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978-1-107-00045-2 - Feminism, Absolutism, and Jansenism: Louis XIV and the Port-Royal Nuns

Daniella Kostroun

Excerpt

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Introduction

On October 29, 1709, King Louis XIV sent his royal lieutenant of police, along with 200 troops, into the valley of the Chevreuse, twelve miles west of Paris, to shut down the convent of Port-Royal-des-Champs. Sixty years earlier, Port-Royal had been a flourishing community containing more than 150 nuns. By 1709 there were only twenty-two left, all over the age of fifty and several of them infirm. On arrival, the lieutenant assembled the nuns in the convent's parlor and read them an order from the royal council stating that they were to be removed from the convent "for the good of the state." He then presented them with *lettres de cachet* (special royal warrants signed by the king) sentencing each nun to exile in separate convents across France. They had only three hours to pack their belongings, eat a final meal, and say good-bye to one another. He then loaded them into carriages and drove them away. Shortly after that, Louis XIV's men exhumed Port-Royal's cemetery, dumped the remains in a mass grave, and razed the buildings to the ground.

How can we account for this episode in which Louis XIV personally ordered the destruction of a convent containing so few nuns? How could these women pose a threat to the state? Port-Royal's destruction becomes even more mysterious when we consider that it occurred at a time of political and domestic crisis for the French Crown. The war with Spain and a series of bad harvests made the first decade of the eighteenth century one of the more difficult periods in Louis XIV's long reign.¹ The king's administrative correspondence reveals that he took a personal interest in

¹ Andrew Lossky, *Louis XIV and the French Monarchy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 271.

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suppressing Port-Royal in spite of these other pressing crises.² Indeed, the matter was so urgent to him that his *lettres de cachet* and his order to close the convent circumvented a judicial review of the convent's status in a blatant exercise of absolute authority.

Why, then, did Louis XIV destroy Port-Royal?

To answer this question, this book explores the role of women and gender in the French Jansenist conflict from its origins in 1640 to Port-Royal's destruction in 1709. Founded in 1215 as a Cistercian convent,³ Port-Royal is best known as the center of Jansenism, the famous seventeenth-century heresy named after the Flemish bishop Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638) that Louis XIV persecuted throughout his reign. Although scholars are familiar with Jansenist resistance by men such as Antoine Arnauld,⁴ Blaise Pascal,⁵ and Pierre Nicole⁶ – all of whom have had a lasting influence on French philosophy, literature, and pedagogy – much less is known about Port-Royal's cloistered women and the powerful role they played in the Jansenist controversy. Many of these women were the sisters and nieces of Jansen's most illustrious defenders, and like their male kin, they were highly educated and fully invested in defending the theological and ecclesiastical values Jansen promoted in his writings. By uncovering their actions, this book not only explains the convent's destruction but also reveals a forgotten episode of female political activism in Old Regime France.

² Albert Le Roy, *La France et Rome de 1700 à 1715* (Geneva: Slatkine-Megariotis Reprints, 1976), 235–94.

³ The words “convent” and “monastery” technically denote religious communities of either sex. In this work, I use the term “convent” according to its popular sense as a community of women. See article “convent” in the Catholic Encyclopedia Online: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04340c.htm>.

⁴ Antoine Arnauld (1612–94), known as “le grand” Arnauld, was a doctor of the Sorbonne and priest. He is best known for writing the *Port-Royal Logic* and for his numerous apologetic works on Jansen. His sister Jacqueline (Marie-Angélique de Sainte Madeleine in religion) reformed Port-Royal by enforcing enclosure in 1609. Many of his female relatives, including his mother, became nuns at Port-Royal.

⁵ Blaise Pascal (1623–62), born in Clermont (Auvergne), was Port-Royal's most famous adherent. He was a noted mathematician, physicist, philosopher, and writer. He became closely connected to Port-Royal after his sister Jacqueline joined the convent as a nun in 1646.

⁶ Pierre Nicole (1625–95) was a theologian and writer who originally had ties to Port-Royal through female cousins who were nuns there. In 1654 he became Antoine Arnauld's principal collaborator and worked with him on many of Port-Royal's most significant texts, including the *Port-Royal Logic*. He also wrote several treatises of note on his own. The most famous of these are his *Moral Essays* (1671–8), three of which were translated into English by John Locke.

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Creating Separate Spheres: Port-Royal and Jansenism

It is surprising that we pay so little attention today to the nuns' resistance to Louis XIV, considering that they left abundant sources documenting their opposition in the form of journals, memoirs, and letters. Then again, this oversight makes sense when we consider the deliberate efforts by the nuns and their supporters to downplay and cover up their actions in these same sources. These efforts had their roots in the earliest polemical exchanges in France in the 1640s in which critics denounced Jansenism as a heresy by exploiting a traditional association of heresy with "unruly" women.⁷ The Port-Royal nuns had been connected to Jansen through their confessor, Jean-Ambroise Duvergier de Hauranne, the abbé of Saint-Cyran (henceforth Saint-Cyran), who was also Jansen's closest friend and supporter in France. Jansen's critics exploited his connection to the nuns in their sermons and pamphlets to make the case that he had founded a new heresy. To counter these accusations, Jansen's defenders insisted on the nuns' disinterest in the theological controversy and on their exacting obedience to the Benedictine Rule (the monastic rule governing Cistercian convents such as Port-Royal). Thus began a tradition among Jansen's male supporters of distancing the nuns from the conflict as much as possible.

However, this tradition involved a delicate balancing act for Jansen's supporters, because as self-proclaimed "disciples" of Augustine of Hippo, these men believed that they were defending fundamental truths about the Christian religion, ones that all members of the faith (even "disinterested" nuns) needed to know and understand. Specifically, they were defending the doctrine of efficacious grace, meaning they believed that human beings are completely helpless in securing their own salvation. They wrote in opposition to Molinists (most of whom were Jesuits supporting the writings of their fellow priest, Luis de Molina), who espoused a doctrine of sufficient grace, meaning they believed that humans can participate in their salvation through the exercise of free will.⁸ Because the Jansenist debates raged over such a core issue of faith, and because critics were denouncing the Port-Royal nuns for meddling in theological

⁷ The symbol of the heretical woman first became a common polemical trope in the fourth century. Virginia Burrus, "The Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, Epiphanius, and Jerome," *Harvard Theological Review* 84, no. 3 (July 1991): 229–48.

⁸ Leszek Kolakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing: A Brief Remark on Pascal's Religion and on the Spirit of Jansenism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3–5, 24–30.

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matters prohibited to them by the Pauline interdictions,⁹ Jansen's defenders found themselves in the delicate position of arguing for the nuns' right to know theological truths about grace while denying that this knowledge was rooted in Jansen's text and the debates it generated.

This dilemma became a crisis in 1661 once Louis XIV demanded the signatures of all members of the Church, male and female, to a formulary denouncing five propositions from Jansen's text according to the terms set by two anti-Jansenist papal bulls. Jansen's defenders saw in the king's formulary a trap – their choice was either to condemn Jansen (and by extension Augustine, they believed) or to refuse to sign the oath and become criminals in the eyes of their king. Neither solution was desirable as they considered themselves to be both good Catholics and loyal subjects. They believed that the only reason they faced this dilemma was because of the machinations of the king's corrupt (Jesuit) confessors. In their search for a solution, many of Jansen's defenders signed the formulary with mental reservations that they explained in supplementary clauses inserted above their signatures. Antoine Arnauld crafted the most famous of these clauses, which tacitly argued that the heretical doctrine in the five propositions did not appear in Jansen's text. Those who signed the formulary with Arnauld's clause condemned the heretical doctrine contained within the propositions with “heart and mouth,” but remained “respectfully silent” on the pope's attribution of the doctrinal errors to Jansen. Arnauld's compromise, known as the “right/fact distinction,” upheld the Church's right to demand belief in matters of doctrine, but denied its authority to demand belief in matters of empirical fact.

Arnauld encouraged the nuns to sign the formulary with his distinction, believing that the Pauline interdictions justified his call for silence on the factual question of whether Jansen authored the heretical doctrine contained in the propositions. A faction of nuns challenged him by asserting that female ignorance of a theological text was no excuse for the distinction, which they believed was a compromise. They argued instead that the Church's command for female silence demanded the more radical response of rejecting the formulary altogether on the grounds that it

⁹ The “Pauline interdictions” were the traditions that prevented women from teaching and studying theology in the Church. They were based on passages from Paul of Tarsus' epistles in which he ordered female silence. Thomas M. Carr Jr. cites the relevant passages from Paul and discusses how their legacy shaped women's spiritual leadership in medieval and early modern monastic communities in *Voix des abbesses du Grand Siècle: La Prédication au féminin à Port-Royal* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2006), 38–42.

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violated all reason by asking women to testify to the contents of a book that the Church forbade them from reading.

The debate over female knowledge at the time of the formulary created deep divisions within the Port-Royal community. Blaise Pascal, who had originally collaborated with Arnauld in promoting the right/fact distinction, now rejected his colleague's arguments in favor of those forwarded by his sister Jacqueline, Arnauld's leading critic among the nuns. This embarrassing split between Jansen's most famous defenders explains why Jansenist apologists, who were already inclined to downplay the nuns' participation to deflect accusations that they were unruly women, now actively sought to erase their initiatives from the record. By insisting on the nuns' female innocence and ignorance and by glossing over these events, seventeenth-century apologists removed the evidence of a highly charged and fractious moment in the history of Port-Royal.

When a new generation of historians began chronicling the Jansenist debates in the eighteenth century, they insisted on the nuns' perfect innocence and ignorance for their own reasons. By this time, both Louis XIV and the last of the Port-Royal nuns were deceased, and a new Jansenist conflict had erupted under the regency government over the papal bull *Unigenitus* (1713). During the *Unigenitus* controversy, Jansenist historians stressed the nuns' innocence to promote a myth of Port-Royal in which the convent symbolized all that was religiously pure about Jansen's defenders.¹⁰ By insisting on Port-Royal's religious purity and complete disinterest in the world, these historians sought not only to contrast the convent's legacy against the moral depravities of the Crown but also to uphold it as a new incarnation of the ancient temple of Jerusalem and to cast its male supporters in the role of the Maccabees – the Biblical family of priests chosen by God to defend the purity of the Jewish religion.¹¹ Port-Royal thus became part of a political drama in which Jansen's eighteenth-century defenders invested their struggles against *Unigenitus* with theological significance as a divine reenactment of a prefigured struggle from the Old Testament to preserve the integrity of the Church from worldly corruption.¹²

In his six-volume work titled *Port-Royal* (1840), literary critic Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve adopts the myth of Port-Royal's worldly

¹⁰ Catherine Maire, *De la cause de dieu à la cause de la nation: Le jansénisme au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 191.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 185, 191.

¹² *Ibid.*, 194.

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indifference to transform the convent into a cornerstone of France's classical heritage. At the beginning of this study, Sainte-Beuve argues that historians of Jansenism and historians of Port-Royal fall into two distinct camps. One deals with the progress of a dogmatic dispute surrounding Jansen's text in the universities, clerical assemblies, and Rome. This dispute was noisy, punctuated by "stubborn debates," "intrigue," and "outcries" between Jesuit priests and university theologians.¹³ The second camp focuses on the Port-Royal convent, the reform established there by its abbess Marie-Angélique de Sainte Madeleine Arnauld (henceforth Angélique Arnauld), the penitential practices of the nuns and the *solitaires* (a pious community of male recluses who congregated at Port-Royal), and the scholarly and literary output of the *solitaires*. In contrast to the Jansenist debates, Sainte-Beuve characterizes Port-Royal by the silence of the cloister, the simplicity of its rural setting, and the inner calm of the soul its inhabitants achieved through private study and contemplation. He acknowledges that the Jansenist debates disturbed Port-Royal with an unfortunate frequency, but he dismisses these disruptions as anomalies, thus keeping the community of nuns and pious men living there intact and inviolable.¹⁴

Sainte-Beuve's highly influential study set the pattern for future studies, which continued to reinforce the divide between studies of Jansenism and of Port-Royal. Historians have helped promote this division by conceding the spiritual, literary, and philosophical legacy of Port-Royal to the seventeenth century and by orienting their studies of Jansenism and its "noisy" politics toward the eighteenth century. Edmund Préclin's *Les Jansénistes du XVIIIe siècle et la Constitution civile du Clergé* (1929) set this course by drawing a connection between the ecclesiastical reforms promoted by the syndic of the Sorbonne, Edmond Richer (1560–1631), and the Civil Constitution of the Clergy of the French Revolution.¹⁵ Dale Van Kley's *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (1996), establishes Jansenism as an eighteenth-century phenomenon that rivals the Enlightenment as an intellectual and cultural origin of the French Revolution.¹⁶ In both cases, even though these authors locate the roots

¹³ Charles Augustin de Sainte-Beuve, *Port-Royal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954–5), 1:114.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:114–15.

¹⁵ Edmund Préclin, *Les Jansénistes du XVIIIe siècle et la Constitution civile du Clergé* (Paris: Librairie Universitaire J. Gamber, 1929).

¹⁶ Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996). Dale Van Kley, *The Jansenists and the Expulsion of the Jesuits from France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975). For the concept of origins

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of the Jansenist conflict at the turn of the seventeenth century, they limit their discussions of that period to one chapter and pick up their stories in earnest in the eighteenth century.

The result from these studies is that we now have detailed narratives of the eighteenth-century Jansenist debates as they wended their way in and out of various educational, legal, and political institutions leading up to the French Revolution. However, no such narrative exists for the seventeenth century. Instead, we have separate histories for various institutions (the Sorbonne, the General Assembly of the Clergy, the monarchy, etc.) in which the topic of Jansenism arises on occasion. Without a comprehensive narrative of how politics and Jansenism intersected across the seventeenth century, it is difficult to explain why Louis XIV persecuted the Port-Royal nuns for heresy with such urgency and why they, in turn, resisted. Thus, to uncover the nuns' resistance to the king, we must also reconstruct the history of seventeenth-century Jansenist politics. Both tasks entail shunting aside the myth of Port-Royal.

Port-Royal and Jansenism: An Integrated View

To unpack the myth of Port-Royal and return the nuns to the historical record as agents in a struggle against their king, this book begins with three assertions. First, anxiety over women's leadership in reforming the French Church following the Wars of Religion gave rise to a unique preoccupation with heretical plots in the French Jansenist debates. Second, the Port-Royal nuns were politically conscious at the same time that they were religious in their behavior. Third, the French monarchy laid the foundation for its claims to divine right rule through the persecution of Port-Royal. These three factors set the stage for Louis XIV's conflict with the Port-Royal nuns.

Chapter 1 examines how social anxieties triggered by women's initiatives to rebuild the French Church following the Wars of Religion¹⁷ contributed to the outbreak of the Jansenist debates in France. The theological debates originated in Belgium, but France was where polemicists accused one another of heresy and plotting to destroy the Church. Jansen's

and the French Revolution see Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*. Transl. Lydia Cochrane (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 4–7.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990) 23–41. Barbara Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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critics bolstered their accusations by drawing on the traditional polemical trope associating women with heresy. They found a convenient opportunity to use this trope in the case of Saint-Cyran. Yet this opportunity only existed because Angélique Arnauld was a prominent reformer in her own right whose initiatives had already generated considerable controversy and anxiety in French society. By linking Angélique to Jansen, polemicists infused their anti-Jansenist discourses with these contemporary fears and anxieties stemming from her leadership. This overlap between anti-Jansenism and anxiety over female leadership at Port-Royal became an enduring feature of the Jansenist debates.

Chapter 2 explains how the accusations of heresy leveled against the Port-Royal nuns generated among them a new political consciousness. By “political consciousness” I mean that the nuns became more sensitive to relationships of influence both inside and outside the convent, and they engaged in power struggles to shape the character and policies of the institutions to which they belonged. The nuns’ approach to politics was rooted in the ideas of Augustine, who believed in a close relationship between human politics and faith.¹⁸ For Augustine, Christians were disinterested in politics in the sense that, unlike Judaism or Islam, which carried their own legal codes, the form of government and laws to which Christians adhered did not matter.¹⁹ What did matter was whether politics created occasions for “impiety and sin.”²⁰ He argued that Christians – both men and women – had a duty to prevent sin both in their own actions and in the actions of others.²¹ Augustine emphasized this communal responsibility to avoid sin in his work *City of God*, defending Christianity from accusations that it had caused the fall of Rome.²² Rather than weakening the polity, he maintained that Christianity created model patriots because Christians were vigilant against vice and corruption, the true causes of the decline of cities and nations. Therefore, Christians were “a great benefit for the republic” because their religious duty to combat sin overlapped

¹⁸ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 35.

¹⁹ Ernest Fortin, “Introduction.” In *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. Ernest L. Fortin and Douglas Kries, trans. Michael W. Tkacz and Douglas Kries (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), viii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, vii. The quote comes from *City of God*, V 17.

²¹ Augustine of Hippo, *City of God* (425), book 19, chapter 16. Catholic Encyclopedia, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120119.htm>: “To be innocent, we must not only do harm to no man, but also restrain him from sin or punish his sin.” On the equality of men and women in the potential for sin, see Augustine, *On the Trinity*.

²² Fortin, “Introduction,” ix.

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with the needs of their polity.²³ This imperative to combat sin was the justification for and motivation behind the nuns' political behavior.

Other political ideas that the nuns took from Augustine included the assumption that political authority, regardless of its form (monarchy, republic, oligarchy, etc.), is patriarchal by nature.²⁴ They also subscribed to Augustine's position that political authority could be used to discipline heterodox Christians to bring them back to orthodoxy. Augustine argued this position during the Donatist controversy, in which he justified the use of fear and coercion against Donatists as a "softening up process" or a "teaching by inconveniences" that would make them more receptive to true religion.²⁵ His support for the use of force against Donatists is the corollary to his belief that Christians must accept oppression and suffering as natural consequences of the human condition. Using the metaphor of the olive press, Augustine argued that the *pressurae mundi* (the calamities inflicted on the human community) always had a positive result on the spirit: "The world reels under crushing blows; the old man is shaken out, the flesh is pressed, the spirit turns to clear flowing oil."²⁶ He counseled Christians to embrace their suffering, be it the result of political or natural forces, as a form of positive discipline designed to purify their spirit.

Augustine's ideas, which posit an intimate relationship between personal faith and human politics, formed the basis of the nuns' political consciousness and explain why they engaged in the Jansenist controversy. When polemicists first began accusing the Port-Royal nuns of heresy, Saint-Cyran counseled Angélique to view these attacks as *pressurae mundi*, ultimately sent to her by the grace of God to purify her spirit and her reforms. From then on, whenever the convent came under attack Angélique prompted the Port-Royal nuns to turn inward and redouble their efforts to combat sin within themselves and in the cloister. As they focused their energies inward, they also believed that their personal battles to combat sin were consistent with the needs to combat sin within the polity, and that they might even produce real results in this outside battle.

²³ *Ibid.*, xii. The quote comes from Augustine's Letter 138, 2.

²⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, book 19, ch. 16. Peter Brown argues that the paternalism he suggests as the ideal form of government was based on his own experiences as bishop. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 324.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

²⁶ *Serm.*, 6; cf. Ep. 111, 2. Cited in *Ibid.*, 232.

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Chapter 3 introduces the notion that the French Crown persecuted Jansenism – and by extension the Port-Royal nuns – as a strategy to combat the loyal opposition of noble elites who saw themselves as protecting the Crown from Cardinal Jules Mazarin (1602–61), the powerful royal minister that they considered to be a foreign “usurper.”²⁷ Mazarin developed this strategy during the *Fronde* (1648–53) when he threw his weight behind a clerical faction demanding a papal bull against Jansen in the hopes that it would help him dispose of Jean-François Paul de Gondi, the Cardinal de Retz (1613–79), archbishop of Paris, and leader of a rebellious faction of nobles. Mazarin attacked Port-Royal, then the largest convent under Retz’s jurisdiction, as part of this campaign to undermine his rival’s authority. However, this meddling in the Jansenist debates ignited opposition from bishops and members of Parlement who argued that Mazarin’s request for the bull favored papal authority at the expense of the traditional liberties of the French, or “Gallican,” Church. Mazarin responded to this Gallican resistance by accusing these recalcitrant bishops and *parlementaires* of Jansenism. Accusations of Jansenism – which implied threats of incarceration and excommunication – thus became Mazarin’s tool for intimidating those who opposed him in the name of defending the liberties of the Gallican Church. When Louis XIV came to power in 1661, he further intimidated Gallican bishops and magistrates by declaring the campaign against Jansenism a matter of personal conscience. Within a decade, therefore, Mazarin’s strategy of persecuting Jansenism became an institutionalized royal policy used to bolster the Crown’s authority vis-à-vis elites in the French Church and Parlement.

Agency and Feminism at Port-Royal

The first three chapters outline the necessary preconditions for the conflict between the king and nuns that led to Port-Royal’s destruction. In the remaining chapters, I describe how these developments interacted under Louis XIV’s reign. To explain how the conflict between king and nuns developed over time, I have found particularly useful the methods of J. G. A. Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and others whose works are associated with the Cambridge School for the study of early modern political thought. These scholars share a concern for how human agents employed language

²⁷ Jay Smith, *The Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600–1789* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 119–23.