



JOAN OF ARC

EARS TUNED TO GOD

THIS PEASANT GIRL BECAME AN INTERNATIONAL HERO AND A SAINT: WHAT ATTRACTS US TO THE MAID OF ORLÉANS TODAY?

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IT IS AN UNBELIEVABLE STORY. A young medieval peasant says she hears voices sent by God to lead a downtrodden French army against its formidable English enemies. Though she has no aristocratic connections, she works her way into the presence of a French prince and convinces him to let her lead his army—and she wins. But then this hero is executed as a heretic only to be exonerated twenty-five years later. In her afterlife, she has become an international hero and a Catholic saint.

Astonishing as it sounds, this is the real story of Joan of Arc.

An Unlikely Hero

Joan is known by several names. In France, she is commonly called Jeanne d'Arc or Jeannette (little Joan). Her father was Jacques d'Arc and her mother, Isabelle Romée. After Joan roused the French troops to a great victory at the battle of Orléans as a teenager, her supporters triumphantly called her the Maid of Orléans (la Pucelle d'Orléans). She referred to herself as "Joan the Maid."

Joan was born on January 6, 1412, in the peasant village of Domrémy, which sits in northeastern France not far from the city of Reims, where French kings were traditionally crowned. Joan would eventually help the disinherited French dauphin (a title used to identify the heir apparent to the throne), a prince named Charles, who became King Charles VII of France. She would engineer his coronation at Reims Cathedral.

The village of Domrémy was dangerous territory at the time because France and England were in the throes of what is called the Hundred Years' War (circa 1346–1453). The French were trying to throw the English out of their territory. The English maintained that their con-

trol of France dated back to William the Conqueror, who left Normandy and took control of southern England in 1066. Look closely at a Shakespearean play or movie that depicts this era. Typically you'll notice the clothes and shield of an English king like Henry V shown in both the red and gold lion symbol of England as well as the blue and gold fleur-de-lis symbol of France—a sign of double claim. Joan of Arc played a significant role at a pivotal moment in history to refute that claim. She was, in essence, fighting in a war for French independence.

In 1415, England's King Henry V won an unexpected victory at Agincourt. (In Shakespeare's *Henry V*, the St. Crispin's Day speech marks this event.) A few years later, he married the French king's daughter with the unifying agreement that their child would be king of both England and France. This arrangement knocked

Prince Charles out of the royal line of succession. In 1422, the aging French king and Henry V both died, leaving a nine-month-old Henry VI as the king of France and England. This situation gave the dauphin Charles an opportunity to claim the French throne. This is the moment where Joan of Arc inserts herself into history to help Charles.

When she was about twelve or thirteen, Joan began to hear voices, which she later identified as the archangels Michael and Gabriel. She also spoke of hearing St. Margaret and St. Catherine, though it is not entirely clear which of several saints of those names she referenced. Likely she meant St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. Margaret of Antioch, who were popular in the area around Joan's hometown. Joan later claimed they gave her a divine mission: to help Charles kick the English out of France.

In early 1429, dressed as a young man, Joan made a perilous journey to Charles' court at Chinon. Able to gain a meeting with him, Joan revealed a secret of his (unknown to this day), that convinced Charles that she had indeed been sent by God to help him. Charles asked a team of theologians at Poitiers to question Joan.

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Theologians found her claims of a divine mission to be authentic; however, throughout her brief career many clerics made the sign of the cross or splashed holy water over her in what seems to have been a quick version of an exorcism. They questioned whether her visions were from the devil and not God. Joan had already impressed many at Chinon and again in Poitiers with her piety and poise—a particularly striking detail since she was born a peasant. But by this point, she was moving amidst high social circles.

She was not well-educated, to be sure, but Joan maintained a stout confidence in God's mission for her. She seems to have dictated several letters with command and purpose, though it's unclear whether she could read and write. There are three signatures, which she could have copied from a model, but nothing else in that same handwriting.

In May 1429, Joan donned a suit of armor and carried a battle flag into the siege of Orléans, where the English were trying to seize Charles to eliminate the perceived threat to the child king Henry VI. The city's location allowed Charles to claim allegiance from French territories in both the north and south.

Although she likely did not physically fight, Joan's presence rallied the troops under Charles, and they took the city from the English and their allies. Charles was then crowned in Reims Cathedral as France's King Charles VII in July 1429, with Joan standing nearby with her parents. The king soon granted the family nobility status. The new king, however, was known to have a short memory and never stayed grateful or loyal to his supporters for long. By the next year, Charles' support of Joan faded and things turned sour.

In 1430, Joan was captured in battle and turned over to the English, who the next year put her on trial as a heretic in Rouen. The line between politics and religion became muddled. If the English could discredit Joan, they could also discredit the



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legitimacy of Charles VII's claim to the French throne. Many believe the trial was rigged against Joan from the start and was an unfair representation of the claim against her. The presiding bishop, though French, was loyal to the English. Joan was given little support to defend herself from the charges of heresy and accusations of witchcraft or sorcery.

Though many saw her responses as astonishing, Joan was found guilty because of the judge and prosecutors' trickery and deceitful tactics. Her visions were declared to have been demonic and deluded. She may have been threatened or bullied into recanting, but that is uncertain. In any event, she returned to wearing boy's clothing and, on May 30, 1431, she was burned to death as a heretic in Rouen. It's been said that Joan shouted out Jesus' name repeatedly and kept her eyes fixed on a cross held before her face. The ashes of her body were scattered to the wind or thrown into the river, depending on the account. Joan was nineteen years old.

Vindication

At the time of her death, Church authorities examined Joan on two different occasions. At Poitiers, theologians had declared her claims to hear God's voice through the saints to be authentic. At the trial in Rouen, those claims were denied; however, her popularity didn't diminish. Even Charles VII realized he owed so much to her. As the Hundred Years' War ended with a French victory, an examination of her 1431 trial began. Joan's mother, Isabelle, played a role in getting the case reopened and spoke in defense of her deceased daughter.

Some witnesses were still alive, and after further questioning had admitted their prior testimony against Joan was the result of coercion. The official Latin record written after the question-and-answer testimonies did not match the notes taken by the scribes at the time of the original trial. In 1456, an extraordinary event took place: Joan's sentence as a heretic was nullified and her name cleared under papal authority. It took a long time, but in 1920, Joan became canonized as a saint. Her feast day is May 30, the date of her execution in 1431.

Why Is Joan So Famous?

Joan's fortunes—her afterlife as a hero—rose steadily after her name was cleared. In the next decades and centuries after her death, she became a symbol of Catholic resistance for the Holy League of territories united against Protestant forces in the wars of religion that dragged through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. She then became a face for French patriotism and nationalism, hailed by none other than Napoleon Bonaparte. In the 1800s, scholars examined the records of her examinations and trials more closely, demonstrating how she had been mistreated. At the same time, she became quite popular in the creative world as the subject of painters and sculptors, especially

in France. In addition, Joan was the main character of more than eighty plays written during the nineteenth century. She also appeared in many illustrated books for children and adults that told her story.

It's important to note that Joan's popularity didn't end at the French border. As World War I progressed, France, the United States, and even Great Britain often used her image to stir men to enlist in the army and raise financial support from civilians. Early silent motion pictures featuring her include *Joan the Maid*, the 1916 film by Cecil B. DeMille, and the 1928 French film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. Ingrid Bergman was nominated for an Academy Award for her performance in the title role of *Joan of Arc* in 1948, and there have been more movie and television versions in the last few decades—probably the most well-known being 1999's *The Messenger* in French.

What is the attraction for believers today? Some scholars see her as nothing more than a cheerful mascot to the French forces at Orléans, while others wondered if she took sword in hand in battle. The fact that she wore male clothing off and on throughout her time in the public eye has caused some people to wonder if she were a medieval cross-dresser, though it is more likely she dressed as a boy for protection. Joan has been praised and scorned as a martyr and a medieval feminist.

For those taking a political stance, to some Joan was a monarchist who supported periodic calls for a stronger government while others see her as a populist champion of the everyday man and woman in the streets. Joan has been called heretic and harlot, visionary and lunatic, prophet and witch, victim and victor, clever in standing up to erudite bishops and a country bumpkin duped by a traitorous Charles.

Joan's faith took action in a fight for justice and self-rule. She has appeal as a prisoner of war and a champion of her conscience who listened to God directly instead of sub-

mitting to Church or civil authorities. She was a woman in a man's world who was not afraid to speak truth to power, which makes her attractive as a female role model. That is one reason why Joan was important to suffragettes who fought for women's right to vote. She broke traditional gender roles and stereotypes—and she was not easily intimidated. In her meetings at the French court and

during her interrogations, Joan could exhibit a fiery tongue.

So many legends, myths, and interpretations surround Joan that it can be hard to get a sense of the real historical figure. Viewed through the lens of history, it seems clear that while she moved in circles high above the station of her peasant birth, Joan of Arc indeed trusted that she was on God's good side. #