

Leseprobe

LA CONFESSION CATHOLIQUE DU SIEUR DE SANCY:

THE SWAN SONG OF THE ZEALOUS PROTESTANTS

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When Henri III died under the knife of Jacques Clément in 1589, Henri de Bourbon, the king of Navarre and the chief of the Protestants, suddenly became king of France. But he was not accepted as such by all his subjects, for many considered that the king had to be Catholic. He had to fight to gain the confidence of the French and make the rebel towns surrender. Years later, Paris still had not given in. So, eventually, Henri IV finally had to convert to Catholicism in 1593, so as to become the legitimate king of all his subjects. He was crowned in 1594. Many people, both Protestants and Catholics, decided to support him, believing that peace was what mattered most, and that it could not be reached without conceding this token of conversion to the people.

Therefore, for the sake of security, not to mention self-interest, many Protestants converted to Catholicism at the end of the sixteenth century. But a few zealous Protestants still refused to convert, or even to accept the very idea of converting. For them, it only meant the death of the Party, and much worse, it was a supreme betrayal of God. They knew the walk of history was against them, and that the chances for the Protestant Party to be reinforced diminished by the day, but they still wanted to voice their virulent disagreement and show their absolute fidelity to God. The Protestant representations of converting often showed blind hatred against the unfaithful, against those who deny their faith for the sake of self-interest.

In that context of political turmoil, Agrippa d'Aubigné wrote the *Confession catholique du sieur de Sancy* to denounce the conversion of the sieur Nicolas Harlay de Sancy, the superintendent of finances under Henri IV. On the 10th of May 1597, four years after having prompted his master Henry IV to take the 'perilous leap', Sancy converted to Catholicism. He thus became, in the eyes of zealous Protestants, the incarnation of baseness and vileness. Yet, he was not the only one. Though no one was threatened (by fire, daggers or arquebuses) into conversion anymore, people were strongly driven to it: conversion was seen as a way to potentially rise in society and to show fidelity to the king – such motives were likely to hook the reckless and unwise fish. Such was, at least, Agrippa d'Aubigné's view on the matter, when depicting in his *Confession catholique du sieur de Sancy* the disastrous era when 'on peschait à l'endormie'. In this virulent book, published several years after its author's death by the notorious Pierre Marteau, an imaginary publisher, Aubigné creates a fiction around the confession of Sancy, where the latter provides justification for his conversion, which he could have actually done in reality. Important public characters were often asked by Catholics to clearly state the authenticity of their new faith and to show proselytism.

The *Confession catholique du sieur de Sancy* is above all a lampoon, that is, according to Yvonne Bellenger, 'a violent and passionate paper which tries to disqualify an opponent or an idea'. It takes the shape of a pastiche of the genre of the confession, but the first intention of the author is

to destroy a man and not to parody a style. His weapon is irony. What makes this text genuinely original is the way Aubigné makes Sancy's conversion meaningless by turning the genre of the 'confession' into a parody. Although false conversions had already been denounced on both sides, and although a priest from the League, Jean Boucher, had already published the *Sermons de la simulée conversion* dealing with Henry IV's conversion, the debate had been confined to the serious genre. As for Aubigné, he attacked Sancy in a new manner, by turning the movements of his will and soul into ridicule. In doing so, he also debunked the genre of the 'confession', by highlighting how it realized the domination of politi