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Tomas M. Carr Jr., *Voix des abbesses du Grand Siècle: La prédication au féminin à Port-Royal*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2006. 360pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. €58.00 (cl). ISBN 3-8233-6189-9.

Review by Daniella Kostroun, Indiana University--Purdue University Indianapolis.

Tomas Carr Jr. has recently established himself as a leader in studies of French early modern convent women. His monograph, *Voix des abbesses du Grand Siècle* along with his edited volume, *The Cloister and the World: Early Modern Convent Voices*, stand together as Carr's "call for a broader recognition of the importance of writings by religious women" among scholars of French literature.[1] While the edited volume draws our attention to the many ways that nuns expressed themselves and to the wealth of sources left by them that remain neglected in libraries and archives, his monograph provides an in-depth look at the speeches, sermons, and other verbal discourses delivered by the abbesses of Port Royal. Cistercian by origin, the Port Royal convent became famous for its role in the Jansenist conflict in the seventeenth century. Carr's thoughtful and impressive study of Port Royal's abbesses successfully fulfills his agenda, which is to show how attending to convent voices can raise valuable insights into female agency, authority, and leadership in the early modern period.

Carr organizes *Voix des abbesses* into three sections. The first section, "Les cadres de la prédication monastique au féminin," outlines the rules and traditions that shaped how abbesses addressed their fellow nuns in collective settings. The second section, "La parole de l'abbesse dans l'évolution de Port-Royal" analyzes the speeches made by Port Royal's abbesses to their community in the period 1602-1684. During this period, seven abbesses governed Port Royal as triennially-elected officers, but the bulk of available sources was generated by three of them: Angélique Arnauld, Agnès Arnauld, and Angélique de Saint Jean Arnauld d'Andilly. These three abbesses served for multiple terms and were all members of the Arnauld family, a distinguished family of the robe nobility.[2] The book's third section, "Dossier: La vie monastique vue à travers les discours de l'abbesse," contains twenty examples from primary sources documenting the Arnauld women's discourses, many of which appear here in print for the first time. Carr groups these discourses according to type and provides for each group a critical guide that puts them in context of the liturgical cycles and historical events at Port Royal. Although a small sample of the hundreds of pages composed by the Arnauld women, these sources give ample testimony to Carr's assertion that although "sworn to silence" they "were eloquent in their own way" (p.10).

Carr's first section is most useful for those interested in convent voices in general. He compares the speech practices of male priests within the convent with those of abbesses (pp. 23-27). He also explains how abbesses' oral discourses fit into the liturgical life of the convent. Abbesses had three opportunities each day to speak to their community: at chapter, in assembly, and during conferences. A fourth, less regular occasion for public discourse by the abbess was the funerary speech, given upon the death of a nun or lay patron (pp. 27-9). He also discusses how nuns collected and preserved records of these speeches. Carr's main focus, however, is on the tensions between the tradition of female silence stemming from the Pauline interdictions against women speaking or teaching in the Church, and the Benedictine Rule, which requires abbesses to lead and guide their fellow nuns. The result of these conflicting traditions was that abbesses preached to their nuns but without the benefit of preaching

manuals or other formal aids. The font of their knowledge was often attributed to the Holy Spirit, rather than to “science” (i.e. book learning), and their predication style was more spontaneous and improvisational than that of male priests (pp. 47-49). Carr’s descriptions of abbesses’ informal preaching styles reinforce the findings made by scholars of women authors in other literary realms. Michèle Longino Farrell, for instance, found that Mme de Sévigné circumvented sexist traditions and distinguished herself in the epistolary genre by avoiding the conventions set by instructional manuals and style guides and by adopting a more “natural” and “artless” writing style.[3]

In addition to considering the rules and traditions governing female speech at convents in general, Carr also looks specifically at the case of Port Royal. Here, he offers valuable insights into Port Royal’s culture that others have hitherto ignored. For example, the Port Royal nuns shared with the new active female orders of their day a desire for ministry, but differed from these teaching and nursing orders by directing their ministry to the reform of other convents (pp. 63-4). Port Royal’s devotion to Madeleine the penitent (as opposed to Madeleine the preacher) reflected their ministry by suggesting that nuns contributed to the Church’s apostolate through private penitence and prayer on the behalf of others, and not by working themselves out in the world (pp. 67-8). When considering the Port Royal nuns’ positions towards the Pauline interdictions, Carr stresses paradox. On the one hand, the nuns insisted on their adherence to these interdictions, and advocated teaching by example rather than by words. On the other hand, there were many “knowledgeable and eloquent” nuns within the convent, who clearly used the interdictions strategically to resist signing the anti-Jansenist formulary ordered by Louis XIV in 1661 (p. 54). This resistance convinced their archbishop that “Saint Paul is completely forgotten by these nuns” (p.54). Carr, in contrast, shows how the Pauline interdictions were at the heart of their resistance to the formulary. They rejected the formulary to “teach by example” that Jansen was innocent (p.70).

The second section of this book, in which Carr traces how the discourses of the three Arnauld abbesses evolved chronologically in response to the Jansenist conflict, is the strongest part of his analysis from a historical point of view. Carr finds that the Arnauld women became more focused and prolific in their speeches at moments of crisis. Angélique Arnauld’s personal testimony and the documentary evidence both suggest that even though she initiated Port Royal’s reform in 1609, she did not speak confidently or frequently before her fellow nuns until the convent came under attack for Jansenism in the 1640s and 1650s. Up until that time, Angélique was “searching for her voice.” (p. 71). Once under siege, Angélique refined her message so that she focused on three instances of “divine grace” that gave Port Royal its special identity: 1) Port Royal’s reform to a strict observance of the Benedictine Rule, 2) Port Royal’s association with the abbé of Saint-Cyran, who taught the nuns how to sustain their reform, and 3) the institution of a perpetual adoration of the Eucharist at Port Royal (pp.125-27). Angélique and her sister Agnès Arnauld preached the benefits of these graces to their fellow nuns repeatedly to inspire them and to maintain control over them during the crucial decades of 1650s and 1660s, the decades leading up to and encompassing the formulary crisis. After a decade of respite following the Peace of Clement IX in 1669, the nuns braced themselves for a new persecution when Louis XIV denounced them for Jansenism in 1679. At this time, the community elected Angélique and Agnès’s niece, Angélique de Saint Jean to serve as their abbess. Angélique de Saint Jean used her platform as abbess to deliver speeches designed to renew the nuns’ dedication to the legacy of Port Royal’s “divine graces” as defined by her aunts (pp.178-79).

Because Carr comes to this study from the perspective of French literature, many of his observations stem from the concerns of that discipline. For instance, his interest in the personalities of the individual nuns, particularly in the relative “severity” or “softness” of Angélique’s character (pp.122-25), is one that has deep roots in nineteenth-century literary scholarship, where critics such as Charles Augustin de Sainte-Beuve evaluated these women through the lens of biographical “portraits.”[4] For the historian, Carr’s text is rich with interesting insights, not all of them fully exploited by him. For instance, one theme that struck me was the Arnauld women’s emphasis on triennial elections as a cornerstone of their

reform. These women argued that elections based on merit were necessary for maintaining piety and discipline in the convent, and that the alternative system, that of royal nomination, would introduce worldly ambition and corruption into the house. For those interested in the evolution of the French nobility, Angélique Arnauld—who started out as a royally appointed abbess upon the initiative of her family, but then went on after her reform to be repeatedly elected abbess (along with her sister and niece)—provides a stunning example of women’s contributions to, and the success of, a “culture of merit” among the robe nobility.[5]

Another section that struck me was Carr’s discussion of the sermons made by the frail and ailing Agnès Arnauld from her bed during the height of Port Royal’s persecution in 1665. At this time, royal guards held the nuns in “captivity” and prevented them from having any contact with sympathetic friends and directors outside of the convent. Under these difficult circumstances, Agnès maintained morale among the nuns by giving sermons in which she compared their ordeal to events from the Old Testament (pp. 161-70). Agnès’ bedroom sermons provide food for thought for those considering Catherine Maire’s argument for a complete rupture between seventeenth and eighteenth century Jansenism, in which eighteenth-century “figurist” historians created a “myth” of the seventeenth-century Port Royal in a battle over memory.[6] In Carr’s discussion we discover Agnès as a precedent to Maire’s “figurist” historians down to the point that their biblical exegesis drew upon the same motifs and examples she used.[7] Although Carr does not explicitly enter the debate over rupture versus continuity in French Jansenism,[8] he nonetheless nods towards continuity when he observes that the parallels Agnès makes between the bible and the Jansenist conflict “are worthy of the figurists from the century of the convulsionaries”(p. 166).

This brief mention of the eighteenth-century figurists is typical of how Carr makes his arguments. He eschews the controversies surrounding Jansenist scholarship to the point that only those already in the know regarding these debates can detect his contributions to them. Such discretion is worthy of the Port Royal nuns. Like the nuns, he also avoids the “science” of experts. He could have framed his study with a discussion of recent critical theory on the power of words to shape communities, transform culture, and influence identity in the context of political disputes. But instead, he allows his theory to reveal itself through his narrative by highlighting the Augustinian underpinnings of the nuns’ approaches to language and by describing how they repeatedly relied on verbal discourses to shore up their authority in times of trouble. Finally, by including a dossier of primary sources, he upholds the nuns’ own pedagogical position that the best way to teach is by providing examples.

This study, which chronicles the remarkable intellect, leadership, and eloquence of the Arnauld women through their own writings is long overdue. Carr has exposed the tip of an iceberg of neglected sources left by these nuns and reveals the extent to which we have ignored the writings of early modern French nuns in general. Let us hope that Carr succeeds in his mission to inspire scholarship on other convent voices. If he fails, it will only be because this carefully-wrought monograph threatens to persuade us that the Arnauld women, in their efforts to create a community of exemplary nuns, were truly exceptional.

Notes:

[1] Susan Dinan “Review of Thomas M. Carr, ed., *The Cloister and the World: Early Modern Convent Voices. Studies in Early Modern France*,” *H-France Review* Vol. 8 (June 2008), No. 71. <http://www.h-france.net/vol8reviews/vol8no71dinan.pdf>

[2] On the Arnauld family and its accomplishments in the realms of law, religion, and royal service, see Alexander Sedgwick, *The Travails of Conscience: The Arnauld Family and the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[3] Michèle Longino Farrell, *Performing Motherhood: The Sévigné Correspondence* (Hanover, NH: The University Press of New England, 1991), 16-17.

[4] Maxim LeRoy, "Introduction" to Charles Augustin de Sainte-Beuve, *Port Royal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954-55), 33. Henri Brémond also famously used portraits--literally those by Phillipe de Champaigne--to assess the personalities and spiritual leadership of the Arnauld abbesses. Henri Brémond, "La Conquête mystique: l'école de Port Royal" in *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* 12 vols (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1916-1932) Vol 4: 176-8.

[5] Jay Smith, *The Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600-1789* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

[6] Catherine Maire, *De la cause de dieu à la cause de la nation: Le jansénisme au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998).

[7] For instance, in one of Agnès' commentaries, she compared the nuns' struggle to that of the Old Testament Maccabee family that led the Jewish revolt against the Syrian king (pp.168-9). Maire, in turn, argues that an important feature of the Port Royal "myth" as created by figurist historians was the claim that Port Royal's resistance to Louis XIV was prefigured by the Maccabees. Maire, 185.

[8] The question of rupture versus continuity in French Jansenism fits into a larger recent debate on the religious origins of the French Revolution. Catherine Maire, "Au sources politiques et religieuses de la Révolution française," *Le Débat* 133 (2004): 133-54. Dale Van Kley "Sur les sources politiques et religieuses de la Révolution française: Commentaires pour un débat," *Commentaire* 108 (2004): 893-914.

Daniella Kostroun
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
dkostrou@iupui.edu

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