

The Joans of Arc

Joan of Arc's life story, seemingly so incredible, so implausible, so full of mystery and the doggedly unknowable, has inspired centuries of artists and writers to retell it in their fashion. Already in Joan's lifetime, Christine de Pizan seized upon it to write "Song of Joan," an epic ballad about divinely sanctioned feminine prowess and its possibilities for world peace. "In preference to all the brave men of times past," de Pizan sang, "this woman must wear the crown!" Shakespeare, ever loyal to his nation, depicted her as a cunning witch. Schiller's popular pro-militaristic play *The Maid of Orleans* reduces her to a romantic heroine. Voltaire used her as fodder for his bawdy satire of mystical twaddle. Mark Twain's Joan, in a sentimental novel, resembled his daughter. George Bernard Shaw's play *Saint Joan* portrayed her as a social reformer, intimating she was an early Protestant; Bertolt Brecht transformed her into a Marxist labor leader; Vita Sackville-West reimagined Joan as an androgynous "feminist" in her own image; Jean Anouilh's 1953 play *The Lark* drew parallels between Joan's times and Vichy France. Besides these famous literary works, there are the renowned films of Georges Méliès, Cecil B. DeMille, Carl Theodor Dreyer, Roberto Rossellini, Otto Preminger, Victor Fleming, Jacques Rivette, Robert Bresson, Luc Besson -- and countless paintings, sculptures, operas, songs, and innumerable biographical, historical, and theological works. Tens of thousands of volumes about her exist in France's national archives alone.

Two recently published biographies, American novelist Kathryn Harrison's *Joan of Arc: A Life Transfigured* and British medieval historian Helen Castor's *Joan of Arc: A History*, intriguingly prove our culture hasn't reached Joan saturation. Though not works of the imagination, both take imaginative approaches to the material, especially Harrison's, whose text is sprinkled with fragments lifted from many of the above works, allowing this reader to experience Joan afresh and see her continued relevance to our times.

Here's Joan's (ever-disputable, infinitely interpretable) story: In 1424, an illiterate twelve-year-old peasant girl from northeastern France began to hear voices she believed were sent from God. They told her to lead an army to rid her devastated country of the English, who had been invading France with the intention of usurping the French crown with increasing success for nearly a century. Joan's task was to liberate the besieged city of Orléans, then pave the way for Charles VII, the dauphin and heir to the throne, to be crowned King of France in the Reims cathedral. Calling herself "Joan the Maid" (*Jeanne la pucelle*), she managed, with astonishing force, eloquence, and grace, to convince enough powerful people, Charles included, of her legitimacy and efficacy to successfully carry out her mission.

To facilitate her undertaking, Joan cut off her hair and dressed as a man. A suit of armor was specially made for her. Her rapid mastery of horsemanship, weaponry, and military strategy was deemed indeed miraculous by the captains who fought alongside her. Orléans, under attack for six months, was liberated by Joan in just four days. Wounded several times, she battled on until Charles was coronated King of France. Joan then set her sights on liberating Paris, still occupied by the English, but she was captured by the Burgundians, England's allies. The now nineteen-year-old Joan was tried by a tribunal of Parisian clerics, loyal to the English, and condemned as a heretic, her most heinous sin her "persistence in wearing man's dress." On May 30, 1431, she was burned alive in Rouen. The French, as Joan's voices had prophesized, soon regained control of their country and Joan's condemnation was nullified in 1456. In 1869, her beatification was championed by the Bishop of Orléans, and in 1920 the Vatican declared her a saint.

Castor's book begins fourteen years before Joan's birth, at the Battle of Agincourt, providing a rich historical, religious, and cultural context for Joan's appearance. This remarkable young woman of the medieval era emerges less as sheer anomaly and more as momentous product of her times, her story enabled by an exquisite confluence of factors. The weary French populace longed for Joan to be what she claimed and rid them of their English oppressors. Prophecies, taken seriously, told of a peasant girl who would deliver the French from their misery. People then, especially girls, often heard the voice of God and had visions. Women dressing as men, though officially condemned by the church as "an abomination unto the Lord," was acceptable in certain circumstances. Precedents of women warriors existed: Joanna of Flanders, whose husband, the Duke of Brittany, was captured by the English, took up his sword and armor and rallied her countrymen to the fight; and the Old Testament boasted exemplary women prophets and warriors, including Deborah, Esther, and Judith.

Both biographers credit Charles's mother-in-law, Yolande of Aragon, *grande dame* of French politics, with giving Joan real agency. Yolande used the Maid and her increasingly wild popularity to pressure the French aristocracy and political class to support the girl in her mission. Yolande and Joan, Castor notes, were united in their belief in Charles's "God-given right to the throne" which "all French princes of the blood should recognize." Harrison, in turn, asserts that Yolande adroitly exploited mass hysteria to further her political agenda.

With prodigious knowledge of Christian religious history and biblical narrative, Harrison weaves into her telling biblical stories and citations Joan would have known. "Her phrasing often mimicked that of Jesus, as recorded in the gospels," Harrison writes, providing illuminating examples. Her account also reveals the critical role Joan's chastity played. Indeed, Joan never called herself Joan of Arc, but always, insistently, Joan the Maid, allying herself firmly with the Virgin Mary and pure, unsullied female flesh. "Death by Eve, life by Mary," was the credo of the times. "To equate female sexuality with disobedience and pollution and judge women exclusively on the basis of their sexual conduct," writes Harrison, "is a cornerstone of Judeo-Christian tradition, a structural and thus indelible doctrine; it is an apologia for misogyny." Joan

would have been aware that even with her voices, her military skills, her eloquence, she was nothing without her virginity, the most powerful symbolic weapon in the hearts and minds of men.

Another major gender issue Harrison deftly unravels is Joan's cross-dressing. Joan blatantly defied scripture by wearing men's clothes. The Church allowed for exceptions in cases of necessity, but Joan often insisted on wearing male clothing when not in battle or travelling. Even to Charles's coronation, she went dressed as a man. Male clothing, she argued during her trial, made her less distracting to her troops and less likely to be groped or raped. More importantly, it served to set her apart from other women and to dissociate her from their perceived powerlessness. If she was to lead thousands of soldiers into battle, urging them to fight for her, for France, and for God, often against terrible odds, she needed supreme authority. That challenge to male privilege would be her downfall. George Bernard Shaw, Harrison notes, summed it up when he wrote in his play, "If a woman could put on male clothing as she liked with impunity, women would have unrestrained opportunities to fornicate and to practice manly acts which are legally forbidden to them according to doctrine... for example, to preach, to teach, to bear arms, to absolve, to excommunicate."

While the plethora of renditions of Joan remind us that Joan the Maid is whatever each of us, of our time and place and particular bent, makes of her, Joan is ultimately a martyr to our fantasy. But both these biographies give us a robust glimpse of Joan herself, a young girl of extraordinary courage and self-confidence, who defied patriarchal restrictions and expectations, in body, deed, and word, to bring the world her message. Six centuries on, patriarchy is still firmly entrenched enough for another young girl who dared to speak up for herself and what she believed in to be nearly put to death. Malala, a Joan of Arc for our times, has miraculously survived to inspire all of us to work harder towards creating a world in which young women everywhere are routinely encouraged to have their say, and are listened to as a matter of course.

Jenny McPhee's books include [A Man of No Moon](#), [No Ordinary Matter](#), [The Center of Things](#), and [Girls: Ordinary Girls and their Extraordinary Pursuits](#). She teaches creative writing at the Central Foundation Boys' School and is a founding board member of the Bronx Academy of Letters. She grew up in New Jersey and lives in London, but mostly she resides at www.jennymcphee.com.