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*Joan of Arc:
The Evolving Image of Heroic and Female Agency*

ABSTRACT: *This essay examines how the image of Joan of Arc (a.k.a. the Maid of Orléans) has evolved – alongside the progression of societal views on women in general – since her execution in 1431. By means of a chronological analysis of literary and scholarly works pertaining to Joan from the early modern period to the present, the author demonstrates that, as society’s gender norms and standards change, so too does the image of historical figures like the Maid of Orléans, including the respective notions of agency and heroism.*

KEYWORDS: *medieval history; Hundred Years’ War; France; England; Joan of Arc; Charles VII of France; literary works; historiography; agency; heroism*

Introduction

Joan of Arc (c. 1412–1431) would be remembered as a heroine, a witch, and ultimately a saint. Throughout her tragically short lifetime and the centuries following her death, this brazen young woman’s courage could often only be explained as an act of God or the work of the devil. In fact, the many bold actions that earned her these two polarizing characterizations remain the subject of public and scholarly fascination up until the present day.

By the time Joan of Arc was born in or around 1412, France had been engaged in the Hundred Years’ War with England for well over seven decades, and England continued to be a very real threat to the French monarchy.¹ When Joan was sixteen years old, she felt compelled by the voices she heard in her head to cut her hair short, dress in men’s clothing, and journey to Chinon to seek out Charles VII (b. 1403; r. 1422–1461), the Dauphin (i.e., the heir apparent) of France, to tell him about her God-given mission.² Charles sent her to be interrogated and to have her purity verified.³ After passing the tests put before her, which seemingly provided sufficient proof that she had been sent by God, Joan was granted troops and sent to Orléans, which was, at that time, under siege by the English (October 12, 1428–May 8, 1429). Regaining control over Orléans was integral to Joan’s mission of manifesting Charles’s claim to the crown of France. At Orléans, Joan, a young girl with no military experience, led her men to victory. Of the thirteen battles in which Joan of Arc participated, the French triumphed in nine. In mid-

¹ For the struggle for power between France and England, see Daniel Rankin and Claire Quintal, eds./trans., *The First Biography of Joan of Arc, with the Chronicle Record of a Contemporary Account* (before 1515; Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1964), 14.

² For an explanation of Charles VII’s royal status, see Régine Pernoud and Marie-Véronique Clin, *Joan of Arc: Her Story*, trans. Jeremy duQuesnay Adams, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 167–168.

³ Charles T. Wood, “Joan of Arc’s Mission and the Lost Record of Her Interrogation at Poitiers,” in *Fresh Verdicts on Joan of Arc*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and Charles T. Wood (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996; Routledge, 2021), 20. In this essay, citations from this work refer to the Routledge edition.

July 1429, Charles was crowned king of France, just as the Maid's inner voices had told her he would. Joan subsequently continued her mission to liberate France from the English. When attempting to win the French capital of Paris back from the Burgundians (who were, at that time, allied with the English) and leading her troops to assist in the defense of the town of Compiègne, Joan was captured by the enemy.⁴ The Burgundians sold her to the English, who then put her on trial. She was convicted of heresy, idolatry, and dressing in men's clothing. After a year of imprisonment, she was burned at the stake in Rouen as a relapsed heretic. Twenty-five years after this execution, a nullification trial was held (1455/1456), in which the original convictions were reversed.⁵ Almost five centuries later, in 1920, Joan was canonized as a saint of the Roman Catholic Church by Pope Benedict XV.

This essay focuses on Joan of Arc's evolving image as an icon of feminine courage. One of history's most prevalent and enduring heroines, Joan of Arc has been subjected to the changing societal standards placed upon women. This essay seeks to show that, as gender norms and standards evolve, so do the images of historical characters in both literary and scholarly works. This is especially true when analyzing historical characters like Joan of Arc, who defied the gender norms of their time.

A number of primary sources highlight the contrasting views of Joan of Arc and the bold actions she took in the last few years of her life. The poem *Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc*, written by one of Joan's contemporaries, the poet Christine de Pisan (1364–1431), provides the French perspective of Joan as a prophet of God.⁶ It also serves as an early example of feminist literature, comparing male biblical heroes to the Maid, who, according to Christine, surpassed them all.⁷ Toward the beginning of the sixteenth century, an anonymous author wrote *The First Biography of Joan of Arc*, including copies of legal documents and letters sent between members of the clergy and aristocracy regarding Joan's capture.⁸ An English translation of the original Latin court documents (first edited by Jules Quicherat in the mid-nineteenth century), was published in 1902 by T. Douglas Murphy as *Jeanne d'Arc, Maid of Orléans*.⁹ The documents continued in these latter two sources provide a somewhat unvarnished view of Joan of Arc and her story. Meanwhile,

⁴ Gail Orgelfinger, *Joan of Arc in the English Imagination, 1429–1829* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), 19, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁵ Jane Marie Pinzino, "Speaking of Angels: A Fifteenth-Century Bishop in Defense of Joan of Arc's Mystical Voices," in *Fresh Verdicts on Joan of Arc*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and Charles T. Wood (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996; Routledge, 2021), 161.

⁶ Christine de Pisan, *Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc*, ed. Angus J. Kennedy and Kenneth Varty (1429; Oxford: Society for the Study of Mediaeval Languages and Literature, 1977).

⁷ Pisan, *Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc*, 15.

⁸ Rankin and Quintal, *First Biography*.

⁹ T. Douglas Murray, ed., *Jeanne d'Arc, Maid of Orléans, Deliverer of France: Being the Story of Her Life, Her Achievements, and Her Death, as Attested on Oath and Set Forth in Original Documents* (New York: McClure, 1902).

literary and scholarly works have often been biased against the Maid, either minimizing or outright mocking her image after her death.

I. Literary Perspectives

Toward the end of the sixteenth century, the famous playwright William Shakespeare (1564–1616) wrote *Henry VI*, a trilogy of plays centered around the Wars of the Roses.¹⁰ *Henry VI, Part I* offers an insight into the English view of Joan of Arc during Shakespeare's time. Upon learning that the combined forces of Joan of Arc and Charles the Dauphin have arrived to end the English blockade, the character of Lord Talbot vows to stop her, proclaiming, "Pucelle or Puzzel, dolphin or dogfish / Your hearts I'll stamp out with my horse's heels."¹¹ This was a slight directed against Joan of Arc, who referred to herself as Jehanne la Pucelle ("Joan the Maid"). In Elizabethan times, the term "Puzzel" could be used to denote a whore.¹² Of course, given that Shakespeare himself hailed from England, "Puzzel" could be perceived as an insult to the French people as a whole, but it certainly would have been recognized as a derogatory term directed specifically against a woman. It would have been especially offensive to Joan of Arc, who took her vow of chastity very seriously, viewing it as a testament to her personal dedication to her mission from God. Granted, Shakespeare's play was written for entertainment purposes, but literary works do communicate the prevailing societal standards for men and women. In this case, Joan, as a woman, was mocked for her celibacy.

Thomas Fuller (1608–1661), an English churchman and historian, wrote about Joan of Arc in his 1642 work *The Holy State and the Profane State*.¹³ Fuller outright dismisses the exemplary qualities that made the Maid a heroine, stating that the French made "her [Joan of Arc] pretend that she had a revelation from Heaven to be the leader of an army."¹⁴ The author alludes to Joan and her divine mission as part of a grand conspiracy on the part of the French. However, he does not outright accuse any other conspirators of what he refers to as "complotting."¹⁵ Fuller only seems to be comfortable with naming Joan as engaged in the plot. Regardless of whether there was any kind of French scheme to rally the nation against the English, Fuller completely dismisses Joan's agency. He believes Joan of Arc's only contribution to turning the tide of the Hundred Years' War was "being a

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part I*, in *The Tudor Shakespeare*, ed. William Allan Neilson and Ashley Horace Thorndike, vol. 10, *The First Part of Henry the Sixth*, ed. Louise Pound (1591; New York: Macmillan, 1911).

¹¹ Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part I*, 26.

¹² For more context on the term "Puzzel," see James A. Freeman, "Joan of Arc: Soldier, Saint, Symbol—of What?" *Journal of Popular Culture* 41, no. 4 (2008): 601.

¹³ Thomas Fuller, *The Holy State, and the Profane State*, ed. James Nichols (1642; London: Thomas Tegg, 1841).

¹⁴ Fuller, *Holy State*, 349.

¹⁵ Fuller, *Holy State*, 349.

handsome, witty, and bold maid (about twentie [sic] years of age)."¹⁶ Fuller later shares what he believes would have been a suitable punishment for Joan after she had been captured and tried, asserting, "[I]et them make her the laundress to the English, who was the Leader to the French army," a statement that underscores his misogynistic view of the Maid.¹⁷

It may seem that the negative takes on Joan of Arc stem from the ongoing rivalry between the French and the English, but Joan did have French detractors as well. For example, Voltaire (1694–1778) wrote about Joan of Arc in an unfavorable satirical poem called *La Pucelle d'Orléans* (first published 1752).¹⁸ As it was a successful piece of literature, it does reflect Joan's image (or at least one of her images) in eighteenth-century France.¹⁹ *La Pucelle d'Orléans* depicts Joan of Arc not so much as a heroine, but as a woman who constantly needs to have her virginity guarded. In his version of the story, Voltaire replaces Joan's saints (i.e., her inner voices) with St. Denis (i.e., the patron saint of France and Paris), whose role seems to be to protect her from being "seduced" by several characters, including a golden ass. Voltaire mocks Joan of Arc and her status as a virgin, making the latter one of the main themes of *La Pucelle d'Orléans*. This focus on Joan's chastity communicates that eighteenth-century society put a great deal of value on women's purity, but did not have similarly high standards for men.

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Joan of Arc was increasingly portrayed as a temporal heroine. One of the first examples of this is a 1801 play by the German author Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), *Die Jungfrau von Orléans*, subsequently published in English as *The Maid of Orléans: A Romantic Tragedy*.²⁰ Schiller depicts the Maid as a martyr, who falls in love with her enemy, Lionel, the Duke of Clarence, and later dies on the battlefield. In the play, when Joan is presented with the opportunity to slay Lionel, she does not and states, "What have I done? Woe's me! I have broke[n] my vow."²¹ In Schiller's play, Joan does die valiantly as a heroine, but she is also romanticized due to her love interest, whom she puts before her holy mission.

Scottish historian, poet, and novelist Walter Scott (1771–1832) offered a brief take on the Maid of Orléans in his book *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*,²² which was published in 1830. Scott highlights the contrasting views on Joan's perceived holiness, particularly the views of the French versus those of the English

¹⁶ Fuller, *Holy State*, 349.

¹⁷ Fuller, *Holy State*, 352.

¹⁸ Voltaire, *La Pucelle, the Maid of Orléans: An Heroic-Comical Poem in Twenty-One Cantos*, trans. W. H. Ireland (1752; London: Printed for the Lutetian Society, 1899).

¹⁹ For more detail on the success of Voltaire's poem, see Pernoud and Clin, *Joan of Arc*, 238.

²⁰ Friedrich Schiller, *The Maid of Orléans: A Romantic Tragedy*, in *The Maid of Orléans, and Other Poems*, trans. and ed. William Peter (1801; Cambridge: John Owen, 1843).

²¹ Schiller, *Maid of Orléans*, 137.

²² Walter Scott, *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (New York: J & J Harper, 1830).

(who portrayed her as a sorceress). His own perspective is made very clear when he states that “the wise on both sides [English or French] considered her as neither the one nor the other, but [as] a tool used by the celebrated Dunois, to play the part which he assigned her.”²³ Thus, according to Scott, Joan was a mere pawn used by the French military leader Jean of Orléans, count of Dunois.²⁴ Scott denies Joan’s personal agency, viewing her simply as a tool to be used by the French aristocracy to further their own interests and regain power from the English. Scott describes Joan of Arc as “innocent,” “high-minded,” and an “amiable enthusiast,” believing her to possess high morals.²⁵ He attributes the Maid’s fate not to witchcraft, but, rather, to the long-held hostility between the French and English, describing it as “a cruel instance of wicked policy.”²⁶

II. Scholarly Perspectives

One of the earliest modern scholarly works on the Maid of Orléans is a biography, titled *The Life of Joan of Arc*, authored by the French journalist, poet, and novelist Anatole France (1844–1924) and published in 1908.²⁷ It is thoroughly researched and uses a plethora of sources, including original documents and other works written on Joan of Arc. Both in the introduction and in the conclusion, France presents his own perspective on Joan of Arc: he believes that Joan did indeed have visions and that she did hear voices, but he also points out that she did, at times, defy the instructions of these voices.²⁸ In addition, France compares the Maid of Orléans to other “prophets” of her time – all male – who also claimed to have holy missions to share with their respective kings. According to France, these prophets ultimately failed in their efforts,²⁹ and “while they failed miserably, she [i.e., Joan] grew in strength and flowered in legend.”³⁰ France does recognize that Joan was guided by her visions, but that she alone chose when to follow them, thus granting her the agency that so many writers and influential voices had denied her in the past. He concludes his book by discussing other representations of Joan and surmises that everyone is liable to view Joan according to their own frame of mind.³¹ This supposition certainly holds true of most past interpretations: some view Joan as a heroine, others view her as a girl and subject her to the societal

²³ Scott, *Letters*, 172.

²⁴ For information on Dunois, see Orgelfinger, *Joan of Arc*, 70.

²⁵ Scott, *Letters*, 173.

²⁶ Scott, *Letters*, 173.

²⁷ Anatole France, *The Life of Joan of Arc*, trans. Winifred Stephens (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1908).

²⁸ France, *Life of Joan of Arc*, xxxvi.

²⁹ France, *Life of Joan of Arc*, xxxvi.

³⁰ France, *Life of Joan of Arc*, xxxvi.

³¹ France, *Life of Joan of Arc*, 476.

scrutiny that has surrounded women for most of history and that includes questioning her control over her own free will and her sexual purity.

Perhaps “the” modern authority on Joan of Arc is a work by the late French medievalist Régine Pernoud (1909–1998) and her colleague Marie-Véronique Clin (b. 1954), a museum curator.³² Pernoud’s and Clin’s book *Joan of Arc: Her Story*, originally published in French in 1986, was translated and revised in 1999 by the American medievalist Jeremy duQuesnay Adams (1933–2016) and edited by Bonnie Wheeler, another American medievalist.³³ In their work, Pernoud and Clin present Joan of Arc and her story in three parts: the first part examines the events from when Joan sets out on her mission; the second part provides information on all known individuals who interacted with Joan; and the final part discusses the continuing debate on Joan’s image, the many rumors surrounding the Maid, and the literary portrayals by authors such as Shakespeare, Voltaire, Schiller, and others. The image of Joan of Arc that Pernoud and Clin strive to convey is very clearly a factual, primary-source-based, and comprehensive one, and they emphasize that “[h]istorians have not always made this fact clear: Prototype of the glorious military heroine, Joan is also the prototype of the political prisoner, of the hostage, and of the victim of oppression.”³⁴

Just one year after the English-language release of Pernoud’s and Clin’s work, the literature scholar Deborah A. Fraioli (b. 1942) published another new monograph, titled *Joan of Arc: The Early Debate*.³⁵ Fraioli discusses how texts from Joan’s own time reflect the respective views of the French and the English. She pays very close attention to “relationships” in Joan’s story, both between individuals and between documents. Her primary focus is what she refers to as “the early debate,” namely, whether Joan was indeed sent by God on her holy mission.³⁶ Based on the documents, Fraioli argues, two perspectives arise: either people were fully supportive of Joan and her divine mission or they did not believe that a woman who heard voices and who dressed in men’s clothing could possibly be doing God’s will. When put on trial by the English, Joan defended her cross-dressing as ordered by God and initially denied hearing voices; however, she eventually recanted and admitted to hearing them. As for the Maid’s agency, Fraioli quotes Joan herself (from the court documents): “She said she came from God and had no business here, in this trial, and asked to be sent back to God from Whom she came.”³⁷ Regardless of the theological debate on whether she was sent by God, Joan stood by her actions.

³² The majority of works cited in this essay list Pernoud and Clin, *Joan of Arc*, as a source.

³³ Pernoud and Clin, *Joan of Arc*.

³⁴ Pernoud and Clin, *Joan of Arc*, xiii.

³⁵ Deborah A. Fraioli, *Joan of Arc: The Early Debate* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2000).

³⁶ Fraioli, *Early Debate*, 193.

³⁷ Fraioli, *Early Debate*, 198.

In 2019, the American medievalist Gail Orgelfinger published *Joan of Arc in the English Imagination*,³⁸ thus offering an analysis of the Maid's image from the perspective of her most prominent historical adversaries and their descendants, and considering a wide range of genres and contexts.³⁹ According to Orgelfinger, there were, of course, English authors who wrote negatively about the Maid, but there were also those who celebrated her as a *virago*.⁴⁰ *Viragos* (or *viragoes*) were women warriors who were seen as mystical, a characterization that seems to have made past societies more comfortable with women's ability to meaningfully participate in a male-dominated act such as war.⁴¹ Regardless of whether such *viragos*, including Joan, were viewed favorably (or not), they were considered to be just as capable as male warriors—in fact, many of them outperformed their male counterparts—but they were held to stricter standards of conduct due to their gender. Chastity (or even virginity) played a major role in whether (or not) these *viragos* were perceived as honorable.⁴² Thus, *viragos* could be celebrated as mystical and pure, but not as real women.

In *Fresh Verdicts on Joan of Arc*, a collection published in 2021, the aforementioned Bonnie Wheeler and Charles T. Wood (1933–2004) have assembled essays on the Maid of Orléans by a number of scholars, covering various aspects of her life, trial, and legacy.⁴³ These essays delve deeply into the story and apply methodologies from a wide range of disciplines. In one of the essays, "A Woman as Leader of Men: Joan of Arc's Military Career,"⁴⁴ the American military historian Kelly DeVries (b. 1956) shows that Joan's troops were entirely loyal to her (there were allied soldiers who paid her no mind, an issue she duly confronted): "They [i.e., her troops] seemed to draw nearer to her when fighting by her side, and after her death, they remembered her military activities with a legend-building fealty."⁴⁵ Joan of Arc was a heroine in the eyes of the men she commanded. She may not have initially had the respect of all soldiers, but, as DeVries demonstrates, she earned their loyalty, and her men would testify to her ability as a military leader even after her death. DeVries also addresses what he believes to be Joan's most impressive "miracle," namely, that her fellow soldiers

³⁸ Orgelfinger, *Joan of Arc*.

³⁹ Orgelfinger, *Joan of Arc*, 4.

⁴⁰ Orgelfinger, *Joan of Arc*, 78.

⁴¹ Orgelfinger, *Joan of Arc*, 45.

⁴² Orgelfinger, *Joan of Arc*, 78.

⁴³ *Fresh Verdicts on Joan of Arc*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and Charles T. Wood (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996; Routledge, 2021).

⁴⁴ Kelly DeVries, "A Woman as Leader of Men: Joan of Arc's Military Career," in *Fresh Verdicts on Joan of Arc*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and Charles T. Wood (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996; Routledge, 2021), 3–18.

⁴⁵ DeVries, "Woman as Leader," 12.

testified to having no feelings or arousal toward her.⁴⁶ This, it seems, allowed them to look at her not (just) as a woman, but as the heroine she proved herself to be.

Conclusion

Joan of Arc's incredible story was plagued by misogyny from the moment she chose to embark on her holy mission. Though she did have the support of France, she was condemned to death by the English and—beyond death—mocked in literary and scholarly works for the next few centuries. Though she did receive a rehabilitation trial twenty-five years after her execution, her image continued to be subjected to the oppression of late medieval, early modern, and even modern society's patriarchal systems. Before the twentieth century, Joan's image was frequently reduced to a holy virgin or a heretic or a powerless pawn of the French. As women attained more autonomy over the course of the twentieth century, Joan's image was transformed as well. Contemporary scholars continue to utilize the surviving documentary record to assess and retell Joan's story, and they create new images of the Maid by applying different methodologies. The ultimate conclusion about Joan and the different aspects of her story may be unclear or differ from scholar to scholar, but it is evident that Joan was a valiant female heroine, and her achievements are no longer held back by her gender.

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⁴⁶ DeVries, "Woman as Leader," 12.