Joan of Arc: A Study in Virginal Power and Female Autonomy

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Abstract

This paper examines the life of Joan of Arc, a visionary and military leader from fifteenth-century France, through contemporary records and later posthumous interpretations by admirers and detractors alike to determine if Joan was able to achieve autonomy in her brief career, and if so, by what methods. Using these resources, it argues that Joan was clearly able to achieve an unprecedented level of political and military autonomy for a common woman in fifteenth-century Europe by using the holy notions of virginity and divine connection that has allowed many mystics and visionaries to ascend beyond their stations throughout history. Furthermore, it considers the gendered notions of clothing that were clearly at play, as many considered Joan to be 'dressing as a man' and changing her identity to achieve her goals, an argument that this paper disagrees with based on the evidence.

Joan of Arc has continued to fascinate intellectuals and scholars since she was alive, and likely will continue to do so well into the future. There are several facets of her reported existence that could be of interest, and this paper will focus on one of the most fundamental: Was Joan of Arc able to act autonomously during her military career, or did the social hierarchy of fifteenth-century Europe require a guiding male hand? Or, because she "dressed as a man"[1], did this enable Joan to surpass these hierarchical limitations? This paper will argue that while there were certainly men involved in the events of her rise and career, Joan's proclamations about her mission from God clearly illustrate that she would not allow anyone else to make the decisions for her, meaning she had to have been involved at an unprecedented level of political and military autonomy for a common woman in fifteenth-century Europe. Furthermore, Joan's claims of virginity, as seen in her title as 'The Maid of France', helped to solidify and strengthen her validity as an agent of God, and thereby her authority on the ground.

Joan of Arc, later known as Jehanne La Pucelle in contemporary records, was born around 1412 in Domremy, France, although the exact date of birth is unknown[2]. England and France were in the throes of the Hundred Years War, with England just having 'won' the crown of France following the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 and the Treaty of Troyes in 1420, thus marking a pivotal moment for France to try and regain its independence as England worked to secure its hold with the marriage of Henry V to Charles VI's daughter Katherine. This was further complicated by the deaths of Henry V and Charles VI in 1422, after which Henry VI and Charles VII, then 1 and 19 years old, respectively, were both proclaimed kings of France, followed by several years of uncertain battle outcomes that left doubt over who had the divine right to the throne of France.[3] During that same time, Joan was having visions of St. Michael and other saints and virgin martyrs, which she claimed began when she was 13, and one of

[1] Karyn Z. Sproles, "Cross-Dressing for (Imaginary) Battle: Vita Sackville-West's Biography of Joan of Arc," (1996), 159.
[2] Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)*, 5.
[3] Warner, *Joan of Arc,* 53

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which directed her to travel to Vaocouleurs and meet with the Dauphin, Charles VII. She would eventually arrive in Chignons sometime in February 1429, although the exact date is unknown and widely debated, and use the 'voices' in her head to find Charles and declare that she wanted to wage war against England, claiming that she would break the siege at Orleans and drive the English out of France.[4] Despite his reported reaction to Joan at Chignons, Charles did not give her his full trust immediately, first having her character examined by theologians from the exiled Parliament de Paris and virginity verified by a council of women at Tours, a verification that would take place many times throughout her life.[5] Satisfied by the results, Charles granted Joan the retinue of a knight: a page, Lois de Coutes, a squire, Jean d'Aulon, and some soldiers, the exact amount of which is unknown; Joan later claimed at her trial that it was between 10-12,000, but contemporary records suggest there were only some 3,000 at Orleans with her.[6]

Throughout her brief but impactful life, Joan is credited with approximately 12 letters, as well as several defining quotes and claims of her divine connections. One such claim, reported to have taken place at Chignon, highlights Joan's insistence that she was the savior of France, and this mindset must have driven an incredible amount of autonomy in her military career as "no one (else) in the world…can recover the kingdom of France; there is no succor to be expected save from me…because my Lord wills that I should do it."[7]

If Joan truly believed this sentiment, which she seemingly did, then she would have seen it as her right, her obligation to autonomously lead the armies of France to victory to put Charles VII on the throne. Before her arrival to Orleans on the 29th of April, 1429, Joan dictated a letter to the English commanders at Orleans, dated the 22nd of March, that they must "*hand over to the Maiden*, who is sent here by God the King of Heaven, the keys to all the towns which you have taken and violated in France…if you do not do so, you will shortly contemplate your great misfortunes."[8]

Although her second letter to the English, thought to date to around the 30th of April, 1429, has not survived, a testimony of a witness at the appeal of her case claims that it further emphasized that "the English should agree to withdraw from the siege, and go back to the Kingdom of England; otherwise she would launch such a great assault against them that they would be compelled to withdraw" and "urged everyone to trust in God; and [said that] if they would have good hope and trust in God, they would be rescued from their enemies."[9]

Joan was able to prove her divine connections by subsequently clearing the siege at Orleans, just as she had proclaimed she would, a connection lauded by contemporaries such as Jean Gerson, the exiled chancellor of the University of Paris, as well as Christine de Pisan, who both claimed in essence that Joan's actions were only possible because she was 'beyond nature', or given power by something divine.[10] Joan herself continued to solidify her mystical

[4] Warner, *Joan of Arc,* 54.
[5] Ibid., 62.
[6] Ibid., 63.
[7] Adrienne L. Barstow, "Joan of Arc and Female Mysticism," (1985), 32.
[8] Douglas O. Linder, "Letters of Joan of Arc (1429-1430)," 2005. Translations by Allen Williamson. Portions in italics are noted as erroneous additions by the scribe. *Joan of Arc's First Letter to the English Commanders At Orleans*.
[9] Linder, 2005, *Letter to the English (dictated at Orleans)*.
[10] Warner, *Joan of Arc,* 63.

connection in her meeting with Charles after the victory at Orleans, in which she urged him to continue attacking the English, prompting Charles to ask by what authority she provided such bold advice. According to records from Count Dunois, Joan responded:

> When I am vexed that faith is not readily placed in what I wish to say in God's Name, I retire alone, and pray to God….I hear a Voice which says to me: 'Daughter of God! go on! go on! go on! I will be thy Help: go on!' And when I hear this Voice, I have great joy. I would I could always hear it thus.[11]

Such statements not only highlight the political autonomy allowed to Joan as a woman and military leader to advise the king, but also put her into the role of a female mystic. Although this paper would also argue she was more of a visionary than a mystic, due to her visions being used for direct counsel with secular leaders and less for transformative unions with God, as can be seen in most definitively mystical works, she was and is considered within the mystical sphere of direct and personal connections to God. It was this personal connection to God that the church took issue with, as attested to in her trial:

> Joan strives to shock the people, persuading them to put absolute trust in all she says and will say. So she takes upon herself the authority of God and the angels, and raises herself above all ecclesiastical power to lead people into error, as the false prophets used to do when they founded sects of error and damnation and set themselves apart from the one body of the church.[12]

Joan was not the first nor would be the last to assume the role of a female mystical prophet, and the responses to each show both the range of toleration, and how class and connection could affect the outcome of your claims. Marguerite Porete (mid-1290s), Catherine of Siena (mid-to-late 1300s), and Bridget of Sweden (exact dates unknown but sometime in the 1300s) are three cases in point.[13] Marguerite faced considerably more initial backlash, condemnation of her work in 1306, and her being burned at the stake in 1310; as far as we know, Marguerite did not live in a community setting, or have a traditional, and male, connection to the church via a confessor or preacher. Catherine and Bridget, on the other hand, were provided a level of protection by their class and connections, and while had it not been for the French clerics under the pay of the English at Joan's trial she may have survived just as well, their status never led to a trial in the first place.[14] Arguably, Joan had a form of male connection to legitimize her role, not only to Charles VII but to her squire, her page, and the men under her charge. But what about Joan's dress and use of gender dichotomy? Did her "male" dressing habits lend any credence itself?

To answer those questions, we must first consider the role of gender in the late Middle Ages, particularly as it relates to religious and social power. While women were certainly capable of ascending to roles of power, as seen in the example of St. Colette, who was consulted for more than forty years by the mother of the Duke of Burgundy during Joan's own

[11] Adrienne L. Barstow "Joan of Arc and Female Mysticism," (1985), 33.
[12] The *Lebellus* d'Estivet, Article 62. Translated in Hobbins, (2005), 152.
[13] Barstow, "Joan of Arc and Female Mysticism," 33-34.
[14] Ibid., 33-37.

lifetime[15], these were often accompanied by concessions in some form or another. Women who produced religious writings during this period, especially those in the mystical field, all had to submit their own will to that of God to gain any notoriety, thus, as Amy Hollywood so eloquently put it, "mak[ing] use of the very gender subordination that constrains them as a condition for and source of agency, an agency ultimately ascribed not to religious women themselves, but to God."[16] While men in positions of religious power often attributed their power to similar mystical claims, it wasn't as necessary as it was for women to even be considered.[17] This wasn't the case in every regard, though, as women were allowed to gain some notions of social power by joining the workforce, or generally contributing to the economic wellbeing of both their household and their locality. In fact, records show that European women regularly worked for pay even in the Medieval era, and in some later cases were the primary buyers for their house, as well as producing or selling goods, such as ingredients for ale in Scotland and woven goods across European towns.[18] Clearly, then, it was possible for a woman to achieve what is often considered unachievable for women of earlier periods.

So, why then did Joan 'dress as a man'? This notion of clothing having a bearing on gender identity was certainly not a new one. Morgan Elizabeth Boharski puts forth the idea of *clothbodies* as "a piece of cloth or clothwork that incites an understanding or treatment of a woman's identity or body that is separate and disconnected from her physical body."[19] Despite the argument by Vita Sackville-West that, because of her own experience in cross-dressing to pass as a man and be with her lover, Violet Trefusis, Joan too must have been cross-dressing for a similar reason of wanting to pass as a man[20], this paper argues that this is an incorrect assumption. Armor was the necessary equipment to fight in a war, and while it was primarily men who engaged in these wars, that does not inherently make the pieces themselves gendered, even if that may have been the perception of most in the Middle Ages. Joan was simply a woman in armor, and at no point did she claim that this 'male' dress altered her identity. During her trial, when asked whether she would have dressed as a woman, she answered that "it is better to obey and serve her supreme lord, that is, God. She said if she had been obliged to wear women's dress, she would have done so at the request of those two ladies more readily than of any others in France, save her queen."[21]

During her abjuration, she reportedly even accepted and wore women's clothing from the clergy, so Joan clearly had no preconceived notions of trying to use clothing to adopt a masculine identity, at least not outwardly.[22]

Clothing was not the only area in which Joan flirted with the limits of gender identity and norms. Joan's claims to being The Maid, an armored virginal savior of France foreseen by Marie Robine[23], were predicated on the holy notions of virginity, and, more so, what it signified to both

[15] Barstow, "Joan of Arc and Female Mysticism," 38.
[16] Amy Hollywood, "Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Religious Historiography," (2004), 514-515.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Sharon H. Wright, "Medieval European Peasant Woman: A Fragmented Historiography," (2020), 6.
[19] Morgan E. Boharski, "Woven Words: Clothwork and the Representation of Feminine Expression and Identity in the Old French Romance," (University of Edinburgh, 2018), 72.
[20] Sproles, "Cross-Dressing for (Imaginary) Battle," 159.
[21] *Saturday, March 3. Sixth session.* Translated in Hobbins, 2005: 79
[22] *The Abjuration of Joan (in Latin)*. Translated in Hobbins, 2005: 195
[23] Barstow, "Joan of Arc and Female Mysticism," 37.

society and the church. Many female mystics throughout the medieval and early modern period were virgins themselves, a fact that helped to solidify their positions of power within the church framework. While Joan's virginity had been examined and verified several times, as mentioned earlier, it's important to establish some historical context. These tests were less about the actual physical virginity itself, as medical physiology was hardly knowledgeable in that regard, but more importantly, due to her extensive horse-back riding and sword training, it is unlikely that Joan's hymen was still intact, and so the tests must have been about the expectations of the ministers themselves.[24] The attributes attached to the concept of virginity, those of unity, purity, truth, authority, and legitimacy, had clear implications for Joan's autonomous behavior: since her virginity had been 'verified', she must have been a true authority of God, and since, at this time anyway, there was no higher power than God in the land, Joan was able to attain incredible military and political power for a common woman.[25] Helen Hackett has suggested that to Protestants and Catholics alike, virginity was 'so special that it can only be attained by a tiny number of the exceptionally sinless, aided by God, and therefore remains the highest goal to which to aspire', an idea that further added credibility to Joan's power.[26]

Why, then, did later English chroniclers attempt to disparage Joan's claims to virginity? As Berneau argues, virginity was becoming less significant as an ideal during the 15th and 16th centuries, although it remained a powerful ideal, nonetheless. Arguably, it was less to do with the virginity itself and more to do with Joan's identity, as highlighted in a passage from the work of Raphael Holinshed, in which Joan fought in a manner 'contrarie to all manhood (but she was a woman, *if she were that*.')[27] Arguably, this questioning of Joan's identity was likely an attempt by the English to question any female power, as they were struggling against the rules of Mary Tudor, Elizabeth I, and Mary, Queen of Scots during the 16th century. Joan's rise in identity, from a common woman of no notable background to an autonomous military leader and threat to the English, was a challenge to the patriarchal hierarchy that the church and monarchy felt would spell their end. It is interesting to note the contrast between this English conception of Joan's identity and later French images of their 'savior'. The first inquiry into the legitimacy of Joan's trial was made by Bouille in 1450, shortly after the end of the English struggle in Normandy, with a second coming two years later by Cardinal d'Estoute-ville, and the verdict of her trial rescinded by 1455/6. Joan would eventually be declared 'Venerable' in 1903, beatified in 1909, and finally canonized as a saint in 1920.[28]

Based upon the evidence, it is clear that Joan of Arc was able to achieve a remarkable level of political and military autonomy in the 15th century for a woman of common birth. Fulfilling the prophecy laid down by Marie Robine, Joan was able to use her divine connections to ascend and advise the king-to-be, Charles VII. Similarly, Joan would assume the role of female prophet, a role that would see varying levels of success, generally based on the inherent class of the one filling it. As examined, to gain such autonomy required Joan to play with the notions of gender and virginity in a way that was only really seen in the mystical realm. However, Joan

[24] Warner, *Joan of Arc,* 13-18.
[25] Aline Berneau, "Saint, Witch, Man, Maid, or Whore? Joan of Arc and Writing History," (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 214-215.
[26] Hackett quoted in Berneau, 2003: 214-215.
[27] Berneau, "Saint, Witch, Man, Maid, or Whore?" 216.
[28] Warner, *Joan of Arc*, xxvi.

never claimed that her use of ‘male’ clothing, which was really just the armor required for battle, changed her identity from a feminine one to a masculine one; this was simply the perception of some contemporaries and later interpretations, but Joan held steadfast to being a young woman, and a virginal one at that. Her use of the holy aspects of virginity, and its importance to both society and church in the 15th century, was arguably her biggest asset in gaining what influence she had. Being simple enough to prove due to the lacking medical knowledge of the time and considered such a rarity that only those truly blessed by and connected with God could achieve it, Joan’s virginity was a potent force in her rise. That rise in identity from a common woman to an autonomous military and political force was clearly seen as a threat to the patriarchal hierarchy of both society and the church. Female autonomy, not guided by the dominating hands of the patriarchy, was a powder keg sitting at the base of their system, and Joan’s autonomy was the flame threatening to bring it all down.

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