

**Michèle Bretz, De Port-Royal au jansénisme à travers les Relations de captivité, Paris (Classiques Garnier) 2021, 295 p. (Univers Port-Royal, 45), ISBN 978-2-406-11447-5, EUR 26,00.**

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The nuns of Port-Royal undoubtedly figure among the most fascinating religious communities of seventeenth-century Europe. They gained lasting fame through their defense of Jansenism, a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century movement within Catholicism that sought to reinvigorate Augustinian theology, fought with the Jesuits over issues of divine grace and pastoral rigor, and clashed with the absolutist French monarchy. Roughly a decade ago, Daniella Kostroun's excellent work drew the attention of Anglophone scholars to the nuns of Port-Royal and argued that their resistance to Louis XIV ought to be understood as feminist. Now, Michèle Bretz's monograph »De Port-Royal au jansénisme« corroborates their significant place in both women's and intellectual history. Bretz makes a valuable contribution by offering more fine-grained coverage of two interrelated aspects – first, the nuns' self-presentation in writing through their *relations de captivité*, and second, their impressive afterlife in the historiography and literature of the late seventeenth through early twenty-first centuries.

After a concise introduction in which Bretz insists on the nuns' agency and on the pivotal position of the *relations* in the history of Jansenism, the first main part of her book deals with the struggles and writings of the 1660s. Throughout the first half of that decade, the *sœurs* and *mères* of Port-Royal angered the archbishop of Paris and Louis XIV by refusing to sign the *formulaire*, a confirmation of personal orthodoxy that condemned five theological propositions identified as Jansenist. Bretz amply contextualizes the many-sided conflict and details its stages. On August 26, 1664, royal troops marched onto the premises of Port-Royal de Paris, forcing twelve nuns – including the abbess – to leave their community behind and suffer a form of imprisonment in other convents whose superiors supported anti-Jansenism. After many peripeties and polemics, the Jansenist nuns reunited in the summer of 1665, and the freshly released members of the community proceeded to pen their *relations de captivité*, reflections on the persecution they had experienced. Bretz shows how these texts escaped the confines of literary genre. In their writings, the nuns represented an intimate reliance on God's love and support, negotiating divine truth and human weakness in ways clearly inspired by Augustine's »Confessions«. At the same time, however, the *relations* constituted Jansenist manifestoes aimed at the public, as well as performances of witnessing (*témoignage* and *témoin* are two of Bretz's keywords) that evoked martyrdom. The *relations'* power thus resided in their delicate balance between monastic and gendered humility on the



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one hand and a politically salient autobiographical approach that almost amounted to auto-hagiography on the other hand.

In Part Two of the book, Bretz further conveys that power by demonstrating how French, English, and German writers have kept rediscovering and redebating the nuns' sufferings and writings from the later seventeenth century to the present day. After the *Unigenitus* affair had reignited the Jansenist controversy in the 1710s, some of the *relations de captivité* first appeared in print in 1724, but they had already been circulating in manuscript form among friends of Port-Royal. Bretz's clearest argument in this part is that many (pro-)Jansenist male writers, from Racine to Sainte-Beuve and beyond, actually tried to blunt the edge of what the convent members had written and done. Even as these later commentators exalted the virtues and desperate struggles of Port-Royal, they often viewed the female religious not as active rebels but as somewhat hapless (albeit saintly) victims. That said, Part Two also uncovers the nuns' relevance to a wide range of other groups, for example nineteenth-century British women writers and anti-Jansenist polemicists of the Third French Republic. Unfortunately, Bretz's writing meanders slightly in the process, juxtaposing relevant works in barely connected vignettes, some of which represent mere descriptive summaries. A certain heuristic indecision may have contributed to this problem: whereas the title of Part Two announces the topic of »Les *Relations de captivité*, un mythe fondateur du jansénisme«, the author proceeds to deliver a much more general reception history of the fate of the Port-Royal nuns. This undertaking remains too vague to enable sustained reflection on intertextuality.

The book has another noteworthy weakness. Instead of analyzing the myths of the early modern Jansenists, it reproduces them in too many places. Although Bretz's bibliography on Port-Royal is helpful and up to date, she largely avoids acknowledging current scholarship explicitly in her chapters and has excessive recourse to older Jansenist narratives. To take only the most glaring example, a long stretch of Chapter Two seems to depend almost entirely on Jérôme Besoigne's »Histoire de l'abbaye de Port-Royal« of 1752, treated uncritically here as both a primary and a secondary source (p. 76–92). Bretz also portrays supposed jesuitical views of obedience and conscience in a way that strongly echoes the Jansenists' own polemics. Her bibliography does not include the works of Jean-Pascal Gay, John O'Malley, or other historians who have spent the last few decades compellingly reinterpreting the intellectual and cultural history of the early modern Jesuits. These omissions matter. By caricaturally assuming the Jesuits' utter disregard for individual autonomy and firm principles of conscience, Bretz weakens her own attempt to contextualize the nuns' approach to those same issues.

That said, this is an elegantly written book, whose intended audience may not be confined to specialized scholars and may also include wider circles of educated Parisians interested in the history and legacy of Port-Royal. In any case, even historians and literary

Frühe Neuzeit – Revolution –  
Empire (1500–1815)

DOI:  
[10.11588/frrec.2022.2.89098](https://doi.org/10.11588/frrec.2022.2.89098)

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critics already familiar with Jansenism will benefit from Bretz's insights on the *relations de captivité* and the gendered reception history of Port-Royal. Scholars working on early modern religious dissidence will profitably read her book in conjunction with other recent work, most notably Natalia Muchnik's »Les prisons de la foi« (2019), and additional historiographical resonances may emerge for different readers. Moreover, Bretz's doctoral thesis, defended in 2016, furnished the first complete critical edition of the *relations de captivité*. »De Port-Royal au jansénisme« makes it abundantly clear that this edition deserves to be published sooner rather than later.



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