

REVOLUTIONARIES, FEMINISTS, MARTYRS?

Revisiting the image of the Religieuses Hospitalières in pre-revolutionary France.

Candidate number: 1032978

Word count: 11,878

Referencing style: Faculty

Impact Statement

Candidate Number	1032978
Thesis title	Revolutionaries, feminists, martyrs? Revisiting the image of the Religieuses Hospitalières in pre-revolutionary France.
Impact statement (200 words max)	The Port-Royal archives (<i>Bibliothèque de la Société de Port-Royal</i>) were closed and available sources severely restricted due to renovation for the duration of 2021. Thanks to the kind assistance of their archivists, I was sent photos of a small number of sources, but the closure prevented me from accessing a wider range of contemporary letters and from accessing anything other than the Le Paige papers. Details of this closure are available on their website.

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Abbreviations

NE *Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques, ou mémoires pour servir à la constitution Unigenitus.*

Introduction

On 26 October 1756, a letter arrived at the doors of the convent of the Religieuses Hospitalières de la Miséricorde de Jesus, on the Rue Mouffetard in southern Paris. The letter carried a formal threat, signed by the Archbishop of Paris himself, that, should they hold a planned election for their Mother Superior, the nuns would be excommunicated.¹ Yet such a fate never arrived: they were spared, by the Paris *parlement* and, ultimately, King Louis XV himself. What was so special about this convent of 30 nuns that the king, archbishop, and the country's largest court intervened to permit them to hold an internal election?

In fact, this formal ecclesiastical warning - this 'Monition' - was not the first letter from the archbishop, Christophe de Beaumont, to land at the Hospitalières' door. Throughout 1756, the nuns had been communicating directly with Beaumont, pleading with him for permission to elect a Mother Superior. On every occasion he obfuscated and delayed, because the real reason for the delay was much bigger than the women who served at the convent in the Faubourg Saint-Marcel. The only condition which would have led the archbishop to permit an election would have been for them to affirm Unigenitus, the 1713 papal bull which condemned Jansenist beliefs, or to nominate as Superior one of the six nuns within the convent who was willing to do so.² The Hospitalières' dispute was thus an inflection point of the Jansenist debate, which dominated French religious politics throughout the eighteenth century.

¹ *Monition signifiée de la part de... l'archevêque aux religieuses hospitalières du fauxbourg Saint-Marcel... (au sujet de l'élection de la supérieure.)* (Conflans, 1756), pp. 1-3.

² L-A. Le Paige, *Lettres sur le péché imaginaire . Au sujet du mandement & instruction pastorale de M. l'archevêque de Paris, touchant l'autorité de l'Eglise, l'enseignement de la foi, & l'administration des sacrements, & la soumission due à la constitution Unigenitus ; portant défenses de lire plusieurs écrits, &c.* (Conflans, 1756), p. 41.

The authorship of the *Lettres* is disputed. I accept Mita Choudhury's attribution of authorship to Le Paige, but some publications attribute it to abbé Jean-Baptiste Gaultier.

The significance of Unigenitus for eighteenth century Jansenism is almost impossible to overstate. In condemning one of the movement's central texts, Pasquier Quesnel's *Réflexions Morales* (1672), the bull condemned Jansenist beliefs as a whole, and served as the canonical basis for attempts to eliminate its practice throughout the century.³ For Jansenist writers, it represented the ultimate target of hatred, as a symbol of their condemnation by the Gallican Church and the ultramontane (pro-Papal, pro-Jesuit, anti-Jansenist) archbishop who controlled it. The *Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques* (NE), the preeminent clandestine Jansenist journal, was founded explicitly in opposition to the bull.⁴ The *parti janseniste* which emerged as the dominant opposition to ultramontane Catholic policy in the Paris *parlement* in the mid-eighteenth century, meanwhile, largely preoccupied itself with Unigenitus-related disputes – in 1754 it was even sent into exile for this reason, and after being recalled was forbidden from discussing the bull under a decree of political silence.⁵ Such disputes included the attempted suppression of the Hospitalières, which will be the focal point of this thesis.

Religion, politics, and the convent in eighteenth century France

From its founding in the mid-seventeenth century until the Revolution, Jansenism was a significant force in French religion and politics. It emerged from the writing of Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638), bishop of Ypres; specifically, his revival of an Augustinian theology

³ 'Unigenitus', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago, 2020), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Unigenitus> (7 Mar 2022).

⁴ The journal's full title was *Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques, ou mémoires pour servir à la constitution Unigenitus*.

⁵ J. Swann, 'The parti janseniste and the refusal of the sacraments crisis, 1734-1756' in *Politics and the Parlement of Paris under Louis XV, 1754–1774* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 91.

which emphasised original sin and the necessity of grace, within the Catholic Church.⁶ Opposed by successive kings and archbishops, the movement nonetheless grew throughout the seventeenth century, before being suppressed in the early eighteenth century. It nonetheless lingered as a political force throughout the 1700s, transforming into a political faction as the Paris *parlement* took on an increasingly political character in the decades before the Revolution.

As sites of religious practice, and therefore of religious disputes, convents figured largely in debates surrounding Jansenism and Unigenitus.⁷ Their history, as Mita Choudhury has argued, is tied ‘inextricably to ... female religious activism’.⁸ Histories of such disputes tend to focus on the Jansenist convent of Port-Royal, which was forcefully dissolved at the will of Louis XIV and Pope Clement XI over the course of the later seventeenth century, culminating in the forced removal of the nuns in 1709.⁹ Vast amounts have been written about the Port-Royal nuns, in large part due to the familial connection of one of their superiors, the Mère Angélique Arnauld, to the influential mathematician and theologian Antoine Arnauld, and the involvement of the *philosophe* Blaise Pascal in their case.¹⁰ Often, the Port-Royal controversy

⁶ M. Cottret & C. Porter, ‘Jansenism’, in *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2005), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195104301.001.0001/acref-9780195104301-e-347> (9 Mar 2022).

⁷ See the Carmelite ‘Filles du Calvaire’, the Franciscans of Beauvais, the Carmelites of Faubourg S. Jacques.

⁸ M. Choudhury, *Convents and Nuns in Eighteenth-Century French Politics and Culture* (Ithaca, 2004), p. 34.

⁹ ‘Port Royal, Convent of’, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford, 2013), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198614425.001.0001/acref-9780198614425-e-4632?rskey=Yv23mS&result=4621> (7 Mar 2022).

¹⁰ For classic histories of Port-Royal, see M. Poulain de Nogent, *Nouvelle histoire abrégée de l'abbaye de Port-Royal* (Paris, 1786); C-A Saint-Beuve, *Port-Royal* (Paris, 1840); C. Gazier, *Histoire du Monastère de Port-Royal* (Paris, 1929);

is treated by historians as a synecdoche for the entire history of French Jansenism; Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve's immense three-volume history of the abbey, published between 1840 and 1848, is often considered the defining history of the French Jansenist debates.¹¹ Yet it has been much more than a century since this history was published, and other convents have continued to be discussed only as an afterthought to Port-Royal. Aside from a small amount of writing on the *convulsionnaire* movement of the early eighteenth century, almost nothing has been written on the numerous female religious communities shaken by Unigenitus-related disputes throughout the 1700s.¹²

This elision between Port-Royal and all other Jansenist convents is misleading, because, between the dissolution of Port-Royal in 1709 and the threatened excommunication of the Hospitalières in 1756, the character of Jansenism changed fundamentally. As has been convincingly demonstrated by a number of significant histories, the character of French religion and politics had by the 1750s developed such as to characterise the eighteenth century as the movement's political era, in contrast to the primarily religious Jansenism of the seventeenth century.¹³ Dale Van Kley, in particular, offers a useful distinction between the political or 'judicial Jansenism' of the eighteenth century and the 'spiritual Jansenism' which

For modern histories of Port-Royal, see M. Escholier, *Port-Royal: The Drama of the Jansenists* (New York, 1968); F. Ellen Weaver, *The Evolution of the Reform of Port-Royal: From the Rule of Citeaux to Jansenism* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1978); J. J. Conley, *Adoration and annihilation: the convent philosophy of Port-Royal* (Notre Dame, 2009); D. Kostroun, *Feminism, absolutism, and Jansenism: Louis XIV and the Port-Royal nuns* (Cambridge, 2011); L. Plazenet, *Port-Royal* (Paris, 2012).

¹¹ See W. Doyle, *Jansenism: Catholic resistance to authority from the Reformation to the French Revolution* (London, 2000) p. 2.

¹² See B. Robert Kreiser, *Miracles, convulsions, and ecclesiastical politics in early eighteenth-century Paris* (Princeton, 1978).

¹³ See Doyle, *Jansenism*, p. 62; D. Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791* (New Haven, 1996), p. 109.

came before it.¹⁴ This development does not mean that Jansenism became solely political in character: to assume so would be to misunderstand the nature of Ancien Régime politics, incorrectly assuming that it was possible for any movement to shed religion entirely in the mid-Enlightenment. It does, however, mean that the history of Port-Royal has cast an inappropriately long shadow over the history of other convents which did not exist in the same political or religious context.

The only scholarship dedicated exclusively to the Hospitalières is Augustin Gazier's *Une Suite à l'Histoire de Port-Royal, d'après des documents inédits*, published in 1906. This authoritative work provides an extremely useful overview of the dispute throughout the mid-eighteenth century, which has influenced later scholarship. His illustration of the relationships between the nuns, the Archbishop of Paris Christophe de Beaumont, and Jansenist *parlementaires* such as Louis-Adrien Le Paige and Lefebvre de Saint-Hilaire has largely informed the factual basis of later scholarship and the understanding of the place of such men in Jansenist politics.¹⁵ Yet the Hospitalières are, literally, 'what happened next' (suite à). In the century since the publication of *Une Suite*, no other historian has focussed exclusively on the Hospitalières. In her 2004 book, *Convents and Nuns in Eighteenth Century French Politics and Culture*, for instance, Choudhury is interested in the Hospitalières and other Jansenist convents only insofar as they are present in the language of Jansenist politicians. Arguing that their image was a specifically feminine one, she suggests that the nuns may have been complicit in

¹⁴ Van Kley, *Religious Origins*, p. 109.

¹⁵ A. Gazier, *Une suite à l'histoire de Port-Royal d'après des documents inédits : Jeanne de Boisgnoel et Christophe de Beaumont (1750-1782)* (Paris, 1906).

For how Gazier has informed later work, see M. Choudhury, 'Gendered Models of Resistance: Jansenist Nuns and "Unigenitus"', *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, 35/1, (2009), p. 50 n. 73.

their presentation, but does not investigate this at any length.¹⁶ Indeed, all of these histories adopt contemporary political Jansenists' presentations of the Hospitalières as victims as authoritative: in *Une Suite*, Gazier even describes the nuns as 'sacrific[ed] like lambs' by Beaumont, directly mirroring the language of holy victimhood used by their male contemporaries.¹⁷ No historian, then, has focussed on how the nuns' own writings illustrate their perspective on the dispute, despite Choudhury's invitation to do so and the ready availability of ample sources through papers housed in the Port-Royal archives.

Beyond the historiography of Jansenist convents themselves, the Hospitalières dispute has implications for a number of broader historical debates. Perhaps the most prominent, and certainly the most pertinent, among such debates is Van Kley's influential history, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (1996), which sees the Jansenist controversy as central to the revolutionary confrontation between Church and State through the dispute it precipitated around the 'state's temporal and church's spiritual jurisdictions'.¹⁸ Though this thesis does not have the scope to address this case as a whole - even the Hospitalières cannot stand in for all eighteenth century religious history - his arguments provide important historiographical context to the long-term implications of the Hospitalières controversy played out in the Paris *parlement*. Jeffrey Merrick's 'desacralization' thesis, which holds that the divine authority of the French monarchy was corrupted by eighteenth century religious disputes, also informs the discussion of eighteenth century religious and political developments.¹⁹

¹⁶ Choudhury, *Convents and Nuns*, p. 67.

¹⁷ 'Christophe de Beaumont ne pouvait se flatterer d'immoler comme des agneaux des religieuses protégées par le Parlement', Gazier, *Une Suite*, p. 14.

¹⁸ Van Kley, *Religious Origins*, p. 143.

¹⁹ See J. Merrick, *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge, 1990).

There is similarly limited scholarship available on the NE, despite the journal's significance for political Jansenism. Van Kley offers some discussion of the journal, which he describes as a 'tour de force of clandestine journalism' which fostered lay engagement and kept doctrinal matters 'on the pages of eighteenth century news print'.²⁰ He convincingly lays out the relationship between print culture and political discourse in the mid-eighteenth century, in particular the appeal of Jansenist writing to 'a lay literate public opinion'. This informs my analysis of the NE, alongside work by Robert Darnton which highlights the appeal of such clandestine journals to an educated lay elite.²¹ The mid-eighteenth century was certainly a fertile time for clandestine Jansenist publications: the NE emerged in an environment in which, as Van Kley's research has identified, at least 'fifteen hundred books and pamphlets' were published opposing Unigenitus in two decades alone'.²²

But Van Kley's focus on the journal is limited, and is more concerned with what the NE demonstrates about eighteenth century print culture than the debates enclosed within it. David Hudson has examined its significance at the outbreak of the Revolution - yet these were some of the least active years in the journal's century-long history, indeed they were the period during which the journal focussed least on political matters.²³ This thesis therefore offers a contribution to how Jansenist debates were reported on in the emerging public sphere, as well as the importance of the NE itself, though it is beyond its remit to contribute to histories of the

²⁰ Van Kley, *Religious Origins*, p. 6.

²¹ See R. Darnton, *A Literary Tour de France: the world of books on the eve of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 2018).

²² Van Kley, *Religious Origins*, p. 194.

For more detail on the clandestine publication methods of the NE, see C. Maire, *De La Cause de Dieu à la Cause de la Nation* (Paris, 1998), pp. 155-157.

²³ See D. Hudson, 'The Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques and the French Revolution', *History of European Ideas*, 10/4 (1989), p. 405-415.

public reception of the journal or its importance to the development of pre-revolutionary print culture.

One particularly interesting aspect of the Hospitalières controversy is the way in which the dispute between the nuns and the Archbishop Beaumont first began: through the interdiction of the convent's election. The convent's constitution thus necessarily takes a starring role in the controversy – yet there is little to no writing available on internal elections in religious orders in the eighteenth century or even the broader early modern period, despite the rise in appeals to constitutionalism and in the wider political context of the time. This is a gap in the literature which this thesis begins to, although cannot fully, confront. Nonetheless, I will attempt, where possible, to highlight the significance of the centrality of the convent constitution.

Revisiting the case of the Religieuses Hospitalières, therefore, offers the opportunity to explore a number of questions about French politics, religion, and gender in the pre-revolutionary period. At the smallest scale, considering the contemporary representations and resolution of the Hospitalières dispute illustrates the role played by female religious communities in such a significant moment in French religion and politics, and what this means for gender in the history of the Early Modern period. At a much broader level, the clash of the Paris *parlement* with the archbishop, alongside the intervention of Louis XV, through the Hospitalières dispute, invites discussion about how the roles of the Church and State interacted and developed in the last decades of the Ancien Régime. It also complicates the distinction in Jansenist history between a primarily-religious seventeenth century and a predominantly-political eighteenth century by demonstrating that, for the nuns themselves, theirs was primarily a religious dispute, not a political one: within the convent walls, the nature of Jansenism had not changed since the

seventeenth century, it was its external political significance which had transformed. It also suggests how histories of politics and print culture in the eighteenth century, specifically of popular journals, might serve to obscure the voices of their subjects, especially when those subjects were women, while contributing to the existing record of the importance of such journals for characterising both the contemporary and historical record of political debates.

This thesis will therefore seek to unpack the public and political debate which surrounded the nuns, through the two pervasive male discourses illustrated, respectively, by Beaumont and contemporary Jansenist writers. It will first examine the idea, following Choudhury, that Jansenist writers ‘transformed nuns into public figures engaged in resistance’.²⁴ In light of her suggestion that the nuns may have been active participants in such ‘resistance’, I will then return inside the convent, to consider their experience and presentation of the dispute. Did they exercise agency over their presentation in parliamentary debates and periodicals like the NE, or was their dispute largely seized upon by male Jansenist writers and politicians without their endorsement or support?

Structure and sources

I will approach this task through an examination of a mixture of printed and press sources, and written correspondence. In chapter one, this will be centred on the perspective of Archbishop Beaumont, as illuminated by the text of the Monition. In chapter two, this will move into the political realm, via the writings of contemporary Jansenist political actors: Louis-Adrien Le Paige’s *Lettres sur le Péché Imaginaire* (1756) and various editions of the NE. In chapter three,

²⁴ Choudhury, ‘Gendered Models of Resistance’, *Historical Reflections*, p. 45.

I will introduce the nuns' own voices to this discussion, as found in letters exchanged with Beaumont and Saint-Hilaire throughout 1756.

These sources complicate the record of the Hospitalières' dispute, and by implication of eighteenth century female Jansenist religious orders, which has so far been determined by the writings of their male contemporaries and dominated by the history of Port-Royal. They demonstrate that the nuns were certainly aware of the Jansenist political context, and had the capacity to act as political agents, reminding us just how far they have been overlooked as actors in their own history. Yet, in demonstrating their awareness of their political contributions, it would be easy to overlook what made the dispute important to the nuns engaged in it. Turning towards their letters reveals that, for the nuns themselves, theirs was a primarily religious dispute: they were religious actors first, and political actors second. The developments in the character of Jansenism by the mid-eighteenth century necessitated political action as a means to achieve religious goals (namely, avoiding excommunication). The Hospitalières were aware of this, and engaged with it actively. But their first commitments lay not with the political ideologies of the Jansenist *parlementaires*, but with their faith, their community, and, above all, the constitutions of their convent.

I. Beaumont's 'Enfans Indociles'

When Unigenitus was promulgated in 1713, Christophe de Beaumont, the future Archbishop of Paris, was only ten years old. Yet by the time he was appointed to the French See in 1746, it had come to define his theology: he was a passionate ultramontane, driven by a commitment to papal supremacy, a centralised Catholic Church, and support for a political sect (the *parti dévot*) allied with the Jesuits and against the Jansenists.²⁵ In October 1756, his attempt to excommunicate the Hospitalières of the Faubourg Saint-Marcel made these nuns an example of this policy.

Initially, communication between the archbishop and the nuns took place through an intermediary, the Father Le Seurre, who was sent to Conflans, where Beaumont lived in exile, to advocate for the Hospitalières on several occasions.²⁶ When this was unsuccessful, they wrote to him themselves: letters shot backwards and forwards between the Hospitalières and the archbishop throughout the year. One such letter, dated from 7 April 1756, 'very humbly ask[s]' for permission to undertake their election, and for Beaumont to identify a suitable date for this to take place.²⁷ When the nuns followed this with a second letter (their fourth in all), detailing the requirement in the convent's constitution for an election to take place, Beaumont replied curtly, saying 'there is nothing in your constitutions which prevents this delay [to the election]'.²⁸ Letters such as these continued to be exchanged throughout the year: the nuns begged repeatedly to be permitted to hold an election, and Beaumont responded with

²⁵ D. Hudson, 'Reviewed Work: The Damiens Affair and the Unravelling of the Ancien Regime, 1750-1770. by Dale K. Van Kley', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 19/3 (1986), pp. 401-4.

²⁶ Quoted in Le Paige, *Lettres*, p. 56.

²⁷ 'demander très-humblement', *ibid.* p. 70.

²⁸ 'il n'y a rien dans vos Constitutions qui s'oppose à ce délai', *ibid.* p. 73.

dismissals, obfuscation, and delays. In the late summer, the Paris *parlement* intervened, calling on the archbishop to permit the Hospitalières to hold an election through a series of two *arrêts*.²⁹ This intensification and publication of the dispute continued at pace until October, when the Hospitalières, with the political and legal support of members of the *parti janseniste*, proceeded towards an election to be held at the end of October. On October 26, this prompted the archbishop to issue a Monition: a formal warning of excommunication to the Hospitalières, escalating the dispute dramatically.

If this excommunication had been proceeded with, it would have entailed the refusal of the sacraments - the heart of Catholic worship - to a group of women who had dedicated their lives to the Church. For Beaumont, however, this was by no means a novel or exceptional approach. Earlier in his tenure, for instance, he had formalised the existing local custom of priests demanding *billets de confession* proving the subject's submission to Unigenitus before administering the last rites. This led to a number of prominent scandals, perhaps none more controversial than the withholding of sacraments (the *refus de sacrements* controversy); in 1749, for instance, 4000 Parisians were said to have attended the funeral of a priest, Charles Coffin, who had failed to produce a *billet* and consequently been denied the last rites at Beaumont's behest. William Doyle, in his crucial and instructive history, *Jansenism*, uses this event to illustrate how Jansenism transformed from a complex and small-scale theological matter into an object of fierce political debate in the mid-eighteenth century.³⁰ It was important that the *refus de sacrements* coincided with the growth of Jansenism as a political, rather than purely religious, phenomenon. Indeed, the *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment* contends that,

²⁹ Le Paige, *Lettres*, p. 112; Described in Swann, 'Parti Janseniste' in *Politics and the Parlement*, p. 11.

³⁰ Doyle, *Jansenism*, p. 62.

while the practice of requiring *billets de confession* had previously attracted little attention, it was scandalous during Beaumont's tenure because 'by 1750 ... death had become a private affair, and theological debates around the bed of the dying were no longer acceptable to the public'.³¹ The *refus de sacraments* controversy therefore provides useful context to the conflict between the archbishop and the Hospitalières, because it demonstrates how deeply Beaumont's career was defined by his relentless defence of Unigenitus and how far this had become a matter for public debate by 1756.

It would not have been possible for Beaumont to be ignorant of the inevitable political implications of attempting to suppress a convent associated with Jansenism in the mid-eighteenth century. The Hospitalières dispute took place at the same time as Jansenism was transforming into a lay movement: a broad scholarly consensus exists that Jansenism became a primarily political phenomenon in the years immediately before the issuing of the Monition.³² Within his broader distinction between 'religious' and 'judicial' Jansenism, Van Kley pinpoints the early 1750s, specifically the *refus de sacraments* crisis, as the moment of 'a clear evolution in the character of Jansenism,' when 'men and lawyers', as opposed to ecclesiastical figures, began 'taking the lead publicly' for the first time.³³ In addition to recalling the sheer significance of this crisis to Beaumont's leadership of the French Church, this argument reminds us that the archbishop was consciously participating in emerging public and political discourse when issuing the Monition. He would have been aware that to threaten the Hospitalières in this way was to trigger further debate in the Paris *parlement* - the largest

³¹ M. Cottret & S. J. Cannizzaro, 'Beaumont, Christophe De', in *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2005), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195104301.001.0001/acref-9780195104301-e-054> (23 Feb 2022).

³² See Doyle, *Jansenism*.

³³ Van Kley, *Religious Origins*, p. 63.

provincial court in France and a major site of contemporary political debate - and thus provoke his enemies, including the king, in the to take up the Hospitalières cause. In fact, the issuing of the Monition led directly to the Hospitalières affair being picked up by the NE.³⁴ This was only possible because of the clandestine circulation of the Monition, which underscores both the existence of public interest in the issue, and how significant the context of eighteenth century Paris political culture was to the affair. Archbishop Beaumont could hardly have been ignorant of either of these things.

There had also been significant and prominent precedent for the suppression of Jansenist nuns set by the Port-Royal affair, whose nuns were long considered martyrs to the Jansenist cause. It would have been impossible for Beaumont to be unaware of this context, given the significance of Port-Royal in Jansenist history. Yet he nevertheless threatened the Hospitalières with the greatest punishment possible. Indeed, in her book, Choudhury credits Beaumont with revitalising an ‘unstable and combustible political atmosphere’ in the early 1750s, in which Jansenist debates, particularly around female religious communities, blossomed.³⁵ Thus, Beaumont substantially contributed to the politicisation of Jansenist debates in the 1750s through his provocation of the Hospitalières and similar communities. His commitment to a specific ultramontane vision of the Gallican Church transformed him into a political actor, even if his own (or, rather, his public) conception of his actions was a primarily religious one. This is the context in which the Monition must be read: as a document which would have political implications, and which it would have been impossible to imagine not being publicised.

³⁴ NE (22 Oct 1756), p. 176.

³⁵ Choudhury, *Convents and Nuns*, p. 57.

The text called upon the nuns to ‘withdraw from the purported election within three days’, lest Beaumont declare them excommunicated.³⁶ Even within the context of the traditional use of paternal language to describe the relationships between female religious orders and their superiors, Beaumont described the Hospitalières in enormously condescending terms: they were ‘enfants indociles’ (rebellious children), against whom he felt great regret at having to use ‘the spiritual arms which Jesus Christ has given us’.³⁷ His ‘soul’ was split between ‘paternal tenderness’ (again, emphasising the paternal relationship) and ‘the pressing law of duty’.³⁸ This contrast in particular reveals how Beaumont conceptualised his conflict with the Hospitalières: to him, defending Unigenitus to the greatest possible extent was his duty, and had to be understood with regards to the familial conception of ecclesiastical relationships. Such an image was fundamental to the nature of the convent - it was a *Mother Superior* which the nuns were attempting to elect, after all - and to relationships between priests (fathers) and members of religious orders (brothers and sisters). The condescension of ‘enfants indociles’ was nonetheless extreme, even within this context. Indeed, the nuns themselves adopted this language of supplication in their letters to the archbishop surrounding the Monition, in which they described themselves as ‘very humble’ and ‘pious’ children, begging for his mercy.³⁹ There seems to have been an element of performance here, as if both sides were attempting to conform to the norms of the relationship between an archbishop and female religious orders. The third chapter will go on to analyse the nuns’ performance of this relationship in more detail, but it is useful at this point to recognise how both sides sought to present their dispute in terms of duty, obligation, and family, in both cases in order to offer some legitimacy to their case.

³⁶ ‘se départir de ladite prétendue élection dans trois jours au plus tard’; Eglise Catholique, *Monition*, pp. 1-3.

³⁷ ‘les armes spirituelles que J.C. nous a confiées’

³⁸ ‘âme’ ‘la tendresse paternelle’ ‘la loi pressante du devoir’

³⁹ ‘tres-humbles’ ‘pieuse’, Le Paige, *Lettres*, p. 29.

These quotations from the Monition thus reveal that Beaumont sought to present his persistent attempts to suppress the nuns as fundamental to the duties of his role as their spiritual father, to whom rebellious children must acquiesce.

Another interesting aspect of the attitude revealed in the Monition is the implication of personal responsibility on the part of the named sisters. Beaumont referred to the nuns by both their full names and their holy names – ‘Marie-Ursule Houet, dite Madelaine de Jesus’, for instance - in doing so presenting them as responsible individually for the series of transgressions, rather than as a corporate body of Hospitalières.⁴⁰ This language excluded those considered guilty from the familial bonds which he emphasised throughout. Beaumont also articulated the responsibility for the forbidden election in legal terms: the Monition was, after all, a legal document, sent as a warning of formal punishment to those who did not submit to its demands. This contrasts starkly with his use of familial language elsewhere: we are reminded that this was not a loving action by a spiritual father towards the children of God, but an aggressive legal move. The dispute was thus brought by Beaumont into the legal sphere: he was not merely delaying or obfuscating, as in his previous letters, but threatening the strongest punishment offered to him by Canon Law, and marking them out as individually guilty.⁴¹

Yet, crucially, the Hospitalières were never ultimately excommunicated: the Monition only served as a formal warning of excommunication, and the excommunication was never imposed.⁴² A Sentence of the Paris Châtelet (the Parisian judicial authorities) on 12 November 1756 instructed that any copies of the Monition be destroyed ‘having been printed without

⁴⁰ Eglise Catholique, *Monition*, p. 1.

⁴¹ Le Paige, *Lettres*, p. 18.

⁴² Gazier, *Une Suite*, p. 27.

permission'.⁴³ This measured language might initially imply that the Châtelet only wished to ban illegitimately printed copies of an otherwise-sound Monition. In fact, both Gazier's history and the *Table Raisonée* of the NE offer an account of events following the issuing of the Monition which suggest that, following the protests of members of the Paris *parlement*, the king intervened, through the Paris Châtelet, to prevent the legal threats issued in the Monition from being carried out.⁴⁴ This ultimately also precluded the excommunication, though the Hospitalières continued to be treated as 'black sheep' ('les brebis galeuses') by Beaumont.⁴⁵ This reprieve was presented by contemporary writers as having been in part the responsibility of the work of Jansenist *parlementaires* and writers, such as Louis-Adrien Le Paige, who will be discussed in more detail in chapter two.⁴⁶ Another important factor, however, was the existing acrimonious relationship between King Louis XV and Archbishop Beaumont, which provided the context for Louis XV's decision to side with his *parlement* over his archbishop. Beaumont's attempt to excommunicate the Hospitalières was a provocation in the face of the king's 1754 decree of political silence on religious issues (though he was not formally bound by it).⁴⁷ Perhaps the clearest example of the state of this relationship by 1756 is the simple fact that the Monition was 'given in Conflans', where Beaumont had been exiled by the king following the *refus de sacrements* controversy. Indeed, the issue of the Hospitalières election was only ultimately resolved following personal negotiations between the king and the pope during Beaumont's exile, in a challenge to the archbishop's authority.⁴⁸ This offers a

⁴³ 'comme étant imprimé sans permission', *Sentence du Chastelet... condamnant au feu l'Epître à M. l'évêque de Troyes et supprimant la 'Lettre à un ami' et la 'Monition signifiée de la part de M. l'archevêque aux religieuses hospitalières du faubourg Saint-Marcel, le 26 octobre 1756'*, (Paris, 1756), p. 2.

⁴⁴ Gazier, *Une Suite*, p. 27.; NE (26 Dec 1756), p. 210.

⁴⁵ Gazier, *Une Suite*, p. 28.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 9.

⁴⁸ 'donné à Conflans', Eglise Catholique, *Monition*, p. 3; Doyle, *Jansenism*, p. 64.

particularly stark contrast to the history of Port-Royal, when nuns faced the king and pope allied against them. Relations between Louis XV and Beaumont remained strained throughout his tenure as archbishop: even after returning from his initial exile in 1757, as tensions diffused, he was again exiled in 1758.⁴⁹

The publicity of the *refus de sacrements* controversy meant that, as discussed, Beaumont almost certainly would have been aware that legal opinion, and, given its clandestine circulation, public opinion would fall on the side of the Hospitalières before their excommunication could be formalised. That public opinion was significant at all in such a dispute is testament to the fundamental contextual shift between the Port-Royal controversy in the first decade of the century and the Hospitalières controversy in the 1750s. The Monition was therefore more significant as an active contribution to public debate by the archbishop, in defence of his ultramontane credentials and in opposition to the lay Jansenism emergent in this century, than as a true attempt to excommunicate the nuns. The Monition, then, was not only about the Hospitalières; rather, it was emblematic of Beaumont's religious policy. It is in this way an illuminating example of the pattern which Beaumont's behaviour followed throughout the political Jansenist period. Just as throughout the *refus de sacrements* controversy the archbishop pursued a policy which entailed denying the last rites to dying priests, so he threatened a small group of nuns whose suffering would inevitably provoke backlash in an increasingly public and politicised movement, such was his commitment to Unigenitus. His interventions remained primarily religious in motivation: the *refus* controversy illuminates a total, lifelong commitment to Unigenitus and the suppression of Jansenism, whereas there is nothing in either scandal to suggest that Beaumont *entered* the dispute as a political actor:

⁴⁹ Cottret & Cannizzaro, 'Beaumont', in *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*.

religious motivations came first. What the Monition illustrates, then, is that the depth of this commitment was so strong as to make a convent of only 30 nuns a worthy target of intervention, even when such intervention would inevitably end up the subject of political scandal, given the politicisation of Jansenist debates in the mid-eighteenth century.

II. Jansenists' 'Pieuses Filles'

The issuing of the Monition brought the dispute between the Religieuses Hospitalières and the Archbishop Beaumont beyond the convent walls, into the febrile world of eighteenth-century Paris political culture. In this newly public environment, it took on the qualities of any dramatised dispute: there became space for heroes and villains, for good and evil, but no longer for the inevitable nuances of a debate that began with a series of letters regarding a matter of convent constitutional policy. Beaumont, long reviled by the Jansenist press, was the caricatured villain: a man governed by 'irrationality, obstinacy, and arbitrary caprice'.⁵⁰ But it was not just Beaumont who fit into this stark, moralised, polemical imagery: at the other extreme, the Hospitalières became his martyred victims, the political symbol of the pious nun.

As indicated in the introduction, extensive literature exists on the Jansenist writers and lawyers operating in Paris politics in the mid-eighteenth century, who were responsible for the transformation of Jansenist debates into an object of lay interest.⁵¹ Recently, Julian Swann has identified twenty such members of the *parti janseniste*, the emergent Jansenist group in the Paris *parlement*, in the mid-1750s.⁵² Le Paige, alongside another prominent Jansenist lawyer and member of the Paris *parlement*, Lefebvre de Saint-Hilaire, receives immense praise in classic historiographies of eighteenth century Jansenism. In Gazier's *Une Suite*, for instance, Saint-Hilaire is credited with being the 'soul' of the Hospitalières affair.⁵³ Le Paige, meanwhile,

⁵⁰ 'un esprit de déraison, d'ahurissement & d'une fantaisie toute arbitraire', Le Paige, *Lettres*, p. 55.

⁵¹ Given the legal function, but increasingly political character, of the Paris *parlement*, the terms 'lawyer' and 'politician' are used interchangeably.

⁵² Swann, 'Parti Janseniste' in *Politics and the Parlement*, p. 100. The *parti janseniste* was not a political party in the modern sense, but a loose political/legal grouping. Swann elaborates on this.

⁵³ 'âme'.

is described as ‘one of the most remarkable men of the eighteenth century...who must be the object of an in-depth study one day’.⁵⁴ The request is repeated to this day: almost a century after Gazier, Swann made the almost identical claim that ‘no political history of eighteenth-century France is complete’ without Le Paige, noting in the footnotes that ‘we await’ his biography.⁵⁵

Le Paige’s influence is certainly prolific in the history of eighteenth-century Jansenism. His writings are influential alone - Swann describes his *Lettres Historiques*, published in 1753, as having ‘had more influence on *parlementaire* thought than Montesquieu’s legendary *L’Esprit des lois*’ (a highly influential *philosophe* text) - but his record of events in the 1750s has had a perhaps even more lasting impact.⁵⁶ Gazier’s extraordinarily detailed account, for instance, lifts its chronology largely from Le Paige’s *Lettres sur le Pêché Imaginaire* (1756).⁵⁷ Modern scholarship on the Hospitalières would be impossible without his records: the collection at the Port-Royal archive which houses writing related to the Hospitalières’ dispute even bears his name. Their primary responsibility for creating the historical record of the dispute is thus perhaps the *Lettres*’ greatest significance. Moreover, Le Paige included in his text a number of letters between the Hospitalières and the archbishop, which demonstrate how the nuns’ writings were used and selectively chosen by their defenders to support the Jansenist political cause, and how this has influenced their historical remembrance. Thus Le Paige, through his *Lettres sur le Pêché*, and Saint-Hilaire, through his letters to the Hospitalières (discussed in chapter three), have come to dominate and define the Hospitalières’ affair. Being such an

⁵⁴ ‘un des hommes les plus remarquables du XVIIIe siècle... qui ne pourra manquer d’être un jour l’objet d’une étude approfondie’, Gazier, *Une Suite*, p. 12.

⁵⁵ Unfortunately, heeding this call does not quite fall within the remit of this undergraduate thesis. Swann, ‘Parti Janseniste’ in *Politics and the Parlement*, pp. 94-5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95. Parenthesis mine.

⁵⁷ ‘Religieuses Hospitalières’, *Table Raisonnée de NE*, (n.d.) p. 736-8.

influential Jansenist magistrate, Le Paige's interest in the Hospitalières was not due to an outsize concern for the suffering of 30 nuns, but because their dispute was, for him, a useful confirmation of his pre-existing political convictions.⁵⁸ The *Lettres sur le Pêché* thus offer a clear example of how the image of the Hospitalières was used in the public discourse of the time.

In the *Lettres*, Le Paige constructed an image of the Hospitalières as the ideal of the female martyr. This is brilliantly illustrated by his description of the nuns in his third letter as 'pieuses Filles' (pious children), 'hit' with an 'act of tyranny', which would be 'condemned by the Canons in the strongest terms' as 'the shame of the episcopate'.⁵⁹ This has a striking resonance with Beaumont's description of the Hospitalières as 'enfants indociles'; both men, writing from entirely different sides of the dispute, depicted the nuns as children. Whereas for Beaumont this provided an opportunity to express his authority over the Hospitalières, for Le Paige, their infantilisation presented them as objects of pity, even helplessness. They were, to him, desperate children in need of the support of Jansenist politicians - he could not conceive of them outside the conventional image of the nun as the perfect pious martyr. This description also abstracts the responsibility for the dispute from the nuns: the dispute became something which was being imposed upon them by the archbishop (they are passively 'hit'), rather than something which the Hospitalières were conceived of as capable of bringing upon themselves. In this way, they were essentially deprived of agency. This is not to say that the description of the Hospitalières' piety was inaccurate; indeed, they sought the label of piety in their own letters. Nonetheless, the choice by Jansenist writers to present them as helpless clearly served

⁵⁸ See Swann, 'Parti Janseniste' in *Politics and the Parlement*, p. 95.

⁵⁹ 'l'excommunication dont il veut frapper ces pieuses Filles, est un de ces actes de tyrannie, que les Canons condamnent avec les termes les plus forts & qu'ils annullent comme étant la honte de l'Episcopat', Le Paige, *Lettres*, p. 55.

political ends: if the Jansenists' opponents were suppressing such models of Christian devotion, such blameless children, then the Jansenists must be the victims, and Beaumont (and his supporters in the *parti dévot*) the oppressor. Indeed, Le Paige structured disputes between Jansenist nuns and Beaumont as simplistic cases of oppressor and oppressed: in 1758, after the Hospitalières dispute had been officially resolved, he went on to write to Saint-Hilaire, 'I am overjoyed to bear witness before you to the innocence of the oppressed. Saint-Loup, Saint-Charles, the Filles du Calvaire, the Religieuses Hospitalières...'.⁶⁰ They were, for him, the perfect political symbol.

Le Paige's *Lettres* were picked up on and amplified by other Jansenist writers, perhaps most importantly by the editors of the NE. As the voice of political Jansenist opinion throughout the century, the journal was explicitly concerned with public opinion and, in particular, influencing it in support of Jansenist politics - something which was possible to a greater extent than ever in the mid-eighteenth century.⁶¹ This chiefly meant opposition to Unigenitus. It was certainly polemical, and has been ridiculed for this in both contemporary and historiographical writing.⁶² As polemical as it may have been, though, it was nonetheless the authoritative Jansenist journal of the period. It thus offer a useful tool to examine the ways in which Jansenist female religious orders, specifically the Religieuses Hospitalières, were interpreted in Jansenist politics and used to influence nascent Parisian public opinion to political Jansenist ends.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Choudhury, *Convents and Nuns*, p. 58.

⁶¹ Van Kley, *Religious Origins*, p. 94. On public opinion in eighteenth century Paris, see A. Farge, *Subversive Words: Public opinion in eighteenth century France*, tr. R. Morris (University Park, PA, 1995).

⁶² Gazier describes it as 'babbling and indiscreet', *Une Suite*, p. 12.

In the NE, the Hospitalières were presented less as the martyrs of Le Paige's imagination, and more as victims of the tyrannical religious policies of Beaumont. Each edition of the NE took the form of a series of dispatches from around the country, relating broadly to Jansenist issues. The Archbishop Beaumont occupied a disproportionate amount of column space in these dispatches throughout the 1750s, vocal obstacle as he was to the Jansenist cause. The Hospitalières' dispute was first mentioned, briefly, at the end of one such dispatch of 22 October 1756 – four days pre-Monition, but after months of communication between the nuns and Beaumont regarding their election. The issue notes that the Hospitalières are being 'newly troubled (*vexées*) by the archbishop'.⁶³ This phrasing implied the existence of a long-term dispute but not one that had, until that point, been brought to the attention of the journal's readers. It is perhaps testament to how common similar acts of suppression were at this point that this weekly published Jansenist journal had not yet mentioned it. More importantly, though, it emphasised the significance of Beaumont in the dispute over that of the nuns. To the NE, the significance of the (then-imminent) attempted excommunication of the Hospitalières was not, primarily, in the nuns' plight, but in what this said about the government of Beaumont. Subsequent mentions of the Hospitalières similarly foregrounded the role of the archbishop and of the Paris *parlement* and Châtelet. The edition of 26 December 1756, for instance, offered the most extensive discussion of the Hospitalières among the 1756 issues. It offered an account of the events following the issuing of the Monition which emphasised the importance of 'a Châtelet which knows its duties and which does not neglect them' without referring at all to the position or experiences of the Hospitalières themselves.⁶⁴ Similarly, the *Table Raisonée* of the NE (a sort of retrospective index of the journal's editions) detailed the events of 1756 on

⁶³ 'nouvellement vexées par M. l'Archevêque', NE (22 Oct 1756), p. 176.

⁶⁴ 'mais il y a à Paris un Châtelet qui connoît ses devoirs, & qui ne les néglige point', NE (26 Dec 1756), p. 210.

the Rue Mouffetard in granular detail, but primarily focused on how the affair reflected on Beaumont: it referred, for instance, to a speech by a prosecutor at the Châtelet which expressed disappointment that Beaumont's 'excessive zeal' had made him 'the cause of troubles of Church and State'.⁶⁵ Interestingly, all of this detail was lifted directly - often word for word - from Le Paige's *Lettres* (this was acknowledged in the text), demonstrating once again how significant the *Lettres* have been in establishing the historical record of the Hospitalières affair, and how fundamentally unstable this record is.⁶⁶ The nuns' legacy was essentially defined by Le Paige.

While it might be tempting to see this intervention as an ardent defence of the nuns, it was in fact just the latest blow in a long-term attack on Beaumont personally. Such a focus on the archbishop was constant in the NE's reporting throughout the 1750s.⁶⁷ This is visible in its reports on Beaumont's approach to other Jansenist female religious communities, beyond the Hospitalières. In the 28 September 1757 issue, for instance, the journal reported on another dispute between Beaumont and a female religious community, saying 'the archbishop, true to form (en suivant toujours son système), is spending his free time stirring up trouble in convents'.⁶⁸ This obsession with Beaumont was certainly a mutual one - the archbishop was, as the Hospitalières affair demonstrates, obsessed with the suppression of Jansenism, thanks to his ultramontane allegiance - but, in the case of the Hospitalières, it meant that the NE showed little concern for the reality of the experiences of the nuns, or how they wished their experience to be presented. The journal was far more concerned for the political aspect of Jansenism, as

⁶⁵ 'devenu la cause des troubles de l'Eglise & de l'Etat par son zele pousse souvent hors des limites', 'Religieuses Hospitalières', *Table Raisonée*.

⁶⁶ See *Table Raisonée*.

⁶⁷ See 'Christophe de Beaumont', *Table Raisonée*.

⁶⁸ 'cet Archevêque, en suivant toujours son système, s'occupe dans son loisir à jeter le trouble dans les Communautés de Filles.', NE (28 Sept 1757), p. 150.

played out in the opposition between the *parti janseniste* and *parti dévot* in the Paris *parlement*, with the NE a vocal and fundamental supporter of the former and the archbishop the religious incarnation of the latter. In contemporary writing and classic histories, then, the Paris political sphere, particularly the emergent *parti janseniste*, has been made the dispute's primary actor as well as creating the historical record. This is the case despite the fact that many of those actively engaged in the popularly-reported Jansenist disputes were members of the first estate: the Jansenists targeted by Beaumont were religious orders, but their disputes were publicised by those with a vested political interest. What has resulted from this is a historical record which privileges the political aspects of the debate: the political factions, how Jansenist disputes were played out in the *parlement*, how they were reported in the NE, and the implications for the relationship between Church and State.

This dismissal of the Hospitalières' accounts of their experiences also in part likely due to the nature of a polemical journal, as demonstrated by the most extensive discussion of the Hospitalières in the NE. This can be found in the 10 April 1757 edition, after the excommunication dispute had been essentially resolved (though the convent would not go on to hold its election until 1758). Instead, the issue detailed a *refus de sacraments* issue. The issue recounted 'an outrageous comedy' during which an aged and long-suffering nun was forced to produce a *billet de confession* on her deathbed by an inexperienced and unwelcome temporary confessor sent in by the archbishop to replace her preferred, recalcitrant, priest.⁶⁹ As the sister died, this foreign priest rejoiced that 'having lived so many years in darkness, the Lord, by his mercy, made her see the light'.⁷⁰ This tragicomic report remains entertaining to modern eyes,

⁶⁹ 'une comédie scandaleuse'

⁷⁰ 'après avoir été tant d'années dans l'erreur, le Sgr, par sa miséricorde, lui faisoit connaître la Vérité', NE (10 April 1757), p. 62.

yet beyond this is valuable in demonstrating both how preoccupied the NE were with the character of the archbishop, and just how entwined the Hospitalières affair was with Beaumont's wider political and religious ideology. It does, however, also reveal the limitations of reporting in the NE. Darnton's work has demonstrated that such literature was primarily consumed by the social and professional elites - those who Van Kley has demonstrated were also attracted by Jansenism as it transitioned into a lay, political movement in the eighteenth century.⁷¹ This context means that what was published in the NE was what would entertain this increasingly lay, but certainly highly educated, Parisian Jansenist elite. Entertaining stories, or those which fit its crusade against Beaumont, were as such privileged over the discussion of the real experience of the Hospitalières. The nascent concept of public opinion was thus a useful weapon for judicial Jansenists' opposition to Beaumont and Unigenitus, which in turn explains the utility of journals like the NE and publications like *Le Péché*. To give Jansenist nuns a more active voice in the journal's reporting might have threatened their presentation as straightforward victims of Beaumont's 'excessive zeal'. For the modern historian, this emphasises the importance of looking towards their own writing.

To Jansenist lawyers and polemicists, then, the significance of the Hospitalières began and ended with their utility as an image of oppression. The 'pieuses filles' were no more than martyrs to the Jansenist cause, or even just victims of their oppression: their public image was an illustration useful to Jansenist political objectives. This may have been to the nuns' benefit: they were never excommunicated, after all. The state of the existing relationship between King Louis XV and the Archbishop Beaumont examined in chapter one suggests, however, that their

⁷¹ J. Swann, 'Reviewed Work: Robert Darnton, *A Literary Tour de France: The World of Books on the Eve of the French Revolution*', *European History Quarterly*, 50/4 (2020), pp. 718-720.

salvation was not only the result of the Paris *parlement* and the kinds of discussions (e.g. in NE) that influenced it, but of existing political factors. Certainly, the Jansenist press trumpeted their own triumph in the Hospitalières' case irrespective of the ultimate significance of their role.⁷² And, in any case, the presentation of the Hospitalières by writers like Le Paige and in the weekly dispatches of the NE were significant, as they capitalised on the laicisation of Jansenism. Through a nascent form of public opinion, they may have influenced the Paris *parlement*, with which the king ultimately sided over the archbishop, to take up the Hospitalières' cause, though direct communication between nuns and *parlementaires* means that this would not have necessarily been the case. Both classic and modern historians of the Jansenist period have nonetheless largely adopted their contemporary caricature, interpreting the Hospitalières as, at worst, silent victims, and, at best, responsible for their own image as victims. None of the sources discussed so far, therefore, portray the full picture of the Hospitalières' experience of their attempted excommunication, and what they do portray is skewed by wider political forces. To determine whether the Hospitalières were silent victims; cunning political actors, consciously using the language of femininity to achieve their aims; or whether their cause was fundamentally transformed by their contemporaries, we must look towards their own letters.

⁷² 'Religieuses Hospitalières', *Table Raisonée*, p. 736-8.

III. The Religieuses Hospitalières on their own terms

In 2002, Van Kley asked whether we should speak of ‘Jansenist feminism’ or a ‘feminine Jansenism’.⁷³ Taking up this challenge in her 2004 book and 2009 article, Choudhury highlighted the gendered presentations of Jansenist nuns (including the Hospitalières) in eighteenth century Jansenist writing.⁷⁴ She suggests that such nuns may have been complicit in this characterisation; that they self-consciously ‘assumed the role of martyrs’.⁷⁵ This chapter, in turn, takes up Choudhury’s challenge: considering the nuns on their own terms, through their own writing, to evaluate how they perceived their own dispute and the political context in which it took place.

Corresponding with Jansenist *parlementaires* as well as the Archbishop Beaumont throughout the 1750s, the Hospitalières demonstrated clear awareness of their significance to Jansenist political debates in the middle of the decade. In their letters to Beaumont, they showed themselves to be familiar with political concepts far outside the sphere of the convent: on 3 October 1756, for instance, just weeks before the Monition was issued, they warned him that ‘the public voice (voix publique) instructs the *parlement* of our grave position’.⁷⁶ Without access to correspondence with Jansenist lawyers directly surrounding this date, it is difficult to know how such a political concept entered the nuns’ lexicon, however, that they were able to employ it at all - even more so that they were able to employ it in such a way as to threaten the archbishop, as they did - demonstrates a sophisticated grasp of political concepts for a group

⁷³ Van Kley, quoted in Choudhury, *Convents and Nuns*, p. 35.

⁷⁴ See Choudhury, *Convents and Nuns*; Choudhury, ‘Gendered Models of Resistance’, *Historical Reflections*.

⁷⁵ Choudhury, *Convents and Nuns*, p. 34.

⁷⁶ ‘le Parlement instruit par la voix publique de notre triste position’, quoted in Le Paige, *Lettres*, 152.

of religious women whose lives were built on the separation from the grubby, human world of political society. Indeed, the Hospitalières' choice to correspond with Saint-Hilaire at all suggests an awareness of the *parti janseniste*, and even of its nuances: Swann has identified Saint-Hilaire as one of the most uniquely religiously-motivated Jansenist *parlementaires*, rarely speaking on 'matters unconnected to the religious dispute', in contrast with the overtly political motivations of other members.⁷⁷

The Hospitalières' awareness of political context does not, however, mean that their dispute was a straightforward case of despotic archbishop versus righteous Jansenists. The nuns' position is complicated by the conciliatory language which they used in communication with the archbishop, which further underscores the fundamental difference between the context in which they operated and that of the Jansenist *parlementaires* who defended them. Far from advocating heretical views, letters in which the nuns pleaded for the archbishop's permission to hold their election constructed an image of conformity with the model of feminine piety which the archbishop might have wished to see in them, and which presented them as his innocent and blameless victims. In the same letter of 3 October 1756, the Hospitalières positioned themselves as supplicants: 'permit us, Sir, to continue to see you as our father'.⁷⁸ In employing the familial language common to the relationship between religious women and their superiors, the nuns emphasised Beaumont's authority - adopting his language to position themselves as desperate, in an inversion of his language towards them. It is unsurprising, perhaps, that this was a letter which Le Paige reprinted, echoing as it did the established familial and infantilising image of the nuns. Indeed, the letter repeatedly emphasised the Hospitalières

⁷⁷ Swann, 'Parti Janseniste' in *Politics and the Parlement*, p. 100.

⁷⁸ 'permettez-nous, Monsieur, de vous regarder toujours comme notre pere', quoted in Le Paige, *Lettres*, p. 152.

emotions, which would have underscored their femininity: they spoke of being ‘suffocated’ by ‘pain and surprise’.⁷⁹ And yet, in this case, at least, the Hospitalières were playing a formative role in their portrayal as such. They used this role to invert their power, introducing a subtle threat in the implication that the archbishop would abandon his duties as ‘father’ if he failed to permit the Hospitalières to hold their election. The juxtaposition of this image of ‘continuing submission to [Beaumont’s] authority’ with the implication of the ‘voix publique’ demonstrated at once their awareness of political context and ability to manipulate their perceived disempowerment, alongside the practical necessity of deference to male authority in the power structures in which they existed.⁸⁰

Though their letters with Beaumont demonstrated clear awareness of and engagement with their political circumstances, letters between the Hospitalières and Saint-Hilaire nonetheless demonstrated dependence on Jansenist politicians for guidance in how to pursue their dispute with Beaumont. This further complicates any understanding of their role in the dispute. The nuns frequently sent Saint-Hilaire copies of the archbishop’s letters to the convent, duplicated by hand by Sister Saint-Louis, their secretary, and accompanied by requests for advice on how to respond. On 12 April 1756, for example, they sent to Saint-Hilaire a copy of a letter from Beaumont, with the request that he ‘have the goodness to guide [their] steps in such a delicate circumstance’.⁸¹ The tone of these requests was incredibly deferential, even considering the relationship and conventions of the time; they treated the *parlementaire* with the same deference they showed to the archbishop, their spiritual superior. In particular, the request that

⁷⁹ ‘La douleur & la surprise nous ont étouffé la voix’, quoted in Le Paige, *Lettres*, p. 152.

⁸⁰ ‘notre soumission persévérante à votre autorité’, ‘le Parlement instruit par la voix publique de notre triste position’, *ibid.*

⁸¹ ‘Ayés la bonté Monsieur de guider nos pas dans une circonstance aussi delicate’, Sister Saint-Louis to Saint-Hilaire, 12 April 1756, BPR, LP, ms. 542.

Saint-Hilaire ‘judge’ the nuns’ situation for them was extremely common. On 24 March 1756, for example, the *parlementaire* was asked whether he ‘judged that there [were] certain precautions to take’ for the eventuality that Beaumont force an election, while on 12 April 1756 he was thanked for ‘judging well’ that the archbishop would behave in a certain way, in this case demonstrating that the Hospitalières had acted on this judgement.⁸² In a letter of late March or early April, Sister Saint-Louis wrote to Saint-Hilaire once again explicitly asking for guidance, in her words ‘so that you can judge (jugé) our situation, of which it is very advantageous for us that you have been happy to be the guide (la guide)’.⁸³ Indeed, it seems that the Hospitalières were taken by surprise by the Monition, even after months of communication with Beaumont: on 24 March, they wrote to Saint-Hilaire that they ‘[did] not believe that the Prelate would go to such an extreme’ as to intervene directly in the convent structure to ensure the choice of a pro-Unigenitus superior.⁸⁴ The threat of excommunication, then - the strongest weapon available to an archbishop - must have shocked them. This dependence on Saint-Hilaire for political guidance by no means detracts from the nuns’ agency in or comprehension of their own dispute. It does, however, suggest that the impetus for the escalation of their dispute into a public confrontation was primarily the responsibility of Jansenist *parlementaires*, rather than stemming from a desire for publicity on the part of the nuns. They may have been willing political actors, without initiating the political action themselves.

⁸² ‘Sy vous jugés Monsieur qu’il y ait quelques précautions à prendre’, Sister Saint-Louis to Saint-Hilaire, 24 March 1756; ‘Mais vous jugés bien qu’on me donna pas cette satisfaction’, Sister Saint-Louis to Saint-Hilaire, 12 April 1756. Both BPR, LP, ms. 542.

⁸³ ‘Afin que vous puissies juger de la position de nos affaires dont il est bien avantageuse pour nous que vous ayés bien voulu en être la guide’, Sister Saint-Louis to Saint-Hilaire, BPR, LP, ms. 542. The date of the letter is unclear, but follows the letter of 24 March and precedes that of 12 April 1756. It is also identified by Choudhury, *Convents and Nuns*, p. 52.

⁸⁴ ‘Je ne crois pas cependant que le Prélat se porte à une telle extrémité’, Sister Saint-Louis to Saint-Hilaire, 24 March 1756, BPR, LP, ms. 542.

The 3 October 1756 letter to Beaumont also underscored an element of the dispute which was significant to the Hospitalières, but largely overlooked in political Jansenist publicity: the convent constitution. Pleading with him, they reminded the archbishop of the requests they had made ‘to Your Grace for more than four years, to obtain permission to proceed with our Elections, as prescribed by our Constitutions & our wishes’.⁸⁵ As a technically neutral document at the heart of the dispute - the constitution would have specified rules such as the length of superiors’ terms, but nothing to do with, for instance, Unigenitus - it is possible that the Hospitalières appealed to the convent constitution so as to remove the debate from the subject of their commitment, or lack of, to Unigenitus. This offered them the opportunity to appeal to rules, rather than politics: their dispute remained, fundamentally, about Jansenist belief, but the constitution was in this case a manifestation of the discord between their belief and the archbishop’s will. But the convent constitution was such a common feature in the Hospitalières’ letters, both to the archbishop and to Saint-Hilaire, that it must have been a matter of concern independently of its implications for the dispute. In their letter to Saint-Hilaire of 12 April 1756, for instance, Sister Saint-Louis expressed (on behalf of the convent) exasperation at Beaumont’s claim that nothing in their constitution opposed a delay to the election, and detailed why he was wrong: ‘how can the Prelate say that there is nothing in our constitutions which opposes the delay?’.⁸⁶ Choudhury suggests that the nuns did so to ‘construct’ an image of disobedience to Unigenitus through obedience to their vows.⁸⁷ While I

⁸⁵ ‘que nous avons faites auprès de Votre Grandeur, pendant plus de quatre années, pour obtenir la permission de procéder à nos Elections, comme le prescrivent nos Constitutions & nos voeux’, quoted in Le Paige, *Lettres*, p. 152.

⁸⁶ ‘Comment le Prélat peut-il dire qu’il ne ait rien dans nos Constitutions qui s’oppose au délai de nos élections’, Sister Saint-Louis to Saint-Hilaire, 12 April 1756, Bibliothèque de Port-Royal, Collection Le Paige (hereafter BPR, LP), ms. 542.

⁸⁷ Choudhury, *Convents and Nuns*, p. 38-9.

agree that the choice of the constitution as a means to plead with Beaumont was carefully made and belies significant political acumen, I am not convinced that this was quite so artificial. The discussion of the convent constitution was incredibly frequent in their letters - significantly more so than that of Unigenitus, which the nuns almost never raised - and always seems to be initiated by the Hospitalières rather than their interlocutors. The frequency of this in the Hospitalières letters seems to me an indication of how deeply felt the politics of the dispute was in the day to day life of the religious order: the ordinary operations of the convent were being interrupted due to the archbishop's never-ending delays, which were in turn the result of the political dispute. This reveals quite how practical a matter the dispute was for the Hospitalières, in contrast with the abstract political tool it was for the *parti janseniste*. It may have been a consciously-chosen way of presenting the dispute, but it also reflected how deeply felt the archbishop's intervention in the convent was.

The nuns' letters to Saint-Hilaire, meanwhile, demonstrate an engagement with the wider context of Beaumont's campaign against Jansenist female religious orders. In a letter written in late March or early April 1756, Sister Saint-Louis confessed to having read a 'relation' written by Orléans nuns, whose 'behaviour' inspired in her 'respect and admiration'.⁸⁸ This was not confined to the 'relation': in the same letter, Sister Saint-Louis referred to having sent some 'very interesting news' to the Sisters of Saint-Gervais, another convent.⁸⁹ The 'relation' was not published in the NE and does not seem to have been published more widely, implying that, despite the fundamentally insular nature of the convent, nuns from different areas of

⁸⁸ 'Je lis actuellement la relation des 3 convents d'Orléans. La conduite de ces Religieuses m'inspire du respect et de l'admiration'. Sister Saint-Louis to Saint-Hilaire, BPR, LP, ms. 542.

⁸⁹ 'Je fis parvenir hier aux Dames de Saint Gervais... une Nouvelle très intéressante'. The location and religious allegiances of this convent are unclear. Ibid.

France were communicating with each other regarding the tribulations they faced in their opposition to Unigenitus. The significance of such communal identities is also suggested by the fact that many of the letters written between the Hospitalières and Saint-Hilaire were signed by almost all members of the convent. All the communication in this period bears the signature of Sister Saint-Louis, as the convent's secretary, but a number bear the signatures of 24 nuns (all-but-six of the convent).⁹⁰ Those that were signed only by Sister-Saint Louis often convey messages from other named nuns to Saint-Hilaire; indeed, one letter sent to Saint-Hilaire in late March even specified that a future letter to the archbishop would 'be signed by all the community in order to prove that [holding an election] is the general will'.⁹¹ Evidently, the letters written by Sister Saint-Louis on behalf of the convent really expressed a common sentiment, one which was self-consciously portrayed in order to convince their subjects of the nuns' common struggle.

Yet the signatures of six nuns were missing from these communal letters, six nuns who occupied a particularly interesting position in the Hospitalières' dispute. These were the nuns who had affirmed, or were willing to affirm, Unigenitus. In Le Paige's *Lettres*, it was suggested that Beaumont would permit an election if the sisters had been willing to nominate as superior one of these six: after returning from talks with Beaumont in Conflans, Le Seurre claimed that an election would be permitted 'on the condition that they choose a Superior who thinks like him'.⁹² Indeed, these six nuns seem to have been omitted from the list of nuns threatened with

⁹⁰ See Sister Saint-Louis to Saint-Hilaire, 14 July 1756, BPR, LP, ms. 542.

⁹¹ 'Cette lettre sera signé de toute la Communauté afin de prouver que c'est le vœux général', Sister Saint-Louis to Saint-Hilaire, late March or early April 1756, BPR, LP, ms. 542. Note that 'general will' is a direct translation, and is distinct from the eighteenth century political concept of the general will (*volonté générale*). For messages on behalf of other nuns, see Sister Saint-Louis to Saint Hilaire, 24 March 1756, BPR, LP, ms. 542.

⁹² 'à condition qu'elles choisiroient une Supérieure qui pensast comme lui' [sic.], Le Paige, *Lettres*, p. 37.

excommunication in Beaumont's Monition, as this list was 24 names long.⁹³ This means that their avoidance of religious conflict has come at the cost of their names being recorded in the convent's history: the only sources which list the convent's members at this time seem to be the Monition and the signed letters to the archbishop and Saint-Hilaire, in neither of which they were named. This, in turn, reminds us of just how far the Hospitalières' memory has been defined by their presentation by their male contemporaries. Thus the existence of these six dissident nuns complicates any discussion of the Hospitalières as presenting unified opposition to Unigenitus – though a majority of the convent did, - but also undermines any suggestion that the nuns were not independent actors with a deep awareness of the context in which they acted. That disagreement over such a fundamental issue - perhaps the defining one for the convent in this period - existed within the 30-nun convent implies significant individual ideological agency, as well as a complex understanding of the debate over the bull itself (such that they formed discrete responses to it). This would likely have created discord and instability in such a small convent, in which nuns operated so closely and with such constant regard for their religious commitments; particularly so, given the lack of a permanent convent structure for as long as they were forbidden from electing nuns to convent offices. Or, perhaps the existence of such dissent indicates that there was no such discord, and the implied disagreement suggests that Unigenitus was *not* the defining issue for the convent in this period, so much as the one it is remembered for thanks to the historical record left by the nuns' male Jansenist contemporaries. In any case, it complicates any sweeping narrative about what sorts of actors the nuns were or were not.

⁹³ Eglise Catholique, *Monition*, p. 2.

The context of the convent, as well as of their gender in the eighteenth century, thus meant that the Hospitalières did not have the opportunity, remit, or knowledge necessary to handle what was necessarily a political dispute without the support of male political actors. These letters demonstrate that this does not, however, mean that the Hospitalières lacked agency in their dispute, so much as that their sphere of action was distinct from that of the *parlementaires*, and that the best way, by 1756, for them to resolve their dispute was through the *parlement*. To perceive agency as a straightforwardly political matter in this context would be to overlook the ways in which the Hospitalières were able to control the details and even the presentation of their dispute: through their commitment to their community, its constitution, and their construction of their image in their writings to male stakeholders. What their letters demonstrate, then, is a nuanced understanding of these elements within the context of political disempowerment in which they operated. They were conscious of their political image, and of its implications for Jansenist politics, and the dissent which existed within the convent demonstrates that Unigenitus and its implications was a matter of personal conscience for individual nuns. This may have been publicly escalated by Jansenist political actors, but it was by no means manufactured by them.

Conclusion

Understanding that the Hospitalières were neither straightforwardly political actors, nor simple footnotes to histories of Port-Royal or political Jansenism, requires a nuanced appreciation of the context in which the Archbishop of Paris attempted to excommunicate them. This was, crucially, the context of a patriarchal system in which very limited agency over their public presentation was available to them, meaning that they relied on male writers (with their own political agendas) and were only able to manipulate their image in direct correspondence with the archbishop (even then in terms familiar to him). Given the strength of Beaumont's word against them, political action was by 1756 a necessary means to achieve religious goals, and something the Hospitalières participated in willingly. Their cause, however, was a religious one. Their world was not the same one as their political defenders'.

This means that the existing history of post-Port-Royal Jansenist nuns has privileged the political aspect - primarily what it meant for the *parti janseniste*, and the long-term implications of this, - whether to demonstrate the nuns as significant (as Choudhury has) or as hardly relevant (as Gazier has).⁹⁴ As a result, the significance of elements such as the convent constitution - central as it was to the dispute - and the day-to-day implications of discord existing within a small convent have been overlooked. The Hospitalières' experience of their attempted excommunication would have been dominated by such concerns, as their letters demonstrate, with political action only becoming significant to them insofar as it offered a resolution to the former. Indeed, this thesis has demonstrated the need for further scholarship on nuns' self-government, as expressed by their convent constitutions.

⁹⁴ See Gazier, *Une Suite*.

Where eighteenth century convents figure in the existing history of Jansenism, they do so largely as footnotes to Port-Royal or sidenotes to male-dominated political history. Van Kley's writing, for instance, is only interested in Jansenist nuns insofar as their resistance contributed to wider political and religious trends in the long-term causes of the French Revolution.⁹⁵ Daniela Kostroun, meanwhile, analyses, after Joan Scott, how the resistance of Port-Royal and subsequent convents may have constituted a feminist speech act, through the attention it drew to the paradoxes of male authority.⁹⁶ For Choudhury, meanwhile, the significance of the Hospitalières' and their contemporary Jansenist nuns' resistance to Unigenitus can primarily be found in how it offered male writers the opportunity to use feminine 'models of martyrdom' to legitimise political action.⁹⁷ They are, in short, revolutionaries, feminists, or martyrs.

Yet all of these perspectives elide the reality of the dispute. There is scope, for instance, for a feminist reinterpretation of the Hospitalières and other later Jansenist convents, but this would require both an appreciation of the fundamental changes in the nature of Jansenism between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as further research into the nature and significance of the convent constitution. Kostroun's speech-act framework, for instance, would have to look fundamentally different from that which she applies to Port-Royal, because the development in the relationship between King Louis XV and his archbishop and the politicisation of religious factions in the Paris *parlement* means that there was no single force of (male) authority acting against the Hospitalières in 1756 - their political circumstances were

⁹⁵ Van Kley, *Religious Origins*, p. 16.

⁹⁶ Kostroun, *Feminism, Absolutism, Jansenism*, p. 17.

⁹⁷ Choudhury, *Convents and Nuns*, p. 45.

particularly complex. It would require, in other words, abstracting them from the history of Port-Royal, and seeing them as agents beyond the uses of their images in contemporary writing.

There is similarly scope for re-evaluating the long-term impacts of the participation of nuns in political disputes in eighteenth century France, with specific regards to the history of the origins of the Revolution, but this requires a nuanced appreciation of the varying contexts such women operated in and the roles which they took on. The clandestine circulation of ecclesiastical documents, and the evident public interest in ecclesiastical affairs, might have significant implications for such history. The rapid and consistent communication between political actors, ecclesiastical authorities, and nuns offers an exciting new angle to the history of print culture in the pre-revolutionary period, but is similarly misapprehended if discussed without regard for the roles and aims of religious women in it.

Above all, revisiting the Religieuses Hospitalières of the Faubourg Saint-Marcel on their own terms reveals that histories of eighteenth century Jansenism have so far overlooked the women whose day-to-day experiences were most impacted by Jansenist debates. The newly political character of the movement in the eighteenth century was certainly significant to the politics of the era, but made little difference to those behind convent walls, still struggling with the religious disputes which lay at the heart of Jansenist commitment. Reading the Hospitalières own writings in light of their male contemporaries' perspectives on them thus demonstrates that eighteenth century Jansenism cannot be considered to have been simple case of suffering or political Jansenist women versus ecclesiastical despotism. Rather, Jansenist nuns such as the Hospitalières were complex and independent actors, whose concerns and preoccupations were not the same as the men who defended them.

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