Colonial Saints: Gender, Race, and Hagiography in New France

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For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. / There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. —Gal. 3:27–28

The French effort to Christianize the natives of seventeenth-century North America coincided with one of the last great periods of European (especially French) hagiography.\(^1\) Thus, when Catholic France boasted of its missionary achievements, it spoke less of pagan nations converted to the True Faith than of saints vaulted into heaven. The Jesuit François Du Creux chose these revealing terms in dedicating his *Historia Canadensis* to King Louis XIV: “Your New France, Louis, has many saints of that very kind that the Apostle mentions everywhere in his Epistles.”\(^2\) Like the annual Jesuit Relations on which it was based, Du Creux’s work is studded with long digressions on the deeds of martyrs and ascetic visionaries, their edifying deaths, and their miraculous post-mortem intercessions; these biographical interjections interrupt the flow of the historical narrative, but they also impart an inner logic to the whole.

Historians mining the Catholic missionary sources in search of rich veins of ethnographic description and historical chronicle are well aware of the “sacred biography” element, though they seldom reflect on it, pre-

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ferring to treat it as an impunity that can be extracted from the high-grade source material. But if missionary texts of the period are saturated in a hagiographic sensibility, as I believe they are in many cases and none more so than those produced by Jesuits, then surely it is important for researchers consulting them to take account of the narrative principles and genre conventions at work in these writings. Moreover, as this article hopes to demonstrate, the stories of saintly lives deserve examination in their own right as sites where notions of gender difference and racial hierarchy were enunciated, qualified, challenged, and inverted.

In a general sense, the interweaving of history and biography is characteristic of the period. Protestant as well as Catholic authors of the early modern centuries felt duty bound to present their readers with figures of exemplary virtue when they chronicled the past or the present. In their choice of subjects, in the qualities they hold up for admiration, and in the way they shape their biographical data into a coherent, meaningful story, writers such as Du Creux display fundamental cultural ideals. Though they were representative of their time and can be understood as contributing in their way to the emergence of the modern self, the Jesuits of New France and their Protestant counterparts in New England drew on ancient literary traditions. Cotton Mather’s gallery of worthy magistrates, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, for example, harks back to Plutarch’s *Lives* as it evokes the wisdom and strength of virtuous statesmen, while Du Creux taps into the similarly venerable genre of the saint’s life. These Plutarchian and hagiographic styles of life narrative had different ways of imparting meaning and significance to individual experience. Moreover, they did not single out the same categories of subjects. Whereas Mather wrote mainly about powerful males, encouraging reader identification through the use of homely, realistic detail to bring even John Winthrop down to earth, Catholic hagiography encompassed a wide range of human types: women as well as men, the comparatively humble as well as the great, and, as will be seen presently, Indians as well as Europeans.


5 In focusing on *Magnalia Christi Americana* as a point of contrast with French hagiography, I have no wish to suggest that Mather’s work embodies the full range of life-writing in colonial New England. In addition to the funeral elegy and the spiritual autobiography there was, of course, a Protestant version of hagiography. John Eliot and Daniel
According to the foremost students of the genre, most of them medievalists, hagiography should be understood as a literature of archetypes. The saint’s life is recounted through “assimilation to type.” Incidents and circumstances appear not to chart the building of character through the accretion of experiences, as in a modern biography, but rather as elements in a system of correspondences, one in which formal similarities link the subject to established saints of earlier centuries and, beyond them, to that ultimate Christian model, the life of Jesus. Thus, it can be misleading to treat hagiography as an imperfect version of ethnography or historiography; hagiography follows a different paradigm, one which presupposes a distinct set of purposes, methodologies, and criteria of significance. In its own way, hagiography can be extremely rigorous, and never more so than in the seventeenth century when the Bollandists, partaking of the rationalist atmosphere pervading intellectual life in the age of Descartes, endeavored to purge from the record of the Lives of the saints the wild stories of improbable miracles and interchangeable stock plots that characterized the Golden Legend of the Middle Ages. Baroque saints were rarely magic makers during their lifetimes, though after death they might be persuaded by the prayers of the faithful to intercede with God to bring about cures and other “extraordinary events.”

What I call “colonial hagiography” constitutes a variant on the Baroque pattern, one devoted to men and women seen to be marked by God’s favor in overseas outposts of Christianity such as New France.

Gookin even authored personal profiles of pious Indians that displayed some of the qualities found in Jesuit texts on saintly natives. Yet the hagiographic genre was much more highly developed in New France, where it dominated the field of biographical literature to the virtual exclusion of other styles. Hence, there is no period biography of such eminently worthy secular figures as Samuel de Champlain to set beside Cotton Mather’s portrait of Winthrop.


Strictly speaking, there were no saints in New France; that is to say, no one was canonized during the colonial period. (Ten individuals who lived in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Canada were canonized in the twentieth century; others have been beatified.) However, the question of who was or was not a real saint has no real bearing on this study. Unquestionably, hagiographic texts did proliferate during the colonial period, as writers recounted holy Lives (of individuals referred to here as “saints” whether they were ever officially recognized as such), sometimes in the hope that their accounts would be accepted as evidence in a future canonization trial, but just as often with a more immediate motive of providing inspiration to readers.

Colonial hagiography was written by religious men and women and was usually addressed, in the first instance, to other members of religious orders. Because so many of the Canadian saints’ stories were disseminated by the highly effective publicity machine of the Society of Jesus, it is easy to overlook that many of these writings circulated only in manuscript form through a network of correspondence linking the two shores of the North Atlantic. In Canada, oral versions of the stories of holiness


A successful canonization campaign required more than just solid evidence of holiness on the part of the deceased “servant of God”; it also took influential backers and vast sums of money to bring these to the attention of the Vatican (analogies to the quest for high public office today come to mind). Canada, unlike Lima, Peru, which secured the canonization of several of its sons and daughters about this time, lacked these political and financial requisites in the 17th century. On these points and on the fascinating story of the late-19th and early 20th-century canonization campaigns, see Kenneth L. Woodward, Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn’t, and Why (New York, 1999); Serge Gagnon, Le Québec et ses historiens de 1840 à 1920: La Nouvelle-France de Garneau à Groulx (Quebec, 1978), 43–122; and Guy Laflèche, Les saints martyrs canadiens, 5 vols. (Laval, 1988–1895).

10 Marie de l’Incarnation composed a Life of her friend and colleague, Marie de St-Joseph and sent it as a long letter to the Ursulines of Tours. Within two years, she was receiving letters from all across France asking her to pray for specified favors at the late nun’s grave. Marie de l’Incarnation to Mère Françoise de St-Bernard, Sept. 1653, in Dom Guy Oury, ed., Marie de l’Incarnation, Ursuline (1599–1672): Correspondance (Solesmes, 1971), 505. Hagiographic manuscripts published in later centuries include François Vachon de Belmont, “Éloges de quelques personnes mortes en odeur de sainteté a Montréal, en Canada, divisés en trois parties,” Rapport de l’archiviste de la province de Québec, vol. 10: 1929–30, 144–89, and Frédéric Ghyvelde, Vie du frère Didace recollet (Montreal, 1894).
also spread through the lay population, leading to the development of a colonial cult of colonial saints, complete with pilgrimages, relics, and miraculous cures.\textsuperscript{11} Sacred biographies were also printed in the Jesuit Relations and other publications of the period.\textsuperscript{12} It would be a mistake to regard these stories of religious heroism simply as moral tales designed to provide behavioral models for the young. Since their subjects were usually lifelong celibates who, in many cases, won fame as martyrs, they were not held up as guides that every Catholic should follow. Instead, the Lives of the colonial saints were meant mainly to inspire wonder at the way human and divine qualities, mortality and eternal life, could reside together in a single extraordinary person. The nuns, monks, and pious lay people who devoured saints’ Lives most avidly seem to have valued them mainly for aesthetic reasons.\textsuperscript{13} Readers seeking Christian perfection found in these works not so much rules for behavior as models for understanding individual experience as a meaningful story. What made a saint’s Life beautiful was the way incidents fraught with pain, humiliation, or failure could all be incorporated into a story of ultimate glorification, one in which nothing proved inconsequential in the end.

Hagiography has always followed conventional patterns, dividing along gender lines and displaying cultural ideals about male and female religiosity. The general tendency in medieval sacred biography was for men to turn their backs on wealth, power, and sex in a heroic act of renunciation; women saints were more likely to pursue a private and

\textsuperscript{11} Marie-Aimée Cliche, \textit{Les Pratiques de dévotion en Nouvelle-France: Comportements populaires et encadrement ecclésial dans le gouvernement de Québec} (Quebec, 1988), 29–33.

\textsuperscript{12} The \textit{Relations des Jésuites}, published annually from 1633 to 1673, constitute a source of central importance for this study. The compilation assembled a century ago under the direction of Reuben Gold Thwaites and published, with English translations, in a bilingue format remains the most readily accessible version. A more complete and more rigorously edited collection of Jesuit documents—including the Relations and much more—is currently advancing under the editorship of Lucien Campeau, S. J. The Campeau volumes are not yet complete, though they now extend as far as the 1650s and reproduce documents in the original language only. Where possible, I cite references to both the Thwaites and the Campeau editions. Thwaites, ed., \textit{The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents}, 73 vols. (Cleveland, 1896–1900); Campeau, ed., \textit{Monumenta Novae Franciae}, 7 vols. to date (Quebec, 1967–1987, and Montreal, 1989–). \textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{13} This is how Marie de l’Incarnation reacted to a contemporary biography in the hagiographic mode: “We were filled with joy and consolation to receive the Life of the venerable Mother St-Francis-Xavier. We found it delightful [ravissante]. Clearly, this blessed mother was filled with the spirit of God.” Marie de l’Incarnation to the Superior of the Ursulines of Dijon, Aug. 9, 1668, in Oury, ed., \textit{Correspondance}, 805 (my translation).
inward spirituality, marked by ascetic self-denial and ecstatic visions. Crudely put, holy men were admired for what they said and did, holy women for what they were.14 Among the saints of New France, this basic sexual division of labor persisted, with the males pursuing more active roles and making their voices heard in the historical record, while the females were celebrated more as virginal “treasures.” However, colonial hagiography did display some noteworthy variations on the metropolitan model where gender difference is concerned, a feature that should become apparent as this article examines first male and then female saints’ Lives.

Along with gender difference, these texts all revolve around racial difference. Indeed, what marks New France hagiography as colonial literature is the fundamental importance of the encounter between European and native or, more specifically, between missionary and missionized.15 When the European literary conventions of sacred biography were deployed on North American terrain, the “New World” environment and the natives who inhabited it became central parts of the story, integrated at the deepest levels into traditional hagiographic plots of journeys, trials, and the opposition of good and evil. Some scholars of early modern life-writing are of the opinion that such texts were always constructed dialectically, “in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile.”16

Unquestionably, this observation applies to writings of individual identity in New France, where Indians generally appear as the Other imparting meaning to the life story of the subject. And yet, as with gender, there is a certain colonial instability, a subversive tendency to make room for the native as a subject as well as an object.¹⁷

December 8, 1649. A small party of Jesuits and Christian Hurons is making its way along snowy paths to a Tionnontaté village near the shores of Lake Huron. Reports had reached them the day before of an Iroquois attack that had destroyed this settlement, the site of recent Jesuit missionary activity. The rumors are only too plausible, coming as they did in the midst of a series of terrible wars that had seen the destruction of dozens of villages around the lower Great Lakes and the annihilation of whole nations. They are therefore prepared for the worst as they come through the trees into the clearing where the thriving community once stood. Even so, they are stunned by the scene of devastation that greets them.

They found only dead bodies heaped together, and the remains of poor Christians,—some who were almost consumed in the pitiful remains of the still burning village; others deluged with their own blood; and a few who yet showed some signs of life, but were all covered with wounds,—looking only for death, and blessing God in their wretchedness. At length, in the midst of that desolated village, they descried the body they had come to seek.¹⁸

The corpse belonged to Father Charles Garnier, and it was the primary object of this rescue-reconnaissance mission, just as the last hours of the missionary’s life were the central subject of two chapters in the Jesuit Relations.¹⁹ (The published account is presumably based on the testimony of survivors, together with whatever archeological clues the material remains seemed to provide, but in spite of the uncertain evidence, the writer tells his story in the confident and definite tones characteristic of hagiographic texts.) Garnier, the Relation tells us, stood by his flock when the enemy stormed through the palisade. He could have escaped but instead he rushed to baptize the converts and give absolu-


¹⁹ Ibid., 106–61.
tion to Christians. In the midst of this holy work, he was shot through the chest and the stomach. One of the attackers stripped the cassock from the apparently dead man, then moved on in search of further plunder. But Garnier had not yet expired. Summoning all his strength, he raised himself up enough to begin crawling toward a wounded man lying nearby in order to offer him absolution. He was in this posture—naked, on his knees, and bleeding profusely—when an enemy hatchet blow finally dispatched him.

Having identified the scorched and bloody remains they believe to be Garnier’s, the search party solemnly interst them. They mark the grave so that the martyr’s bones can be retrieved at a later date, and then, fearing a return of the Iroquois to the site of their victory, they hurry back to safety.

The Jesuit Relation for 1649 recounts the destruction of Tionnontaté and most of its inhabitants purely as the backdrop to a more significant event, for this was the occasion on which God marked a favored individual as one of his own. The biographical framing of the story is characteristic of the hagiographic genre. So too is the focus on death as the central event in the subject’s life or, to be more exact, death and denial of death, for the assurance that Garnier went straight to Heaven is an essential element. The writer naturally emphasizes the missionary’s courage and dedication to his duty, noting that he could have fled had he wished, but these admirable moral qualities are only one part of the overall portrait of martyrdom. Just as significant are the outward resemblances with the Passion of Christ. Accordingly, the narrative dwells on Garnier’s nakedness, on the way his blood waters the earth, on his humble and submissive kneeling position. The signs are plentiful, their meaning unmistakable.

In most respects, the Garnier narrative is a standard hagiographic text, yet in its historical context, it is unmistakably an example of colonialist writing. To appreciate this aspect to the full, visualize that Jesuit-led burial party picking through the smoldering ruins of Tionnontaté. The rescuers have to sift through carnage and debris, passing over dead Indian bodies and also wounded, but still living, Indian bodies, until they find what they have been seeking: one lifeless, but immeasurably precious, European body.

Martyrs are Christians who are killed for their faith, making a conscious sacrifice of their lives. Originally, in the time of the primitive Church, “martyr” and “saint” were synonymous terms; after a long period during which anti-Christian killers were in short supply and the definition of sainthood was consequently broadened to embrace other forms of religious heroism, martyrdom staged a comeback in the early
modern centuries as Catholics set out to combat heresy in Europe and to convert the unbelievers of Asia and the Americas.\textsuperscript{20} New France produced its harvest of martyrs, most of them Jesuits and most of them killed in the 1640s, during the darkest days of the wars that pitted the French and their native allies against the Iroquois Five Nations.

A famous picture from the period captures all the major martyrs of New France, collapsing time and space in order to bring together ten deaths in a single tableau (see Figure I). It seems to have been composed originally in the 1650s, although there have been so many variant copies over the years that it is hard to know which came first; the version reproduced here was drawn by the Paris engraver Grégoire Huret as an illustration for Du Creux's \textit{Historia Canadensis}.\textsuperscript{21} There is a distinct hierarchy to this composition: Charles Garnier, along with Antoine Daniel, who came to a similar end during another military engagement in 1648, appears in the second rank of saints; two other, rather inept, missionaries who died in uncertain circumstances after losing their way in the woods are also in the middle distance. On prominent display in the foreground are the most famous Jesuit martyrs, Isaac Jogues, Gabriel Lalemant, and Jean de Brébeuf. In addition to dying for their faith, these three suffered excruciating torture.

Father Jogues is seen, kneeling like a sacrificial lamb as he waits to receive the fatal hatchet blow near the Mohawk town of Ossernenon. His mutilated hand testifies to an earlier period of captivity among the Mohawks, during which he was beaten and tortured but managed to escape to the Dutch settlement at Fort Orange. Voluntarily returning to the site of his ordeal on a diplomatic mission, he was summarily executed; the Mohawks were apparently convinced that he was guilty of malevolent sorcery.\textsuperscript{22} In no phase of his two-stage martyrdom did Jogues suffer alone. During his first captivity, he watched as a young Jesuit donné, René Goupil, was killed for having traced the Christian cross on children's foreheads. The circumstances suggest that Goupil had a


\textsuperscript{21} Though not himself a Jesuit, Huret produced almost all the images that illustrated French Jesuit publications through the middle decades of the 17th century. See the highly informative study by François-Marc Gagnon, "L'iconographie classique des saints martyrs canadiens," in Laflèche, \textit{Les saints martyrs}, 1:37–79. A good modern reproduction can be found in Du Creux, \textit{History of Canada}, facing 2:481.

\textsuperscript{22} The most detailed account of Jogues's experiences from his initial capture by the Mohawks in 1642 until his death in 1646 is to be found in the Relation of 1647 in Thwaites, ed., \textit{Jesuit Relations}, 31:16–137; Campeau, ed., \textit{Monumenta Novae Franciae}, 7:96–136. See also the accounts of his first captivity in the Relation of 1642–1643 in Thwaites, ed., \textit{Jesuit Relations}, 24:280–85, 294–307, 25:42–73; Campeau, ed., \textit{Monumenta Novae Franciae}, 5:592–625.
stronger claim than did the Jesuit martyrs to having died for the sake of his religion; accordingly, he was eventually canonized, but as a layman, he appears in the Huret illustration literally overshadowed by Jogues. When the missionary returned to the Mohawk country and met his rendezvous with death in 1646, he was again accompanied by a lay Frenchman who perished along with him. The Jesuit chroniclers neglect to mention that he was also escorted by twenty-four Hurons, many of them baptized Catholics; according to some reports, they were put to death only after enduring horrible tortures.23

Featured along with Jogues in the front row of Huret’s tableau are Jean de Brébeuf, the most famous of the New France martyrs, and his junior colleague, Gabriel Lalemant. When an Iroquois force captured the Huron village where they were staying in March 1649, these two Jesuits bravely refused to abandon their post. Unlike Charles Garnier’s comparatively brief ordeal, however, it was their fate to be taken alive, tied to stakes, and slowly tortured to death.24 In the engraving, Brébeuf towers above the other figures. His chest is scorched by red-hot axe blades slung round his neck and, while some Indians cut chunks of flesh from his extremities, others prepare to pour boiling water over his head in mocking imitation of baptism. Lalemant, a human burnt offering, has been draped by his tormenters in a flaming cloak of bark and pitch.

Of all the Canadian martyrs, Brébeuf had by far the most illustrious post-mortem career.25 Across New France and Old France, the story of his ordeal, in all its gruesome detail, was told and retold through the medium of the spoken, the written, and the printed word. Catholics began praying to him for guidance and help. Sick people were cured by drinking water in which his relics had been dipped; hospital nuns slipped pulverized bits of his bone into the beverages served to Huguenot soldiers under their care and reported that his assistance helped them to rescue these patients from heresy.26

All this glory did not come as a reward for exceptional results in spreading the Gospel, for Brébeuf can hardly be considered a great success in his chosen profession. A missionary raised on tales of Francis Xavier baptizing Asians by the thousands and of José de Anchieta gathering the nations of Brazil under the Christian standard, he must have found his twenty-five years in the Canadian field extremely discouraging. Most of those years he spent among the Hurons, who tended, on the whole, to fear and loathe him as an exceptionally malevolent sorcerer. So unpopular was Brébeuf that, for a time, he had to be removed from the Huron country altogether.27 His spiritual diary is filled with dark visions of crosses and of bleeding Jesuits. “O my God,” he wrote, stopping just short of despair, “why are you not known? why is this Barbarous country not all converted to you? Why is not sin abolished from it?”28 His comfort came in premonitions of his own agony and death, a gesture that would confer certain meaning on all that had gone before. What might otherwise have looked like a career of futility and failure could, after a martyr’s death, be seen as a program devised by God to temper the faith and test the resolve of his chosen one.

Brébeuf emerged as the favorite Jesuit saint partly because his death seemed to fit the profile of a perfect martyr’s end. Depictions of his ordeal in both words and visual images concentrate not only on his fortitude but also on a chain of signs attesting to its religious significance. Like Jesus, he prophesied his own death, even intimating to colleagues some foreknowledge of the exact time and circumstances. Like dozens of martyrs in the ancient times of Roman persecution, he continued to preach and to praise God throughout his torture; he was silenced only when his tormenters cut off his tongue and mutilated his lips, proving in the process that they, as much as he, were driven by religious motives. Further proof that his suffering stemmed from hatred for Christianity was found in a cruel parody of baptism: aided by “pagan” Hurons familiar with the rituals of the French religion, the jeering Iroquois poured boiling water over the Jesuit’s head. Where modern readers—not to mention many Catholic writers of the time—might see Brébeuf’s death and those of the other Canadian martyrs as commonplace tragedies in a bloody seventeenth-century war, the Jesuits insisted that both victims and aggressors were acting on metaphysical principles.29

27 Relation of 1642, ibid., 23:35–37.
29 When Récollet missionaries were killed in the line of duty, their colleagues mourned them as admirable workers who had accepted the risks of life among savages. Récollets such as Louis Hennepin and Chrestien Le Clercq were scathing in their treatment of the Jesuits’ martyrdom complex; Hennepin, A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America [London, 1698], 2 vols., ed. Thwaites (Chicago, 1903), 346; Christian Le Clercq,
In general, hagiography takes the form of a discourse of emblems, and Brébeuf’s case lent itself particularly well to such treatment. Death seen in advance and embraced by the victim, fortitude through pain and humiliation, a naked body attacked by hate-filled unbelievers, the shedding of blood: these artfully arranged correspondences with the Passion of Christ made the Brébeuf story irresistible to a large Counter-Reformation audience.

The Huret engraving of the martyrs of New France might well be seen as a colonialist image, for natives form an essential part of the composition. The tableau is heavily populated with Indians, all of them male and all of them actively engaged in the grim business of slaughter. There is one exception to this pattern. Far to the rear, behind the second rank of Jesuits, stands an obscure figure, hardly more than a blot on the page; the legend identifies him as “Joseph Onoharé, a young Algonquin, tortured for three days and nights in the spring of 1650, for refusing to give up the worship of Christ.” The artist’s ambivalent attitude toward this suffering Christian convert is striking. On the one hand, he relegates him to a distant position; on the other hand, he draws attention to him by placing his body at the convergence of several lines in the composition. In a narrative image organized around the confrontation of two categories of men, martyrs and Indians, Onoharé constitutes a troubling anomaly.

Captured in the course of an abortive raid into the Mohawk country, Onoharé was subjected to the usual tortures inflicted by Iroquoian peoples on prisoners of war; his ordeal greatly exceeded anything faced by Brébeuf and the other Jesuit martyrs. Moreover, according to the rather implausible interpretation offered in the Relation of 1650, the Mohawks were “enraged” by Onoharé’s incessant prayer: “But this Young man, despising their fury, thanked God for the grace he had given him to suffer as a Christian, and not as a common Savage.” If the religious significance of the death of this savage who was also a Christian could be evaluated on the same ground as that of Brébeuf and Jogues, what about the dozens of baptized Huron and Algonquin converts who met similar fates in the terrible Iroquois wars and who, according to the Relations, suffered with admirable piety? To exclude Onoharé from recognition as a


30 Translated from the Latin legend to the illustration in Du Creux, History of Canada. For the story of Joseph Onoharé, see ibid., 571–74, and Thwaites, ed., Jesuit Relations, 35:222–33.

possible martyr would be inconsistent under the circumstances, but to include him could raise disturbing questions about the racial-religious hierarchy implicit in the missionary enterprise itself. When copies of the Du Creux illustration were published in later centuries (see Figure II), the problem was solved by simply leaving Onoharé out of the picture (and the Vatican followed suit when it canonized all the martyrs depicted here, minus Onoharé, as a wholesale batch in 1930). In 1664, however, there was still uncertainty.

The colony’s religious communities, both male and female, were alive with excitement in the 1640s as reports of torture and death filtered in. Rejoicing in the good fortune of the Jesuit fathers (“Oh, how sweet it is to die for Jesus Christ!”), Ursulines and hospital nuns lamented the restrictions that kept them far from the torture stake in the comparative safety of the convent. Women played an exceptionally prominent part in the Catholic mission to New France, and, though none was actually killed for her religion, many were seen to be singled out by God in other ways. Hence the emergence of a female version of colonial hagiography featuring stories patterned on the Lives of the great women saints of the late Middle Ages and featuring extreme self-abnegation (fasting, flagellation, sleep deprivation, and the like) coupled with inward illumination and experiences of union with Christ.

The medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum suggests that the life stories of religious women tended to reflect the fact that girls and women enjoyed far less freedom of action than did males; accordingly, “both men and women saw female saints as models of suffering and inner spirituality, male saints as models of action.” Some of the missionary women of seventeenth-century Canada were actually extremely effective in the realm of practical action. Marie de l’Incarnation was one such dynamo, and even more so was Marguerite Bourgeois of Montreal, who established schools, set up a new religious order, and generally took in hand the welfare of the infant settlement. Madame de la Peltrie was the

32 Laflèche, _Les saints martyrs_, 1:299-301.
33 “O qu’il est doux de mourir pour Jésus-Christ!” Marie de l’Incarnation to her son, summer 1647, in Oury ed., _Correspondance_, 324.
Figure II. Étienne David, Mort heroïque de quelques pers dans la Compagnie de Jesus dans la Nouvelle France, Lithograph, 1868. Photo courtesy University of Toronto.
intrepid founder of the Quebec Ursuline convent, and Jeanne Mance raised money and recruited settlers vital to the survival of the Montreal experiment. All these women were admired during their lifetimes and commemorated after their deaths, but their reputations only peaked centuries later.\textsuperscript{36} In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the feminist movement was transforming gender relations in the English-speaking world, the French-Canadian Church held up Bourgeoys and Mance as icons of a kind of pious feminine domesticity. In the seventeenth century, however, full hagiographic veneration was reserved for mystic-ascetic women with far less active careers. The traditions of European hagiography prepared Catholics to marvel more at the visions and inward spiritual experiences of sickly nuns such as the Ursuline Marie de St-Joseph and the hospital sister Catherine de St-Augustin.\textsuperscript{37} The stories of these two women are anything but monuments to familial devotion; instead they stress the subject’s situation radically and insistently outside the roles of daughter, wife, and mother.\textsuperscript{38}

Though they conformed in a general way to prefabricated European models, New France’s narratives of female saintliness do display special colonial characteristics. Bynum notes that heroic piety among late medieval women was recounted in stories of consistent, lifelong virtue, “without crises or turning points” such as the dramatic episodes in which a male saint turns his back on sin and worldliness.\textsuperscript{39} Canadian hagiography exhibits a similar gender contrast, with male narratives centering on the ultimate crisis of martyrdom, while the female texts trace the subject’s life from early childhood, recounting dozens of anecdotes along the way, some of them seemingly trivial—an inward struggle, for example, over whether or not to taste an ardently desired lemon—but all of them illustrative of the saint’s original and enduring perfection.\textsuperscript{40} These colo-


\textsuperscript{37} Thus, Saint Catherine of Siena, one of the central figures in Bynum’s study, was remembered less for her bold ventures as a mature woman advising popes and settling schisms than for her “mystic marriage” and the extraordinary fasting of her youth.


\textsuperscript{39} Bynum, Holy Feast and Holy Fast, 25.

\textsuperscript{40} Raguenneau, Vie de la Mère Catherine de Saint Augustin, 72–74.
nial lives are not without turning points, however, at least not where European-born women are concerned. For Marie de St-Joseph and Catherine de St-Augustin, the Atlantic crossing itself formed a central crisis, each young woman tearing herself with the greatest difficulty from family, convent, and homeland to undertake a perilous journey into a forbidding land. Marie de St-Joseph came in 1639, at age twenty-three, as one of a small party from Tours to found the Ursuline house at Quebec. Her Life, as written by Marie de l’Incarnation and subsequently paraphrased for publication by the Jesuits, revolves around painful dramas of separation. At age fourteen, she had to find the strength to enter the novitiate in spite of emotional pleas from her mother and father. Nine years later, she was chosen to be part of the first convent in New France, and her frantic parents almost succeeded in convincing Marie to remain behind, but after a period of hesitation she plunged forth on her mission. The influential father of Catherine de St-Augustin undertook legal action to prevent his daughter from leaving France, taking his case as far as the parlement of Rouen and then, in a sudden change of heart—precipitated, according to the hagiographer, by the fervent prayers of Catherine and her sisters—he dropped the suit and offered up his daughter as a voluntary sacrifice to God.41

The stories of the two young nuns continue along parallel tracks. Both experienced harrowing ocean crossings: Marie’s storm-tossed ship narrowly avoided collision with an iceberg, while Catherine’s was struck by disease, so that she arrived in Canada half dead. Even for the healthy, life was not easy in the infant colonial town of Quebec, and both nuns suffered from chronic illnesses that kept them bedridden for long periods and finally took their lives. After the douceur de vie of France, pain and deprivation in Canada. And these physical afflictions seldom brought spiritual comfort: rather just the opposite. Marie endured long periods of “inner desolation,” while Catherine’s soul and body formed the battleground for agonizing conflicts as demons tortured her and mysterious inner forces paralyzed her arm when she reached for the communion host.42 Glorification came only at the very point of death.

In framing these stories in terms of movement between a place of comfort and security and a place of desolation and danger, the biographers of the two nuns draw on ancient hagiographic themes. Saints travel from “the City” to “the wilderness,” where, like Christ in the desert, they

41 Thwaites, ed., Jesuit Relations, 32:133–35.

42 Strange as it seems, diabolical possession was frequently regarded by 17th-century mystics as a sign of God’s favor. The deity made use of the devil, just as he used illness, adversity, and other trials, to try the soul and to annihilate the self-love of the chosen one. See Fernando Cervantes, The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain (New Haven, 1994), 101.
must rely on their inner resources as they face evil. In the mystical language favored by the French missionaries, the hardships of the wilderness become so many “crosses” to be embraced, eagerly and lovingly, in the knowledge that God wishes it. Paradox abounds, for every misfortune can be understood as further evidence of divine favor. For Marie de l’Incarnation, Canada was “an earthly paradise where crosses and thorns grow so lovingly,” attractive precisely because it was so repellent with its forbidding climate and its rocky landscape. But what made New France “bad,” and therefore “good,” was something at once more human and more metaphysical than the cold weather. This was a place associated with sin and inhabited by people who did not recognize God or follow his law.

Before she ever left France, Marie de St-Joseph once had a memorable dream. It begins in a beautiful urban square filled with opulent shops where the worldly were seduced by luxury and vanity. Fearing to be trapped there herself, Marie turns to find herself in the presence of a phalanx of strong young men, “dressed in the costume of savages” and drawn up in military order. “It is through us that you will be saved,” they announce, as they lead her away. Rescuing her from the pitfalls of civilized frivolity, these semi-nude men seem to suggest much more serious dangers—sexuality and violence most obviously—that Marie will have to face before salvation is hers. As was so often the case, the figure of the savage served as a repository for that which early modern Europe wished to repress: simultaneously attractive and menacing, its presence made New France the ideal proving ground for heroes of Catholicism.

Native North America is omnipresent in colonial hagiography. Enemy Iroquois tear the flesh from Jesuit bodies, while friendly Hurons and Algonquins lead missionaries on harrowing expeditions through the wilderness. Native languages confound the priest’s understanding, the smoke of the longhouse torments his eyes, corn porridge revolts his palate, and pagan ceremonies shock his sense of morality and decorum. Even when not trying to kill the saintly figure, natives put him on never-ending trial, reject his message, laugh at him, convert for a time before sliding back into “adultery” and “infidelity.” By this means is the Jesuit humbled and ultimately exalted. Indians are seldom mentioned explicitly

46 See de Certeau, “Montaigne’s ‘Of Cannibals’: the Savage ‘1,’” in his Heterologies: Discourse on the Other (Minneapolis, 1986), 67–79.
in the Lives of the mystic nuns, but a vaguer, more abstract, but nonetheless ominous, aboriginal presence lurks in the narratives dedicated to Marie de St-Joseph and Catherine de St-Augustin. For Catherine, Canada was a place “of great suffering and great fear,” and that fearsome aspect was surely related to the native presence. In both its male and its female variants, colonial hagiography enlists the native as an essential instrument of God’s arduous plan for his saints.

Natives appear also in benign roles in the Lives of the colonial saints and in the other missionary writings. Stories abound in the Jesuit Relations of exemplary converts: pious women going to courageous lengths to protect their chastity, men who boldly proclaim the gospel to unbelievers, children starving rather than eat meat during Lent. But whose success is being celebrated in these success stories? The pious natives themselves, so recently redeemed from a God-less and sin-drenched American environment, tend to be evaluated on a special, diminished scale of spiritual achievement; whereas Europeans could aspire to sanctification in this forbidding land, the highest hope for natives was that they should become tamed savages. Even the highly sympathetic Marie de l’Incarnation dismissed out of hand any suggestion that Indians might aspire to the Catholic priesthood: “The nature of the American Indians is such that even the most intelligent and saintly among them are completely unsuited to ecclesiastical duties; instead they must be taught and gently led along the path of Heaven.” A quasi-anonymous quality in so many of these anecdotes of admirable converts suggests that they are told mainly to illustrate the power of God and the efficacy of the missionary.

“Good Indians” and “Bad Indians” have in common, then, that they appear primarily as enabling figures. Whether kneeling to accept baptism, thrusting firebrands at the suffering body of a martyr, or accepting the healing ministrations of the hospital nun, the native is a crucial actor in every drama of colonial saintliness. Less concretely but no less essentially, the Indian presence provides definition to the missionary’s Christian and European values. Imagined as “pagan savages,” the natives represent the negation of order and civility; alternatively, they represent a naturalness and innocence that stands as a reproach to Europe’s artificiality and inspires the missionary to adhere to a purified version of his or

47 Ragueneau, Vie de la Mère Catherine de Saint Augustin, 40.
49 “Le naturel des Sauvages Amériquains, même des plus saints et spirituels, n’étant nullement propre aux fonctions Ecclesiastiques, Mais seulement à être enseignez et conduits doucement dans la voye du Ciel”; Marie de l’Incarnation to her son, Aug 30, 1650, in Oury, ed., Correspondance, 396.
her ideals.\textsuperscript{50} What the figure of the native lacks in the early missionary writings is a fully developed self, that quality of wholeness that invites reader identification and that the hagiographic portraits of exemplary missionaries exude so strongly.

Given the well-documented tendencies of colonialist writing, not to mention the fundamental religious presumptuousness of the missionary enterprise, it is hardly surprising to find these texts objectifying natives. More remarkable is the contrary tendency. Hesitantly at first, the Catholic chroniclers of New France began to recognize some native Christians as complete spiritual subjects and even to contemplate the prospect of genuine cross-cultural holiness. Mystical currents swirling through seventeenth-century France may have played a predisposing role. If during a famous encounter on the coach to Paris the Jesuit Jean-Jacques Surin could find his pretensions to religious knowledge deflated by the radiant spirituality of an illiterate peasant, perhaps illumination might also be discovered among the “ignorant” natives of North America.\textsuperscript{51} Though they seldom transcended the dichotomous mindset of civilized-versus-savage, the French mystics tended to idealize that which seemed to stand outside the established European order, and what better antidote could there be to regulation, formality, and cold rationality than the (stereotyped European image of the) North American Indian? Hence the strain of “mystic exoticism” running through French Catholicism of the period frequently focused on figures of the sauvage.\textsuperscript{52}

One early example of a Good Indian tale shading off into a story of saintliness is the Jesuit portrait of Joseph Chihwatenha, the leading Huron Christian of the late 1630s. Cut down suddenly in an enemy ambush with no apparent religious motive, he could not be considered a martyr; instead, published accounts portrayed him as an exemplary leader, “the special glory of the infant church among the Hurons.”\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{50} These European conceptions of “natural man” as projected onto the natives of the Americas are discussed in Anthony Pagden, \textit{The Fall of Natural Man} (Cambridge, 1982). See also Olive Patricia Dickason, \textit{The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas} (Edmonton, 1984); Peter Hulme, \textit{Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean} (London, 1986); Tzvetan Todorov, \textit{The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other}, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1987); and Greenblatt, \textit{Marvelous Possessions: The Wonders of the New World} (Chicago, 1991), and \textit{New World Encounters} (Berkeley, 1993).


\textsuperscript{52} On the mystical movement in French Catholicism in the 17th century, see de Certeau, \textit{The Mystic Fable}, vol. 1: \textit{The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries}, trans. Michael Smith (Chicago, 1992), and Mino Bergamo, \textit{La science des saints: Le discours mystique au XVIIe siècle en France} (Grenoble, 1992). Bergamo stresses the theme of the exotic in mystical writing of the time and is the source of the phrase “l’exotisme mystique” quoted in the text.

\textsuperscript{53} Du Creux, \textit{History of Canada}, 1:305.
Bruce Trigger suggests that Chihwatenha’s decision to accept Christianity is best understood in light of the economic and political advantages connected with close alignment with the French, but of course that is not how the Jesuits saw it. Long passages in the Relations dwell on his efforts to combat paganism and vice; he is quoted extensively in his native language giving voice to pious sentiments. All this positive attention, copious though it may be, is presented basically in the exemplary savage mode, and yet, privately and tentatively, some Jesuits considered Chihwatenha something more than an admirable “tamed Indian.” Brébeuf presided over the Huron’s funeral, and, during the night following the burial, he experienced a vivid dream. As he recounted it in his private spiritual journal, “A sort of pavilion or dome descended from Heaven and placed itself over the grave of our Christian . . . The feeling I had at the time was that God wished to indicate the state of this good Christian’s soul.” Well-trained Jesuit that he was, Brébeuf was skeptical of his own visions and reluctant to make any public declaration on the basis of unconfirmed signs, but in the recesses of his intuitive mind, there was apparently room for a native saint.

A decade later, the uncertain figure of Joseph Onaharé entered the published record on the margins of the tableau of Jesuit martyrs. Though it devotes less space to him than it did to Chihwatenha, the Jesuit Relation for 1650 does venture to suggest that Onaharé might be a saint. Some Christian Hurons, reports the chronicler, “say that he deserved the martyr’s palm, for indeed he suffered for Jesus Christ.” In this way, the Jesuit advances a claim on behalf of Onaharé while simultaneously distancing himself from that claim. Marie de l’Incarnation’s reaction to the death was more direct and personal. She knew Onaharé as a well-beloved neophyte who had frequently visited the Ursulines’ parlor for religious instruction; a letter to her son in France communicates her grief as well as her maternal pride over his “glorious death.” “Have I not in him a good son? He is rather my father and my advocate with God.” Though Marie could not countenance the idea of a native taking religious orders, she could imagine this Algonquin transformed from “son” to “father”: the Indian as spiritual child becomes the Indian as guide and protector.

56 Brébeuf’s spiritual journal in Campeau, ed., Monumenta Novae Franciae, 7:480–81. In the semiotic code of Baroque mysticism, the image of the “pavilion or dome,” like that of the palace or similar grand edifice, was rich in meaning. It tended to be associated with Heaven, God, and the saints.
The Jesuits published other notices in the hagiographic mode concerning aboriginal women. One of these appears in the Relation of 1667–1668 under the title “Precious and Admirable Death of a Savage Girl 14 Years Old” and tells the story of a child who had taken a vow of perpetual chastity. Her piety was rewarded with visions of the Virgin Mary; occasionally, she could even catch the scent of Paradise wafting on the night air. She died young and, in a classic sign of saintliness, her corpse was found to be intact when the tomb was opened nine months later.

Her virtue had shown itself during her life in a greater measure than could have been expected in a girl of her age; but it seems to have been more strikingly manifested after her death, by the incorruption of her body. This can be regarded as a recompense for the great aversion she had to impurity, and a certain horror that she felt in the presence of immodest persons.

French readers were invited to marvel at these “extraordinary marks of grace,” as well as other, similar cases of aboriginal holiness from the second half of the seventeenth century.58

The most elaborate hagiographic story concerning a native took shape in Jesuit minds late in the century, though it was first published only in 1715. An Iroquois woman, Catherine Tekakwitha, is its subject.59 She was born in a Mohawk town in what is now New York, and after converting to Catholicism, she moved in 1677 to the Christian Iroquois settlement of Kahnawake (the French called it Sault St Louis) near Montreal. Along with a group of like-minded young women in the Jesuit-sponsored community, she followed a life of the most severe asceticism, punishing her body and denying it nourishment until it succumbed in 1680 at the age of twenty-three. After her death came the “extraordinary events” associated with saintly status. A Mohawk woman as well as the Jesuit priest, Claude Chauchetière, had visions of the Heaven-bound Tekakwitha, and, in the months following her death, her rosary and the earth from her grave were discovered to have miraculous healing powers. Eventually, her tomb became the destination of pilgrims,

both native and French, seeking to cure illness, disability, or moral distress.

The key to this colonial cult was Chauchetièrè. Like Brébeuf before him, this Jesuit mystic was inspired with the belief that he had witnessed the death of an Indian saint, and like Brébeuf, Chauchetièrè hesitated to proclaim this improbable conjunction of savagery and Christian holiness. But whereas Brébeuf confined his veneration to a discrete paragraph in his secret diary, Chauchetièrè devoted thirty years of his life to the task of verifying his belief that Tekakwitha was no ordinary pious Indian. He interviewed anyone who had known Tekakwitha during her lifetime and kept records of the miracles that followed her death (in a cult that he himself assiduously promoted). His faith in the native saint ebbed and flowed over the years, his Jesuit superiors persistently discouraging his enthusiasm. Chauchetièrè states quite clearly that it was because Tekakwitha was sauvage that the colonial Church would not accept evidence indicating she had been singled out by God.60

Finally, as is so often the case in the history of European saints, the strength of the popular cult overcame the scepticism of the clerics, and in 1715 the Society of Jesus published the Life of Catherine Tekakwitha.61 The story of the “Iroquois Virgin” was a great success in France, and before long foreign translations were published in Mexico, Germany, and Holland. This positive reception encouraged the Jesuits to give wider publicity to the cases of Etienne Tegananokoa, Françoise Gonanatenha, and Marguerite Garangoa, Christian Iroquois from Kahnawake who, in a rare instance of open conflict with non-Catholics of the original Five Nations, were captured and burned to death. Proclaimed as martyrs, they joined Tekakwitha as objects of colonial veneration, making Kahnawake a powerful magnet for pilgrims.62 A soldier passing the village in 1750 observed that “the lame and the crippled have been healed by travelling to Sault Saint-Louis to invoke these new saints at their tomb. . . . In the Montreal area,” he continued, “four festivals are celebrated in honor of the four [sic] Indian martyrs of the town of Saint-Louis and some parishes in the vicinity come there in procession every year to celebrate a high mass.”63 By the early eighteenth century, then, a native ascetic-

60 Chauchetièrè, “La vie de la B. Catherine Tegakouita, dite à présent la Sainte Sauvagesse,” Archives de la Société de Jésus, province du Canada français (St-Jérôme, Québec), no. 343, p. 2; “Notes autobiographiques du P. Claude Chauchetièrè [1694],” ibid., no. 390.
visionary was being treated as a saint and three Christian Indians killed in war were venerated as martyrs.

The Tekakwitha story resonated most powerfully. Not only did hers become by far the most widely read of all the saints’ Lives of New France, it conformed more closely than the others to the classic format. Colonial hagiography, a genre seemingly designed to glorify the white missionary, which habitually enlisted Indians either as figures of menace or as tokens of successful evangelizing, found its culminating expression in a work dedicated to a native. Though modern scholarship tends to ascribe cynical political motives to the Jesuits who published this holy Life, the Tekakwitha story is by no means an unprecedented departure. Instead, it should be seen as the consummation of a long-term trend in New France hagiography: vignettes of a liminal Other, the “exemplary Indian,” expand, acquire more and more of the signs of saintliness, and shade off into genuinely hagiographic texts with a Christian Indian at the center.64

Sacred biography in New France conferred meaning on the colonial enterprise through attention to individual life narratives. It was not tales of bold conquerors or wise magistrates that captured the French imagination but rather the self-abnegation of mystic-ascetic women and the dramatic sacrificial gestures of male martyrs. As with the Puritan visionaries of New England, Catholic writers of New France pointed to affinities with the primitive Church; but whereas the former dwelt on the nature of a God-fearing community, the latter focused more on individual destinies corresponding to the lives of the original saints and to the life and Passion of Jesus.

With sharply divergent male and female versions of the saintly life, hagiography has always been a discourse about gender. As such, it pro-

64 Something similar occurred in the history of religious life-writing in Spanish America. Along with the hagiographic works honoring Spanish bishops and white mystic women, passages are also dedicated to saintly representatives of the colonized races: the humble Peruvian mulatto Martín de Porres, for example, or the pious Mexican Indian, Petronila de la Concepción. (See the works cited in note 9 above.) Most of these exemplary natives and blacks had been assimilated into the Hispanic sphere of colonial life (both examples were servants of religious orders) and, with the exception of Martín de Porres, none was accorded full saintly treatment. Thus, in 1724, when opposition arose to the proposed establishment of a convent for native nuns in New Spain, the religious authorities had to go far afield to find a case that would prove conclusively that Indians were capable of spiritual perfection. The pamphlet that clinched their case contains a chapter of legal and philosophical arguments, as well as two brief notices on exemplary Mexican natives; however, the bulk of the volume is devoted to a subject reflected in its title: La gracia triunfante en la vida de Catharina Tegakovita, Indía Iroquesa (Mexico, 1724) [republished with an introduction by W. Michael Mathes (Madrid, 1994)]. This is a translation of the “Lettre du Père Cholenc,” together with a “Punto Apologetica” by Doctor D. Juan Ignacio Castorena y Ursua.
vides modern scholars with a window on men’s and women’s religious styles—the tendency, for example, for Catholic women of the time to express their devotion in ascetic behavior and mystic visions—and on prevalent views about the value of religious perfection—holy women prized for their virginal purity, holy men for their heroic achievements. Hagiography in the Baroque period was anything but a projection of ordinary sex roles, however. Most saints were celibates whose rejection of family ties and parenthood was held up as a cause for admiration. In other contexts, Counter-Reformation writers could celebrate marriage and domesticity as enthusiastically as their Protestant counterparts, but not when it came to religious heroes whose lives partook of the divine. In the charmed sphere inhabited by saints, beyond the familiar world of sexual urges and family connections, even the basic polarity of male and female begins to break down.

This subversion of the gender dichotomy was, if anything, more pronounced in colonial than in metropolitan hagiography. The Jesuit martyrs and mystical nuns who form the subject of this study are particularly notable for their lack of paternal or maternal qualities. Whereas the (male) Baroque saints of Europe were typically bishops and founders of religious orders, rank-and-file missionaries such as Jean de Brébeuf and Isaac Jogues were favored in New France; on the women’s side, sickly ascetics were venerated more than celibate matriarchs such as Jeanne Mance and Marguerite Bourgeoys. The Canadian preference for saintly figures who kept their parental tendencies—even metaphorical ones—under control makes for an especially striking contrast to real-world practices in New France, a society where marriage and the prompt remarriage of widows were almost universal.\(^65\) Thus the contrast between gender as lived in the secular world and gender as enacted by God’s chosen elite seems particularly strong in colonial hagiography. Further than that, sacred biography in New France tends to undermine some of the distinctions between male and female that are specific to saint’s lives. Here girls wrench themselves from parents and set out for savage lands, while men gain fame as martyrs, adopting a “feminine” passivity in the face of deadly violence. While profoundly gendered, colonial hagiography can nevertheless be read as an attempt to negate gender. It embodies both sexual difference and the aspiration to transcend sexual difference, together with its associated passions and conflicts.\(^66\)

As with gender, so with race. Missionary literature always entails a dialectic of universality and difference, usually with a racial coloring.

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(humanity is one and fundamentally equal, hence the need to encompass all the world in the Christian fold; good missionaries struggle with the evil ways of pagan savages), and in the case of colonial hagiography themes of difference are particularly prominent. From ancient times, sacred biography was constructed around the confrontation of polar opposites: Christian versus pagan, divine versus diabolical, city versus wilderness. Transposed to the North American setting, it seemed natural to add colonizer and colonized as a parallel polarity, casting European missionaries as the heroic subjects and assigning Indians the Other’s role. But the discourse of difference generated its own negation, and, in the religious imagination, if not in the realities of colonial life, difference was transcended and the savage became a saint. The life of a native could be written, not as a mere adjunct to a European life, but as a story packed with its own meaning and beauty.