

Who Was Joan of Arc?

I always thought Joan of Arc was something of a medieval legend, embellished over the centuries in a hundred paintings, novels, and films. I couldn't have been more wrong.

Rummaging through the treasure of cheap French texts in the Kindle store, I unearthed *Le Procés de Jeanne d'Arc*. Her 1431 witchcraft trial in Rouen was recorded word-for-word, and when, some 25 years later, she was posthumously tried again – for judicial rehabilitation – dozens of friends, family members and officials gave vivid testimony under oath of her words and actions. It's hard to imagine a more carefully documented medieval life.

As I read *Le Procés*, “Joan” disappeared, and *Jeanne* (to pronounce, let a soft G flow into “Anna”), emerged in the clear light of eyewitness testimony.

In the town of Donrémy, Lorraine, in 1412, Jeanne was born into war and for war. A deeply pious Catholic she was raised in the thick of *La Guerre de Cent Ans*, the endless, devastating, bloody and futile attempt of the reigning English descendants of William the Conqueror to take back their hereditary continental lands.

The French Burgundian nobility, promised generous rewards by the English, supported the invaders against their fellow countrymen (like Vichy five centuries later) and denied France's throne to the Dauphin, Crown Prince Charles.

At thirteen, Jeanne felt that Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret were daily visiting and speaking to her. Her “Voices”, as she called them, promised that she would lead France to drive out the English, and that she would take the Dauphin to Rouen to be crowned Charles VII.

Jeanne was therefore a religious patriot for whom the issues

were very clear: It could not be Heaven's will for the English to be ruling and plundering France, and it was her God-given duty to rectify this. (Later she hoped that England and France would join forces in a new crusade for Jerusalem. When it came to the English, it was nothing personal.)

It was the 1429 siege of Orleans that brought Jeanne to the fore. She left peaceful Lorraine to seek out Charles. The French generals had no interest in the opinions of a country girl, but dogged persistence gained an audience. Robert de Baudricourt, a key French officer, was bowled over by her courage, her bold and lucid plan, and her cool certainty of victory.

It was at this time that Jeanne cut her hair short and dressed in the clothes of a knight. It suited her mission and mindset, and protected her from the groping of men-of-war.

At their famous meeting, Charles disguised himself as a courtier to test Jeanne's spiritual insight. This adolescent behavior was sadly typical, and he proved to be insipid and unprincipled, utterly unworthy of Jeanne's fierce loyalty.

While Charles vacillated, Jeanne dictated defiant "Leave or Die" letters to the English. Finally, she was given white armour, a horse, and an army, and she rushed to Orleans. There she physically led the charge—many charges—against powerful British forces, drawing nervous French soldiers in the wake of her fierce and joyous audacity. In less than a week Orleans was free.

Granted fresh forces she swept through the Loire Valley, freeing city after city, undoing in weeks many decades of hard-won British victories.

And so Jeanne d'Arc led Charles by the hand to the throne at the Cathedral of Reims: a country girl beside the hereditary monarch; a giant of humanity beside a pygmy with a crown.

That was the high water mark. From there she was repelled from a number of valiantly hopeless assaults against the English and Burgundians. Injured and captured before Compiègne, she was sold in a disgusting deal to the English invaders.

The English couldn't just kill Jeanne. She was now a national figurehead, and Charles' crown rested on her exploits and moral power. They had to degrade her and her cause. A bevy of Parisian bishops and academics, keen for British preferment, stood ready to do the deed.

They chained her and impounded her, a captive lioness, in an actual iron cage. This was the start of the attempted dehumanization and degradation. English men-at-arms daily tormented her and threatened her chastity. They arraigned her before some sixty priests, the elite of France's church and academy. They charged her with heresy and witchcraft: to damn her and her cause to hell.

Little Charles disowned her.

At trial they repeatedly asked her stupid and irrelevant questions: "Why do you cut your hair like that?" "Why do you wear men's clothes?" "What do the saints wear?" "Do they speak French?" "Where did you get your horse?" "Where did you get your sword?" "Were there fairies around your backyard tree?" (*Vraiment!*) They never ever tired of obsessing over her clothes. She responded with astonishing lucidity and composure, and her words make *Le Procès* one of the immortal pinnacles of French literature. Just one example:

Prosecutor: Does God hate the English?

Jeanne: Of the love or hate that God has for the English, or of that which God will do to their souls, I know nothing. But I do know that they will be kicked out of France, except those who die here; and that God will send victory to the French and against the English. ("If only she was English!" shouted a British observer.)

And she stood firm. Through daily interrogation, deprived of counsel and any female company, though falling sick in her dungeon (they gave her the best doctors; the executioner could not be robbed), though stood before the rack and the ghoul skilled in its use, though physically confronted with the stake and burning alive—she stood firm.

She wasn't superhuman though. As she recounted her constant physical torment at the hands of the soldiers, the transcript movingly records, *Elle pleure*, "She weeps."

After three months they gave up. They listed her crimes and sent it to the Sorbonne for rubber-stamping. They put her on a public scaffold, and in a confusing moment of physical and emotional exhaustion and despair she agreed to plead guilty. They gave her a recantation to sign, but she didn't know how to write. It's hard to imagine a more pathetic scene: this magnificent young woman making the mark of the cross, because she couldn't even sign her own name.

They convicted and sentenced her to life in prison with "the bread of despair and the water of affliction." Two days later, to ward off the soldiers, she put back on her male clothes. This "relapse" was all her enemies needed. They gave her to the secular powers to burn the next day. Brave as she was, she wept, grasped at her hair, and cried out that it would be better to be beheaded seven times than to die such a death.

So they carted her to the market place. They chained her to a stake. A vicious sermon was heard. She begged to see a cross, and she fixed her eyes on it as she died.

She was nineteen.

Jeanne d'Arc defies categorization. No cause may claim her. But if mankind is indeed made in God's image, then Jeanne displayed—in her moral strength, dignity, open candor, loyalty, and courage—more of it than most. Yes she trembled before the stake. Yet even the soul of Christ shook before the

Cross, and we must never forget that true courage is not the absence of dread, but the will to overcome it.

On the anniversary of her death read for yourself what Jeanne d'Arc did and said. Watch Robert Bresson's astonishing 1963 dramatization of the trial (he used original transcripts.) Gaze up at the high mountain of her courage. You will find your humanity—your soul—enriched by the view.

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