

About the time I began to teach a course in the Women's Studies curriculum (with two daughters just beginning their careers), the US was plunged into conflict over an individual woman's right to decide whether to interrupt her pregnancy. The Washington marches, and long cold mornings picketing to keep the Boston birth control clinics open, combined with teaching new courses from an ever-expanding number of exhilarating texts, made me realize what it might be to bring all one's life's convictions to bear on research, to no longer be a woman well taught to think like a man, severing historical questions from politics.

Nostalgia for the physical settings and the material beauty of medieval works of art has lessened with age, but not my fascination with new interrogations. I feel as though I am answering a new call, one that is difficult and costly and immensely rewarding at the same time. Some feminists have called for help from historical work to dislodge the false unity of "women." Medieval case studies are ideally suited for this, because the dominant notion of sexual difference (the one-sex model as Laqueur has called it) allowed great variation in the construction of masculinities and feminities. And the canon of art history needed changing, not just by adding women and stirring (as artists, as images etc.), but to subvert our patriarchal discourses; in the basic art history survey course, for example, I now depart from the textbook to discuss Hildegard of Bingen's text and image in *Scivias* of ensoulment occurring just as the fully-formed child is ready to enter the birth canal (at that time, the pope who examined her work must have agreed that the soul did not enter the womb at conception). More than feminists, the young in the US need to know that truth claims do ideological work, and to recognize their workings in late capitalism. Enlisted in this project, research/teaching, academe/the "real" world, are no longer binaries that I have to choose between. Nostalgia for the past and longing for the future are the same.

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## **JOAN OF ARC: MANEUVERABLE MEDIEVALISM, FLEXIBLE FEMINISM**

Medievalism is a new transdisciplinary realm of cultural studies inherited from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup> While the nineteenth century fostered medievalism aesthetically, as well as intellectually, in architecture, crafts, painting, and even certain literary genres, we of the late twentieth century have dispensed with the various filigrees and ogees in our more urgent search for origins, identities and reassurances of continuity at all levels. Our medievalistic pursuit has become what Paul Zumthor characterizes as "not a stylistic device, but an intellectual necessity."<sup>2</sup> Like nineteenth-century

medievalism, however, the current interest pursues a popular as well as an elite-scholarly level, particularly in literature and film. Though initially misty and mystical in their allure, medieval topics rapidly lend themselves to rational trappings, such as etiology, etymology, euhemerism or genealogy.

The figure of Joan of Arc endures uniquely as both product and progenitor of the medievalistic impulse, mustering its diverse subdisciplines into her service. Rediscovered and in a sense saved by nineteenth-century medievalism, her presence in turn generated and continues to generate further avenues of similar inquiry, particularly in her shifting political associations.

But what do we really know for certain about her historical reality, as that mythical, adolescent, crossdressing entity (1412-1431) who saved France? Her true words are virtually unavailable, even via the two primary sources: her official letters composed during her campaign and her trial testimony. Since she was most likely illiterate (a debated point) she was obliged to dictate her letters, while her testimony underwent translation into Latin well after the trial by pro-Burgundian clerks. Her best-known contemporary portrait is by a pro-Burgundian notary, Clement of Fauquembergue, who may never have seen her, yet was somehow moved to sketch her, attired in a dress while carrying a sword, in his manuscript's margin. Though in truth not the rustic shepherdess so dear to modern political iconographers, she nonetheless was a daughter of the patriotic French bucolic borderlands (that, too, disputed for political motives: was it Champagne or Lorraine?). Her "supernatural" accomplishments and "unnatural" dress took on greater validity and positive value in light of various Biblical female precedents, hagiography and ancient prophecies. Although she delivered France from the hopeless Orléans siege, this would not suffice as a true miracle for her canonization. Happily it was learned she revived an infant long enough for it to receive last rites at the church in Lagny. She then enraged the Church hierarchy by adhering to her voices and refusing to submit to the Church Militant, "lapsing," abjuring her belief in her voices, then "relapsing"—as symbolized by her dressing as a woman, then resuming male attire—only under extreme physical and mental duress. Yet this same Church would later extol her as one of its great female defenders in France.

The paradoxes proliferate. A virgin, who never called herself "Jeanne d'Arc" but rather "Jeanne la Pucelle" (Joan the Maid), she nonetheless spawned the noble lineage "d'Arc" because of letters patent granted to her family by the king she had crowned. Others claim she was born out of some royal wedlock, which explains how she convinced the Dauphin so easily. While her execution by burning arguably represents the apogee of her life, legend also had it that she escaped to live another twenty years or more while another woman died at the stake in her place. On the other hand, after her burning, witnesses testified that

her heart was found among her ashes, intact and full of blood. And in no other instance has the Church both burned the same person as a heretic and then canonized her, which at least partially explains why her sainthood waited until 1920. As this partial list of incidents and counter-incidents reveals, though historians continue to examine shards of her life, her reality remains elusive.

For these reasons and more, the Maid has captivated the emotions and intellects of a tremendous range of scholars, poets, artists, political ideologues and activists since her mission to save France from the English in 1429. Christine de Pizan, presumably cloistered at Poissy, would be the first to praise her for both political and personal motives during Joan's lifetime. She would be the only female author to write about Joan until the seventeenth century, and the first to expound with any militant force until the nineteenth century. The male clerics and theologians who examined her at Poitiers, less protected by Christine's privileged marginality as a woman writer, hedged their bets even when approving Joan's mission, fearful that any statements favoring this cross-dressing *athleta Christi* might return to haunt them, just as Joan's words at Poitiers were indeed used against her at the Rouen trial. They were thus not recommending her as proto-"sensitive males" but for reasons of political expediency; yet the statements of some of them, notably Jean Gerson and Jacques Gelu, would fuel later encomia like Christine's.

Joan's death in 1431 transcends that of all other martyrs except for Christ. Like Anita Hill in our time, even though she lost in court, her cause triumphed. The English were expelled ca. 1456; Charles VII, her unhelpful dauphin, became known as "the Victorious." When the French "rehabilitated" Joan that same year, it was not for the heroine's sake but rather for the newly-triumphant nation's collective conscience: witness the uneasy silence following what should have been a joyous event. Only François Villon, a poet not usually known for his feminist sentiments, had anything interesting and daring to say about her when he stressed her universal goodness as "la bonne Lorraine." In fact, up until the early nineteenth century, the French both knowingly and unwittingly buried her, with very few exceptions, under pages of mediocre literature, condescending histories and amateurish scholarship. After Villon, the most gifted writer to touch upon her was unfortunately Voltaire, whose rabid anti-Catholicism reduced her to some sort of clerical female *Candide*. Even her trial records festered, unedited, until the 1830's. Here is where medievalism enters to deliver her.

Schiller's famous romantic drama, *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* (1802), though it does not even have her burn at the stake but rather die in the Dauphin's arms, aroused the literate public to her idealistic presence—and also German philologists to her untouched trial records. When it was learned that the

brilliant German scholar, Guido Goerres, was about to edit and thus appropriate the “relics” of their heroine, the French quickly founded their own historical preservation society and enlisted the efforts of the young Jules Quicherat to beat Goerres to the punch. Quicherat’s five-volume edition of the trial records plus literary and historical citation attracted a readership ranging from Mark Twain to Alexandre Dumas. The interests of cultural nationalism were furthered in the work of Quicherat’s more famous mentor, Jules Michelet, who published on and also taught her life in parallelism with that of Christ. Michelet, the controversial new-historian of his day, would change later versions of his biography of Joan in accordance with his shifting religious beliefs, from ardently catholic to more republican (i.e., secular, rationalist). His passionate, patriotic, semi-mystical biography remains the most influential in Johannic writing. Joan’s femaleness for him allegorized French virtues (compassion, purity, self-sacrifice) essential for a great national destiny. His daughter of France would simultaneously crystallize the country’s self-image as much as it would her own identity. Paradoxically, this Joan would be disputed both by right-wing catholics anxious to make her a national saint and centrist republicans in search of a national guardian. Her long-delayed canonization, finally precipitated after First-World-War French soldiers reported her spectre coming to console them in the trenches, partially appeased France’s religious right, embittered by the 1905 separation of Church and state.

Many later authors, whether European, American, Latin-American, Maltese, Scandinavian or Japanese, would appropriate Joan, each for his or her own needs, whether political or personal. Volumes can be written examining the attitudes of various historical figures and their image of Joan in relation to their ideas and achievements, some more puzzling than others. For example, we can understand the young Indira Gandhi idolizing her, while wondering more at Rimbaud’s choice of her over all male martyrs as his model for a victim of persecution in *Une Saison en Enfer*.<sup>3</sup>

Politically she represented alternately right- and left-wing causes throughout the modern era, with the right taking her over the more successfully, first with the Action Française in the 1890’s, then during Vichy, and now as we observe in the case of Le Pen’s 1992 re-adoption of her. Such universal appropriation seems to have been motivated by each party’s need, at some point, to assume an androgynous absolute, embodying the physical and intellectual power of man with the purity and fecundity of woman, as a symbol of its ideological destiny.

If all Joan’s significations as described thus far appear decidedly non-feminist, it is because they are, especially in her native country. Only outside France would she gain widespread acceptance as a feminist symbol, particularly in Britain and the United States. This is because she was taken over by the Church and conservative political factions so early on in her political-iconographical

ontogenesis that she became inextricable from these causes within France, probably going back to the Dauphin's propagandists, eager to protect her eccentric appearance from pro-English accusations of witchcraft and harlotry. Such claims not only threatened her reputation but also, more seriously, tainted the legitimacy of Charles VII's accession to the throne after Orléans. Outside France, such affiliations never took hold, thus allowing modern British (as distinct from Joan's enemies, the *Englicherie*) and American admirers to focus on her idealistic connotation as secular militant female savior.

As her image has sifted down through the various cultural strata, Joan has served as protectress of British suffragettes and patron saint of women gymnasts. Still lower down the scale, she has unwittingly lent her name and image to everything from a silverware pattern and label of Brie cheese to a brand of pork and beans.

Fortunately for her political posterity at least M. Le Pen has just seen fit to replace her on his party's letterhead with a more masculine, Catholic, Germanic, yet equally "French" figure, that of Clovis, king of the Franks, baptized in 496.<sup>4</sup> Thus quietly disowned, Joan no longer has to align herself with the sexism, religious intolerance, racism, genocide and jingoism inherent in fascist ideology—at least, not until her next appropriation.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Marina Brownlee, Kevin Brownlee and Stephen G. Nichols, eds., *The New Medievalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); William D. Paden, ed., *The Future of The Middle Ages* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994) and R. Howard Bloch and Stephen G. Nichols, eds., *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> *Parler du Moyen Age* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), cited in R. Howard Bloch, "The Once and Future Middle Ages," *Modern Language Quarterly* 54:1 (1993), 71.

<sup>3</sup> For full bibliographical references to the authors alluded to in this essay, see my *Joan of Arc in History, Literature, and Film* (New York: Garland, 1990), esp. nos. 238, 1048, 895, 893, 1060, 1163, 1221, 100, 1235, 1196, 1425, 1216.

<sup>4</sup> For a deft, lucid interpretation of the Joan-Clovis rivalry in the FN's political symbolism, see Adam Gopnick, "Paris Journal: The First Frenchman," *The New Yorker* (Oct. 7, 1996): 44-53.