

## AN EXAMPLE OF AN "A" PAPER - History 451

*As the comment (placed here at the end of the bibliography) states, "This essay is a superior piece of work, beautifully written and convincingly argued." Rather than gild the lily with explanation, I'll let the essay speak for itself.*

*The text retains the corrections and comments I made on the original.  
The final paragraph in Arial Type is the comment I appended to the original.*

### Compare the role of women in seventeenth-century New France and New England in shaping and sustaining the spiritual and moral lives of their communities..

#### Women in the Background Due to Gender-Based Hierarchies in New France and New England

Although the Catholics of seventeenth-century New France came to North America under different circumstances ~~than~~ from those of their Puritan counterparts in New England, both groups sought to promote Christian religiosity in the New World and relied on their female population to quietly carry out societal goals set forth by male leaders. In New France, women acted as leading missionaries among native tribes, heavily influencing the religious development of the colony's first indigenous converts. In New England, women guided the religious and moral growth of their families, a task which male Puritan leaders considered crucial to the mission of building a "city upon a hill" in North America. But despite significant contributions to their respective environments, women in both New France and New England sat below men in gender-based hierarchies and were barred from the civic affairs of their colonial societies.

By the early 1630s, the Jesuits of Quebec had established an intensely religious foothold in the New France. Due in part to the absence of an influential secular clergy in the colony, they exercised authority over the religious operations of Quebec and the surrounding area. (Davis) As a result, many of the norms of French Christianity either did not exist or were less stressed than in Europe, which was a world away from New France in a number of respects. First, it was, geographically, a world away, rendering impossible the speedy communication between various church figures that fostered a French religious bureaucracy. Also, New France was still an exploratory venture in the 1630s, bringing issues directly related to survival to the forefront. Most importantly, a large portion of its population was non-Christian – an issue that church authorities on both sides of the Atlantic sought to remedy, often with the help of female missionaries.

Ursuline nuns such as Marie de L'Incarnation began arriving in and around Quebec in the 1630s on the heels of the Jesuit pioneers. The women had already cultivated an identity as teachers and ardent missionaries in France, but their arrival in the colony posed its own challenges. (Davis) First, most of the natives of New France spoke only their indigenous languages, and the process of learning Algonquin, Huron and Iroquois took time. Also, there was the issue of cultural dissimilarity between the French and the natives, often most acute in the behavior and tasks of women. Still, L'Incarnation and the other educated, literate Ursulines positioned themselves at the forefront of missionary activity in Quebec, and succeeded in converting a number of native girls and women. (Vimont, 185)

At roughly the same time in the frontier settlement of Montreal, Marie de Bourgeoys exercised control over the development of New France, as well. De Bourgeoys not only made forays in-to the native villages surrounding her Congregation but also oversaw the French-born "founding mothers" of the colony as they settled into their new surroundings and began to marry. French authorities were acutely aware that in order to build a self-sustaining population in New

Comment [CLC1]: excellent opening

Comment [CLC2]: page? Use a correct notation

Comment [CLC3]: repetitive

Comment [CLC4]: native peoples (except converts in *reserves*) were sovereign entities, not part of New France

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France, they needed to foster a *Canadien* identity ~~in~~ that would replace the transience of the fur traders and the celibacy of the regular clergy. (Foster, 95) De Bourgeoys acted as ~~the~~ steward of the project, supervising not only the newly arrived women but also the male workforce responsible for sustaining the settlement. Her Congregation de Notre Dame became an exception to the gender-based hierarchy prevailing in Europe and other parts of New France at the ~~time~~, a model in which men were often on the margins and under the supervision of women.

Comment [CLC7]: or, a

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In both cases, however, men remained the ultimate authorities. L'Incarnation certainly influenced the Ursuline identity in the colony and in fact actively shaped the Christianity that haltingly took hold among the native populations in and around Quebec. There is even some evidence that her prominence as a woman affected the standing of indigenous women in their native settings. (Vimont, 193) But L'Incarnation, who frequently referred to the inferiority her sex, also answered to a religious director and, eventually, an ecclesiastical hierarchy completely composed of men. Her writings have survived, but ~~they~~ have been edited by her son and rid of various words and phrases that might cast her as less than ladylike. (Davis) De Bourgeoys's mission also faltered with time, the upsetting of gender roles among other things proving too abnormal for the male population to support. In spite, or perhaps because of, the success of the founding mothers in creating a frontier-born community, clerical authorities altered the Congregation de Notre Dame ~~such so~~ that it ceased to exist in its original form. By the eighteenth century, the male power structure of France had largely replicated itself in North America. (Cohen, 9/11)

The Puritans who settled in seventeenth-century New England did so with the explicit intention of building a godly community ~~in North America~~, far ~~away~~ from the decadence and religious repression of England. They arrived as families and, in some cases, entire English Puritan congregations made the trip ~~to Massachusetts together~~, at once moving from an environment in which they were the oppressed minority to one in which they were the arbiters of society. (Cohen, 9/20)

Puritan religious leaders operated independently of any ecclesiastical ~~authority~~, as their theology called for the autonomy of the congregation. Each town organized itself around a three-pronged governmental model, with civic magistrates, Puritan ministers and a dedicated laity coming together to form a ~~g~~Godly ~~S~~society. The unprecedented power vested in the laity, though likely a relic from ~~secretive~~ English Puritanism more so than an essential element of its New England manifestation, meant an emphasis on the family's obligation to foster religious growth, normally under the guidance of a woman.

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Although women were encouraged to read the bible, attend church and even lead supplemental discussions of the sermon, they held almost no public voice in Puritan services. At home, men dedicated to farming and traveling often left their wives to oversee the raising of their children, the upkeep of the house and, in many cases, the family business. (Westerkamp, 15) Nonetheless, it was a core value of Puritan society that women obey their husbands at all times. Women did occupy positions of limited authority, however, and it is difficult to overstate the importance placed in their management of household affairs. In spite of the widespread perception that they were physically frail and intellectually weak, New England's "deputy-husbands" were frequently the leading religious and moral authority for young children and thus factored immensely into the societal development of the colony. (Cohen, 9/25)

Although they made up a large portion of Puritan church members in the seventeenth century, the exact nature of their Christian autonomy for women was unclear. Whether intentionally or not, Anne Hutchinson tested the boundaries of female independence when she began "prophesying" in private, without the guidance of a male minister. Hutchinson, who claimed to speak directly to God, posed two fundamental challenges to the Puritan power structure of 1630s New England: she sidestepped the appointed ministers in interpreting the word of God and, more damningly, she stepped out of place as a woman, spreading her views rather than taking direction from male superiors. Tellingly, Hutchinson's private discussions were not

immediately controversial and she was seen as playing a chief role in the spiritual growth of the colony. To be sure, Hutchinson did establish herself, along with a number of men, as a dissenter and openly questioned the authority of the ministers. But the Puritan power structure identified her as the ringleader of dissent because she was a woman whose voice posed a threat to New England's entire social order. As Salem minister Hugh Peter noted, Hutchinson had "rather bine a Husband than Wife and a preacher than a Hearer." (Kamensky, 72)

Whereas Hutchinson broke the rules governing female voice in religion – a transgression for which she was banished from Massachusetts - Ann Hibbens met with trouble when she tested her household authority. Convinced that she was being overcharged by a group of carpenters while her husband was away, Hibbens sought other estimates, which, according to the ministers who that eventually excommunicated her, was tantamount to calling the carpenters liars. She was brought before the male leaders of her congregation ostensibly to apologize for the slight, but the proceedings quickly focused upon her unwomanly demeanor, specifically her audacity in accusing men of deception and refusing to abandon the issue to her husband. It was, in the murky? world of Puritan home economics, a clear sign that men were in charge, whether they be husbands, carpenters, or ministers. Like Hutchinson, Hibbens defended herself and refused to admit to any wrongdoing, which proved to be more offensive than her original transgressions. (Hibbens, 57)

In response to both cases, Puritan authorities eager to reinforce the importance of the hierarchical family model engineered a backlash against women's public speech and drove their congregations to unprecedented gender-based segregation. (Kamensky, 96) Outspoken and relatively independent women were no longer seen as intriguing and magnetic, as had sometimes been the case even in England, but were rather labeled as social lepers, best removed from the community until they learned to govern their tongues. It is difficult to determine whether women such as Hutchinson and Hibbens were more important as dissenters in challenging powerful individuals in their communities or speaking out as women and rejecting the norms their peers had silently endured to that point. By each interpretation, they were crucial in shaping the development of early New England.

And so, as New France and New England developed from fledgling settlements to thriving colonies, each relied heavily on the contributions of women. Although they did not write the rules of their respective societies, the women of each area held religious responsibilities such [awk.] that their interpretation of Christian teachings inherently influenced the beliefs of their friends, families and, in the example of New France, the nearby indigenous populations. Somewhat ironically, their presence as women also forced male authority figures to reevaluate and in some areas alter the gender roles that had persisted for centuries in Europe and governed the lives of women prior to colonial expansion. Still, women remained subservient, often very publicly and otherwise under a system of complex but binding unwritten laws. Men, as a result, stood in the nominal positions of power, relegating women to silent roles in the history of the period.

### Works Consulted:

Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, MA, 1997)

William Henry Foster III, "Women at the Centers, Men at the Margins: The Wilderness of the Secular Sisters of Early Montreal Reconsidered," in Dinan and Meyers, eds., *Women and Religion in Old and New Worlds* (New York, 2001)

Comment [CLC11]: her church, including the laity, had that power, not a group of ministers

Comment [CLC12]: this discussion, tho' excellent, is weighted toward the dissenters. What about Anne Bradstreet?

Comment [CLC13]: entirely true?

| Fr. Barthelemy Vimont, "Relation of What Occurred in New France in the Year 1642," in Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 73 vols. (Cleveland, 1896-1901)

Joyce Marshall, ed. and trans., *Word from New France: The Selected Letters of Marie de L'Incarnation* (Toronto, 1967)

Marilyn Westerkamp, *Women and Religion in Early America 1600-1850* (New York, 1999)

Jane Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue: The Politics of Speech in Early New England* (New York, 1997)

"Church Trial of Mistress Ann Hibbens," in Nancy Cott, ed., *Root of Bitterness: Documents of the Social History of American Women* (New York, 1972)

Charles Cohen, *Lectures from History 451* (Fall 2007)

This essay is a superior piece of work, beautifully written and convincingly argued. New French women acted as missionaries, you argue, while New English women "guided the religion and moral growth of their families" (1), but in both instances they "sat below men in gender-based hierarchies and were barred from the civic affairs of their colonial societies" (1)—though you take careful note of the partial exception that Bourgeois represents. I would raise only two small points, one formal, the other substantive. Re the former: in the future, please use full footnotes rather than parentheses for citations and be sure to include page numbers. Re the latter: your discussion of New English women runs heavily towards those who dissented (e.g., Hutchinson, Hibbens) and scants those who fit in (e.g., Bradstreet). Perhaps the secondary readings, notably Westerkamp and Kamensky, threw you in this direction, but you had much material on hand to discuss women's roles within the gender hierarchy. But I have little else to say except that the paper is a masterful exposition for an undergraduate course, and that I would, with your permission, like to put it on my website as an example of what constitutes an "A" paper.

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