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The Maiden of France: A Brief Overview of Joan of Arc and the Siege of Orléans

Cam Rea

France, embroiled in a war with England in a struggle over the French throne during the Hundred Years' War, would find a savior who in turn was a heretic to the English. This sinner and saint was a woman by the name of Joan of Arc. While most people know that the English burned her at the stake at Vieux Marché in Rouen, most have forgotten her military adventures against the English.

The Peasant Girl

In 1412, Joan of Arc (or Jeanne d'Arc) was born in the village of Domremy located in the Duchy of Bar, France. She was the daughter of poor farmers by the names of Jacques d' Arc and his wife Isabelle. Like the upbringing on any farm, Joan learned primarily agricultural skills. She was said to have been a hardworking and religious child.

Joan's fame came when she claimed to hear the voice of God, which instructed her to expel the English and to have the Dauphin, Charles Valois (Crown Prince of France) crowned king of France. Incredibly, Joan would get her chance to meet with the Dauphin Charles VII when the situation changed for the worse in 1429. In 1429, the city of Orléans, loyal to the French crown, had been under siege by the English for over a year. With



Figure 1. *Jeanne d'Arc*, by Eugène Thirion (1876). The portrait depicts Joan of Arc's awe upon receiving a vision from the Archangel Michael.

Orléans under heavy attack, the uncle of Henry VI, John, Duke of Bedford and the English regent, advanced with a force towards the Duchy of Bar, which at that time was under the rule of Rene, the brother-in-law of Charles Valois.

Divine Revelation

As the English advance seemed unstoppable, the young Joan in the village of Domremy approached the garrison commander, Robert de Baudricourt, and informed him that voices told her to rescue Orléans. She demanded that he assemble some men, provide some resources, and take her to meet with the Dauphin at Chinon. The garrison commander scoffed at the idea of a peasant girl standing before the French Royal Court and sent her away. Not dissuaded, she petitioned Baudricourt's soldiers, and making accurate predictions about the outcomes of battles (apparently proving divine revelation), won the right to appear to the Royal Court.

Joan arrived at Chinon on 23 February 1429. Right before Joan arrived, Charles is said to have disguised himself to see if she would be able to identify

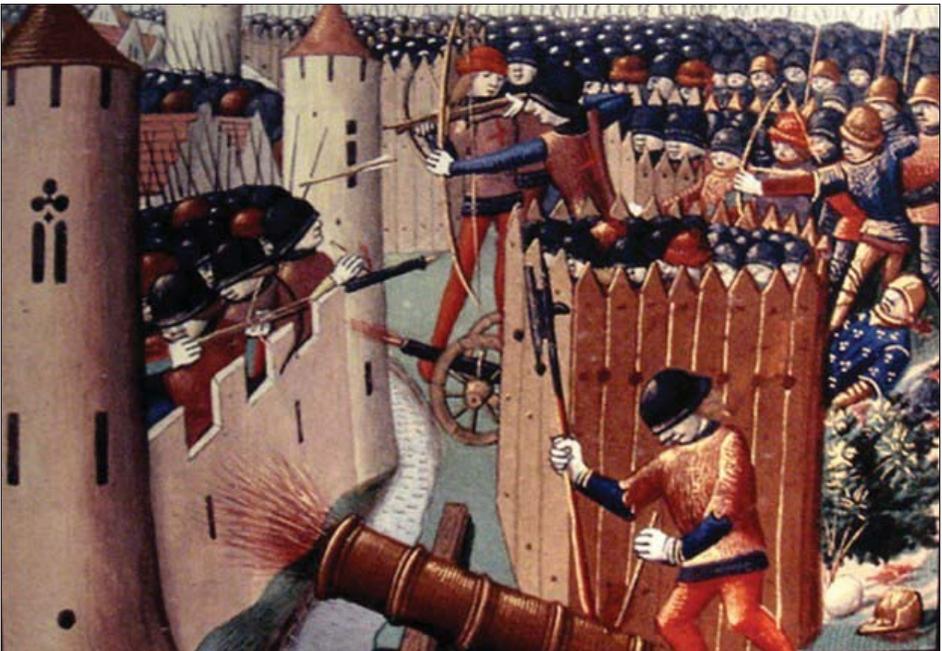


Figure 2. The Siege of Orléans, c. 1493.

him, and to test her “powers” as a prophetess, but it was to no avail, because she bowed before him, and said, “God give you a happy life, sweet King!”¹



Figure 3. Miniature from *Vigiles du roi Charles VII*. Joan of Arc and Charles VII, king of France.

After a lengthy examination by the theologians, she was found not to be a heretic or insane. With no mental issues found, they advised Charles to let her do what the divine will had apparently commanded her to do. Charles agreed. Before setting off to fight the English, Joan wrote a letter to the English king and English Regent of France:

JESUS, MARY

King of England, render account to the King of Heaven of your royal blood. Return the keys of all the good cities which you have seized, to the Maid. She is sent by God to reclaim the royal blood, and is fully prepared to make peace, if you will give her satisfaction; that is, you must render justice, and pay back all

that you have taken.

King of England, if you do not do these things, I am the commander of the military; and in whatever place I shall find your men in France, I will make them flee the country, whether they wish to or not; and if they will not obey, the Maid will have them all killed. She comes sent by the King of Heaven, body for body, to take you out of France, and the Maid promises and certifies to you that if you do not leave France she and her troops will raise a mighty outcry as has not been heard in France in a thousand years. And believe that the King of Heaven has sent her so much power that you will not be able to harm her or her brave army.

To you, archers, noble companions in arms, and all people who are before Orléans, I say to you in God's name, go home to your own country; if you do not do so, beware of the Maid, and of the damages you will suffer. Do not attempt to remain, for you have no rights in France from God, the King of Heaven, and the Son of the Virgin Mary. It is Charles, the rightful heir, to whom God has given France, who will shortly enter Paris in a grand company. If you do not believe the news written of God and the Maid, then in whatever place we may find you, we will soon see who has the better right, God or you.

William de la Pole, Count of Suffolk, Sir John Talbot, and Thomas, Lord Scales, lieutenants of the Duke of Bedford, who calls himself regent of the King of France for the King of England, make a response, if you wish to make peace over the city of Orléans! If you do not do so, you will always recall the damages which will attend you.

Duke of Bedford, who call yourself regent of France for the King of England, the Maid asks you not to make her destroy you. If you do not render her satisfaction, she and the French will perform the greatest feat ever done in the name of Christianity.

Done on the Tuesday of Holy Week (March 22, 1429). HEAR
THE WORDS OF GOD AND THE MAID.²

One can definitely suspect that the king of England and the English Regent of
France did not take it to be cordial.



Figure 4. Joan of Arc depicted on horseback, illustration
from a 1505 manuscript.

Religious War

Joan of Arc, as a symbol of God's will to the French, had turned a generational Anglo-French battle over thrones into a religious war.

Joan convinced the leading French theologians and France's future king that the Divine had sent her; they in turn, provided her with armor to wear and placed a force of four thousand men under her command. She set off towards Orléans soon after, carrying a white banner depicting Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and two angels.

On 29 April 1429, she entered Orléans. There she met with the commander of the garrison, John, comte de Dunois, the Bastard of Orléans. Upon meeting him, she demanded that he immediately attack the English. However, Dunois was not ready. While he was preparing with the now additional four thousand troops who accompanied Joan, Joan decided to approach and shout at the English troops. She informed them that she was the one sent by God—the “maiden”—and said to them “Begone, or I will make you go” but the English upon hearing her message, hurled insults back.³ On 30 April, the Orléans militia, under the command of Étienne de Vignoles, assaulted the English at the Boulevard of Saint-Pouair, but the attack proved unsuccessful. Joan called out to Sir William Glasdale at Les Tourelles stating, “Yield to God's command.”⁴ The English replied by calling her a “cowgirl.”⁵ They made it known to Joan that if they captured her they would surely burn her. But even in their anger, they were also cautious.

On 1 May, Dunois and a small band of men, along with Joan and some soldiers, left to bring the army back to Blois. During this small mission, the English did not attempt to engage the French even though they knew she was among this small army. Interestingly, the reason for not engaging the French seems to have been due to fear, for the lower English ranks feared that she had some supernatural powers and to risk taking her dead or alive was detrimental to their own wellbeing. On 3 May, the main body of Joan's relief force arrived. She made it clear to the French soldiers and officers that God had sent her, as she rode in at the head as a priest and chanted from the book of Psalms.

With Joan and four thousand men in Orléans, the Armagnacs—prominent Orleanists in French politics—attacked the outlying English fort of Saint Loup on 4 May and captured it. Feeling confident after the capture of Saint Loup, the French were preparing to attack the weakest English bastions on the south bank of the Loire the next day. However, despite the win, Joan decided on a temporary one-day truce to honor the Feast of the Ascension on 5 May. It was during this truce that Joan wrote a letter for the English stating, “You, men of England, who have no

right to this Kingdom of France, the king of Heaven orders and notifies you



Figure 5. *Joan of Arc*, oil on parchment, c. 1450-1500. Miniature portrait in an illustrated manuscript. Centre Historique des Archives Nationales, Paris, France.

through me, Joan the Maiden, to leave your fortresses and go back to your own country; or I will produce a clash of arms to be eternally remembered. And this is the third and last time I have written to you; I shall not write anything further.”⁶ She gave this letter to a crossbowman and he shot the letter into the English fortress of Les Tourelles. In the fortress, an archer retrieved the message and said, “Read, here is the news!” The English commander replied, “Here is news from the Armagnac whore!”⁷ Joan is said to have wept after hearing their reply.

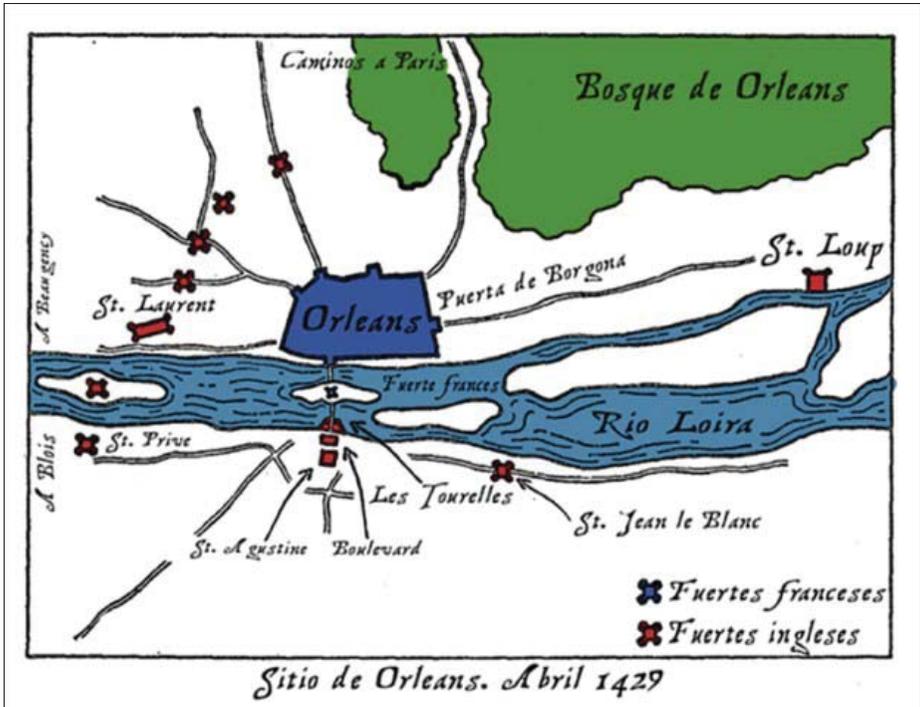


Figure 6. Fortifications around Orléans at the time of the siege. English forts are depicted in red, French forts are depicted in blue. Map by Milo Tatch, published under GNU Free Documentation License.

The English Downfall

On 6 May, the French set off and reached Fort Saint-Jean-le-Blanc. However, they found it empty. The Armagnacs continued to advance. The English appeared outside the fort and attempted a cavalry charge but were defeated and

driven back into their stronghold.

With the English bottled up, the Armagnacs continued on, capturing another English fort near the Les Augustins monastery. From here, the Armagnacs held steady on the south bank of the river Loire before engaging the English fortress of Les Tourelles the following morning on 7 May.

While Joan partook in many of the battles, she did so from a support role, encouraging the men, boosting morale and confidence, and she also helped many of the wounded before she was herself wounded above the breast by an arrow at Les Tourelles. She is said to have pulled the arrow out with her own hand and dressed the wound with oil. After treating her wound and getting some rest, she noticed French troops retreating from the fortress. She quickly grabbed her standard, and stormed towards the fortress. She stuck her banner into the ground and shouted encouragement to the men to fight on.

Sir William Glasdale and his small English force, seeing that they could



Figure 7. France in the Hundred Years' War, by Aliessin. Published under GNU Free Documentation License.

hold no longer in their earth-and-timber fortress, and after witnessing that Joan was not dead, fled the flimsy ill-constructed fort for the safer stone fortress of Les Tourelles. It was at this moment that Joan saw Glasdale fleeing and shouted to him. “Glasdale! Glasdale! Yield to the King of Heaven! You called me a whore, but I have great pity on your soul and the souls of your men!”⁸ Whether Glasdale stopped or not is up for debate, but during the chaos around them, a French incendiary boat became wedged beneath the wooden drawbridge, causing it to catch fire. Glasdale and his men attempting to cross it to reach the safety of Les Tourelles, did not make it, for the bridge caught fire and soon weakened. The bridge could not hold the weight of the men and it disintegrated and gave way. Glasdale, and the men with him, crashed into the river and drowned due to the weight of their armor.



Figure 8. French troops of Joan of Arc besieging the English fortifications during the siege of Orléans, c. fifteenth century.

Tables Turned

The seemingly unstoppable French advance caused the English to surrender the fortress, which resulted in a French victory that lifted the siege of Orléans. Nine days after Joan's arrival at Orléans, the siege had collapsed. This military victory was a major turning point in the Hundred Years' War. Afterwards, more fortresses fell within the duchy, causing the English to send forces to stop the advancement but they were in turn defeated. In just a few weeks, the English from the Loire valley were swept aside and Bedford, the English Regent of France, had lost much of his supplies, which greatly crippled any further English advance for the time being.



Figure 9. *Joanne of Arc Falls Prisoner at Compiègne*, by Jules Eugene Lenepveu, c. 1886-1890.

Joan partook in many successful military operations until the English eventually captured her. Joan of Arc and the French army marched toward the defense of Compiègne against the Burgundian army, led by John of Luxembourg, and arrived on 14 May 1430. However, on 22 May, Joan went out during a sortie and surprised the Burgundians. While Joan's attack was effective, the Burgundian forces refused defeat, rallied their forces, and defeated her men. Joan retreated toward the gates and continued to fight, as she refused to admit defeat. This

stubborn will allowed her to fall into the hands of her enemy, for the commander of the town left the gates open long enough for Joan and her forces to enter. However, seeing Joan refusing to disengage and the enemy ever so close to the entrance, the commander ordered the gate shut, sealing Joan's fate.

After the Burgundians captured her, they imprisoned Joan at Beaulieu Castle at Rouen. After a lengthy imprisonment and trial, the English executed the Maiden of France on 30 May 1431.

The author previously published a slightly different version of this article on his blog at <http://www.camrea.org/>.

Notes

1. Régine Pernoud, Marie-Véronique Clin, *Joan of Arc: Her Story*, trans. Jeremy duQuesnay Adams, ed. Bonnie Wheeler, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 103-137, 209.
2. Joan of Arc, Letter to the King of England, 1429, trans. Belle Tuten from M. Vallet de Vireville, ed. *Chronique de la Pucelle, ou Chronique de Cousinot* (Paris: Adolphe Delahaye, 1859), 281-283, <https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/joanofarc.asp>.
3. Joan of Arc, quoted in Wm. E. Baumgaertner, "1429-The Maid of Orléans," *A Timeline of Fifteenth Century England 1398-1509* (Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing, 2009).
4. Joan M. Edmunds, *The Mission of Joan of Arc* (Forest Row, East Essex: Temple Lodge Publishing, 2008), 46.
5. Ibid.
6. Joan of Arc, Third Letter to the English at Orléans May 5, 1429, accessed January 15, 2017, https://archive.joan-of-arc.org/joanofarc_letter_May_5_1429.html.
7. Allen Williamson, "Segment 6: Orléans, Part II," Joan of Arc Biography, accessed January 15, 2017, http://www.joan-of-arc.org/joanofarc_life_summary_orleans2.html.
8. Ibid.

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