

Examining the Visions and Voices of Joan d’Arc

Kennedy Benjamin Samuels

Joan d’Arc (1412-1431) rose to *contemporary fame* waging war against the English occupiers of her native France in the early 15th Century and she was able to do so through her excellence in leadership; however, if that were all to her story she would most likely have been forgotten to the annals of history. It was through her religiously zealous actions that she was able to achieve *ever-lasting celebrity*. She claimed to have been God’s messenger; she aimed to save France at his command. She claimed to have heard voices and seen visions of apparitions; she received signs from prominent saints, such as Michael, Margaret, and Catherine.¹ Her self-proclaimed God-given mission was cut short when she was caught by (English-allied) Burgundian forces at Compiègne in 1430. She was handed over to members of the Catholic Church who accused, tried, and found her guilty of multiple canonical crimes. As a result, she was burned at the stake in 1431. In the entire process leading up to her execution, despite an abjuration (in which she retrospectively believed she was beguiled into agreeing) that she later recanted, she held steadfast.² Joan never vacillated under the intense, scrutinous questioning and painful torture that she was subjected to, and not to mention the threat of being “abandoned [by the Catholic Church] as a heathen.”³ Many prominent people through different ages of history have taken a gander at the claims that Joan d’Arc made through her short lifespan, and deduced very different conclusions on her supposed divinity. I now look to study those same zealous claims of hers myself in order to find what could best have explained her visions and voices. Was she a liar who conjured these claims for her own self-benefit? Was she legitimately and divinely chosen by God to save France and to rid the Frankish land of Angles? Did she believe in her own divinity? Was she suffering from

epilepsy (which in retrospective psychiatric analysis is something she possibly could have had) or did she possess a different disability? What I present hereafter on Joan d’Arc’s claims will have its basis on accounts- in imagery and literature- that detail her life before the trial, documents relating to the trial and retrial, and works after her death that were either originally transcribed in or translated to the English language.

During her life, the youthful Joan d’Arc had been adamant that she had received countless visions and voices directed to her from the Almighty Lord himself. Although there had been a high level of devotion to Roman Catholicism among the people in her village of Domrémy during her adolescence, even to those Frenchmen and women, her piety seemed abnormal, and she was often “made fun of” by others when she was a child.⁴ Even as she stared at her deathly fate, which was soon to arrive at the stake, the French Maid claimed that she was still receiving the same visions and voices on a daily occurrence. Many during her life and in the past five-hundred years after her fiery departure from this world and into the next have accepted this notion of piety. In order to ascertain the reasoning behind Joan’s ambitions and her self-proclaimed visions, exploring her symptoms while receiving these God-given messages is a crucial place to begin understanding her.

Joan first began to encounter these supposedly divine apparitions that plagued her entire life, “when she was thirteen” years old.⁵ It was during her trial in Rouen that she went into further detail when questioned about this abnormal aspect of her life. When she heard these God-sent voices, with them came physical symptoms. She stated that they rarely occurred “without light” present, and the aforementioned lights only ever arrived to her on the “same side” that the voices originated from.⁶ The onset of her voices often synchronously started “when the [church]bells rang.”⁷

When asked during her trial how she knew these visions and voices were divinely sent, Joan never divulged much information. On numerous occasions she was profoundly certain she had been in the presence of Saint Michael, the modern-day patron saint of military personnel.⁸ She also claimed to have seen Saint Gabriel, the patron saint of messengers, Saint Margaret, the patron saint of the falsely accused, and Saint Catherine, a saint who like Joan was a virgin and a powerful feminine figure. In the record of the trial, Joan consistently (and carefully) answered questions which were hurled at her. It is quite possible that Joan could have deliberately acted in such a way simply to help craft and sustain her own image—or maybe there was something else—someone else—guiding her.

It is first important to accept the possibility that Joan d’Arc, the French Maid, conjured up these claims for her own self-benefit, to further herself in French society, or to simply find a reason to fulfill her wish to rid the French nation of the English occupiers. There were many cases of women in France, before the rise of Joan d’Arc, who had also claimed to have heard voices and seen visions. There were “a few visionaries” that “claimed the ability to prophesy and sought out the [French] king in order to inform him of that which they knew, thus foreshadowing Joan’s own actions.”⁹ She was not unique in this regard; however, it was her military prowess in the fight for France’s freedom that did make her distinctive from those before her.

Two years before Joan’s death in 1429, a prominent Parisian expressed a view that was common among many Burgundians (who were pro-English): Joan d’Arc possessed “a superhuman power that was neither divinely miraculous nor diabolically monstrous and that tended, as such, to be identified with the marvelous.”¹⁰

This view has been propagated within works published since her death in 1431. In a play titled, *Saint Joan*, which was

written by George Bernard Shaw and first published in 1924, Pierre Cauchon, the Bishop of Beauvais, in one scene downplays Joan's accomplishments to anything supernatural and suggests the English are subpar on the battlefield when compared to her. He states, "(w)hat do her victories prove but that she has a better head on her shoulders than your swearing Glass-dells and mad bull Talbots?"¹¹ This depiction of Cauchon gives credence to Joan's capabilities over connection to the divine, because in reality, Cauchon was a bishop who worked for the English, whose main concerns were her heresy and her presumed supernatural abilities. Although this perspective of Joan strongly defends her military prowess, it is also biased against her divinity.

At certain times, when questioned about her voices and visions, Joan gave unspecific answers and would instead retort in a demanding manner, reasoning that her sole aim was to save France with having the purest intentions of serving God while doing so. Among the multiple occasions she made statements along these lines, she was once recorded as having stated she was of the knowledge that "the [French] king and the duke of Orléans" were favored in the eyes of God.¹² Now, in looking at the translated trial records, one would be able to explicitly view that Joan was being interrogated and tortured, and that her experience while she was being put on trial was harsh overall. During her trial, while she was imprisoned at Rouen, Joan made multiple testimonies of instances when she was being mistreated. She even stated that some "guards had tried to rape her" on occasion.¹³ In a novel titled, *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*—which was originally written as a serial by Mark Twain in the late 19th century—Joan is described as being "as white as ever" at her trial, highlighting her fear and torment.¹⁴ In moments of great pain, such as the ones Joan underwent, when we feel the emotions of fear, anger, sadness, betrayal, etc., it is perfectly reasonable to lash out; it is important to consider this. However, this

then raises a particular objection. If she was sent from God, then she should have been able to remain cool headed despite the harsh reality that she was subjected to. We would expect somebody who was sent from a divine being, a higher power, to be more in control of their feelings than a flawed human being.

When Joan was asked what her voices sounded like during her questioning at trial, she sometimes gave indistinct and demeaning retorts, as was stated previously. In one instance it was said that she stated to her questioner that the voices spoke “(a) better tongue than you do.”¹⁵ If Joan could describe the sound of the voices to give her more credence—that is, if the voices were of legitimate origins—then why did she not make a statement along this manner? Joan, although being illiterate, was not unintelligent, so if she was using the voices and visions as a facade for her self-benefit, she was masterful in what she possibly and intentionally invoked.

As was aforementioned, Joan discussed particular saints who were and continue to be synonymous with certain groups of people. She made mention of Saint Michael, Saint Catherine, Saint Gabriel, and Saint Margaret. Michael the Archangel was known as “God’s warrior against the Devil.”¹⁶ Today, he continues to be a saint revered by military personnel who is thought of as bringing luck and victory in battle. Any contemporary soldier would have been heavily influenced to vacillate to or valiantly fight for a person who supposedly possessed this saint on their side. Catherine of Alexandria (or “Katherine” as it is also often spelled) “was one of the most popular saints in medieval Europe.”¹⁷ She was and is still thought to bring protection against any sudden and or easily avoidable deaths. It would also be important to make note that she was thought of “as a prime example of female prudence, polished reasoning, and persuasive speech.”¹⁸ Any examination of Joan at her trial could deduce that she was a reasonable and benevolent beguiler through

her own “polished reasoning, and persuasive speech.” Very similar characteristics have often been attributed to Margaret of Scotland (or Margaret of Hungary, as she is also often referred to)—another saint that Joan often mentioned. Saint Margaret’s pious fame resulted from her “modesty, mildness of temper, and a great benevolence of disposition.”¹⁹ In her short life, Joan d’Arc perhaps could have been attempting to channel her own inner-Catherine or inner-Margaret. If she purposely identified herself with those saints, then she would have incredibly and purposely strengthened her reputation and claims of divinity.

During the Medieval Period in Europe, many disabilities—mental or physical—were categorized and treated differently by contemporary professionals compared to how doctors would look at those same disabilities today. Any “mental disorder” was believed to have necessitated repairs to “the soul” of the person with the affliction. These apertures in one’s moral fabric were thought to be solvable only through “the counsel of a priest, rather than a physician.”²⁰ This must have been the castor oil of the time for sickly children. It is hard to imagine that any child that would enjoy pilgrimages to their local church to assist in ridding themselves of illness or disability, instead of playing in creeks or meadows; except for maybe a French maiden, who through the sufferance of a disability, was under the belief that she was divinely sent.

This is one of the most intensely debated views of the young shepherd girl turned nation-saver of France—that she could have possibly suffered from a disability. Multiple scholarly sources have narrowed down their scope to support the view that Joan d’Arc had one specific illness: a form of epilepsy. (There are multiple views that conclude she could have possessed various forms of epilepsy, but it is less important to address every form of epilepsy.) An extensive article written by Dr. Barbara Schildkrout, published online in 2017 by *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, supports this view of

Joan. In her article, Dr. Schildkrout agglomerated many sources together to form a consensus that would align itself with her work. However, out of the nine total sources that she referenced, five of them were either from *Epilepsy & Behavior* or *Epilepsia*—journals that focus on anatomical and psychological analysis. One could make the argument that with these numbers, her work possesses a dearth of depth in relation to historical analysis. However, she still was able to provide a perspective on Joan d’Arc that many historical analyzers would most likely not be able to produce. Dr. Schildkrout, in concluding her work, judiciously stated, “(w)hile we will never be certain about Joan’s diagnosis, transcripts of her testimony, no matter how biased, are remarkably consistent with partial seizures.”²¹ In regard to uncertainty that is present in retrospective neurological analysis, she is definitely correct. However, she then references a quote that is also important to note, as it mentions the most obvious of Joan d’Arc perspectives. She stated, “Joan *knew* the voices were from God.”²²

This introduces the most prominent and most simplistic view of Joan, the view that she was sent by God. Similar to the whole picture of Joan, which encompasses all possible perspectives that could explain her visions and voices, even with this particular perspective, there was—for a long period of time—not an absolute consensus on how the Maiden of France should be remembered in relation to Holy Roman Catholicism. In the 15th century, her conviction of heresy and burning at the stake resulted from the propagation of officials in the Catholic Church from within the English-occupied area of France. In the 20th century, during World War I (1914-1918), Joan d’Arc was canonized by the same Church that had condemned her. It is important to see how this occurred and why. This pious view and fate of Joan had many twists and turns that developed over centuries.

In the centuries following after her death, the battle over Joan's legacy with Catholicism was not a pertinent issue. It was not until the late 19th century when those of a religious viewpoint saw Joan d'Arc in two different perspectives and then, a "battle" ensued. First, there was the view held by Catholics and royalists. This group saw Joan as "one sent by God to aid the [French] King."²³ This was the contemporary view held by many in France during Joan's life. Christine de Pizan, an influential French writer of the time, epitomized this view. She once stated, "God has wished to bestow His grace...through a tender virgin."²⁴ Joan was not betrayed by God; her downfall resulted from her overextending herself. This was the cause of her demise from that perspective. The second view, the view of Romantics, perceived Joan as a French martyr; a national symbol of French liberation and bravery. Joan, "the daughter of the people, [was] betrayed by her King and burned by the Church."²⁵ A compromise was eventually met, and hostilities between the two sects ended. The French Maid would be both a symbol of French patriotism, bravery and pride, and a symbol representing the virtuous and pious aspects of Catholicism. Despite this resolution, however, this "(b)attle of Joan of Arc" would continue (with small aftershocks) until 1914. It was in that year when the Catholic Church canonized her, centuries after her death. Her path to sainthood was unique. She was granted sainthood during a time of dire French need: the people of France needed a person to look up to for courage and bravery in the face of hard times during, and immediately after, World War I.

Of the many reasons why this view became the most popular perspective of Joan d'Arc—and remained that way—was the fact that it became popularized through early motion pictures in the first half of the 20th century. One of those many films, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), is still revered and studied. The film, directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer, relies

heavily on French Impressionism (i.e., shots created solely to provide emotion for the scene) to depict the ordeal that Joan underwent while she was imprisoned. It depicts her bravery and reliance on God's protection and wisdom through its imagery and script.²⁶ The movie puts Joan on a high pedestal of devotion and vulnerability, making it easy for audiences to identify with her struggle. At the end of the movie, a man proclaims that they—anybody present at her burning at the stake—had just allowed the murder of a saint. This part of the film is eerily similar to a scene from the Bible when a man shouts after the death of Jesus, “(t)ruly this man was God’s Son!”²⁷

Another one of the many films that has propagated this view of Joan, albeit with more of the Hollywood Style (i.e., shots created solely for the progression of narrative), is *Saint Joan* (1957). The film, which was based off of George Bernard Shaw’s play from 1924, and directed by Otto Preminger, shows a much more mature Joan, a Joan in control. In one scene, she is shown tending to Charles VII like a concerned mother.²⁸ If one is unable to relate to Joan through her piety and vulnerability in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, then films such as *Saint Joan* and similar depictions through other mediums have allowed people to latch on to Joan in another way: as a powerful feminist figure.

Not only has Joan been portrayed on the big screen, but she has also been plastered on canvas and etched in wood. Many works of art show Joan and focus on her piety, her virginity, and her devoutness. One such work of art, by J. William Fosdick in 1896, shows (in figure 1) Joan being prayed for and guided to heaven by angels.²⁹ It would be incredibly difficult to find works of art of many other people in recent history who have been shown in even a similar state of reverence. The divinity of Joan has retained its relevance at the forefront primarily due to images such as these (and films similar to the ones aforementioned), because they present

their audiences with the impression that Joan should be viewed as a religious figure, a respectable pious figure, who died for no malevolent intention.

With all of these viewpoints of Joan d’Arc having been explored, how should a woman with such accomplishments that have inspired many, and will inspire many more to come, be remembered? Joan was not only able to rise to a level of fame in her contemporary time, but she was also able to rise to a level of celebrity that has since lasted far longer than that. Without her overall assistance and leadership prowess it is quite possible that the English forces might have eventually overtaken the rest of France, thus changing the course of history. Joan was a go-getter, she did what she thought she was able to achieve, and more importantly, she acted on what she thought was right and virtuous. A question still remains: what could reasonably explain the visions and voices that Joan herself was adamant that she had experienced? Well, there is not a clear answer to that question as the answer has been hidden by time and a lack of unbiased contemporary information. Any one of these perspectives could be the explanation for Joan’s voices and visions, and this does not mean that any two or even all of them could have—in reality—explained Joan’s proclamations. Whether she lied for her self-benefit, acted on symptoms caused by disability, or even if she was legitimately and divinely chosen by a higher power, Joan d’Arc is a figure whose story, whose struggle, is so universal that she has been meticulously imitated and studied for hundreds of years, and will continue to be studied for hundreds of years to come.

Figure 1.



Endnotes

- ¹ Daniel Hobbins, *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 65-66.
- ² Hobbins, *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, 208.
- ³ Hobbins, *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, 169.
- ⁴ Larissa Juliet Taylor, *The Virgin Warrior: The Life and Death of Joan of Arc*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 14.
- ⁵ Hobbins, *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, 53.
- ⁶ Hobbins, *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, 53.
- ⁷ Hobbins, *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, 206.
- ⁸ Anatole France, *The Life of Joan of Arc, Vol. 1 and 2*, (New York: John Lane Company: MCMIX: October 17, 2006), 30.
- ⁹ Karen Sullivan, *The Interrogation of Joan of Arc*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 22.
- ¹⁰ Sullivan, *The Interrogation of Joan of Arc*, 1.
- ¹¹ George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan: A chronicle play in six scenes and an epilogue*, (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2019), 37.
- ¹² Hobbins, *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, 140.
- ¹³ Régine Pernoud, *The Retrial of Joan of Arc*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 213.
- ¹⁴ Mark Twain, *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2002), 236.
- ¹⁵ Pernoud, *The Retrial of Joan of Arc*, 113.
- ¹⁶ Antonella Palumbo, “Saint James the Greater and Saint Michael Archangel: Historical, Anthropological and Artistic Features in their Routes,” *Almatourism Special Issue No. 6*, (Italy: Chieti Pescara University, 2017), 68.
- ¹⁷ Jacqueline Jenkins and Katherine J. Lewis, *St Katherine of Alexandria: Texts and Contexts in Western Medieval Europe*, (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers n.v., 2003), 2.
- ¹⁸ Emily C. Francomano, “‘Lady, you are quite a chatterbox’: The Legend of St Katherine of Alexandria, Wives’ Words, and Women’s Wisdom in MS Escorial h-I-13,” in Jacqueline

Jenkins and Katherine J. Lewis, eds., *St Katherine of Alexandria: Texts and Contexts in Western Medieval Europe*, (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers n.v., 2003), 136.

¹⁹ Dr. John Geddes, *The Life of Saint Margaret, Queen of Scotland. With some account of her husband, Malcolm III. Surnamed Kean More, and of their children.*, (Aberdeen: J. Chalmers And Co., 1794), 10.

²⁰ Eliza Buhrer, “‘But what is to be said of a fool?’ Intellectual Disability in Medieval Thought and Culture,” in Albrecht Classen, eds., *Mental Health, Spirituality, and Religion in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, (Boston: De Gruyter, Inc., 2014), 318.

²¹ Dr. Barbara Schildkrout, “Joan of Arc--Hearing Voices,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 174, No. 12, (December 1, 2017): 1153-1154.

²² Dr. Schildkrout, “Joan of Arc--Hearing Voices,” 1153-1154.

²³ Gerd Krumeich, “Joan of Arc between left and right,” in Robert Tombs, eds., *Nationhood and Nationalism in France: From Boulangism to the Great War 1889-1914*, (HarperCollinsPublishers, 1992), 66.

²⁴ Christine de Pizan, “The Tale of Joan of Arc,” 254.

²⁵ Gerd Krumeich, “Joan of Arc between left and right,” 69.

²⁶ Carl Theodor Dreyer, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), 44:35.

²⁷ Arnfríður Guðmundsdóttir, “Joan as Jesus: A Feminist Theological Analysis of Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc*,” in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, Vol. 55, No. 4, (December 2016), 372-378.

²⁸ Otto Preminger, *Saint Joan* (1957), 23:00.

²⁹ J. William Fosdick, *Adoration of St. Joan of Arc*, 1896, Fire Etched Wood Relief, 109 ³/₄ in. x 49 ¹/₂, Washington, D.C., U.S.A.