

Antoine BAUDRY DE SAINT-GILLES D'ASSON, *Journal d'un Solitaire de Port-Royal 1655-1656* (Univers de Port-Royal), Pol ERNST et Jean LESAULNIER (éd.). Paris, Éditions Garnier, 2021, 12,4 × 19 cm, 395 pages, ISBN 978-2-406-11334-8

Graeme Hunter

Volume 75, numéro 1, janvier-avril 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094630ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Collège universitaire dominicain, Ottawa

ISSN

0316-5345 (imprimé)

2562-9905 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Hunter, G. (2023). Compte rendu de [Antoine BAUDRY DE SAINT-GILLES D'ASSON, *Journal d'un Solitaire de Port-Royal 1655-1656* (Univers de Port-Royal), Pol ERNST et Jean LESAULNIER (éd.). Paris, Éditions Garnier, 2021, 12,4 × 19 cm, 395 pages, ISBN 978-2-406-11334-8]. *Science et Esprit*, 75(1), 131–133.

---

## RECENSIONS ET COMPTES RENDUS

### PHILOSOPHIE

Antoine BAUDRY DE SAINT-GILLES D'ASSON, **Journal d'un Solitaire de Port-Royal 1655-1656** (Univers de Port-Royal), Pol ERNST et Jean LESAULNIER (éd.). Paris, Éditions Garnier, 2021, 12,4 × 19 cm, 395 pages, ISBN 978-2-406-11334-8.

Antoine Baudry de Saint-Gilles d'Asson is not a household name. And although he became a "solitaire" of the Port-Royal abbey in the late 1640s, he does not figure among the brightest stars of that galaxy. He embraced Jansenism, and admired the philosophical theology of Antoine Arnauld, but his writings are not of the order of Arnauld, Nicole, Pascal, Racine, et al. For this reason, historians of Port-Royal, or of Jansenism in general, are prone to passing him by.<sup>1</sup>

But they shouldn't be. Saint-Gilles kept a journal, a good deal of which is extant, re-edited and reprinted in the text here being reviewed. *Journal d'un solitaire ...* (henceforward *Journal*) is not a work of theology or philosophy, but it is an important document in its own right. Whether the author is recording the persecution of Arnauld, the perfidy of Jesuits, or the tempestuous turmoil of his time and place, his accounts are clear and thorough. The editors rightly note that he offers something that surpasses his thorough and even-handed documentation of events: insight into the human condition.<sup>2</sup>

Though not a philosopher or theologian in his own right, Saint-Gilles understood both disciplines and could detect authenticity or fraud whenever he ran across them. A good example, memorable for its humour, as well as its clarity, is his description of a meeting to discuss a thesis propounded by a certain Dominican priest by the name of Fr. Jean Nicolai. The speaker was also the moderator of the meeting. Saint-Gilles writes:

The theme of the discussion is: 'Orthodox Thomist truths concerning divine grace in contrast to the dogmas and errors of Jansenists.'

The event is dedicated to the chancellor who, in the flattering terms expected of such persons, is called *defender, asserter* and *gate-keeper of truth*.

Jansenius is treated as an *ignoramus*, condemned by the Pope. Almost all the conclusions drawn from Nicolai's thesis are Molinist in character, and Fr. Nicolai, according to Saint-Gilles, had the bearing of someone who covets a position at court: *farsi inanzi*<sup>3</sup>, as the Italians say.

---

1. See, for example, the single reference to Saint-Gilles in Marc ESCHOLIER, *Port-Royal: The Drama of the Jansenists*, New York NY: Hawthorn, 1968, p. 98.

2. *Journal*, p. 11.

3. "Farsi inanzi" means roughly "self-promotion."

The *Journal* entries of 1655 and 1656 document massive persecution of the Port-Royal community and uncertainty within. Lucid and arresting accounts bring to life events ranging from brutal to providential. They are the content of the book I am reviewing here.

Editors Lesaulnier and Plazenet have done a meticulous job of editing, annotating, and republishing the *Journal*. It will enlarge and elevate our current understanding of Port-Royal.

Though there is much romance and adventure in the story of Port-Royal, the *Journal* focusses on the facts. It deals with gritty institutional struggles, hostile religious and ideological conflicts, and threats and provocations aimed at the leaders of Port-Royal.

Momentous events of 1655 include Pope Alexander VII's denunciation of five unorthodox propositions, said to be found in Cornelius Jansen's *Augustinus*. Port-Royal's celebrated theologian, Antoine Arnauld, fans the flames of controversy by writing two open letters (the second two hundred pages in length) in defence of *Augustinus*. These events are well-covered and contextualized by Saint-Gilles.

Early in 1656, Blaise Pascal jumps into the fight by releasing his brilliant *Provincial Letters* into the libraries of the reading public, and at the same time teaching ordinary readers to recognize erroneous Jesuitical claims when they see them, and laugh dismissively as the rustic narrator of the *Provinciales* roasts Jesuit authorities.

At this time, philosophy and theology are locked in heated disputes about how to reconcile freedom with nature and grace. Some are bent on reconciling these gifts of God, others to proving reconciliation impossible. It is not surprising, therefore, that Saint-Gilles describes his journal as "heated" in its coverage of "two terrible years, endured by the friends of Port-Royal." He reported a "fratricidal war" of words, punctuated by "ferocious, base, and tortuous attacks on Arnauld." Not to mention pitiless censure from the Jesuits.<sup>4</sup>

Not all was negative in those years, however. One of Port-Royal's most celebrated victories is the miraculous healing of Pascal's niece, Marguerite Périer, from a serious infection in one eye. Her condition was diagnosed in the jargon of that time as a *fistula lachrymosa*.

Marguerite was a young pupil in residence in one of Port-Royal's *petites écoles*. Celebrated doctors with Port-Royal connections had attended Marguerite, but none could suggest a remedy that would not further impair the remaining vision in the affected eye. Her condition deteriorated until Friday, March 24, 1656, in the third week of Lent. After Mass that day, the children were invited to approach closely a relic on loan to Port-Royal, and said to be a thorn from the crown of Christ. It became known as *la sainte épine* (the holy thorn). As Marguerite passed by, a school mistress encouraged her to touch the thorn to her infected eye. A few minutes later the child began to feel cured.

The celebrated doctors who had seen her before the miracle were eager to see her again afterwards. How would medical science view her recovery? As a miracle, they were obliged to conclude.

---

4. *Journal*, p. 204-205.

The miracle of the holy thorn was acclaimed as a great victory for Port Royal. Prior to the Mass on the day of the miracle, they had prayed in words drawn from Psalm 86: "Fac mecum signum in bonum..." ("Show me a token of good, that they which hate me may see it and be ashamed...") It seemed that God had vindicated Jansenists and exposed the dishonesty of their Jesuit critics.

In the *Journal* entry for April 3, 1656, Saint-Gilles, gives a short account of the miracle of March 24<sup>th</sup>. The events surrounding the *sainte épine* also moved the great Arnauld to include an account of miracles in his *Port-Royal Logic*, published a few years later. I have argued elsewhere that the account Arnauld gives of miracles in that place anticipates, and even challenges, the sneering critique of miracles that Hume would produce a century later.<sup>5</sup>

The *Journal* opens many windows onto the daily life of cultivated associates of Port-Royal in a time of struggle, but also onto common European life in the late seventeenth century. Furthermore, it has the serendipitous merit of being significant to readers anywhere today. It depicts a historical period not unlike our own, misshapen by government overreach, divisive politics, lies, fake news, hysteria, with capital crimes committed, barely reported, and excused.

We like to think we are the first orphans of civilization, but Saint-Gilles tells us we are not orphans at all. Instead, we are descendents of the family of Mother Angélique, Abbess of Port-Royal, and her younger brother Antoine Arnauld; also of the family of Pascal and his niece Marguerite; and of course of the solitary Saint-Gilles.

Graeme HUNTER

*Research Professor*  
*Faculty of Philosophy*  
*Dominican University College*  
*Ottawa*

Stephen E. BRAUDE, **Dangerous Pursuits: Mediumship, Mind, and Music**. San Antonio TX, Anomalist Books, 2020, 15,2 × 22,8 cm, 334 p., ISBN 978-1-949-50115-5.

Stephen Braude's *Dangerous Pursuits* presents the author's latest work focused on the philosophical issues surrounding parapsychology, as well as his personal experiences investigating, testing, and attempting to verify the reality of paranormal phenomena. Less of a singular work than a collection of related essays, a number of common threads run throughout all the pieces included in this book, allowing each to make a relevant contribution to the discussion (including the final chapter, which, in spite of its topic, on the subject of jazz performance, has something to say about the possibility of clairvoyant connections with others on a more everyday level). With relatively short, focused chapters, Braude's book provides a concise, yet multifaceted overview

---

5. See Graeme HUNTER, "Arnauld's Defence of Miracles and its Context," in Elmar KREMER (ed.), *Interpreting Arnauld*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994, pp. 11-126.