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Orpheline

Louis XIV is seen here “making it rain” over the impoverished and mostly illiterate girls that have been chosen for the long journey to New-France. An exotic dancer’s shoe parades as the glass slipper from Charles Perrault’s classic fable, *Cendrillon*. Perrault served as the finance minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert’s secretary during the Filles du Roi immigration program. Would he have found inspiration for the tale in these orphaned girls?

The Motto, *Gagnon Paradis Surprenant* lists the last names of the three suitors in the French-Canadian novel *Maria Chapdelaine*. It is also a play on words, translated as “winning a surprising paradise”.

Le baptême ridicule

The first boat containing the new “shipment” of girls arrived, as stated in the motto, the 22 of September 1663. It was a tradition for newcomers to be “baptized” in the waters of Newfoundland before their final destination in the colonies. This was seen as a means of cleansing the people of their previous wrongdoings and sin in France.

Such a ritual is alluded to by the Baron Lahontan in his damning diatribe against the girls in his 1703 memoirs, *Nouveaux Voyages dans l’Amérique septentrionale*.

Inspection

The girls were hand selected, many by Madame Bourdon and Elizabeth Estienne from l’Hopital-Général de Paris. Strong, stockier constitutions were preferred for the establishment of homesteads in the harsh climate of the colony. The inspection, however, further continued once the Filles du Roi arrived. Before being married, the girls would often be monitored under the care of sisters or clergy. The moral quality of the girls was lambasted by Ursuline Marie de l’Incarnation, who surveyed the progress of the program. Disrobed monk and forgotten Siècles des Lumières author Nicolas Gueudeville slandered the girls, naming them “Nonnes de Paphos”.

Rêve de nymphes

Before the arrival of the Filles du Roi, there were 6 to 14 times more men than women in New France. Understandably, before 1663, upwards of 75% of new colonists would eventually head back to France.

The purpose of these new settlers certainly inflamed the imagination of the people.

Anticipated by the men of the colony, they would cause many to cease roaming the woods as trappers and voyageurs and settle the land. “Amazones de lit” is pulled, again, from a citation by Gueudeville.

Les Duchesses

“Duchesses” is the term used to designate the women competing for the crown at the Carnaval de Québec’s beauty competition.

The girls would have had plenty of choice for a partner once in New France. All but one of the 737 women married. Many fiancées would break their contracts to finally seek out a better suitor. In many ways, the scarcity of women gave these girls an unsurpassed level of control.

The “Miss Valérie” sash worn by the ballerina –like figure on center stage nods to the once scandalous québécois film, *Valérie*. The film’s protagonist, Danielle Ouimet, was crowned *Miss Province de Quebec* prior to her notorious starring role. It was once a common phrase to warn girls to “Ne fait pas ta Valérie” (not act like Valerie).

The auction paddles held by the “Bonhommes” refers to the number of women recruited (737) and of these the number of parisiens (265).

The Motto, “une chaussure pour chaque pied” (a shoe for every foot) was crudely expressed by the Baron Lahontan to describe the variety of women available (although the homogeneity of their spoken French helped harmonize the language and create the French spoken in Québec today).

Les mariées

The surintendant Jean Talon had sent out an ordinance defending the men to hunt and trap if they were not married within 15 days of the new arrivals. This edict was not strictly followed but it does demonstrate the encouraged swiftness of the unions.

On average, most were married within 4-5 months.

he Elvis supporters insinuate elopement and the sun “king”. The Santa Banana flags (from the québécois film *Elvis Gratton*) implies the strict regimes of Banana Republics on their people.

Bénis soient les bedons

Each of the Filles had an average of 7.4 children. Catherine Ducharme had the most, bearing 18 children over the course of 27 years. Most would conceive 1.7 months after their wedding day (essentially at their next ovulation).

Jean Talon stated in 1667 that the women bore children almost every year (“y portant presque tout les ans”). This was not that great of an exaggeration as the population quickly doubled by the end of recruitment in 1673. Millions of North Americans today can trace their lineage to the Filles du Roi.

La jeune veuve

The title of this piece refers to another québécois film, *Les aventures d'une jeune veuve*.

Women would remarry quickly in New France, especially if there were still children at home. A quarter would have 3.6 dependants whereas an eighth of new widows would still have the responsibility of at least 5 children at home.

There was no time to observe the traditional grieving period. Most remarried well-within the year. Although not all young, their new husbands were either the same age or younger (which is a far cry from their first unions – the men were an average 5 years older. A fifth of all couples had an age difference of 10 years or more.)

The unbalance in the matrimonial market still made these women viable for another go. 86% of women widowed before 40 remarried... an extremely uncommon phenomenon during the Ancient Régime.

The motto, *La mort d'un bucheron*, is the title of the 1973 Québécois film of the same name. The story of Maria Chapdelaine is sexualized and curiously retold as Maria leaves the woods only to be exploited in the big city.