DE-MYSTIFYING THE MYSTIC: RE-READING THE SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF MARIE DE L’INCARNATION,

LA RELATION DE 1654

par

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Thèse doctorale
Littérature canadienne comparée

Sherbrooke, Québec
May, 2012

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ABSTRACT

Spiritual autobiography was the primary form of narrative expression available to religious women, or any pious woman for that matter, in the mid-seventeenth century. Church doctrine underpinned generally accepted notions of women’s inferiority and essential worthlessness, notions internalized by women regardless of any superior energy, talent for business or physical or mental acuity they might have had. This multidisciplinary analysis argues for a gendered reading method using twenty-first century knowledge in order to provide new insights into Marie de l’Incarnation’s spiritual autobiography, *La Relation de 1654*.

While traditional discourse has centred on the thirteen chapters, or ‘oraisons’ (states of prayer) of *La Relation* which constitute the various stages of Marie Guyart’s spiritual ascent to *unio mystica* in the tradition of the Western Christian mystics, my re-reading of the text as gendered discerns nine specific life events, including certain of those she deemed mystical, embedded in her narrative. A useful tool in my analysis is the theoretical model offered in *Women’s Ways of Knowing* by Mary Belenky et al. Based on their study of women’s development of self in the late twentieth century, *Women’s Ways of Knowing* identifies five epistemological perspectives through which women might pass, from ‘silence’ to ‘constructed knowing,’ in their journey towards better knowledge of self and the world. The Belenky et al. study acknowledges key events in the lives of their women subjects, events that triggered their transition from one stage to the next. When the chronology of Marie Guyart’s lifeline as revealed in her autobiography is examined against the *Women’s Ways of Knowing* model, certain of the nine key life events she describes may similarly be seen as triggers for the transitions marking the various stages of her evolution of self.
Informed by history, psychology, physiology and theories of women’s autobiography and epistemology, my gendered reading of La Relation de 1654 attempts to provide insight into Marie Guyart’s spiritual experiences and traces her evolution differently than traditional interpretations. It attempts to locate those events and decisions which allowed her to grow from a position of silence to the acquisition of voice and critical thought, from her practice of severe ‘heroic’ mortification, her self-hatred, suicidal depression and difficult inter-personal relationships to a life of accomplishment and love of self and other. In the textual account of her spiritual journey, Marie Guyart moves from a Christocentric focus to one inspired as well by the strength of the iconic archetype of the Holy Mother, creator and nurturer of life, both physical and spiritual. In my reading, I observe how the role of the Virgin Mary changes and evolves, from a rare appearance in the first half of the text in her traditional role as intercessor with God, to a new role as spiritual guide and mentor in her own right.

My gendered reading of La Relation de 1654 attempts to expose what is timeless in Marie Guyart’s quest for self, meaning and purpose in the world, while at the same time, locating it within the social, religious and rhetorical constraints imposed on women and their narratives of self in the seventeenth century.
RÉSUMÉ

Au milieu du XVIIe siècle, l'autobiographie spirituelle était la principale forme d'autonarration possible pour les religieuses, voire pour toute femme pieuse. La doctrine de l'Église soutenait des notions généralement acceptées de l'infériorité et de l'absence de valeur des femmes, notions que les femmes ont interiorisées, quelles que soient leur énergie, talent d'entrepreneure ou leur acuité physique ou mentale. Cette analyse multidisciplinaire propose une méthode de lecture sexuée qui utilise des connaissances du XXIe siècle pour offrir de nouvelles intuitions sur La Relation de 1654, l'autobiographie spirituelle de Marie de l'Incarnation, de même que sur sa persona culturelle en tant qu'une des mères fondateuses du Québec.

Les commentaires existants sur La Relation traitent surtout des treize chapitres ou « oraisons » (états de prière) de La Relation, comme les divers stades de l'ascension spirituelle de Marie vers l'union mystique dans la tradition des mystiques chrétiens occidentaux. Or, ma relecture du texte en tant que discours sexué discerne neuf événements de vie précis dans sa narration, des événements de vie qu'on peut voir comme des stades de transition dans son évolution de soi. Le modèle théorique offert dans Women's Ways of Knowing par Mary Belenky et al, constitue un outil utile dans mon analyse. Fondé sur l'étude du développement du soi des femmes à la fin du XXe siècle, Women's Ways of Knowing identifie cinq stades épistémologiques par lesquels les femmes peuvent passer, du "silence" à la "connaissance construite," dans leur cheminement vers la connaissance de soi et du monde. Dans les vies des femmes sujets, l'étude de Belenky et al reconnaît des événements clés qui déclenchent leur transition d'un stade à l'autre, événements dont l'impact sur elles est différent de celui relevé par des études semblables antérieures, centrées principalement sur des hommes. Quand on examine la chronologie de la
ligne de vie de Marie, telle qu'elle la révèle dans son texte, selon le modèle de *Women's Ways of Knowing*, certains des neuf événements clés qu'elle décrit peuvent être vus comme des moments de transition dans son cheminement spirituel et temporel.

Informée par l'histoire, la psychologie, la physiologie, l'épistémologie et les théories sur l'autobiographie de femmes, ma lecture sexuée de *La Relation de 1654* tente d'offrir des intuitions sur les expériences que Marie Guyart considère spirituelles, mystiques ou religieuses et trace l'évolution du sujet narratif d'une manière qui diffère des interprétations traditionnelles. Elle tente de situer ces événements, ainsi que les décisions subséquentes qui lui ont permis de passer d'une position de silence à l'acquisition d'une voix et d'une pensée critique, à partir de la pratique d'une mortification "héroïque" sévère, de haine de soi, de dépression parfois suicidaire et de relations interpersonnelles difficiles jusqu'à une vie d'accomplissement et d'amour de soi et de l'autre. Dans son cheminement, Marie passe d'une focalisation entièrement christocentrique vers une focalisation inspirée par l'archétype iconique de la Sainte Mère, que j'identifie comme représentant le "principe de pouvoir féminin" créateur et nourricier de la vie. Dans ma lecture du texte, j'observe comment le rôle de la Vierge Marie change, passant d'une rare apparition dans la première moitié, dans son rôle traditionnel d'intercession auprès de Dieu, à une présence actuelle, "sentie" et transcendante vers la fin de l'autobiographie, dans un nouveau rôle de guide spirituelle à part entière.

Ma lecture de *La Relation de 1654* est sexuée. Elle tente d'exposer ce qui est intemporel dans la quête de soi de Marie Guyart, de même que sa quête de sens et de but précis dans le monde en tant que femme de son temps.
INTRODUCTION

A Multidisciplinary Approach and Biographic Context

Spiritual autobiographies of seventeenth-century nuns are complex and Marie de l’Incarnation’s *Relation de 1654* (which I refer to throughout this document as *La Relation*) is no exception. Her passionate language in the mystic tradition, her inscriptions of key dream memories and ecstatic visions, as well as her graphic descriptions of severe penitential mortifications and demonic possession, give voice to a silence imposed by history, cultural norms and ecclesiastic authority. Such language, typically regarded as evidence of remarkable spiritual experiences, may also be considered in the light of feminist revisionist history, social psychology, women’s autobiography theory, and women’s epistemology. My rereading of *La Relation de 1654* applies insights from recent research across these disciplines, as well as from the physical sciences, while respecting the profoundly spiritual nature of the text.

A Multidisciplinary Approach

In their study of the extreme behaviour of recognized holy persons and ascetic mystics across the ages, *The Mystic Mind: The Psychology of Medieval Mystics and Ascetics* (2005), Jerome Kroll and Bernard Bachrach caution that such new approaches have not been without controversy.¹ They raise the potential problem of reductionism, of “substituting a biological level of explanation for an essentially psychological or mystical experience” (29). Nonetheless, evidence in the text suggests that specific biographical facts and events in Marie de l’Incarnation’s life - such as those related to death and loss - had a psychosomatic, as well as psychological, impact on certain of her experiences deemed mystical. The trauma of the deaths of her mother, husband and mother-in-law, grief, loss of the family business,
loss of status and income, fear, and separation from her infant son, all preceded her religious conversion experience. Psychologists have established the experience of such trauma in an individual’s life as a strong causal link to subsequent religious conversion, as we will see in Chapter Four.\textsuperscript{11}

In \textit{Religious Studies Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things} (2009), Ann Taves proposes a model with which scholars may bridge the gap between the sciences (including the socio-psychological study of the mind and the neuroscientific study of the brain), and traditional religious studies. Taves’ model offers a new paradigm for the study of religious experience that takes the notion of reductionism into account. Taves’ approach favours generally accepted “attribution theory,” which emerged towards the end of the twentieth century, a theory based on common-sense causal explanations for certain experiences deemed mystical or spiritual.\textsuperscript{12} Opposed to attribution is the \textit{sui generis} approach that assumes religious, mystical, or spiritual experiences are inherently unique and stand outside any logical explanation (17). Taves considers that experiences deemed mystical or spiritual can be studied both as biological/psychological phenomena and as subjective phenomena, thus allowing us to develop a naturalistic understanding of such experiences:

After decades of critical discussion of the concept, we can neither simply invoke the idea of ‘religious experience’ as if it were a self-evidently unique sort of experience nor leave experience out of any sensible account of religion. Rather than abandon the study of experience, we should disaggregate the concept of ‘religious experience’ and study the wide range of experiences to which religious significance has been attributed. (8)
Along with others, Taves' multi-disciplinary approach informs my study of Marie de l'Incarnation's visions, dreams, and experience of demonic possession, as well as her experience of the numinous, or "sensed presence" of the Virgin Mary, set in a historical and gender-specific context. In the representation of the Virgin Mary in the text, for instance, there is a gradual shift away from Guyart's almost total Christocentric focus to a new and dominant alignment with the Holy Mother. Rare references to her in the first half of the text invoke only her traditional role as intercessor with the male divinity. At about the mid-point of the narrative, however, the Holy Mother appears in "The Dream of the Three Kisses"—a dream represented by the autobiographical subject as life-changing. In it, the Holy Virgin is represented as directive and wise, the iconic mother, creator and nurturer of life, with an authority of her own. Subsequently, Guyart credits the Holy Mother with being the agent responsible for lifting her longest and deepest period of at times suicidal depression. Ultimately, it is the Virgin Mary who comes to her aid in the aftermath of the fire which destroyed the monastery, and stayed with her as a transcendent presence throughout the rebuilding process. In this final phase of construction, rebirth and renewal, Guyart proceeds in the text in complicitous and familiar alignment with the Holy Mother as spiritual guide and mentor. Guyart attributes to her a power and agency that recall certain characteristics of the great goddesses of antiquity, representative of the feminine principle of creation, wholeness, and wisdom as defined by Marilyn Casselman in *Talking the Walk, the Grassroots Language of Feminism*:

The feminine principle ... represents the integrity inherent in human nature fundamental to the body, mind, and spirit of human wholeness. At its core, it is the authority of female being, in and of itself—essential and without domination. It is
grounded in the collective human experience and the inheritance that all women share. (122)

Casselman’s definition includes the notion of women as creators of life and community at its most basic level, as nurturers and bearers of compassionate wisdom (122). Such characteristics are inherent in Guyart’s iconic representation of the Virgin Mary in the text, as they prove to be in her construction of self.

The name “Marie de l’Incarnation” is laden with significance. It was Marie Guyart’s chosen identity from the moment she took her religious vows in 1633 until her death in 1672 and the name with which she signed her spiritual autobiography. Her re-naming marks a major shift in her evolution of self, joining her in name and spiritual power with the incarnation of Christ. As Gerda Lerner observes, in the tradition of the ancients: “a person newly endowed with power is renamed” (The Creation of Patriarchy, 151). Guyart’s new name calls forth a new identity, an identity that, for her, involved rejecting the material world for the world of spirit in the monastic tradition. It reflects the power of the Holy Trinity invested in her through her mystical union with Christ and recalls the moment of her religious conversion, which occurred on the eve of the Feast of the Incarnation, 1620, when she was twenty. Coincidentally, and perhaps not insignificantly, “Marie de l’Incarnation” was also the name chosen by the co-founder of the Ursulines in France, Barbe Acarie, one of the most powerful women of her time, who died a few years before Guyart entered religious life. That Guyart adopted the same religious name as Acarie is perhaps indicative of a phenomenon observed by historian Barbara Diefendorf as the mimetic inter-generational influence of certain pious ascetic women of the elite on other spiritually-motivated women (From Penitence to Charity, 76). As well, Guyart’s new identity carries over that part of her
baptismal name which reflects the significant cultural and religious role of the Virgin Mary in Catholic society and, ultimately, in Guyart's own sense of herself. For the sake of brevity, I refer to Marie de l'Incarnation throughout this document as "Guyart," her maiden name.

Although her ascetic mystic spirituality developed more than a hundred years after the end of the period historians generally refer to as the Middle Ages (500 - 1500), commentators agree that Guyart's spirituality was influenced by currents of "l'École française de spiritualité," whose precursors were the German and Flemish mystics of the 13th and 14th centuries and the Spanish mystics of the 16th century (Marie-Florine Bruneau, Women Mystics Confront the Modern World, 20). Her practice of severe or 'heroic' mortification emulated that of certain ascetics of the tradition.

"Heroic asceticism," as opposed to more moderate forms of penitential asceticism, is an excessively harsh form of mortification which Guyart inflicted on her body throughout her twenties, a practice her biographer Dom Guy-Marie Oury refers to as her "pénitences excessives" (Marie de l' Incarnation, vol. 1, 59). It is defined by Kroll and Bachrach as a combination of severe laceration of the flesh, sleep deprivation, and starvation practised over a prolonged period of time, the physiological effects of which are cumulative (The Mystic Mind, 2, 7). Kroll and Bachrach's study of the medieval mystics and asceticism is of significance to my own because of the historical link between the heroic ascetic mystics of the late medieval period and those of the early modern period (Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 7). Contrary to popular conceptions regarding the severity of female penitential mortification, Kroll and Bachrach observe its relative rarity in connection with mystic experience in the history of western Christianity in spite of the notoriety of such well-known heroic ascetic mystics as Saint Catherine of Genoa and Saint Catherine of Siena: "recurring
figures throughout medieval history, ones that ... attract more attention than the actual
numbers would justify, are the religious mystic and heroic ascetic” (*The Mystic Mind*, 1).
Notably, however, there was a statistically dramatically higher percentage of female than
male mystics who practised heroic asceticism in the medieval period (116).

According to Kroll and Bachrach, two current hypotheses claim to account for the
historic rise of female heroic asceticism and mysticism in the late Middle Ages, neither of
which provides a completely satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon. The first is that
religious women, having been increasingly denied a functional role in the Church, turned to
asceticism and mysticism as a reaction against male ecclesiastic hegemony; the second is
that women are more predisposed than men to perceptions beyond the material and may also
be more subject to suggestibility (*The Mystic Mind*, 126). According to Kroll and Bachrach,
such approaches demean “both the psychological state of mind and the spiritual yearnings of
medieval women” (125). Rather, their hypothesis is that self-injurious behaviour was used
increasingly by spiritually-inclined women in an effort to bring about altered states of
consciousness which they understood as mystical union with the divine: “asceticism was a
culturally acceptable and symbolically meaningful (because of identification with the human
suffering of Jesus) practice that was efficacious in inducing a desired trance state that was
interpreted [as] ... a mystical experience of closeness with God (127).”

Any Malceived Guyart’s harsh mortification in this light, as a response to her desire for *unio
mystica* (*Mystic in the New World*, 64). And, as Ariel Glucklich observes in *Sacred Pain*,
the line between saintliness and pathology is blurred (128). According to Glucklich, pain
inflicted on the body facilitates, neurologically and psychologically, the emergence of a
desired identity: “religious pain produces states of consciousness and cognitive-emotional
changes that affect the identity of the individual subject and her sense of belonging to a larger
community or to a more fundamental state of being’’ (6), and:

The more irritation one applies to the body in the form of pain, the less output the
central nervous system generates from the areas that regulate … a sense of self […]
Modulated pain … facilitates the emergence of a new identity … the new identity for
the mystics is almost always what they set out to achieve. (207)

My study applies Glucklich’s and Kroll and Bachrach’s observations to Guyart’s textual
account of her severe mortifications and goes further, taking into account complex historical
and personal circumstances. Such circumstances include gendered notions of inferiority and
the inherent weakness of women, the danger they posed to man by virtue of their sex and
perceived vulnerability to the devil, societal oppression and submission to patriarchal
authority, as well as the trauma of loss and humiliation, all of which, arguably, influenced
Guyart’s behaviour.

Thus, important biographical referents inform my understanding of certain key events in
Guyart’s life, events which may have provoked or contributed to her severe and prolonged
somatic behaviour and visions. It is behaviour Marie-Florine Bruneau suggests may be seen
as “suffering” and “madness,” “a mutilation and an obstacle to any individual’s human
dignity” (55). For Guyart, however, the most likely explanation for her mystical experiences
was a religious, or sui generis, explanation in the context of historical, religious, and
gendered notions of women’s inferiority and weakness.

According to Taves, the idea of mystical or spiritual experience is “deeply embedded” in
the essential meaning of religion. In recent decades, this approach has been heavily criticized as
it sets up religious experience as something unique which defies explanation in biological,
psychological or sociological terms, essentially for fear of reductionism (3). Since 1990, Taves observes, with new knowledge of the brain and human consciousness, there has been a dramatic increase in studies of the neurological, cognitive, and evolutionary underpinnings of religion, including mystical experience, that continues to strengthen interest in naturalistic explanations. Matthew Bagger, on the other hand, rejects mystical experience outright as a form of supernatural explanation that is 'both empty and unacceptable,' using examples from Teresa of Avila's spiritual autobiography. While mystical believers validate their experience for themselves, Bagger stresses the paramount importance of social and historical context, especially in the late medieval period, and he believes: "in our contemporary context, with our ultimate values and explanatory commitments, they can no longer do so" (Religious Experience, Justification and History, 3). Such studies are key influences on my exploration of Guyart's self-construction in La Relation de 1654.

**Biographic Context**

Marie de l'Incarnation (1599-1672) was born Marie Guyart into a devoutly Catholic family of the lower bourgeoisie in Tours, the fourth daughter of eight children. Her father, the son of a notary, was a baker, a "marchand boulanger" (Oury, Marie de l'Incarnation, vol. 1, 9). At seventeen she was married against her wishes to Claude Martin, a silk manufacturer. Two years later she was widowed, the mother of a six-month-old son, and destitute. Left alone to negotiate the dissolution of the family business through difficult personal circumstances about which the text is mostly silent (the deaths of her mother, husband, and mother-in-law in quick succession, as well as the compromising innuendos of a love triangle on her husband's part), Guyart turned to her religion for solace (Deroy-Pineau, Françoise. Marie Guyart: femme d'affaires, mystique, mère de la Nouvelle-France, 1599 - 1672, 87).
At twenty, she experienced a traumatic conversion which marked the beginning of her mystic quest: “je me vis toute plongée en du sang ... mon esprit était convaincu que ce sang était le sang du Fils de Dieu de l’effusion duquel j’étais coupable” (La Relation, 182). At that time, she acquired her first spiritual advisor, a Feuillant priest, to whom she began a regular accounting of her spiritual and temporal life: “[j’avais] à lui rendre compte de tout ce qui se passait” (193). For the following ten years, Guyart supported herself and her son by shouldering increasing responsibility in her brother-in-law’s transportation company, eventually running it. In 1631, at age thirty, she left the world of business, her family (her son was nearly twelve and her father ailing) and her friends, and entered the cloistered Ursuline monastery in Tours where she believed she would spend the rest of her life. Less than ten years later, however, in a dramatic turn of events, she was sailing to Canada as Mother Superior responsible for building the first Ursuline monastery in the New World. She lived in New France from 1639 until she died thirty-three years later in 1672, at the age of seventy-two.

In spite of the limited social and educational advantages of a woman of the lower bourgeoisie, and in spite of her reduced circumstances as a destitute widow, Guyart’s talents and determination led her to a life of extraordinary achievement and a permanent place in the cultural heritage of Quebec. She is recognized as founder of the first female monastery in North America, an educator of girls, a lexicographer, a chronicler of the history of New France, an autobiographer, and a mystic. She was also a prolific writer. Literary critic Ted Blodgett calls her “one of the most significant writers of the seventeenth century” (The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature), and Chantal Théry refers to her as an important contributor to our “matrimoine” (De plume et d’audace: femmes de la Nouvelle-France).
Among Guyart’s writings are spiritual treatises, meditations, hagiographic essays, an enormous number of letters of spiritual and historical significance, and two spiritual autobiographies, *La Relation de 1633*, of which only fragments remain, and the integral *La Relation de 1654*.

In the years immediately following her death, several of her spiritual writings and two hundred and seventy-eight of her letters were edited and annotated by Guyart’s son, Dom Claude Martin, Benedictine of St. Maur. They were published by Louis Billaine of Paris in 1677 as *La Vie de la Vénérable Mère Marie de l’Incarnation, Ière Supérieure des Ursulines de la Nouvelle-France, tirée de ses Lettres et de ses Écrits*, in which *La Relation de 1654* was included “in extenso” as the principal document.

For over 250 years Guyart’s texts languished in relative obscurity until the appearance of Henri Brémond’s superb and influential *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France au XVIIe siècle* (1922), which devoted a long section to her life and her importance as a mystic (Vols.VI and VII). In 1929, Dom Albert Jamet, Benedictine of Solesmes, undertook to re-edit and republish Guyart’s collected spiritual works in a scholarly edition based on Dom Claude’s *Vie* of 1677. It appeared in four volumes as *Les Écrits spirituels et historiques de Marie de l’Incarnation* (1929-39). As Guyart scholar Dom Guy-Marie Oury notes, all of Guyart’s works in this edition, with the sole exception of *La Relation de 1654*, had been edited by her son for style and structure: “seule *La Relation de 1653-4* est parvenue jusqu’à nous sous la forme même dans laquelle Marie de l’Incarnation l’avait composée” (*Marie de l’Incarnation, 1599-1672*, vii). While the basis of my study is *La Relation de 1654*, I also refer to *La Relation de 1633* and to certain of her collected letters in *Marie de l’Incarnation Ursuline (1599-1672): Correspondance*, edited by Oury and published by l’Abbaye Saint-Pierre de Solesmes (1971), and to the biography by Oury,

In the last two decades, with new interest in spirituality, women’s autobiography, and women’s historical writing, numerous works on Guyart’s spiritual and epistolary texts have appeared. In 1993, Laval University’s Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses, together with La Province des Ursulines de Québec, established the Centre d’Études sur Marie de l’Incarnation with the purpose of developing awareness of Guyart’s spirituality and her influence in Quebec history. Since then, new works have appeared, among them Marie de l’Incarnation: Marie Guyart femme d’affaires, mystique, mère de la Nouvelle France by Françoise Deroy-Pineau (1999), Marie Guyart de l’Incarnation: Un destin transocéanique, edited by Deroy-Pineau (2000), and Entre mère et fils: le dialogue des vocations (2000), Femme, Mystique et Missionnaire: Marie Guyart de l’Incarnation (2001), and Lecture inédite de la modernité aux origines de la Nouvelle-France, all edited by Raymond Brodeur and all of which have contributed to inscribing Guyart’s persona as part of the cultural memory of Quebec. In 2008, Jean-Daniel Lafond produced a documentary film, “Folle de Dieu” and a play, “Déraison d’amour,” both of which focus on Guyart’s ecstatic mysticism. Recent works by Marie-Florine Bruneau, Chantal Théry, Jacques Maître, and Anya Mali, as well as book chapters by Dominique Deslandres and Natalie Zemon Davis, have widened the discourse considerably. Bruneau’s analysis situates Guyart alongside Mme Guyon in the experience of women in the waning light of a dominant medieval world-view; Théry, Deslandres, and Zemon Davis observe Guyart mostly in the context of her writing as an early woman of the Church in the New World; Maître’s interest is psychological analysis related to evidence of anorexia nervosa in Guyart’s autobiographical writing, while Mali focuses on Guyart’s spiritual self-
representation in her thirteen stages of spiritual evolution within the Western mystic tradition. Mali argues that while Guyart reached the stage of *unio mystica* in her late twenties in France, she attained the ultimate state of spiritual poverty much later in her life, as a result, in part, of the extremely harsh environment of the New World.

My study takes a different approach. With its focus on Guyart’s principal spiritual autobiography, written in the New World but centred on her memory of experience in the Old, my analysis looks at her key religious experiences of conversion, mystic visions and dreams, all of which occurred in France, from a gendered and multi-disciplinary perspective. Unlike any other to date, the present study considers, among other things, Guyart’s descriptions of severe self-inflicted bodily injury in the light of new psychological and neuro-physiological understanding. I analyze the significance of Guyart’s movement in the text from its Christocentric focus towards a gradual alignment with the Holy Mother as iconic representation of the female archetype, from silence and submission to a confident voice of her own. An important tool for my understanding of Guyart’s life-writing, the distance of three and a half centuries notwithstanding, is the epistemological study *Women’s Ways of Knowing*.

The purpose of my dissertation is to broaden understanding of Guyart’s life experience as a gendered subject, using tools fashioned from contemporary discoveries in several disciplines. My study is multi-methodological, contextual, and feminist. Helen Buss observes that: “a contextual reading is interdisciplinary, relying on information from a broad range of cultural documents, and theoretically eclectic” (45). This analysis situates Guyart’s spiritual narrative first in historical context, a context which is opened up more by new understandings of gender violence and its consequences in the early modern period as presented by recent revisionist historians. My contextual approach is further informed by
previous Guyart commentators and by literary theory as it applies specifically to the spiritual self-narratives of the female mystics, such theories as proposed by Leigh Gilmore, Bella Brodski and Celeste Schenck, among others. Feminist epistemology, specifically those theories outlined in *Women's Ways of Knowing* by Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger and Jill Mattuck Tarule, provides an important model against which to consider Guyart's development of self in contemporary terms. New developments in the fields of science, psychiatry, psychology, and physiology offered by Taves, Kroll and Bachrach, Jens Brockmeier, Jacques Maître, Jacob Belzen and Anton Geels, among others, provide additional insight to my analysis.

Of particular interest are the five different perspectives proposed by *Women's Ways of Knowing*, a study which observes how women in the late twentieth century view the world and their relationships with authority, how they struggle with notions of power and self and how social structures both help and hinder their development. In spite of radically different cultural contexts, I analyze Guyart's construction of self against the Belenky et al. model and adapt their model with a different historical context of gender in mind. In the course of their evolution, most of the women in the study identified significant shifts, or transitions, similar to those life events Guyart inscribes in *La Relation*, transitions triggered by trauma or loss, or physical and emotional displacement, which facilitated their movement from one perspective to the next. When I draw on the theories outlined in *Women's Ways of Knowing* and apply them to Guyart's self-construction in her spiritual autobiography, I find catalytic shifts and transitions that indicate similarities between the evolution of self in the twentieth-century women in Belenky et al's study and Guyart's evolution of self, from the first perspective of 'Silence' to the fifth and last perspective of 'Constructed knowing.'
As far as the construction of self in women’s spiritual autobiography is concerned, Leigh Gilmore cautions that the autobiographical subject must be seen as a representation of the self, a re-construction to be understood in the context of why, for whom and for what purpose the text was written (Autobiographies: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation, 127). In a letter dated August 9, 1654 to her son Claude, Guyart makes it clear that she wrote her spiritual autobiography to honour his request that she do so, as directed by God through her spiritual advisor, for his personal edification and to assist him in his own mystic quest:

Pressée par vos raisons, et vaincue par vos prières, j’ay communiqué votre désir à celui qui dirige mon âme, luy représentant que je ne pouvois plus de moy-même user de refus, en vostre endroit ... Non seulement il a trouvé bon que je vous donnasse cette consolation, mais il m’a commandé même de le faire, c’est pourquoi je le fais après avoir invoqué le secours du saint Esprit. (Correspondances 525)

It is conceivable, however, that despite her concerns for privacy and her stated desire in a further letter to Claude dated 27 September, 1654 that he keep her manuscript to himself, that he write “Papiers de conscience” on the cover: “afin que personne n’y touche, et n’y jette les yeux sans scruple” and that it be burned if Claude should become seriously ill, or better still, sent to her niece for safe-keeping, Guyart knew she had reached a position of spiritual “mastery” almost unheard of for women in her time and desired (consciously or unconsciously) to leave a record of her extraordinary mystical experiences for posterity. According to Natalie Zemon Davis, Guyart’s spiritual autobiography, clearly destined for Claude’s eyes alone, reflected a decidedly different expectation of readership than when she wrote for a wider audience in the Jesuit Relations, anonymously or not, or in letters to her religious colleagues which she assumed would
be circulated in the community (*Women on the Margins*, 124). Marie-Florine Bruneau suggests that Guyart might have had other motives, for in publishing Guyart’s spiritual autobiography, Dom Claude Martin in fact did what Guyart claimed to fear, “or desire above all else . . . to make her known as an author and a mystic” (74).

Nonetheless, Guyart’s caution regarding her privacy betrays a very real concern, a concern she suggests Claude will understand: “Voilà bien des conditions, mais, mon très cher fils, je suis délicate en ce point, et vous êtes assez éclairé pour voir que j’ai raison de l’être” (*Correspondances*, 548). As well, it can be surmised that part of her motivation for writing, in the face of her reluctance to do so and the enormity of her daily obligations, was a sense of guilt towards her son for abandoning him, as Oury has noted (*Marie de l’Incarnation*, vol. 2, 475), a notion which runs through the text of *La Relation* as it does through her letter of August 9, 1654: “je vous avois abandonné si jeune” (*Correspondance*, 525). Guyart’s sense of marginalization as a mystic also comes through in this letter, for while she is delighted to learn that Claude is interested in the mystic path, she cautions him that few people (she does not discriminate between religious and lay) appreciate the mystic life: “peu de personnes connaissent l’importance de cette vie cachée.” That Guyart understood the mystic life as a privilege but, at the same time, as isolating and marginalizing is an important element in her image of self.

Reading in the context of imposed cultural, historical, religious and linguistic conventions, I trace Guyart’s evolving self and power as a woman through what I perceive as nine key transformational shifts. As a critic/reader, I see these transitions, connected to key life events differently than the thirteen “states of prayer” Guyart outlines as the stages of her spiritual ascent, stages which Oury (*Marie de l’Incarnation*, vols I and II) and Anya Mali
(Mystic in the New World) identify as being in accordance with the mystic tradition. For the purposes of my analysis, I identify these life events, events which include those key dreams and visions deemed ‘mystical,’ ‘spiritual,’ or ‘religious’ by Guyart, Oury and Mali, among others, in the context of Guyart’s textual evolution from a young woman consumed by guilt and fear, by anxiety and depression, to one confident of her relationship with others and the world, a world which, for her, included submission to patriarchy, traumatic personal loss, and a passionate belief in God, Christ, the Holy Mother and the Church. I refer to these life events as the “Dream of the Visitation of Christ,” “Conversion Experience,” “Mystic Union with Christ,” “Transition to the Monastery,” “Demonic Possession,” “Dream of the Three Kisses,” “Trans-Atlantic Crossing,” “Miracle of the Feast of the Assumption,” and “Transcendent Presence of the Virgin Mary.”

I interrogate as well the significance of Guyart’s narrative style in the context of new interdisciplinary research and revisionist approaches to history which shed light on my rereading and gender concerns: the symbols in her dreams, the trope of humiliation and humility (and the difference between them), references to the erotic Song of Songs throughout the text, the use of biblical intertext in Latin as well as French, and the tone of familiarity in her dialogue with the divine. Guyart’s frequent references to the inadequacy of human language to express the mystic experience, common in the writings of both male and female mystics, anchor her truth claims in the Christian mystic tradition.

With regard to Guyart's language, variations in spelling, grammar, and linguistic construction, typical of seventeenth-century French writing, are numerous in the original text, and therefore, citations in my document will not call attention to such variations as they occur. On page 377 of the original text, for example, Guyart writes: "une abîme de lumière
et d'amour" and "un abîme d'obscurité et de ténèbres douloureuses" In the same sentence, using both the feminine and masculine articles for the same word ("abîme") with the same meaning. Editor Jamet comments on this usage in a footnote at the bottom of the page.

Definitions of mysticism are provided by several of the scholars I discuss in this study. Mario Beauregard, for instance, observes that: “the word mysticism … derives from a Greek word ‘muo’ meaning ‘conceal’… Serious mystics seek access to levels of consciousness that are concealed from everyday life. Or, perhaps not so much concealed as ignored” (The Spiritual Brain, 182). Bernard McGinn defines it as: “that part, or element, of Christian belief and practice that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the effect of what the mystics themselves have described as a direct and transformative presence of God” (The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism, xiv). While Kroll and Bachrach suggest that the desire for mystic experience is part of a fundamental human characteristic evident in every culture across history as a means of escaping or rising above normal lived realities (The Mystic Mind, 1), Jerome Gellman observes that “theistic experience is conditioned from the outset by patriarchal conceptualizations and values, and by sex-role differentiation in the practice of religion [...] The study of gender in religious experience and mysticism has barely begun and promises new insights into and revisions of our understanding of these human phenomena” (“Mysticism,” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online (May 2010), 30-31). Guyart’s reference to the mystic life as “cette vie cachée” echoes Beauregard’s notion of concealment, her visions and ecstasies reflect the unitary experience referred to by McGinn, while her beliefs and attitudes can be seen as an example of the “patriarchal conceptualizations” referred to by Gellman.

As Chantal Théry observes, mystic women’s ways of knowing, especially their
dreams and visions, have been discounted by theologians and historians alike. Yet, according to Théry, such dreams and visions appear to have served a key purpose in translating their messages of hope and promise for the future:

Des théologiens, des historiens, des critiques ont eu tendance à dénoncer ces “superstitions,” ces “enthousiasmes” féminins. Mais, dans Rêver en France au 17e siècle, Jacques Le Brun, entre autres, en tient judicieusement compte: le rêve réactualise un songe inaugural perçu comme promesse et appel, garantit un destin et balise un trajet qu’il faut suivre coûte que coûte. (De plume et d’audace 100)

Guyart's dreams represent a different altered state of consciousness than that of her visions, the former occurring in nocturnal sleep, the latter in a waking state during the day-time, or, as in her experience of demonic possession, in a state between sleep and wakefulness. In contrast to her dreams which present her as a passive receiver of divine messages, the visions, quite possibly related to the severity and duration of her practice of heroic mortification, serve to affirm her agency as an active seeker of unio mystica. Dreams, visions, and her experience of possession appear to play a significant role in Guyart's evolution of self, as Théry implies. Notably, they follow challenging life events; for instance, according to editor Jamet, her opening “Dream of the Visitation,” which situates Guyart as a child of seven in the yard of an “école champêtre,” likely reflects an actual place in the country to which the family had moved due to an outbreak of plague (La Relation, 17).

In my analysis of Guyart’s dreams, I provide textual evidence of her evolution from a state of childhood silence and submission to one of resistance against cultural expectations in adulthood, specifically with her decision to pursue the path of the mystic, to become a nun, and subsequently to go to Canada. In the course of her evolution, Guyart gradually gains
confidence and a voice, and ultimately, the ability to challenge authority in matters of conscience, for example, in her desire to combine the rules of Paris and Tours in a new rule for the Ursulines of Quebec.

In Chapter One, I present the historical, social and religious underpinnings of the early seventeenth century which framed Guyart’s spirituality and understanding of self in both the old and new worlds. Of note is the widespread economic misery, poverty, and disease related to the effects of decades of war and successive waves of plague, and the historic phenomenon of female penitential asceticism and mass demonic possession in France. The presence of itinerant armies, according to Julius Ruff, exacerbated the high rate of domestic and sexual violence against women who were considered morally, mentally, and physically inferior to men (44). The period was marked by religious fervor and the historic rise in female monasticism at the intersection of a fading medieval world-view and the dawn of the Enlightenment (Krumenacker, 7). In Chapter Two, I review the stages of Guyart’s spiritual ascent as she perceived it and provide an overview of critical works on Guyart’s writing. In Chapter Three, I discuss notions of “concealment,” of “policing,” and gender, as theorized by Leigh Gilmore in respect to women’s confessional autobiography, which contribute to our understanding of how Guyart’s voice was constructed within the context of her beloved Church, yet strangled by the repressive politics and practices of her times (Gilmore, Autobiographies, 119). In Chapters Four, Five, and Six, I explore the significance of the severity of Guyart’s mortifications, depression and humiliation, her conversion experience and mystic union with Christ, as well as her experience of demonic possession. Barbara Diefendorf argues that it was the savagery of the religious wars, considered God’s punishment for sin, that was behind the rise of penitential asceticism in certain pious women
(From Penitence to Charity, 242), while Moshe Sluhovsky argues that the bizarre "psychological or psychopathological behaviours of nuns," related to the historical anomaly of mass female possession, was due, in part, to the oppressive environment of the newly reformed and ascetic monasteries (242). Neither historian considers evidence of the cumulative effects of humiliation and personal trauma on the female psyche, such as recorded in the autobiographical and biographical accounts of spiritual women of the time. In my analysis, I explore such evidence in Guyart’s text and the likely effects it had on her construction of self. In Chapter Seven, I employ the theoretical model proposed in *Women's Ways of Knowing* as a tool to assist my understanding of Guyart’s evolution in terms of contemporary women’s epistemology. In Chapter Eight, I examine the significance of Guyart’s encounters with the Virgin Mary as feminine archetype, first in the "Dream of the Three Kisses," then in the "Miracle of the Assumption," and finally, in the "Transcendent Presence" of the Virgin Mary at the end of the narrative.
CHAPTER ONE

A Social Milieu of Violence and Fear

The social environment that shaped Guyart’s early years is portrayed by Julius Ruff in *Violence in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800*, as “a violent age,” “many times more violent than our own,” in which oppression and fear were endemic (5). Ruff’s perspective is echoed by Barbara Diefendorf in *From Penitence to Charity* and Georges Vigarello, in *A History of Rape: Sexual Violence in France from the 16th to the 20th Century*. In this chapter, I review the threat of violence as a possible contributing factor to the psychology of spiritually-inclined women, and conceivably to the self-injurious behaviour of some, including Guyart. Supported by strong archival evidence, such research provides a particularly graphic picture of a society whose fabric was fraught with violence and fear, conditions exacerbated by war and economic woes. Guyart biographer Françoise Deroy-Pineau notes, for example, the difficult economic times in Tours in which the silk industry, into which Guyart married, was particularly hard hit (*Marie de l’Incarnation: Marie Guyart, femme d’affaires, mystique, et mère de la Nouvelle France*, 93). At the same time, according to Ruff, the presence of private itinerant armies in the towns and cities, armies lacking in discipline, food, and supplies, was a threat to public safety, especially the safety of women: “the very nature of the age’s warfare, and structural inadequacies of the state’s apparatus of military discipline, finance and supply, meant that armies inflicted much violence even on passive and friendly civilians. Consequently, most early modern European civilians feared and hated soldiers” (44), an observation echoed by Vigarello (61). Soldiers, like those Guyart remembers seeing as a child (“j’avais vu un capitaine qui logeait en nos quartiers, que ses soldats suivaient avec leur drapeau”), were billeted in civilian homes during the winters
and even during campaigns (*La Relation*, 171). Guyart’s image of the soldiers on parade is juxtaposed with the image of a church procession, an image which reflects the Jesuit notion of “soldier” of the Church: “Lorsque je voyais aux processions la croix et bannière que les chrétiens suivaient, mon esprit et mon Coeur trésaillaient de joie ... je disais en moi-même: ‘Ah! C’est là mon capitaine. Je le veux suivre!’ (*La Relation*, 171). The image of the military alongside that of the clergy provides ‘visual’ emphasis of the Catholic perception of the seriousness of the Protestant heresy and the militant nature of their opposition.

As there was no centralized police force in the towns and cities to control banditry or maintain order, the military presence exacerbated what was already an excessively high incidence of social and domestic violence by today’s standards, a violence according to Ruff that was tolerated by social silence and a legal structure that left it virtually unchallenged. Brutality by male heads of households towards their wives and children or towards domestic servants and apprentices “flourished behind a wall of silence,” while violence against vulnerable women, the young, the unmarried, widows, domestic servants, or country girls working in fields or tending flocks alone, was particularly prevalent (131). Consequently, incidents of sexual violence were grossly under-reported and when they were, they were regarded as a moral shame, not as a juridical crime, equally damning for both victim and perpetrator. Ruff observes that: “rape was undeniably widespread in early modern Western Europe,” a threat from which Guyart, as a girl and young woman in the world, would not have been exempt (147). According to Vigarello, frequent religious festivals incited ribald behaviour among young men, behaviour that, although viewed by Church and civil authorities as “inherently dangerous,” was difficult if not impossible to control (142, 164).

The practice of “rapt” in which a young woman could be abducted by a suitor against
her will, forcibly kept overnight and consequently obliged to marry her abductor, (a practice still current in some societies today), was equally feared and tolerated. Indeed, rapt affected Guyart closely. According to Oury, Guyart’s beloved niece, Marie Buisson, whom she loved as her own daughter, became an Ursuline as a direct result of a rapt. At age 15, she was abducted and confined against her will. She managed to escape and take refuge in the Ursuline monastery in Tours where she opted to stay in spite of her lack of inclination for the vocation. Eventually, she joined the order and adopted the same religious name as Guyart (Oury, Marie de l’Incarnation, vol.1, 397). The silence in Guyart’s text with regard to this event and other dangers which were part of everyday life for women was culturally imposed. Any misfortune that befell women, or men, was perceived as merited and God-sent as punishment for sin. As Marie Mayeski observes in “Women and their Mothers: Rejecting and Reclaiming the Tradition of the Saints:”

The most important step in the retrieval of spiritual stories is an understanding of the lives of the women saints within a revised historical framework [...] Humility, silence, and obedience were highlighted as the virtues pertinent to women. Humility was distorted to mean ‘thinking little of oneself;’ silence was praised over speaking out for the truth. Obedience almost always meant the non-critical acceptance of authority. Such a narrow interpretation of feminine values does not survive a genuine dialogue with the real stories and ... texts of saintly women.

Although there is no explicit reference to sexual violence against women in Guyart’s autobiographical text, no doubt due, in part at least, to conventions governing the genre of confession, Chantal Théry points out Guyart’s audacity in “daring to address the subject of rape” in her Correspondances (“Les audaces ‘laiques’ et ‘féminines,’ ‘moderne’ et
‘postmoderne,’” 96). In her article, Théry notes Guyart’s expression of disgust with the behavior of French men in Canada. The pathology of violence towards women which permeated the social environment of Guyart's formative years in France carried over to the New World, posing an essential contradiction to the morality preached by the Church. I do not know if Guyart was herself a victim of such violence against women, nor do I suggest that she was. Rather, I wish only to emphasize that this was the context in which she wrote and in which she constructed a spiritual, yet gendered self.

In early seventeenth-century France, sickness and scarcity made life precarious for rich and poor alike. According to Bernard Hours, while the Edict of Nantes, signed by Henry IV in 1599 (the year of Guyart’s birth), technically ended the wars of religion, the treaty was not well-received by the Church: “quand elle prévalait, la tolérance est demeurée jusqu’à la fin une épine dans la chair d’une église gallicane qui ne put jamais l’accepter avec sincérité” (143). In Tours, as in other cities, Catholics organized processions and public prayer denouncing the peace and proclaiming Catholicism as the one true religion.

When Henri IV was assassinated in 1610, Guyart was still a girl. Overt political unrest and military action returned, first under the ultra-Catholic regent Marie de Medici and subsequently under her son Louis XIII. According to Hours, the decade of the 1620s was witness to indescribable savagery, a savagery which recalled the wars of religion of the previous generation:

Ces campagnes ont été marquées par des déchaînements de sauvagerie qui rappellent les moments les plus sinistres des guerres civiles de la fin du XVIe siècle [...] L’écho des événements militaires explique aussi le climat de méfiance et les manifestations paniques dans les zones que les combats ne concernent pas. (148)
Living in our time in North America, it is difficult to imagine the climate of fear, mirrored in religious beliefs (fear of God, fear of the devil), which contributed to shaping the psychology of our foremothers, and conceivably, to the violence certain women inflicted on their bodies in the name of penitential mortification to assuage the wrath of God. Centred on an “essential misogyny,” such beliefs included a perception of women as “passionate, unreasoning and potentially violent individuals, the source of earthly sin, whose evil natures could be kept under control only by male domination” (Ruff, 35). Notions of female culpability, inferiority, and vulnerability to the devil’s ways engendered a widespread, underlying fear of women, who, in turn, were socialized to believe in their inherent weakness and sinful nature, such as Guyart expresses in her memory of her husband’s death when she was nineteen: “diverses affaires qui suivirent cette separation m’apportèrent de nouvelles croix, et naturellement plus grandes qu’une personne de mon sexe, de mon âge et de ma capacité les eusse pu porter” (La Relation, 172). Consequently, girls and young women were trained in submission to men, God, and all in authority, particularly by their mothers (Diefendorf, 72). Such submission, including a total abdication of will to husband and father, was mirrored in religious submission to the will of God and the Church. Parenting techniques included humiliation, a practice Barbara Diefendorf describes with excerpts from biographical and autobiographical accounts of the life of Barbe Acarie, one of the most influential pious women of the time, as well as from the biographies of Acarie’s daughters (From Penitence to Charity, 73). Guyart was raised at a time when training one’s daughters in submission was expected of all devout women.

Although it has been theorized that the mass movement of women into newly created and reformed monasteries may have been influenced by the women’s desire to flee the
violence and atrocities of war, it should be noted that social and domestic violence exacerbated by the wars, the practice of rapt, the subjugation of women and use of humiliation may also have been contributing factors. The difference between the tactic of humiliation and the notion of humility according to Mary Potter Engel, is: “the difference between [the] self-naughting humility that delights in God taught by mystics and the corrosive humiliation of self taught by those who profit from keeping the other in its place” (151). Guyart suffered humiliation at the hands of others throughout her life, as she exercised humility in her relationship with God and others, the effects of which I discuss in Chapter Two.

According to Bernard Hours, in the early years of the seventeenth century, regardless of advances in knowledge of medicine and science understood by few, the general population was mostly illiterate, with limited tools for making sense of the world. Knowledge of the cycles of the earth was experiential for the vast majority, who had no understanding of the physical or biological referents we have today. Astrology and alchemy were still regarded as superior arts. In spite of scientific advances, progress and communication were slow, and the process of changing age-old beliefs was even slower (2). Belief in a world of spirits beyond the physical realm was anchored in the rites and rituals of the Church and in the belief in a God who had control over the workings of the world. This all-embracing religious sensibility is essential to our understanding of early seventeenth-century France, as Hours points out:

Du simple besoin de sécurité jusqu’à la curiosité intellectuelle et à la spiritualité la plus authentique … tout rapport au monde est de nature religieuse. C’est pourquoi, si on veut comprendre … il faut prendre le contre-pied de nos attitudes contemporaines.
Although Guyart was taught to read and write at an early age, the great majority of people were dependent on oral traditions handed down from antiquity. For Guyart, as for her contemporaries, the world of the spirit was as real as the material world, accessible by means of religious rites and rituals. In *L'Église et la vie religieuse dans la France moderne, XVIe-XVIIIe siècle*, Hours portrays a day-to-day life governed by such ritual. For the Catholic faithful, the week began with obligatory mass, its Latin liturgy punctuated by fiery sermons in the vernacular, the specialty of thousands of itinerant preachers, or “prédicateurs,” whose purpose was to raise the passions of the crowd in a veritable pedagogy of fear (30).xv

In a world where the threat of death was ever-present and where the idea of dying in a state of sin struck terror in the heart of the believer, the emotional impact of the “prédicateurs,” a large number of whom were Capuchins, an ascetic order with a reputation for harsh bodily mortification, was considerable (30). According to Guyart, these powerful preachers had a significant influence on her formative years, and they may have fuelled her desire for mortification:xvii

Dès mon enfance, ayant appris que Dieu parlait par les prédicateurs, je trouvais cela admirable et avais une grande inclination de les aller entendre […] Venant à être plus grande […] j’avais en si grande vénération les prédicateurs qu’alors que j’en voyais quelqu’un par les rues, je me sentais portée d’inclination de courir après lui et baiser les vestiges de ses pieds. (*La Relation* 169)

The rhetoric of the prédicateurs fostered an already obsessive fear of death and sin in the general population in anticipation of a final judgment (Hours, 7). According to Guyart, the prédicateurs fanned her reverence for the priesthood and her own fears as well as a passion
for preaching and saving souls, functions specifically forbidden to women. Fear for the souls of others is reflected in her concern for those around her when she was the young mistress of her husband's household:

J'eusse voulu que toutes les personnes avec lesquelles Notre-Seigneur m'avais mise eussent eu l'amour pour cette fréquence [des sacrements] et avais de la crainte pour eux, pour certain genre de péchés que j'apprehendais qu'ils fussent mortels et qu'ils manquassent de les bien confesser. (La Relation 166)

As Roger Duchène points out in Être femme au temps de Louis XIV, fear of death and for the souls of women of childbearing age was particularly acute. The notion that suffering in childbirth was a woman’s penance for original sin was promulgated by the Church throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and consequently, fear associated with childbirth was deep and widespread: “il ne faut pas minimiser les traumatismes entraînés par la culpabilisation du sexe féminin et l’annonce répétée d’intolérables douleurs et de morts atroces” (40). A lack of understanding of hygiene led to dangerous post-partum infections:

Aux morts survenues pendant le travail s’ajoutaient, dans les jours suivants, celles des fièvres puerpérales, dues à un total manque d’hygiène. Ces morts sont trop fréquentes pour que … les femmes ne soient pas conscientes des risques auxquels toute naissance les expose. (31)

According to Jacques Gélis, Mireille Laget and Marie Morel, a married woman in the period would become pregnant an average of five or six times. Given that ten percent of deliveries were fatal, a woman had a fifty to sixty percent chance of dying as a result of childbirth. It is understandable, therefore, that the onset of delivery was generally accompanied by a sense of terror (95). Although Guyart’s text is silent with regard to her
pregnancy and childbirth, a silence consistent with social convention and the genre of women’s spiritual autobiography, editorial notes indicate that Guyart visited her church on the evening before her son was born, conceivably to pray for protection (La Relation, 177, note 8).

The text is not silent, however, about her aversion to marriage (and its inevitable consequences). Guyart admits her negative feelings to her son in the Supplément: “ne vous étonnez pas si, me voyant libre, j’avais une si grande aversion du mariage” (La Relation, 483). She refers to her marriage as a captivity which would have been unbearable without her religious devotion, a practice of which her husband approved: “sans cette tolérance, ma captivité et les croix qui la suivaient, m’eussent été insupportables” (La Relation, 170).

Nevertheless, her liberation came early with her husband’s death. Her refusal to entertain offers of remarriage, in spite of encouragement from her family and the Church, her insistence on wearing strange garb, presumably to dissuade suitors, and her solemn vow of celibacy when she was just twenty, may be perceived as evidence not only of her piety, but also of her aversion to the state of marriage (La Relation, 483). A widow of any age was legally free to decide for herself, and a religious vocation offered the option of an education, albeit under an alternate form of submission, within the relative safety of the female monastic community. As Carolyn Woidat notes in “Captivity, Freedom, and the New World Convent,” Guyart did not view the cloister as a place of captivity but as a place of possibility: "Guyart depicts the cloister as a liminal space in which women can discover a wider sense of purpose" (2). Nonetheless, Guyart believed her marriage was God’s will if only in that it allowed her to bring her son into the world and to suffer the “crosses” her marriage and subsequent losses brought her:
Je crois et j'ai toujours cru que je n'y avais été engagée qu'afin de servir au dessein que Dieu avait de vous mettre au monde et pour souffrir diverses croix par la perte des biens et par les choses dont je crois vous avoir parlé [...] Ne vous étonnez pas si, me voyant libre, j'avais une si grande aversion du mariage. *(La Relation 482-3)*

Nevertheless, Guyart admits that her husband’s death caused her pain. She also alludes to the pain of a love triangle for which her husband, apparently, repeatedly asked her forgiveness:

Vous en seriez étonné, mon très cher fils, si vous saviez les particularités que vous saurez dans l'éternité, et comme il fallait que je fusse engagée dans les croix du mariage [...] Et pour les choses que vous savez et qui étaient arrivées par surprise, il en avait tant de douleur qu'il m'en a souvent demandé pardon. *(La Relation 482)*

Chastity was required of women before marriage and fidelity within it; the same standard, although preached by the Church, did not apply to men except, notionally, within the ecclesiastic vocation. In spite of her religious inclination, it is reasonable to perceive Guyart’s refusal to remarry as a form of resistance to gender expectations.

Although married women had no rights to property of their own, widows acquired the property of their deceased husbands, at least until the age of majority of a male heir. In Guyart’s case, that meant assuming the debts and legal responsibilities of seeing her husband’s business through bankruptcy proceedings. In a rare acknowledgement of her abilities, Guyart recognized that she handled it well: “j'avais du talent pour le négoce” *(La Relation, 187)*. According to Roger Duchêne, however, regardless of any obvious strengths or talents women might have, whether in business, family, or the community, it was a socially embedded fact that women were perceived as weak and inferior: “l'idée de la
faiblesses physique et morale de la femme apparaît comme une évidence qui traîne partout” (16). In North America in the information age, it is difficult to understand with what tenacity ancient beliefs in the inferiority of women prevailed throughout the seventeenth century despite mounting philosophical debate and increasing biological evidence to the contrary. As Duchêne points out, it was not until the end of the century that Huygens’ microscope identified the existence of sperm and until well into the next that human reproductive physiology was finally understood. In Guyart’s time, although, as Duchêne notes, dissection of human bodies was proving that woman’s purpose was as noble as man’s, it was difficult to change age-old perceptions firmly rooted in the social consciousness: “la religion, l’expérience, la loi naturelle, tout est bon pour répandre et confirmer l’idée d’une infériorité qui semble d’une vérité immémoriale” (Être femme au temps de Louis XIV, 17). Knowledge of the reproductive process in Western society was governed by ancient superstitions and fear. Menstrual blood was regarded as “dangereux,” “un excrément maléfique … qui empire toutes choses” (11). Such notions of menstrual blood were juxtaposed with religious notions of the redemptive blood of Jesus, and, as I argue later in Chapter Two, they may consciously or unconsciously have been present in the dramatic vision of Christ’s blood that triggered Guyart’s conversion. According to Duchêne, at the same time as a detailed human anatomy was published in 1609 demonstrating the complementary functions of male and female bodies, Boguet’s guide for the pitiless prosecution of (mostly female) witches was also published: “au début du 17e siècle, alors que la lutte contre la sorcellerie atteint son paroxysme, pour les magistrats comme pour les clercs, il ne fait pas de doute que les sorciers sont d’abord et surtout des sorcières” (52). Even in the seventeenth century the Inquisition was alive and well. From the end of the fifteenth century to the mid-seventeenth, some thirty
thousand copies of the infamous guide for the prosecution of witches, the *Malleus Malleficarum*, first published in 1486, were printed, with thousands of women tortured and killed as a result: "dans tout l’Europe du XVIe siècle et du début du XVIIe, des milliers de victimes sont mortes d’une répression qui a surtout frappé les femmes" (53). Satan was believed to lead a force of demonic assistants to whom women were particularly vulnerable, and notions of woman as evil, linked to her perceived weakness, led to a condemnation of female sexuality and of sexuality in general: “la diabolisation de la femme est évidemment liée à un rejet et une condamnation de sa sexualité, voire de la sexualité en général” (24).

Attitudes towards woman’s sexuality were based on a profound ambivalence, aligned as they were with reverence for the chastity of the Virgin Mary on the one hand, and with fear of the seductive powers of the biblical Eve on the other. At the bottom of the social hierarchy, woman’s place reflected prevailing religious beliefs in a strictly hierarchical and patriarchal divine authority, reaching from God and the highest celestial spirits to the lowliest of creatures, with man closer to God than woman, who was beneath him. According to Krumenacker, the hierarchical order of the Church on earth reflected the spiritual hierarchy of the heavens:

> La vision dominante du monde est très hiérarchique. L’importance des *Hiérarchies céleste et ecclésiastique* de Denys l’Aréopagite est considérable ... la structure de l’univers dans les écrits dionysiens, est hiérarchique ... il n’est pas étonnant ... que l’on pense la société à l’image de l’univers, comme étant formée d’êtres qui s’organisent, du plus humble au monarque très chrétien, en ordres hiérarchisés’’

(74).\textsuperscript{xix}

In such a context, it is not difficult to perceive Guyart’s visions of the supreme authority of
the Holy Trinity cast in the context of a celestial hierarchy, mirroring the social hierarchy of
the world in which she lived:

Dans le même attrait ... la très Sainte Trinité informait mon âme de ce qui se faisait
par elle-même, par communication en la suprême Hiérarchie des Anges, Chérubins,
Séraphins et Trônes ... Et distinctement, je connaissais les opérations et rapports de
chacune des divines Personnes de la ... Trinité dans chacun des chœurs de cette
suprême Hiérarchie. (La Relation 235)

Within this celestial hierarchy, the role of the priest was sacred. Yet, as a woman and
a mystic who claimed direct communication with God, Guyart was able to circumvent (and
thus subvert) certain powers of the priest and, by inference, certain authority of the
patriarchy. Further, she resisted traditional ecclesiastical boundaries which excluded women,
boundaries she transgressed in her writing with references to the sacerdotal language of the
Psalms in Latin: “In Te Domine speravi, non confundar in aeternum,” for instance (La
Relation, 181), or “Caeli enarrant gloriam Dei” (La Relation, 290). She crosses the line
again when she recalls how she took it upon herself to instruct employees in her brother-in-
law’s company on their Christian duty, assuming, in so doing, pedagogical and counselling
functions that were the sole purview of the priest:

Je me voyais quelquefois avec une troupe d’hommes, serviteurs de mon frère, et me
mettait en table avec eux ... pour avoir le moyen de les entretenir en ce qui concernait
leur salut, et eux me rendaient familièrement et simplement compte de leurs actions,
s’entr’accusant les uns et les autres des fautes qu’ils avaient faites ... Je les assemblais
quelquefois pour leur parler de Dieu et leur enseigner comme il fallait garder ses
commandements. (La Relation 256)
Protestant belief that priests were no different than any other human being, and not endowed with any special grace, was perceived by Catholics as sacrilege. In the mid-sixteenth century, in response to the Protestant heresy, the Council of Trent reinforced the notion of the clergy’s special powers and reaffirmed the Eucharist as a veritable sacrifice in which, by the power invested in the priest, bread and wine were transformed into the mystical body and blood of Christ. Protestants rejected this notion outright, claiming the Eucharist as a symbolic act only. Everywhere, militant Catholics demonstrated their opposition and, as if to claim God’s special favour towards them, reported an abundance of miraculous showings.

After a century of war, observes Jean-Pierre Gutton, religion offered the only safe haven: “la sécurité résidait essentiellement, et presqu’exclusivement, dans la confiance en Dieu” (40). The oppressive ultra-Catholic Holy League of the late sixteenth century spawned the brotherhoods, or “confréries,” of the early seventeenth century, powerful grass-roots organizations dedicated to penance, good works, and Catholic education, their influence no doubt reflected in Guyart’s memory of her childhood “‘pente au bien.’” Among the most powerful of the confréries was the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement, motivated by apostolic zeal and supported by an elite and extensive Jesuit network, chapters of which were led by such prominent laymen as Jean de Bernières of Caen, who became Guyart’s devoted friend. According to Gutton, the exemplary piety of les dévots was linked to the need to establish a sense of order after so many decades of war; punctuality, self-control, and religious education were taught in the context of ensuring the soul’s salvation (39). The influence of the Jesuits, especially at the higher levels of society, was everywhere (32). Catechism, morality, reading and sums were taught in “les petites écoles” attached to the cathedrals,
schools supported by the confréries for the primary education of the children of merchants and artisans. Girls were taught as well as boys to ensure they would teach the faith to their children (104). To this end, and especially to counter the Protestant movement, the Church supported a massive recruitment of priests into the teaching orders. Under the constant surveillance of the curé, discipline in the primary schools was strict; student “officers” were appointed to supervise behaviour and devotional activity in the classroom, and as adults, contributed to the surveillance of behaviour in the community (107, 118). The increasingly influential Jesuits encouraged the growth of the confréries, which, in turn, fostered the growth of monasticism, both male and female. Under their influence, and especially with the help of certain powerful women of the elite, notably Barbe Acarie and Madeleine de Sainte-Beuve, the Ursulines were established in Tours in 1625. Their focus on active spirituality in the education of girls tipped the balance for Guyart’s choice over more contemplative orders:

J’avais beaucoup d’inclination aux Feuillantines, à cause de leurs grandes retraites et austérités … Quelques bonnes âmes me souhaitaient Carmélite, et, de mon côté, j’aimais beaucoup ce saint Ordre. Cependant … dès que j’eus les premières … impressions de quitter le monde, ce fût d’être Urseline. (La Relation 270)

While Guyart’s determination to pursue monastic life is clear, other factors may have consciously and subconsciously influenced her decisions: factors such as war, social violence, and recurrent plague. Fear of death was heightened by the oratory of the ‘prédicateurs’ in an environment of social turmoil in which there was no apparent solution to the great schism in the Church caused by Protestantism, to daunting theological questions, or to the horrors of unending war (Krumenacker, 122). The introduction of other peoples from
the New World and China, and new discoveries in mathematics and astrology were shaking the very foundations of the medieval world-view to which the Church tenaciously clung. Yet, for some historians, the new practice of mental prayer was an indication that some individuals were beginning to think for themselves. According to Krumenacker:

Il s'agit donc bien, au tournant des XVIe et XVIIe siècles, de la disparition de tout un monde ... Les spirituels ... héritent de concepts, d'images, d'expériences, avec lesquels ils cherchent à y répondre. L'importance de la hiérarchie, le rôle du prêtre, la nécessité d'une vie intérieure, se combinent avec divers types de spiritualités et de visions du monde, plus ou moins bien adaptées au contexte nouveau. Mais l'important ... est de partir de soi, d'être attentif aux expériences qui jalonnent la découverte spirituelle; cela explique la nécessité des récits biographiques des mystiques ...

Mystique et action ne peuvent être dissociés. (123)

Guyart's mysticism was based on just such a concept of spirituality, as evidenced in the text by her active engagement in the apostolic mission in the New World.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, historians paint a grim picture of the inherently violent society in which Guyart spent her formative years. The practice of humiliation, rapt, and the widespread, socially tolerated violence against women, a violence exacerbated by the presence of itinerant armies, were all likely factors in the historic movement of women to newly constructed and reformed monasteries. Despite advances in science and medicine, the prevailing world-view was one in which God, Satan, and the presence of spirits were very real. Fear of sin and death was especially acute for women of child-bearing age, for whom suffering in childbirth reflected woman's biblical penance for original sin. Guyart's pursuit of mystical union with God must be seen in the context of history, gender and the
psychological effects of trauma and fear in order to understand the behavioural responses to key life events she describes in *La Relation*. 
CHAPTER TWO

Guyart’s Mystic Journey and a Review of her Critics

In the first part of this chapter, I provide a synopsis of the thirteen stages of Guyart’s spiritual journey as she presents them in La Relation de 1654. In the second part, I explore the two main camps, both religious and non-religious, into which her various critics fall.

Synopsis

In this section, I review the various stages of Guyart’s spiritual growth in order to illustrate how her evolution as a gendered subject can be seen differently using the perspective of a multidisciplinary reading. My consideration includes the religious and theological interpretations of two primary Guyart scholars, Dom Guy-Marie Oury and Anya Mali, one a priest of the Benedictine order of the monastery of Solesmes writing in the 1970s (who continued the earlier, scholarly work of Dom Jamet of the same order), the other a professor and researcher writing more than twenty years later in the context of advanced comparative theology. Both scholars provide important insights into the stages of Guyart’s spiritual journey within the Western Christian mystic tradition of the Church. According to both Mali and Oury, the thirteen “états d’oraison” which constitute Guyart’s spiritual journey follow traditional lines, from her “initial religious awakening” as Mali describes it, to “the sovereign conviction of total interior union with God,” an evolution: “from a state of insecurity and confusion to one of confidence and understanding” (Mali, Mystic in the New World, 58). In Marie de l’Incarnation, Oury’s erudite two volume biography of Guyart, the author’s focus is on Guyart’s developing spirituality throughout the thirteen stages of La Relation de 1654, from her early childhood in Tours to her attainment of unio mystica as the defining moment in her mystic life. Oury offers illuminating detail on the role of Guyart’s spiritual directors, especially the Jesuits, in her
spiritual development, her transition to the New World and her life there, and the role of the Virgin Mary in the perspective of the time and in Guyart's life, specifically the relative absence of her mention in Guyart’s text, as we will see. Like Oury’s, the focus of Anya Mali’s analysis is also on Guyart’s spiritual ascent. In *Mystic in the New World*, Mali argues that while Guyart’s account of her conversion and subsequent stages of the soul’s spiritual ascent towards *unio mystica* are consistent with the Christian mystical tradition, she goes one step further than Oury, noting that, unlike Teresa of Avila and other Christian mystics, for whom the moment of spiritual marriage was the ultimate mystical experience, *unio mystica* marked the mid-point of Guyart’s journey towards the ultimate state of spiritual victimhood, a state, Mali points out, that was not uncommon to mystic writings of the seventeenth century (87). While both Oury and Mali interpret the text from their vantage as scholars of religion and theology, my multidisciplinary focus brings a different perspective to a reading of the text. For instance, while Mali explains the end of Guyart’s second ‘dark night of the soul’ in terms of the mystic tradition as coincident with her final vows, in January, 1635, I interpret the text as indicating the end of her second period of deep psychological anxiety after writing her *Relation de 1633*, as we will see, a lifting coincident with Guyart’s entrance into what she claims was a new psychological space, “une nouvelle région,” on completion of the writing exercise. As Mali provides a clear summary of Guyart’s mystic journey in contemporary religious terms, I will refer to it for the sake of clarity. My interpretation and analysis follow in subsequent chapters.

According to Mali, the first spiritual state, (*état d’oraison*) is one of “spiritual disposition,” in which Guyart indicates her first awareness of God’s calling in a childhood dream. In late adolescence, inspired by the dream, Guyart turned to the Scriptures, liturgy, sermons, and rituals of the Church. The second, third, and fourth *états d’oraison* describe
Guyart's religious conversion and the beginning of her mystic quest. In the course of these three states, the process of spiritual purification or abasement, and the longing for spiritual union with God are intensified in a merging of "purgative and illuminative" states. The fourth state describes Guyart's acute desire to possess the spirit of Christ, to purge the soul of all its impurities, the "via purgative," and to rid herself of any reliance on the physical senses. It concludes with the understanding that regardless of any effort on her part, spiritual union comes only by divine grace (Mali, 62). In the fifth state, as Guyart believed God draws closer, she becomes increasingly aware of the incompatibility of life in the world and the true life of the spirit. To the vow of chastity she took following her conversion Guyart adds the vows of poverty and obedience. At this stage she is troubled by doubt and anxiety, an anxiety that lifts only after time as a result of her vision of two hearts conjoined, "the illuminative joined with the unitive," a vision she interpreted as her heart united with the heart of God in preparation for mystical marriage (Mali, 69).

In the sixth état d'oraison, Chapter Six of La Relation, Guyart relates the first of three Trinitarian visions which occurred during Pentecost, 1625. It is a state Mali labels as Guyart's "passive state of purity and repose" in preparation for the next state of spiritual marriage, outlined in Chapter Seven, which Mali describes as a state of "cognitio Dei expermentalis," or direct and mystical union with Christ (Mali, 70). Chapter Eight describes Guyart's third Trinitarian vision, which occurred shortly after her entrance to the monastery, on March 17, 1631. While she was at prayer, just as she was for the second vision, she had the exalted experience of "the mutual possession of the Trinity and the Soul," a state in which the love of God, and nothing else, is possible (ibid, 72). Following this experience, Guyart was "inundated by temptations and eery imaginings which she took to be the work of the devil," and
experienced a second dark night which lasted another two to three years \( \textit{ibid}, 73 \). The ninth state, what Mali calls the state of "apostolic spirit," corresponds to Guyart's "Dream of the Three Kisses," a dream she interpreted as God's call to missionary action. Chapter Ten of \textit{La Relation de 1654} describes a state of "spiritual repose which lasted a year, a state of acceptance of God's will that she become actively involved in apostolic work. The eleventh state is characterized as Guyart's "love of the cross," a time in which she focused on the practicalities of her venture in the New World. The twelfth state documents Guyart's departure for and arrival in the New World and her "revolt of the passions," her third and most difficult dark night. Guyart entered the thirteenth or final state of "victimhood and continual consummation" on the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in 1647, after a direct appeal to the Holy Mother to deliver her from her eight years of anguish. In this final state of "true poverty of spirit," she experienced the divine essence as pure love (74).

According to Mali, Guyart's spiritual ascent began with her conversion in 1620. Seven years later, in 1627, she achieved her goal of \textit{unio mystica} prior to entering the monastery and twenty years later, she reached the state of spiritual victimhood in Quebec, in 1647.

According to Guyart's text, her conversion occurred shortly after the deaths of her husband and mother-in-law, the loss of the family business and separation from her son. In it, she perceived her body bathed in the blood of Christ and all her manifold sins clearly and unmistakably revealed:

\[ \text{Lors ... les yeux de mon esprit furent ouverts et toutes les fautes, péchés et imperfections que j'avais commises depuis que j'étais au monde me furent représentées en gros et en détail, avec une distinction et clarté plus certaine que toute certitude que l'industrie humaine pouvait exprimer. Au même moment, je me vis} \]
toute plongée en du Sang et mon esprit convaincu que ce sang était le Sang du Fils de
Dieu, de l’effusion duquel j’étais coupable … (La Relation 182)

As a result, she says, she was completely transformed: “changée en une autre créature, mais
si puissamment changée que je ne me connaissais plus moi-même” (La Relation,
185). Notions of innocence which had governed her sense of self to that point were lost
forever: “je voyais mon ignorance à découvert qui m’avait fait croire que j’étais bien parfaite,
mes actions innocentes” (185). For the first time, she saw herself as abject, “un vermitseau
de terre,” guilty of Jesus’ blood spilled for her (183).

Following her conversion, Guyart sought a spiritual advisor and gave herself entirely
to his direction. xxxiii She withdrew to the attic of her father’s house for a year of solitude
during which she read spiritual texts and entered into her first dialogues with God. Her son,
then six months old, had been taken to a wet nurse. The image of the blood of Christ kept her
focused on His suffering: “mon coeur parlait sans cesse à Dieu … poussé par une puissance
qui m’était supérieure … je voyais bien que cette puissance-là provenait de l’impression du
Sang précieux et des souffrances de Notre-Seigneur” (187). Free from the obligations of
marriage, motherhood and business due respectively to the death of her husband, the removal
of her son to a wet nurse, and the loss of the family business, she turned to a life of piety, and
embarked on a journey to be worthy of mystical union with Christ: “je ne concevais rien de
bon, de beau, ni de souhaitable, que d’être en possession de l’esprit de Jésus-Christ” (201).

Guyart spent four years in this initial stage of her spiritual journey, a period Oury
refers to as “le temps d’approfondissement de la première grâce,” a time which also includes
her first spiritual “dark night” (Oury, vol.1, 91), in which she indulged in continual
penitential acts of self-abasement: “j’en faisais des actes dans les choses les plus abaissantes
et humiliantes" (La Relation, 202). After her conversion, she began her practice of increasingly severe bodily mortifications with the understanding that the soul, “la partie supérieure” (“elle”) was responsible for disciplining the body, “la partie inférieure :” “elle traite son corps comme une esclave ... elle le fait passer partie des nuits à se discipliner sanglamment ... elle ne lui permet de sommeil que le peu qu’il lui en faut pour ne pas le laisser mourir” (211). Pulled towards a religious vocation she was certain God would arrange in time (“je me sentis appelée à la religion ... il me ferait cette grâce en son temps”), she studied the “infinis trésors” of the Scriptures (218). In spite of feelings of euphoria, however, from the start she was troubled by feelings of anxiety, doubt, and abandonment: “je me voyais quelquefois comme abandonnée” (223), feelings she refers to as her “tentations.” “mon sens peinait jusqu’à l’inquiétude active ... une crainte me saisissait et me disait que j’étais trompée” (225). Feelings of self-hatred repeated over and over in the text began with her conversion, provoking “de plus en plus ... une haine de moi-même” (187), “une si grande haine de moi-même” (209), and contempt for her body: “je l’avais en haine mortelle” (228). Her feelings of self-hatred were accompanied by a repeated desire to die, “de très grands désirs de mourir” (223), and severe penitential mortifications. xxiv Guyart describes how she began her mortifications with the permission of her spiritual director: “ayant entendu dire ... qu’il fallait demander congé à son confesseur de faire des pénitences ... je lui demandai permission. En ce commencement, ce fut une ceinture de crin et la discipline’’(185). As Diefendorf observes, a woman’s submission (and obedience) to a spiritual director was not simply a reflection of gender roles but one of pupil to teacher:

Participants in many of these relationships adopted traditional gender roles, but this was not the only pattern these relationships could take. The submission was, in
principle at least, that of pupil to teacher or beginner to expert in the spiritual life, and not weak woman to powerful man ...” (From Penitence to Charity, 69)

In her study of forty-two women penitents and their male confessors (1450 - 1750), Jodi Bilinkoff notes that these relationships were “frequently reciprocal,” if not equal (11).

At age twenty-five, having passed through her ‘dark night,’ Guyart experienced a vision of her heart united with the heart of Jesus:

Une fois, j’expérimentai qu’on m’avait ravi mon coeur et qu’on l’avait enchassé dans un autre coeur, et qu’encore que ce fût deux cœurs ... si bien ajustés que ce n’était qu’un ... je ne sais si je dormais ou veillais, mais revenant à moi-même, je fus plusieurs jours dans un état d’union avec Notre-Seigneur. (La Relation 229)

While Guyart does not remember whether she was awake or asleep, she remembers the image as a vivid life experience. At the time, she was working in her brother-in-law’s business, caring for the sick and needy, preaching and teaching the word of God, all the while lacerating her body and depriving it of sleep and food: “elle redouble ses pénitences et se consomme dans les actions de charité du prochain, se faisant toute à tous pour les gagner à son Bien-Aimé” (256). In spite of the extraordinary graces she believed God had bestowed on her, Guyart believed her pursuit of penitential purification required continual acts of humiliation: “une disposition de pureté extraordinaire qui me portait dans l’abaissement et dans l’anéantissement de moi-même,” acts of humiliation in the context of religion that mirrored acts of humiliation in daily life (233). While her account of her conversion covers only four pages in Chapter Two of the text (181-185), reference to her mortifications and descriptions of them, sometimes shocking in their severity, and to self-hatred, humiliation and a desire to die begin in Chapter Two and continue interspersed over forty pages (185-
233) to Chapter Six, covering the years leading up to her three visions of the Trinity and mystic union: “la divine Majesté me poursuivant sans cesse... me portait dans l’abaissement et dans l’anéantissement de moi-même” (232). These mortifications, which Oury describes as “pénitences excessives” include wearing a hair shirt, lying on a hard surface covered in stinging nettles and inflicting bloody lacerations on her body to cause pain and deprive herself of sleep: “elle le fait passer partie des nuits à se discipliner sanglamment ...” (211), or “je me déchirais de coups” (213), or “c’était en quoi les macérations du corps me servaient beaucoup ... pour châtier mon corps - parce que ... je l’avais en haine mortelle” (228). Certainly, Oury attributes the severity of her mortifications, “ces procédés qui nous choquent” (91),xvii in part to her harshly ascetic Feuillant directors: “il fallait être Feuillant et vivre au XVIIe siècle pour accorder tant de latitude à une jeune femme dans son ardeur à macérer son corps” (Marie de l’Incarnation, vol. 1, 86),xv but other factors such as significant personal loss, trauma, the general devaluing of women, socially-tolerated violence, especially against women, and anxiety, as I argue, may have played an important part.

In May, 1625, Guyart had the first of her three visions of the Holy Trinity: “laquelle impression était sans forme ni figure, mais plus claire et intelligible que toute lumière ” (La Relation, 233-5). The same anxiety that plagued her after her conversion returned: “il me vint une grande crainte d’être trompée et que ce ne fût quelque piège du diable” (237). Her faith that mystic marriage would eventually take place kept her going: “le mariage où elle [son âme] se sent appelée et auquel elle prétend” (241). A year later, she received God’s grace of unio mystica in the second Trinitarian vision:

Et l’âme expérimente ... ce mariage spirituel ... lequel la brûle et consomme d’un feu
si suave et si doux qu’il n’est pas possible de le décrire ... Il vient ... des embrassements mutuels de ce Verbe suradorable et de l’âme qui, dans les baisers de sa divine bouche, la remplit de son Esprit et de sa vie. (254)

Although she had attained the divine gift of spiritual marriage, Guyart intensified her practice of bodily mortification and good works: “elle redouble ses pénitences et se consomme dans les actions de charité” (256), reflecting the practice of *imitatio Christi* and the model of the suffering Christ: “En cette souffrance... il n’y a rien à faire qu’à souffrir la divine maîtrise de la sacrée Personne du Verbe” (262). The sense of abasement at the core of her penitence reflects spiritual currents of the time and conceivably, a sense of worthlessness linked to societal attitudes towards women: “mon âme a toujours connu qu’elle était le rien à qui le Tout se plaisait de faire miséricorde” (266).

Guyart entered the Ursuline convent in January, 1631, when she was thirty. She professed loving her vocation above all else: “j’expérimetnais cette vérité qui me faisait aimer ma vocation et l’état religieux, au-dessous duquel je voyais toutes choses” (285). Yet again, she suffered symptoms of depression, symptoms Oury identifies as her second period of spiritual crisis and which she refers to as her “tentations et aversions.” Shortly after taking the veil, she recalls, she was attacked on all sides by the devil, by temptations of blasphemy, dishonesty, and pride, ignorance of spiritual things and irritability. She did not trust herself and believed she had been duped (292). For the first time, Guyart alludes to difficulties with inter-personal relationships, and feelings of impatience or acrimony “contre l’agir de mon prochain.” Again, she felt abandoned by God: “à peine l’apercevais-je, et je n’en recevais aucun soulagement, me trouvant seule à porter ma croix” (293).

Guyart’s third vision of the Holy Trinity, in which she perceived herself to be imbued
with the mystery of the Holy Spirit, occurred not long after her transition to the monastery:
“cette fois, le Père et le Fils et le Saint Esprit se donnent ... entièrement” (286). Full of joy at receiving God’s remarkable favours, “une exubérance qui est indicible” (288), she perceived herself nonetheless as all the more base: “je me voyais le néant et le rien ... Je ne pouvais dire autre chose: ... “Je suis le néant et le rien!” (287).

In 1632, news of the devil’s attacks on the Ursulines at Loudun prompted Guyart’s own brief experience of possession, in which she perceived a malevolent force penetrate her body, a force subsequently vanquished by a benevolent spirit. As Moshe Sluhovsky observes:

The mass demonic possession of the Ursuline nuns of Loudun in 1633-40 is among the most famous (or infamous) episodes in the history of diabolic possession and witchcraft accusations in early modern Europe ... It was in convents more than in any other space that women pursued the new spiritual exercises and techniques that characterized interiorized contemplation in all its different configurations: passive, Jesuit, Teresian, Salesian, Theatine, and so on. It was therefore in convents that the growing anxiety concerning unauthorized practices, with its accompanying fears of diabolic illusions and temptations came to the fore. And lest we forget, convents were gendered spaces, and women ... were regularly assumed to be deceived and/or deceivers, to mistake the diabolic for the divine, and to pursue spiritual exercises above their mental and biological capacities. (Believe Not Every Spirit 234)

Following her experience of possession, Guyart fell into yet another, terrible state of anxiety, a state she suffered alone, in the absence of her spiritual director, for two years: “mes peines intérieures ... continuèrent près de deux ans” (295). Her symptoms of anxiety persisted until the arrival of a new spiritual director, Georges de la Haye, in 1633, the first in the series of
Jesuits who would guide her for the rest of her life (297). De la Haye required Guyart to write a full accounting of her spiritual life to that point in what became her first spiritual autobiography, *La Relation de 1633*. It is likely that de la Haye’s pronouncement that her spiritual experiences were authentic rather than evidence of the devil’s work played a serious psychological role in the alleviation of her anxiety. Thus, in spite of periods of anxiety and doubt, Guyart’s growing spiritual, and temporal, confidence may be attributed, in part at least, to de la Haye’s mentoring and support. The role of mentor is key to some women’s ability to transition into greater knowledge of self and the world, according to theories outlined in *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (as I discuss in Chapter Nine). In her text, Guyart points to the important role Georges de la Haye played in her life and as a result of his intervention, how her life changed: “je me trouvai comme en une nouvelle région” (302). It was the beginning of her life-long relationship with the Jesuits and a new chapter in her spiritual and temporal life: “dès que j’eus commencé d’ouvrir mon coeur à ce bon Père, toutes mes peines se dissipèrent, comme qui m’eût délié d’une captivité … depuis ce temps-là, la direction de ma conduite intérieure a toujours été sous les Révérends Pères de la Compagnie de Jésus ” (298).

But, as Roger Duchène points out, and as Guyart reports was the case for her, spiritual women did not consult with their advisors every day. There were often long periods between sessions which allowed women to ponder and think and to exercise their will, as was the case with Guyart, who wrote many letters in the decade of her twenties to the absent Dom Raymond, for example. In answering to their spiritual directors and to God, women gained a certain autonomy from their priests, husbands, fathers or male heads of households, and even in the case of religious women, from the authority of the Mother Superior (195). As well,
according to Diefendorf, it was not unusual for women advanced in spiritual life to offer
direction to lay men as well as women, a practice Guyart, who was considered spiritually
advanced as a proclaimed mystic and as Mother Superior of her community, entertained at all
levels of society, from Indians to Governors, once in Canada (From Penitence to Charity,
158).

Not long after her entrance to the monastery. Guyart was appointed "sous-maîtresse
des novices," a role which gave her the responsibility of overseeing the spiritual growth of
her young charges:

C'était mon office de leurs enseigner la doctrine chrétienne pour les dresser pour les
rendre capables de l'Institut. Je le faisais avec un grand zèle que Dieu me donnait
avec la facilité de m'énoncer sur les mystères de notre sainte foi. J'avais beaucoup de
lumières là-dessus. Je portais en mon âme une grâce de sapience (306). xxi

In 1634, Guyart had a dream in which the Virgin Mary kissed her three times and beckoned
her to an unknown land, a dream subsequently interpreted by her spiritual director as God's
call to join the mission in Canada:

C'était la deuxième année de ma profession, que je fus mise sous-maîtresse des
novices ... Une nuit, après un discours familier que j'avais eu avec [Notre-Seigneur],
en dormant, il me fut représenté en songe que j'étais avec une dame séculière ... elle
et moi quittâmes le lieu de notre demeure ordinaire. Je la pris par la main, et, à
grands pas, je la menai après moi [...] J'aperçu une petite église ... et sur cette ...
église, la sainte vierge qui y était assise. (304)

The dream marked a turning point in her life, a recognition of her apostolic vocation:

"j'avais eu toute ma vie un grand amour pour le salut des âmes, mais depuis ce que j'ai dit
des baisers de la très sainte Vierge, je portais dans mon âme un feu qui me consommait pour cela" (307). From that point on, Guyart’s focus in the text turns outward, shifting from spiritual matters to her preoccupation with the practicalities of pursuing her goal of joining the apostolic mission, a process which consumed her for the next five years.

On May 4, 1639, Guyart sailed from France to the New World, never to return. As with her transition to the monastery ten years before, her initial feelings were of unspeakable joy: "lorsque je mis le pied en la chaloupe qui nous devait mener en rade, il me sembla entrer en paradis puisque je faisait le premier pas qui me mettait en état et en risque de ma vie pour l’amour de lui qui me l’avait donnée" (354). As in the earlier transition, however, there is an equal element of despair. Guyart’s departure in fact signalled the beginning of her longest (eight years) and deepest period of despair, a period she refers to in the text as her "révolte des passions" and which Mali and Oury refer to as her third "dark night of the soul:" "Dans la traversée je demeurai seule ... je me vis ... dépouillée de tous les dons et grâces que Dieu avait mis en moi, de tous les talents intérieurs et extérieurs qu’il m’avait donnés (376). Reduced to a state of "humiliation indicible," she is overcome by thoughts of suicide:

Je passais d’une abîme de lumière et d’amour en un abîme d’obscurité et de ténèbres douloureuses, me voyant comme plongée dans un enfer ... réellement, je me voyais sur le bord de l’enfer ... et je sentais en moi une disposition qui me voulait porter de m’y précipiter. (377)

Guyart’s symptoms of depression, her third spiritual "dark night," lasted until the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in 1647. On that day, she recalls being instantly and permanently delivered from all the years of emotional pain: "il ne se peut dire la paix ... que l’âme possède se voyant ... libre de ses liens et rétablie en tout ce qu’elle croyait avoir perdu
The lesson Guyart took from her experience was that, even after attaining spiritual union with God, the soul never stops progressing: “Dans la suite du temps ... l’âme ... aura ses croissances spirituelles ... jusqu’à la fin. Quelque degré d’union avec Dieu qu’elle ait expériménté ... en cette vie, il y a toujours quelque chose de plus” (424). As Mali points out, unlike that of Teresa of Avila and other great mystics of the tradition, Guyart’s spiritual progression continued beyond mystic union towards an even higher state, the state of spiritual victimhood (*Mystic in the New World*, 75).

After the fire of 1650, which destroyed the Ursuline monastery, Guyart was reappointed Mother Superior responsible for its rebuilding. Although the fire was caused by the negligence of a young novice (*La Relation*, 431), Guyart took it personally as God’s punishment for her sins: “mes dispositions intérieures dans l’accident de notre incendie furent que ... je crus que mes péchés en étaient la seule cause” (434), a stance of self-incrimination typical of the female mystics Gilmore observes as a gendered phenomenon (113). Guyart then entered what she recognized as a new, and ultimate, state of spiritual victimhood: “or, l’état intérieur dans lequel Notre-Seigneur m’a conduit depuis que j’entrai pour la seconde fois en charge, a été un état de victime continu” (450). Ironically, Guyart says, she had always known she would ‘walk through fire’ for the truths of the Gospels in her spiritual journey, a challenge she experienced literally:

L’âme ... aura ses croissances spirituelles ... jusqu’à la fin. Quelque degré d’union avec Dieu qu’elle ait expériménté ou expérimente en cette vie, il y a toujours quelque chose de plus [...] Avant que je fusse religieuse ... les lumières de l’Écriture sainte engendraient en moi une foi si vive qu’il me semblait que j’eusse passé par les flammes pour ces vérités. (425)
Guyart’s spiritual journey strongly reflects the influence of the Jesuits under whose direction she spent most of her religious life. In Canada, in 1645, under the direction of Jérôme Lalemant, she made a new vow, that everything she did, thought, or said should be for “the greater glory of God,” an indication that she had taken the Jesuit motto as her own: “Dieu me permit de le faire en cette sorte: de faire, de souffrir, de penser et de parler ... pour la plus grande gloire de Dieu ... le tout, entendu dans mes actions libres” (La Relation, 409).

A Review of her Critics

Guyart commentators fall into two main camps, those religious scholars (among them the eminent Dom Guy-Marie Oury, and Anya Mali and Thérèse Nadeau-Lacour, all of whom focus on Guyart’s spiritual experience in the Christian mystic tradition) and critics of a less religious bent (such as historians Dominque Deslandres and Natalie Zemon Davis, literary critics Chantal Théry and Marie-Florine Bruneau, as well as psychoanalysts Jacques Lemaitre and Bernadette Colombel), whose approach is naturalistic and scientific while respectful of the spiritual nature of Guyart’s writing.

In their introduction to Lecture inédite de la modernité aux origines de la Nouvelle-France, editors Raymond Brodeur, Dominique Deslandres and Thérèse Nadeau-Lacour reflect on Guyart’s enduring spiritual influence with a quote from Charles-André Bernard: “cette femme ... est, aujourd’hui, une incontournable source d’inspiration pour le renouveau spirituel (5).” While for Thérèse Nadeau-Lacour, the thirteen states of prayer or “états d’oraison” which constitute Guyart’s Relation de 1654 reflect prevailing currents of spirituality, they do not necessarily coincide with exterior events in Guyart’s life (“Marie Guyart, une femme dans tous ses états: La gestation et l’affirmation d’une “subjectivité mystique,” 32). It is a perspective which runs counter to my own, for instance, in my consideration of the impact of the traumatic
life events Guyart relates as preceding her conversion experience, or the effect of the destruction
of the monastery, the Iroquois massacres of the Hurons, and the martyrdom of her Jesuit
colleagues which preceded her experience of the transcendent presence of the Holy Mother and
the onset of her perceived final state of "spiritual poverty," among others. Nadeau Lacour’s
analysis assumes, for instance, that Guyart’s conversion was God’s gift of grace and her ensuing
sense of worthlessness was related only to her theological understanding. In Nadeau Lacour’s
discussion of the period from Guyart’s conversion at age twenty to the moment of mystic union,
a period of seven years, she makes no mention of Guyart’s severe mortifications, presumably
perceiving them, like Yolaine Laporte in Marie de l’Incarnation: mystique et femme d’action, as
normal penitential practice for female mystics of the time (36).

While Mali, in her highly scholarly and historicized approach, recognizes the role
external events might play in an individual’s psychology, particularly in the case of Guyart’s
conversion, she is all but silent on Guyart’s prolonged period of severe mortifications. Like
Nadeau Lacour, Mali considers these mortifications solely in the context of the ascetic
penitential tradition. Following Guyart’s conversion, she notes only that Guyart: “began to do
penances, frequent the sacraments, attend sermons and cultivate solitude” (49).

My analysis of Guyart’s conversion experience differs from Mali’s (48) in that while
Mali suggests such an experience presupposes a “certain emotional maturity on the part of the
individual who must attain a strong awareness of self before that self can radically change,” I
attempt to demonstrate that Guyart progressed gradually into a state of acquired maturity in my
analysis of her text in relation to the Women’s Ways of Knowing model in Chapter Seven of this
document. I note for example, Guyart’s reaction to the trauma of her conversion in 1620 when
she withdrew for a year into silence in the attic of her father’s house compared to her quite
different reaction to the fire of 1650, thirty years later, when she immediately took charge of the
rebuilding process. I examine the notion of ‘victimhood’ not simply as a spiritual state in
Guyart’s life, but also as as metaphor for the larger condition of women. Mali’s analysis of
Guyart’s thirteen spiritual states, as described in the thirteen chapters or ‘oraisons’ of La
Relation, from her first inclinations to a spiritual life through each successive step, includes the
dramatic impact of the New World on Guyart’s spirituality and on her attainment of the ultimate
state of spiritual victimhood. Yet, as Mali points out, of the thirteen chapters in La Relation,
eleven deal with Guyart’s life in the Old World, an emphasis reflected in my own analysis. In
“Strange Encounters: Missionary Activity and Mystical Thought in Seventeenth Century New
France,” Mali expands on her theory that Guyart’s spirituality assumed new and distinct forms in
Canada consistent with similar shifts in other early missionaries, shifts Mali attributes to their
environment of survival in the New World: “the spiritual growth of the missionaries was
nurtured by the harsh conditions and by the constant danger of death in which they lived (79).”

Chantal Théry, on the other hand, perceives Guyart not just in terms of her persona as a
mystic in the complex environment of her time, but as a woman ahead of her time, specifically
with respect to her leadership in formulating a new constitution for the Ursulines of Quebec
(“Les audaces ‘laïques’ et ‘féminines,’ ‘moderne’ et ‘postmoderne,’” in Lecture inédite de
modernité aux origines de la Nouvelle-France, 96). Théry rejects any notion of Guyart as
“folle,” stating categorically that “Guyart n’est ni “folle de Dieu” ni “tête folle,” mais une femme
infiniment passionnée et responsable, libre et éclairée”’ (96). While I agree with Théry, it seems
clear that Guyart evolved into this persona, that there is evidence in the text that she was not
always so “éclairée,” and that her long period of severe mortifications during her twenties may
be seen, in part, as a kind of temporary, albeit prolonged, distress brought on by notions of sin
and guilt, by religious conditioning, and by the trauma of her conversion and personal loss, encouraged by her spiritual longing and the influence of her harshly ascetic spiritual advisors. The focus of Théry's article is Guyart's life and writing in Canada and the importance of her role as an observer of history with regard to Indian women and their culture. In *De plume et d'audace: femmes de la Nouvelle-France*, Théry studies Guyart and other seventeenth-century religious women in transition to the New World, the "mutation culturelle provoquée par le passage de l'Ancien au Nouveau Monde," mostly through their correspondence (11). Along with Dominique Deslandres, Nathalie Zemon Davis and others, Théry signals Guyart's respect for Amerindian culture, especially the rights and freedoms of the women, but she goes further, arguing that native women inspired Guyart and other missionary women to go beyond the strictures of their culture:

Les missionnaires ont trouvé en Nouvelle-France et dans leurs communautés - si austères qu'elles aient été - une liberté et un espace d'identification différent qui leur ont permis de développer ... de faire preuve d'initiatives ... qu'on ne porte pas habituellement au compte des femmes ... à aller au bout de soi-même. (14)

Much has been written about Guyart's accomplishments in New France, to the point, as Théry observes, of becoming tiresome (88). Yet an important element of Guyart's life in the fledgling colony, little studied in non-religious terms, is the extreme emotional distress she describes in *La Relation* which she suffered for many long years there, a distress so severe that she entertained thoughts of suicide, as we have seen. Mali and Oury refer to this period as Guyart's third "dark night," a period of torment Guyart believed was necessary for her spiritual progress. My analysis of Guyart's anguish, however, follows in the path of Théry's observations that other elements than God's hand alone were at work in her life: "les rôles singuliers que
Marie de l’Incarnation et bien des femmes - loin d’être des “servantes indignes”- ont fait jouer à
Dieu, au Christ et à la Vierge nous apparaissent autrement” (92). Rather than to the work of the
devil, for instance, Guyart’s mental anguish in the New World can be attributed, in part, to the
difficult interpersonal relationships she experienced in her new religious community. Such
difficulties were exacerbated by conflict related to the merging of the two different Ursuline
rules under Guyart’s direction, as we will see, and to the harsh physical environment, as Zemon
Davis and others attest.

Marie-Florine Bruneau’s analysis of Guyart’s writing in *Women Mystics Confront the
Modern World: Marie de l’Incarnation and Madame Guyon*, situates Guyart at the crossroads of
unique historical influences; it is informed by two different approaches. The first, that of Michel
de Certeau, observes Guyart as caught in the intersection of the decline of mysticism as a way of
knowing and the rise of scientific knowledge. In the face of loss of prestige and social status for
mystic women, Bruneau theorizes, somatization took on greater importance than ever as a means
of authentication (5). The second approach, based on a critique of Carolyn Walker Bynum’s
*Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, situates the “bodily drama” of the female mystic as resistance to the
increasing authority of the male clergy. Bruneau objects to Bynum’s celebration of somatization
as a means of self-empowerment for the “dominated subject,” arguing that while female mystics
may have gained a certain authority through their somatization they paid dearly for it, ultimately
affirming notions of woman as “wicked flesh.”

With regard to the connection between Guyart’s conversion experience and her passion
for saving souls in the New World, Dominique Deslandres explains that because Catholics
believed the end of the world was near, in order to be ready for Judgment Day, it was incumbent
on those called to apostolic responsibility to do everything in their power to save souls, thereby
saving their own. According to Deslandres, the belief that Christ’s blood was spilled for all lent tremendous psychological motivation to Guyart’s perception of being bathed in the blood of Christ, motivation which spurred her apostolic zeal: “on comprend, dès lors, combien la vision du sang a pu déterminer le destin spirituel de Marie Guyart” (“L’Utopie mystique et les tracas de la fondation de la Nouvelle-France,” Lecture inédite, 115). My analysis considers the psychological impact of Guyart’s conversion experience, especially as it was likely exacerbated, according to dates provided in biographic notes (and observations by Deroy-Pineau), by the sudden appearance of post-lactation menstrual blood, during Lent, with all its connotations of woman’s original sin, guilt, weakness and susceptibility to the devil’s ways.

Nathalie Zemon Davis also considers Guyart’s life in Canada and the changes the new environment brought to her perception of self. In Women on the Margins, based primarily on Guyart’s Correspondance, Zemon Davis demonstrates how Guyart’s respect for the equality, rights, and freedoms of women in Amerindian culture was in opposition to the Jesuits’ notions of female submission and inferiority. While Zemon Davis acknowledges that women were not the only marginalized group in Guyart’s time, in her view, they were “by far” the most oppressed. She argues that it was Guyart’s distance from the seats of power that allowed her the relative freedom to achieve a certain power of her own, not only in her monastery as Mother Superior, but in her relationship to the Amerindians who perceived her as a matriarch, as well as in the wider community in her role as counsellor even to governors (252). Such power as Zemon Davis and Théry find in Guyart’s life in New France Guyart herself perceived, paradoxically, as subsumed in the ultimate state of ‘spiritual victim.’

Jacques Maître and Bernadette Colombel bring the psychoanalyst’s perspective to Guyart’s autobiographical writing, Maître focusing on evidence of anorexia nervosa in Guyart
(Anorexies religieuses, anorexie mentale: essai de psychanalyse socio-historique de Marie de l’Incarnation à Simone Weil) and Colombel on notions of loss and desire as normal human motivators behind Guyart’s pursuit of the mystic experience (“L’Écriture mystique: enjeu de la subjectivité”).

In his analysis of Guyart’s text, Maître refers specifically to evidence in the female ascetics to the connection between the manifestation of anorexic tendencies and the women’s passage from childhood to adulthood, a passage which was often precipitous: “dans la mystique féminine catholique, on voit souvent une course de vitesse entre le mariage, qui fait accéder à l’état de femme, d’épouse, potentiellement de mère, et la virginité consacrée qui barre le chemin” (13). In a recent article, “Pubertal Process and Green Sickness in Renaissance Drama,” psychiatrists Ursula Potter, Roger Bartrop, and Stephen Touyz suggest a relationship between the bodily changes of menarche in the 16th and 17th centuries, which occurred at about age fourteen or fifteen, and the fear of marriage and the dangers of childbirth they may have triggered in some girls (381). It is of note, in Guyart’s case, that in the Supplément to La Relation de 1654, she specifies that at age fourteen or fifteen she expressed the desire to be a nun to her mother, a desire she connects to the notion of fear (though not specifically fear of marriage) in her comment that at the time she was “fort craintive” (La Relation, 481). In the same article, the authors also indicate that the connection between starvation and suppression of menses (amenorrhea) was acknowledged in medical journals as early as 1554 (381), a connection of which Guyart may well have been aware and that may have influenced her practice of food deprivation.

As we have seen, Guyart’s spiritual journey, which began with her conversion, follows more or less the traditional path of the Christian mystics. Her progression takes her from
conversion through spiritual purification and abasement, purgation, and illumination towards eventual mystic union with the Holy Trinity. As Mali points out, Guyart went beyond unio mystica to achieve the ultimate state of spiritual poverty or victimhood, a state she reached in her later years in Canada. Initial stages of her journey were marked by self-loathing, severe mortifications, and anxiety, the first of three "dark nights." A second dark night, an experience of demonic possession, and a dream of the Virgin Mary, subsequently interpreted as a call to Canada, left her focused on an apostolic mission. Her departure for the New World was marked by a deepening and pervasive anxiety which included alienation, the notion of abandonment by God, and thoughts of suicide. Her suffering was alleviated only eight years later on the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, an event which precipitated her entrance into the ultimate state of spiritual poverty. As we have seen, Guyart's commentators fall into two main camps, those who focus on her mystic ascension and those who focus more particularly on her gendered role as a religious woman in history. Guyart's spiritual autobiographical writing cannot be fully understood without an appreciation of both perspectives.
CHAPTER THREE
Female Mystics, Powerful Women, and the Discursive Crisis

Guyart's voice was both constructed within the context of the religious institution and strangled by the repressive politics and practices of her times. At the same time, Guyart was no doubt influenced by other strong women of her time as she (consciously or unconsciously) resisted the cultural conditioning that would have silenced her. In this chapter, I explore the particular historical circumstances and the role of certain powerful women in society which contributed to the discursive crisis in which Guyart, as a mystic, participated.

In Autobiographies: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-representation, Leigh Gilmore refers to the "high/low" tensions of female mysticism, which subjected the female mystics to surveillance and "policing" by the Church (119). The 'high' recognized special favours the mystics claimed to receive from God, while the 'low' represented the sinful nature inherent in their femaleness. Yet, paradoxically, Gilmore argues that their desire for union with the "anatomical maleness and semiotic femaleness" of Christ's body eclipsed all notions of gender. Likewise, the suffering certain spiritually-minded women inflicted on their bodies in imitatio Christi can be seen "as standing outside gender," according to Gilmore, a (subconscious) attempt by spiritual women to go beyond the dominant male/female power tensions (140). According to Gilmore, the policing of the female mystics occurred as a result of their encroachment into patriarchal authority and the Church's need for control, and carried with it the threat of consequences to which the women's male counterparts were not subjected to the same degree. With its inherent tensions, the notion of "policing" adds a significant level of stress to the constraints all spiritually-minded women were under, regardless of social class.

Despite such constraints, according to Barbara Diefendorf, the influence of certain powerful and pious women of the elite who played an important role in the Catholic reform movement and in the rise of female monasticism, affected the attitudes and beliefs of like-minded women across the social
strata at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries (*From Penitence to Charity*, 8). Their ascetic spirituality and bodily mortifications are known to have had a mimetic effect on women of Guyart’s generation. Most notable among them, as mentioned, was Barbe Acarie, founder of the Carmelites and co-founder of the Ursulines in France, and mistress of the Acarie circle of Paris, a renowned centre of religious and political influence. In *From Penitence to Charity*, Diefendorf provides descriptions of Acarie’s ascetic and mystic practices, details of the humiliation she suffered at the hands of her husband and the ‘shocking’ accounts by her biographers of the training in submission she imposed on her daughters (one of them descended into the cruelest forms of self-inflicted injury imaginable and nearly died). Acarie’s heroic asceticism, her submission of will, and, paradoxically, her enormous strength of character may be seen reflected in Guyart’s textual descriptions of her own heroic ascetic practices and strengths, especially in instances of resistance to authority, resistance Mali characterizes as her “nasty confrontations with religious figures who used their authority and influence to try to foil her plan” (93). While Mali refers to Guyart’s perception of her ability to persist in the face of obstacles as being evidence of “divine providence at work behind the scenes every step of the way” (*ibid*), it is likely that what she experienced reflected the influence of Acarie and other prominent spiritually-motivated women of the elite such as Jeanne de Chantal, co-founder with François de Sales of the Visitandines. While Bruneau mentions the influence of Acarie on spiritual women of the upper class (20), and positions Acarie, de Chantal, Guyart and Mme Guyon on a spiritual and theological continuum, she does not remark on any specific influence Acarie might have had on Guyart herself, a woman of a lower social order.

Although an in-depth analysis of Acarie’s influence on Guyart is beyond the scope of this study, a brief discussion of Acarie’s intergenerational and inter-class influence, as presented by Diefendorf, is relevant to my understanding of Guyart’s spirituality and her evolution of self. According to Diefendorf, Acarie’s home in Paris was the hub of an ultra-Catholic spiritual and political movement, the meeting place for theologians and spiritual leaders of the highest order,
including Cardinal de Bérulle, Benoît de Canfield, François de Sales, and high-ranking ministers of the court (From Penitence to Charity, 80). In the intense Catholic revival of the first half of the seventeenth century, hundreds if not thousands of women flocked to newly established religious orders and reformed houses in which penitential fervour modelled after the saints of the earlier Church found expression in various forms of asceticism. Diefendorf argues that, although such asceticism was originally male-gendered, it had gathered steam, proportionally, for certain spiritual women of the late medieval period and is reflected in the practices and writings of the female saints Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Genoa and Catherine of Siena, among others. Certain severely ascetic men of the period, notably Benoît de Canfield, were strong influences on Acarie who, along with other lay women like her (including Madeleine de Sainte-Beuve, co-founder with her of the Ursulines), took to the practice themselves:

Heroic asceticism, although consistently gendered as male, was one spiritual path that was not barred to women, and the women who pursued this path gained a respect and admiration not otherwise accorded their sex. Their deeds, and the publicity given these deeds, had important consequences for the material and spiritual propagation of the Catholic Reformation in France. Well-publicized acts of renunciation generated a sympathetic and imitative response. (From Penitence to Charity 8)

The power of inter-class and inter-generational mimetic behaviour among spiritually-inclined women should not be underestimated, Diefendorf argues. As a founder of the Carmelites and Ursulines, Acarie’s influence was no doubt felt by Guyart; and the fact that Guyart adopted the same religious name Acarie took when she entered religion in 1614, for example, is quite possibly, not coincidental. Like Guyart, Acarie inflicted heroic ascetic mortifications on her body while at the same time maintaining a high level of functionality in the world. She supervised the construction of new female monasteries, raised her family, supported her husband’s career, ministered to the sick, the poor, and the war-wounded and received people at the highest echelons of religious and political power. Like Guyart after her, she wrote spiritual treatises and a spiritual autobiography. In tune with
religious understanding of the time, it was Acarie's belief that God required abject humility and penitence as well as works of charity to expiate sin and end the suffering of the wars (40). In fact, Diefendorf postulates a possible psychological and physiological connection between the ecstasies and visions recorded by Acarie and others of the pious penitential female elite as a sociological response to, and an emotional outlet for, the enormous "physical and psychic tensions" of the period, constantly fanned by the "thundering rhetoric of atonement" of the itinerant preachers (48). For Acarie and other women of her circle, the model of religious perfection lay in the ascetic monastic orders of men. By mortifying the flesh, they insisted, women could achieve the same spiritual goals as men and they too should have their own monastic orders in which to do so (62).

While the notion of despising the self was central to the penitent's spiritual exercises, destruction of the will in submission to the will of God was the ultimate goal; paradoxically, according to Diefendorf, it was also empowering, for it was presumed to lead to a state of enlightenment (71). Among the more important spiritual works of the time was Benoît de Canfield's *Règle de Perfection réduite au seul point de la volonté de Dieu*, published in 1609, which focused on the complete annihilation of the self in order to create a self utterly absorbed in the will of God (85). Canfield's concept of the duality constituted by the allness of God and nothingness of man was rooted in the practices of late medieval penitential asceticism and grounded in the all/nothing dialectic at the core of its theology. His concepts are central to the expression of nothingness which constitutes a leitmotif in Guyart's text: "O mon grand Dieu! O suradorable Abîme! Je suis le néant et le rien!" (*La Relation*, 287).

However, while Guyart's language of spiritual baseness is typical of the genre and reflects both religious and culturally prescribed submission to patriarchy, it may also be perceived as presenting a form of resistance. Considered in conjunction with numerous examples in the text of public and personal humiliation at the hands of others, both lay and secular, such language may be seen to reflect Guyart's deep feelings of degradation, feelings she was conditioned to accept as a
woman in the contextual understanding of penance sent by God for her sins: "je m’estimais heureuse du grand bien qui m’était arrivé ... de souffrir des humiliations" (209).

Guyart’s representation of humiliation is conflated in the text with notions of humility. Repeated over and over again in the text, humiliation and humility constitute an important trope; as Gilmore observes: “the rhetoric of spiritual confession is filled with such deference; the humility topos is common to the point of being ‘pro forma’” (116). It is, however, an important element in understanding Guyart’s evolution of self, for her self-deprecating language, in line with what Diefendorf refers to as “obligatory demurrals,” reflects her religious and cultural belief in woman’s lowly state before God and man, regardless of whatever wisdom, opinion, or advice she may be called upon to offer (From Penitence to Charity, 158).

According to Gilmore, the female mystic’s identity as she constructs it, anchored in her own version of truth, is intricately linked to societal and religious notions of gender embedded in just such widely-held beliefs in woman’s weakness and vulnerability to sin. Consequently, the female mystic’s claims to truth were held under close scrutiny, subject to the religious and judicial constraints (and punishments) of heresy. Claims of mystic or visionary experience by women, as they expressed them as part of spiritual ascension, prompted a “discursive crisis” in the Church in which the language of male ecclesiastic authority clashed with the presumed authority of the language of the female mystic (107). Consequently, the truth claims contained in female mystics’ spiritual autobiographies can be seen to embody a form of resistance which posed a fundamental challenge to the Church (109). In the context of a discursive crisis, the mystic’s desire to report her experiences and her intimate connection with the divine was subject to the “penalties and payoffs” of truth-telling (112) and to gendered notions of negativity. The demand for authenticity, specifically connected to female mystics, is based on the fact that the stakes for truth-telling were high:

With gender logic, women and visionary experience were both seen as forms susceptible to the devil’s seductions; indeed, negative values attached to women spill into definitions of mysticism and are addressed in the progressively formalized regulations concerning “truth.”
Such definitional discourses marked the limits of the confession by establishing what truth could be told and installing a confessor, specifically a theologian, who would police those limits. Yet despite the exclusion of women from the priesthood the authority devolving from their charismatic and visionary experience was largely unassailable, and the presence of such complex regulations evidences the church/state's desire to gain control over this power. If visions were verified, mystics could claim the authority to address popes and kings, to speak for God and all. If visions were deemed demonic, the penalties varied.

The mystic or visionary, generally perceived as unacceptable by the authorities, pleaded not only for her life, but for the fate of her soul. In this light, Guyart's claims that the Holy Spirit was the inspiration for her writing can be seen as her need to establish that her claims were supported by the highest possible authority: "je dis simplement ce que je crois être selon la vérité, ... ce que l'Esprit qui me conduit me presse de dire. [... ] il n'y a que ... l'Esprit qui me fournit ce que j'ai à dire" (La Relation, 246). According to Gilmore, visionary experience had first "to be coded as a potential sin and then defended. There are no commandments regarding visionary experience, although there is sufficient biblical attention to false prophecy and demonic possession to put any mystic on the defensive" (117).

Further, according to Gilmore's theory, as a result of the intense scrutiny they were under, female mystics lived in a state of constant tension, a hyper-awareness not unlike that experienced by prisoners under twenty-four hour surveillance. Evidence of Guyart's awareness of danger is found in a letter to her son in the fall of 1651 in which she describes how she allowed an earlier manuscript of La Relation de 1654 to burn in the conflagration of 1650 rather than risk it falling into the wrong hands: "la pensée me vint de les jeter par la fenêtre, mais la crainte que j'eus qu'ils ne tombassent entre les mains de quelqu'un me les fit abandonner volontairement au feu" (Correspondances, 425). Again, in another letter in the same year, she reiterated her request that Claude ensure the manuscript be read by no one but himself:
Je vous prie d'écrire sur la couverture, Papiers de conscience, afin que personne n'y touche, et
n'y jeter les yeux sans scrupule: avec cette précaution les personnes de votre condition
peuvent facilement garder des papiers de cette nature, où personne ne peut avoir de veue. Si
vous veniez à tomber malade, et que vous fussiez en danger de mort, faites-les jeter au feu,
ou plutost afin que je sois plus assurée, envoie-les à ma nièce qui aura soin de me les tenir si
je vous survis. Voilà bien des conditions, mais, mon très-cher fils, je suis délicate en ce point,
et vous êtes assez éclairé pour voir que j'ai raison de l'être. Cette lettre est courte, afin qu'elle
fasse plus d'impression sur vostre esprit, et que vous fassiez plus facilement réflexion sur la
nécessité de la chose que je demande et espère de vous. (Correspondances 548)

Guyart's claim that it was not easy for her to write about her spiritual experiences expresses a
fear of being denounced that bears noting. In fact, in spite of her writing within the tradition of the
genre, and in spite of the models of strong women and the saints, she claims she had not read
anything that resembled her (unique) experience of the thirteen 'states of prayer' that made up her
spiritual journey. As I will argue later, pious women of the élite were much less likely to be accused
of heresy than women of lower social orders. In the text, Guyart repeatedly acknowledges the
inadequacy of language to express the mystery of her spiritual experiences. As she made clear in a
letter to her son dated August 9, 1654, it was God who commanded her to write through her spiritual
director, and again in her letter of September 27, 1654, she expressed a fear of being denounced. In
the act of writing itself, Guyart challenges and surmounts all three possible obstacles to writing one's
spiritual experiences, as she perceived them. Likely reasons, she suggests, include three possibilities:
that people who had mystical experiences did not to write about them out of respect for God, because
of the inadequacy of language, or for fear of being denounced:

Dans l'expérience de ces états d'oraison, je n'ai rien lu ni entendu de semblable, ce qui m'a fait
croire que ceux qui ont écrit de la vie intérieure ... n'en ont pas voulu parler par respect de
Dieu ou parce que cela surpasse la condition humaine, ou bien, le pouvant, l'ont tu de crainte
que ceux qui ne sont pas conduits dans ces voies n'en fussent mal édifiés. (La Relation 242)
Behind thinly veiled fear, such claims emphasize the perceived specialness of her experiences and of her act of inscribing them. But, as Gilmore argues: “potentially heretical claims about God’s direct communication with individual women created a crisis in ecclesiastical authority,” and as a result, the female mystics were in a double bind: while they fervently wished to represent their spiritual experiences accurately, they were, at the same time, under close scrutiny from the “policing” of the confession (117). It was in the discursive function of confession, perceived by the mystic as an obligation, that mystic claims of authenticity and spiritual autobiography gained their authority (107). Given such notions of surveillance, Guyart’s repeated disclaimer that she is writing under the auspices of her spiritual advisor, as well as her frequent use of biblical intertext in both Latin and the vernacular, lend additional strength to her truth claims:

Le psaume Caeli enarrant gloriam Dei ... avait des attraits qui me perçait le coeur et m’emportaient l’esprit: ... Vos témoignages sont véritables; ils se justifient d’eux-mêmes, ils rendent sages les plus idiots; envoyez-moi par tout le monde pour l’enseigner à ceux qui l’ignorent. (La Relation 290)

Guyart participates in the ‘discursive crisis’ as well through examples in the text of her encroachment on the teaching and preaching territory of the clergy and appropriates their language, even adopting a tone of intimate familiarity with God. In fact, her language in dialogue with God so offended her spiritual advisor in Canada, Jérôme Lalemant, that he advised her to stop using it. She recalls in the text that she tried to stop but was unable to do so. By persisting in her familiar language with God, disobeying her director in deference to her own method of communicating with Him, Guyart resists, circumvents, and subverts patriarchal authority:

Le Révérend Père Lalemant m’éprouvait et me disait ... que je n’étais pas digne de traiter avec Dieu dans une si grande familiarité, eu égard à mes grandes imperfections ... le zèle et la ferveur avec laquelle il me disait cela m’anéantissait et m’eût fait passer par le feu pour que la divine Justice eût été satisfait de ma trop grande témérité. Je me faisais de très grandes
violences pour traiter avec mon divin Époux d'une autre manière, mais je ne pouvais faire autrement. (*La Relation* 410)

While biblical references in Guyart's writing could be easily verified, claims of divine favour inscribed in her accounts of her dreams and visions could not. Faced with such claims, the Church's usual practice was to charge certain specially qualified priests with the power of discernment, that is, with the authority and responsibility to judge claims of mystic experience as true or false. Because both demonic and divine visions were believed to derive from the same realm of spirit, claims of visions of any kind were suspect and discernment was a difficult task. Furthermore, since women were considered specifically and particularly vulnerable to the devil's deceptions, discernment was a gendered problem, a problem particularly problematic for the Church. As Sluhovsky observes:

The spiritualization of possession meant also its feminization ... the discernment of possessing spirits and the growing distrust of new forms of spirituality became completely intertwined ... with the development of an elaborate discourse concerning the reliability of women in general and spiritually inclined women in particular. Equally important ... only expert theologians could discern spirits that possessed the soul. This created a clear hierarchical relationship between the possessed ... and male theologians, Inquisitors, and exorcists, who claimed a monopoly over the knowledge of interior "movements." (*Believe Not Every Spirit* 29)

It was every priest's duty, on pain of excommunication, to report to the bishop with regard to any women who claimed to have mystic experiences, ecstatic visions, or demonic possessions; as Sluhovsky observes: "no mystic or spiritually-inclined person was above suspicion" (173). Under such circumstances, it is reasonable to consider that Guyart herself was subject to intense "policing" and the risks and dangers of heresy, scrutiny that extended to her claims of divine communication through her dreams and visions and claims of demonic possession. In 1633, shortly after her final vows, her Jesuit spiritual advisor Georges de la Haye requested a complete written account of Guyart's life and spiritual experience to which she responded with *La Relation de 1633*. Oury
perceives de la Haye's request solely as a means of helping him understand his new charge (*Marie de l'Incarnation*, Vol. I, 214); yet, in an environment of surveillance such as Gilmore documents and theorizes, it is conceivable that de la Haye's request fell under his responsibility as a priest to police the claims of spiritual women. In the chronology of the text, de la Haye's request followed closely upon Guyart's claims of demonic possession, claims that would naturally have been suspect. Guyart's relief at de la Haye's judgement is explicit:

> Il m'obligea de lui écrire la conduite de Dieu sur moi dès mon enfance, et enfin tout ce qui s'était passé dans le cours des grâces qu'il avait plu à la divine Majesté me faire [...] je mis le tout entre les mains dudit Révérend Père, lequel ensuite m'assura que c'avait été le Saint-Esprit qui m'avait conduite. (*La Relation* 298)

> Après l'assurance que le Révérend Père de la Haye m'eut donnée que j'étais dans le bon chemin, je demeurai dans une grande paix. (*ibid*, 302)

It is also possible that *La Relation de 1633* served as a document which could be referred to the bishop, if necessary, for the priest's own protection, for, according to Sluhovsky, as spiritual persons, priests were also considered particularly susceptible to the devil, especially when dealing with women (*Believe Not Every Spirit*, 180).

That Guyart's claims were deemed authentic no doubt elevated her to a level of spiritual and temporal authority beyond most women of her lower-bourgeois class and marginalized station in life as a cloistered nun, regardless of her superior talents for business, administration, and the ability to network through her powerful Jesuit contacts. Yet moderate religious behaviour was more highly valued than ecstasies, visions and extreme behaviour. According to Sluhovsky, class affiliation, personal reputation and social connections played a role in the outcome of clerical judgment. Unlike their noble counterparts, most women of non-aristocratic birth who made claims of demonic possession were not discerned favourably ("The Devil in the Convent," 1396). It is likely, therefore, that Guyart's lower-bourgeois class distinction would have put her at higher risk of suspicion of heresy than other spiritually-minded women of a higher class, such as Barbe Acarie. *In Mystic*
Women Confront the Modern World, Marie-Florine Bruneau suggests that Guyart's act of writing her spiritual experiences was not only an expression of the mystic's compulsion to write, but a calculated attempt on her part to persuade ecclesiastic authority to recognize her divine mandate, for "without this recognition ... the female mystic was consigned to heresy, dereliction, criminality, or delusion" (67). Bruneau's observations reflect the seriousness of ecclesiastic judgment and the possibility that, as Leigh Gilmore has pointed out, for female mystics, their very survival was at stake (110). It is perhaps for this reason that Guyart repeatedly insists in La Relation de 1654 that her mystic dreams and visions are real and not a figment of her imagination: "il ne faut pas estimer qu'il y a ici quelque chose d'imaginaire; l'imagination n'y a point de part" (La Relation, 243).

The stakes for truth-telling were high in another respect as well. As Sluhovsky notes, monasteries for women depended on their good reputation to attract novices and students and the financial support that went along with them. A mystic deemed genuine was an asset to the monastery's reputation, while women whose visions and ecstasies were suspect, as was the case for the Ursulines of Loudun, risked putting their establishment in jeopardy (Sluhovsky, 257-8). In this light, Guyart's claims of demonic possession would conceivably have put her and her monastery under serious surveillance. Further, Gilmore argues, authority in the mystics' writing stems from the proximity of spiritual autobiography to the rhetoric of confession, for "the confession imports not only the spiritual but also the legal constraints of truth telling and potential punishment for error into the genre" (109). The mystic's claims were not only sworn to, but subject to verification. Gilmore argues that the notion of truth is culturally constructed as gendered under patriarchy and that: "truth is marked as a cultural production entwined with our notions of gender so completely that even the structural underpinnings of truth production is masculinist (ibid).

Certain of Gilmore's observations inform my analysis of Guyart's development in La Relation: first, that truth claims in woman's spiritual autobiography are key elements in the construction of the self and that these elements are historically specific; second, that women making claims of mystic experience were under the religious and legal constraints of truth-telling with dire punishment for
error; and finally, that such truth-telling was gendered under patriarchy, an authority Guyart clearly resisted from time to time. Further, according to Laurie Finke, when a woman of the period made her spiritual dreams and visions public, she represented herself as a genuine religious figure who should be afforded the authority to speak and act in a way usually accorded only to men. The mystics’ claims allowed them to resist the oppression imposed on them by patriarchy: “these women claimed the power to shape the meaning and form of their experiences. Their words, and even their bodies ... became the sites of a struggle to redefine the meaning of female silence and powerlessness,” (“Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision,” 404).

As mentioned, Guyart makes frequent reference to the limitations of human language to express the ineffable throughout her text: “Ah! Qui pourrait dire ce que c’est que la communication de cet adorable Chef? Il n’est pas possible que la langue humaine le puisse déclarer” (La Relation, 244). Conversely, and just as consistently, she evokes the powerful and exalted sensuality of the ancient erotic love poem, The Song of Songs, a poetic metaphor for divine love which she insists has nothing to do with human sexuality: “Lorsque je dis qu’il l’embrassa, ce ne fut pas à la façon des embrassements humains” (252). Both the limitations of language and the sensual power of the Song of Songs appear as tropes throughout the text, anchoring Guyart’s writing in the tradition of the Christian mystics, male and female, from as early as the writings of Origen in the second century, (McGinn, Zemon Davis, Bruneau). As Gilmore observes, “tropes of ineffability and unrepresentability abound in documents that also detail, with tireless precision, the whole range of bodily and mental effects” (Autobiographies, 116). Her point is that the mystics do describe their visionary experiences “in the rhetoric of the ecstatic body,” in a “lover’s discourse,” which eroticizes the relationship with God, “and that they do so as part of the formal requirement of the confession” (ibid). Hence, it can be assumed, Guyart’s reference to the Song of Songs goes further than a trope meant to anchor her writing in the tradition. It may be seen to provide a poetic and ephemeral quality to that part of the text which claims her mystic experience as real, special and different in a way ordinary language cannot, a human metaphor for the divine love at the core of the mystic experience.
While Guyart emphasizes the limitations of language, she understands its paradoxical power in the notion of the Word made flesh, in compassionate feelings and actions more important than any words. It is the language of the sacred text that embodies divine power and empowers believers; it is with such language that Guyart teaches, preaches, and saves souls. With her frequent references to the *Song of Songs*, Guyart attempts to convey her experience of another reality, of pure, limitless spiritual love, while at the same time providing credibility for her truth claims:

Ce que j'appelle purement amour, c'est lorsque Dieu tout d'un coup se laisse posséder à l'âme, où il lui permet ... de savoir par une science expérimentale d'amour qu'il est dans elle et avec elle et qu'il soit Dieu [ ... ] Elle lui dit: "Que fera, mon Bien-Aimé, que je vous trouve dehors, que je vous baise et que je vous embrasse à mon aise, que je vous fasse manger le jus de mes grenades?...etc." [ ... ] Mais venez, ô mon Amour, que je me répande dedans vous par un amour réciproque autant que ma bassesse le peut permettre, et que vous, Amour, le pouvez souffrir. C'est pourquoi j'ai souhaité de vous voir, mon petit frère, suçant les mamelles de ma mère ... pour vous embrasser à mon aise, et que personne ne s'en scandalise. (La Relation 239)

The female mystic’s public claims may be seen as an act of self-assertion, and her writing, as Gilmore suggests, as subversive. At the same time, through her vow of obedience, she paradoxically maintains and supports the patriarchal order that defines, (and confines) her. Guyart’s act of writing may be theorized as an act of resistance which transcends the cloister walls, yet such resistance was likely unconscious, and repressed by deeply ingrained notions of inferiority and guilt. Nevertheless, while Guyart’s self-abasing descriptives (“chétive créature,” “le néant que j'étais”) and frequent references to humility and humiliation reflect the religious and mystic currents of the time, they also draw attention to and paradoxically subvert the societal oppression of women (La Relation, 353). As I hope to demonstrate, however, while such notions of baseness shaped Guyart’s sense of self, they ultimately did not define her.
CHAPTER FOUR

Spiritual Conversion and Heroic Mortifications

When Guyart was twenty, she had a dramatic experience in a public setting in which she quite suddenly and unexpectedly perceived herself bathed in the blood of Christ. The experience constituted for her a transformative religious conversion which marked the beginning of her mystic quest. Through most of the decade, under the guidance of her first spiritual director, the feuillant Dom Raymond de Saint Bernard, Guyart pursued a path of rigorous penitential purification which, according to the chronology and descriptions in the text, appears to have occasioned a series of visions, accompanied (and perhaps brought on) by practices of severe bodily mortification. In this chapter, I explore Guyart’s representation of her practice of bodily self-injury in La Relation de 1654 from a physiological and psychological point of view, as well as its gender specificity, as part of the process of self-abnegation she had embarked on in order to empty herself of all traces of the self and accede to spiritual fusion with God. My intent is to demonstrate that, as well as being an extreme expression of devout religious practice, Guyart’s textual account of her mortifications may be seen as an unconscious response to personal trauma and loss in the wider context of the societal angst of endless war, economic misery, and plague, as well as the oppression of women under patriarchy. Accordingly, I explore Guyart’s account of her conversion experience and the physiological and psychological effects of her mortifications from a science-based, feminist, and epistemological perspective.

Gender-related notions of “madness” have been associated with Guyart’s mystic visions and ecstasies in the titles of such recent works as Marie Guyart: folie de Dieu by Roger Paul Gilbert, and the National Film Board documentary by Daniel Lafond, Folle de
Dieu (in the English version, Madwoman of God). The allusion to “madness” in these titles may be seen to reflect twenty-first century perceptions of mental illness associated with the excessive behaviours of certain pious ascetics and mystics of history, especially women, as well as the perception of many contemporary skeptics in early seventeenth-century France. Gilbert and Lafond’s works focus on the expression of Guyart’s mystic spirituality through her ecstacies and visions and ignore the extremes of her penitential ardour, the painful lacerations, sleep deprivation and starvation she inflicted on her body throughout her twenties.

Because excessive mortifications were looked upon with skepticism in the social circles of her time, and because they were officially discouraged by the Church, it is reasonable to ask the text if compounding factors beyond the strictly religious were behind Guyart’s mortifications and why she included fairly detailed descriptions of them in her spiritual autobiography when she knew such excesses were frowned upon. According to Moshe Sluhovsky, seventeenth-century skepticism surrounding mystic claims was so great that by 1630, the word “visionnaire” had come to mean “crazy” in common parlance (203). At the time of writing La Relation de 1654, however, it had been over a quarter of a century since Guyart had given up her heroic ascetic practice and her remarkable ecstatic visions had ceased.

Few Guyart scholars make reference to her mortifications. One who does is biographer Dom Guy-Marie Oury, who suggests a link between them and her first spiritual directors. Others are Anya Mali and Yolaine Laporte, who see them, like Oury, in the context of the ascetic tradition. In Marie de l’Incarnation, mystique et femme d’action, Laporte dismisses Guyart’s “sanglante discipline” as being within the norm, “une forme d’ascèse
assez répandue au début du XVIIe siècle, siècle religieux par excellence” (36). Kroll and Bachrach point out that a lack of sympathy in scholars to the severe mortifications of the ascetics of the past is understandable because all forms of self-injury are generally viewed with skepticism today, even when motivated by religious passions. In fact, such behaviour is regarded today either as deviant or symptomatic of mental illness: “our scientific … worldview has no lens to view excessive self-injurious behaviour except through the microscope of mental illness” (203-4). According to Kroll and Bachrach, historically, mild to moderate forms of bodily mortifications have generally been tolerated, while extreme forms have consistently met with official disapproval (2-4). They theorize further that a specific gender bias has accompanied female forms of ecstatic mysticism, considered evidence of hysteria:

The late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century approach to medieval mysticism … which continues to shape our thinking, was that it was a form of hysteria and, as such, an expression of womanly weaknesses, suggestibility, and tendencies toward dramatic exaggeration. (204)

According to Barbara Diefendorf, traditional explanations for ascetic self-injury rest on theories of imitatio Christi, the imitation of the suffering of Christ, and/or of contemptus mundi, detachment from the world and the senses (From Penitence to Charity, 19, 51, 242). Or, as Gilmore observes: “to unmake the human body by mortifying the flesh is to remake it in the image of Christ in his Passion. Bodily wounds … replicate Christ’s own fragile and broken flesh in an embodied sympathy” (134). Such explanations, however, appear too limited in Guyart’s case. New insights with regard to the cumulative effects of war and violence on the psyche, and to the effect of personal trauma and grief, allow different perspectives with regard to reading her text. According to Naomi S. Shaw, in “Shifting Conversations on Girls’ and
Women’s Self-injury: An Analysis of the Clinical Literature in Historical Context,” self-injury may reflect the struggle of women within a patriarchal culture and embody their experiences of violation. Shaw argues that the historical discourse on women’s self-injury mimics their experience of objectification and violence by silencing or distorting it. The idea of self-injury is of note today because of its surprising prevalence among young women in Western society. According to Marta Aizenman and Mary Ann Conover-Jensen, self-injury is a growing epidemic in our time, a malady which affects seventeen percent of otherwise normal individuals, more prevalent among young women than men. Non life-threatening self-injurious behaviours have been shown to be addictive and primarily motivated by an individual’s need to regulate and cope with negative emotions (“Speaking through the body” 8), regardless of religious context or motivation. From this perspective, the fact that Guyart overcame her self-injuring behavior, consciously or unconsciously, by choosing the Ursulines over the more ascetic Carmelites or Feuillantines and carrying on with constructive and purposeful action in the world is a model which resonates today. My interrogation of Guyart’s bodily self-injury, therefore, goes beyond the strictly religious, and certainly beyond Guyart’s own understanding of it. It allows me to speculate about the relationship between her mortifications and her conversion experience, and about the impact on both of certain traumatic life events.

The second and third chapters of La Relation suggest that Guyart’s mortifications began immediately following her conversion, a traumatic experience in itself which prompted emotions of guilt and self-hatred. It was these feelings that appear to have triggered her first penitential mortifications, a practice intensified under the supervision of her Feuillant spiritual directors. In order to understand the extent of the conversion trauma, it is necessary to consider the circumstances surrounding it. Anya Mali suggests that because research on conversion has
generally reflected two different approaches, either that of the social scientist or that of the religious believer, focus on the individual’s perception of what happened in the conversion experience has tended to be lost. Consequently, her own approach is to focus on what the experience meant to Guyart (33). All of these approaches, however, ignore the traumatic antecedents which help explain Guyart’s response to what she perceived as God’s direct intervention in her life. According to the text, Guyart’s conversion occurred in public on March 24, 1620, the morning of the day before the Feast of the Incarnation, a few months after the last in her series of considerable losses (the deaths of her mother, husband and mother-in-law, separation from her infant son, loss of livelihood and social status). Guyart recalls that, one morning, while she was going about her business in Tours, she suddenly perceived herself bathed in the blood of Christ. In that moment, she became instantly aware that she was guilty of sin, not innocent as she had thought herself to be:

Un matin que j’allais vaquer à mes affaires que je recommandais instamment à Dieu avec ... une certitude de foi qu’il m’assisterait infailliblement, en cheminant, je fus arrêtée subitement, intérieurement et extérieurement ... par un arrêt subit. Lors, en un moment, les yeux de mon esprit furent ouverts et toutes les fautes, péchés et imperfections que j’avais commises depuis que j’étais au monde, me furent représentées ... Au même moment, je me vis toute plongée en du sang, et mon esprit, convaincu que ce sang était le Sang du Fils de Dieu, de l’effusion duquel j’étais coupable ... Si la bonté de Dieu ne m’eût soutenue, je crois que je fusse morte de frayeur ... Il n’y a langue humaine qui le puisse l’exprimer ... Or, dans tous ces excès, je ne perdais point la vue que j’étais plongée dans ce précieux Sang [...] je m’en revins en notre logis, changée en une autre créature, mais si complètement changée que je ne me connaissais plus moi-
Still vivid thirty-four years later, Guyart’s memory of her conversion was an experience she considered transformative, the pivotal experience of her life. Beyond her religious beliefs, and beyond the conversion experience itself, the origin of Guyart’s severe mortifications may be seen to lie, in part, in the personal trauma and loss she experienced in the period which preceded it.

According to psychologist of religion Antoon Geels, most studies show that the phenomenon of religious conversion, especially related to loss and regardless of culture or religious discipline, usually occurs within two years of severe emotional stress (110-11). Particularly relevant to Guyart’s situation is Geel’s note that the element of parental loss is particularly remarkable in the lives of the mystics. In Guyart’s case, her conversion occurred only months after the deaths of her husband and mother-in-law, as well as the loss of her family’s business and livelihood and separation from her infant son, all preceded by the recent death of her mother. Compounding the situation, no doubt, was a cultural conditioning which encouraged the suppression of emotions such as grief, sadness, and anger, as a sign of acceptance of suffering believed to be sent by God. Other factors, such as the stress of societal pressure to remarry in the face of her strong aversion to marriage, may have played a role: “me voyant libre, j’avais une … grande aversion du mariage. Cela provenait de ce que le fonds que Dieu me donnait … était incompatible avec d’autres liens que ceux de son saint amour” (La Relation, 483).

It is the severity of the mortifications Guyart describes, however, which alerts the reader’s attention. According to the text, she inflicted pain on her body by a variety of means: her lacerations and flagellations drew blood, exposing her skin to inevitable infection;
she ingested bitter absinthe to destroy any pleasure in food; she inhaled the stench of rotting flesh (designed to make her retch); and she allowed herself just enough sleep to stay alive. The third person narration Guyart uses at this point is indicative of the soul-body duality then prevalent in Catholic belief:

[Dieu] donne [à l’âme] un nouvel esprit de pénitence qui fait qu’elle traite son corps comme une esclave (sic). Elle le charge de haires, de cilices et de chaînes, le fait coucher sur le bois, et pour linceul, un cilice; elle le fait passer partie des nuits à se discipliner sanglamment; elle lui fait manger de l’absinthe, de peur qu’elle prenne goût aux viandes; elle ne lui permet de sommeil que le peu qu’il lui en faut pour ne pas le laisser mourir, parce qu’elle veut qu’il souffre. Avec ces pénitences, les autres actions domestiques et les travaux du tracas, elle lui fait panser les plaies puantes et l’assujettit de s’en approcher si près qu’il en reçoive le sentiment; elle le fait aller où il y a charognes très infectes, pour en prendre à loisir le sentiment. Non contente, elle lui fait prier quelque personne confidente de le battre rudement. Elle ne lui donne aucun repos, mais de continuelles inventions à le faire souffrir … ce pauvre corps se laisse conduire comme un mort. (La Relation 211)

Crippled by the severity of her penances, Guyart continued, nonetheless, to carry out her daily responsibilities. A product of the dualistic system of Catholic belief, she punished her mortal body while at the same time she nourished her soul with the spiritual sustenance of the Eucharist and charitable acts towards others:

Mon corps brisé de pénitences reprenait ses forces par la manducation de ce divin pain et un nouveau courage pour recommencer tout de nouveau … Je me voyais quelquefois comme abandonnée. Lorsque dans la rigueur de l’hiver, pendant
l'obscurité de la nuit, je voulais châtier mon corps que je tenais tout découvert, à
peine pouvais-je remuer le bras. Je disais à ce divin Amateur: "Mon Bien-Aimé,
mettez-vous sur mon bras, à ce qu'il ait des forces pour châtier ce misérable corps."
Lors, il m'en donnait de si puissantes que je me déchirais de coups; puis, je mettais
une haire pour que ses brins et piqûres fussent d'autant plus sensibles. Ensuite, je
m'allais jeter quelques heures sur mon pauvre lit. (La Relation 223)

In the ascetic tradition of *imitatio Christi*, Guyart’s mortifications were intended to punish
her sinful body in the image of the suffering Christ: "les macérations du corps me servaient
... pour châtier mon corps : - parce que j'étais une grande pécheresse, je l'avais en haine
mortelle; - et pour honorer les souffrances du suradorable Verbe Incarné” (La Relation, 228).

Guyart’s conversion occurred in the third week of Lent, an anticipatory period in
which penitential feelings would normally run high and she and the whole community would
be obliged to reflect on their sins and repent. It is conceivable that in the closing days of
Lent, with the influence of the preachers thundering their rhetoric of sin and Christ’s
sacrifice, that general suggestibility and Guyart’s own sensitivity due to her recent losses,
were heightened.

Further, gendered notions of fear related to woman’s sinful nature, conflated with
notions of woman’s menstrual blood as dangerous, “un ‘excrément’ maléfique,” contributed
to the complexity of the circumstances surrounding Guyart’s conversion experience, as I
hope to show (Duchêne, 11). Jacques Maître points out that the notion of being bathed in the
blood of Christ is a common theme in mystic discourse and that it is often accompanied by a
deep sense of guilt. He notes that Guyart’s account of her experience is consistent with this
model (*Anorexie religieuse, anorexie mentale*, 114). An examination of the chronology of
events presented in the text, in editor’s notes, and by Oury and Deroy-Pineau, allows for a perspective which includes the possibility that Guyart’s menstrual blood, after a long period of suppression due to pregnancy and lactation, likely recommenced at about the same time, if not coincident with, her conversion experience. Certainly, superstition and ignorance surrounding human reproductive physiology and the function of menses prevailed, and any discussion related to women’s blood was taboo. Accordingly, it is conceivable that the blood Guyart perceived “intérieurement et extérieurement” as the blood of Christ at the moment of her conversion, could be associated with, or psychologically suggested by, the onset of menses with all its nefarious connotations:

Touchant ce qui se passa en moi en l’année mil six cent vingt, j’allais actuellement vaquer à mes affaires … et le tout se passa dans l’intérieur, mais d’une vue et expérience si vive et si pénétrante que réellement je me voyais en tout moi-même plongée dans du sang. (La Relation 484)

Of note as well, is the coincidence of her conversion experience falling on the eve of the Feast of the Incarnation, the day on which Jesus is believed to have been conceived in his mother’s womb. Guyart’s son, then six months old, had been taken to a wet nurse. According to Deroy-Pineau, the only reason Guyart would have employed a wet nurse, given her compromised financial and social circumstances, was because she had lost the ability to nurse him herself (Marie de l’Incarnation: Marie Guyart mystique, mère de la Nouvelle France, 95). After well over a year of biological suppression due to pregnancy and lactation, once lactation stopped, Guyart’s menstrual flow would normally have returned within the time frame of her conversion. The suggestibility factor regarding the coincidence of the date (the eve of the Feast of the Incarnation of Christ), the rhetoric of sin in Lent, the
proximity of Christ’s passion, negative notions around woman’s blood with the possible
return of menses, are all factors which, when combined, conceivably set the stage for
Guyart’s religious perception of being “internally and externally” bathed in Christ’s blood. It
is a combination of factors no psychologist today would ignore. Under such circumstances,
Guyart’s expression of terror is understandable: “si la bonté de Dieu ne m’eusse soutenue, je
crois que je fusse morte de frayeur” (La Relation, 182). Considerations such as the above do
not diminish Guyart’s belief in divine action, nor alter her claims to mystic authenticity;
rather, they situate what continues to be considered by the Church as a mysterious event of
supernatural origin as part of a natural confluence of physiological events and psychological
responses in historical context. The possibility of such an explanation, with its physiological
and psychological components, contributes to my understanding of Guyart’s expression of
self-hatred and her expressed need to punish her body for its perceived sinfulness beyond
purely religious motives, for nowhere was the sinful nature of woman represented more
symbolically than in the evils associated with menstrual blood. As Roger Duchêne observes
in Être femme au temps de Louis XIV, the theory of humours and woman’s weakness, both
physical and moral, was entrenched in the collective imaginary: “l’idée de la faiblesses
physique et morale de la femme apparaît comme une évidence qui traîne partout, et
particulièrement dans la littérature populaire, source et reflet de l’opinion commune … on
craint tout particulièrement leur flux mensuel … d’autant plus pernicieux qu’on en ignore la
cause (10). In this perspective, I suggest, Guyart may be perceived, at least in part, as a
victim of a social pathology that affected all women. At one point, Guyart recalls, the
severity of her fasting frightened her director, to the point that he feared for her life: “mon
esprit était toujours hors de moi-même; mon corps devenait comme une squelette (sic). Mon
supérieur ... eut quelque crainte que cette abstraction actuelle continue ne me causât la mort, vu sa longue durée” (La Relation, 312). In the context of her belief system, however, Guyart hated her body and desired to punish it for preventing her soul from leaving the material world to join her beloved Jesus in the world of spirit: “son plus grand obstacle qui la retient et l'empêche de s'envoler dans le séjour de son Bien-Aimé” (258).

According to Kroll and Bachrach, individuals who attempt to achieve spiritual transcendence today, whether through meditation or with drugs or alcohol, share a common purpose with the heroic ascetics of the past in that their actions express a desire to escape the day-to-day reality of the material world. Yet modern psychodynamic theory indicates that regardless of motivation, religious or otherwise, people who seek altered states of consciousness, including those heroic ascetics of history, may not actually know why they do what they do (206). It is conceivable, therefore, that factors beyond the penitential motivation of imitatio Christi and contemptus mundi were behind Guyart's bodily mortifications, factors of which her conscious mind was unaware.

Following her conversion, Guyart’s behaviour changed in another way as well. She adopted strange garb and acted strangely, ostensibly to deter suitors. At the time, she was fully aware that her bizarre behaviour made her different and that she was noticed because of it. She behaved differently and she felt different; because of her conversion, she believed she was different. In La Relation de 1633, Guyart recalls fearing that because of her strange ways, people in the community would think she was crazy, indeed, she says she was crazy because she did not act like the others: “j'avais une si grande vivacité intérieure qu'en marchant elle me faisait faire des sauts, en sorte que si l’on m’eût aperçue, l’on m’eût prise pour une folle. Et de fait, je l’étais, ne faisant rien comme les autres” (Jamet, t.1, 160).
In another instance in *La Relation de 1633*, Guyart also recalls fearing that people would think she was crazy if they knew what she was doing to her body, so she took care to hide her mortifications: “ceux que je fréquentais ordinairement n’eussent jamais jugé que je me fusse arrêtée à tous ces exercices de mortification; c’eût été assez pour leur faire croire que j’étais une folle; aussi, donniais-je de garde qu’on ne s’en aperçût” (173). Guyart recalls as well hiding her mortifications from disapproving attention while working in her brother-in-law’s business. She describes sneaking around at night, presumably to keep herself awake, without a candle in order not to be seen. She took such pains to avoid being seen that she risked hurting herself. While her brother-in-law made comments on occasion which led her to believe he suspected her behavior, nonetheless, she recalls there were only two occasions when she was surprised by servants who came upon her at night:

J’allais partout sans chandelle, me mettant peu en peine d’être vue ou entendue. La cave, les greniers, la cour, l’écurie pleine de chevaux, étaient mes stations. La nuit, je me mettais en danger de me blesser. J’étais aveugle à tout. Pourvu que je trouvasse lieu à me cacher, ce m’était assez. Mon frère me disait parfois des paroles en riant qui me pouvait donnait sujet de croire qu’il savait quelque chose de mes pénitences; mais prenant cela pour récréation, j’étais aveuglée et insensible à tout ... je n’y rencontrai aucun homme. Seulement, en deux occasions, une servante m’a surpris ... elle vit la table et les bancs sur lesquels je couchais et ma haire. (264)

Evidently, those who were aware of Guyart’s practice disapproved of it. In *La Relation de 1654* she recalls that even her spiritual director, Dom Raymond de Saint-Bernard, treated her visions with derision, suggesting that she suffered from illusions and that next, he supposed, she would be performing miracles: “il se riait de tout, en me disant, si je ne pensais point un
de ces jours faire des miracles ... et ... que je souffrais illusion” (316).

Through the infliction of physical pain in secret, and in spite of the adverse opinion of others, Guyart hoped to achieve detachment from her material self: “Dieu fait expérimenter à l’âme qu’il la veut tirer du soutien de ce qui est corporel, pour la mettre dans un état plus détaché, et dans une pureté par où elle n’a pas encore passé” (Jamet, t.1, 206). According to Kroll and Bachrach, although in retrospect the religious context makes sense of otherwise “highly aberrant” behaviour: “persons who privately injure themselves [today] are generally considered mentally ill, even if they insist that religious reasons inspired such injuries” (25).

What is important to consider in Guyart’s case, from today’s perspective, is the protracted nature and severity of her practice and its neurological effect on her body, a behaviour similar to that which underpins addictions:

Harsh self-injurious behaviors, especially if carried out on a prolonged or habitual basis, literally reshape synaptic pathways in the central nervous system [...] These processes provide the underpinning for those predictably repetitive patterns of behaviors that we tend to call habits and addictions [...] At a psychological level, deliberate use of thought-deflection techniques ... lend[s] further operant reinforcement to the self-injurious behaviors (Kroll and Bachrach, 28)

Seeking solitude for her mortifications was not new to Guyart. Following her conversion, she withdrew to the attic of her father’s house alone for a year. Through repetition, the text stresses the importance of her need for solitude and the role it played in her spiritual development, a solitude which allowed her to ponder the recent events of her life and talk them over with God: “l’attrait intérieur m’appelait à la solitude,” “mon esprit ... préférait la solitude;” “où ma solitude fut favorisée ... mon coeur parlait sans cesse à Dieu”
Guyart’s need to be alone may be related to a socially prescribed period of grief, yet it was evidently a strong need for her to have time to pray and to punish the flesh. Indeed, it was in her period of solitude that Guyart remembers first thinking of herself in negative terms, as “la dernière des créatures pour laquelle il (le Christ) avait si amoureusement répandu son précieux Sang” and that her first notions of self-hatred began: “qui produisait de plus en plus en moi une haine de moi-même” (ibid).

Oury characterizes Guyart’s somatic behaviour as “pénitences excessives” and explains it (as we have seen), as due, in part at least, to the influence of the Feuillants, an order known for its “caractère pénitentiel ... très marqué” (Marie de l’Incarnation, vol. I, 59). He notes that one would have to appreciate the austerity of the order to understand how anyone could allow a young woman to inflict such injury on herself: “il fallait être Feuillant et vivre au XVIIe siècle pour accorder tant de latitude à une jeune femme dans son ardeur à macérer son corps” (86). Oury does not gloss over this disturbing period of Guyart’s life, however, pointing out that in her Relation de 1633, she describes the extreme physical suffering caused by lacerations in even greater detail than she does in La Relation de 1654, from lying down on a plank covered with stinging nettles to wearing a hair shirt and chains. In La Relation de 1633, as quoted by Oury, Guyart explains how she mortified her body and with what severity, using a mix of both third and first persons (use of the third person serves to distance the effects of the pain while the first person serves to make it more subjective, personal, and acute):

Non seulement elle couche à même sur des planches, mais elle étend sur celles-ci un cilice pour que le contact soit plus rude ... les disciplines d’orties, dont elle usait l’été, lui était extrêmement sensibles, à s’en ressentir trois jours durant. Elle usait aussi de
chardons, et l’hiver d’une discipline de chaînes qui ne semblait rien au regard des orties … elle portait presque continuellement haire ou cilice, et l’habitude de dormir sur la dure avec un cilice pour drap, avait insensibilisé le côté sur lequel elle reposait en sorte qu’en me touchant, je ne me sentais pas. Cette mortification … est la plus pénible que j’aie jamais faite, car la dureté du bois et la pesanteur du corps faisaient entrer le crin dans la peau, en sorte que je ne pouvais dormir qu’à demi, ressentant toujours la douleur des piqûres. (Oury, *Marie de l’Incarnation*, tome 1, 87)

Certain Guyart critics like Oury and Mali recognize the connection between her mortifications and the conversion experience which triggered her penitential desire, as well as the fact that there may have been “factors contributing to and consequences issuing from the conversion, which the convert may or may not have taken into account” (Mali, 64). Yet their analysis of Guyart’s mortifications remains within the religious context. My analysis attempts to take epistemological, contextual, and gender factors into greater consideration.

In her spiritual autobiography, Guyart brings the behaviours she once hid into full view in spite of the possibility of disapproval by others. Represented by Marie-Florine Bruneau as a reaction against “internalized misogyny,” and as deliberate survival tactics and adaptive mechanisms” under oppressive patriarchal regimes (54), or by Oury as a direct result of the influence of her Feuillant spiritual advisors, Guyart’s heroic mortifications appear to be all that and more. They may also be the result of a complex set of historic social and personal circumstances that led her to participate in a practice peculiar to a relatively small number of individuals in Western European history, including women of extraordinary talent and intelligence like Teresa of Avila and Barbe Acarie.

Kroll and Bachrach provide physiological and neurological evidence that altered states of
consciousness brought on by severe and protracted pain in fact “alter the brain state in significant ways” (74). It is difficult, with current knowledge, not to view the physical and emotional symptoms Guyart describes in her text in the context of protracted bodily self-injury as obsessive behaviour. Guyart represents herself as having indeed been “mad,” both in her own eyes and in the eyes of others. But she reports a form of temporary acute emotional distress in her life-writing, both in her earlier Relation de 1633 and in La Relation de 1654, evidence, in modern physiological understanding, of apparently obsessive, potentially self-destructive, and most likely addictive behaviour. In the text, Guyart refers to the end of her long period of severe mortifications lightly: “quoique j’aimasse et me portasse d’affection à tous ces petits exercices de mortification dans le monde, néanmoins je ne ressentis pas une pensée ni mouvement contraire à l’obéissance en cette occasion” (La Relation, 279). According to the text, obedience to the demands of monastic rule and the support of a new environment she loved made the cessation of her severe mortifications possible, if not easy. Her comments here notwithstanding, as I have argued, the violence of the self-injury Guyart describes in the text, and the prominence she gives it, should not be ignored. As well as their role in penitential self-annihilation, Guyart’s severe mortifications may be seen as a reflection of widespread societal violence, internalized concepts of women’s worthlessness, and the role models of heroic ascetic women of the elite.

Guyart’s construction of her spiritual growth in La Relation de 1654 mirrors her representation in the text of progress towards greater meaning and purpose in her life and work, first in her advancement from lowly servant in her brother-in-law’s household to operating manager of his entire business enterprise, then from novice to assistant mistress of novices in the monastery and, eventually, to Mother Superior in Canada. Her fears and self-hatred transformed
over time into a love for God that left room only for love, conceivably love for herself as well as for others. Although the theme of abasement runs through the narrative, expressions of actual self-hatred are limited to the descriptions of her bodily mortifications. The societal devaluing of women, as well as the superstition surrounding mystic women under the continuing threat of heresy, were all elements operating in Guyart’s social environment at the highest levels of moral authority, justice and theology. Such an environment of fear and oppression begs the question as to which elements of society were truly “mad.” Her self-proclaimed emotional distress may be seen as a reflection of a prevailing social pathology.

While Diefendorf and others argue rightly that the “urge to crucify the flesh” must be understood in the context of early modern religious ideas (From Penitence to Charity, 75), evidence Guyart presents in La Relation de 1654 lends itself to an interpretation of greater complexity than has heretofore been offered by historians, Guyart biographers, and her religious and literary commentators. That Guyart inscribed details of her “pénitences excessives” in the face of general ecclesiastic and social disapproval may be seen as a form of resistance. As well, however, in the context in which habitual patterns of behaviour are now understood as the underpinnings of physiological addictions, the fact that Guyart was able to change those patterns is a testimony to her strength and character.

My analysis includes a further examination of Guyart’s representation of her symptoms of psychological distress, her description of her most severe period of anxiety, humiliation, and sometimes suicidal depression. Her deepest and longest period of depression, according to the text, appears to have been triggered by her transition to the New World. Paradoxically, it is just such a dramatic psychological and geographic dislocation which, according to Belenky et al., may trigger greater knowledge of self in certain questing women. It is a
trigger for Guyart's evolution of self for which there is considerable textual evidence.
CHAPTER FIVE

Anxiety, Depression, Humiliation

By far the longest and most severe of Guyart’s three periods of depression, as she describes them in *La Relation de 1654*, began with her departure for the New World. Certain biographical details, absent from her text, may contribute to a better understanding of the sudden end of her depression, a miracle Guyart attributed to the Virgin Mary on the Feast of the Assumption in 1647, some eight years later. In this chapter, I explore such events, as well as the emotional and physical effects of trauma, stress-induced anxiety, expectations, prejudices of class and power, humiliation and jealousy, not to mention the harsh Canadian environment, all of which may have contributed to Guyart’s “dark nights of the soul.”

Nathalie Zemon Davis, Dominque Deslandres, Chantai Théry and Anya Mali have dealt with the impact of the Canadian environment on Guyart’s spirituality and her life, as has Pierre Nepveu in *Intérieurs du Nouveau Monde: Essais sur les littératures du Québec et des Amériques*:

Comment, passant de l’Europe à l’Amérique, peut-on se vivre, sans le soutien extérieur que l’on connaissait, comme sujet. La réponse de Marie de l’Incarnation est aussi extrême que claire, aussi paradoxale qu’exemplaire; en lâchant tout, en “s’annihilant” et en se soumettant le plus humblement possible à cette réduction. Ou, si l’on veut une version plus moderne et nietzchéenne de cette affirmation paradoxale du sujet : “Dans le halo de la mort, et là seulement, le moi fonde son empire.” (*Intérieurs du Nouveau Monde*, 40)

In a few pages, Nepveu succeeds in raising key notions of deprivation, suicide, martyrdom, and ‘l’extraordinaire tension psychique’ of life in the New World for Guyart and her religious
colleagues (45). While the geography and context of New France had an undeniable effect on the autobiographical subject and her spirituality, such an impact has been studied in considerable depth, specifically by Anja Mali with regard to Guyart's ascension to the final state of spiritual victimhood, and by Deslandres, Zemon Davis, and Théry, among others, who have relied heavily on Guyart's thirty-two years of correspondence, following her arrival in Canada. Further investigation beyond the focus of this thesis is warranted, especially in relation to those stories in Guyart's correspondence which relate to her admiration for aboriginal women. As her descriptions in the text attest, there is no question that Guyart's transition to the New World, including her departure and the crossing itself, were difficult. Nor is there a question that the act of writing what became an enormous number of letters was vital for her, to maintain her connections with religious colleagues and loved ones and for the support she needed as Mother Superior, financially and in kind, to build and sustain the monastery. Prior to her departure, Guyart describes how in 1639 she became acquainted with Monsieur de Bernières, "trésorier de France à Caen," through her benefactress Madeleine de la Peltrie, a well-respected and pious gentleman who became one of her principal correspondents and confidants until his death in 1659 (La Relation, 359). According to the text, it was through Madeleine de la Peltrie that Guyart made her connections with certain members of the upper class, a network which proved vital to the mission's survival. Certainly, by the time she sat down to write La Relation de 1654, Guyart was an accomplished writer, mature in age and perspective, as I hope to demonstrate in my analysis of her epistemological evolution of self in Chapter Seven. Guyart had spent nearly fifteen years braving the hardships of Canada. She knew what she could say and what she could not say. She had already written two previous versions of spiritual autobiography, La
Relation de 1633 and the manuscript she let burn in the fire of 1650, as well as spiritual treatises and, by then, thousands of letters. She was practiced at her craft and understood how to engage her reader. She knew how to use abrupt contrast and change of mood to create narrative tension, as she did, for example, in her account in La Relation de 1654 of her transition to the monastery when she juxtaposed her new-found peace with the shattering brouhaha of her son and his friends clamouring at the gate for her return:

Il ne se peut dire combien la religion me fut douce après un tracas tel que celui que j’avais quitté … Notre-Seigneur permit que j’eusse une bonne épreuve d’abord. Ce fut qu’une troupe de petits écoliers, compagnons de mon fils, s’assembla … en nombre à la porte du monastère, qui, avec une grande confusion, faisaient des bruits et des cris qu’on me rendit. (La Relation 278)

Or, similarly, as she did in her story of embarkation on the first leg of her trans-Atlantic crossing, when one moment she was in heaven with joy, and the next, she was literally gripped by the terrors of the sea:

Lorsque je mis le pied en la chaloupe qui nous devait mener en rade, il me sembla entrer en paradis … Je chantais en moi-même les miséricordes d’un si bon Dieu qui me conduisait avec tant d’amour au point que j’avais désiré il [y] avait si longtemps.

Tout le temps que dura la traversée de la mer me fut intensivement et actuellement un continuel sacrifice, m’offrant nuit et jour dans les périls continuels en holocauste à mon divin et céleste Époux. (354-5)

Both examples of literary tension mirror the conflicting emotions of pain and joy, the pain of rupture and the joy of anticipation, associated with leaving the old and embracing new life possibilities.
The description of Guyart’s trans-Atlantic crossing, like her transition to the monastery nearly a decade before, marks an important break in her narrative as it does in her life. In the psychological and geographical rupture of leaving France, deprived of everything that was familiar, saying good-bye to her son, friends, family, colleagues and country, never to return, Guyart reacts in a way reminiscent of her response to an earlier traumatic rupture when, as a young widow, she withdrew to the attic of her father’s house. Like the solitude she sought then, she sought solitude during the crossing; nor, as then, had she a voice with which to express her feelings: “Dans la traversée, je demeurai seule, n’ayant aucun pouvoir en moi de communiquer ce que j’expérimenterais par la subtilité de l’occupation intérieure” (376).

The harrowing and perilous crossing took three months, the ships blown weeks off course in snow, wind, and fog (Oury, Marie de l’Incarnation vol. II, 323). In itself the crossing was traumatic: “tout le temps que dura la traversée de la mer me fut intensivement et actuellement un continuel sacrifice, m’offrant nuit et jour dans les perils continuels en holocaust à mon divin … Époux” (355). From the time of embarkation, symptoms of Guyart’s third and longest period of depression took hold, a state of emotional and psychological distress which lasted eight years, from May 1639, until the Feast of the Assumption in August, 1647 (374), symptoms which included a deep sense of worthlessness, a loss of confidence in herself and in those around her, and strained inter-personal relations:

Je me vis dépouillée de tous les dons et grâces que Dieu avait mis en moi … Je perdis la confiance en qui que ce fût, et les personnes les plus saintes et celles avec lesquelles j’avais le plus eu d’entretiens … Dieu permettait qu’elles eussent des tentations d’aversion continuelle contre moi. (376)
She saw herself in abject humility, "la plus basse et ravalée et digne de mépris qui fût au monde," grateful to the other nuns for putting up with her: "je ne pouvais me lasser d’admirer la bonté … de mes soeurs de vouloir bien dépendre de moi." She recalls feeling humiliated by the way others treated her, "je n’osais quasi lever les yeux pour le poids de cette humiliation," and as a result, just as her feelings of worthlessness had led her to carry out the functions of the lowliest servant to the servants in her brother-in-law’s household years before (functions which would have included cleaning lavatories, for example, in the most basic of conditions), similar feelings of abjection led her to assume similar duties during the trans-Atlantic crossing "dans cette bassesse d’esprit, je m’étudiais de faire les actions les plus basses et viles, ne m’estimant pas digne d’en faire d’autres" (376). She relates how her thoughts turned to suicide:

J’étais parfois subitement arrêtée et me semblait que réellement je me voyais sur le bord de l’enfer … et je sentais en moi une disposition qui me voulait porter de m’y précipiter … Lors, [Dieu] excitait la partie supérieure de mon âme à vouloir en effet être précipitée dans l’enfer, pour ce que la Justice divine fût satisfaite dans le châtiment eternal de mes indignités. (378)

Guyart acknowledges that her talents were above the ordinary; yet precisely because of this knowledge, the burden of their perceived loss and humiliation was all the greater. Indeed, she compared herself to the biblical prodigal son:

Si j’avais des vues que Dieu m’avait donné des talents pour diverses choses, dans les états et conditions où il m’avait appelée, je voyais et il me semblait avoir l’esprit convaincu que, comme un autre enfant prodigue, j’avais tout perdu par ma faute … Ainsi, tout servait à mon humiliation et anéantissement. (La Relation 409).
As Phyllis Chesler observes in *Women and Madness*, such depression in talented but socially oppressed women is not unusual, and it may be severe:

> The cumulative effect of being forced to lead circumscribed lives is toxic. The psychic toll is measured in anxiety, depression, phobias, suicide attempts, eating disorders, and such stress-related illnesses as addictions, alcoholism, high blood pressure and heart disease. (17)³xxiii

The oppressive practices of the Ancien Régime with regard to the subjugation of women persisted in the New World as they had in the Old. Religious women were cloistered in Quebec as they had been in France and remained under the protection of the Bishop (or his representative). Yet despite the wall which enclosed them, the Ursulines were no longer denied access to people from the outside. Indigenous people, men as well as women, who sought food or shelter from the ongoing threat of the Iroquois wars or teaching in the Christian way, as well as clerics and lay persons who sought advice and counsel, all presented themselves to the monastery: “nous avions une grosse famille que nous assistions tous ... en les nourrissant, car plusieurs personnes de piété assistèrent en ce qu’ils pouvaient ces pauvres exilés, mais les maisons religieuses ... y contribuèrent le plus (*La Relation*, 430). In the primitive, difficult conditions of the early years of establishing the community, conditions which required physically as well as emotionally exhausting effort, Guyart recorded many of her observations of early society in her letters. But in her spiritual autobiography she records her frequent feelings of sadness, humiliation and despair. Cultural and religious self-effacement of women allowed little mention of their own accomplishments. There are few references in the text to her responsibilities as Mother Superior, to her overseeing the construction of the monastery or to the daily efforts required
to ensure her community’s survival. Little is said about managing the merger of the two Ursuline houses or about the exhaustive correspondence needed to keep the flow of financial and material support coming from France: “j’avais beaucoup d’affaires pour notre établissement et notre union. Notre-Seigneur me faisait la grâce d’en venir à bout avec bénédiction, quelques épines qui s’y rencontrassent” (398). As Gilmore observes: “the rhetoric of spiritual confessions is filled with … deference; the humility topos is common to the point of being pro forma … [It reflects] a pattern that fails to reconcile a woman’s achievements with the cultural position she occupies” (Autobiographies, 116). Yet while the text is mostly silent about Guyart’s extraordinary energy and accomplishments, it is not silent about the mental anguish and humiliation she suffered:

Je passais d’une abîme de lumière et d’amour en un abîme d’obscurité et de ténèbres douloureuses, me voyant comme plongée dans un enfer, qui portait en soi des tristesses et amertumes provenantes d’une tentative de désespoir, qui était comme née dans ces ténèbres, sans que j’en connusse la cause, et je me fusse perdue dans cette tentative, si, par une vertu secrète, la bonté de Dieu ne m’eût soutenue. (377)

While Guyart accepted humiliation as perceived just punishment from God for her sins, paradoxically, His love provided her the strength to endure it:

Je loue et bénis ce sacré Sauveur de ce qu’il lui a plu en diverses manières m’humilier dans ses voies … S’il m’a dit : Faites du bien à ceux qui vous font du mal, c’est une loi qu’il me semble qu’il a écrite dans mon cœur avec une efficacité toute d’amour … Comme ayant eu diverses affaires, depuis que je suis en Canada, et par conséquent à traiter avec personnes de diverses conditions, il s’est rencontré plusieurs affaires assez épineuses; ces divines maximes ont été ma force et mon soutien. (La Relation 423)
Although Guyart’s feelings of humiliation were related to notions of spiritual self-abasement, they were no doubt reinforced by societal notions of female inferiority and submission in the context of which the practice of humiliation of women was common. According to Evelin Lindner, it is not until the late twentieth century that the deleterious effects of pervasive humiliation on mental health were understood, especially in relation to two recent findings in neuroscience. The first of these is that when we observe others being humiliated we act as if we have been humiliated ourselves, an observation which suggests humiliation need not be directly experienced to be harmful. The second is that the pain of humiliation is perceived in the brain as if it were physical pain, “equally strong and compelling.” Further, according to Lindner, it is now understood that feelings of humiliation can lead to obsessive and addictive behaviour: “the core of any addiction is its compelling and intense nature […] Feelings of humiliation may be as significant and consuming as any form of addiction or dependence” (“The Transition of the Link Between Humiliation and Mental Health,” Lecture at the International Mental Health Professionals of Japan Conference, March 17-18, 2007). In “Current State of the Art in Research on Humiliation,” Linder observes that negative emotions caused by humiliation may be turned inward as depression or outward as violence, while some people simply thrive under stress.xxxvi

The frequent references to humiliation, both self-inflicted and suffered at the hands of others, are notable in Guyart’s text. By repeatedly describing her inner sense of abjection before God and man, Guyart draws the reader’s attention to its significance. Suppressing any sense of pride in herself was critical to her beliefs, cultural conditioning, and self-perception. As Gerda Lerner points out, “women have for millennia participated in the process of their own subordination because they have been psychologically shaped so as to internalize the
idea of their own inferiority" (The Creation of Patriarchy, 218). While the language of humility is common to the texts of pious women and men, and specifically related to the concept of self-abnegation in the spirituality of the times, it involves a complex psychology for women under patriarchy which did not apply to men. Further, Chantal Théry suggests that humility and abasement were part of a deliberate linguistic strategy adopted by religious women in the justification of their vocation:

Toute leur vie, les femmes missionnaires, femmes de caractère et d'idées, supérieures et gestionnaires de couvent, devront justifier le bien-fondé de leur vocation, de leur présence et de leur travail [...] l'excès d'humilité était le levier autorisé de l'affirmation de soi: elles se rabaissaient d'abord, pour mieux oser ensuite s'exprimer ou favoriser leurs projets. (De plume et d'audace 13)

Thus, Théry suggests, when Guyart refers to herself in her letters as a “faible et imbécile créature,” “un vers de terre,” or “le plus chétif instrument qui soit sous le ciel,” or if she apologizes for “la petite capacité de [son] sexe,” the reader is not to be fooled by the rhetoric of “l'infinie humilité imposée par des institutions misogynes ou sexistes” (156). Rather, Théry finds evidence of a nature “digne des grands missionnaires et des globe-trotters,” and a pluck and fearlessness that contradicts Guyart's language of baseness: “Pour moy, je vous dis franchement, je n'ay peur de rien, et quoy que je sois la plus misérable du monde, je suis prête et me sens dans la disposition d'aller aux extrémitez de la terre, quelques barbares quelles soient” (Oury, Correspondances, letter CXVII, quoted in Théry, ibid, 81). Thus, according to Théry, in the self-effacing language of Guyart's correspondance one finds, paradoxically, an affirmation of self. But in the language of her spiritual autobiography, with its insistence on feelings of humiliation, baseness and suicidal depression, there is much
more than a linguistic strategy: there is a cry of gendered suffering that runs deep.

Guyart's indomitable spirit was stricken, but not broken, by the slings and arrows of humiliation; that she inscribed them allows us a deeper understanding of the humiliation practices of the times and their deleterious effects, perhaps mirrored in her depression and heroic mortifications.
CHAPTER SIX

Demonic Possession

Fear of the devil, conflated with fear of woman, was a deeply felt cultural phenomenon, not just in popular culture, but also in the minds of the great thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Krumenacker, 49). Guyart commentators tend to ignore or dismiss her claims of an experience of demonic possession, possibly because reference to it might detract from the positive image of Guyart they are presenting. In this chapter I will describe the experience as Guyart presents it and situate it in the context of her times, particularly in relation to the mass possession at the Ursuline convent of Loudun, forty-five kilometres from Tours, during the same period. As well, I will analyse the personal factors in Guyart’s life that may have fed into the experience and speculate as to why and for what purpose she included it in her autobiography, given that such claims in women were suspect.

According to the text, Guyart’s experience of demonic possession occurred one night in the monastery in 1632. At the time, she had just learned of the devil’s attack on certain of the Ursuline nuns at the neighbouring monastery of Loudun, a situation about which she expressed both sadness and anger:

En ce temps-là, l’on eut nouvelle des possessions arrivées à nos Mères de Loudin: ce qui me touchait d’une grande compassion et haine contre le diable de ce qu’il était si hardi d’avoir osé s’approcher et vexer ainsi les servantes de Dieu, lequel je priaïs fréquemment pour ces pauvres affligées. (La Relation 293)

While limited to a description of no more than two pages, Guyart’s memory of possession stands out in my reading because of its graphic detail and because of the fact that she links it specifically to the Loudun affair, one of the most infamous cases of mass demonic possession.
in the history of Europe.³³vii

According to Moshe Sluhovsky, the historic rise in cases of mass possession occurred at a time when controversy regarding such claims was grounded in a widespread misogynistic belief in the inherent weakness of women. As he points out, demonic possession is a gendered phenomenon in Christian history, for while there are some recorded cases of individual possession in men, the vast majority involved women. Incidents of mass demonic possession involved only religious women, with no recorded cases of mass possession among men, religious or lay. While great fear was attached to the perceived work of the devil, possession could also serve as a positive sign indicating that religious women had made significant enough progress along the spiritual path to attract the devil’s attention (247). Guyart’s textual representation of her possession experience can be seen in this light, as both a testimony to her spiritual advancement and as support for her spiritual claims. It can also be seen as a metaphor for her fears.

According to her narrative, one night about midnight in 1632, approximately a year after she entered the monastery, Guyart left her bed in the dark, (she had no candle) to check on her “maîtresse des novices” who was ill, praying to the Holy Trinity through the Virgin Mary for protection against the devil as she went. No sooner was she back in bed and her eyes closed, she recalls, than she perceived a horrible spectre in human form as bright and as clear as day. His face was long and bluish in colour; with earth-shattering cries, he stuck out his tongue and taunted her. She shuddered, made the sign of the cross and turning her back on him, rolled over in bed. The image disappeared and she fell asleep:

Une nuit entre autres, comme je visitais sur la minuit ma maîtresse des novices qui était malade, je me souvins, passant par le dortoir de faire quelque hommage et prière
à la très sainte Trinité par l’entremise de la très sainte Vièrge, et, pour faire dépit au
diable, de dire des prières vocales à ce sujet: ce que je fis. A mon retour, je ne fus
pas plus tôt sur ma couche - je n’avais pas de chandelle - qu’il se présenta à mon
imagination un spectre horrible, en forme humaine, que je voyais aussi clairement
qu’en plein jour, quoique j’eusse les yeux fermés. Il avait un visage long, tout
plombé et bleuâtre, les yeux gros et plus qu’un boeuf, qui, pour se moquer de moi,
me tira sa langue longue et épouvantable, et avec une grimace et un hurlement que
je crus qui avait été entendu de tous les dortoirs. A l’abord, je frémis, mais ayant
fait le signe de la croix sur moi, je lui tournai le dos et n’eus plus cette
représentation. Je m’endormis fort posément jusqu’au matin, que je fus trouver ma
supérieure pour lui dire tout ce qui s’était passé. (293-94)

The next morning, she asked her Mother Superior if she had heard the devil’s howls, howls
she thought were loud enough to be heard throughout the dormitory. Her Mother Superior
replied that she had heard nothing (294).

Another night soon after, lying in her bed but not sure if she was awake or asleep,
Guyart had a different sensation. This time, she perceived the same evil spirit slip into her
bones and into the very nerves of her body with the sole intent of destroying her. For what
seemed an eternity, she was paralyzed with fear. She could neither move nor call out, the
kind of sensation which suggests what Ann Taves refers to as ‘sleep paralysis,’ a
phenomenon known to occur in the trance-like state between waking and sleep states (76).
In her terror, *her voice was strangled*, much as the voices of all women are strangled by the
social oppression of patriarchy. Suddenly she felt a second, powerful but benevolent force
enter her body and engage with the malevolent demon in fierce battle, ultimately vanquishing
it:

En une autre nuit, que j'entendais encore des soeurs marcher par le dortoir, tout d'un coup j'expérimentai en mon corps que ce malin esprit s'était glissé dans mes os, dans mes moelles et dans les nerfs, lequel me voulait détruire et m'anéantir. Je me trouvais en une extrême peine, car je ne pouvais me remuer ni appeler personne. Cela dura assez longtemps. Lors, ayant bien pâti, je sentis en moi une force et vigueur si puissante, comme si c'eût été un autre esprit, se battre et lutter contre cet autre, qu'en moins de rien il l'eut (sic) brisé et anéanti. Lors, je demeurai libre [...] Jamais depuis ce temps-là, cela m'est arrivé. (La Relation 294)

Of note in Guyart’s account is the fear that the devil wished to destroy her. Years later, when Jeanne des Anges (the Mother Superior of the Loudun convent during the mass possessions), visited Tours, Guyart recalls telling her about her experience. Jeanne des Anges replied that the same thing had happened to their exorcists: “lorsque la Révérende Mère prieure des Urselines de Loudin passa chez nous ... je lui communiquai cela. Elle me dit que souvent le diable faisait chose semblable à leurs exorcistes” (ibid). By inscribing the Mother Superior’s observation, Guyart makes the parallel between herself and the exorcists of Loudun, aligning herself not only with the victims, but with the male priests who were there to help them, once again crossing and resisting gendered lines. xxxviii

According to Sluhovsky, while accounts of dreams and demonic temptations were commonplace, claims of possession by demonic spirits were relatively rare, and incidents of mass demonic possession, which occurred sporadically in the last half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century in Europe, were extremely rare (171). The seriousness of the accusations at Loudun, the intrigue that accompanied it, and the duration
of the drama caused a major scandal in the country and presented a particular challenge to Church authority and theology, all of which has been studied by Michel de Certeau as a historical and sociological phenomenon in *La Possession de Loudun*. Interest in the phenomenon remained strong in the twentieth century with the publication of Aldous Huxley’s 1952 novel, *The Devils of Loudun*, which was dramatized in an opera of the same name by Krzysztof Penderecki in 1969, and by Ken Russell in the 1971 British film, *The Devils*. The whole affair was mired in intrigue and tainted by the cruelty of the death of the accused priest, who was tortured and burned alive.\textsuperscript{xxxix}

As Sluhovsky points out, in such an environment, any claim of demonic possession on the part of a religious woman put her under suspicion and jeopardized the well-being of her monastery. The female monasteries relied on their good reputation to attract novices and financial support. While the presence of a recognized mystic, usually a woman of noble birth, would add to a monastery’s positive renown, a case of demonic possession cast a pall over it. Any nun, especially a mystic, who behaved in a suspect manner could put the entire community at risk, exposing it to financial disaster such as befell the Ursulines of Loudun as a direct result of their alleged possessions. During the period of the possession, Jeanne des Anges reported later, the community was reduced to extreme poverty. With few provisions, they went for days at a time without eating, relying on cabbage and the vegetables from their garden for sustenance (Sluhovsky, 257-8). Given the environment of ‘policing’ and surveillance described by Gilmore, and the risks and dangers described by Sluhovsky, there is little doubt that Guyart’s claims of demonic possession would have been viewed with suspicion. Her *Relation de 1633*, written at the request of her spiritual director Georges de la Haye shortly after her experience of possession as a summary of her spiritual life to that
point, may conceivably have served the purpose of discernment. Certainly, Guyart's expression of relief at de la Haye's judgment of divine, not demonic, influence in her spiritual narrative is clear: “après l'assurance que le Révérend Père de la Haye m'eut donnée que j'étais dans le bon chemin, je demeurai dans une grande paix ... je me trouvai comme en une nouvelle région” (La Relation, 302). Her relief may be seen in the larger context of safety from the threat of heresy, as the Inquisition, according to Sluhovsky, was alive and well in early seventeenth-century France (31). As she was neither of noble birth nor well-connected in aristocratic circles at the time, her first real connections to the upper class occurring just prior to her departure for the new World, Guyart would not have been assured the same deference accorded to Jeanne des Anges.

The increase in cases of individual possession and the phenomenon of mass female possession were coincident with the rise of female spirituality and monasticism in the period. Historians de Certeau and Sluhovsky, among others, agree that such phenomena were related to societal factors, including the devaluing of women, and that by the 1630s suspicion of women's claims of mystic visions and demonic possessions had become widespread in common, as well as theological, circles (Sluhovsky, 203). But for Guyart, her experience was as real as any in her material reality. Distinct yet connected, Guyart's voice may be seen to join with that of her sisters of Loudun, perhaps as a subconscious cry of solidarity with these suffering women, who through their claims, had gained a voice that demanded to be heard. For this reason, a brief look at the circumstances of Loudun is in order.

**The Mass Possessions of Loudun**

As Sluhovsky points out, of more than fifty cases of demonic possession registered during the first half of the seventeenth century, only six, five of them in France, became
causes célèbres. Of these, Loudun was the most notorious (239). De Certeau, in his analysis of the Loudun affair, does not discount outright the possibility of mental illness among the possessed women, but, given the impossibility of personal evaluation, he attributes their symptoms more to a deep, underlying confusion characteristic of this period when the medieval religious world-view was crumbling in the face of rising rationalism, a confusion which manifested itself in the bodies of certain of society’s repressed and silenced members. Coincident with the rise in possessions, he points out, was a new wave of plague raging across Europe. In the city of Loudun alone nearly a quarter of the population of 14,000, some 3,700 people, had died in a tragic repetition of the plague of 1603. Like all misfortunes, the plague was considered a punishment from God against which neither doctors nor ecclesiastics had any power. As de Certeau observes: “la fréquence des pestes dans la région depuis deux siècles a rendu la mort partout présente, et avec elle, la peur et la terreur de la mortalité imminente” (La Possession de Loudun, 33). Because of the plague, public gatherings were forbidden, and there were no more Church processions or itinerant preachers to exhort the crowds of the faithful. Fear gripped the people. As the first possessions of Loudun coincided with the last cases of plague, they have been construed by some as a subconscious cry of anger and despair.

According to de Certeau, the period was witness to unprecedented reports of ecstatic behaviours in women, which, as we have seen, would more often than not have been discerned as being of demonic rather than of divine origin. The practice of expelling demons from the energumen, or possessed person, had the effect of re-establishing social order in a period that was ‘intensely troubled’ (31). In de Certeau’s view, the possession of the Ursulines at Loudun provided a public diversion of the most theatrical kind, involving
exorcists, doctors, members of the judiciary, politicians, and clergy of all rank, from the local priests to the highest echelons of the Church, including Cardinal Richelieu himself. Central to the whole affair was Urbain Grandier, the controversial priest who was reputed to have a mistress and perhaps even to be married. Grandier had dared to challenge the authority of the Church by taking a public stand against celibacy and had published a pamphlet to that effect (124). His enemies within both the Church and lay communities accused him of heresy; the possessed nuns claimed it was Grandier disguised as Satan who came to them in the night with lewd suggestions and attempts at sexual seduction. The affair escalated with Richelieu's decision to execute him. Grandier, who maintained his innocence throughout, was executed in 1634 as an example to anyone who questioned the authority of the Church. In spite of his death, the possessions of Loudun continued unabated until 1638 (La Relation, 301, note 5).

According to Sluhovsky, one of the paradoxes of women's perceived susceptibility to the devil is that they were also believed to be more susceptible to divine possession than men (194). Yet, as a gendered phenomenon, women's mystic experience had long been associated by the Church with a form of mental illness. From as far back as 1415, Jean Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris, had issued dire warnings that women's claims to mystic experience were not to be trusted. In 1608, Gerson's warnings were repeated in the Compendium maleficarum, a guide for practitioners of discernment published in the ongoing spirit of "surveillance" and "policing" of women who claimed mystic experience so aptly described by Gilmore. By 1634, the papal bull Coelestis Hierusalem reversed certain indicators of charismatic gifts which henceforth would be deemed clear signs of demonic temptation, making ecclesiastic approval of any woman's experience of ecstatic spirituality as
evidence of divine possession “extremely rare” and the threat of persecution by the Inquisition very real (Sluhovsky, 202).

In the 1630s, monastic women posed a new challenge to the Church, as most were following the new Jesuit, Salesian, and Theresian forms of “interior passivity” amidst growing theological concern that such practices allowed greater exposure to the devil’s manipulations. Sluhovsky observes that these new forms of spiritual practice were introduced in conjunction with harsh ascetic rule in the reformed monasteries, and since mass possessions occurred only under these conditions, he theorizes that it was this combination that provided the cultural trigger for the phenomenon (195).

Sluhovsky’s theories do not, however, take into specific consideration as causal factors the humiliation and degradation of women, evidence of sexual misconduct in the monasteries, or the high level of sexual abuse of women in the wider society. Added to the above social factors are the personal life circumstances that may have prompted a further sense of humiliation for some religious women, nuns who had previously enjoyed certain privileges of their class, like maids and furnishings from home, who lost them in the newly imposed austerity. According to Sluhovsky, at Loudun, for example, novices are reported to have smashed crucifixes in rage over the austerity of their living conditions or been sent home for suicidal depression, yet theologians of the period persisted in their belief in the supposed ‘sexual insatiability’ of young religious women. It was a belief supported by Loudun physician Claude Ouillet who declared that the possessed nuns were in the throes of ‘hystéromanie,’ or sexually provoked madness (255). As Sluhovsky observes, it was not unusual for ‘possessed’ women to claim that demons entered their bodies through their sexual organs (Jeanne des Anges, claimed her demons resided in her vagina, her ‘shameful parts’),
or that the possessed women’s bodies should writhe in mock contortions of sexual intercourse. Possessed sisters exposed themselves and accused their Mother Superior of sexual contact with them. Still, there is evidence, according to Sluhovsky, of real sexual debauchery among the nuns at Loudun as well as with their father confessors in other monasteries, all such behaviour being ascribed to the work of the devil. It is reasonable to suppose that such behavior was not limited to the nuns of Loudun and that it may also have been true at Tours, as in other monasteries, as well. As Sluhovsky points out, it was only after, and not before the nuns had been diagnosed as possessed, that they acted out sexually as energumens, an indication of psychological suggestibility. The devil, he suggests, may thus be seen as a metaphor for the nuns’ doubts as to their worthiness (258), stopping short of suggesting any possible link between sexual abuses and the nuns’ ‘madness.’ While Guyart’s description of her experience of demonic possession is brief, it is significant in its psychological connection to the horrors of the mass possessions of Loudun. In it, it is not difficult to perceive a metaphor of sexual invasion and violence, of fear, literally and figuratively of being destroyed, and in her memory of physical paralysis and inability to cry out, a further metaphor for the fear and cultural silencing of women.

While a unique psychological and historical context, including serious issues around female sexuality, undoubtedly contributed to preconditions for the societal phenomenon of demonic possession, both individual and mass, there is evidence in Guyart’s text of psychological distress related to other factors in the period leading up to her possession experience. Such factors include the rupture and loss, the anxiety, doubt, and inter-personal difficulties she describes suffering in the two years prior to (and one year after), her perceived encounter with the devil:
Quelque temps après que je fus revêtue du saint habit de religion, les tentations commencèrent à m'attaquer de toutes parts …. C'étaient des tentations de blasphème, de déshonnêteté, d'orgueil, nonobstant ce que je sentais et expérimen
tais de faiblesses et de pauvretés: une insensibilité et stupidité ès choses spirituelles, un contre-sens en mon imagination contre l'agir de mon prochain ... Il me semblait que j'étais trompée du diable et que je m'étais abusée, croyant que ce que qui s'était passé en moi, qu'on avait cru être de Dieu, n'était que feintes. (La Relation 292).

Guyart's transition to monastic life constituted a dramatic rupture with the outside world in which she left her son and her whole former identity as a woman, in short, everything she had known, behind. And six months later, her father died, just as he said he would if she left him, adding the additional burden of loss and negative public opinion to the extraordinary sacrifice she perceived religion required of her:

J'eus encore un autre assaut. Mon père ... m'assura qu'il mourrait d'affection si je me retirais. Moi, qui voulais obéir à Dieu ... je passai par-dessus toutes les tendresses de la nature, appuyée sur les paroles de Notre-Seigneur: Qui aime son père et sa mère plus que moi n'est pas digne de moi. En effet, il mourrut environ six mois après ... les personnes qui ne jugeaient que selon le monde avaient divers sentiments à ce sujet, pendant que mon divin Époux me faisait expérimenter qu'il fait bon tout quitter pour l'amour de lui. (282)

In the months following, in contrast to the peace she felt at being free of the “tracas” of the world, Guyart suffered symptoms of anxiety and doubt she understood only as the devil testing her resolve. Her son had gone to Rennes, her father was dead, her relationships with the other nuns were difficult and her spiritual practice diminished due to her inability to
concentrate. Her anxiety caused her serious suffering and confusion, suffering which included thoughts of suicide:

> Je ne voyais ... d’autre sujet de ma croix que moi-même ... ce qui me faisait redoubler mon affliction ... je devenais pire avec les âmes saintes que je n’avais été avec les perverses du siècle ... en sorte qu’étant une fois proche d’une fenêtre, il me vint une tentative de me précipiter du haut en bas. (313)

Soren Kierkegaard provides a description in *The Concept of Dread* of the power exerted over the psyche by such anxiety:

> No Grand Inquisitor has in readiness such terrible tortures as has anxiety. No spy knows how to attack more artfully the man he suspects, choosing the instant he is weakest, nor knows how to lay traps where he will be caught and ensnared, as anxiety knows how. No sharp-witted judge knows how to interrogate, to examine the accused, as anxiety does, which never lets him escape, neither by diversion nor by noise, neither at work nor at play, neither by day nor by night. (139)

In *La Relation de 1654*, Guyart inscribes her memory of demonic possession squarely in this period of prolonged anxiety which Oury describes as her second dark night of the soul. As Oury observes, the two years of Guyart’s noviciate were difficult: her brother-in-law in whose business and household she had worked and raised her son, died; the plague had returned to Tours and “grand nombre de personnes en furent frappé,” including one of the novices in Guyart’s charge. At the time, Guyart’s sister lent a house to the Ursulines who took the novices there where they remained under Guyart’s direction until the worst of the plague was over: “Marie de l’Incarnation, novice de sept mois à peine, a donc été chargé du noviciat” (*Marie de l’Incarnation*, vol 1, 194). It was a position of considerable
responsibility. Oury speculates that Guyart’s symptoms of depression, although severe, were not uncommon in novices, especially older women novices, due to the contrast between monastic life and the life they had left behind (ibid, 199). He raises doubt about the veracity of Guyart’s possession claim, suggesting that she was truly in a bad state, and that rightly or wrongly, she believed she had been attacked twice by the devil: “dans l’état psychique où se trouvait Marie de l’Incarnation … elle crut, à tort ou à raison être deux fois la victime du démon” (ibid, 204). He does not elaborate on Guyart’s possession experience nor on its link with the phenomenon of the mass possession of the Ursulines of Loudun.

But while her narrative clearly situates Guyart’s claims as being in solidarity with the nuns of Loudun, her claims were nonetheless based on an experience that was different from theirs. Unlike the public spectacle of the Loudun possessions, which lasted for years, Guyart’s experience was brief, private, apparently in a state between sleep and waking consciousness, a dream-like state which, according to Ann Taves, is of special interest to researchers: “dream research promises to provide an increasingly sturdy psychophysiological model … to analyze the process whereby unusual experiences on the boundary between sleep and waking are deemed religious” (76). In her category “unusual experiences on the boundary between sleep and waking,” Taves includes possession:

If the basic research on sleep and dreams offers the possibility of a psychophysiological framework for understanding a range of phenomena on the border between sleep and waking, the relationship between trance, a commonplace boundary phenomena, and possession, a social construct, provides a good vantage point for examining the complicated relationship between the psycho-physiological and the social dimensions of experience. (79)
Guyart’s description of being unable to move or cry out during her possession experience suggests a state of ‘sleep paralysis,’ as we have seen, which, according to Taves, includes “hypnagogic and hypnopompic hallucinations – that is, a brief experience of involuntary immobility immediately prior to falling asleep (hypnagogic) or upon waking (hypnopompic), often associated with vivid hallucinations of a sensed presence” (132), an “Intruder” or “Incubus” which has an intentional mind of its own, presences that are often interpreted as spirits:

Researchers theorize that the experience of feeling awake, typically while alone and in the dark, and yet unable to move triggers the threat-activation system (TAVS) [...] Research promises to provide new insight into the neurological basis of anomalous experiences of the self that are often characterized as ‘mystical’ or ‘spiritual’ (134). Or, as Kamenetz observes, in *The History of Last Night’s Dream*, in REM sleep: “with the exception of the diaphragm and eyeball muscles … our large muscle groups, such as arms and legs, are completely paralyzed. This seems to account for those strange dreams where we are terrified by an attacker and cannot move, or we are scared witless but cannot muster a scream” (56). While the insights of science provide much in the way of explanation of Guyart’s experience of possession, they also shed light on the considerable difference between it and the protracted “performance” possessions of the Loudun nuns, a trance-like state in which the individual is “highly amenable to suggestibility from others,” according to Taves. In other words, the nuns of Loudun were likely subject to “the intention, suggestion, and cultural expectations of those with whom subjects interact,” ‘those’ in the case of Loudun, being priests and exorcists, among the many other observers (80). Nonetheless, Guyart’s memory is important because it lends her voice to the combined voices of the
suffering women of Loudun, women in extreme and obvious distress. If their cry is, as Sluhovsky and de Certeau suggest, a subconscious reaction to various forms of societal oppression and silencing, Guyart’s voice can be seen, along with theirs, as a voice of (subconscious) resistance. It is significant as well, that in Guyart’s account, unlike that of her possessed sisters, she was freed by a benevolent spirit, an indication that her experience had some characteristics of a dream, characteristics which include “the dreamers’ ability to suggest the direction they want their … dreams to take” (Taves, 80). It is conceivable that with her subconscious mind in a dream-like state, Guyart did not perceive herself as a ‘victim’ of the devil, or of the violence and fear of which he may be seen to be a metaphor, but rather as someone who could overcome oppression and ultimately live without fear. Such growth in confidence and in knowledge of herself and the world, as demonstrated in Guyart’s text, is characteristic of the subjects who engage in the process of development of self as represented in the various epistemological perspectives in the Women’s Ways of Knowing model.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Women's Ways of Knowing

An important tool in my analysis of Guyart's evolution of self is *Women's Ways of Knowing* by psychologists Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger and Jill Tarule. A landmark study on the distinct ways women acquire and process knowledge about themselves and the world, *Women's Ways of Knowing* provides insights into the evolution of Guyart's self-knowledge when applied to the chronology and textual construction of *La Relation de 1654*. First published in 1986 with a subsequent edition in 1997 and followed by *Knowledge, Difference, and Power: Essays Inspired by Women’s Ways of Knowing* (1996), Belenky et al.'s first text studies the epistemological evolution of women from across the social and economic spectrum and at various ages and stages of life. Key to the analysis are the subjects' perceptions of their transformational life experiences, their relationships and decision-making abilities, self-image, and obstacles to personal growth, as well as the effects of wisdom gained from mothering. What is apparent in the study is the notion of women coming into or "questing into" ways of knowing that allow them to see themselves differently than in the context of the values imposed on them by a patriarchal society that devalues them. The five “epistemological perspectives” presented in *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, “Silence,” “Received Knowing,” “Subjective Knowing,” “Procedural Knowing” and “Constructive Knowing,” are not fixed or necessarily linear, nor do they presume to fully represent the complexities and uniqueness of a woman’s life. Instead, they present a theoretical model with which to better understand the shifts that occur in the lives of late twentieth-century women subjects and the stages of their growth into greater self-knowledge.
There are certain difficulties in attempting to apply a twentieth-century model to the life-writing of a seventeenth-century mystic, differences in concepts of self in the two historical and religious contexts as well as differences in concepts of truth-telling. Belenky et al.'s model of twentieth-century women's ways of knowing does not entertain concepts of 'mystic' knowing other than to acknowledge the importance of a spiritual (or moral) dimension in the most evolved of the five perspectives. Yet, nonetheless, certain of the theories of gendered knowing developed in *Women's Ways of Knowing* may be considered pertinent to Guyart's self-representation since they are based on characteristics shared among many female subjects across history: characteristics such as silence and submission, courage, maternal nurturing, listening to external authority, the desire to learn, the development of an 'inner voice' and the development of a voice of one's own.

In this chapter, I review the five theoretical perspectives presented by Belenky et al., and attempt to demonstrate how Guyart's textual construction of self, in the context of her spiritual journey and her times, may be interpreted in light of them, in spite of the difference in space and time. As Leigh Gilmore suggests, notions of the “self” vary in different historical times. The late medieval female mystic desired to be infused by God as the ultimate state of self-identification in a language and style foreign to today's secular reader. It was a desire expressed consistently by Guyart throughout her text:

> Lorsque Dieu se laisse posséder à l’âme ... on n’appète que jouir; ce lui est assez de savoir par une science expérimentale d’amour qu’il est dans elle et avec elle et qu’il est Dieu ... elle aspire d’être abîmée en cet abîme et enfin d’y être tellement perdue qu’on ne voie plus que son Bien-Aimé qui l’aura par amour transformée en lui. (*La Relation* 239)
Gilmore rightly suggests that such a perspective in an individual today might be looked at “ambivalently” (151). In considering the mystic concept of self in certain independent and self-sufficient contemporaries, Gilmore observes:

Autonomous “individuals” would probably not experience themselves as profoundly penetrable by the Holy Spirit, nor, conversely, would they conceive of the Holy Spirit as the medium in which they live, move, and have their being. The desire for such experience, and the particular form it takes, are shaped by cultural factors, and our ability to interpret their expression is similarly bound by our own historicity. (151)

It is fair to say that the desire and propensity for spiritual experience and closeness with a living God, a God who dwells within, persists in certain individuals in contemporary Christian religious practices today, many of whom are perceived, and perceive themselves, as highly independent and autonomous in the quotidian and in their professional pursuits. As well, they may reflect some of the same preoccupations as the late medieval mystics, preoccupations summarized by Kroll and Bachrach as “charity, love, humility, detachment, rejection of physical comforts and pleasures, and pursuit of closeness with God” (207).

Nonetheless, knowledge of self in religious or spiritually-minded individuals today is not confounded generally with knowledge of God in the same cultural context as it was by the early modern female mystics. Alone in her room after partaking in Holy Communion, a sacrament, as Gilmore notes, in which “one is no longer separate from … Christ’s body” (138), Guyart recalls the totality of her knowledge of herself as one with God:

C’est une chose si haute, si ravissante, si divine, si simple, et hors de ce qui peut tomber sous le sens de la diction humaine, que je ne la puis exprimer, sinon que je suis en Dieu, possédée de Dieu et que c’est Dieu qui m’aurait bientôt consommée par
sa subtilité et efficacité amoureuse [...] qui a toujours son rapport au suradorable

Verbe Incarné, mon divin Époux ... mon âme ne se trouvant avoir vie qu’en lui. (La Relation 464)

At the same time, this oneness with the divine is accompanied by a fundamental knowledge of her baseness: “une véritable et foncière connaissance qu’on est le néant et l’impuissance même” (ibid), in the context of her life-long mystic quest for detachment and the annihilation of the ego. In contemporary secular terms, Guyart’s desire for knowledge of God may be seen as a desire for knowledge of self, a desire expressed in the terms and conditions of her religion and culture and the specific demands of the Christian mystic tradition.

In Women’s Ways of Knowing, the authors define women’s “knowing” as awareness of self, an ability to listen to the self as well as others, and to be “alert” to all the facets of life around them (141). Only briefly do they acknowledge the importance of the spiritual dimension in the life accounts of the women in the fifth perspective devoting considerable attention to issues of moral concern to the women in their study and little to issues of a spiritual, religious or mystic nature. They note, however: “more than any other group, [constructivist women] are seriously preoccupied with the moral or spiritual dimension of their lives” (150).

The authors of Women’s Ways of Knowing do give considerable importance to the ability of the women in their study to develop an “inner voice,” and the ability to consult and listen to it, as a sign of their developing sense of self. It is this inner voice, which for Belenky et al. is the ‘hallmark’ of the evolving ‘knower’:

Along with the discovery of personal authority arises a sense of voice - in its earliest form, a “still small voice” to which a woman begins to attend rather than the long-
familiar external voices that have directed her life. This interior voice has become, for us, the hallmark of women's emergent sense of self and sense of agency and control. (68)

From my perspective, the inner voice identified by Belenky et al. may be viewed as a psychological parallel to Guyart's experience of her "voix intérieure" as she presents it in the text, from its first early signs in solitude and in dialogue with God to its later constant manifestations, which she recognized as the voice of God within:

La parole intérieure se dit subitement dans le fond de l'âme et porte en un moment son effet. Elle ne laisse aucun lieu de douter ni même d'hésiter que c'est Dieu qui parle dans l'âme, mais elle se la rend soumise tout ce qui est dans la créature, et la chose arrive infailliblement comme elle a été signifiée. Cette parole intérieure est semblable au langage de l'esprit [...] l'âme l'entend et la distingue bien, et elle sait assurément qui est celui qui lui a parlé. (497)

In the foregoing excerpt from the end of her spiritual narrative, Guyart's inner voice can be seen as her reliable guide and purveyor of knowledge: "et la chose arrive infailliblement comme elle a été signifiée." But her inner voice was not always so clear or so well-defined. In her memory of her young self, as a girl, the emphasis is on listening to the external voice of authority. She recalls how she was drawn to listen to the itinerant preachers: "[j'] avais une grande inclination de les aller entendre" and to repeat to others what she heard, "l'histoire que je racontais à mon retour," and that when she listened to the word of God it seemed to pour into her heart like liquid into a vase: "lorsque je l'entendais, il me semblait que mon Coeur était un vase dans lequel cette divine parole découlait comme une liqueur" (168). The passivity implied by this image is striking in comparison to the woman of action.
she became.

Exploring Guyart's evolution of self through the secular and theoretical lens of *Women's Ways of Knowing*, brings her, a female mystic and gendered subject of the seventeenth century, into greater perspective and understanding for the contemporary secular reader, spiritually-minded or otherwise. It is another tool which serves a useful purpose in my attempt to "demystify the mystic." That mysticism clouds the issue of knowing, and makes analysis of self, authority and community problematic to begin with, is summarized by Gilmore in her observation that what we call "truth" in autobiography and in culture, is "largely the effect of a long and complex process of authorization," that is, what a culture deems verifiable as truth (Gilmore, 170). The notion of mystic knowing, as addressed by Taves, represents a current cultural duality in the ongoing debate between materialist science and proponents of religious, mystical, or spiritual faith and experience. Also, in the genre of spiritual autobiography, gender and class play specific roles, as we have seen, for example, in the case of increased scrutiny for women mystics of a lower social order over those of higher standing, and for women in general over men. Belenky et al.'s study does not focus on the impact of class (and race), but searches for shared experiences by women from across the social spectrum.

Thus, any study of women's oral or written accounts of their life experiences in the late twentieth century has its limitations when applied to women's writing of the past, as Gilmore cautions: "autobiography's task is always ... to produce truth," truth in the context of what the culture in which it is written accepts as truth, for such notions are cultural constructs and change as cultures change (Gilmore, 19). The life stories of the women in the Belenky et al. study were accepted as truth by the psychologists who interviewed them, who
tried to "honour each woman's point of view" (*Women's Ways of Knowing*, 16). Guyart's truth claims, on the other hand, while accepted by her Jesuit spiritual advisors, were subject to the intense scrutiny of the Church who viewed women's mystic claims as a challenge to their power and hegemony. The language concerns imposed on Guyart's spiritual writing may be seen to reflect the cultural "codes" Gilmore refers to in order to be accepted as truth in her time: "In order to regulate potentially threatening speech ... the church/state developed an elaborate vocabulary that controlled, through both the setting and the language of confession, what one could and must say ... one ... had to convince the confessor in "his" language" (Gilmore, 109). Limitations on truth-telling such as those imposed on Guyart did not affect the women in the Belenky et al. study. For Guyart, however, there are things she simply could not say or elaborate on regarding the difficulties of her marriage, for example: "pendant que j'avais de grands sujets de croix, étant dans une condition qui en produisait de continuelles" (*La Relation*, 170). No such social inhibitions restricted the candor of the women in the Blenkey et al. study, protected as they were by anonymity.

There are similarities nonetheless. For Gilmore, the autobiographical 'I' of the female mystic, while anchored in its "temporal locations," in a historical context, is "an agent of dislocation and disruption both in history and in the text" (48). It is a role the authors also perceive for the voice of the women in their study, a voice they attempt to make heard above the 'powerful templates men have etched in the literature and in our minds' with regard to women's epistemology and learning (9). In both cases, women were engaged in operations of truth-telling which allowed the notions of 'agency' and evolution of self to emerge. With regard to the duality of Guyart's spiritual and temporal lives, and her writing which involved both, she insists that her temporal life never got in the way of her spiritual preoccupations
and vice-versa, but that everything that happened to her was for her spiritual growth, and any
time she thought she was 'becoming something,' in other words, when the ego got in the
way, she simply remembered that she was nothing, and God was all: “j’ai toujours cru que sa
divine Majesté ne me donnait des grâces que pour servir à mon avancement spirituel … et de
plus que je souillais ces mêmes dons … donnant sujet de croire par ma production que j’étais
quelque chose, et au fond, je ne suis rien et ne vaut rien en toutes manières” (428). The
autobiographical ‘je’ in this case, “je souillais,” reflects Guyart’s sense of agency and
responsibility for her actions as one very much trying to be aware of the self, a reflection of
the twenty-first century model’s definition of “knowing” as awareness of self. For Guyart,
however, evolution of the self could mean only ‘avancement spirituel.’

Yet making allowances for the difference in context of Women’s Ways of Knowing,
when applied to the genre of spiritual autobiography, requires an awareness of further
limitations, the most obvious of which is the live interaction with trained psychologists. Yet,
the three core questions posed to the women in the Belenky study may be posed
successfully to Guyart’s text. These questions about how the women perceive truth and
authority, who and what serve as their guides, and how they know what they know, reflect
conds of knowing that may be perceived to transcend time.

Of note in the study is the enduring influence of patriarchy on the women’s notions of
knowledge and truth in the various epistemological perspectives observed by Belenky et al..
According to the authors, such notions as are “articulated and accepted today have been
shaped throughout history by the male-dominated culture” (5).

Theory Applied

In this section, I review relevant characteristics of each of the five perspectives in the
Belenky et al. model and demonstrate how Guyart's evolution of self may be seen to reflect them: an analysis of subjecthood and knowing in terms of gender helps my understanding and the process of 'demysitifying the mystic.' I note again the authors' caution that progression through the study's theoretical perspectives is not linear.

The first epistemological perspective, identified as 'Silence,' represents a rare category in the study, with its extreme expressions being denial of the self and dependence on external authority for direction (24). Although the contexts are vastly different, there are parallels between the experience of the contemporary women in this category and Guyart's representation of certain early childhood experience, as well as of her withdrawal into solitude after her conversion. According to the study, 'silent' women had no "inner voice," no "mental direction," and no inner dialogue with the self with which to develop thought (25). Another hallmark of 'silent women,' is blind obedience to authority (28). Guyart shows signs of the 'silent' perspective in her cultural submission to the external authority of her father and the Church, and in her extreme denial of self in her heroic mortifications. 'Silent knowing' represents a perspective of unquestioned submission to external authority that may be seen to correspond with the historical silencing of women in the oppressive conditions of patriarchy: "describing the self is difficult for all women and impossible for the silent woman ... raised in demeaning circumstances" (26). While in the Belenky et al. study "demeaning circumstances" refers to familial and immediate social influences, in Guyart's time, such circumstances as fostered the humiliation of women were endemic to society as a whole.

Following her great personal losses and her religious conversion in young adulthood, Guyart withdrew to her father's house for a year of silence and solitude: "je trouvais ma vie
dans la ... pénitence et dans la solitude (188),” where, she recalls: “ma vue était mortifiée, mes oreilles bouchées aux discours du monde; je me taisais, ne pouvant parler que de Dieu et de la vertu” (La Relation, 188). She was silent and voiceless, except in her first experience of inner dialogue with God. Even when she tried to speak in confession, she found no voice: “Alors, j’étais pour me disposer à me confesser. Mais étais-je au confessional ... mon Coeur se fermait; je ne pouvais me confesser” (167). According to Belenky et al., it is when certain women’s social arrangements collapse and change is imposed on them that many begin to look inward. There is a shift away from what was previously perceived as all-powerful external authority to a glimpse of inner truth. In the shift towards the next perspective, to received knowing, women find authority outside themselves; they conform, they work to others’ expectations, they care for and empower others with little concern for the self. They see themselves as capable of receiving and reproducing knowledge, they teach, but are incapable of creating knowledge on their own. Typically, they give much more than they receive (47). In her religious and cultural conditioning Guyart relied on the scriptures as an infallible source of truth: “je croyais que tout ce qui était dit par l’Esprit de Dieu était véritable et infaillible” (La Relation, 167), and she cared for others in the context of her religious devotion and beliefs: “je ne trouvais du soulagement que dans les actions de charité. C’était ce qui me faisait vivre, en chérir et chercher les occasions lorsque je ne les avais pas présentes” (228). And, she found a voice to teach and preach when she worked in her brother-in-law’s business: “je ... les assemblais quelquefois pour leur parler de Dieu et leur enseigner comme il fallait pour garder ses commandements” (La Relation, 256).

The significant shift from the notion of self as static in silent knowing, and to a certain extent in received knowing, to a self in the third perspective of active, subjective knowing, is
marked by a sense of becoming in the world, a shift from silence to a ‘protesting inner voice’ (Belenky et al., 54). Accordingly, “as a woman becomes more aware of the existence of inner resources for knowing and valuing, as she begins to listen to the still small voice within her, she finds an inner source of strength” (55). Significant trauma and loss or changes brought about by a difficult marriage or business responsibilities were found to be important triggers in the shift from received to subjective knowing (56). Triggers included “an absence of stable male authority … or a sense of failed male authority,” some “crisis of trust” which, coupled with a change of fate, allowed women to “walk away from the past” (58). New strength, optimism and self-esteem were noted in the shift to ‘subjectivist’ knowing, a shift which, according to the study, could also involve a certain sense of isolation from others, feelings of loneliness and despair. Such shifts bring to mind indications of the courage Guyart felt in her transition to the monastery; for example: “[mon divin Époux] influait en mon âme un aliment et un nourrissement intérieur qui m’êut fait passer par les flammes, me donnant un courage à tout surmonter et à tout faire” (La Relation, 275), or on her departure from France when she observes: “je voyais, et l’Esprit qui me conduisait en rendait témoignage à ma conscience, que je n’avais jamais rien fait de si bon coeur” (353). Such courage, however, was followed by memories of anxiety, first in the monastery shortly after her arrival where she describes feeling she was alienated from God: “en cette souffrance, je ne sais en quelle region de l’esprit [Dieu] était … je n’en recevais aucun soulagement, me trouvant seule à porter ma croix” (293), and second on her arrival in the new World:

Je me vis … dépouillée de tous les dons et grâces que avait mis en moi […] je me voyais … la plus basse et ravalée et digne de mépris qui fût au monde […] je passais d’une abîme de lumière et d’amour en un abîme d’obscurité et de ténèbres
douloureuses, me voyant comme plongée dans un enfer (376-7).

Similar to the women in the Belenky et al. study, possible triggers for Guyart’s hypothetical transition from received to subjective knowing include an ‘absence of stable male authority,’ evidenced by the suggestion of a love-triangle involving her husband and his early death (which left the family business in bankruptcy). Such issues may have triggered her two or three key life choices in which she did, effectively, turn her back on life as she had known it.

According to the Belenky model, such issues of trust may also explain why some women sought reassurance and confirmation of self in some form of maternal authority, grounded nonetheless in first-hand experience (60), an orientation which may have encouraged Guyart’s gradual shift in the text towards the strength of the Virgin Mary.

The concept of ‘mothering’ in Guyart’s text does not emerge until the appearance of the Virgin Mary nursing the infant Jesus in the “Dream of the Three Kisses (La Relation, 305). As mother of Jesus, God’s love incarnate, the Virgin Mary is identified in Guyart’s text as the Holy Mother, symbol of maternal love and nurturing. As Gilmore notes with reference to the role of the Virgin Mary in the spiritual autobiographical text of Julian of Norwich: “by bearing the word of God in her body, Mary is [portrayed as] the mother of us all” (144). In Guyart’s pivotal dream, the descriptive image of the Holy Mother also corresponds, in Jungian terms, to the symbolic feminine archetype.

According to Women’s Ways of Knowing, the ability to talk things over with sympathetic and understanding people allowed women to start believing in themselves, a reckoning which echoes in Guyart’s memory of relief once she made the transition to monastic life: “il ne se peut dire combien la religion me fut douce après un tracas tel que celui que j’avais quitté” (La Relation, 279). Like Guyart, the ‘subjectivist’ women
demonstrated strong determination in their quest for self in spite of an “extraordinary range of emotional pushes and pulls, emotions like anxiety, anger, insecurity, guilt, depression, and exhilaration, most of the women were making these changes with a stubborn determination” (76). Such a range of emotion is echoed in Guyart's descriptions of her periods of anxiety and depression, and in her anger at the devil for attacking the nuns of Loudun: “ce qui me touchait d’une grande compassion et haine contre le diable” (293), as it is in her descriptions of passionate, pious exhilaration, her “exubérance qui est indicible” (288). According to Belenky et al., the women who embraced the transition to subjectivist knowing were “actively and obsessively preoccupied with a choice between self and other” (Belenkey et al., 7). Often, when the women left behind the expectations of others they cared about, they could be overcome with a sense of loss, an emotion represented in Guyart’s text in each of her three periods of anxiety which followed her major transitions. And like Guyart, women in transition to subjectivist knowing often faced negative reactions from family and friends for their plans, as she did from her father, son, and brother-in-law when she entered the cloister, and even from certain Jesuits when she made her plans known for her voyage to Canada: “il était si indigné qu’il en venait aux injures et invectives fort fréquentes et outré cela m’en écrivait de pleins papiers ... il m’envoya un de ses Pères, que je connaissais, pour me combattre ... ils se moquèrent tous deux de moi” (La Relation, 331). As well, according to Belenky et al., women in transition to the subjectivist perspective often referred to themselves in “painfully negative terms” when they spoke about how little they were valued in the past (81). Albeit within the complex religious and historical context of her times, Guyart’s language of self reflects similar notions of worthlessness, especially in the first chapters of her text, prior to her experience of mystic union, and in the context of her
mortifications and self-hatred, as we have seen: "moi, qui me voyais la dernières de ses créatures ... je ... suivais cette pente qui produisait de plus en plus en moi une haine de moi-même" (La Relation, 187). By contrast, her later language, while still self-deprecating according to the linguistic conventions of the confession, nonetheless soften by the end of the narrative where, by association, her evolved sense of confidence of being one with God positions her alongside "les grands saints:"

Oserai-je dire que la bonté et la magnificence de mon divin Époux m'a fait la grâce de me communiquer les effets des divines paroles qu'il a dites dans son sacré sermon des huit béatitudes. Je ne présume pas toutefois que cela ait été comme il l'a fait aux grands saints, qui sont dignement disposés à recevoir ses grandes grâces ... car ... je confesse que je suis le néant et l'impuissance même ... et le sentiment que j'ai de moi dans la possession de sa divine familiarité et de ses magnifiques largesses dans mon âme me tien au delà de l'étonnement. (450)

Like Guyart three centuries earlier, ‘subjectivist’ women who retreated from old responsibilities and relationships often turned away from men and chose to move away from an old identity towards a completely new one. Such tendencies resonate with Guyart’s identity shifts, first when she adopted ‘strange garb’ to dissuade suitors, then when she changed her name to ‘Marie de l’Incarnation.’

While women in the ‘subjectivist’ perspective still listen to others, they begin to hear themselves think, are ‘forward-looking, positive, and open to new experiences,’” characteristics easily attributable to Guyart (Belenky et al., 84). In Guyart’s case, and in the context of her religion and times, her (one-sided) conversations with God and her “divin Époux” may be seen to represent a form of thinking out loud:
Mon chaste Époux … il faut bien que vous me mettiez en ce séjour bienheureux et que vous me tiriez de la corruption du monde, puisque son esprit est si contraire au vôtre. Ah! Chaste Amour, voulez-vous cela; ôtez-moi la vie … et vous voulez que je possède ce bien et que je ne meure pas, et vous vous plaisez à cela … C’est vous qui me faites ainsi souffrir! (268)

Such thinking, in accordance with Women’s Ways of Knowing theory, can be a precursor to the development of reflective and critical thought. In the study, the women “engaged in self-expression by talking to themselves, talking to their diaries [and]… these women were seen as “gaining a voice” and a “‘knowledge base with which [to] investigate the world’” (85). In Guyart’s case, along with her dialogues with God, the process of writing her first spiritual autobiography in 1633, writing letters in France to her often absent spiritual director, and from Canada to her many correspondents in the Old World, as well as her two later autobiographical manuscripts, La Relation de 1650 and la Relation de 1654, allowed her to actively reflect on her life experience, and thereby theoretically, like the subjectivist women, “gaining a knowledge base from which to investigate the world.” According to Women’s Ways of Knowing, such a factor facilitated the women’s transition to the next perspective known as procedural knowing (86).

What motivated or caused women to move from one way of knowing to the next, according to Women’s Ways of Knowing, were the life circumstances that challenged their old ways, where the women’s opinions opposed those of established authority. Guyart’s text provides ample evidence of her opinions in opposition to authority: her desire to be a nun opposed by her mother, of not wanting to marry opposed by her father, of taking religious orders opposed by family and friends, of going to Canada opposed by just about everyone, of
developing a new monastic rule for the Ursulines, initially opposed by the Bishop and both mother houses of Paris and Tours, and so on, all key opinions and objections about which her narrative text is clear. For women in evolution from subjectivist to procedural and finally to constructivist knowing, perspectives which involve critical reasoning and the supportive role of teacher, mentor, or counsellor was essential (Belenky et al., 93). It is a relationship, according to La Relation de 1654, from which Guyart similarly benefited, especially her relationships with her Jesuit advisors Georges de la Haye in France and Jérôme Lalemant in Canada.

It is of note that while the Belenky et al study largely avoids mention of mysticism, religion, and matters spiritual, they quote the great twentieth-century mystic, Simone Weil, with regard to procedural knowing: “in this position, in Weil’s words, ‘the soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth’” (99). With this rare quote from a recognized twentieth-century mystic, the authors legitimize the notion of mystic knowing, of expressing a psychological truth of accepting others as they are in mystic or spiritual terms. In a similar expression of a psychological shift in her attitudes towards others, Guyart notes the disappearance of all her ill-feelings towards others, people she could henceforth accept as they were in love and friendship:

Cette … paix qui vient de l’acquiescement aux peines, souffrances et croix qui arrivent, qu’on reçoit de la main de Dieu … une grande patience dans les croix et une pente et une inclination entière à la paix et bénignité avec tout le monde; un doux empressement intérieur de bienveillance pour ceux de qui on a été offensé, de qui l’on recherche avec adresse les approches … enfin, une aversion entière à l’esprit
Yet, procedural knowers are “practical, pragmatic problem solvers,” as we know Guyart to be from her biographers. The description of “having their feet firmly planted on the ground,” however, may not be one the authors of the study would necessarily see applying to the mystic (Belenky et al., 99). In the duality of her highly evolved spiritual life and equally engaged physical accomplishments, however, I find little contradiction.

According to the study, the procedural knower, like the subjective knower, values personal experience as a way of knowing even more than the voice of external authority, a characteristic illustrated in Guyart’s text with reference to her ability to follow through with plans for a new constitution for her community in Quebec. In this position, as in others before it, a sense of personal authority arises “primarily with the power of a group and its agreed upon ways for knowing” (Belenky et al., 134). According to the model, women who make the transition to constructed knowing are typically articulate and reflective people, observant and caring of others, intensely self-conscious, aware of their thoughts, judgments, moods, and desires, all characteristics not difficult to discern in Guyart’s construction of self. The perspective of constructed knowing is marked by the quest for a unique and authentic voice. Women who proceed to this perspective all go through periods of intense self-reflection when they make the choice to move outside the given (Belenky et al., 135). Such transitions usually involve psychological or geographical removal from all that is familiar, a rupture Guyart experienced in her move from France to the wilderness of Canada.

According to Women’s Ways of Knowing, women who experience such ruptures question themselves as to their identity, purpose and meaning of life, questions Guyart relied on God for answers: “la divine majesté me fit connaître qu’elle voulait l’exécution du
dessein qu’elle m’avait inspiré et elle me pressait fortement intérieurement … de déclarer et communiquer ce qui se passait en moi pour son appel au Canada” (La Relation, 327).

Women in the ‘constructivist’ perspective develop a narrative sense of the self: “they want to develop a voice of their own to communicate to others their understanding of life’s complexity” (140). Hence, one could postulate, Guyart’s compulsion to write. Like Guyart in her commitment to her religion and responsibilities in the New World, ‘constructivist’ women work best in collaborative groups over long periods of time:

Constructivist women aspire to work that contributes to the empowerment and improvement in the quality of life of others. More than any other group of women in this study, the constructivists … reveal in the way they speak and live their lives their moral conviction that ideas and values … must be nurtured. (152)

It is in this fifth perspective that the women in the Belenky et al. study developed a voice of their own. The transition is characterized by “intense self-reflection … when they chose to move ‘outside the given’ by removing themselves psychologically and at times even geographically from all they had known” (135). Intense self-reflection was an integral part of Guyart’s confessor/penitent relationship with her spiritual advisors throughout the course of her religious life, nowhere in the text better illustrated than in her recollection of ‘opening her heart’ to de la Haye in 1633: “lorsqu’il m’eut entendue, il m’obligea de lui écrire la conduite de Dieu sur moi dès mon enfance … aussi tous mes péchés et imperfections de toute ma vie” (La Relation, 298).

Taking stock of Guyart’s life experiences as she relates them in La Relation de 1654 in terms of the five epistemological stages of the Women’s Ways of Knowing serves to illustrate both the similarities and profound cultural differences between Guyart and questing women
of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although the model avoids discussion of spiritual
knowing, it does acknowledge its importance to the women subjects, an aspect which begs
further investigation. Yet, just as the constructivists in the Belenky et al. model saw that “all
knowledge is a construction and that the truth is a matter of the context in which it is
embedded” (138), so Guyart understood God as truth in the context of her time and as creator
(constructor) of all things. At one with God, with her "suradorable Verbe Incarné," in the
parlance of the time, Guyart, by definition, saw herself as ‘co-creator’ in the inexplicable
mystery of existence: "mon âme expérimente qu’étant dans l’intime union avec lui, elle en est
de même avec le Père Éternel et le Saint-Esprit" (La Relation, 461).
CHAPTER EIGHT

Encounters with the Holy Mother

In this chapter, I explore Guyart’s memory of her three encounters with the Holy Mother: the first in a dream, the second as a miracle, and the third as a transcendent presence. All three encounters are significant in Guyart’s autobiography and, I hope to show, demonstrate her shift away from an all-consuming Christocentric and Trinitarian focus in the text towards the archetypal feminine in the image and ‘the felt presence’ of the Virgin Mary, and towards a new understanding of herself and her power as a woman. As I noted in the previous chapter, the image of ‘mother’ in Guyart’s text emerges with the appearance of the Virgin Mary in the "Dream of the Three Kisses," in which she is represented as being at the age of nursing the baby: “je ne pourrais jamais décrire la ravissante beauté … de cette divine Mère. Elle était comme à l’âge qu’elle allaitait notre très adorable petit Jésus” (La Relation, 305). As mother of Christ, God’s love incarnate, the Virgin Mary is identified in Guyart’s text as the Holy Mother, symbol of maternal love and nurturing. In Guyart’s pivotal dream, the image of the Holy Mother can be understood in Jungian terms as the symbolic feminine archetype.

As the quintessential mother figure, the Virgin Mary invokes notions of creation, nurturing, creativity and subjectivity that may be seen to mirror the essence of Guyart’s own sense of self as spiritual mother in the new World. According to Bella Brodski, it is the mother figure in women’s autobiography that engenders subjectivity, as it is the mother who is the primary source of speech and love. “Classically,” Brodski observes, “the autobiographical project symbolizes the search for origins, for women, a search for maternal origins and that elusive part of the self that is coextensive with the birth of language” (246).
Brodski’s theory makes it possible to consider Guyart’s emerging sense of self as connected to the act of writing, inspired by the transcendent presence of the Holy Mother and by her own sense of maternal obligation to record her life for her son.

**The “Dream of the Three Kisses”**

In the chronology of *La Relation de 1654*, the “Dream of the Three Kisses” occurs about mid-point in the text, not long after Guyart’s experience of demonic possession, the writing of *La Relation de 1633*, and de la Haye’s favourable judgment. In her lifeline, the dream occurred in the second year of her profession when she was in charge of the novices, a position in which she was responsible for the souls of twenty or thirty young women (*La Relation*, 306). At the time of the dream, Guyart says, she had no idea what it meant and had never heard of Canada. It was her spiritual director who interpreted it for her as God calling her to the New World. This prophetic dream, which is part of her public persona in the cultural imaginary of Quebec, marks the beginning of her apostolic vocation.

In the dream, Guyart perceives herself leading a lay woman by the hand in an unknown country. Many obstacles are in their path. Guyart does not know the way, where she is, or where she is supposed to go. Eventually she and the woman she is leading arrive at the entrance to a beautiful place. Standing guard is a man dressed in white, like one of the apostles, who motions them to enter and to continue along the path before them. In the distance, Guyart perceives a tiny white marble church upon which the Virgin Mary is seated with the baby Jesus. In front of them is a vast expanse of land obscured by mist: “ce lieu était très éminent, au bas duquel il y avait un grand et vaste pays, plein de montagnes, de vallées et de brouillards épais qui remplissaient tout (*La Relation*, 303). At first, the Virgin Mary was as stiff as the marble upon which she sat. In a rush of affection, Guyart
approaches the Holy Mother from behind and as she does, the Holy Mother begins to move, bending towards her baby son speaking to him ‘intérieurement’ about a project for this country. Then, turning towards Guyart, the Holy Mother kisses her. Three times the Virgin Mother turned to Guyart in her dream; three times she kissed her lovingly, genuinely, unconditionally, all the while whispering to her baby about a project which apparently involved her (La Relation, 305). The number three, twice repeated in the Holy Mother’s gestures and kisses, so powerful in Christian Trinitarian symbolism, lends emphasis and authority to the notion of divine will that was firmly fixed in Guyart’s psyche:

Avec une grâce ravissante, elle se tourna vers moi et, souriant amoureusement, elle me baisa sans me dire mot, puis elle se retourna vers son Fils et lui parlait encore intérieurement, et j’entendais en mon esprit qu’elle avait du dessein sur moi, duquel elle lui parlait. Lors, pour la deuxième fois, elle se tourna vers moi et me baisa derechef, puis elle communiquait à son très adorable Fils et ensuite me baisa pour la troisième fois. (La Relation 303)

Guyart was obliged by obedience to report all ‘interior movements’ to her spiritual director, the Révérend Père Dinet, who along with her previous Jesuit advisors had close connections with the missions in Canada. For Dinet, the dream could only be interpreted literally:

Le Révérend Père Dinet, recteur de la Compagnie de Jésus, lequel, comme j’ai dit, mon supérieur m’avait donné pour directeur, me visitant, je lui rendais compte de ce qui se passait en moi. Il approuvait ma disposition et disait que ce qui m’avait été montré en ce pays pourrait être effectué en moi, au sujet de la Mission de Canada. Lorsqu’il me dit tout cela, je n’avais jamais su qu’il y eût un Canada au monde, ce que j’avais vu ne m’en ayant donné aucune notion, car, comme j’ai dit, je demeurais
dans l’ignorance des choses que j’avais vues ... ne pouvant pas m’imaginer que

Notre-Seigneur me voulut corporellement dans un pays étrange pour le servir ... eu
ergard à ma profession de religieuse et de recluse dans un monastère. (313)

In *The History of Last Night’s Dream*, inspired by Freud, Jung, and others, Roger Kamenetz observes that the role of dreams, and their cultural importance, appears based on three possibilities: the dream as warning, the dream as presenting opportunities, and the dream as presenting the essential image of the dreamer. According to Kamenetz, dreams use poetic metaphoric imagery to reflect our current predicament in life, and, in particular, our relationships with authority (159). Dreams may bring forward suppressed feelings, usually involving an element of fear (199). In applying such theory to Guyart’s text, I see the key dreams in her autobiography as reflecting who she was, possible opportunities before her, and a sense of purpose for her life.

Guyart’s “Dream of the Three Kisses,” is a pivotal dream for several reasons: it triggered her apostolic quest, it provided the rationale and motivation for joining the mission in Canada, and, perhaps most significantly, it presented an image of the Virgin Mary as symbolic representation of the feminine as opposed to the male patriarchal God for the first time in Guyart’s autobiographical construction: “j’avais eu toute ma vie un grand amour pour le salut des âmes, mais depuis ce que j’ai dit des baisers de la très sainte Vièrge, je portais dans mon âme un feu qui me consommait pour cela” (*La Relation*, 307). The Virgin Mary appears as a distinct and beautiful woman in the dream, one who assumes direct authority in her own right (rather than as mediator, as in the few instances in which she is previously invoked in the text), beckoning Guyart literally and symbolically towards her and towards new possibilities. According to Kamentez, the Jungian archetype of the ‘Self’ appears in
dreams as a religious figure and represents the union of the conscious and the unconscious mind (*A History of Last Night's Dream*, 218). Applying this theory to Guyart's dream, the image of the Holy Mother may be seen to represent the archetype of the feminine self. And if, as Kamenetz suggests, it is the 'feelings' in the dream that are most significant, (rather than the object of the feelings), it can be postulated that the love Guyart felt for the Holy Mother may be interpreted as the beginning of self-love (*Ibid*, 143). Kamenetz theorizes that our dreams can take us back to the past and heal it. A new choice takes place in the existential moment, which, for Guyart in the “Dream of the Three Kisses,” could represent a healing love for the woman/self/mother represented by the divine mother (149).

According to Kamenetz, the manifest content of the dream message is presented in its pictures: “dreams reveal through powerful images and dramatic situations [the dreamer’s] predicament in life, where [he or she is] blocked, stuck, lost without even knowing it” (159). In this dream Guyart is presented as lost, she does not know where she is or where she is going. Her vision of the place is obscured by mist, except for the clear images of the ‘maisonette,’ which serves as a church, and of the Virgin Mary, the baby Jesus, and the white marble church upon which the Holy Mother sits; in other words, the “sign-posts” in her dream mirror the religious focus of her life, without which she was truly ‘lost.’ If, as Kamenetz suggests, “dreams tell you the truth about your basic predicament” in life, it is not difficult to extrapolate the many challenges Guyart faced as assistant to the Mother Superior responsible for novices when she was just a novice herself. Her dream of leading another woman, a lay person, could reflect the fact that she would soon be leading 'lay' women in their religious journeys, the novices not yet committed by their vows; or it could be a reflection of the leadership qualities that were part of her personality and character, but which
she was not sure how to use. Yet, for Guyart, the dream could only be interpreted literally by her spiritual advisor, so that when she encountered Mme de la Peltrie, the lay woman who would finance and accompany their mission, Guyart ‘recognized’ her, by her ‘sweetness’ and ‘ingenuity,’ as the woman she was leading by the hand in her dream (*La Relation*, 346).

At the entrance to the place in the dream stood a guardian, a man in white whom Guyart suggests resembled an Apostle, archetypal image of patriarchal authority. According to Kamenetz, a dream which involves entering a new place, a dream of going through a gate, is an ancient dream metaphor, which, for Dinet, represented the literal entrance to a new land. The gate-keeper motioned Guyart and her companion forward, in other words, he gave them permission to proceed. And Guyart understood that it was there she should go: “et lors, je comprenais intérieurement, quoiqu’il ne parlât pas, que c’était là” (304). If the dream is perceived as a mirror of current life situations, the gate may be seen to reflect Guyart’s new role in religious life, and the ‘brune’ or mists which obscured the view, her lack of clarity with regard to her role, her purpose, or her future. The mists might also be interpreted as obstructing the meaning of the dream from her: “je me réveillais ... je ne savais néamoins ce que voulait dire ce qui c’était passé” (306). The figure of the Virgin Mary, depicted as holding and nurturing her baby, may be seen to predict the spiritual maternity Guyart would experience with her novices and in New France. Since the image of the Virgin Mary can be seen as the archetype of the feminine, the iconic representation of the maternal combined with wise spiritual guide, calmly pointing the way to new possibilities within, then it may be perceived as calling Guyart to a new sense of confidence in herself. Guyart’s conviction that Dinet’s interpretation was correct, that the dream meant God was calling her to join the mission abroad, was reinforced one day at prayer. As a vision of her dream appeared to her,
just as she remembered it, she heard an inner voice she interpreted as God’s voice telling her it was indeed Canada in the dream and that He wanted her there: “Lors, cette adorable Majesté me dit ces paroles: “C’est le Canada que je t’ai fait voir; il faut que tu y ailles faire une maison à Jésus et à Marie” (316), a voice I read as a reflection of her own new confidence in herself and in the opportunity before her.

On reflection, Guyart recalls that she had known from the moment she became an Ursuline that her time in the monastery in Tours was part of a divine plan meant to prepare her for something more: “J’avais … quelque chose dans moi, dès que je fus aux Urselines, [qui me disait] que la divine Bonté me mettait en cette sainte maison comme en un lieu de refuge, jusqu’à ce qu’elle disposât de moi pour ses desseins (La Relation, 309).”

Guyart’s dream proved to be transformative. With it there is a shift in the text from her preoccupation with solely spiritual things to the practical matters of engaging with the apostolic mission in Canada. The shift from spiritual to practical emphasizes the enormity of her undertaking, one which had no precedent in France. It may also be seen as evidence of Guyart’s growing confidence in her belief that she too could participate along with the Jesuits in saving souls, that she was in fact, on a level with them: “je me promenais en esprit dans ces grandes vastitudes et j’y accompagnais les ouvriers de l’Évangile, auxquels je me sentais unie étroitement … et il m’était avis que j’étais une même chose avec eux” (311).

From that point on, Guyart’s preoccupation with the missions in Canada became an obsession, like the obsessive nature of her mortifications, supported by her belief that she had been singled out by God for a special purpose:

Je ne voyais plus d’autre pays pour moi que le Canada, et mes plus grandes courses étaient dans les pays des Hurons, pour y accompagner les ouvriers de l’Évangile […]
qu quoique je tâchais de me comporter prudemment, je ne pouvais si bien me cacher que plusieurs ne jugeassent que Dieu voulait quelque chose de moi en particulier, et croyaient que sa divine Majesté me tirerait du monastère pour quelque occasion à sa gloire. (La Relation 314)

Coincidentally, as the text attests, at the same time, Father Poncet sent her a copy of the Jesuit Relations and informed her of his own intentions to go to Canada. He invited her, ostensibly without any knowledge of her dream, to consider joining the mission as well. He also sent her the account of a Spanish nun, Mother Anne de Saint-Barthélémy, who had left the cloister in Spain to do God’s work in Flanders. This was extraordinary for the times and presumably a model for her to consider:

Sans qu’il sût aucune de mes dispositions et sentiments touchant cette Mission, il m’écrivit la vocation que Dieu lui donnait pour y aller travailler et m’envoya une image de Mère Anne de Saint-Barthélémy, espagnole ... qui avec sa main montrait la Flandre ... l’invitant de l’y aller servir et que l’hérésie l’allait perdre. “Je vous envoie cette image, me disait-il, pour vous convier d’aller servir Dieu dans la Nouvelle-France.” Je fus étonnée de ce “convi,” vu, comme j’ai dit, qu’il ignorait ce qui se passait en moi, que je tenais fort secret ... (La Relation 317)xlvii

It is conceivable, of course, that in spite of Guyart’s claim to the contrary, Poncet was aware of her dream and of Dinet’s interpretation of it, given the close network between himself and the other Jesuits who had served as her spiritual advisors. But even if he were not aware of it, the fact that he specifically mentions Anne de Saint-Barthélémy and that she was sent to work against the threat of heresy (Protestantism) in Flanders to save souls, reflects the possibility of a woman engaged in apostolic work abroad. Obviously, Poncet and other
Jesuits sympathetic to Guyart recognized that her many talents could be useful in Canada.

It was, by the way, through the influence of this Jesuit network in the secret societies, specifically the powerful Société du Saint Sacrement, that Guyart was connected to because of her wealthy patron, Madeleine de la Peltrie. In Guyart’s version of the story, de la Peltrie was a wealthy young widow of noble birth who had made a vow on her death-bed that if God allowed her to recover she would dedicate her life to the education of girls in Canada (La Relation, 329). While Guyart saw only the hand of God in bringing the two women together, it was the practical hand of the Jesuits that made it happen, specifically that of Poncet.

According to Sluhovsky, there was no lack of choice for candidates for the mission in Canada as a great number of nuns wanted to go (318); however, as Chantal Théry points out, the Jesuits were looking for wealthy lay women, not nuns who were governed by vows of poverty (19). At the time, the Loudun possessions had become a horrific and contentious cause célèbre. Men at the highest levels of juridical authority as well as the most senior theologians of the Church attempted to solve the crisis. As the suspicion that accompanied all mystics was high, the impact of the Loudun affair should not be discounted as a possible factor in the complex circumstances of Guyart’s successful bid to join the mission abroad.

As Chantal Théry points out, as a relatively unknown nun of the lower bourgeoisie from Tours, Guyart was an unlikely candidate for the Canadian mission. As mentioned, in the Jesuit Relation of 1633, Paul Le Jeune had specifically called for women of the Paris élite who would have the freedom of movement and the necessary funds to support themselves and contribute to the Christianizing of French and native girls. With respect to Guyart, Théry wonders (without postulating), what went on in the six years between Le Jeune’s call and the surprising (to him) arrival of the little group of impoverished nuns headed by Guyart (De
plume et d'audace, 19). The story of Madeleine de la Peltrie's encounter with Guyart and their subsequent departure, although detailed by Guyart and embellished by Oury and Deroy-Pineau, ignores the environment of surveillance in France and potential risks to her. As Sluhovsky points out, upper-class nuns like Jeanne des Anges who made claims of possession or other divine interventions, nuns “with the right network of patrons and benefactors” (which at the time, Guyart had not), were much more likely to be discerned favourably than their lower class and less well-connected sisters (250).

Such perspectives widen the reading of Guyart’s text from one which centres on her religious passion alone to one which takes into account social and political circumstances of the time, references that are absent from the text due perhaps to Guyart’s lack of awareness of such matters, or her exclusion from them (a situation which changed dramatically in Canada where, as Mother Superior in a tightly knit colony her letters reflect keen political and historical observation).

Movement in Guyart's evolution of self is reflected in the images in the “Dream of the Three Kisses.” Metaphorically, such movement may be seen in the image in the dream of Guyart advancing arms outstretched towards the Virgin Mary, alone with her child, iconic symbol of female courage and strength. Contrasted with the obscured view of the landscape, metaphor for uncertainty and anxiety, for not knowing where she is - where she is going or what her purpose is - is the confidence Guyart demonstrates in her feelings with regard to the love and power of the Holy Mother. Then in her early thirties, and following three years of anxiety and doubt, she now experiences the love of the Virgin Mary, a love which may be interpreted as a new-found love of self. It is this confidence which may be perceived as allowing Guyart to proceed boldly against all obstacles in such a major undertaking as
leading the first group of religious women to Canada. It was a major shift to positivity from
the anxiety and depression she had experienced for the previous three years since she had
entered the monastery and from the avowed self-hatred she had felt throughout her twenties.

The "Miracle of the Assumption"

While dreams are among the most significant and transformative experiences of
Guyart’s life, certain life events, especially those which mark physical and emotional rupture,
play key roles as well. Following each of three major ruptures, (the ruptures of death and
loss when she was nineteen, of entering the cloister ten years later, and of her trans-Atlantic
crossing ten years after that), Guyart experienced persistent symptoms of anxiety,
interpersonal tensions and depression.

On the Feast of the Assumption, 1647, after eight long years of “la révolte des
passions et tentations d’aversion,” Guyart felt God wanted her to ask the Virgin Mary for
deliverance from her suffering. Suddenly, her symptoms disappeared, never to return:

En un instant, je me sentis exaucée et ôter de moi comme un vêtement
sensible, et une suite et écoulement de paix en toute la partie sensitive de
l’âme. Cette aversion fut changée en un amour cordial pour toutes les
personnes envers lesquelles j’avais ressenti de l’aversion et … des grandes croix
intérieures et tentations que j’avais portées près de huit ans. (La Relation 418-421)

This incident, from which Guyart emerged “une personne toute autre” (428), caused a
healing shift in her attitudes, especially towards her colleagues. The relief brought about by
the “Miracle of the Assumption” is significant in that Guyart perceived her direct appeal to
the Virgin Mary as inspired by God himself, “j’expérimentaîs lors que l’Esprit de Dieu me
faisait parler à cette divine Mère” (La Relation,418). This shift towards the Virgin Mary, first
noted in the “Dream of the Three Kisses,” may be seen to indicate an awakening in Guyart’s evolution of self, a shift away from her near total alignment with the image of the masculine embodied in the notion of Christ, her “divin Époux,” towards an alignment with the agentive power of the feminine. The steps in Guyart's evolution are not sudden and complete, but gradual and irregular, consistent with the theories outlined in the epistemological study, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, and explored in Chapter Seven.

Significantly, Guyart's permanent release from anxiety into a newfound and lasting peace is immediately followed in the text by what she refers to as one of the worst incidents of humiliation of her life. While acts of humiliation continued as a matter of course, they no longer affected her as they had in the past. As well as a new confidence in God, there is evidence of a new confidence in herself:

> Enfin, Dieu permit, qu’il s’y rencontrât des circonstances capables de me plus humilier que chose aucune qui me fût arrivée … Notre-Seigneur m’avait fait connaître qu’il voulait de moi la chose de laquelle il était question et à laquelle on s’opposait […] je ne doutais point de la volonté de Dieu ni qu’elle s’accomplirait en son temps, comme en effet, elle arriva. *(La Relation* 419)

There is an important coincidence in the timing of Guyart's transformational experience of August 15, 1647. According to Oury, Guyart had been working since 1641 on a new constitution for the Ursulines of Quebec, which would establish them as a distinct and separate house from the mother houses of Paris and Tours: “constitutions tels qu’il nous en fallait pour ce pays et selon les expériences que nous avions de ce qui se pouvait faire” *(La Relation*, 406). As Oury indicates, the process proved to be a thorny one: “ainsi quelques-unes des Ursulines de Québec se montrèrent peu satisfaites” *(Marie de l’Incarnation*, vol 2,
419). Her own community in Tours was “fort chatouilleuse” with regard to the concessions
Guyart made in the course of the deliberations. Finally, with the cooperation of Father
Lalemant, then Head of Mission in Canada, the new constitution was approved and adopted
on July 31, 1647 (ibid, 413). The amount of contention Guyart dealt with in those years can
be measured by the fact that the decision was reversed after her death, and the rule of the
Ursulines of Quebec returned to that of Paris for two more centuries (ibid, 420). It appears
Guyart was a woman well ahead of her time. It is perhaps no coincidence that the one-
hundred- and- forty page document, by all accounts written by Guyart but credited to
Lalemant (ibid, 418), was signed just prior to the Feast of the Assumption on July 31, 1647,
on the Feast of Saint Ignatius (ibid, 417). The “miraculous” lifting of her long period of
depression coincided, therefore, with the resolution of this major issue, dear to her heart, and
two important dates of religious significance. It is of note, and perhaps one of the reasons
she worked so hard for it, that, according to Oury, Guyart wrote the new constitution in such
a way as to mitigate the use of humiliation. As an act of discipline by the Mother Superior
towards her charges, the use of humiliation was considerably less harsh in the new
constitution for the Ursulines of Quebec than in the rule of the mother houses, an indication
that at some level, Guyart was aware of its damaging effects: “aussi bien à Tours qu’à Paris,
le style des Règlements est plus sec, il a un caractère plus juridique et moins humain” (ibid, 422). Guyart’s approach was gentler, as described by her son who is quoted by Oury: “le
moins qu’elle pourra donner de répréhension au public hors du chapitre, ce sera le meilleur
… la vraie douceur … consiste en la façon et manière d’avertir [les sœurs] de leurs fautes en
observant les circonstances de temps et de lieu” (ibid, 424).

Guyart’s belief that her depression was lifted by the direct intervention of the Virgin
Mary allowed no room for credit to herself for all the years of hard work at a high level of excellence, against considerable opposition from many quarters, including her own mother house in Tours. It was Guyart’s cultural and religious conviction that God was at work through her and that she was capable of nothing on her own. The writing and adoption of the new constitution was arguably the greatest accomplishment of her vocational life, her practical vision of the organization’s future needs based on the formulation of a distinct and separate rule to determine a new and appropriate identity for the Ursulines of Quebec. It was an accomplishment which conceivably contributed to her ability to face the great challenges ahead: the trauma of the stepped-up Iroquois wars, the decimation of the Hurons, the martyrdom of three of her Jesuit colleagues, and the conflagration of December, 1650, which destroyed everything Guyart had worked so hard to build.

The “Transcendent Presence”

After the fire, when the decision was made to rebuild the monastery, Guyart was put in charge: "Je fus donc chargée de tous ces soins, autant intérieurement de la part de Dieu que de la part de l’obéissance" (La Relation, 439). Shortly before the fire, the Ursulines had dedicated their monastery to the Virgin Mary, naming her perpetual Mother Superior. From that time, and for the first time in the text, Guyart recalls, she considered the Holy Mother her closest ally after God: “je la regardais donc en ce dessein, comme ma conduite, et ma toute (sic) après Dieu” (440). However, this new relationship took an unexpected turn when, for the first time in the text, Guyart felt the spiritual presence of the Virgin Mary manifest by her side: “je ressentis son assistance d’une façon et manière fort extraordinaire, qui était que je l’avais continuellement présente” (La Relation, 441). It was a continuous presence reminiscent of Guyart’s previous sense of the presence of Christ: “j’avais quelquefois un
sentiment intérieur que Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ était proche de moi, à mon côté, lequel m'accompagnait" (205). In her perception, the Holy Mother became a constant companion and guide to Guyart during the entire rebuilding process from 1651-54:

Je n'eus pas plus tôt commencé que je ressentis son assistance d'une façon et manière fort extraordinaire, qui était que je l'avais continuellement présente. Je ne la voyais pas des yeux du corps ni par vision imaginaire, mais en la manière que le suradorable Verbe Incarné me fait l'honneur de se communiquer à moi, par union, amour et communication actuelle et continuelle, que je n'avais jamais expérimenté au regard de la très sainte Vièrge. (La Relation 441)

According to Anne Taves, belief in the agentive power of spirit may be strong enough to provoke feelings or sensations of the presence of a divine spirit, attributions which may explain Guyart’s sense of the very real presence of the Virgin Mary throughout the rebuilding process:

Although anomalous events … and experiences characterized as mystical or spiritual are not experiences of an agent, people may still attribute them to an agent, if they believe that there are agents who can and do cause such things to occur. We can distinguish, in other words, between things that are attributed to the action of an agent – that is, things people believe were caused by an agent – and feelings, sensations, and perceptions suggestive of agency. In the first instance, an agent is presumed to exist and something is attributed to the presumed agency based on people’s knowledge of or beliefs about the agent in question. In the second instance, we have feelings, sensations, and perceptions that are suggestive of agency. On the basis of this type of experience and the beliefs they hold about it, people may postulate the
presence of an agent to whom they attribute the power to act and affect things. (40)

This felt presence and the intimate commerce “between” the two “women” throughout the rebuilding process, may be seen as a metaphor for Guyart’s confidence in the strength and courage she found in the iconic image and its representation of the divine feminine:

En chemin faisant, je m’entretenaïs avec elle ... Selon les occurrences, j’allais en haut, en bas, sur les échafaudages, sans crainte, en l’entretenant de la sorte. Quelquefois je me sentais inspirée de l’honorer par quelques-unes des hymnes ou antientes de l’Église. Je suivais tous ses mouvements. Je lui disais souvent: “Ma divine Mère, gardez, s’il vous plaît, nos ouvriers’ ... elle les a si bien gardés que dans la bâtisse et construction, pas un n’a été blessé. Ma faiblesse avait besoin de ce secours dans toutes les fatigues qu’il me fallut supporter en toutes les dispositions qu’il a fallu faire ... Trois bâtiments ne m’en auraient pas tant donné. Néanmoins, j’y expérimetais ce que dit Notre-Seigneur de son joug, [qu’il] est la douceur et suavité, que je ressentais de la compagnie de sa très sainte Mère. (La Relation 441)

According to Gerda Lerner, vestiges of the power and agency once attributed to the Great Goddesses of antiquity were ascribed to the Holy Mother in the cult of the Virgin Mary. The sacredness of Mary’s virginity, her own immaculate conception, and her divine motherhood were elements that: “echoed the power of ancient mother-goddesses as givers of life and as the protectresses of women in childbirth” (The Creation of Feminine Consciousness, 125). Thus, the perceived independent authority of the Virgin Mary throughout the rebuilding process (as opposed to her role as intermediary with God the Father and the Son), may be seen as a remnant of the independent power and agency of the female divine. In Guyart’s important representation of the Virgin Mary as powerful
creator/collaborator *in her own right* may be perceived a glimpse of an ancient form of knowing suppressed by thousands of years of patriarchal rule. It can be understood as a resistant inner harking back, an intuitive and subconscious acknowledgement of the honour and dignity of the female principle, formerly lost in the humiliation of societal and religious oppression.

In spite of the felt assistance of the Holy Mother, however, the period following the fire was understandably difficult for Guyart, a period compounded by the serious illness of her beloved friend, Mère Marie de Saint-Joseph, who subsequently became the first of the original group of religious women to die in the New World. Further, the intensification of the Iroquois wars had caused remnants of the Huron nation to take refuge in Quebec, hundreds of people in need of any help the Ursulines in their reduced circumstances could provide:

> Eux donc et leur troupeau, qui était environ 400 ou 500 chrétiens, s’arrêtèrent, ici à Québec. Dans l’affliction que je portais à mon âme, la seule consolation qui me restait, voyant ces pauvres fugitifs, était d’être proche d’eux et que nous aurions de leurs filles. (429)

Along with the destruction of the Hurons, the Iroquois captured, brutally tortured and killed the Jesuits Brébeuf, Garnier, and Lalemant, a loss Guyart felt deeply: "Ah! Que ce coup me fut extrême." *(La Relation, 429; Oury, Marie de l’Incarnation, 450).*

This time, contrary to her devastating losses as a young widow, Guyart did not withdraw inward in solitude and mourning, nor did she contemplate returning to France: "retourner en France, à moins d'une volonté de Dieu reconnue, j'y ressentais une aversion entière" *(La Relation, 437).* Another significant contrast with earlier behaviours and emotions is the fact that her feelings of culpability did not give rise to self-hatred or harsh
mortifications, as they had in the past. Rather, Guyart immediately set about looking after the practical affairs of survival and rebuilding. Such a shift in her response to tragedy suggests evidence of her evolution of self. It defines the person she had become, her enormous strength of character mirrored in the felt spiritual presence and agency of the Virgin Mary. In fact, Guyart claims, the experience of the manifest presence of the Virgin Mary was different from any previous experience she had had of the Holy Mother. A shift in tone in the text signals this difference: for the first time in her narrative, Guyart communicates with the Virgin Mary with the same familiarity she used to address her Holy Spouse: “je la sentais, sans la voir, auprès de moi, m’accompagnant partout … je m’entretenas avec elle, lui disant: "Allons ma divine Mère, allons voir nos ouvriers" (La Relation, 441).

* * * * * * *

The shift in the role of the Holy Mother in relation to Guyart in the text is gradual. It is a shift from the Virgin Mary’s traditional function as divine intercessor (for instance, when Guyart prayed through her for protection on the night of her possession experience), to one with directive power in her own right (as she appears in the “Dream of the Three Kisses”), and ultimately as guide and mentor in the reconstruction process at the end of the narrative.

Guyart interpreted her first encounter with the Virgin Mary in the “Dream of the Three Kisses” as a sign that she was being beckoned by divine will to a new space, geographically, psychically, and symbolically distant from the cultural conditioning of France, and as yet unknown destiny. As Antoine Vergote observes: “metaphors prevail in mystical language, and symbolic perception is essential to mystical experience” (“Plying between Psychology and Mysticism,” 94). The image thus presented provides a metaphor
for Guyart's own spiritual journey, from one anchored in the directive authority of a male God (represented in the dream by the archetype of the Apostle), towards the feminine archetype and empowerment. The appearance of the iconic female figure represents the cultural and religious importance of the Virgin Mary although she is overshadowed throughout Guyart’s spiritual narrative by the text’s clearly Christocentric focus (a focus set in the image of the living Christ in the first dream images in the opening paragraphs of the text, consolidated in her period of longing for spiritual marriage with Him, and culminating in spiritual marriage and a life of service to Him). Yet early mention of Guyart’s desire to “see” the Virgin Mary “some time before she dies,” in the first chapter of the narrative, builds literary and dramatic tension: “la très sainte Vièrge que je passionnais de voir ... avant que de mourir ... voilà comme la Bonté divine me voulait suavement disposer si je lui eusse été bien fidèle” (165). Although Guyart does not claim to physically see the Virgin Mary, the ‘appearance’ of her felt, transcendent presence at the end of the narrative may be considered a prayer answered, bringing the narrative full circle and with it, ‘proof’ of Guyart’s claims of divine grace and truth and of her fidelity to that truth.

Yet until the “Dream of the Three Kisses,” the text is relatively silent with regard to the Holy Mother (and female authority) and completely silent with regard to Guyart’s biological mother, compared to the overwhelming presence of male authority, with references throughout to God the Father, Jesus as Holy Spouse, various priests and spiritual advisors, her son, and her biological father. It is of note that in the Supplément, however, she does mention her mother's opposition to the idea of her becoming a nun, apparently because she was too "gay" or cheerful for such a life: "ma mère ne me croyait pas propre [à être religieuse] parce que elle me voyait d'une humeur gaie et agréable, qu'elle estimait peut-être
incompatible avec la vertu de la religion" (La Relation, 482). According to biographic notes, Guyart’s mother, Jeanne Michelet, died sometime between 1617 and 1619, (prior to the deaths of her husband and mother-in-law), at a time in her life when her mother’s presence would normally have been important to a young woman, especially during her first pregnancy (La Relation, 175). The effacement of the biological mother in the text can be seen to reflect her physical absence/death. Along with negligible mention of her Mother Superior throughout, the absence of ‘mother’ mirrors the general effacement of women in society. Nonetheless, this effacement of women is paradoxical beside the widespread veneration for the Virgin Mary, women’s key role as mothers and nurturers, and the respect Guyart demonstrated for her mother in a 1644 letter to her sister:

Je me souviens que notre défunte mère, lorsqu’elle était seule dans son trafic, prenait avantage de ce loisir pour faire des oraisons jaculatoires très affectives. Je l’entendais dans ces moments parler à Notre-Seigneur de ses enfants et de toutes ses petites nécessités ... vous ne croirez pas comme cela a fait impression sur mon esprit.

Je vous dis ceci ma chère soeur afin que vous l’imitiez... plus... que de tout autre.

(Correspondances 235)

Offering her mother as a role model for her sister suggests Guyart viewed Jeanne Michelet as a model for herself as well. The absence of the biological mother in the text may be seen to reflect the general devaluing of women under patriarchy, as Patricia Smart has observed in Writing in the Father’s House: The Emergence of the Feminine in the Quebec Literary Tradition.

With the appearance of the “Transcendent Presence” just two years after the perceived “Miracle of the Assumption,” the invisible strength of the feminine can be seen to mirror
Guyart's new-found confidence in herself. The more she progressed in her spiritual life, the more Guyart aligned with the Holy Virgin, evident in these three key memories, the “Dream of the Three Kisses,” the “Miracle of the Assumption,” and the “Transcendent Presence.” The manifestation of the spiritual presence of the Virgin Mary, and Guyart’s alignment with her, represents, in fact, the culmination of the life events in Guyart’s text, which stand out as transformational in her evolution of self. The entire rebuilding process, with its collaboration between Guyart and the transcendent presence of the Holy Mother, may be seen to represent a coming together in Guyart’s progress towards a women’s way of knowing at the end of her narrative, an ending which provides the contextual present in which La Relation de 1654 was written as a movement away from a solely Christocentric, subservient, male-oriented way of knowing towards a greater sense of power and confidence as a result of her alignment with the feminine.

Significantly, however, the Virgin Mary soon reverts to her role as “Mère et Médiatrice auprès de son Fils” and the narrative reverts to its Christocentric focus (La Relation, 449). With the reconstruction project complete, Guyart's role as chief builder in extraordinary times reverted to the day-to-day responsibilities of managing the monastery, a role which continued to consume all her waking hours and left her little time to write: "le divertissement où je suis ne me permet pas de m'étendre bien au long" (452). On the spiritual plane, she entered a new state of "pauvreté spirituelle," an "état de victime continué" (450), a state in which she described herself as being completely possessed by God:

C’est une chose si haute, si ravissante, si divine, si simple, et hors de ce qui peut tomber sous le sens de la diction humaine, que je ne la puis exprimer sinon que je suis
en Dieu, possédée de Dieu et que c’est Dieu qui m’aurait bientôt consommée par sa subtilité et efficacité amoureuse, si je n’étais soutenue par une autre impression qui succède à celle-là qui … tempère sa grandeur comme insupportable en cette vie […] Les effets que porte cet état sont toujours un anéantissement et une véritable et foncière connaissance qu’on est le néant et l’impuissance même […] une fomentation de paix … qui vient de l’acquiescement aux peines, souffrances et croix qui arrivent … [avec] une grande patience … ; un doux empressemment intérieur de bienveillance pour ceux de qui on a été offensé, de qui l’on recherche avec adresse les approches, pour, sans faire semblant de rien, les traiter d’amis … enfin une aversion entière à l’esprit d’indignation, pour ne garder aucun sentiment des injures et torts qu’on reçoit du prochain … Les effets de cet état sont de prendre … les souffrances dans l’amour … du suradorable Verbe Incarné. (La Relation 464)

It is this state of pure love, Guyart finds herself a ‘victim’ in ‘true poverty of spirit.’ It is a state in which she is one with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a “pureté et simplicité spirituelle,” ‘l’Amour objectif’ (461). It is the thirteenth and highest state of spiritual ascension Guyart attained in her journey, one which, according to Mali, as mentioned, is higher still than spiritual marriage: “Unlike other mystical writers, Marie does not present the experience of mystical union or spiritual marriage as the ultimate stage of the spiritual journey” (Mystic in the New World, 87). From another viewpoint, Guyart’s arrival at a state of spiritual mastery following her experience of the transcendent presence of the Virgin Mary, demonstrates a maturity in her acceptance of life’s trials with calm resolve.

Guyart’s encounters with the Holy Mother mark life-changing transitions, transitions from the Old World to New France, from depression to serenity, and, following the
completion of the rebuilding of the monastery, from a state of spiritual union to an even higher state of spiritual mastery as “victime continuelle.”
CONCLUSION

Reading La Relation de 1654 in 2012

To open a copy of Guyart’s spiritual autobiography, is to enter a historical era and another world altogether. It is not just the seventeenth-century language or the primitive setting of New France in which she wrote, nor the war-stricken early modern France of her memory that must be taken into account. One is immediately struck by the specific language of the mystic, foreign to modern sensibility, both exalted and utterly base which, as Leigh Gilmore notes, reflects the ‘code’ the late medieval mystics had to apply in order to be judged credible according to the cultural norms of truth-telling. Such norms were not benign. They were set in the context of what Gilmore describes as a ‘discursive crisis’ between the authority of the Church and the claims of the mostly female mystics whose direct experience of God, perceived as a threat to ecclesiastical power, put them in a category apart. Such women were looked upon with suspicion within the Church, and by 1630, with the rising tide of enlightenment, as Sluhovsky observes, with increasing derision in the wider public.

The persona of Marie de l’Incarnation, created by her son in the late 17th century with the publication of her Vie, and subsequently promoted by her religious advocates who succeeded in having her beatified by the Church two centuries later, persists in the cultural imaginary of Quebec today. Her dramatic conversion, her religious fervour and the miraculous dream which brought her to Canada in 1639, her respect for the aboriginal people and passion for learning and teaching, are integral to her public story as a courageous and respected founding foremother of French Canada. But the shadow side of the oppression of women under patriarchy, the effect of grief and loss and humiliation on the human spirit, the severe mortifications she inflicted on her body for years, the threat of surveillance and its consequences, are neglected in the official story.
The physical hardships of the Canadian wilderness on the psyche of the early Europeans, including Guyart, have been explored recently by historians and literary scholars. My reading of Guyart’s spiritual autobiographical text digs deeper into the female psyche by taking into account the symptoms she describes or alludes to in her text, assisted by information from her biographers and the insights of twenty-first century knowledge in various related disciplines. In this re-reading, I have attempted to ‘demystify’ the mystic through the lens of contemporary science and infuse new meaning and purpose into Guyart’s life-narrative. At the same time, I acknowledge that there is no demystifying the ineffable mysteries of the spiritually-gifted whose life experience, like Guyart’s, has brought them to a personal understanding of God. My re-reading has attempted to understand Guyart’s evolution of self through the significant emotional and psychological events in her construction of self, - her conversion, her ‘heroic’ mortifications, and her suicidal depression, for example - in light of twenty-first century knowledge. In my view, understanding the effects of her historical environment - of societal violence and the devaluing and humiliation of women, among other things - on her evolution of self lends even greater credibility to the courage and fortitude of this remarkable woman than a study of the spiritual journey alone.

In Chapter One, I explored social violence as a possible contributing factor to the psychology of fear reflected in the religious practices of certain spiritually-inclined women in early seventeenth-century France. On the political front, the year of Guyart’s birth coincided with the signing of the Edict of Nantes meant to end decades of brutal civil war. But the pacifist King Henry IV was assassinated when Guyart was still a child, and his successors, the regent Queen and her son, Louis XIII, saw war as a legitimate means to fight the Protestant heresy. Thus the environment of brutal social violence Guyart was born into continued in her childhood,
repeating the bloody confrontations of the decades before, exacerbated by successive waves of plaque and economic misery. The itinerant armies billeted among civilians were feared and hated, as we have seen, their presence contributing to an already high rate of widely tolerated, and silenced, domestic violence, according to recent revisionist historians. As Julius Ruff notes, rape was widespread and any incident of sexual violence was couched in guilt and shame, as much for the victim as the perpetrator. Any misfortune that befell women was considered just punishment by God for their sins. Such was the case for Guyart who suffered serious personal loss when she was twenty, loss coincident with new and particularly vicious military campaigns, which preceeded, and perhaps contributed to, the psychology of her religious fervour and her conversion experience which in turn triggered her severe penitential bodily mortifications.

In Chapter Two, I reviewed the thirteen stages of Guyart’s spiritual ascent towards union with God in the Catholic mystic tradition, each state corresponding to a chapter of her text. In the course of her spiritual journey, Guyart relates her experience of three increasingly difficult ‘dark nights of the soul,’ periods documented and explained by Guyart scholars Guy-Marie Oury and Anya Mali as temptations Guyart was obliged to pass through on her journey towards mystic union with God and the ultimate state of ‘spiritual poverty,’ as described by Mali. While Guyart’s text credits God for all that happened to her, it also provides evidence of important human influences, influences such as the mentoring of Georges de la Haye, whose favourable discernment of her Relation de 1633 established her credibility as a mystic (although spiritually-minded women, especially mystics, were always subject to the ‘policing’ of the Church, as Gilmore observes). De la Haye’s compassion and care for Guyart’s young son began her lifelong relationship with the Jesuits. As Barbara Diefendorf and Roger Duchêne point out, the relationship of spiritually-inclined women to their spiritual directors fostered the women’s ability
to think for themselves. And as noted by Belenky et al., the role of a trusted mentor can be critical in women’s evolving sense of themselves. De la Haye’s discernment of divine influence in Guyart’s life, a pivotal moment in her text, is immediately followed by the lifting of her second dark night of the soul.

Guyart’s arrival in the New World marked a major transition in her life, a psychological and geographical rupture which triggered her third, longest, and most severe period of depression. But, as she recalls in the text, on the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, in 1647, thanks to her direct supplications to the Holy Mother herself, her depression miraculously and permanently lifted. While Guyart attributes the lifting of her depression to the grace and power of the Virgin Mary, I argue that the timing of the alleviation of her psychological symptoms coincides precisely with perhaps her greatest personal achievement, that of finalizing the new constitution for the Ursulines of New France, a task she had worked years to accomplish. In spite of culturally imposed silence with regard to Guyart’s taking any credit for her accomplishments, the psychological effects of her hard-won victory are difficult to ignore.

In Chapter Three, I examined the ‘surveillance’ and ‘policing’ of the female mystics and the special tensions they were subjected to as a result. Leigh Gilmore postulates a “discursive crisis” in which the authority of the male ecclesiastic language clashed with the presumed authority of the female mystic. In her view, the spiritual autobiographies of the female mystics embodied a resistance and fundamental challenge to the Church, a resistance I perceive Guyart as unconsciously participating in. In the context of “policing” and gendered notions of women’s susceptibility to the devil, and the “penalties and payoffs” of truth-telling in confession, Guyart’s relief at her spiritual director’s favourable judgment of La Relation de 1633 takes on greater meaning. By repeating notions of “bassesse” and bringing the humiliations she
suffered to the fore in her text, Guyart may be seen to subvert the societal oppression of women while paradoxically supporting the patriarchal order she served.

In Chapter Four, I explored Guyart’s practice of heroic mortification from a gendered, science-based, and common-sense point of view. My argument focused on the notion that while the severity of her mortifications may be seen as an extreme expression of religious devotion, they also reflect an unconscious response to the personal and societal trauma she suffered. From the stand-point of today’s knowledge of severe self-injuring practices, more prevalent among young women than men, and especially with regard to their addictive nature and their relationship to emotional trauma, the fact that Guyart was able to cease her mortifications and lead a highly productive life is remarkable. This point is arguably one of the greatest testimonies to her strength of character, a major accomplishment overlooked by her commentators.

Also from the standpoint of twenty-first century knowledge, I argue that the physiological component of Guyart’s conversion experience, in which she describes being bathed in the blood of Christ, allows for a possible connection with the sudden reappearance of her menstrual blood after many months of suppression due to pregnancy and lactation, with all its nefarious connotations. The suppression of emotion under such circumstances, exacerbated by the Lenten rhetoric of sin and guilt and atonement, no doubt contributed to a state of mind highly susceptible to the experience of religious conversion. Such perspectives increase our understanding of the self-destructive behaviour Guyart subsequently subjected herself to, behaviour she could only understand in the religious context of guilt, contrition, penance and the hope of salvation.

In Chapter Five, I explored Guyart’s account of her most difficult period of depression, a period which began with her transition to the New World and which was so severe that she
entertained thoughts of suicide. It is an aspect of her life narrative that has previously been little explored other than in the context of her spiritual journey and the demands of the harsh physical environment in Canada. In my analysis, I examined Guyart’s account of her difficult interpersonal relationships, how she was humiliated, even by her colleagues, and the pain it caused her. As in a previous psychological and social rupture twenty years earlier, she recounts retreating into silence and assuming the lowliest and most servile tasks during the trans-Atlantic crossing. In my analysis I consider the deleterious effect of the humiliation Guyart describes experiencing at the hands of others throughout her text, a practice commonly used on women of the time regardless of social class. Guyart biographer Dom Guy Oury notes that Guyart removed humiliation from the new Ursuline rule as a tool for the use of the Mother Superior to discipline her nuns, a reflection I suggest, of her personal experience of the damage it can do to the human spirit. Because, as she acknowledges in her text, she had been given ‘superior talents’ by God, Guyart felt all the more responsible for her abject depression. Such depression, Phyllis Chessler reminds us, was not unusual in talented but socially repressed women, and could be severe.

As I have argued in Chapter Six, Guyart’s experience of demonic possession, however brief in the text and dismissed or glossed over by her commentators, is of significance because of its textual link with the infamous case of mass demonic possession at Loudun and because of its gender specificity. Paradoxically, it was believed that the further a woman advanced along the spiritual path, the greater the risk of her exposure to the devil. By including her account of the devil’s attacks in her text, it can be theorized that Guyart was, in fact, attempting to legitimize her claims of spiritual progress. Further, the descriptions she provides leave little doubt as to their metaphoric link with sexual invasion, violence, and fear. Guyart’s depiction of being unable to move or to cry out may also be seen as a metaphor for the cultural silencing of women
and as a (subconscious) cry of resistance, just as Gilmore perceives the spiritual autobiographical writing of the medieval and late medieval mystic women as a voice of resistance in and of itself.

In Chapter Seven, I reviewed the strengths and limitations of the theoretical perspectives of women’s evolution of self developed by Belenky et al.’s *Women’s Ways of Knowing* as a tool for my understanding of Guyart’s self-representation. Of special note in the Belenky et al. study are the authors’ findings with respect to the notion of rupture as a transitional trigger from one perspective of women’s knowing to another. The limitations of the study in my analysis include the distinctly different historical environments of the twenty-first and seventeenth centuries, different cultural notions of the ‘self,’ as well as the study’s lack of consideration for the spiritual dimension of life even though its importance was specifically noted by the women subjects in the most advanced perspective of knowing. Nonetheless, my comparison provides an additional, hypothetical lens through which to view Guyart’s evolution of self.

While Gilmore perceives the very act of writing as an act of resistance on the part of the female mystics, according to the Belenky et al. model, writing the self may be seen more as an act of commitment to the self than as an act of deliberate resistance to external authority. In her claim of direct communication with God, Guyart may be seen to resist and subvert the authority of the Church, while paradoxically supporting it. Such perceived resistance can also be read, at the same time, as an expression of her subconscious need to grow. In spite of culturally interiorized notions of inferiority, obedience and humility, and in light of her exceptional talents and intellectual gifts, Guyart followed her own path to education and power in the only way open to her.

Of singular significance in the text, I argue, is Guyart’s movement from an entirely Christocentric focus at the beginning of the narrative towards an eventual alignment with the
Holy Mother at the end. In Chapter Eight, I explored each of Guyart’s three encounters with the Virgin Mary as evidence of this important evolution of self, first, in the “Dream of the Three Kisses,” then in the “Miracle of the Assumption,” and finally, in the “Transcendent Presence.”

In the “Dream of the Three Kisses,” Guyart’s pivotal dream directing her to the New World, we saw the Holy Mother beckon Guyart towards her with loving affection and assurance towards her, and towards a major geographical and psychological transition to unknown possibilities of self.

In my analysis of the ‘Miracle of the Assumption,’ I explored the longest and most severe of Guyart’s periods of depression and the extenuating circumstances that surrounded it, including her struggle for a new constitution. It was a cause she believed critical for the future success of the monastery and its mission in the New World. When it was finally written and signed, it was her belief that God himself advised her to appeal directly to the Virgin Mary for deliverance, not as an intermediary, but as an agent in and of herself. The fact that her appeal coincided so closely with the signing of the new constitution is a coincidence too significant to ignore. Instantly, Guyart’s depression lifted and all the ill-will she felt towards and from others permanently disappeared. It was a miracle of healing as it was a miracle of achievement, perhaps the most remarkable of her life. In the direct intervention of the Holy Mother may be seen, paradoxically, the symbolic acknowledgement of the power of the iconic feminine emerging in Guyart herself.

In her third and final encounter with the Holy Mother, Guyart moves even closer to the feminine principle, aligning herself as companion and collaborator in intimate commerce with the transcendent presence of the Virgin Mary throughout the reconstruction of the monastery, an act of joint creation that can be interpreted as symbolically representing the feminine role of
reproduction. The absence of Guyart's biological mother in the text, her lack of nurturing of her own son, and her guilt for abandoning him, are countered by the call of the great Mother to the physical and spiritual nurturing and growth of the mission in the New World. By association with the iconic power of the Virgin Mary, Guyart lays claim to a newfound strength and courage.

While the dangers of reductionism in contextual and multi-disciplinary readings are to be avoided, considerations of the naturalistic explanations for Guyart's conversion experience, severe mortifications, visions and dreams in relation to her textual evolution of self provide greater understanding of her relevance to the contemporary, secular reader.

While Guyart's spiritual autobiography represents instruction to her son and posterity in the thirteen states of her mystic journey as she experienced it, my re-reading discerns and hypothesizes the key life and spiritual events embedded in her self-narrative which triggered the transforming shifts that fuelled her evolution of self. When these transformational shifts are examined in light of the *Women's Ways of Knowing* model, in spite of the model's limitations, Guyart's evolution of self may be seen to correspond with the progression of questing late twentieth-century women, however irregular and non-linear that progression may be. Thus examined, Guyart's progression from 'silence' to glimpses of 'constructive' and critical thinking is made more relevant, real, and all the more exemplary.

As Patricia Smart has observed in her landmark study *Écrire dans la maison du père*, there have been writerly women, though not many recorded in history, prior to our own times, who refused the notion of victim (or sexual objectification) and in their way, resisted and subverted the oppression of patriarchy:

Bien avant les féministes de nos jours, il y a eu des femmes qui se sont refusées au rôle de *mater dolorosa* ou de femme-objet, et qui, inscrivant les traces de leur propre
subjectivité dans le language littéraire, ont contesté cette tradition de sacrifice, qui n'est au fond que l'autre face de la sempiternelle autorité du Père. (352)

In Demystifying the Mystic, my re-reading of *La Relation de 1654*, Guyart emerges clearly as one of them.
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---. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a mystical person as: “one who whether Christian or non-Christian, seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain union with or absorption into the Deity, or who believes in the possibility of the spiritual apprehension of truths that are inaccessible to the understanding” (Oxford English Dictionary Compact Edition, 1971, p.1889).

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According to Susan Fiske and Shelley Taylor: “attribute theory deals with how the social perceiver uses information to arrive at causal explanations for events. It examines what information is gathered and how it is combined to form a causal judgement” (*Social Cognition.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991)

The ascetic spirituality of the French School promulgated by Cardinal de Bérulle at the end of the 16th and early 17th centuries had a particular influence on certain influential and pious women of the elite. These women, Barbe Acarie among them, fostered the rise of the female monastic movement (Diefendorf, 8; Bruneau, 20; Krumenacker, 113).

Dom Guy-Marie Oury situates Guyart’s severe mortifications as directly influenced by the particularly harsh asceticism of her Feuillant spiritual advisor (*Marie de l’Incarnation*, vol. 1, 59), and Bruneau sees them as required ‘proof’ of her calling (*Two Mystics Confront the Modern World*, 40).

A general atmosphere of social, economic and political upheaval during which the moral authority of the Church was challenged, particularly by the reputed degeneracy of the papacy, likely contributed to a greater freedom among women “to seek religious fulfillment, particularly of the affective mysticism variety through heroic asceticism” (Kroll and Bachrach, 126).

“The question remains … as to why asceticism was more pronounced in female than in male mystics. One possibility is that men, even holy men, were not as intense in their pursuit of ecstatic mystical states as were women, and were even somewhat distrustful of such states. Thus, there is a need to explain the data in two ways: first, to explain the increased use of asceticism in female holy persons, especially female mystics and, second, to explain the absence of increased use of asceticism in male holy persons, especially male mystics in the later centuries of the Middle Ages. We suggest there is a base rate in the population, assumedly equally shared by men and women, of relative ease and affinity for entering into altered states of consciousness and that, when a society encourages greater numbers of individuals to participate in activities for which they have modest talents at best, they have to find ways to help nature along. Heroic asceticism is one of those ways” (Kroll and Bachrach, *The Mystic Mind*, 128).

It is grounded in recent studies by such historians as Georges Vigarello, Julius Ruff, Barbara Diefendorf, Yves Krumenacker, Bernard Hours and Moshe Sluhovsky.

In “Captivity, Freedom and the new World Convent: the Spiritual Autobiography of Marie de l’Incarnation,” Carolyn Woidat notes: “Marie … is perhaps as well-known for her mystical visions and missionary work as she is for her radical decision as a widowed mother to abandon her young son” a decision that was not unique in the period. (2)

According to Barbara Diefendorf, “the Catholic revival was deeply rooted in the traumas of religious wars and in the apocalyptic and penitential spirituality to which the wars gave birth” (From Penitence to Charity, 242). According to Bernard Hours’ history of the Church and religious life in early modern France, the period of the religious wars strengthened the base of Catholic reform: “le grand élan catholique du XVIIe siècle français y plonge ses racines nourricières” (L’Eglise et la vie religieuse dans la France moderne: XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle, 142).

Ruff contends that it was a period “many times more violent than our own” in spite of generalized belief to the contrary, “ours are not, at least yet, the most violent times according to historians” (2). His hypothesis is based on research by historians beginning in the 1950s which reveals that “Europeans half a millennium ago constituted a society far more violent than that of their modern descendants. Violence … was part of the discourse of early modern interpersonal relations … and Europeans of all social strata were prone to violent behavior, a situation quite different from that obtaining in our own time (2).”

Of note are Belenky et al’s findings in Women’s Ways of Knowing regarding sexual abuse of women. In their study:

“Sexual abuse appears to be a shockingly common experience for women. In our sample … 38 percent of the women in schools and colleges and 65 percent of women contacted through the social agencies told us they had been subject to either incest, rape, or sexual seduction by a male in authority over them - fathers, uncles, teachers, doctors, clerics, bosses. Abuse was not limited to any particular epistemological grouping of women… nor was it limited to any specific class, ethnic, or age group; but the sense of outrage was most prominent among the subjectivists who angrily recalled their past naiveté and silent submission … They tended to locate the trauma … at an earlier period during which they had no sense of voice and an unquestioned trust in the authorities of their life.” (59)
The high rate of sexual abuse found in the twentieth century in the Belenky et al study begs the question as to its frequency and effect on women of the early modern period.


Vigarello observes that “rapt,” or abduction, was usually followed by violence: “One word recurs under the ancient regime, fostering the confusion between theft and rape, treating the rape of a woman as equivalent to stealing her away (rapt). This was … because the abduction was generally followed by violence” (47).

The first part of each sermon, the ‘instruction fidei,’ focused on the suffering of Christ, the morbidity of sin, and the ravages of hell, while the second part, the ‘instruction morum,’ focused on redemption through prayer, frequent communion, penance and charitable works (Houras, 30).

Diefendorf notes that ascetic women were inspired by male role models.

Reference Deroy-Pineau, p. 9 of this document.

As Yves Krumenacker observes: “une société égalitaire est, à l’époque, impossible à penser, l’égalité a été aboli par le premier péché; depuis, l’humanité ne peut plus trouver d’ordre et se rapprocher de Dieu qu’au moyen d’une stricte hiérarchie” (L’Ecole française de spiritualité: des mystiques, des fondateurs, des courants et leurs interprètes, 74).

Belief that one’s soul could not be saved without a minimum of instruction was the reason, according to Gutton, that early education became a priority in France in the early seventeenth century (96).

By the time Guyart entered the cloister in 1631, thirty-six Ursuline monasteries had been established in France on the model of the Paris house. According to Diefendorf, each new monastery would send one or two young women for a period of two years to train in them for leadership positions (From Penitence to Charity, 132).


Barbara Diefendorf argues that “despite the apparent contradiction, [certain pious ascetic women] justified their ascetic practices as exercises in the abdication of will at the same time that they cultivated self-control – the deliberate exercise of will – as a means of accomplishing [their] mortifications. The same paradox lay at the heart of their relationships with spiritual directors. Although they claimed to submit unreservedly to the director’s authority, their aim of abdicating self-will so as to accomplish the will of God ultimately authorized independent judgement” (From Penitence to Charity, 68).
with the conversion narratives in the Christian tradition, a zeal evident in her passion for teaching, the actual turning
novices, who was ill, on the night of Guyart's possession. Conceivably, Guyart took over her duties.

xxv"The first role Guyart was given in the monastery was that of assistant mistress of novices, a role which included
spiritual direction for the nuns in her charge. As Barbara Diefendorf points out, on a spiritual level, the mistress of
novices was equal to the Mother Superior. Along with the confessor, all three were responsible for the advancement
of the novices' souls: "The mistress of novices was by no means the junior partner in this threesome ... perhaps most
remarkable ... is the implicit equality of the sacramentally ordained confessor, the abbess, and the mistress of
novices when it came to offering spiritual direction" (154). As we know from the text, Guyart visited the mistress of
novices, who was ill, on the night of Guyart's possession. Conceivably, Guyart took over her duties.

xxviii Note: While Mali sees Guyart's apostolic zeal as a natural offshoot of the conversion experience, consistent
with the conversion narratives in the Christian tradition, a zeal evident in her passion for teaching, the actual turning
point in the text for her call to apostolic service is the moment of interpretation of the "Dream of the Three Kisses," a notion I explore in Chapter Six.

xxvi Guyart's transition to the New World may be seen as a leaving behind of the past such as Belenky et al theorize,
a transition that can play a considerable role in the development of self and that may occur: "as late as thirty, forty or
even fifty ... along with significant indicators of an impetus toward action, change, and risk taking" (Women's Ways
of Knowing, 82).

xxvii It is an approach taken by Robin van Løben Sels in her psychoanalytic study of "Mairie," a patient, and her
medieval mystic counterpart, Hadewijch of Brabant (A Dream in the World: Poetics of Soul in Two Women, Modern
and Medieval, 2009).

xxxi The rise in female monasticism and the intensification of religious fervour among women was not without its
detractors, according to Diefendorf. Many of the young women who flocked to the new orders did so without the
permission of their families and much of the general population viewed the vogue of "interiorized spirituality" with
suspicion. One commentator at the time observed the flight of women to religious vocation as evidence of "silly
devotion," "apocalyptic fear," and even "laziness" (From Penitence to Charity, 64).

xxxii Regarding the severity of the pain associated with heroic penitential mortifications, Kroll and Bachrach observe
that it was in fact, intolerable, caused by infections that inevitably set into the wounds, continuously aggravated by
the deliberate irritation of the hair shirt. It was just such intolerable pain the mystics sought for the inevitable
neurologically altered states of consciousness that eventually followed (The Mystic Mind, 67). Kroll and Bachrach
explain that the pain of penitential mortification was a gradual development in history because the goal of the early
Christian ascetics was quite different from that of the heroic ascetics of the late Middle Ages. The focus of the
former was a renunciation of worldly comforts and a mastery of physical needs and impulses, while the focus of the
latter, whose influence on Guyart's mysticism is clear, was on suffering in and for itself: "There are no examples of
self-laceration as a heroic ascetic practice among the desert fathers while by the late Middle Ages, the methodical
application of self-torture took on a justification of its own among the heroic ascetics despite admonition by more
moderate elements in the Church. The verbalized goal was to experience directly the passion of Jesus; the effect
was the production of the altered states of consciousness that follow upon the experience of severe and unremitting
pain ... When we hurt ourselves ... we are doing more than just causing pain, or fulfilling some symbolic function
of cultural significance. We are altering our brain state in significant ways (74). It is today accepted science that the
basic physiological effects of all three forms of extreme heroic asceticism are "essentially identical for all human
beings independently of time, place, and culture (Kroll and Bachrach 27)." Despite given variations in individual
response to pain and other variables, "the range of basic physiological responses, including production of an altered
state of consciousness, to the triad of mortification of the flesh, sleep deprivation and prolonged fasting are firmly
fixed and fairly hard-wired by one-hundred million years of evolutionary history" (27). Most importantly, the
connection between self-injurious behaviours and altered states of consciousness is established in the human
unconscious, not in the deliberate conscious awareness of cause and effect action (28). That Guyart perceived she
was motivated by religious and spiritual beliefs is not in question, and it is probable she was aware such practice
would eventually result in the desired visions.

xxxiii To emphasize the point, Chesler quotes Virginia Woolf's famous assertions with regard to gifted women
under the British patriarchy. Although Woolf references the sixteenth century, her observation is appropriate for women in similar circumstances in France and Canada under the Ancien Régime in the 17th century:

Any woman born with a great gift in the 16th century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry, would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty. (70)

The sisters under Guyart's charge in the Ursuline community at Quebec came from both the mother house in Paris and the monastery in Tours. They wore different habits and observed differences in religious rule. Guyart recognized the need for a new unifying constitution and rule for the nuns of Quebec and worked diligently for years towards that end, from 1640 to 1648.

As editor Jamet notes, in the seventeenth century 'abîme' was both masculine and feminine (La Relation, 377).

Linder, Eelin. (www.humiliationstudies.org/whoweare/evelin13.php.) According to Linder, Antonio R Damasio, 1994, in Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain, provides a perspective on the important "constructive" role that emotions play in the process of decision making. In Emotional Intelligence, 1996, Daniel Goleman relies heavily on Damasio and provides descriptions of brain activities which lead to post traumatic stress disorder in which humiliation plays an important part.

Jeanne des Anges was a noblewoman whose social status stood her in good stead throughout the Loudun affair. In fact, at the time of her stopover in Tours, Jeanne des Anges was on a kind of celebrity pilgrimage to the shrine of François de Sales.


In fact, Oury gives the incident short shrift, suggesting it is of little importance because it only happened once in her life (Marie de l'Incarnation, vol 1, 204).

Taves, Ann. Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009 (Winner of the Distinguished Book Award, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 2010). Taves "shifts the focus from 'religious experience,' conceived as a fixed and stable thing, to an examination of the processes by which people attribute meaning to their experiences. She proposes a new approach that unites the study of religion with fields as diverse as neuroscience, anthropology, sociology, and psychology to better understand how these processes are incorporated into the broader cultural formations we think of as religious or spiritual." (press.princeton.edu/titles/9060html.)

"Answers to specific questions were subsequently analyzed against an earlier, similar landmark study on men, William Perry's study on epistemological development (Belenky et al., 9)."

In a subsequent study, Knowledge. Difference and Power: Essays Inspired by Women's Ways of Knowing (1996), Belenky et al acknowledge that the acquisition of knowledge of self, and of meaning in one's life, is based on interdependence with others, on "coconstruction" of knowledge about themselves and others:

How one knows is multiply determined within the array of relationships that define the self. Meaning making is ... interactional and negotiable, that is, knowledge is coconstructed. Persons are situated in communities of knowers in which the dynamics of power and status are often controlling factors in how one knows and what one knows. (15)

In "The Divine Feminine Unveiled," Elizabeth Debold observes that the feminine principle as we understand it today reflects Carl Jung’s theory that “the feminine and masculine are ontological principles so profound as to life that one could see them as inherently sacred” (EnlightenNext Magazine, February - April, 2008.

Kamenetz presents an analysis of Freud’s famous dream of Irma which demonstrates entirely different, healing, outcomes than Freud’s self-serving interpretation. (A History of Last Night’s Dream, 122).

According to Jamet’s notes, Anne de Barthélémy was secretary and confident to Saint Teresa of Avila; she travelled from Paris where she had established a reformed Carmelite convent in 1604, to establish a new monastery in Flanders (La Relation, 321)
Coincidentally, the Feast of the Assumption is a significant day in Jesuit history: in 1534, St. Ignatius made his vow which led to the founding of the Society of Jesus.

Editor Jamet notes that the word 'divertissement' was used in the pascalian sense and that: "les emplois qui lui étaient confiés lui prenant tout son temps ne [laissaient] à Marie aucun liberté pour écrire" (footnote b, *La Relation*, 452).