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Agnès Cousson, *L'Écriture de soi: Lettres et récits autobiographiques des religieuses de Port-Royal. Angélique et Agnès Arnauld, Angélique de Saint-Jean Arnaud d'Andilly, Jacqueline Pascal*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2012. 636 pp. Notes, bibliography, index, and appendices. 135.00€ (hb). ISBN: 9782745324047.

Review by Linda Lierheimer, Hawaii Pacific University.

The history of Port-Royal and its association with the seventeenth-century Jansenist controversy has generated an immense amount of literature. The outlines of the controversy are well-known: the eruption of a theological quarrel around the writings of the Dutch theologian, Cornelius Jansen, that began with the arrest of the spiritual director of the abbey, abbé de Saint-Cyran, in 1638; the decades-long dispute and propaganda war between Jesuits and so-called “Jansenists” which generated the philosopher Blaise Pascal’s *Lettres provinciales* (1656-57); resistance to signing a formulary condemning the ideas of Jansen in the 1660s; the destruction of Port-Royal-des-Champs by Louis XIV in 1710; and the issuing of the papal bull *Unigenitus* in 1713 condemning Jansenism. Only recently, however, have scholars turned their attention to the nuns of Port-Royal who were at the center of the controversy. Agnès Cousson’s erudite and detailed study of the writings and self-representations of the nuns of Port-Royal is an important addition to this scholarship.

The literary output of the Port-Royal nuns was enormous, a striking paradox in light of the abbey’s strong emphasis on the rule of silence. Cousson sets out to explore this seeming contradiction by examining the writings of the three most famous abbesses of Port-Royal: Angélique Arnauld (1591-1661), who reformed the abbey in 1608, her sister, Agnès Arnauld (1593-1671), and their niece, Angélique de Saint-Jean Arnaud d’Andilly (1624-1684), as well as those of Jacqueline Pascal (1625-1661), sister of the famous philosopher. These writings include almost 3,000 letters, short biographies of their fellow nuns, and Angélique Arnauld’s first-person account of the reform of Port-Royal. Cousson also looks at accounts written by Angélique de Saint-Jean and other nuns from their imprisonment during the years 1664-1669 for refusing to sign the formulary.

Considering the strict rules about silence, how did these nuns justify their extensive writing? To start with, they defined “silence” as primarily the *regulation* of speech, not its complete suppression. Written and oral communication for practical, moral and spiritual purposes were considered legitimate forms of expression. As Agnès Arnauld observed, “Les choses nécessaires que l’on dit avec retenue n’interrompent point le silence, mais seulement les inutiles” (p. 109).

The book is divided into four parts. Part one, “Les ambiguïtés de la personne humaine,” outlines the ideas about personhood central to the culture and spiritual ideals of Port-Royal, the rules and duties prescribed for the nuns, and how these influenced the nuns’ sense of self and their relationship to writing. Becoming a nun entailed adopting a new identity that was marked by the taking of a religious name: the replacement of the old self (*le moi humain*) with a new spiritual self devoted to serving God. At Port-Royal, this transformation was more than symbolic. The nuns embarked on a process of transformation aimed at destroying the *moi humain* through constant self-examination that took the form of both written and oral confessions and accounts of their spiritual state. In theory, this meant renouncing individuality in favor of a new shared communal identity in which all vestiges of a nun’s past

life had been eliminated. The process involved an inherent contradiction: a constant attention to the self in order to destroy it. While the rules and constitutions of Port-Royal emphasized conformity, importance was also placed on the individual as a spiritual being. Mother superiors recognized that the physical and intellectual characteristics of each nun made them better at certain tasks, and spiritual direction required close attention to individual differences and personalities, and to the strengths and weaknesses of each nun. Spiritual growth depended on the individual will, and salvation was a personal matter.

In the second part of the book, “Le maintien des sentiments humains,” which makes up the bulk of the volume, Cousson explores the way these theoretical notions of the self were applied in the practical context of life at Port-Royal, and the gap between normative discourse and lived experience. The rules of detachment and of becoming dead to the world were difficult to apply in daily life, and entering the convent certainly did not suppress the nuns’ connections to their past lives and previous identities. They retained close ties with family members both within and outside the convent, and family identity continued to be important. Communal life, letter writing, and visits facilitated the existence of an interior personal life and the persistence of close relationships with family, other nuns, and supporters of the convent. Nuns revealed their unique personalities and personal histories in the different themes, styles and words they used in their letters, which provided an opportunity for spontaneous personal expression that was not allowed in other contexts.

Parts three and four focus on the role and purposes of writing at Port-Royal, particularly in the context of religious persecution. Writing engaged nuns in both internal spiritual struggle and external struggle against anti-Jansenist enemies of Port-Royal. Cousson argues that letter writing played an important role in the struggle against the *moi humain* and the transformation of the self. In addition to offering advice and instruction to the reader, spiritual letters encouraged deep reflection that led the writer to internalize the moral and spiritual messages they contained. Cousson shows that these writers engaged in a rhetorical “veiling” of the self through the use of an impersonal style. This style was characterized by a “rhetoric of humiliation” or self-criticism accompanied by praise for the grandeur and power of God, by a “rhetoric of repetition” of the same religious themes and passages to reinforce or deepen the faith of the recipient, and by a “rhetoric of fear” that used images of the devil and reminders of death to inspire intense emotion and push the reader towards spiritual conversion.

During the years of persecution, the Port-Royal nuns were forced to take on a public role in defense of their community. One way they participated in this struggle was through first-person accounts of their personal experiences of imprisonment, or “captivity narratives” (*récits de captivité*), the most famous of which was written by Angélique de Saint-Jean. While such narratives contradicted the imperative to destroy the self, in the context of persecution, they served as weapons in the war against the enemies of Port-Royal and took on a heroic character. Writers of these narratives represented themselves as martyrs and tragic heroes sacrificing themselves for God. Their purpose was not to glorify the author, but to defend the honor of their community and preserve the historical memory of its persecution. The nuns’ writing from this period thus served as the basis of the collective “myth” of Port Royal as an exceptional group chosen by God.

The use of the term *écriture de soi* to describe a diverse set of writings that includes letters, biographies of fellow nuns, and autobiographical narratives, might seem on the surface surprising. Cousson argues that taken together, these writings served as a form of collective autobiography: “Les lettres, la *Relation* d’Angélique Arnauld, les relations de captivité, les *Vies* et les autres récits des soeurs oeuvrent à l’autobiographie du groupe, à la constitution et à la transmission de son identité” (p. 566). This collective spirit is exemplified by the writers’ use of the pronouns “nous” and “on” in place of “je.” For the nuns of Port-Royal, singularity rested in the community, not in the individual. Autobiography, biography, and communal history were thus interchangeable.

Cousson's detailed examination of the language and rhetoric of these texts provides fascinating glimpses into the nuns' individual subjectivities and sense of identity. However, since she mostly confines herself to internal textual analysis and to the immediate circumstances in which these texts were written, one is left wondering about the larger context for and significance of these writings. To what extent are these models typical of all monastic writers, and to what extent are they unique? For example, Cousson shows that the letters praising nuns upon their death served to reinforce a sense of common purpose and identity, but such letters were not specific to Port-Royal. Here and elsewhere, Cousson's analysis would have benefitted from a more systematic treatment of convent writing in general.

Cousson might also have been more attentive to the role of gender in shaping the nuns' sense of self and their relationships with others. For example, one could argue that Angélique Arnauld's adoption of a maternal role in relation to her brother Antoine was not merely an expression of affection, but also provided legitimacy for her offering him counsel and advice. Cousson states in a number of places that the writings of the Port-Royal nuns "recalled" or "echoed" those of male Jansenist writers such as Antoine Arnauld, Pierre Nicole, and Blaise Pascal. This begs the question: What exactly was the nuns' contribution to the literature surrounding Port-Royal and the Jansenist controversy? Were the nuns full contributors to this discourse, or were they mainly restating the ideas of their male counterparts? Based on what Cousson writes in the remainder of her masterful study, it seems evident that the former was the case. Daniella Kostroun has shown that through her letters, Angélique Arnauld actively collaborated with her brother Antoine Arnauld on his texts.^[1] By extension, might not the male writers associated with Port-Royal have been just as likely to "echo" the ideas of the nuns?

Cousson's study makes a significant contribution to the scholarly literature on early modern notions of the self and on convent writing during that period. It supplements the work of Thomas Carr and others that has revealed the prevalence of such writing and sought to remedy the lack of scholarly attention it has received.^[2] The book is, however, difficult to navigate, and she mostly leaves it to the reader to synthesize its central arguments. Anyone without a solid background on the history of Port-Royal and the Jansenist controversy will find it rough going. Yet, for specialists and scholars of the period, this volume will be an invaluable resource, especially since many of the nuns' letters have never been published, and there is no complete critical edition of their writings. The extensive bibliography of primary and secondary works in French related to Port-Royal is particularly useful, though one will have to look elsewhere for the important work published in recent years by Anglo-American scholars.

NOTES

[1] Daniella Kostroun, *Feminism, Absolutism, and Jansenism: Louis XIV and the Port-Royal Nuns* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 63-70.

[2] Thomas Carr, "From the Cloister to the World: Mainstreaming Early Modern French Convent Writing—An *État présent*," *EMF: Studies in Early Modern France II: The Cloister and the World: Early Modern Convent Voices* (2007): 7-26. See also the other articles in that volume.

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