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Michèle Bokobza Kahan, *Témoigner des miracles au siècle des Lumières: Récits et discours de Saint-Médard*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015. 372 pp. Notes, bibliography, index and table of contents. 74.00€ TTC. (hb). ISBN 978-2-8124-3654-3; 39.00€ TTC. (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-3653-6.

Review by Allison Stedman, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

In this ambitious and informative study, Michèle Bokobza Kahan investigates a corpus of miracle narratives associated with a series of supernatural healings that occurred between 1727 and 1732 at the tomb of the deceased Jansenist deacon François de Pâris in the cemetery of the Parisian Saint-Médard Church. Although initially publicized as leaflets, pamphlets, and brochures, these narratives (116 in total) were subsequently collected, authenticated, and standardized before being archived and published in more reputable venues. They appeared in the Jansenist periodical *Les Nouvelles ecclésiastiques* between 1728 and 1732. They appeared in a ten-volume collection published secretly by Lottin between 1732 and 1735. In 1737 they were substantiated with “irrefutable proof” by the zealous Jansenist Louis Basile Carré de Montgeron and republished in high quality format as *La Vérité des miracles opérés par l’intercession de M. de Pâris*. Over the course of the eighteenth century they continued to be collected, substantiated and catalogued by the Jansenist lawyer Louis Adrien Le Paige, whose archive, now housed in the Bibliothèque de la Société de Port-Royal in Paris, comprises nearly 2400 volumes.

Although other studies of the Saint-Médard miracles have examined them as “the emblem of the religious and political contradictions” that dominated the first half of the French Enlightenment, pointing to the incongruity of such phenomena in what is widely understood as an emerging “Age of Reason,” Kahan’s interest in these texts stems from what they reveal about the role and the status of the eyewitness at the dawn of the French Enlightenment.[1] Approaching the texts as a literary historian, Kahan reveals how these miracle narratives are in fact *products* of the Enlightenment by showing how they engage with the crisis of European consciousness, exploit the circumstances of the emerging public sphere, and take advantage of the changing conditions of the literary marketplace in an effort to prioritize individual subjectivity and to subvert the absolute authority of the reigning political and religious institutions. As Kahan describes, this body of eighteenth-century miracle narratives differs substantially from the accounts of miraculous healings that came before them because in the 1700s, miracle narratives no longer functioned as ideological tools to bolster the hegemony of church and state. In emphasizing the individual’s direct connection to the divine, these narratives offered “proof” instead that individuals could forgo the mediation of established institutions and access God directly. As such, in placing the individual at the center of the narrative and in constructing these narratives in ways that aim to mobilize public opinion, the witnesses and anthologists of the Saint-Médard miracles made use of the same kinds of literary practices, polemical strategies, and publication techniques that high Enlightenment philosophers would later adopt in the context of their own treatises, novels, and tales.

The anomalous persistence of miracles at the tomb of François de Pâris has been amply studied for its connection to Jansenism, the principles of which had been condemned by the Pope with the Bull *Unigenitus* in 1713 and by the Archbishop of Paris in 1720.[2] These miracles have also been examined

in studies of the *convulsionnaire* phenomenon, a series of curious, seemingly paranormal spiritual events that began in 1731 when visitors to Pâris's tomb found their bodies wracked by convulsions that sometimes lasted for hours on end and which prompted contemporary onlookers to beat and stab them in an attempt to rouse the individuals from their convulsive states. By 1732 the spectacle surrounding the convulsions had drawn such a large and unruly crowd that law officials were constrained to close the cemetery, but the *convulsionnaire* movement continued underground for at least another fifty years, assembling in private homes in Paris and other French cities and descending even further into torture and sadomasochism.[3]

Not surprisingly, the spectacular nature of the convulsion phenomenon had the effect of eclipsing the miracle phenomenon that preceded it, both in the eighteenth century and in the eyes of historical posterity, causing scholars interested in the events of the Saint-Médard cemetery to gloss over these miracles as precursors to the more dramatic and widespread convulsion-spectacles that followed. As a result of their association with these convulsions, the Saint-Médard miracles have been examined primarily as evidence of the kind of irrationality that created the religious origins of the French Revolution and that fostered emerging beliefs about the dangers of the female imagination and the inherent moral inferiority of women.[4]

In focusing specifically on the *miracles* attributed to the intercession of the deceased deacon François de Pâris, and in examining these texts as early Enlightenment narrative creations in their own right, Kahan's work presents a thorough and original analysis of a substantial body of texts that have to date received little scholarly attention.

NOTES

[1] Catherine-Laurence Maire, *Les Convulsionnaires de Saint-Médard, miracles convulsions et prophéties à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard/Julliard, 1985), p. 13.

[2] See for example, Bryan E. Strayer. *Suffering Saints: Jansenists and Convulsionnaires in France, 1640-1799* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2008).

[3] According to C-L Maire, an estimated 270 people experienced or participated in convulsions in 1732 alone.

[4] See further, B. Robert Kreiser, *Miracles, Convulsions, and Ecclesiastical Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1996); David Garrioch *The Making of Revolutionary Paris* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Monique Cottret, *Jansénismes et Lumières. Pour un autre XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998); and Lindsay Wilson, *Women and Medicine in the French Enlightenment: The Debate over "Maladies des Femmes"* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

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