



Authority and Gender in Angélique Arnauld (1591–1661)

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An abbess of the convent of Port-Royal, Angélique Arnauld defends the right of women to exercise authority in the religious and political realms. In her own reform of Port-Royal, Mère Angélique insisted that the abbess was to be elected by the convent's nuns rather than nominated by the king. The abbess would have a fixed term of office (six years) rather than a lifetime appointment. Regular assemblies of the nuns in chapter would discuss the convent's constitution and rules. Clerical control would be limited inasmuch as the abbess would nominate and dismiss the convent's chaplains, preachers, and confessors.

Nuns would receive a substantial theological education through the reading of Augustinian texts, especially those written by Jansenist authors, and through sermons and lectures presented by erudite clerics in the house chapel. In her correspondence with other convents, the abbess propagated a conventual reform that would enhance self-government by women and deepen their theological and philosophical culture. In her correspondence with Marie-Louise de Gonzague, the queen of Poland, the abbess emphasizes the duties proper to women who exercise political authority. Such women should act as charitable advocates for the poor during times of war, epidemic, and famine. In particular, they should exercise the difficult Christian virtue of love for one's enemy during periods of war. As the persecution of the Jansenist movement intensified, Mère Angélique defended the right of nuns to refuse to assent to what they believed to be erroneous condemnations of alleged heresies. The authority of church and state did not extend to the coercion of conscience on fallible judgments of fact. Like men, women had the right to refuse to engage in what they believed to be exercises of deception.

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