Feminism, Absolutism, and Jansenism

Louis XIV and the Port-Royal Nuns

Daniella Kostroun

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107000452

First published 2011

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Kostroun, Daniella J., 1970–
Feminism, absolutism, and Jansenism : Louis XIV and the Port-Royal nuns /
Daniella Kostroun.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-107-00045-2 (hardback)
1. Cistercian nuns – France – History – 17th century. 2. Port-Royal des Champs
(Abbey) – History – 17th century. 3. Louis XIV, King of France, 1638–1715 – Political
and social views. 4. Jansenists – France – History – 17th century. 5. Patriarchy –
France – History – 17th century. 6. Feminism – France – History – 17th century.
7. Despotism – France – History – 17th century. 8. Religious absolutism – France –
History – 17th century. 9. France – Politics and government – 1643–1715.
10. France – Religion – 17th century. I. Title.
BX4328.Z9P64 2011
273'.7–dc22 2010031629

ISBN 978-1-107-00045-2 Hardback

Feminism, Absolutism, and Jansenism

Louis XIV and the Port-Royal Nuns

Feminism, Absolutism, and Jansenism chronicles seventy years of Jansenist conflict and its complex intersection with power struggles between Gallican bishops, *parlementaires*, the Crown, and the pope. Daniella Kostroun focuses on the nuns of Port-Royal-des-Champs, whose community was disbanded by Louis XIV in 1709 as a threat to the state. Paradoxically, it was the nuns' adherence to their strict religious rule and the ideal of pious, innocent, and politically disinterested behavior that allowed them to challenge absolutism effectively. Adopting methods from cultural studies, feminism, and the Cambridge School of political thought, Kostroun examines how these nuns placed gender at the heart of the Jansenist challenge to the patriarchal and religious foundations of absolutism. They responded to royal persecution with a feminist defense of women's spiritual and rational equality and of the autonomy of the individual subject, thereby offering a bold challenge to the patriarchal and religious foundations of absolutism.

Daniella Kostroun is currently Assistant Professor of History at Indiana University–Purdue University, Indianapolis. She is the coeditor (with Lisa Vollendorf) of *Women, Religion, and the Atlantic World (1600–1800)* and the author of "A Formula for Disobedience: Jansenism, Gender, and the Feminist Paradox," which appeared in the *Journal of Modern History* and won the 2004 Chester Penn Higby Prize by the Modern European History section of the American Historical Association.

For Johnny

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible had I not received support and encouragement from many institutions and individuals over the years. I am forever grateful to my undergraduate mentor, the late Nan Karwan-Cutting, for initially sparking my interest in French history. Steven Kaplan, another undergraduate mentor, was the one to suggest that I study Jansenist women in the first place. In graduate school, William Reddy and Kristen Neuschel were my thesis advisors. Both have remained valued mentors and friends over the years. I also want to thank the other members of my thesis committee, Donald Reid, Jay Smith, and Susan Thorne, for all of their help and advice.

This project could not have been completed without the financial support I received from the two schools where I have taught, Stonehill College and Indiana University–Purdue University, Indianapolis (IUPUI). In addition, funding from the Duke University–University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Center for European Studies; the Center for International Studies at Duke University; the Erasmus Institute of Notre Dame; the Center for Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles; and the Mellon Foundation (via the Gutenberg-e project) supported research for this project.

While conducting research, I received invaluable help from the staff and librarians at the Cornell University Kroch Library Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections in Ithaca, New York; the Interlibrary Loan Department at Stonehill College MacPhaidin Library in Easton, Massachusetts; the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris; the Archives Nationales in Paris; and the Rijksarchief in Utrecht, Holland. I owe a special thank you to Valérie Guitienne-Mürger and Fabien Vandermarcq at the

Bibliothèque de la Société de Port-Royal in Paris for sharing their knowledge and expertise with me, for facilitating my access to large numbers of documents during short research trips to France, and for their hospitality over afternoon tea.

I have presented portions of the research and ideas that appear in this book on earlier occasions and am grateful for the thoughtful feedback I received from my colleagues. In addition to thanking my colleagues who provided feedback at annual meetings for the Society of French Historical Studies, the Western Society for French History, and the North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature, I also want to thank the members of the Triangle French Studies Group, the Center for Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Studies at UCLA, the Women and Culture in Early Modern Europe Seminar at the Humanities Center of Harvard University, and the Religious Studies Department at IUPUI. The people in these groups read drafts of my research and provided me with useful and often in-depth comments.

I do not know how I can ever thank enough my most assiduous readers who read entire drafts of this manuscript multiple times: Thomas Carr Jr., William Reddy, Susan Rosa, and the anonymous readers at Cambridge University Press. Others who read my work and helped me to clarify my ideas in important ways are Johnny Goldfinger, Michèle Longino, John Lyons, Sarah Maza, Edward Muir, Malina Stefanovska, Philip Stewart, Dale Van Kley, Ellen Weaver-Laporte, and Rebecca Wilkin. Stephanie O'Hara not only lent her critical eye to the text, but she also helped me with many of my translations. Others who have helped me, inspired me, and encouraged me as I worked on this project are my colleagues, past and present, in the history departments at Stonehill College and at IUPUI, Michael Breen, Mita Choudhury, Katie Conboy, Kirsten Delegard, Barbara Diefendorf, Cécile Dubois, Eliza Ferguson, Natalie Goss, Janine Lanza, Anthony LaVopa, Marina Leslie, Linda Lierheimer, Elie Lobel, Shari Lowin, Keith Luria, Wendy Peek, Jennifer Perlmutter, Amy Smith, Sara Spaulding, Courtney Spikes, Lisa Vollendorf, Sydney Watts, and Rafia Zakaria. This book has been improved and enriched by the insight of all the people here mentioned. I am responsible for the imperfections that remain.

I want to thank my editor at Cambridge University Press, Beatrice Rehl, for believing in this project. I also am grateful for the help I received in producing the manuscript from Emily Spangler at Cambridge University Press and Brigitte Coulton of the Aptara Corporation. Before finding a home for this manuscript at Cambridge, I received invaluable guidance

and advice from Kate Wittenberg, editor of the Gutenberg-e series at Columbia University Press/Epic; Elizabeth Fairhead of the American Historical Association; and Alisa Plant of Louisiana State University Press.

As every working mother knows, you are only as good as your childcare. For this reason, I want to thank the Early Childhood Program at Fairview Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, as well as Evelyn Hovee, Amy Hovee, Indhu Raghavan, and Sindhu Raghavan for providing reliable, loving care for my children over the years. I owe a special thanks to Dorothy Delegard and Danielle Houser who traveled to France with me to care for my children as I worked in the archives.

Finally, I want to thank those who saw me through this project on a day-to-day basis. This includes the members of my Active Researchers Group: Terri Carney, Tamara Leech, Kristy Sheeler, and Jennifer Thorington-Springer. For more than two years now, I have met on a weekly basis with these remarkable women from Butler University and IUPUI to set my writing goals and to report on my progress. They have consistently encouraged me, goaded me, coached me, and kept me focused on my project over this time. I also want to thank Hélène and Jean-Pierre Briand, dear family friends, who have treated me like one of their own ever since I was in grade school. I do not think I could ever have balanced the demands of my family life and my career as a French historian had they not always welcomed me and my children to stay with them in Paris and kept us fortified with incomparable French meals. I owe eternal gratitude to my parents, Val and Winnie Kostroun who have always encouraged me and believed in me. And last but not least, I want to thank my husband Johnny Goldfinger, my mother-in-law Myrtle Goldfinger, and my children Kenny and Cody Goldfinger. These are the people who make my daily life joyful.

Parts of the introduction, conclusion, and Chapter Five were published in "A Formula for Disobedience: Jansenism, Gender, and the Feminist Paradox," *The Journal of Modern History* 75 (September): 483–522. Permission to reproduce that material here is gratefully acknowledged.

Abbreviations

AN	Archives nationales de France
Ars.	Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal
BN	Bibliothèque nationale de France
BPR	Bibliothèque de la Société de Port-Royal
Ms.	Manuscript
Mss. Ff.	Manuscrits fonds français
UPR	Port Royal Collection, Rijksarchief, Utrecht, Holland

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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.

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 Nicole[6] – 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.

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.

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.

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 wordly 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.

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 civil 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 XVIII siècle et la Constitution civile du Clergé* (Paris: Libraire 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

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 Religion[17] 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).