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Daniella Kostroun, *Feminism, Absolutism, and Jansenism: Louis XIV and the Port-Royal Nuns*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xiii + 273 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$115.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 9781107000452.

Review by Linda Lierheimer, Hawaii Pacific University.

In 1709, twenty-two elderly nuns at Port-Royal-des-Champs were dispersed and their convent suppressed on the orders of the king. Some months later, the convent was razed to the ground. What led Louis XIV to destroy this ancient abbey that had survived for almost 500 years? This is the central question that Daniella Kostroun poses in her important and ground-breaking study of the history of the Port-Royal nuns from the 1609 through 1709 and their central role in the Jansenist controversy.

The Jansenist controversy, which began in the 1640s, centered on the writings of Cornelius Jansen, a Dutch theologian, about the nature of grace and free will. What began as a theological quarrel ended as a political struggle that challenged the authority of the absolute monarchy and paved the way for the French Revolution. Until now, scholars have focused primarily on the men associated with Port-Royal, such as Antoine Arnauld and Blaise Pascal, and have paid scant attention to the nuns. This book is the first comprehensive study of the Port-Royal nuns, which is astonishing, considering the extensive historiography on Jansenism and its centrality to the religious and political history of seventeenth and eighteenth-century France.

What accounts for this omission? Kostroun argues that the efforts of the nuns and their supporters to downplay their role in the controversy facilitated this silence. Eighteenth-century Jansenist historians developed a “myth of Port-Royal” in which the convent came to symbolize religious detachment from the corrupt world of politics. Recent scholars have continued this tradition by separating the history of the Jansenist controversy from the history of Port-Royal. Kostroun challenges this myth by placing the Port-Royal nuns at the center of the story, where they belong, and taking them seriously as political actors. She shows that at every important moment in the history of seventeenth-century Jansenism, the nuns played a decisive role, often pushing the male supporters of Jansen towards more radical and extreme positions than they would otherwise have taken.

Kostroun begins her history of Port-Royal with the reform of the convent by Angélique Arnauld at the beginning of the century. In 1602, Angélique was named abbess of the Cistercian abbey of Port-Royal-des-Champs at age ten. (Officially, the church required abbesses to be at least eighteen, but her family lied about her age.) Eight years later, she reformed the convent and introduced the strict observance of the Benedictine Rule. Although this was in keeping with the reforming spirit of the day—many of the older women’s convents in France were undergoing or would undergo similar reforms—her actions aroused anxiety when she refused to favor women of higher birth over others who were more capable. Angélique’s first significant act of rebellion occurred on what became known as the *journée du guichet*, when she locked the doors of

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the convent against her parents (who had formerly been allowed to visit at will) and established strict enclosure at the abbey.

In 1625, the abbey of Port-Royal was transferred to Paris, in part due to the malarial swamp surrounding Port-Royal-des-Champs. Angélique was aided in her efforts by Sébastien Zamet, the bishop of Langres, with whom she collaborated to found a new religious order. She persuaded Louis XIII to give up his right to appoint the abbess of Port-Royal in favor of triennial elections by the nuns, as specified by the Benedictine Rule. Angélique left Port-Royal to become superior of the new convent of the Institute of the Holy Sacrament. However she soon fell out with Zamet and, influenced by her new spiritual director, the abbé de Saint-Cyran, returned to Port-Royal. During this period, a scandal erupted around a devotional text written by Angélique's sister, Agnès. Although the text was never formally condemned, the "Secret Chaplet affair" led to rumors and suspicions that the nuns harbored heretical views. Saint-Cyran's arrest in 1638 lent credence to these rumors and contributed to a public perception of the nuns as "unruly women."

The eruption of the Jansenist debates in the early 1640s created a new political consciousness on the part of the nuns rooted in St. Augustine's ideas about the relationship between faith and politics. For Angélique, the attacks on Port-Royal were a test of the nuns' commitment to reform and a divinely inspired opportunity for spiritual renewal. Kostroun argues that Angélique collaborated with her brother Antoine, not with specific suggestions or comments on his texts defending Jansen, but, following Saint-Cyran's concept of the "science of saints," by providing spiritual advice and offering her own behavior as a model. In contrast to some male Jansenists who urged Antoine to soften his rhetoric, Angélique pushed him to take a strong stance: "Those who love the truth as much as they love God from which it derives cannot defend it with weakness" (p. 69).

During the Fronde (1648-1653), the Jansenist controversy took on a more overtly political turn. The Crown used accusations of Jansenism to discredit its enemies, particularly the powerful Cardinal de Retz, and Jansenism became associated with political, as well as religious, rebellion. From this point on, anti-Jansenism became official royal policy. In 1656, Mazarin and Anne of Austria ordered the destruction of Port-Royal, but the convent was saved when one of the nuns was miraculously cured by a relic. The incident became known as "the Miracle of the Holy Thorn," and the convent became a pilgrimage site. But this reprieve was only temporary. Louis XIV began his personal rule in 1661 by ordering the arrest of the convent's confessor, removing the pensioners and postulants, and forbidding the nuns from receiving new ones.

Louis XIV made opposition to Jansenism a litmus test of loyalty to the Crown and a cornerstone of his efforts to establish himself as an absolute monarch. He required that all members of the clergy, both male and female, sign a formulary condemning the five propositions attributed to Jansen. The nuns of Port-Royal became leaders of the resistance to the formulary. The strategy of male Jansenists was to sign with a preface that indicated their mental reservations, the famous right/fact distinction. In essence, this meant that they affirmed the church's right to make decisions on matters of faith, but that they remained silent on whether the condemned propositions actually appeared in Jansen's text.

The nuns' decisions about whether to sign the formulary were complicated by gender. Unlike men, they had to balance issues of personal conscience with their corporate identity as nuns and the church's traditional proscription of women's involvement in theological issues. Although Antoine Arnauld designed a special restrictive clause for the nuns that stressed their ignorance and right to silence on such matters, some nuns were still reluctant to sign. Jacqueline Pascal (the philosopher's niece) took the position that the nuns should be willing to sacrifice

themselves and their convent rather than compromise: "I know very well that nuns are not meant to defend the truth, although, one could say that due to an unfortunate course of events and the moral upheaval in which we now find ourselves, that for as long as bishops act with the courage of nuns then nuns must act with the courage of bishops" (pp. 121-122). In the end, the decision whether to sign or not was moot because the King refused to accept signatures with a restrictive clause and called for acceptance of the formulary "pure and simple."

By 1664, the Port-Royal nuns were the only ones who continued to resist the formulary. Their male counterparts had either signed, were in prison, or had gone into hiding (an option not open to nuns). Louis XIV issued a new edict that targeted the nuns and defined Jansenism as an assault on the state and a cause of social disorder. Any person who refused to sign the formulary was guilty of rebellion against the king. Division among the nuns resulted in a permanent breach. While the majority of the nuns continued to resist, a smaller group signed the formulary. The result was the permanent division of Port Royal into two houses: Port-Royal-des-Champs, where the recalcitrant faction lived under virtual house arrest, and Port-Royal-de-Paris, where Louis XIV revoked the nuns' right of election and appointed an abbess of his own choosing.

The formulary crisis ended in 1669 with the Peace of Clement IX that pardoned those who had refused to sign and imposed silence on questions about Jansen's text. However, this supposed peace was illusory as Louis continued his attack on the nuns of Port-Royal. Kostroun argues convincingly that the controversy over regalian rights was effectively a continuation of the Jansenist controversy. Louis tried to use the nuns' Jansenism to revoke their right of election and reclaim his right to appoint their abbess; however this attempt failed thanks to opposition from Rome, which saw this as part of a larger attempt to limit its authority over the French church.

The final chapter in the history of Port-Royal was initiated when the Paris nuns, with the support of the king, laid claim to the assets of Port-Royal-des-Champs and initiated a legal battle to reunite the two houses. The nuns of Champs fought back both in the courtroom and in the developing public sphere, publishing letters, petitions, and legal briefs related to their case. In 1705, a new anti-Jansenist papal bull, *Vineam Domini*, renewed the debate over the five propositions. The nuns were asked to sign a certificate confirming that they had received the bull, which they interpreted as yet another attempt to force their submission. They signed only after including a clause pointing out that the bull contradicted the Peace of Clement IX. Things came to a head in October 1709, when the abbess of the Paris convent arrived at Champs to take possession. The nuns refused her entry and submitted a formal appeal against her. At this point, the King seems to have been pushed to his limit, and on October 29, sent the lieutenant of police with 200 men to disperse the nuns by *lettres de cachet*, allowing them only three hours to prepare for their departure.

This final episode raises the question of why Louis XIV took such decisive action at this particular moment in time, when the nuns at Champs seem to have been on the verge of admitting defeat. Why not continue with the original plan to reunite the two convents? The abbess of Champs feared this outcome and wrote to a supporter asking what to do if the abbess of the Paris house returned with the bishop, since the nuns could not refuse to open their door to him. Kostroun argues that the nuns' refusal to compromise and their public defense of their innocence challenged the king's claim to rule by divine right by critiquing as illegitimate his attempts to impose authority, and that Louis could not afford the risk that they would continue to do so. If so, his strategy backfired by making martyrs of the nuns, who became a rallying point for opposition to the monarchy and resistance to the bull *Unigenitus* in the following decades.

Because of their gender, the nuns of Port-Royal had to adopt different strategies of resistance from male Jansenists. As women and nuns, they could not participate directly in the public debate over Jansenism. Instead, they employed a variety of rhetorical strategies to influence others while denying their own agency. Kostroun uses Quentin Skinner's distinction between "locutionary" and "illocutionary" meanings to discern the nuns' role as political actors, arguing that we must focus on the "performative force" of their speech acts, not just the content (pp. 11-12).<sup>[1]</sup> The nuns used the traditionally feminine art of letter writing to recruit supporters, criticizing their political enemies on the one hand, while stressing their subordinate position as women on the other. Keeping meticulous records of their struggle helped the nuns to justify their actions to outsiders and to create a shared history of persecution and resistance that connected newer nuns with their predecessors. The nuns defended their rights to self-government and freedom of conscience by appealing to Rome, the civil and ecclesiastical courts, and, particularly in the final stages of the conflict, public opinion.

Kostroun argues that the seventeenth-century *querelle des femmes* structured the debate about Jansenism, with anti-Jansenists employing misogynist arguments, and pro-Jansenists taking a pro-women stance. Too often the *querelle* is understood as primarily an intellectual debate. Kostroun shows us how these arguments had real-life religious and political stakes. Although she occasionally uses the term "feminist" a bit too expansively, as when she asserts that the Jansenist argument that "women were equal to men in their capacity to sin" was a "feminist position" (p. 20), she makes a convincing case for an expanded definition of feminism that takes seriously early modern arguments for women's equality, rather than seeing these as mere precursors of modern feminism. Using Joan Scott's definition of feminism as "paradoxical in expression,"<sup>[2]</sup> she argues that while the Port-Royal nuns used traditional ideas about feminine weakness to justify their actions, their behavior and rhetoric offered powerful arguments for female equality, at least in matters of conscience.

This book makes an important contribution to the history of Jansenism and to our understanding of the limits of absolutism under Louis XIV. The absence of the Port-Royal nuns from the historiography up to this point has led to an incomplete, if not distorted, picture of Jansenism and its significance. If, as Dale Van Kley has argued, Jansenism challenged the foundations of divine right monarchy, this was in no small part due to the resistance of the Port-Royal nuns.<sup>[3]</sup> In addition, Kostroun's book provides us with a complex picture of the inner workings of convent life and the interactions of nuns with the outside world, and seconds the work of historians like Barbara Diefendorf and myself that points to the cloister as a site of resistance and autonomy.<sup>[4]</sup> While the Port-Royal nuns were unique in their notoriety, their strategies of resistance were no different from those used by other nuns in this era to negotiate power and resist authority. In sum, Daniella Kostroun's book about the nuns of Port-Royal argues for the central role of religious women in delineating the boundaries of power in the age of absolutism, and in setting the stage for a new political ideal based on individual rights and equality that is characteristic of our modern age.

## NOTES

[1] Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Volume 1: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

[2] Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 16.

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[3] Dale K. Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996).

[4] Barbara Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Linda Lierheimer, "Gender, Resistance, and the Limits of Episcopal Authority: Sébastien Zamet's Relationships with Nuns (1615-1655)," in Jennifer M. DeSilva, ed., *A Living Example: Episcopal Reform, Relations, and Politics in Early Modern Europe* (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, forthcoming).

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