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Breaking the Mold: Joan of Arc's Unyielding Individuality

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BREAKING THE MOLD:
JOAN OF ARC'S UNYIELDING INDIVIDUALITY

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Western Civilization
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When asked to describe her experience growing up with Joan of Arc, Isabellette d'Epinal stated, "We never saw her in the street, but she stayed in church, praying; she did not dance, to the point that the other youth would often talk about it."¹ Even as a young child, Joan of Arc stood out from her peers because of her unconventional lifestyle. While other children played, Joan went to church and practiced a pious lifestyle, which became increasingly influential later in her life. As she grew older, Joan of Arc became known for her unusual dress, piety, and leadership. These aspects of Joan's personality have been studied independently by historians,² but through a comprehensive study of these characteristics, it becomes clear that Joan stood out from her peers because of the strict obstinacy with which she maintained her unique lifestyle. Her mannerisms caught the attention of her English rivals and even the French, whom she fought to protect. Because of Joan's unyielding individuality in dress, faith, and guidance of others, Joan of Arc's French and English peers saw her as a threat.

Growing up in the peasantry of Domrémy-la-Pucelle, France in the fifteenth century, Joan of Arc had an unconventional childhood. She was born amongst the chaos of the Lancastrian phase of the Hundred Years' War, a dispute over the French throne that pitted

¹Régine Pernoud, *The Retrial of Joan of Arc: The Evidence at the Trial For Her Rehabilitation 1450 - 1456*, trans. J.M. Cohen (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), 76.

²See for example Anne Llewellyn Barstow, "Joan of Arc and Female Mysticism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1, no. 2 (1985), <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/25002016>, Beverly Boyd, review of *Joan of Arc: Heretic, Mystic, Shaman, Studies in Women and Religion*, by Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Mystics Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1992), <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/20717126>, and Gail K. Hart, "Re-dressing History: Mother Nature, Mother Isabeau, the Virgin Mary, and Schiller's Jungfrau," *Women in German Yearbook* 14 (1998): 92, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/20688873>.

France against the English and their Burgundian allies. Throughout her childhood, Joan of Arc's pious mother, Isabelle Romée, instilled in Joan a strong devotion to the Catholic Church. At the early age of thirteen, Joan had her first experience of mysticism, an intimate spiritual connection leading to revelation. Claiming to follow directions sent by God, Joan of Arc set out to lead the French in battle in order to install Charles of Valois as king. With persistence, Joan gained an audience with the dauphin Charles and received approval to lead an army to Orléans, which had been under siege by the English. She succeeded in her military endeavors, especially in lifting the siege of Orléans in less than nine days. Joan of Arc and her troops successfully led Charles VII to Reims for his coronation in 1429. However, when Joan was ordered to confront a Burgundian assault on Compiègne, she was thrown off of her horse and captured by Anglo-Burgundian forces. In 1431, she was tried for heresy by an English Church court led by Bishop Pierre Cauchon and burned at the stake. Adding to this chaos, the Church was torn by the Western Schism, with three claimants to the papacy. During these tumultuous times, Joan of Arc caused controversy through her unorthodox beliefs and practices.

The English ecclesiastical court in Rouen, Normandy condemned Joan's proclivity for dressing in men's clothing, fearing her strong opposition to the Church's values. Fifteenth-century European society expected women to dress appropriately in gowns and dresses, so Joan's "putting off the habit and dress of the female sex...[was] contrary to divine law, abominable to God, condemned and prohibited by every law."³ Thus, because she did not wear women's clothes throughout her military expeditions and trial, Joan had committed a severe

³Coley Taylor and Ruth H. Kerr, *The Trial Of Jeanne D'Arc*, trans. W.P. Barrett (Gotham House Inc, 1932), 16.

offense against the Church. In *The Trial Of Jeanne D'Arc*, Pierre Cauchon punishes Joan for this infringement of divine law. The court decides that “in view of the crimes of which this woman was defamed, especially the impropriety of the garments to which she clung, it was their opinion that we should properly defer permission for her to hear Mass and attend the divine offices.”⁴ Therefore, the English ecclesiastical court attempted to delegitimize Joan’s reputation as a devout follower of God by not allowing her to attend mass because she did not follow the ordinances of the Church. The reasoning behind this punishment is further depicted when the Bishop states, “The said Jeanne [Joan], forgetful of her salvation and at the instigation of the Devil, is not and has not been ashamed...to receive the Body of Christ in dissolute male attire, a costume forbidden and prohibited her by the command of God and the Church.”⁵ This description of Joan suggests that the Church saw women who did not adhere to its standard of dress as wicked or influenced by the Devil. The events of Joan’s trial as recorded by the court in *The Trial Of Jeanne D'Arc* clearly portray Joan in a negative light. While there is some bias in it since it is a translation of Joan’s trial manuscript as recorded by her English enemies, the document remains an enlightening and useful source in understanding English hostility towards Joan. Because the court condemned Joan throughout the trial for dressing like a man, many historians agree that the English killed Joan for the unorthodox way she dressed. In “Why the Medieval Trial of Joan of Arc Is of Particular Interest Today,” Susan Tiefenbrun concludes that Joan’s unusual clothing was detrimental to her life. Tiefenbrun states, “Thus, it was not unusual for a pious woman to hear voices from God. But wearing men’s clothing...was unusual in the

⁴Ibid., 36.

⁵Ibid., 195.

Middle Ages and cost Joan her life.”⁶ Gail K. Hart agrees with Tiefenbrun’s conclusion, stating, “Joan of Arc’s executioners burned off her clothes and exposed her naked body to establish her femaleness *and* femininity.”⁷ Hart asserts that the English made a point of establishing Joan’s wrongdoing in crossdressing by revealing her femininity at her execution. Thus, these scholars claim that Joan’s forbidden way of dressing instigated her death sentence. While it is important for historians to study Joan’s clothing decisions, they must also consider the different trends in her behavior in order to understand the context in which others viewed her actions.

Although Joan’s clothing went against the Church’s standards, her stubborn disobedience and rejection of the Church’s instructions heightened the tensions surrounding the issue. During the trial, the court gave Joan a script to read in front of a crowd of people including the clergy that stated, “I confess that I have most grievously sinned...in wearing a dissolute, ill-shaped and immodest dress against the decency of nature, and hair cropped round like a man's, against all the modesty of womankind.”⁸ However, four days after making this public confession, Joan reverted back to wearing men’s clothing. When she read the scripted confession, the Church pardoned Joan of her sin, but after she relapsed, the Church quickly proceeded with convicting Joan of this sin. The ease with which the Church was able to overlook Joan’s clothing demonstrates that the Church was more troubled by Joan’s disobedience of their

⁶Susan Tiefenbrun, "Why the Medieval Trial of Joan of Arc Is of Particular Interest Today," *Journal of Law and Religion* 21, no. 2 (2006): 469, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/30040603>.

⁷Gail K. Hart, “Re-dressing History: Mother Nature, Mother Isabeau, the Virgin Mary, and Schiller’s Jungfrau,” *Women in German Yearbook* 14 (1998): 101, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/20688873>.

⁸Taylor and Kerr, *The Trial Of Jeanne D'Arc*, 344.

orders than by her choice of clothing. Joan of Arc refused to submit herself to the clothing standards set for females, which inadvertently switched the focus of her trial from her clothing choices to her refusal to follow the Church's orders. Had she repented and given in to the orders of the Church to wear women's clothing, Joan would have lived longer. When asked why she chose to wear men's dress she stated, "Everything I have said or done is in God's hands, and I commit myself to Him. I certify to you that I would do or say nothing contrary to the Christian faith, and if I had said or done anything, or if anything were found on me, which the clerks should declare to be against the Christian faith established by Our Lord, I would not uphold it."⁹ In this statement, it is clear that Joan believed she was maintaining her own faith in God by not giving in to the expectations of the court. This posed an even greater threat to the Church than her actual clothing because it undermined the Church's power and authority. The court condemned Joan for her disobedience by stating, "And although you have many times been admonished to put it off, you would not, saying that you would rather die than put off this dress, unless it were God's command."¹⁰ In this accusation, the Church felt threatened by Joan's crossdressing because Joan blatantly disregarded the Church's authority over her. By refusing to adhere to the Church's rules, Joan threatened the hierarchy of power that the Church rested on. Although the court disapproved of Joan's choice of clothing, her accusers were even more concerned with her unyielding disobedience to their orders and used it to justify her death sentence.

⁹Ibid., 233.

¹⁰Ibid., 332.

In addition to her unusual style, Joan of Arc also threatened the papacy through her role as a mystic and her sole devotion to God. After her first experience of mysticism at the age of thirteen, Joan frequently saw visions of Saint Michael, Saint Catherine, and Saint Margaret. Joan believed in a “voice [that] comes from God.”¹¹ Rather than practicing religion through the systematic Church, Joan fostered an intimate connection with God through the visions He sent her. Once again, Joan tested the authority of the Church with this individualistic choice. Bishop Pierre Cauchon of Beauvais, the judge of the trial, condemned Joan because she “would submit to none except God Himself and the blessed ones of the triumphant land, and spurned the judgment of our Holy Father the Pope, of the Council General and of, all the Church Militant.”¹² Although the court punished her for it, Joan maintained her individual experience of God’s presence by listening to the voices He sent her rather than by submitting to the normal hierarchy of the church. She continued to defy her accusers throughout the trial. For example, when asked to submit her deeds of piety, Joan continued to assert that she would only follow God’s will and not the established Church, stating, “I will maintain that manner of speech which I always said and held in the trial.”¹³ In this statement, Joan ignored the judge’s demands and displayed a lack of care toward following directions from all others besides God. John Weakland summarizes the individuality of mysticism that prompted the Church’s disapproval of Joan of Arc. Weakland

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., 375.

¹³Ibid., 340.

states, “Mysticism is inherently anti-authoritarian because it is so intensely individualized.”¹⁴ Therefore, since Joan of Arc’s practices involved private inspiration from God, she caused outrage in the established church. During Joan’s trial, the judge claimed that Joan “misled the Catholic people”¹⁵ through her fame as a mystic. By practicing religion in her own way and refusing to submit to the orders of the court, Joan publicly repudiated the need for established religion, threatening the Church. In attempt to alleviate Joan of Arc’s practices, which threatened the already weakened Church, officials commented that Joan’s “life coincided with an outbreak of heresy...immediately attributed to the Devil.”¹⁶ This statement indicates that Joan’s accusers used the Devil as an excuse for her actions since she acted against the will of the Church. It is important to note that they came to this realization because, as Boyd states, “Her enemies could have found no other explanation for the defeat of the English armies at the hands of a woman than the presence of the Devil.”¹⁷ Rather than attributing Joan of Arc’s accomplishments to her skill or the blessing of God, medieval French society attributed her work to the Devil. The frequent explanation of Joan’s actions as a product of the Devil emphasizes the overwhelming insecurity that the Church and enemy troops felt toward Joan of Arc because of her defiance of their jurisdiction.

¹⁴John E. Weakland, review of *Joan of Arc: Heretic, Mystic, Shaman*, by Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Church History* 56, no. 4 (1987): 526, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/3166439>.

¹⁵Taylor and Kerr, *The Trial Of Jeanne D'Arc*, 215.

¹⁶Beverly Boyd, review of *Joan of Arc: Heretic, Mystic, Shaman*, by Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Mystics Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1992): 104, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/20717126>.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

Despite the fact that mystics were not uncommon in fifteenth century France, Joan of Arc remained a threatening force to both the English and the French because she incorporated leadership into her pious and visionary powers. For example, Joan used the advice given to her by God to become a war commander. Pierre Cauchon led an accusation against Joan in the trial because “the said Jeanne, against the bidding of God and His Saints, proudly and presumptuously assumed domination over men; she appointed herself leader and captain of an army.”¹⁸ Cauchon’s specific use of the word “men” rather than the more inclusive term of “people” illustrates the abnormality of a female war commander in the fifteenth century. Joan’s role as a female leader of an army along with the fact that her army defeated the English in pivotal battles, such as the Siege of Orléans, threatened England’s role as a leader in the region. In response, the English attempted to discredit her piety and success by stating that she went against the will of God. Scholars agree that recognizing Joan’s great skill, “the judges must have gone in fear and trembling to the opening of the trial in the heart of the English military headquarters.”¹⁹ Therefore, Joan’s unprecedented expertise as a female military commander posed a threat to the English court. As Joan became a stronger leader, she also gradually became a threat to Charles. Although Charles’ counselors and generals strongly advised him to deny Joan’s requests, after Joan had pleaded unrelentingly with him, Charles gave her the opportunity to lead a French army. Joan’s unmoving dedication paid off because eventually, as Barstow states, “Castles, towns, entire cities went over to King Charles’ allegiance because of [Joan’s]

¹⁸Taylor and Kerr, *The Trial Of Jeanne D'Arc*, 216.

¹⁹Deborah Fraioli, "The Literary Image of Joan of Arc: Prior Influences," *Speculum* 56, no. 4 (1981): 821, doi:10.2307/2847364.

courage and magical abilities.”²⁰ Barstow takes into account the perspective of groups other than the English on Joan of Arc, showing that even though English rulers tried to depict Joan’s motives as demonically inspired, Joan gained a large following of French and other non-English people by listening to the instructions of her voices. Her range of influence included not only individual followers but also entire cities. After her remarkable series of victories, Joan of Arc tried to persuade Charles to attempt to retake Paris. However, Charles and his court advisor Georges de La Trémoille were concerned about the vast amount of influence that Joan of Arc was beginning to have over the French people since, as Weakland explains, she “was more than a mystic. She became for her compatriots a shaman, a salvific leader.”²¹ Joan’s unusual role as a mystical leader threatened the legitimacy of Charles’ crown. When Joan of Arc was put on trial by the English ecclesiastical court, Charles and the French did not even attempt to help her because they were scared of the immense power that she had gained and did not want to be associated with Joan’s idiosyncratic personality. The transcript of Joan’s trial states, “He [Charles] did not know how to profit by all the consequences of the national movement that was aroused by Jeanne's advent.”²² Even though Joan had aided Charles in becoming king of France, Charles abandoned her because she was no longer of use and a growing threat to his power. Because of Joan of Arc’s unique position as a persevering leader, both the English and the French became cautious and threatened by Joan of Arc.

²⁰Anne Llewellyn Barstow, "Joan of Arc and Female Mysticism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1, no. 2 (1985): 33, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/25002016>.

²¹John E. Weakland, review of *Joan of Arc: Heretic, Mystic, Shaman*, 526.

²²Coley Taylor and Ruth H. Kerr, *The Trial Of Jeanne D'Arc*, 389.

Through her unconventional dress, worship, and leadership and her obstinate adherence to these practices, Joan of Arc broke social expectations of gender and religion, threatening both English and French supporters. Many scholars have closely studied Joan and the enigma of her distinctive choices in wearing men's clothing, connecting privately with God, and leading an army of men. Looking at the individual instances of these actions, it may seem that Joan's many controversial decisions are what made her stand out. However, viewing Joan's behavior through a wider lens reveals that it was not her choices but rather her pattern of relentless dedication to adhering to these choices that threatened others. By using this approach to analyze the field of scholarship on Joan, which has remained stagnant in the past several decades, we can begin to better understand the unique traits of Joan's case that differentiated her from her peers. By maintaining her own values even under harsh pressures, Joan became a powerful believer who wouldn't be controlled by those around her. Her steadfastness in beliefs gave her an influence unlike that of any other woman in the fifteenth century. This allowed Joan to mobilize others, bringing awareness to issues of diversity in religion and expression that still remain today.

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