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Anne Midgley
American Public University System

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Joan of Arc through the Ages: In Art and Imagination

Anne Midgley

Since her death at the hands of the English in 1431, Joan of Arc has inspired and puzzled millions. The poor peasant girl who rallied the French to victory at Orléans has fuelled the imagination of artists, authors, poets, and cinematographers. Over the past six centuries, the enigmatic Joan has appealed to not only the people of France, but also to groups as diverse as Philippine and Macedonian revolutionaries, literary societies, American suffragists, and temperance advocates. Yet, according to one Victorian writer, she has also alarmed and troubled many, for according to her assessment, “There is no figure in history more incendiary to the imagination than this Joan of Arc.”¹

From Heretic to Saint: The Trials of St. Joan of Arc

Cam Rea’s article “The Maiden of France: A Brief Overview of Joan of Arc and the Siege of Orléans,” published in this issue of the *Saber and Scroll Journal*, well details the French military victories that Joan inspired against the English and their French allies, the Burgundians. The English and their allies feared and detested Joan; however, her loyalty to the Dauphin of France, Charles, and her visionary leadership in battle inspired the French Armagnacs to repulse their enemies, lift the siege of Orléans, and win a number of subsequent military victories. These victories eventually led to the coronation of Charles VII as the king of France on 17 July 1429. Out of gratitude, Charles ennobled Joan and her family on 29 December 1429. He provided them with the name of Du Lis and established lilies for their coat of arms. On 24 May 1430, a surprise Burgundian attack on the town of Compiègne led to Joan’s capture. She became a prisoner of John of Luxemburg, who sold her to the English. The English desired her death. This prompted the charge of heresy and the infamous ecclesiastical trial that resulted in her death sentence.² The court documents record the Sentence of Excommunication against Joan, stating,

[T]hat you have been on the subject of thy pretended divine revelations and apparitions lying, seducing, pernicious, presumptuous, lightly believing, rash, superstitious, a divineress

and blasphemer towards God and the Saints, a despiser of God Himself in His Sacraments; a prevaricator of the Divine Law, of sacred doctrine and of ecclesiastical sanctions; seditious, cruel, apostate, schismatic, erring on many points of our Faith, and by all these means rashly guilty towards God and Holy Church. And also, because that often, very often, not only by Us on Our part but by Doctors and Masters learned and expert, full of zeal for the salvation of thy soul, you have been duly and sufficiently warned to amend, to correct thyself and to submit to the disposal, decision, and correction of Holy Mother Church, which you have not willed, and have always obstinately refused to do, having even expressly and many times refused to submit thyself to our Lord the Pope and to the General Council; for these causes, as hardened and obstinate in thy crimes, excesses and errors, WE DECLARE THEE OF RIGHT EXCOMMUNICATE AND HERETIC; and after your errors have been destroyed in a public preaching, We declare that you must be abandoned and that We do abandon thee to the secular authority, as a member of Satan, separate from the Church, infected with the leprosy of heresy, in order that you may not corrupt also the other members of Christ; praying this same power, that, as concerns death and the mutilation of the limbs, it may be pleased to moderate its judgment; and if true signs of penitence should appear in thee, that the Sacrament of Penance may be administered to thee.³

Despite her excommunication, prior to her execution Joan received the sacraments of Confession and the Holy Eucharist. On 30 May 1431 at Rouen, the English burned Joan at the stake. Not satisfied with her death alone, the executioner had her body burned again. The fire did not consume her heart, which the executioner found intact; however, “for fear lest [her] remains . . . be used for witchcraft . . . [he had it] thrown into the Seine.”⁴

In 1450, Charles VII realized that Joan’s death as a heretic sullied his own reign, as her heroism had led to his coronation. Accordingly, on 13 February 1450, Charles tasked one of his counsellors, Guillaume Bouillé, “to inquire into the conduct of the Trial undertaken against Jeanne by ‘our ancient enemies the English,’ who, ‘against reason, had cruelly put her to death,’ and to report the result of his investigations to the Council.”⁵ Bouillé’s inquiry ended several months later, after relatively few testimonies, in part because the French did not

wish to antagonize the English. In 1452, Cardinal Guillaume d'Estouteville reopened the investigation, but the new round of inquiries also ended without result. Joan's family petitioned the Pope, and in 1455, Pope Calixtus III agreed to the family's request. The Trial of Nullification ended in 1456 with a sentence of rehabilitation—in essence, voiding the conclusions of the original trial. The findings stipulated that the processes and sentences of the previous trial were “full of cozonage, iniquity, inconsequences, and manifest errors, in fact as well as in law; . . . they have boon, are, and shall be—as well as the aforesaid Abjuration, their execution, and all that followed—null, non-existent, without value or effect.” Furthermore, the court declared that, “[Joan] and her relatives, Plaintiffs in the actual Process, have not, on account of the said Trial, contracted nor incurred any mark or stigma of infamy; we declare them quit and purged of all the consequences of those same Processes; we declare them, in so far as is necessary, entirely purged thereof by this present.”⁶

The nullification trial removed the charges of heresy; it did not establish evidence of holiness, nor consider her death to be that of a martyr. No cult developed to advocate for her sanctity nor were any miracles attributed to Joan until almost five centuries following her death. Yet, Pius II beatified Joan in 1909 and Benedict XV canonized her on 16 May 1920. The reasons for this are worthy of investigation. Church historian Larissa Juliet Taylor claims that complex French and Vatican politics played a role in Joan's canonization, although it did follow proper Church procedures, including the research and testimony of several of the Sacred Congregation's Devil's Advocates. Taylor claims that Joan's cause célèbre lay dormant until the mid-nineteenth century when historians, particularly Jules Michelet and Jules Quicherat began to research Joan, who had become a symbol for both the republican and monarchists of a much-divided France. Taylor notes that Félix Dupanloup, a French scholar and priest, began his role as Bishop of Orléans with “an encomium of Joan that attracted international attention,”⁷ as he hoped to return France to its religious roots. Dupanloup became Joan's champion, introducing “the cause for her beatification [to Rome], and [raising] the first funds towards a new monument in her honor.”⁸

Devil's Advocate Augustine Caprara contended, “[T]his praise of sanctity has come to her only in our own time,”⁹ and that “no miracles or cult was attested.”¹⁰ According to Taylor, Pope Pius II “asked the cardinals and consultants of the Sacred Congregation of Rites to pray with him ‘in so difficult a manner’.”¹¹ The Pope approved Joan's cause for beatification to proceed on 6 January 1904. Shortly thereafter, the Sacred Congregation approved three miracles that occurred through her intercession, and Pope Pius X declared Joan “Blessed” on 11 April

1909.¹²

World War I devastated Europe between 1914 and 1918. Taylor claims that the relationship between the Vatican and France worsened during that war and that tensions between both parties ran unabated. Yet in 1920, two years after the “War to end all Wars,” Pope Benedict XV canonized Joan of Arc, the symbol of France’s glory. While Joan’s route to sainthood took an arduous journey, and her ultimate elevation to Saint Joan of Arc contained an element of political mediation between France and the Vatican, ultimately, the Church recognized Joan as a member of the heavenly Church Triumphant—a fitting tribute to the Maid of France, the young girl whose military exploits saved France.¹³

Joan of Arc in Art

During a recent lecture at professor of medieval French literature, Nadia Margolis, stated that Joan of Arc “has been depicted in more images than anybody else except Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ The earliest artistic representation of Joan of Arc is a sketch by Clément de Fauquembergue, dated from 1429 and made during her lifetime, though it is unlikely that the artist saw Joan in person.¹⁵ Kristi L. Castleberry, who created the brochure for the 2009 Rossell Hope Robbins Library exhibit on Joan of Arc, noted that Joan presented artists with “a unique challenge. There was no precedent for representing a woman who dressed as a man but called herself the Maid, no visual model for a peasant girl who rode next to the king to his coronation.”¹⁶ She further noted, “Medieval and Early Modern artists used a variety of visual cues to

the Farnsworth Art Museum, distinguished



Figure 1. *Joan of Arc*, sketch by Clément de Fauquembergue, 1429.

signal Joan's identity and [avoided] the troubling fact that Joan's image defied categorical representation.”¹⁷

As noted earlier, once Joan's Trial of Nullification reached a successful completion, interest in her waned until the nineteenth century, at which time she became a favorite subject of painters and illustrators. In “Saint, Soldier, Spirit, Savior: The Images of Joan of Arc,” Elizabeth Foxwell noted that between 1850 and 1930, artists created over three hundred fifty representations of Joan's life and exploits, depicting her “as a defender of the monarchy, the epitome of French courage, [the] loyal servant of God, the symbol of a united France, and liberty.”¹⁸ Foxwell classified artistic images of Joan in three categories—“in armor, [representing] heroic virtue, at the stake, [depicting her as a] saint, martyr, sacrifice for France, and listening to voices [dramatizing her as a] prophet, spirit, obedient daughter of God.”¹⁹ She described in particular detail a mural completed in 1909 by Louis Maurice Boutet de Monvel, *The Vision and the Inspiration*, which includes Joan as well as St. Michael the Archangel, St. Catherine of Alexandria, and St. Margaret. According to Joan, the voices of these three saints counselled and guided her from the age of thirteen until the time of her death.²⁰



Figure 2. *The Vision and the Inspiration*, oil and gold leaf on canvas by Louis Maurice Boutet de Monvel, c. 1907-1909, National Gallery of Art.

A similar painting of Joan done by Jules Bastien-LePage in 1879 depicts Joan in her parents' garden with the apparitions of her saints in the background. Artistic representations of Joan have reflected not only her life but also reinterpreted her in a multitude of symbolic and allegorical ways. In some paintings, the artist portrays Joan in a manner reminiscent of the Virgin Mary, while in others she appears as a chaste warrior similar to the goddess Athena.

Interpretations of Joan have varied through time, as well, particularly in response to challenges faced by France. Foxwell notes that during the Bourbon Restoration, artists portrayed Joan as a defender of the monarchy. Representations of Joan were particularly popular amongst the French following their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War.²¹

Images of Joan inspired American suffragists in the early twentieth century. The Paul Dubois equestrian statue of Joan of Arc, dedicated on 6 January 1922 and located in Washington D.C. was a gift from the Society of French Women of New York to the women of the United States. Joan's unique appeal continues to be re-imagined today. "The Maid of France and Popular Culture" section of this paper provides a further analysis of this topic.²²

Joan of Arc in Literature

Christine de Pizan penned perhaps the earliest writing about Joan, the *Ditié de Jeanne d'Arc* (The Song of Joan of Arc), which she wrote during Joan's lifetime. Christine's poetry speaks to great pride in Joan's military prowess, and hails Joan as the champion of France:

She frees France from its enemies,
Recovering citadels and castles.
No army ever did so much,
Not even a hundred thousand vassals!
And of our brave and able folk,
She is the chief and first commander.
God makes it so; not even Hector
Nor Achilles could withstand her.²³

Shakespeare's Henry VI, Part 1, on the other hand, presents Joan far differently.

A witch, by fear, not force, like Hannibal,
Drives back our troops and conquers as she lists:
So bees with smoke and doves with noisome stench
Are from their hives and houses driven away.
They call'd us for our fierceness English dogs;
Now, like to whelps, we crying run away.²⁴

Detailed records from the trials of Joan of Arc provide incredible insight into her life. They have inspired authors from the fifteenth century until the present day. Castleberry claims that Mark Twain's *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* published in 1895 is perhaps the "first thoroughly researched version of Joan."²⁵ Twain held an unapologetically positive vision of Joan, pronouncing in *Personal*

Recollections, “Whatever thing men call great, look for it in Joan of Arc, and there you will find it,”²⁶ as well as “It took six thousand years to produce her; her like will not be seen in the earth again in fifty thousand.”²⁷ In Twain’s “Saint Joan of Arc” published in *Harpers Monthly Magazine*, he described Joan as, “easily and by far the most extraordinary person the human race has ever produced.”²⁸ On the other hand, George Bernard Shaw’s play, *Saint Joan* is dramatically different. Written in 1924 shortly after Joan’s canonization, Shaw provides extensive historical background in his preface to the play. He cautions his audience to remember that Joan was “only a girl in her teens. . . . She knew nothing of iron hands in velvet gloves: she just used her fists.”²⁹

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed historiography of the academic works on Joan of Arc. Suffice it to say, that the scholarship is extraordinarily extensive, and at times contradictory. Castleberry points to Margolis’s *Joan of Arc in History, Literature, and Film: A Select, Annotated Bibliography* as a starting point for interested scholars.³⁰

Joan of Arc on the Silver Screen

Though she had been dead for nearly half a millennium, Joan of Arc began her film career in 1916, with Cecil B. DeMille’s first historical epic, *Joan the Woman*.³¹ Other film representations followed, perhaps the best being Theodor Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), which Roger Ebert reviewed in 1997, stating that “to see [Renee Maria] Falconetti in Dreyer’s [film] is to look into eyes that will never leave you.”³² Ebert quoted Pauline Kael, “It may be the finest performance ever recorded on film.”³³ According to Ebert, the director, Dreyer, threw out the original screenplay and in its place, used transcripts from Joan’s first trial. Ebert sums up the power of Dreyer’s version of Joan of Arc:

To modern audiences, raised on films where emotion is conveyed by dialogue and action more than by



Figure 3. Poster for *Joan the Woman* by Cecil B. DeMille, starring Geraldine Farrar. 1916.

faces, a film like "The Passion of Joan of Arc" is an unsettling experience—so intimate we fear we will discover more secrets than we desire. Our sympathy is engaged so powerfully with Joan that Dreyer's visual methods—his angles, his cutting, his closeups—don't play like stylistic choices, but like the fragments of Joan's experience. Exhausted, starving, cold, in constant fear, only 19 when she died, she lives in a nightmare where the faces of her tormentors rise up like spectral demons.³⁴

Victor Fleming's 1948 film, *Joan of Arc*, starring Ingrid Bergman, also gained tremendous acclaim. Bosley Crowther, who reviewed the movie for the *New York Times* claimed that the movie was one of the "most magnificent films ever made;"³⁵ however, he faulted it for perhaps missing the "mystery, the meaning and magnificence of the poor girl called Joan."³⁶ Other highly regarded films on Joan's life and death include Otto Preminger's 1957 film *Saint Joan* and Roberto Rossellini's 1954 *Joan of Arc at the Stake* in which Ingrid Bergman again appeared as Joan.³⁷

The Maid of France and Popular Culture

Perhaps nowhere is Joan of Arc more continually re-imagined than in popular culture. It is safe to say that Joan of Arc is a cultural phenomenon, a person



Figure 4. *Joan of Arc*, World War I British propaganda.

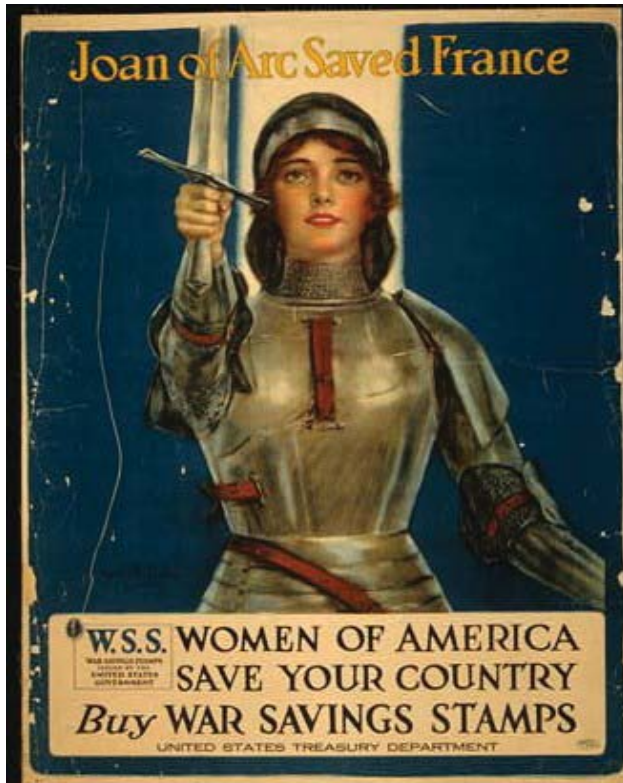


Figure 5. Joan of Arc saved France—Women of America, save your country—Buy War Savings Stamps, Library of Congress.

with unique appeal who has fascinated diverse people throughout the last six centuries. Castleberry's study of Joan in popular culture notes that Joan's image has been "romanticized, politicized, propagandized, and advertised."³⁸ Universities offer classes on Joan of Arc, with titles as strange as "Joan of Arc: History, Literature, and Film. Superhero, Crazy Trans-Kid, Saint, or Fraud?" to the more simple "History 401: Joan of Arc."³⁹

Both the United States and Britain used Joan's image to sell war bonds during World War I. Castleberry's "Re-Imaging Joan: Appropriations of Joan of Arc" catalogues appropriate as well as questionable uses of Joan's image, ranging from First Communion medals to Joan of Arc Butter Beans.

However, the Thompson Cigar Company has perhaps shown the poorest taste of all commercial appropriations of Joan's image by her to hawk Joan of Arch Robusto Connecticut, a mild cigar.⁴⁰

In perhaps the most recent re-imagination of Joan, the LGBT community has adopted her as an icon.⁴¹ In articles from "Joan of Arc and 9 Other 'Queer' Saints" to books such as *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*, Joan has gained another loyal following.⁴²

Conclusion

Since her life and death in the early fifteenth century, Joan of Arc has defied classification. Her youth, visions, heroism, military accomplishments—even her manner of dressing and trial and death—have made her the subject of countless forms of re-imagination in history, art, literature, film, and popular culture. Perhaps no individual has been analysed and interpreted more than Joan of Arc, yet her unique appeal continues to gain new advocates amongst both religious and secular people. She truly was one-of-a-kind, making it easy for most to agree with Mark Twain that she was "easily and by far the most extraordinary person the human race has ever produced."⁴³

Notes

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5. Mathias Gabel and Carlyn Iuzzolino, trans., "Introductory Notes to the Nullification Trial," *Saint Joan of Arc's Trial of Nullification*, 1903, accessed January 17, 2017, <http://www.stjoan-center.com/Trials/index.html#nullification>.

6. Mathias Gabel and Carlyn Iuzzolino, trans., "Concluding Document: Sentence of Rehabilitation," *Saint Joan of Arc's Trial of Nullification*, 1903, accessed January 17, 2017, <http://www.stjoan-center.com/Trials/index.html#nullification>.

7. Taylor, "Joan of Arc," *The Catholic Historical Review*, 238.

8. Joseph Sollier, "Felix-Antoine-Philibert Dupanloup," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* Vol. 5 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909), accessed January 18, 2017, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05202a.htm>.

9. Taylor, "Joan of Arc," 239.

10. *Ibid.*, 239.

11. *Ibid.*, 240.

12. "The Beautification and Canonization of Saint Joan of Arc," *Joan Directory*, accessed January 18, 2017, <http://www.jehannedarc.org/canonization.html>.

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38. Castleberry, "Joan of Arc's Brief Life and Long Afterlife."

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