

Putting Pascal to Practical Use: Jansenist Women at the Peace of Clement IX

*Daniella Kostroun
Stonehill College*

In 1667, a group of French bishops began the process of brokering a truce between Louis XIV, his Jesuit advisors, and the Jansenists. The aim of this truce was to end the conflict surrounding Louis XIV's 1661 decree ordering all members of the Church to sign a formula swearing adherence to two papal bulls condemning the *Augustinus*, a theological study by the late bishop, Cornelius Jansen. When Jansen's supporters (known as "Jansenists") resisted the formula, the king persecuted them to the point that nineteen French bishops demanded this truce on the grounds that the king had encroached upon ecclesiastical jurisdiction in his zeal to combat Jansenism. The Jansenists, who had suffered fines, imprisonment, and exile, were eager, for the most part, to see this truce succeed. An exception among them, however, was the Port Royal nuns. These women had suffered their own share of deprivation, imprisonment, and even physical violence at the hands of their archbishop for refusing the formula. Yet when presented with the peace agreement, they refused to compromise. This refusal meant that the king was no longer the only person angry with them. Now, even the nuns' staunchest male Jansenist allies had become critical of their position.

Why did the nuns continue to resist? Why were they the only ones to refuse compromise? When describing the

nuns' resistance to Louis XIV's anti-Jansenist policies, most scholars have criticized the nuns for their intransigent, radical behavior. These scholars have accused the nuns of pride, of stubbornness, and of becoming overly engaged in the Jansenist quarrels.¹ By simply judging the nuns' behavior, Jansenist scholars have avoided the task of actually exploring the nuns' motives for resisting. Instead, historians of Jansenism have left us with the impression that the Port Royal nuns were unruly women who acted out of ignorance or a lack of reason.² This paper challenges the inherent misogyny in Jansenist scholarship by exploring the motives behind the nuns' radical resistance to the formula. In particular, it suggests that the nuns' continuous refusal to compromise was a rational, political response to Louis XIV's persecution, one that was grounded in the political theory of the Jansenists themselves.

Jansenist political thought

When studying Jansenist political theory, scholars typically turn to Blaise Pascal's passages on the relationship between force and justice in his list of fragments known as the *Pensées*. In these passages, Pascal argues that the people who exercise the most force in human society will always be able to decide what constitutes justice. He writes:

It is just that what is just be followed, it is necessary that the strongest be obeyed. Justice without force is impotent; force

¹ Charles Augustin de Sainte-Beuve, *Port Royal*, ed. Maxime Leroy, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1954-55), 2:707, 851. Augustin Gazier, *Histoire générale du mouvement janséniste*, 2 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1924), 1:166, 227.

² The claim that women were devoid of reason was a common misogynist trope in early modern France. See Linda Timmermans, *L'accès des femmes à la culture (1598-1715)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1993), 244.

without justice is tyrannical. It is necessary therefore to combine justice and force; and for this, to make justice strong, or the strong just.

Justice is open to dispute; force is easily recognizable and indisputable. Thus it has been impossible to give force to justice, because force contradicts justice and says that it is unjust, that she herself is just. And so, unable to make that which is just strong, we have made the strong just.³

In these passages, Pascal struggles with the paradox of the two concepts—justice and force—that coexist in human society at the same time that they remain mutually opposing forces. They are mutually opposing because force, the brutish, human side of the equation, will always negate justice: "force contradicts justice and says that it is unjust." Since nothing can argue against force—because force by definition, does not argue, it forces—Pascal concludes that humans must settle with the idea that since we are "unable to make that which is just strong, we have made the strong just." This conclusion affirms the pessimistic Augustinian belief that since the world is doomed to imperfection, government is a necessary evil. Pascal asserts elsewhere that people should obey and submit to these imperfect governments because, like many political theorists of his time, Pascal's greatest fear was the chaos of civil war.⁴

One way to make better sense of Pascal's political theory is to consider it in light of the typical Jansenist interpretation of the Passion. Like many Counter-

³ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Léon Brunschvicg (Paris, 1934). The English translation used here is Nannerl O. Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France: The Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 272.

⁴ Keohane, 271.

Reformation Catholics, the Jansenists saw devotion to Christ's Passion as a way to atone for allowing the Protestants to attack the Eucharist.⁵ While most Catholics highlighted Christ's physical suffering in the Passion, and hence his physical embodiment in the Eucharist, the Jansenists emphasized the psychological suffering Christ experienced from being rejected by the world and having to face his death passively.⁶ In his analysis of Pascal's theory, the literary critic Louis Marin posits that the height of Christ's psychological suffering in the Jansenist imagination is the moment when Pontus Pilate, sitting on his throne and thronged by the people, faces a helpless Jesus hanging on his cross.⁷ This moment sums up Pascal's political theory: true justice, embodied by Jesus, is juxtaposed to and attacked by human force. Human force will quash this justice because of its natural inclination towards domination (the *libido dominandi* according to Augustine). Justice, in turn, has no choice but to remain silent and powerless before force.

Although Pascal advocates obedience to imperfect governments, he does not deny people the power to point out and recognize injustice. The silence of Christ, after all, had a purpose: to accuse force. As Louis Marin states, "there is only accusation of tyranny through the silence of the accuser . . . silence in the accusation is the secret, the inaudible mark of the just man." In other words, the

⁵ F. Ellen Weaver, *The Evolution of the Reform of Port Royal: From the Rule of Cîteaux to Jansenism* (Paris: Editions Beauchesne, 1978), 96.

⁶ Jacqueline Pascal, *A Rule for Children and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. John J. Conley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 30.

⁷ Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King*, trans. Martha M. Houle (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 19.

absolute silence of Christ—a "negative discourse" in the writings of Marin⁸—is paradoxically a powerful discourse because it alone can reveal the full extent of human tyranny.

Marin's "negative discourse" is vividly portrayed by Jacqueline Pascal, Blaise Pascal's sister, in her devotional treatise "On the Mystery of the Death of our Lord Jesus Christ." Jacqueline wrote this treatise in 1651, one year before she became a nun at Port Royal. She wrote:

Jesus had no life whatever during the entire time of his death. Nonetheless, his hands and feet by their wounds . . . and the wounds on his body acted as so many tongues and voices. By a clearly intelligible language proper to their own condition, they proclaimed the greatness of God, who had demanded such a satisfaction. They reproached humanity for the sins that had required such a reparation and preached incessantly to Christians about the greatness of their duties. Throughout all this, his tongue maintained perfect silence.⁹

Here Jacqueline stresses the power of silent accusation by stating that Christ's open wounds spoke a "language proper to their own condition."

The overlap between Blaise Pascal's political ideas and his sister's devotional writings is no accident. This overlap was possible because both had become tied to the Cistercian convent of Port Royal, where the Jansenist interpretation of the Passion first developed. The nuns' particular devotion to Christ as crucifix dated from the time of the foundation of the Institute of the Holy Sacrament in 1627 by Port Royal's reforming abbess, Angélique Arnauld, and Sebastien Zamet, the bishop of Langres. The idea behind this new religious community was to institute a

⁸ Marin, 22-23.

⁹ Jacqueline Pascal, 34.

perpetual adoration of the Eucharist. Angélique was particularly interested in seeing this adoration follow the austere values that she drew from her Cistercian background: isolation from the world, poverty, and silence. These values clashed with Zamet's vision for the Institute, which involved a more joyful celebration of God replete with flowers and perfumes at the altar.¹⁰ These differences along with clashes over the Institute's administration led to a falling out between Arnauld and Zamet and abandonment of the new Institute. However, when Angélique returned to Port Royal, she incorporated her version of Eucharistic adoration into the convent, and Port Royal added the phrase "of the Holy Sacrament" to its name. In addition, the nuns adopted a white habit with a red cross on the chest to symbolize their devotion to the Passion.¹¹

Pascal's theories on force and justice were closely linked to Eucharistic devotion at Port Royal and the Jansenist understanding of the Passion. This link between Pascal's political theory and the nuns' devotion to the Eucharist, in turn, had political significance during the formula crisis. When Louis XIV began pressuring the nuns to sign a formula condemning Jansen's *Augustinus* against their will, they responded with silence. In other words, they responded according to Pascal's theories on force and justice in which silence, by necessity, was the only solution for force.

¹⁰ Angélique Arnauld describes her differences with Sebastien Zamet in her autobiography. See Jacqueline-Marie de Ste. Madeleine Arnauld, *Relation écrite par la Mère Angélique Arnauld sur Port-Royal*, ed. Louis Cognet (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1949), 124-25.

¹¹ For a full account of Angélique Arnauld's reform of Port Royal see Louis Cognet, *La Réforme de Port Royal* (Paris: Sulliver, 1950).

The nuns' political behavior

The formula crisis began in 1661 when Louis XIV ordered all members of the Church to sign a formula, swearing adherence to two papal bulls that condemned five propositions allegedly drawn from Jansen's *Augustinus*.¹² The nuns, who believed that Jansen's writings contained the true doctrine of Augustine, did not want to sign the formula. To avoid signing, the nuns evoked the Church's command that women be silent and reminded the king that they were incapable of passing judgment on the five propositions because of their sex. They pointed to the differences in opinion among bishops over the question of whether these propositions could even be found in Jansen's text and argued that because these bishops disagreed over the formula, the nuns harbored doubts about its legitimacy. Given this doubt, they argued, there was no way for them to sign without making some judgment about the accuracy of the propositions. This judgment, they claimed, would be a clear violation of the Church's command for female silence. Instead, they argued, the safest course of action would be to avoid signing the formula directly by adding a restrictive clause to it stating that as women, they remained silent on the question of the five propositions.¹³

Louis XIV responded to these arguments by ordering the Archbishop of Paris to extract the nuns' signatures "pure and simple" at all cost. The archbishop pressured the nuns by sending the leaders among them into exile, by

¹² A good account of the formula crisis and its history in English is Alexander Sedgwick's *Jansenism in Seventeenth-Century France: Voices from the Wilderness* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977).

¹³ Daniella Kostroun, "A Formula for Disobedience: Jansenism, Gender and the Feminist Paradox," *The Journal of Modern History* 75 (Sept. 2003): 497-98.

denying the community the sacraments, and by granting the king permission to quarter troops in the convent.¹⁴ Under these conditions, the nuns' devotion to the Passion took on a new political significance because they could now argue that they shared in Christ's suffering through the injustice of human force. Like Christ, the nuns now experienced painful isolation from society. Also, like Christ, their only defense against this tyranny was their silence.

The nuns' silence on the question of Jansen's orthodoxy was a powerful silence, a "negative discourse" that accused Louis XIV of tyranny. Seventeenth-century political theory claimed that the king's duty was to defend the rights and privileges of his subjects. Any violation of privileges by the king was viewed as an illegitimate use of authority or act of tyranny.¹⁵ In the case of the nuns, Louis XIV was violating their "natural female privilege" to remain silent when asked to judge a theological text. In addition, Louis XIV's command to use force against these "innocent virgins" and to violate the cloister by stationing troops within its walls only underscored the nuns' silent accusation of tyranny.

The king and his ministers, however, resorted to force because they did not see the nuns' request for silence as a plea by innocent women, but as an insolent form of resistance. The king rejected the nuns' alleged innocence because their request for silence dovetailed neatly with a broader Jansenist strategy for resistance, which involved

¹⁴ Details of these events can be found in the "persecution journals" that the nuns wrote at the time. For a useful bibliography of these and other primary sources pertaining to Port Royal see F. Ellen Weaver, "Port Royal," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1985): 13:1932-52.

¹⁵ Philippe Sellier, "De la 'tyrannie,'" in *Justice et Force: Politiques au temps de Pascal*, ed. Gérard Ferreyrolles (Paris: Klincksieck, 1996), 365-75.

critiquing the papal bulls through a distinction between "right" and "fact." According to this distinction, the Church had "right" over questions of doctrine such as whether five theological propositions were heretical or not. However, when it came to matters of fact—such as whether those five propositions appeared in Jansen's book or not—the Church had no authority because these matters could be determined by all through reason. The Jansenist theologian Antoine Arnauld championed the right/fact distinction and encouraged many to resist the formula by adding a restrictive clause to their signatures spelling out this distinction.¹⁶ Thus, when the nuns signed with their clause stating their right to remain silent as women, they too upheld Arnauld's distinction but under the mantle of the Church command for female silence.

The nuns' support for the right/fact distinction suited Arnauld in the early years of the formula crisis. During these years, he wrote several treatises, most notably the *Apology for the Nuns of Port Royal*, which exhorted the public to take note of the nuns' example.¹⁷ This text contains many of the themes emanating from Pascal's writings on force and justice. In Arnauld's *Apology*, the nuns are elevated as figures of Christ, who, in their suffering, silently give justice a voice. For example, in the introduction, he writes that although most people will cater to the king's force, some will be moved by the plight of Port Royal's helpless women and will take the time necessary to review their case in depth. He adds that when these people examine the situation, they will see clearly that when the archbishop of Paris, along with royal troops

¹⁶ Sedgwick, 106-38.

¹⁷ Antoine Arnauld, "Apologie pour les religieuses de Port Royal" in *Oeuvres de Messire Antoine Arnauld, docteur de la maison et société de Sorbonne*, vol. 23 (Paris: S. d'Arnay, 1755-1783).

"invade the convent like a hoard of thieves," the highest powers of France have joined forces to oppress these women. They will see that "[w]hen there is nothing but power and violence on one side, there is nothing but reason and innocence on the other." When these observers recognize this complete juxtaposition between force and innocence they will realize that the nuns "are participating truly in the state and condition of the first among the righteous." Like Christ, they are a spectacle from God "established for the ruin and resurrection of others."¹⁸ In other words, Arnauld's *Apology* posits the nuns as a physical embodiment of Pascal's theory of justice and force.

The sympathy that Arnauld showed for these women quickly waned in the following year when he became involved in the plans to organize a truce in the Church. These plans took off in 1667, when four bishops resisted the formula by issuing pastoral letters in support of Jansen's orthodoxy. When the pope denounced these letters at the request of the king, several French bishops rose up to oppose this gesture of papal authority over French affairs. It became clear to many that the pope and king were using the Jansenist quarrels to assert dominance over the episcopacy. Hence began a series of negotiations to hammer out a peace. These negotiations were kept secret from the most radical Jesuits in the king's council because it was believed that they would block the negotiations.¹⁹

As it turns out, it was not the Jesuits who most hampered these negotiations, but the Port Royal nuns. The truce resulted in an agreement that the four bishops would sign the formula while attaching a separate document

¹⁸ Arnauld, *Apologie*, 169.

¹⁹ Sedgwick, 136-38.

spelling out the right/fact distinction. In addition, the negotiators agreed that they should include the nuns in this truce.²⁰ When the nuns learned of this decision, they protested because they believed that the four bishops did not defend Jansen clearly enough. The nuns argued that unless the bishops' signatures included the right/fact distinction, then the nuns' silence was open for misinterpretation. This position put the nuns at odds with their fellow male Jansenists, in particular Antoine Arnauld who had already sent a request to the king asking him to include the nuns in the truce. In the spring of 1668 Arnauld's initiative resulted in a heated exchange with his niece, Angélique de Saint Jean Arnauld d'Andilly, a leading nun at Port Royal. In a letter to her uncle, Angélique de Saint Jean wrote that the settlement was unsatisfactory because it would silence the truth and allow error to spread:

Because the result of a settlement . . . would no doubt presuppose the promise to keep silent on the question of fact, out of fear of rekindling the debate, and during this silence of the truth, the voice of error would be able to make itself heard throughout the land, and death could take us by surprise before we had the opportunity to acknowledge God and to deliver the truth from its harmful captivity.²¹

Arnauld replied three days later that her fears about the settlement were unfounded.²² He wrote that he also understood why—given the nuns' past experiences—they hesitated to sign the formula without a clear statement of

²⁰ Pierre Guilbert, *Mémoires historiques et chronologiques sur l'Abbaye de Port-Royal des Champs* (Utrecht, 1755), 1:18.

²¹ Angélique de Saint Jean Arnauld d'Andilly to Antoine Arnauld, spring, 1668, cited in Guilbert, 21-22.

²² Antoine Arnauld to Angélique de Saint Jean Arnauld d'Andilly, cited in Guilbert, 583.

the right/fact distinction, and he admitted that this had been his own position up until the present. He argued, however, that times had changed and that Jansen's work had been so well defended that "it is certain that it will pass as very well vindicated for all posterity."²³ Now that Jansen's orthodoxy was clear, he added, the question of the signature was merely one of discipline and could in no way compromise their faith.²⁴

In addition, Arnauld argued that the nuns should sign to support the peace and to save the convent from destruction. With regards to the peace, he wrote that although he had always advocated signing with the right/fact distinction, he would never have insisted on this had the peace of the Church been at stake: "I never would have been able to imagine, nor can I imagine now, that if the peace of the Church depended upon this manner of signature that one could refuse to sign in good conscience."²⁵ With regards to the convent, he added that the nuns' current refusal to join the truce would most likely result in Port Royal's destruction and that "everybody who supports you now, would condemn you terribly if they knew that you were of this opinion [to sacrifice the convent]."²⁶

Arnauld's arguments did not sway the nuns. First of all, his change of opinion merely reinforced their original position that as long as they could see contradictions among men's opinions on the formula, they had reason to doubt. As long as they had reason to doubt, they had an obligation to remain silent. Second, Arnauld's concern for the house raised their suspicions. Port Royal was a wealthy convent, after all, and the nuns suspected that their friends

²³ *Ibid.*, 587.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 588.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

and family wanted the truce because they feared seeing the property that they invested in Port Royal end up in the hands of strangers. Understanding full well the intertwining of religion and politics in their society, the nuns decided to act in a way that seemed to be guided purely by religion. In a short treatise written at the beginning of the peace process, Angélique de Saint Jean made clear her rejection of worldly compromise:

There is nothing as perilous in God's affairs than to make overtures. It is enough to fall rather than to make one step against his order. . . . In this way the affairs of God become our own, and we make them fully human and effective through us. . . . We will remain invincible if we always remain firm in the position in which he has placed us.²⁷

Here she claims that "one step" against God's order is as bad as falling altogether. This principle was especially true, in her view, when one sought compromise as a way to reduce suffering: "The servants of God can never believe themselves to be more secure than during those times when they have no other choice but to suffer."²⁸ As this quote suggests, the nuns decided to resist the compromise because this would ensure their suffering.

When the nuns refused to compromise at the Peace of Clement IX, they were not "proud" or "overstepping their bounds" as much as they were ideologically consistent. By remaining consistent, they became Jansenist political activists who revealed Louis XIV's tyranny by embracing silence and suffering. In addition, they were making a "Pascalian Wager" of sorts. Certainly, the nuns' resistance was not rational in terms of protecting their worldly goods.

²⁷ Guilbert, 35.

²⁸ Ibid.

However, the nuns understood that should they stick to their beliefs and prevail in this struggle, then the payoff for them in terms of the spiritual rewards and pious reputation would be so great, that it was worth taking the risk in the first place.

In the end, the nuns' wager paid off. To the humiliation of the Archbishop of Paris, the nuns never signed the formula that he had pressured them so hard to sign. Instead, he was forced to issue them a pardon. This victory for freedom of conscience against Louis XIV was the nuns' major victory. But this was not the only reward for the nuns. In terms of property, they initially suffered a financial loss when their community was divided into two houses as part of the settlement. When Port Royal was divided, two-thirds of the total property went to the eleven nuns who had signed the formula back in 1664 while the remaining one third went to the over eighty nuns who had resisted the formula. This enormous financial setback, however, was only temporary. In the decade following the Peace, the Jansenist nuns enjoyed their most prosperous era ever, as many wealthy patrons, inspired by the nuns' religious commitment, showered Port Royal with donations.²⁹

The significance of the nuns' resistance to the Peace of Clement IX is multiple. This episode reveals that the nuns were well versed in the political theory of their male Jansenist allies. When the nuns refused to compromise, they were not irrational or "unruly" women who were blind to political reality. Instead, they were putting into practice Pascal's political theory that posited absolute silence and suffering as the sole solution to absolute power. In addition, this episode reveals how Pascal's theories on force and

²⁹ Charles Augustin de Sainte Beuve famously described this decade of growth at Port Royal immediately following the formula crisis as the "autumn" of Port Royal: Sainte-Beuve, 856.

justice may have provided a blueprint for challenging absolutism. By putting Pascal's ideas into practice, the nuns demonstrated that although tyranny could not be defeated, it could at least be forced to show its hand.