

Fénelon Revisited: A Review of Girls' Education in Seventeenth Century France

Elizabeth Rapley*

This article reviews the state of feminine education in the seventeenth century when schooling, once a luxury of doubtful value available only to a select few, became a social necessity. Hundreds of schools were established across France to accommodate the new need for Christianization, control and social promotion. Emphasis was on religion, reading (which was perceived as an instrument of salvation) and handwork. Learning of writing and arithmetics was not widely encouraged. The author concludes that the new schools served the purpose which their founders had set them, to give girls a training appropriate to their sex and salvation.

Cet article considère l'état de l'éducation féminine en France du XVII^e siècle, au moment où l'éducation cessa d'être un produit de luxe, d'une valeur d'ailleurs douteuse et où elle devint une nécessité sociale au lieu d'être réservée à quelques privilégiées. Des centaines d'écoles furent fondées dans le pays pour satisfaire de nouveaux besoins de christianisation, de contrôle et de promotion sociale. L'accent était mis sur la lecture, perçue comme instrument du salut, et le travail manuel; l'apprentissage de l'écriture et de l'arithmétique n'était pas encouragé. L'auteure conclue que le nouveau système scolaire répondait aux attentes de l'élite dirigeante : ce n'était pas tant l'acquisition de connaissances livresque que la création d'une force de travail qualifiée et disciplinée.

“Nothing is more neglected than the education of girls.” With this critique, first published three hundred years ago,¹ the famous educationist, Fénelon, passed a judgement on seventeenth century feminine education which has remained fixed from his time to our own. The opinion is still widely held, that there was no serious interest in feminine education in France until the end of the seventeenth century.²

But in fact, Fénelon's book was itself evidence of the progress which had already taken place in feminine pedagogy. A hundred years earlier few, if any, French churchmen would have concerned themselves with the schooling of girls. Interest in female instruction as a specialization was born with the seventeenth century.³ A few young ladies had previously been raised and educated in nunneries, and some girls had attended school, either in the occasional classrooms run by schoolmistresses, or, more often, in mixed classes. But the idea that girls *ought* to attend school was developed in the collective mind of

* Elizabeth Rapley is a Ph.D. in History from the University of Ottawa, and has taught at the University of Ottawa and Carleton University.

1. François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, *Education des filles* (Paris: Flammarion, 1937), p. 5 (my translation).

2. A corrective to this is offered by Roger Chartier, Marie-Madeleine Compère and Roger Julia in their important work, *L'Éducation en France du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, S.E.D.E.S., 1976), Chapter VIII. But by their own admission their outline is limited for lack of supporting studies.

3. “La question de l'éducation des filles, et en particulier, celle des petites filles pauvres a été posée pour la première fois au XVII^e siècle,” Bernard Chedozeau, “Les petites écoles de Pierre Nicole”, published in *Marseille* 88 (1971): 15.

Counter-Reformation society, and implemented gradually throughout the two remaining centuries of the Old Régime. The creative stage of this implementation came not in the eighteenth, but in the seventeenth century; and the principal agent involved was the feminine religious congregation.

The purpose of this article is to review the state of feminine education in the 1680s, when Fénelon's book appeared; to assess what schools were available and to whom, and to examine what was being taught and how well. As these questions are explored another question takes shape: why? Why was schooling important for girls? In promoting, funding and supporting schools for girls, seventeenth century French society had its own design, or cluster of designs, which needless to say were not identical with those of the late twentieth century. The effectiveness of its schools must be measured against the goals which it set forth.

I

By 1687, when Fénelon's book first appeared, urban France was already well supplied with girls' schools. These varied as widely as the society that had produced them. A case unto itself was the royal academy of Saint-Cyr, founded a year earlier, with thirty-six *dames professes* teaching 250 *demoiselles* from noble but impoverished families. But though Saint-Cyr was the darling of the King (and of the King's wife, Madame de Maintenon), the very pinnacles of exclusivity were still, in fact, the ancient abbeys, where the daughters of royalty and high nobility were given a mediocre education at considerable expense. More accessible to the majority of upper-class families, but similar in their pedagogical tradition, were the *pensionnats* of some hundred and fifty Visitation convents. Here tiny groups of girls — sometimes as few as two — lived within the cloister under the care of a single nun. Once a fortnight they were allowed to join the community at recreation; otherwise their entire life was spent in a cocoon of lessons, play and prayer, including, for the older girls, the recitation of office with the nuns. The children were given a modified religious dress, known as the *petit habit*. At fifteen they were allowed to ask to enter the religious life; those who were considered unsuitable were sent back to their homes.⁴ Since no holidays were permitted from the cloister,⁵ this tiny physical and intellectual space provided all their experience for the greater part of their childhood and adolescence.

It was to this kind of schooling that Fénelon took exception:

Une jeune fille de condition y croît dans une profonde ignorance du siècle Elle sort du couvent comme une personne qu'on aurait nourrie dans les ténèbres d'une profonde caverne et qu'on ferait tout d'un coup passer au grand jour.⁶

The contemplative communities were directed, naturally enough, towards contemplation, and they made no special allowances for their young boarders. Yet, paradoxically, these were the schools which aristocratic families preferred, to give their daughters the correct "tone".

4. E. Catta, *La Visitation Sainte-Marie de Nantes (1630-1792)* (Paris: Vrin, 1954) p. 367.

5. This practice, which derived from the Council of Trent's ruling on the enclosure of nuns, was interpreted with more or less latitude in different congregations. The Ursulines and the *Filles de Notre-Dame* allowed occasional holidays. But in many monasteries, including Saint-Cyr, *pensionnaires* were kept inside the monastery throughout their school life.

6. "Avis de M. de Fénelon à une dame de qualité sur l'éducation de mademoiselle sa fille," *Education des filles* (*op. cit.*), pp. 121-22.

It is arguable that the best education available for girls benefited not the upper classes but the lesser nobility and the bourgeoisie; and that it was as likely to be found in provincial towns as in Paris. The Catholic Reformation had opened floodgates of feminine activism. Thousands of women poured into the new teaching congregations — the Ursulines, the *Filles de Notre-Dame*, and the Canonesses of Saint Augustine of the *Congrégation de Notre-Dame* — with the result that some five hundred convents of teaching nuns were established in the course of the seventeenth century. “On voit partout de leurs monastères,” wrote a contemporary, “et il n’y a pas de si petite ville qui n’en ait un ou deux.”⁷ The communities specialized in the instruction of girls. They brought to it all the expertise they could muster. They varied in size and status, and so did their *pensionnats*. Every merchant and lawyer, every land- or office-holder, could find a school to suit his purse.

Alongside these *pensionnats*, though completely separate, were the convents’ day schools. Here the lesser children of the cities were entitled to attend school five days a week, four and a half hours a day. In some cases they paid a fee, so that the schools in fact duplicated the existing *petites écoles* run by secular schoolmistresses. But the majority were received without charge. They were taught under the same school rules as the boarders, though the student-teacher ratio was much higher. The size of the day schools varied from community to community: thus the Ursulines of Rouen, with seventy-five nuns, taught 400 day students, while in Saint Bonnet-le-Château, “trois Ursulines ont comme élèves trente petites filles auxquelles elles apprennent la lecture et la dentelle.”⁸

The free schools fulfilled an obligation to their cities which the nuns had undertaken at the time of foundation. The particular purpose of the new teaching congregations, which distinguished them from the contemplative orders, was their dedication to the free instruction of children. This was what they offered in return for permission to occupy city space and to accept donations from city people. By this arrangement the municipalities acquired for their girls facilities which complemented their existing schools for boys. “Les religieuses n’ont été instituées que dans les vues du bien public de la Cité,” ran a declaration in Montbrison at the time of the Revolution, “c’est-à-dire pour instruire et enseigner les filles pauvres.”⁹ Actually, it seems unlikely that their student population was drawn from the truly poor. The Rules stipulated that all children who presented themselves, as long as they were not of evil reputation, or sick, or scrofulous, were to be accepted.¹⁰ But the crowds of little girls who appeared in the free classrooms had to meet one criterion: their families had to be able to spare their labour. In an age when even the youngest children of needy families were expected to work, they were therefore not the poorest of the poor.

The female monastic communities were limited in the service that they could offer to the public. Their nuns were cloistered, which meant that they could only serve the children who came to them. From mid-century, schools had begun to appear which were

7. An anonymous chronicler of Châlons-sur-Marne, quoted in A. Babeau, *La Ville sous l’Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1880), p. 462.

8. A.D. Seine-Maritime sér. D. 404; M.-C. Gueudré, *Histoire de l’Ordre des Ursulines en France* (Paris: Editions Saint-Paul, 1957), vol. II, p. 176.

9. A.D. Loire sér. L., quoted in P.-R. Gaussin and M. Vallet, “L’instruction secondaire des filles en Forez aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles,” in *Religion et politique: Mélanges offerts à André Latreille* (Lyon: Audin, 1972), p. 461.

10. See, for instance, Pierre Fourier, *Les Vraies Constitutions des religieuses de la Congrégation de Notre Dame* (N.P., 1649), III, T. 3, 8. Fourier was the co-founder of the Canonesses of Saint Augustine of Notre-Dame, and a pioneer in feminine education.

intended specifically to carry education outwards to poor girls, in the quarters where they lived. These were created, in the first place, by the parish *charités* — confraternities, mostly of women, which dealt in every kind of charitable work, from soup kitchens to visiting the sick.¹¹ They were operated not by nuns, but by *dévoit* laywomen, and their funding came from rich groups or individuals. With time, many of these women banded into pious communities, and as *filles séculières* or *maîtresses charitables* became a recognized institution in old regime society. The purpose of their schools aroused considerable suspicion among the existing corporations of schoolmasters and schoolmistresses, and initially the authorities insisted that they serve only the genuine poor, who could not afford to pay fees.¹² In spite of all precautions, however, the indigent failed to show up in the hoped-for numbers, and it was the artisan class that sent its daughters to the charity schools — the “amidonniers, boulangers, cardeurs de laine, jardiniers, mantriers, perruquiers, savetiers, serruriers, tisseurs et tonneliers,” enumerated by the historian of such schools in Reims.¹³

Lower in social standing than these free but “respectable” schools were the schools for paupers. These were usually connected to the *hôpitaux-généraux*, or workhouses. They were managed by the *Bureaux des Pauvres*, and their personnel were supported by, and often lodged in, the institutions. Sometimes the schools operated outside the workhouse, as in the case of the charity school in the cemetery of Saint-Maclou church, in Rouen:

...Deux classes, l'une d'environ quatre-vingt filles qui travaillent à faire des bas, l'autre d'environ quarante qui font de la dentelle Les maîtresses enseignent à lire, à écrire, à travailler Les filles travaillent pour des marchands de la ville dont elles sont payées fort ponctuellement ce qui aide à soulager leurs familles de leur pauvreté.¹⁴

But for the lowest of the low, the institutionalized poor, classes were held inside the workhouses themselves; the pauper children of the seventeenth century were taught manual work, a smattering of reading, and a great deal of religion.

By the 1660s and 1670s charitable schooling was a growing industry in many of the cities of France. Its most famous proponents were the priests of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, whose book, *L'Escole Paroissiale*, gained wide circulation as a teaching manual, and Charles Démia, priest of the diocese of Lyon. Schooling, Démia argued, was the only means by which poor children could be saved from the gibbet and the brothel, and made into good citizens.¹⁵ Catholic society, after some grumbling, accepted the idea, and by the diversion of its legacies and donations to the cause, attempted to turn it into an achievable goal.

From this community effort girls benefited as much as boys, sometimes even more. In some cities, girls' free schools outnumbered boys' in the later seventeenth century.¹⁶ This unusual feminine privilege (which was eventually reversed) is generally attributed

11. M. Fosseyeux, *Les Ecoles de Charité à Paris sous l'Ancien Régime et dans la première partie du XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1912), p. 27.

12. A pioneer of these schools, and co-foundress with Vincent de Paul of the *filles de la Charité*, was Louise de Marillac. In 1641 she was authorized to open a charity school in Saint-Denis, “à la charge d'enseigner les pauvres filles seulement, et non d'autres.” *Lettres de Louise de Marillac* (n.p., 1890), p. 64.

13. Fr. Léon de Marie Aroz, *Nicolas Roland, Jean-Baptiste de La Salle et les Sœurs du Saint-Enfant-Jésus de Reims* (Rome: Maison St-Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, 1972), p. 156.

14. Parish visit of J.N. de Séraucourt, 1698, quoted in J.-P. Bardet, *Rouen aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Paris: S.E.D.E.S., 1983), vol. I, p. 248.

15. *Remonstrances à Messieurs les Marchands, Echevins, et principaux habitants de la Ville de Lyon touchant la nécessité des écoles pour instruire les enfans pauvres* (Lyon, 1668).

16. M. Fosseyeux, *op. cit.*, p. 73; R. Chartier, M.-M. Compère and D. Julia, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

to the upper classes' pressing need for well-trained nursemaids for their children.¹⁷ But it may also have resulted from the greater willingness of women to take on the lowly service of the primary schools, and from the greater adaptability of basic feminine skills to the environment of the classroom.¹⁸

Feminine education was weakest in the rural areas. The village schools of France were mostly in the hands of schoolmasters, either lay or clerical. They fitted into the parish economy, sometimes acting as vergers and bellringers as well. They occasionally received girls as well as boys in their classrooms, in spite of the repeated thunderings of Church and Crown against the evils of co-education. But schoolmistresses were rare. The expense of maintaining a schoolmistress as well as a schoolmaster was simply too much for most villages. In a diocesan inspection of the Paris region made in 1672, only 21 out of 137 parishes were found to have a girls' school.¹⁹ This poor showing was typical of most of the countryside. The *dévo*t reformers of the late seventeenth century poured considerable effort and expense into the training and funding of country schoolmistresses, but with only minimal results. Throughout the Old Regime feminine education remained an urban privilege.²⁰

In numbers of schools and schoolmistresses, and in the choices of schooling offered to girls, the seventeenth century can hardly be accused of neglect. A substantial number of schools did exist, and a substantial number of girls actually did spend some time in school. The sum total of it all cannot be called an education "system" — this would suggest an overall design, and nothing could be further from the truth. The State, in fact, played a minimal role in the establishment of schools. Only after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes — and then only for a few decades — did the Crown take a serious interest in the matter of children's education.²¹ As for the Bishops, their role was supervisory and supportive rather than creative. They retained the right of inspection "comme leur ancienne possession dans ce royaume",²² but they seldom founded schools themselves. The schools of the seventeenth century were like a coral reef: layer upon layer of foundations, small or large, all developed and maintained by strenuous private and community efforts.

From the very extensiveness of these efforts the question arises: why had Frenchmen taken so firm a step towards feminine education? There were several motives, depending on who was involved. First in time, and probably in importance, was that of the religious reformers: instruction of women was the way to salvation — their own and their families'. In 1524, Luther had written that girls must have schools, so that women could be capable of raising their children as Christians. His idea became an accepted truth among Reform educators. In France, wherever the Huguenots acquired sufficient power, the education of both boys and girls became a major strategy. Catholics, stunned and disturbed by the

17. See Y. Poutet, "L'enseignement des pauvres dans la France du XVII^e siècle," *XVII^e siècle* 90-91 (1971), p. 88.

18. This, at any rate, was Démi'a's argument: "Pour les filles, que les dames tiennent en apprentissage pendant qu'elles fréquentent les écoles, elles pourront être plus longtemps à l'école." *Reglemens pour les Ecoles de la Ville et Diocèse de Lyon*, quoted in G. Compayré, *Charles Démi'a et les origines de l'enseignement primaire* (Paris, 1905), p. 82.

19. Jeanne Ferté, *La vie religieuse dans les campagnes parisiennes (1622-1695)* (Paris: Vrin, 1962), p. 246.

20. Chartier, Compère and Julia, *op. cit.*, pp. 245-46.

21. F. Furet and J. Ozouf, *Lire et écrire: l'alphabétisation des français de Calvin à Jules Ferry* (Paris: Editions de minuit, 1977) vol. I, p. 81.

22. Chartier, Compère and Julia, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

spread of heresy, adopted the same strategy, first in self-defence, later out of conviction. Faith in the power of the school to create religious fervour was combined with a recognition of the influence of women over their families' spiritual lives. "Leur malice ou leur piété," wrote Pierre Fourier, "importe plus qu'on ne croit, à la République chrétienne."²³

The local notables whose efforts and money supported the schools agreed on the importance of christianizing the children; but they hoped, too, to contain them. In this they reflected the desire for social order which permeated the France of the Sun King. Schooling was necessary to train children for their station in life. Educators agreed that the child should receive the education proper to the state to which it had been called, and no more. "Rien n'est si beau que de ne sortir de son état," as Madame de Maintenon told her *demoiselles*.²⁴ For the poor, this meant learning the deference proper to their condition. "En instruisant les pauvres enfants des principes de la religion, il s'agit d'en faire de bons artisans et valets," wrote Dénia.²⁵ For girls, it meant learning to live inside the narrow intellectual and occupational limits that society assigned to them. "Retenez leur esprit dans les bornes communes, et apprenez-leur qu'il doit y avoir pour leur sexe une pudeur sur la science, presque aussi délicate que celle qui inspire l'horreur du vice," wrote Fénelon.²⁶ In a regime of established ranks and orders, where some were born to command and others to obey, it would have been foolish to open up new vistas of the mind.

However, no matter how carefully the agenda for social control was constructed, there can be no doubt that schools also provided the means for social advancement. Dénia and his associates found need to defend themselves against a widespread suspicion that their schools encouraged children to rise above their station.²⁷ And there was truth to the accusation. Parents, even poor parents, may indeed have sent their children to school to be christianized, but it is hardly likely that they did it to ensure that they were kept in their place. The reason that families were ready to forego their children's assistance in home or workshop, by sending them out to school, must have been that by doing this they hoped for their social promotion. For boys, the lure was obvious: a little Latin and a knowledge of letters might secure them a niche in the expanding world of business, minor offices, the Church — or, at the very least, domestic service. When Dénia's schoolmasters trained their boys "à saluer honnêtement, à bien faire un message, à bien écrire une lettre, ou encore à faire un paquet",²⁸ they were, in fact, preparing them for social ascension.

Even for girls, the number of parents ready to send their daughters to school suggests that, in addition to the benefits of religious instruction, some sort of advantage, social or economic, was to be gained from the effort. "What is astonishing," writes one historian, "is not the relative weakness of feminine literacy, but rather that so many parents insisted in spite of everything on procuring an education for all their children."²⁹ In the final analysis,

23. Pierre Fourier, *Lettres*, vol. I, p. 89, quoted in H. Derréal, *Un missionnaire de la Contre-Réforme* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1956), p. 126.

24. Emile Faguet, *Madame de Maintenon Institutrice* (Paris, 1887), p. 58.

25. Dénia, *Règlements (op. cit.)*, quoted in E. Germain, *Langages de la foi à travers l'histoire* (Paris: I.S.P.C., 1972), p. 76.

26. Fénelon, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

27. See, for instance, his *Remonstrances*, p. 499. See also the criticism of the *Sœurs du Saint-Enfant-Jésus* in Reims made by members of that city's council: "Elles nourrissent les servantes dans une fainéantise qui n'est pas propre au ménage." (René Bourgeois, *Mémoires*, vol. III, p. 697, quoted in A. Hanneuse, *Vie de Nicolas Roland* [Reims, 1888], p. 184).

28. *Règlements (op. cit.)*, quoted in G. Compayré, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

29. B. Groperrin, *Les petites écoles sous l'Ancien Régime* (Rennes: Ouest France, 1984), p. 142 (my translation).

it appears that the schools offered something of material value: an instruction in basic skills, and a behaviour training for a society that was becoming more polished, more demanding. "Le temps passé, nos grands pères se mouchoient sur la manche," grumbled Jean Maillefer, *bourgeois* of Reims, "les galonds de leurs souliers estoient des lanons de cuire Ce n'est pas de mesme à présent."³⁰ In other words, the rough rude world was passing, and *civilité* was coming to the masses.

These three motives — christianization, control, promotion — will be found intertwined, underlying all the seventeenth century's efforts at pedagogy. They corresponded to, and served to reinforce, society's central values. In what has been called "le siècle sacré",³¹ a new Catholicism confronted French society with very real demands, not only for conformity, but for informed participation. At the same time, the country as a whole experienced a deep need for the rule of authority, in the light of the disorders and religious wars of its recent past.³² Yet society, because it was expanding, opened the door to a certain upward mobility, by absorbing more and more literate people, and people with skills.³³

II

These motives informed not only the content of what was taught, but the manner in which it was taught. The greatest challenge to seventeenth century educators was the establishment of discipline, and the development of ordered teaching methods. Here, the female teachers made significant contributions to the practice of their day.

The nuns of the early 1600s were usually untrained for the work which they decided to undertake; many of them were unschooled, some of them even illiterate.³⁴ They had no tradition of female pedagogy on which to draw, and no breathing space to develop efficient teaching methods. It is little wonder, then, that they drew heavily on the experience of the male teachers whom they most admired — the Jesuits. The women's congregations all considered themselves to be the female counterparts of "the Society", and Jesuit influence was pervasive, both in their philosophy of discipline and in their teaching techniques.

The nuns faced girls of all ages, most of them without previous schooling, and, therefore, unbroken to orderly classroom behaviour. They had, at first, only the most rudimentary teaching aids. In addition, they taught in common classrooms, filled with scores, sometimes hundreds, of children, and they taught by the traditional individual method. What this meant can be illustrated by a contemporary description of the first free classrooms of the Ursulines of Dôle: "Dans une même salle, un grand nombre de filles, vieilles et jeunes,

30. Henri Jadart, *Mémoires de Jean Maillefer continués par son fils jusqu'en 1716* (Paris-Reims, 1890), p. 51.

31. René Taveneaux, *Le Catholicisme dans la France Classique* (Paris: S.E.D.E.S., 1980), vol. I, p. 177.

32. J. Portemer, "Réflexion sur les pouvoirs de la femme selon le droit français au XVII^e siècle," *XVII^e siècle* 144 (July-September, 1984), p. 11.

33. Towards the end of the century this period of expansion came to an end, and a "great glaciation of social mobility" set in. (See E. Le Roy Ladurie, in G. Duby and A. Wallon, *Histoire de la France rurale* [Paris: Seuil, 1975], p. 526). Henceforth, throughout the eighteenth century, society would be much more elitist, much more restricted in the schooling which it offered to the under classes — and to women.

34. Thus Pierre Fourier had to teach his young schoolmistresses to read and write. See "Relation à la gloire de Dieu" by Alix Le Clerc, 1666, quoted in E. de Bazelaire, *Le Bienheureux Pierre Fourier* (Clermont-Ferrand, 1953).

assises sur des bancs... nos sœurs les prennent successivement, les unes après les autres, pour les choses affectées au rang où elles sont."³⁵

It was imperative to develop methods of managing these crowds. The first step was a division of the students into smaller groups. This division could be by subject: the *Filles de Notre-Dame* at first divided their children into classes, for reading, writing, sewing, and handwork.³⁶ However, the division which came to prevail was the division according to ability and knowledge. The Ursulines of Dôle decided to divide their children into six grades.³⁷ Fourier advised his canonesses to use three levels: "les petites Abecedaires qui commencent a cognoistre leurs lettres, ... celles qui apprennent a lire ès livres imprimez,... les Escholieres qui lisent ès Registres, et autres papiers et lettres escriptes a la main."³⁸ Within the classes there were further divisions into benches, of ten or twenty students to a mistress.³⁹ Each mistress had to keep her instruction within the limits assigned to her.⁴⁰ The *Intendante*, or Mistress of Studies, reviewed the students' work several times a year, and the girls who had mastered the knowledge pertaining to their benches were promoted to a higher level. This subdivision of the classroom according to levels of achievement, joined in time to the general use of uniform textbooks, laid the foundation for simultaneous instruction, one of the great pedagogical achievements of the century.⁴¹

The subdivision of the classroom also allowed each teacher to expand her control over her students. The congregations all adopted the institution of the *décurie* — a classical military device, borrowed from the Jesuits who in turn had borrowed it from the Calvinists.⁴² Each group of ten children had its own *décurionne*, or *dizainière*, who was responsible for assisting with lessons and with discipline. *Dizainières* were simply students "plus sages et plus sçavantes", and their duties were limited to two- or three-month stints,⁴³ during which they co-operated with the mistress by ensuring the study and discipline of their group. The *dizainière*, like the *décurion*, was the cornerstone of old regime schooling. Wherever the ratio of students to teachers was high — as was usually the case in the *petites écoles* — student offices proliferated. Students led the prayers, distributed and picked up the books, drilled their juniors in their recitations, swept the floors.

Also in imitation of the Jesuits, the students were encouraged to compete with each other. "Emulation", in the Jesuit system, was used as a whetstone for the students' minds.⁴⁴

35. Père Orset, S.J., quoted in J. Morey, *La vénérable Anne de Xaintonge, fondatrice de la congrégation de Sainte-Ursule au Comté de Bourgogne* (Besançon, imp. Jacquin, 1901), vol. II, p. 63.

36. *Les Ordres religieux* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1926), vol. VIII: *La Compagnie de Marie Notre-Dame* (hereafter *Compagnie Marie Notre-Dame*), p. 74.

37. J. Morey, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

38. *Vraies Constitutions*, art. 14.

39. *Ibid.*, art. 15.

40. "Les maîtresses auront soin de ne pas anticiper les unes sur les autres, mais de se conformer au règlement de chaque classe, en restant dans les limites assignées" (Anne de Xaintonge, in J. Morey, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 71).

41. By simultaneous instruction is meant the teaching of the entire group at the same time, instead of the old practice of addressing individuals while the rest of the class waited its turn. The teacher sat at the front, or stood at the back, of the class, while the children stayed in their places.

42. For the Jesuit model, see François de Dainville, *La Naissance de l'humanisme moderne* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1940) vol. I, p. 144. For the older Calvinist model, see F. Soury-Lavergne, *Chemin d'Education sur les traces de Jeanne de Lestonnac 1556-1640* (Chambrey-les-Tours: C.L.D., 1984), p. 74.

43. *Règlements des Ursulines* (Paris, 1705), part I, pp. 144, 152-53.

44. Emulation served to "aguillonner et esmouvoir grandement les escoliers, les resveillant s'ils sont endormis & les faisant galoper plus legerement..." *Bref Discours*, 1608, quoted in F. de Dainville, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-52.

The feminine congregations applied the principle with verve. In their classrooms, students read and recited against each other, and corrected each other's work.⁴⁵ Individuals and groups competed for academic honours, which were often signified by their position on the benches.⁴⁶ For the winners, there was a bench of honour, under a crowned statue of the Blessed Virgin. For lazy or difficult students, there was a bench of penitence.⁴⁷

The reverse side of the Jesuits' use of emulation as a spur to good scholastic behaviour was their disapproval of physical punishment or uncontrolled anger in the classroom. The schoolroom was, by long tradition, a violent and rowdy place. "Après les Ecossais il n'est point de plus grands fesseurs que les maîtres d'école de France," Saliat had written in the sixteenth century.⁴⁸ Montaigne had recalled with feeling the "cris et d'enfans suppliez, et de maîtres enyvrez en leur cholere".⁴⁹ Such excess went counter to the Jesuits' model of self-discipline, and they took pains to avoid it.

This control of emotions was greatly sought after by the women's congregations:

Les maîtresses se gouverneront en sorte que tout leur maintien, leur port, leurs actions, leurs paroles, leurs mouvemens soient tellement réglés et ajustés qu'elles servent à leurs escholières de modèle Elles ne leur montreront aucun signe de cholère, ou d'impatience ou de dédain; elles ne les appelleront ny anesses, ny bestes, ny sottés, ny mauvaises filles; elles ne crieront pas haut à l'entour d'elles, elles se garderont surtout de les battre ou frapper.⁵⁰

A variety of lesser punishments was developed: prayers, to be recited while kneeling, for minor offences,⁵¹ *oreilles d'âne* for poor study, the *langue rouge* for lying.⁵² Shame punishments were preferred to physical discipline.

The women did not give up corporal punishment altogether. They simply ruled against the casual whipping of children. "Qu'elles les corrigent plus par la parole que par les coups. On ne permettra de donner le fouet que pour quelque faute notable."⁵³ In some cases, the strap could only be applied after consultation with the superior, and in circumstances of great solemnity.⁵⁴ This contrasts strikingly with the punishments recommended for boys by *L'Escole Paroissiale*, which were graded from the cane across the fingers through heavier beatings to prison "dans laquelle on les enferme l'espace de 2, 3, 4, 5 ou 6 heures."⁵⁵

45. "Chaque maîtresse appariera ses élèves deux à deux et l'une avec l'autre, celles qui sont plus égales en science à lire pour s'écouter l'une l'autre et se reprendre et se combattre pour leurs prières, catechisme et leçons." *Vrayes constitutions*, quoted in M. Maggiolo, "L'œuvre pédagogique de Pierre Fourier" *Mémoires de l'Académie de Stanislaus*, 1892, 5^e série, t. X, p. 219. Also see the school rule of the *Filles de Notre-Dame*, quoted in *Marie Notre-Dame*, p. 77: "On fera réciter debout ce qui se devra dire par cœur, la partie ou adversaire de celle qui récite se levant de l'autre côté, à l'opposite, et l'enseignant ou reprenant s'il en est besoin..."

46. *Vrayes constitutions*, *loc. cit.*

47. *Ibid.*, p. 229. This punishment was considered so serious that only the *Intendante* could order it.

48. Quoted in Alix de Rohan-Chabot, "Les écoles de campagne en Lorraine au XVIII^e siècle", Thèse de Doctorat de 3^e Cycle, (Paris, 1967), p. 170.

49. Michel de Montaigne, *Essais* (Paris: Ed. Garnier Frères, 1971), vol. I, no. XXVI: De l'Institution des Enfants.

50. *Vrayes Constitutions*, in L. Maggiolo, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

51. *Vrayes Constitutions*, Part III, art. 54.

52. "Règlement pour les petites Ecoles Chretiennes", p. 113.

53. "Règlements des Ursulines de Bordeaux", quoted in M.-C. Gueudré, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 244.

54. "... Par une sœur converse aiant le visage voilé et ce en tel endroit de la classe que ny la maîtresse, ny la Mère Intendante, ny les escholières ne puissent voir celle que l'on chastie." (*Vrayes constitutions*, quoted in L. Maggiolo, *op. cit.*, p. 230).

55. Quoted in B. Gersperrin, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

To modern observers, who abhor corporal punishment, the fact that the nuns whipped at all shows that they could not, or would not, escape the brutal habits of their times. But in fact, it seems that feminine educators were on the way to developing their own philosophy of discipline, based on a different understanding of the children whom they were to teach. A key text regarding discipline, which can be found repeated in other rules, appears in the Constitutions of the Ursulines of Paris, drawn up in 1623:

D'autant que les jeunes filles, les unes se corrigent par la crainte, les autres par la douceur, les unes par la verge, les autres par douce persuasion, les unes par le silence, les autres en les regardant et par le seul maintien, les maîtresses de chaque classe s'étudieront à remarquer le naturel et inclinations de leurs écolières et leur capacité, afin de les traiter avec prudence et discrétion.⁵⁶

Feminine school rules, imitations of their masculine counterparts in so many ways, displayed one original characteristic: they treated their student population as sensitive beings, open to damage. "La crainte est comme les remèdes violents qu'on emploie dans les maladies extrêmes," wrote Fénelon, "ils purgent; mais ils altèrent les tempéraments... une âme menée par la crainte en est toujours plus faible."⁵⁷ It is interesting that a manual written for boys' schools in 1709 condemned violence also, but on the grounds that it might harden the children.⁵⁸ Feminine discipline, initially modelled on that of the Jesuits, developed its own originality to serve what was perceived as a different, much more vulnerable student population.

As in the discipline of the new congregations, so in their pedagogy: the Jesuit model was universal. "Faire comprendre avant de faire apprendre": the principle was central in the *Ratio Studiorum*.⁵⁹ In close imitation, the women designed a course of studies which demanded that the student fully complete one stage before advancing to the next.

This adaptation of the pedagogy of the Jesuit *collèges* was all the more striking because it was applied to schools of very modest academic standards. The religious schoolmistresses of the seventeenth century lavished their pedagogical care upon elementary courses of studies. It was, after all, the only work open to them. Whereas schoolmasters of the *petites écoles*, if they had any education at all, were simply marking time in hopes of promotion to better positions,⁶⁰ schoolmistresses had nowhere further to go. The mediocrity of feminine education, therefore, must be attributed not to the teachers' indifference or incapacity, but to the social reality to which they had to conform. "Il n'y a guère de personnes à qui il n'en coûte cher pour avoir trop espéré," wrote Fénelon.⁶¹ Wise schoolmistresses heeded this advice, and learned to make the most of their limited possibilities.

The rules and manuals of the teaching congregations described, in detail, even the most basic procedures. The rules, once formulated, soon tended to harden, so that further adaptation was difficult. Thus, after a flurry of creative activity at the beginning, literal observance of the original teaching methods very swiftly became an obligation, and the rule was inscribed:

56. Quoted in M.-C. Gueudre, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 245.

57. Fénelon, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

58. *Règlement et méthode pour les écoles* (Paris, 1709), quoted in M. Fosseyeux, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

59. F. de Dainville, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

60. According to the superior of the seminary for schoolmasters in Lyon, "quand une fois le maître sait la méthode d'enseigner ces sortes de leçons, il est certain qu'il n'a besoin d'aucune autre préparation avant que d'aller dans l'école, ou tout au plus un quart d'heure suffit pour réfléchir à ce qu'il doit faire." (Quoted in B. Grosperin, *op. cit.*, p. 64). His schoolmasters were all young priests, waiting for benefices elsewhere.

61. Fénelon, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

Les Maîtresses maintiendront exactement l'ordre ordinaire des exercices... et n'y pourront rien changer, qu'avec la permission de la Supérieure et Maîtresse générale.⁶²

Innovation was considered to be disobedience to the rule; any nun guilty of it could be reprimanded or removed.⁶³ The communities were ardent guardians of custom. Rigidity, not laxity, was their invariable tendency: their pedagogical methods were virtually unchanged at the time of the Revolution.

The *filles séculières*, by the very nature of their calling, could not hope for extensive preparation. The single *fille dévote* in Montmartre, working alone with her eighty girls,⁶⁴ had no time to improve her skills. Communities of only two or three members were equally unlikely to try ambitious programmes. However, the larger communities of *maîtresses charitables*, which appeared in growing numbers from the 1660s onwards, laid down comprehensive school rules and training procedures.⁶⁵ "Elles doivent posséder leur matière parfaitement, afin de rien avancer qu'elles ne soient certaines et bien éclaircies."⁶⁶ Their theoretical training was shorter than that of the cloistered communities, but their practical training began earlier.⁶⁷ Even when qualified, the women were allowed an hour's study each day, "pour se rendre capables d'avancer dans la Doctrine Chrétienne, et apprendre à mieux écrire, observer l'ortographe... se conformant en toutes choses pour ne rien ajouter ou diminuer aux Statuts."⁶⁸

The *filles séculières* faced certain difficulties which the cloistered nuns avoided. First was the number of students. For the *maîtresses charitables*, a class of fifty was standard; and there were cases where a single mistress was expected to teach a hundred children.⁶⁹ Second was the distance from the home community, which led to lack of supervision and support. To counter this, the superior of each community was expected to visit the schools

62. *Reglemens des ursulines* (1705), p. 33. In this case, the practice under discussion was the folding of the boarders' linen.

63. The *Reglemens des ursulines* listed among "les fautes grièves ... manquer notablement en l'instruction des Ecoières ... et renverser l'ordre de leurs exercices, sans cause legitime et sans permission." (*op. cit.* II, p. 75). A *fille de Notre-Dame* at La Ferté-Bernard who wanted to try new methods was sent back to the Mother House at La Flèche. (P. Calendini, *Le couvent des Filles de Notre-Dame de La Flèche* [La Flèche, 1905], p. 179).

64. René de Voyer d'Argenson, *Annales de la Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement*, publiées et annotées par le R. P. Dom Beauchet-Fillieau (Marseilles, 1900), p. 69.

65. Some of these school rules have survived. See, for instance, the *Statuts et reglemens des ecoles chretiennes et charitables du S. Enfant Jesus* (1685), drawn up by their founder, Nicolas Barré. Also see the *Reglement pour les petites Ecoles Chretiennes* (Arch. Sœurs de l'Enfant-Jésus de Reims, ms. 17). This community, founded by Nicolas Roland, was the forerunner of the Christian Brothers. The rules for the Lyon community of *Soeurs de Saint-Charles*, of which the original appears to have been lost, are summarized in Gabriel Compayré, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-14

66. Arch. Sœurs de l'Enfant-Jésus de Reims, ms. 17, f. 10. *Reglement pour les petites Ecoles Chretiennes*.

67. Nicolas Barré, for one, was an exponent of training on the job. "Le Père Barré disait que les filles mises d'abord en emploi avancement beaucoup plus, que si on les instruit longtemps auparavant que de les mettre dans l'exercice des classes et des Instructions La meilleure manière d'apprendre, c'est d'enseigner." *Mémoires et Instructions*.

68. N. Barré, *Statuts et reglemens*, Chap. III, art. XV.

69. In Montpellier, in 1685, four mistresses ran a school for four hundred students. (H. de Grèzes, *Vie du R.P. Barré, religieux minime, fondateur de l'Institut des Ecoles charitables du Saint-Enfant-Jésus de Saint-Maur* [Bar-le-Duc, 1892], p. 216). According to Barré's rule, this was too many: "chaque Maîtresse ne sera chargée pour l'ordinaire que de 70 ou 80 Enfants" (*Statuts et reglemens*, Chapter VIII, art. viii).

at regular intervals “pour voir et examiner comment tout s’y passe, et l’édification que le Peuple en retire.”⁷⁰

The interest which the teaching congregations took in their pedagogy, and the efforts which they took to ensure that their members met certain standards, suggest professionalism, at least in intent. How far this professionalism was practised in the classroom cannot be precisely measured. However, a certain guarantee was built in by the structures of community life. Where community life was strong, its members were more likely to maintain their standards. A second guarantee of sorts came from the lack of alternatives. Most of the priests who taught in the charity schools were young men without livings, marking time until something better turned up. The women did not suffer from such distractions. Limited as they were in their options, they treated elementary school-teaching with a respect which no male congregation could match until the founding of the Christian Brothers in the late seventeenth century.

III

For the schoolmistresses of the Counter Reformation, the teaching of religion was absolutely paramount. The profane subjects were simply added to their curriculum as bait, to entice the parents into sending their children to school. As the Ursuline foundress of Dôle wrote,

Lecture, grammaire, écriture et les autres sciences seroient de peu de choses, si elles ne nous servoient à rendre nos élèves meilleures et surtout vraiment chrétiennes.⁷¹

It was therefore to the teaching of religion that they devoted most of their time and energy.

Christian doctrine was taught, as it was taught universally, by means of the catechism. At a time when versions of the catechism abounded, the teaching nuns chose theirs carefully. The Ursulines began with the Bellarmine catechism, which was specifically designed for children.⁷² However, they later drew up their own catechism, so as to avoid, as much as possible, material unsuited for their girls — in effect, anything pertaining to the sixth and ninth commandments.⁷³ Louise de Marillac, also, composed a catechetical model, to reduce the difficult formulae of faith to something comprehensible to the children of the charity schools.⁷⁴

The teaching of catechism was a difficult exercise. “Que les tendres esprits de ces petites filles ne soient ou trop chargez, ou ennuyez, ou degoutez de ces bonnes viandes,” warned Pierre Fourier.⁷⁵ In spite of a host of downward revisions, the content of Christian doctrine remained intractably difficult to explain. “Les grands mystères,” which must be taught to the faithful, were “l’unité et grandeur de Dieu, l’adorable Trinité, l’Incarnation

70. Every fortnight for the city schools, every three months for more schools in nearby towns; at least once a year for more distant schools. (*Ibid.*, chap. IX, art. viii). The same obligation applied to the superior of the Reims community (Reglement pour les petites Ecoles Chretiennes, f. 156).

71. Y. Poutet, “Spiritualité des enseignants: Anne de Xainctonge et Jean-Baptiste de La Salle” *Revue d’ascétique et mystique* 139 (1959), p. 323.

72. J.-C. Dhôtel, *Les origines du catéchisme moderne, d’après les premiers manuels imprimés en France* (Paris: Aubier, 1967) pp. 98-99.

73. M.-C. Gueudré, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 231.

74. J.-C. Dhôtel, *op. cit.*, pp. 272-74.

75. *Vrayes constitutions*, art. 23.

du Verbe, la divine Eucharistie, les Sacrements, les Commandements de Dieu, etc....”⁷⁶ Between the extreme simplicity of the “profane” syllabus and the complicated, abstract terms and concepts of the catechism, writes one historian, there was an “abyss”.⁷⁷ The obvious recourse was to teach by rote. But serious catechists were warned against this temptation. The preferred solution was to combine memorization with informal questioning. By the end of the century the method was firmly set. After the common recitation of questions and answers, the schoolmistress was trained to ask “subquestions”: “on doit s’étendre sur les demandes et reponses, lorsqu’elles sont un peu trop amples et dans des termes obscures, que les Enfants et les personnes non instruites ne peuvent retenir ni entendre le sens.”⁷⁸ The catechism lesson ended with a summing up of one principal idea, and an edifying story.

The pedagogy of Christian living covered the entire school day, and subsumed every subject taught. Much time was devoted directly to behaviour training, to “Christian duties, hatred of sin, love of virtue, *civilité* and good manners.”⁷⁹ Although the nuns drew heavily upon masculine — especially Jesuit — teaching traditions, they also developed new approaches, to allow for the particularities of their sex.

Most girls who went to school in the seventeenth century were directed towards motherhood and home management.⁸⁰ In this they differed from the boarders in the Benedictine and Cistercian abbeys and the Visitation convents, whose school years were a preparation for the cloister. Both the Canonesses and the Ursulines explicitly discouraged the training of young children for the religious life. As the *Annales des Ursulines* commented: “Ne prenant point les petites filles exprès pour les faire Religieuses, il n’étoit plus nécessaire de leur apprendre les cérémonies du chœur que les autres exercices monastiques.”⁸¹ The reasoning behind this was made clear in their mandate: Christian motherhood was the means of converting the world. “Ayant reçu de bonnes instructions, elles en sortissent pour porter la vertu dans les familles. Les familles, bien réglées, réformeraient les villes et les provinces, à ainsi le monde deviendrait tout autre.”⁸²

To fulfil their mission, Christian girls had first to learn to be devout: “étant plus agréables à Notre Seigneur, et plus utiles pour elles d’être fort devotes et vertueuses, que sçavantes.”⁸³ The youngest children were first taught their prayers, and how to make the sign of the cross, “prenant garde qu’elles le forment posément et avec attention”.⁸⁴ From that time on, from the moment of their entry in the morning, every school day included exercise in prayers, in examination of conscience, in attending Mass with reverence and decorum. Indeed, the grand processions of students, two by two, through the streets to

76. Archbishop de Grammont of Besançon, 1688, quoted in B. Grosperin, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

77. B. Grosperin, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

78. *Règlement pour les petites Ecoles Chrétiennes*, f. 139.

79. *Vraies Constitutions*, Part III, art. xiii.

80. This ultimate purpose did not change throughout the century, though the theories regarding methods evolved. See R. Chartier, M.-M. Compère, D. Julia, *op. cit.*, pp. 231-32.

81. Quoted in M.-A. Jégou, *Les Ursulines du Faubourg Saint-Jacques à Paris 1607-1662* (Paris: P.U.F., 1981) p. 56. This is not to say, however, that boarders were discouraged from entering religion. Of the fifty-eight nuns living in the monastery of Faubourg Saint-Jacques in 1662, thirty-nine were ex-boarders (*ibid.*, p. 107).

82. Père Marin S.J., speaking to Madame de Sainte-Beuve, quoted in H. de Leymont, *Madame de Sainte-Beuve et les Ursulines de Paris, 1562-1630* (Lyon, 1890), pp. 154-55.

83. *Règlements des Ursulines*, Chap. IV, p. 62.

84. N. Barré, *Règlements manuscrits pour les écoles charitables*, p. 2.

church, became a form of theatre, by which these young recruits to the *dévo*t world showed themselves to the public.⁸⁵

Modest and dignified behaviour was intimately tied to the practice of religion:

Les maîtresses dresseront leurs petites gens à se montrer modestes ... Elles les régleront sur la soigneuse et perpétuelle retenue de leurs yeux, sur le mouvement des mains, de la tête, du corps, sur leur parole, leur marche, leur maintien à l'église, en l'eschole, parmy leur maison; à table en mangeant, en marchant par la ville, en parlant aux personnes, en les interrogeant, en les répondant, en leur écrivant quelque missive.⁸⁶

Religion, the study of salvation, merged imperceptibly into *civilité*, the study of one's place in the world.⁸⁷ And the place of women was within the barriers of their own modesty and *pudeur*.

The accent on horror of sin, "particulièrement de ceux qui sont opposés à la pureté", was more marked in feminine than in masculine pedagogy. Fourier, and others after him, saw the innocence of early childhood as a gift which could be preserved by careful upbringing.⁸⁸ The child, if shielded from bad influence, could grow up in ignorance of all sins of impurity. This principle, added to the nuns' natural reserve, made direct reference to the sins of impurity almost unthinkable. Sexual reticence was pushed to such lengths that some nuns were reluctant to discuss the details of the Incarnation, or to mention the word "marriage".⁸⁹ It is not surprising, then, that they taught purity mostly through indirect reference. The usages of the *Sœurs du Saint-Enfant-Jésus* of Reims are typical:

Quand les Enfants demandent ensuite si c'est péché mortel? il leur faut répondre qu'une bonne chrétienne qui aime Dieu de tout son cœur ne doit faire cette question et que cette seule parole, cela déplaît à Dieu.⁹⁰

But if the schoolmistresses did not talk directly about impurity, they did not hesitate to attack the occasions of sin. Their students were instructed not to sing worldly songs, or to dance. They were to dress modestly, "ne porter jamais la gorge découverte, ni les bras ainsy que font les mondaines et prostituées",⁹¹ to talk "en chrétiennes", and to avoid walks, talks and games with boys.⁹² They were to have their own beds if possible; certainly they were no longer to sleep with their parents or brothers. In a number of ways, they learned the distrust of the body which was so much a feature of the seventeenth century.

Pudeur went far beyond physical modesty. It represented the feminine identity as it was perceived in the seventeenth century, in all its weakness and limitation. Thus Fénelon could write of the *pudeur* which females should feel in the face of knowledge,⁹³ and Madame de Maintenon could tell her students: "Il est de la modestie d'une fille ou d'une

85. The practice was later adopted, for this reason, by the Christian Brothers.

86. *Vraies Constitutions*, quoted in M. Maggiolo, *op. cit.*, pp. 222-23.

87. This understanding of *civilité*, as a study of the behaviour pertaining to one's station in life, is vividly put forth in a talk on the subject given by Mme de Maintenon to the *classe verte* of Saint-Cyr, in July, 1716. "Puisque Dieu vous a fait naître demoiselles, prenez-en les manières aussi bien que les sentiments" (E. Faguet, p. 104).

88. See his letter to the nuns of Saint-Nicolas, 9/xi/1606. (P. Fourier, *Correspondance*, vol. I, p. 11)

89. For this false delicacy the nuns of Saint-Cyr were roundly scolded by Madame de Maintenon (Entretien, 1705. E. Faguet, *op. cit.*, p. 153-54).

90. Règlement pour les petites Ecoles Chrétiennes, f. 4.

91. N. Barré, *Règlements manuscrits*, p. 18.

92. Règlement pour les petites écoles chrétiennes, f. 9.

93. See above, n 26.

femme de paraître ignorer bien des choses, quand même elle les saurait."⁹⁴ To seek learning for its own sake was unfeminine, and dangerous.

*Dévo*t women of the seventeenth century lived within this definition of their nature. Their own writings are full of self-deprecation, and allusions to their natural weakness. Their pedagogy remained humble and unassuming, an acknowledgement of the limitations of their sex. This was the price which they were required to pay, for the very real advances which they had been able to make in feminine education.

In the small repertoire of "profane" subjects taught in girls' schools, reading was by far the most important. There was no *petite école* that did not claim to teach its pupils how to read. This was because the profanity of the subject was more apparent than real. In fact, reading was "an instrument of salvation",⁹⁵ since it allowed access to the word of God; therefore it was the duty of Christian educators to make it available to all.

It was the pedagogy of reading, more than anything else, that demanded a new organization of the classroom. The first religious schoolmistresses still gave their reading instruction individually. But the numbers of children to be taught made a more orderly system imperative. The teacher had to be able to lead all her children together — hence the importance of the division of classes into smaller groups of equal ability. The problem of what to read came next. Credit for the invention of the blackboard is generally given to Pierre Fourier, who in his constitutions prescribed for each class "une ardoise, ou planche, ou tableau, attaché en un lieu éminente de l'eschole, en sorte que toutes celles qui y apprennent le puissent aisément voir."⁹⁶ This blackboard, and other variations such as large printed cards, were particularly useful for the beginners:

Pour faire la leçon a celles de la troisieme classe la maistresse leur monstrera une grande feuille ou seront imprimées toutes les lettres en gros caractères et leur en nommera trois ou quatre a la fois leur en faisant la difference, par exemple qu'une m a trois jambes, qu'une n n'en que deux, que l'u est fait comme l'n excepté que l'u est ouverte par en hault et que l'n est ouverte par en bas, et ainsi les autres.⁹⁷

The other learning tool which made simultaneous instruction possible was the cheap book. By mid-century at least, children were expected to have a standard book purchased for them by their parents or, if they were poor, provided by the school.

The beginners' reading was in Latin, the language of the Church. They first learned single letters, then syllables, which the mistress indicated with a pointer.⁹⁸ The younger children were then left in the care of the second mistress, or the *dizainières*, to practice their reading. The intermediate and senior classes were taught to read in French:

Les maîtresses enseigneront les escholières à lire proprement en langue vulgaire et en latin et à bien prononcer les mots; elles dresseront celles de la 1^e et de la 2^e classe à s'arrester un peu aux virgules et un peu davantage au bout des périodes.⁹⁹

In order to expand their reading skills, it was the custom to ask the older students to bring in family papers: marriage contracts, inventories, land titles, account books. "Exiger de

94. E. Faguet, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

95. F. Furet and J. Ozouf, *op. cit.* vol. I, p. 90.

96. *Vrayes Constitutions* Part III, art. XIV, 3.

97. N. Barré, *Reglements manuscrits pour les écoles*, p. 3.

98. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

99. *Vrayes Constitutions*, quoted in M. Maggiolo, *op. cit.*, p. 223; also N. Barré, *Reglements manuscrits*, p. 6.

l'élève qu'elle prononce bien et avec un bon accent ce français passé de mode; ne pas souffrir que les lettres soient devinées, ni la leçon dite par habitude et par cœur."¹⁰⁰

Directions such as these seem to imply that for many girls, in many schools, proficiency in reading was perfectly attainable. Whether, in the future, they read the spiritual works for which they had been instructed or the harmful books which Fénelon so strongly deplored,¹⁰¹ they nevertheless joined the growing population of readers which was one of the features of the seventeenth century. The vast majority of the students of the *petites écoles*, however, did not reach the higher classes. They stayed at school for two or three years at the most, leaving when they had made their first communion, somewhere between the ages of ten and twelve.¹⁰² They then moved back into a world which was still largely illiterate, and where such reading skills as they had learned might be of little use.

It is difficult to judge, then, how effective the reading classes of the *maîtresses charitables* were for the women of their time. A historian of literacy has pointed out that for the common people the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were a period of transition between an oral and a written culture.¹⁰³ The only indicators we have of this rising level of literacy are signatures in the marriage registers. Women's signatures, while growing steadily in numbers, always remained significantly fewer than men's. Of the many women who learned how to read, but not to write, no satisfactory estimate can be made.

If reading was the instrument of salvation, writing was a useful skill, a saleable commodity.¹⁰⁴ The two disciplines had not yet undergone the bonding that would one day make them two parts of the same learning process. In other words, they were treated separately. This dissociation is seen as "an essential phase in the passage of civilization from the oral to the written culture."¹⁰⁵

Most *petites écoles*, including many that catered to the poor, wrote into their syllabus the phrase "enseigner à lire et à écrire". At best, they must only have meant that writing would be made available to exceptional students. In existing pedagogical tradition, a student could progress to writing only after mastering the skill of reading.¹⁰⁶ The *abécédaires* of the lowest classes were never allowed to touch pens or paper.

Writing required additional tools and facilities. The students' parents were normally required to supply the tools: "un petit pupitre sans serrure, ... un canif, du papier, un encrier et de la poudre."¹⁰⁷ Sometimes writing students were expected to pay an extra fee. The

100. J. Morey, *op. cit.*, p. 79. It was stipulated, however, that these notarial documents "ne soient point des choses vicieuses... par exemple, quand ce sont des enquêtes et examinations de témoins, où l'on parle d'injures ou autres choses malséantes." The practice of bringing such documents into school continued in Franche-Comté, according to Morey, until after the Revolution.

101. "Faute d'aliment solide... elles se passionent pour des romans, pour des comédies, pour des récits d'aventures chimériques, où l'amour profane est mêlé" (Fénelon, *op. cit.*, p. 11).

102. First communion was a recognized rite of passage in Catholic society. Children who had made it were treated as adults before the law. (F. Lebrun, *La vie conjugale sous l'Ancien Régime* [Paris: Armand Colin, 1975], p. 138). It was generally considered the appropriate time for working children to leave school. (A. Babeau, *Les artisans et les domestiques d'autrefois* [Paris, 1886], p. 158).

103. Jean Meyer, "Essai sur l'instruction populaire en Bretagne du XVI^e au XIX^e siècle", *Actes du Congrès national des sociétés savantes I* (Reims, 1970), p. 343.

104. F. Furet and J. Ozouf, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 90-91.

105. Jean Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 333. (My translation).

106. E.g. *Sœurs du Saint-Enfant-Jésus*, Reims, Règlement pour les petites Ecoles Chrétiennes, p. 111: "On ne les mettra point à l'écriture, qu'au paravant elles ne sachent lire dans la français et la Civilité."

107. N. Barré, *Règlements manuscrits*, p. 27.

school had to supply tables, which were over and above the benches on which the students otherwise sat. The handling of writing materials required considerable skill. Students had to learn to sharpen their quill pens "à chaque exemple ou coppie qu'ils auront à faire",¹⁰⁸ to keep their paper clean and neat, to powder their new work with sand or sawdust, to prevent smudging. The ink, which was often made by the teacher, had to be kept from drying out, in ink wells of horn or lead.

In ideal circumstances, the teaching of writing was work for an expert. The school rule of the Ursulines called for one or two writing mistresses to teach the day school.¹⁰⁹ The writing mistress was required, first, to show her students how to hold their pen, then to form letters, then liaisons, then whole lines:

Et qu'elle leur apprenne à être propres, à ne point barbouiller leurs papiers d'encre, ny tacher leurs habits.... Sur tout qu'elle prenne garde de les faire tenir droites en écrivant, et fasse peu écrire de suite celles dont la taille se gâte.¹¹⁰

In the schools of the Canonesses, other members of the community assisted by writing onto the students' papers the examples which they would be expected to copy the next day.¹¹¹ But in the many charity schools where ideal circumstances seldom prevailed, other arrangements had to be made. The mistresses were often forced to leave the students to write their lines from examples, then correct their work afterwards.¹¹² Sometimes the more advanced students were called upon to correct the beginners.¹¹³

Once the students had mastered the many techniques of writing, they were introduced to *orthographe*, or spelling, in French: a subject which, as Pierre Fourier warned them, was full of discrepancies.¹¹⁴ After practice in dictation, from some "bon auteur... pas trop éloigné de la forme la plus commune", they were tested by a practical application of their skill:

On leur donnera quelquefois pour orthographe des formes de quittance, de recépissé des marchandises vendues ou ouvrages faits, ou pour argent prêté et pour des choses qui se rencontrent tous les jours et ont besoin de s'écrire pour plus grande assurance.¹¹⁵

Finally, the best students were encouraged to compose their own small works.

It can be seen from all this that writing was a laborious skill, difficult and time-consuming to teach, and probably not worth the effort unless some economic benefit awaited the student. As Jean Meyer has pointed out, writing as a universal discipline had to await the development of technology, in the form of slates, pencils and steel pens.¹¹⁶ The huge free classes of sixty, even eighty students, crowded along their benches, could not have been accommodated by their teachers, even if it had been considered necessary. The dif-

108. *L'Escole paroissiale.*, p. 258.

109. *Reglemens des Ursulines* Chap. VIII, p. 144.

110. *Ibid.*, Chap. VI, p. 75 ff.

111. *Vrayes Constitutions*, Part III, art. 40.

112. N. Barré, *Reglemens manuscrits*, p. 4. These examples were resumably printed in their books, or on cards.

113. *Reglement pour les petites Ecoles Chretiennes*, p. 108.

114. *Vrayes Constitutions*, quoted in M. Maggiolo, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

115. *Ibid.*, pp. 225-26.

116. J. Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 339. It should be noted that metal pen nibs were already in use in the *petites écoles* of Port-Royal (F. Delforge, *Les petites écoles de Port-Royal, 1637-1660* [Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1985]). Their use, however, did not become general until much later.

faculties were simply too great; furthermore, the needs were small. Writing remained a privileged subject, available only for those who required it in their calling.

It is remarkable that it was offered at all to girls. There was a bundle of overlapping prejudices against women who could write. For the upper classes, writing, insofar as it was a trade, still carried a taint of servility. "Ecrire, c'est perdre la moitié de sa noblesse," wrote Mlle de Scudéry.¹¹⁷ Among the writing professionals, the *maîtres écrivains*, there was no anxiety to see women invading their profession. "Cet art étoit attaché au sexe masculin."¹¹⁸ Some moralists saw it as a dangerous skill, which would allow women to carry on underhanded liaisons. But the chief argument against writing seems to have been that it undermined the existing order. The later seventeenth and the eighteenth century saw a strong resurgence of the opinion that education should be tailored to the station in life of the students. "On excluerait de l'écriture ceux que la Providence a fait naître d'une condition à labourer la terre."¹¹⁹ What applied to the lower classes applied also to women: they should not exceed the limits of their condition. A century later, Restif de la Bretonne stated the case succinctly:

Il faudrait que l'écriture et même la lecture fussent interdites à toutes les femmes. Ce serait le moyen de resserrer leurs idées et de les circonscrire dans les soins utiles du ménage, de leur inspirer du respect pour le premier sexe qui serait instruit de ces mêmes choses avec d'autant plus de soin que le deuxième sexe serait négligé.¹²⁰

It has been suggested that the Church of old regime France later became the accomplice in "une vaste demi-alphabétisation" of women. There are cases of synodal regulations and episcopal ordinances specifically forbidding girls' schools to teach writing.¹²¹ This, however, was a development for the future. Among the feminine educators of the Catholic Reformation period, and their masculine mentors, very few showed any reluctance in principle to teaching girls to write. This may have been a sign of their own confidence in schooling, as the means of saving and regenerating the world. As the century progressed, their view lost ground; their optimism ran counter to the opinion that was to prevail under the Enlightenment. But it prefigured the faith of the Revolution, and indeed of modern liberalism, in the power of education to create and sustain good citizens.¹²²

As for arithmetic, usually only the senior students, who had mastered the skills of reading in Latin and in English, were given training in this subject. In most schools, its small share in the school curriculum (approximately two half-hours per week) indicates its minor importance in feminine education. The programme remained severely practical:

[La maîtresse] leur fera supputer à quoy reviendroient les choses qu'elles auront achetées, par exemple, 15 aunes de passément à trente cinq sols l'aune, puis le leur en fera faire une somme totale, et la payer en diverses sortes de monnoye.¹²³

117. Quoted in C. Dulong, *La vie quotidienne des femmes au grand siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1984), p. 12.

118. C. Robillard de Beaurepaire, *Recherches sur l'instruction publique dans le diocèse de Rouen avant 1789* (Evreux, 1872), vol. II, p. 276.

119. *Mémoire* of 1667, quoted in F. de Dainville, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

120. Quoted in F. Furet and J. Ozouf, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 356.

121. *Ibid.*, p. 356-57, and p. 85.

122. This is the argument of Furet and Ozouf. See their "Conclusion", *op. cit.*, vol. I, in which they compare the ideology of the Counter-Reformation Church to that of the Revolution.

123. *Reglemens des Ursulines*, Chap. VIII, art. 85.

Here, obviously, was training for home management. However, many young women destined to work in their family businesses, must have profited from these classes. Training in home management was also training for the shop.

Next to reading, the most important subject in the "profane" syllabus was handwork. If the rules are to be believed, there was not a girl, from the richest to the poorest, who did not learn at school to work at "quelque ouvrage conforme à son estat pour eviter l'oisiveté pernicieuse."¹²⁴ Handwork was part of the essence of femininity. The distaff was its symbol. "La femme forte file," wrote Fénelon, "se renferme dans son ménage, se tait, croit, et obéit."¹²⁵

Training in handwork was a valuable part of seventeenth century female education. Sewing was a skill as writing was a skill. In terms of its application to the everyday life of women, it was far the more useful of the two, and no educator of the time would have dreamed of eliminating it. But it was also indicative of the restrictions which society placed upon women. "La science des femmes, comme celle des hommes, doit se borner à s'instruire par rapport à leurs fonctions," wrote Fénelon.¹²⁶ And their functions were strictly domestic. The horizons of female education were limited by a social diktat which allowed no scope for radical change.

Handwork varied from one institute to the next, with the purpose of the school and the character of its clientèle. Indeed, one can almost guess at the social level of the school from the handwork that it taught. The better schools were anxious not to take their students' work to a professional level. "On se contentera d'enseigner des ouvrages communs et tout ensemble aisez et biensensans et utiles aux pauvres et aux riches. On n'y monstera point d'autres ouvrages rares et subtils et de gros appareil," wrote Fourier.¹²⁷ Highly skilled work was inappropriate for modest young women of good family. Such expertise was left to working women, or to religious communities in financial need.

Where the size of the community allowed, "ouvrages" were taught by a specialist, sometimes in conjunction with arithmetic and *orthographe*, which required individual attention. Thus the girls who were not working on their books were able to work on their sewing. Ideally, a special room was reserved for the work. The convent of Dôle built such a classroom, well-lit and spacious.¹²⁸ For the mistresses in the *petites écoles*, working with their crowds of little girls, handwork seems to have been reserved for spare time when other work was done. "Elles travailleront evitant l'oisiveté...."¹²⁹ The brevity of the rules on this subject seems to suggest that handwork was not a priority in these *petites écoles*: an indication both of the teachers' limitations and of somewhat different expectations on the part of the parents.

But handwork reigned supreme in the many pauper schools and workshops of France. Here reading was at best a minor concern; and it was often forgotten altogether. The apprentices worked in silence, sewing, knitting stockings, and lacemaking, to a background of spiritual instructions and improving readings, with occasional group singing, "afin de

124. Arch. Providence de Rouen, "De l'esprit de la communauté des Filles de Sainte-Geneviève", chap. 2, art. 1.

125. Fénelon, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

126. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

127. *Vrayes Constitutions* Part III, art. 48.

128. J. Morey, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 378.

129. N. Barré, *Reglements manuscrits*, p. 7.

délasser et récréer leur esprit." In these austere institutions, the religious educators succeeded finally in meeting the expectations of the ruling elite, by creating a skilled and disciplined workforce, with no pretensions to book learning.

IV

How, in the end, should we assess the seventeenth century's efforts to educate its girls? In size and scope they were impressive. No overall estimate has yet been made of the number of women who had found their way into schoolteaching by the end of the century, though the statistics of one congregation alone — between ten and twelve thousand Ursulines in three hundred and fifty communities¹³⁰ — can serve as an indication. What is known for certain is that by then there was hardly a town, no matter how small, without at least one girls' school. In 1700, girls in cities and towns across the country were expected to go to school, whereas in 1600 very few parents had even dreamed of the idea. What had been a luxury of doubtful value had now become a social necessity.

What was the quality of their schooling? To Fénelon, with his upper-class world view, it was vapid, frivolous, and often excessively pious. For modern observers, with their upwardly-mobile world view, it was limiting, oppressive, and certainly excessively pious. But in fact, at its best, it was what education still is: a training for the real world that the children were preparing to enter.

The religious schoolmistresses of the seventeenth century were the product of their times. They personified the *mentalité* of the Catholic Reformation: its emphasis on order and obedience, its spirituality — and its activism. Within their limited sphere they participated in the social change that was already under way. Though the intellectual content of their teaching remained slight, they contributed towards the rationalization of the classroom which was essential to the development of modern teaching techniques. They also assisted in the modernization of the attitudes which adults held towards children. Finally, they joined with other religious elites both Catholic and Protestant, in promoting schooling as the means of regenerating society. For these reasons they left their own worthwhile mark on modern pedagogy.

130. M.-C. Gueudré, *op. cit.* vol. II, p. 187.