Critics since the Quiet Revolution period have automatically assumed that the tragedy, the wandering, the blackness, and the frustrated mysticism that recur in Quebec men's writing from the poetry of Émile Nelligan to the present are the reflection of a national search for identity, condemned to unending circularity or paralysis by the ambivalence of Quebec's situation within Canada. But what if this alienation were also a gender-based phenomenon? And what if, existing alongside 'his story,' there were an 'other' story, offering a different perspective not only on the national dilemma, but on reality in a more general sense?

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NEW FRANCE: WOMEN WITHOUT WALLS

THE NOTION OF "WOMEN'S PLACE" OR "WOMEN'S ROLE," POPULAR WITH NINETEENTH CENTURY COMMENTATORS, suggests a degree of homogeneity inappropriate to the seventeenth century. It is true that on a formal, ideological level men enjoyed the dominant position. This can be seen in the marriage laws, which everywhere made it a wife's duty to follow her husband to whatever dwelling place he chose. In 1650, the men of Montreal were advised by Governor Maisonneuve that they were in fact responsible for the misdemeanours of their wives since "the law establishes their dominion over their wives." Under ordinary circumstances the father was captain of the family hierarchy. Yet, it is clear that this formal male authority in both economic and domestic life was not always exercised.

The idea of separate male and female spheres lacked the clear definition it later acquired. This is in part related to the lack of communication and standardization characteristic of the *ancien régime* – along sexual lines or any other. One generalization, however, applies to all women of the *ancien régime*. They were not relegated to the private, domestic sphere of human activity because that sphere did not exist. Western Europeans had not yet learned to separate public and private life. As Phillipe Ariès pointed out in his classic study, the private home, in which parents and children constitute a distinct unit, is a relatively recent development. In early modern Europe most of domestic life was lived in the company of all sorts of outsiders. Manor houses, where all the rooms interconnect with one another, show the lack of emphasis on privacy. Here, as in peasant dwellings, there were often no specialized rooms for sleeping, eating, working, or receiving visitors; all were more or less public activities performed with a throng of servants, children, relatives, clerics, apprentices, and clients in attendance. Molière's comedies illustrate the familiarity of servants with their masters. Masters, maids, and valets slept in the same room and servants discussed their masters' lives quite openly.

Though familiar with their servants, people were less so with their children. They did not dote on infants to the extent that parents do today. It

may have been, as some writers have suggested, that there was little point in growing attached to a fragile being so very apt, in those centuries, to be borne away by accident or disease. These unsentimental families of all ranks sent their children out to apprentice or serve in other people's homes. This was considered important as a basic education. It has been estimated that the majority of Western European children passed part of their childhood living in some household other than their natal one. Mothers of these children – reaching down, in the town, as far as the artisan class – might send their infants out to nursemaids and have very little to do with their physical maintenance.

This lack of a clearly defined "private" realm relates vitally to the history of women, since this was precisely the sphere they later were to inhabit. Therefore it is important to focus on their place in the pre-private world. To understand women in New France one first must pass through the antechamber which historian Peter Laslett appropriately calls "the world we have lost."

In this public world people had not yet learned to be private about their bodily functions, especially about their sexuality. For aid with their toilette, noblewomen did not blush to employ *hommes de chambre* rather than maids. The door of the bed-chamber stood ajar, if not absolutely open. Its inhabitants, proud of their fecundity, grinned out from under the bedclothes at their visitors. Newlyweds customarily received bedside guests. There was not the same uneasiness in relations between the sexes which later, more puritanical, centuries saw, and which, judging by the withdrawal of women from public life in many of these societies, probably worked to their detriment.

Part of the reason these unsqueamish, rather public people were not possessive about their bodies was that they did not see themselves so much as individuals but as part of a larger, more important unit – the family. In this world the family was the basic organization for most social and economic purposes. As such it claimed the individual's first loyalty. A much higher proportion of the population married than does today. Studies of peasant societies suggest that, for most, marriage was an economic necessity.

The family was able to serve as the basic economic unit in preindustrial societies because the business of earning a living generally occurred at home. Just as public and private life were undifferentiated, so too were home and workplace. Agricultural and commercial pursuits were all generally "domestic" industries. The idea of man as breadwinner and woman as homemaker was not clearly developed. Women's range of economic activity was still nearly as wide as that of their husbands.

In New France, wives of artisans took advantage of their urban situation to attract customers into the taverns they set up alongside the workshop, which was often also their home. On the farms where most of the population lived, "work" and "home" differed least of all. Both sexes toiled in the fields together. In this period and for generations afterward it was reported that rural couples conferred before making financial decisions.

Given the economic importance of both spouses, it is not surprising to see marriage taking on some aspects of a business deal. We see this in the provisions of the law that protected the property rights of both parties contracting a match. The fact that wives often brought considerable family property to the marriage, and retained rights to it, placed them in a better position than their nineteenth-century descendants were to enjoy.

In New France the family's importance was intensified even beyond its usual role in *ancien régime* societies. Colonization required the work of both spouses, and there was an exceptionally high annual marriage rate. The importance of the family as a social institution was compounded because other social institutions, such as guilds and villages, were underdeveloped. This probably enhanced women's position, for in the family women tended to serve as equal partners with their husbands, whereas women were gradually losing their position in the guilds and professions in Europe.

Law reinforced family relations. The outstanding characteristic of the legal system in New France – *the Coutume de Paris* – is its concern to protect the rights of all members of the family. The *Coutume* reinforced the family, for example, by the penalties it levied on those transferring family property to non-kin. It took care to protect the property of children of a first marriage when a widow or widower remarried. It protected a woman's rights by ensuring that the husband did not have unilateral authority to alienate the family property (in contrast to eighteenth-century British law).

The law valoeized families in other ways too. In a colony starved for manpower, reproduction was considered a matter of particularly vital public concern – a concern well demonstrated in the rewards for large families and the extremely harsh punishments meted out to women who concealed pregnancy. We see a positive side of this intervention in the care the Crown took of foundlings, employing nurses at a good salary to care for them and making attempts to protect these children from stigma. Midwives too were paid by the Crown. This, and the training they received, helps account for an unusually low rate of female mortality in the childbearing years. (Up to age 60, women had a one-to-three year longer life expectancy than men.)

State regulation of the family was balanced by family regulation of the State. Families had an input into the political system, playing an important

role in the running of the State. Women's political participation wa favoured by the large role of entertaining in political life. For the courtier' role, women were as well trained as men, and there seems to have been n stigma attached to the woman who participated independently of he husband. Six women, Mesdames Daine, Ryan, Lotbinière, de Repentign Marin, and St. Simon, along with six male officers, were chosen by th Intendant to accompany him to Montreal in 1753. Rural women had elec tions to select parish midwives. Women were also part of what historian have called the "preindustrial crowd." Along with their menfolk, they wer full-fledged members of the old "moral economy" whose members rioted and took what was traditionally their rightful share (and no more) whe prices were too high or when speculators were hoarding grain. The fou hundred women who rioted for bread in the hungry Quebec winter of 175 illustrate this aspect of the old polity.

Demographic Advantages

Demography favoured the women of New France in two ways. First, thos who went there were a highly select group of immigrants. Second, gende imbalance in the early years of the colony's development also worked i their favour. Most of the female immigrants to New France fall into two ca egories. The first was a group of well-connected and highly dedicated rel gious figures. They began to arrive in 1639, and a trickle of French nun continued to cross the ocean over the course of the next century. The secon distinct group was the *filles du roi*, government-sponsored female migrant who arrived between 1663 and 1673. These immigrants, though not as ou standing as the *dévotes*, were nevertheless privileged compared to th average immigrant to New France, who arrived more or less threadbar The vast majority came from Île-de-France and the northwestern parts o France, where women enjoyed fuller legal rights, were better educated an more involved in commerce than those in southern France. When they s foot on colonial soil, the immigrants would find themselves prized as scarce resource.

The great religious revival of the seventeenth century endowed Ne France with several exceptionally capable, well-funded, determined leader imbued with an activist approach to charity and with that particula mixture of spiritual ardour and worldly *savoir-faire* that typified the mystic of that period. The praises of Marie de l'Incarnation, Jeanne Mance, an Marguerite Bourgeoys have been sung so often as to be tiresome. Perhaps though, a useful vantage point is gained if one assesses them neither as saint nor heroines, but simply as leaders. In this capacity, the nuns supplie

much-needed money, publicity, skills, and settlers to the struggling colony.

Marie de l'Incarnation, a competent businesswoman from Tours, founded the Ursuline Monastery at Quebec in 1639. Turning to the study of Indian languages, she and her colleagues helped implement the policy of assimilating the young Indians. Then, gradually abandoning the futile policy, they turned to the education of the French colonists. Marie de l'Incarnation developed the first on the Ursuline seigneurie and served as an unofficial adviser to the colonial administrators. She also helped draw attention and money to the colony by writing over the course of thirty years some 12,000 letters, many to admirers in court circles.

An even more prodigious fund-raiser in those straitened times was Jeanne Mance, who had a remarkable knack for making friends in high places. They enabled her to supply money and colonists for the original French settlement on the island of Montreal, and to take a place beside Maisonneuve as co-founder of the town. The hospital she established there had the legendary wealth of the de Bullion family – and the revenues of three Norman domains – behind it. From this endowment she made the crucial grant to Governor Maisonneuve in 1651 that secured vitally needed troops from France, thus saving Montreal. Mance and her Montreal colleague Marguerite Bourgeoys both made several voyages to France to recruit settlers. They were particularly successful in securing the female immigrants necessary to establish a permanent colony.

Besides contributing to the colony's sheer physical survival, the nuns also raised its living standard. They conducted the schools attended by girls of all classes and from both races. Other nuns established hospitals in each of the three towns. The hospitals provided high-quality care to both rich and poor, care that compared favourably with that of similar institutions in France. Thus the *dévotes* played an important role in supplying leadership, funding, publicity, recruits, and social services. They may even have tipped the balance toward survival in the 1650s, when retention of the colony was still in doubt.

In the longer run, they established an educational heritage, which survived and shaped social life long after the initial heroic piety had grown cold. Admirably, women never shared men's access to the Jesuit College, the training schools for artisans and river pilots. The schools that the *dévotes* founded did however, prevent a situation such as developed in France, where education of women increasingly lagged behind that of men. The opinion-setters in France sought to justify this neglect in the eighteenth century and a controversy began over whether girls should be educated outside the home at all. Girls in Montreal escaped all this. Indeed, in 1663

Montrealers had a school for their girls but none for their boys. The result was that for a time Montreal women surpassed men in literacy, a reversal of the usual *ancien régime* pattern. The unusually good education of women that Charlevoix extolled in 1744 continued to be noted by travellers long after the fall of New France. Late in the seventeenth century literacy was roughly double the 14 per cent rate in the mother country. Marguerite Bourgeoys' congregational nuns provided free schooling in Louisburg, and in the Montreal District, while the urban elite paid to send their daughters to Ursuline schools. The Ursulines were traditionally rather weak in teaching housekeeping (which perhaps accounts for Swedish traveller Pieter Kalm's famous castigation of Canadian housewifery). Nevertheless they specialized in needlework, an important skill since articles of clothing were a major trade good sought by the Indians. Moreover, the Ursulines taught the daughters of the elite the requisite skills for administering a house and a fortune – skills which many were to exercise.

Apart from the nuns, the famous *filles du roi* were women sent out by the French government as brides in order to boost the colony's permanent settlement. Over 800 arrived between 1663 and 1673. If less impressive than the *dévotes*, they, too, appeared to have arrived with more than the average immigrant's store of education and capital. The majority of the *filles du roi* (and for that matter, of seventeenth-century female immigrants generally) were urban dwellers, a group that enjoyed better access to education than the peasantry did. Over one-third were educated at the Paris Hôpital Général. Students at this institution learned writing and such a wide variety of skills that in France they were much sought after for service in the homes of the wealthy. Six per cent were of noble or bourgeois origin. The *filles* brought with them a 50-100 *livres* dowry provided by the King and in many cases supplemented this with personal or family funds ranging from 200-450 *livres*. These two major immigrant groups, the *filles du roi* and particularly the nuns, account for the superior education and "cultivation" travellers attributed to the colony's women.

The other demographic consideration, the much greater emigration of men to the colony, might lead one to expect that the needed group would receive favoured treatment. The facility of marriage and remarriage, as well as the leniency of the courts and the administrators toward women, suggests that this hypothesis is correct. Women had a wider choice in marriage than did men in the colony's early days. There were, for example, eight marriageable men for every marriageable woman in Montreal in 1663. Widows grieved, briefly, then remarried within an average of 8.8 months after their bereavement. In those early days the laws of supply and demand operated to

women's economic advantage, as well. Rarely did these first Montreal women bother to match their husband's wedding present by offering a dowry.

Economic opportunities

Even more than demographic forces, the colonial economy served to enhance the position of women. In relation to the varied activities found in many regions of France, New France possessed a primitive economy. Other than subsistence farming, the habitants engaged in two major pursuits. The first was military activity, which included not only actual fighting but building and maintaining the imperial forts and provisioning the troops. The second activity was the fur trade. Fighting and fur trading channelled men's ambitions and at times removed them physically from the colony. This helped open up the full range of opportunities to women. Many adapted themselves to life in a military society. A few actually fought. Others made a good living by providing goods and services to the ever-present armies. Still others left military activity aside and concentrated on civilian economic pursuits – pursuits that were often neglected by men. For many this simply meant managing the family farm as best as one could during the trading season, when husbands were away. Other women assumed direction of commercial enterprises, a neglected area in this society that preferred military honours to commercial prizes. Others acted as sort of home-office partners for fur-trading husbands working far afield. Still others, having lost husbands to raids, rapids, or other hazards of forest life assumed a widow's position at the helm of the family business.

New France has been convincingly presented by the historian William Eccles as a military society. The argument is based on the fact that a very large proportion of its population was under arms, its government had a semi-military character, its economy relied heavily on military expenditure and manpower, and a military ethos prevailed among the elite. In some cases, women joined their menfolk in these martial pursuits. The seventeenth century occasionally saw them in direct combat.

The most famous of these seventeenth-century *guerrières* was, of course, Madeleine de Verchères. At the age of fourteen she escaped from a band of Iroquois attackers, rushed back to the fort on her parents' seigneurie, and fired a cannon shot in time to warn all the surrounding settlers of the danger. Legend and history have portrayed de Verchères as a lamb who was able, under siege, to summon up a lion's heart. Powdered and demure in a pink dress, she smiles very sweetly out at the world in a charming vignette in Arthur Dougla's *A Daughter of New France, being a story of the life and times of Madeleine de Verchères*, published in 1916. Perhaps the late twentieth

century is ready for her as a musket-toting braggart who extended the magnitude of her deed with each telling and who boasted that she never in her life shed a tear, a contentious thorn in the side of the local *curé* (whom she slandered) and of her *censitaires* (whom she constantly battled in the courts). She strutted through life like an officer of the *campagnard* nobility to which her family belonged. One wonders how many more there were like her.

By the eighteenth century, women had withdrawn from hand-to-hand combat, but many remained an integral part of the military elite as it closed in to become a caste. In this system, both sexes shared the responsibility of marrying properly and maintaining those cohesive family ties which lay at the heart of military society. What is more surprising is that a number of women accompanied their husbands to military posts in the wilderness. Wives of officers, particularly of corporals, traditionally helped manage the canteens in the French armies. Almost all Canadian officers were involved in some sort of trading activity, and a wife at the post could mind the store when the husband had to mind the war, as did the imperious Madame Lusignan who created a state of near-mutiny at Fort St. Frédéric in the 1750s by monopolizing the trade there, with her husband, the Commandant, helping to enforce it. The nuns, too, marched in step with this military society. They were, quite literally, one of its lifelines, since they cared for the wounded. A majority of the invalids at the Montreal Hôtel-Dieu were soldiers, and the Ursuline institution at Trois-Rivières was referred to simply as *l'hôpital militaire*. Humbler folk also played a part in military society. In the towns female pub-owners conducted a booming business with troops. Other women served as laundresses, accompanying armies on campaigns. At Quebec City, prostitutes plied their trade as early as 1667.

While warfare provided a number of women with a living, it was in commerce that the *Canadiennes* really flourished. Here a number of women moved beyond supporting roles to occupy centre stage. This happened for several reasons. The first was that the military ethos diverted men from commercial activity. Second, many men who entered the woods to fight or trade were gone for years. Others, drowned or killed in battle, never returned. This left many widows who had to earn a livelihood. This happened so often, in fact, that when women, around the turn of the eighteenth century overcame their numerical disadvantage, the tables turned quickly. They soon outnumbered the men and remained a majority through to the Conquest. Generally speaking, life was more hazardous for men than for women – so much so that the next revolution of the historiographic wheel may turn up the myth of New France (at least in relation to its women) as an oppressed group.

The geographically mobile male population projected a number of

women into forms of activity more typically performed by males. Feminine enterprise was certainly not unknown in France. Absent husbands in New France made it particularly likely that female relatives would cover home base, and it was not unusual for men heading west to delegate powers of attorney to their wives. Some procured supplies or kept accounts or made trade goods. Canoes were built by women and girls at Trois-Rivières under government contract. In the colony's first days Jeanne Enard was an important though unscrupulous trader at Trois-Rivières while Mesdames de la Tour and Joybert shipped furs from Acadia. In the eighteenth-century Mesdames Couagne and Lamothe were substantial merchants at Montreal as were the Desaulniers sisters whose Indian trading post was a front for a Montreal-Albany smuggling operation.

The final reason for women's extensive business activity was the direct result of the hazards men faced in fighting and fur-trading. A high proportion of women were widowed; and as widows, they enjoyed special commercial privileges. In traditional French society, these privileges were so extensive that craftsmen's widows sometimes inherited full guild-master's rights. More generally, widows acquired the right to manage the family assets until the children reached the age of twenty-five (and sometimes beyond that time). In some instances they also received the right to choose which child could receive the succession.

Thus, in New France, both military and commercial activities that required a great deal of travelling over vast distances were usually carried out by men. In their absence, their wives played a large role in the day-to-day economic direction of the colony. Even when the men remained in the colony, military careers often absorbed their energies. In these situations, it was not uncommon for a wife to assume direction of the family interests. Others waited to do so until their widowhood, which – given the fact that the seventeenth-century wife was about eight years younger than her husband and that his activities were often more dangerous – frequently came early.

New France had been founded at a time in Europe's history in which the roles of women were neither clearly nor rigidly defined. In this fluid situation, the colony received an unusually capable group of female immigrants during its formative stage. Long remaining in short supply, these women appear to have been relatively privileged within marriage, at school, in the courts, and in social and political life. Circumstances enabled the women of New France to play many parts: wife and mother, but also devote, trader, warrior, landowner, smuggler, politician, educator and entrepreneur. For us to understand them, we have to overcome our own era's demarcation of private and public life.