*, p. 134. Pettegree notes that “Genevan publishing houses were obliged to eschew any sort of narrative illustration: the popular Genesis, Exodus and Apocalypse cycles that adorn Lyon bibles are nowhere to be seen” (pp. 143–144).


60. Burks, p. 263.