

H-France Review Vol. 20 (April 2020), No. 74

John J. Conley, S.J. *The Other Pascals: The Philosophy of Jacqueline Pascal, Gilberte Pascal Périer, and Marguerite Périer*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019. xiii + 263 pp. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-268-10513-6.

Review by Nicholas Hammond, University of Cambridge.

There is a rather delicious irony in the fact that the one scholar who has done more than any other to highlight the significance of the women associated with Port-Royal (the convent that became the standard-bearer of Jansenism in seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century France), and to make their writings accessible to an English-speaking readership, happens to belong to the Society of Jesus, traditionally the scourge and implacable enemy of the Jansenists. In a previous book, John J. Conley explored the thought of Angélique Arnauld, her sister Agnès, and their niece, Angélique de Saint-Jean Arnauld d'Andilly.[1] In this new book, he turns to three members of the Pascal family: Blaise Pascal's sisters, Gilberte Périer and Jacqueline Pascal, and Gilberte's daughter Marguerite Périer.

Conley devotes a chapter to each of the three, giving a brief biography, followed by a summary of their written works, and ending with each woman's "philosophical contribution." While this approach allows for a certain symmetry among his three protagonists, the fact that so much of their writing is intimately linked to their familial situation and overlaps with each other's lives means that a large amount of the same information is repeated both within individual chapters and across the three sections of the book. As frustrating as this might be for the reader perusing the book as a whole, such repetitions do allow each chapter to be read independently without too much background information being lost in the process.

Of the three, Jacqueline Pascal (1625-61) has justifiably received the most scholarly attention. A childhood prodigy like her brother, she had written and performed a five-act verse play and several pieces of poetry in the salons and the royal court before the age of thirteen. Her most substantial writing comes from her association with Port-Royal, notably *Règlement pour les enfants* (1657), translated previously by Conley,[2] detailing the methods and goals of the Port-Royal convent school at the time that she was its headmistress, and her meditation on the passion of Christ, *Sur le mystère de la mort de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (1651). Conley argues convincingly that, in all her writing, including her *Relation à la mère prieur de Port-Royal* (1653) where she defends the vocational right of women in the aftermath of her own family's initial refusal to allow her to become a nun at Port-Royal, "rather than being a simple observer, Soeur Jacqueline often acts as a participant in the theological controversies she witnesses" (p. 67). In the face of extraordinary pressures, including being forced in June 1661 by Louis XIV to sign a formulary

of adhesion to the bulls of Popes Innocent X and Alexander VI condemning five heretical propositions alleged to be found in Port-Royal's foundational text, Cornelius Jansen's *Augustinus*, the Port-Royal nuns, including Jacqueline, were interrogated and persecuted. Jacqueline died only a few months later, the day before her thirty-sixth birthday, reportedly exhausted by all she had to endure.

Gilberte Périer (1620-87) is remembered mostly for her biographical essays on both her siblings, but she was also instrumental in collecting her late brother's papers and helping to edit his works, including the *Pensées*, left unfinished and in a fragmentary state. Conley acknowledges the primarily hagiographical purpose of both biographies but suggests that each piece is not uniformly uncritical. While her *La vie de Monsieur Pascal* is widely available in most editions of Blaise's works, *La vie de Jacqueline Pascal* is far harder to find, so it is especially welcome that Conley has provided a clear translation of the latter piece in an appendix. Gilberte confronted different challenges to those faced by the unmarried Blaise and Jacqueline, as she found herself torn between trying to raise a family that conformed to the rigor of Jansenist ideals and playing an active role in salon society. Conley argues that, like her sister, Gilberte formulated her own philosophy of education in the letters she wrote to her sons, but it is difficult to see what is truly original about her idea that, as Conley puts it, "it is the pursuit of and fidelity to God's will that is the preeminent purpose of education" (p. 117).

Marguerite Périer (1646-1733) was the third child of Gilberte and Florin Périer, largely known for her part in the miracle of the Holy Thorn in 1656. While a pupil at the Port-Royal convent school, Marguerite suffered from a painful fistula around her eye that threatened to require medical intervention. After a nun placed a thorn believed to have belonged to Christ's crown of thorns next to the eye, Marguerite's affliction was said to have been healed immediately. The event plays a key role in her uncle's polemical work against the Jesuits, *Les Lettres provinciales*, and continued to stir emotions for and against the Jansenists during her life. Conley shows the extent to which Marguerite became involved in various controversies during the eighteenth century. These included Louis XIV's order for the destruction of the convent of Port-Royal des Champs in 1711, and her formal opposition (in her *Profession de foi*, provided in translation in an appendix by Conley) to Pope Clement XI's 1713 papal bull *Unigenitus* condemning 101 heretical propositions allegedly contained in the writing of the Jansenist theologian Pasquier Quesnel. The rest of her written contributions consist mainly of anecdotes about her uncle and family.

In this book, Conley does a magnificent job of establishing the significance of these three female members of the Pascal family. By focusing on them rather than on their more famous male relative, we are given the opportunity to hear their voices. Conley is particularly persuasive in asserting the value of their alternative narratives.

Where Conley is less successful is in his repeated insistence upon each of them being "women philosophers" with their own brand of thought. Through no fault of their own, they were not afforded the same opportunities as the male members of their family, and all their writings tied them very narrowly either to Port-Royal or to promoting the reputation of Blaise Pascal. As interesting as their thoughts on education may be, they were denied the chance to develop and sustain distinctive philosophies that could exist independently of the constraints imposed upon them by their Jansenist teachers. Conley betrays the thinness of such terms when he writes, for instance, that, "like her mother, Gilberte, Marguerite has made a contribution to philosophy through her conscientious vocation as the family chronicler and archivist" (p. 165). Moreover,

when Marguerite's *Profession de foi* is heralded as her most significant written contribution, the fact that it consists only of four short paragraphs shows us the precarious nature of such philosophical foundations.

Although Conley displays a thorough knowledge and grasp of his three subjects throughout the book, his terminology occasionally lacks precision. In the chapter on Jacqueline Pascal, for example, while analyzing her work, *Sur le mystère de la mort de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ*, he describes her as a "moraliste" (using the French term, p. 34). As the title of the treatise indicates, Jacqueline is about as far as it is possible to be from subscribing to the thought of a writer like La Rochefoucauld, whose aim was to describe rather than prescribe and who was careful to extract direct references to religion and God from his discourse. Interestingly, one of the more remarkable aspects of her brother's *Pensées* lies in the way that he often constructed his fragments by posing initially as a *moraliste*, describing the contradictions of humanity, before becoming a *moralisateur* and stressing the need for the sceptical reader to embrace the Christian religion.

While Conley rightly sees Jacqueline's contribution to theories of education as her most significant intellectual achievement, it comes as a surprise to find no mention of her letter (26 October 1655) to Blaise about a new reading method that he was devising for the pupils at Port-Royal. The questions that she asks show both her active involvement in Port-Royal pedagogical methods and an independence of thought that refuses to be subservient to her brother.

These caveats aside, *The Other Pascals* remains an essential study of the important role played by women in religious thought during the early modern period in France.

NOTES

[1] John Conley, *Adoration and Annihilation: The Convent Philosophy of Port-Royal* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

[2] Jacqueline Pascal, *A Rule for Children and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. John J. Conley (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Nicholas Hammond
University of Cambridge
Ngh20@cam.ac.uk

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

