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Smoke and Mirrors



JOAN OF ARC: A FRENCH (FLIGHT OF) FANCY

MANY ACCOUNTS OF Joan of Arc portray her as a heroine of the early fifteenth century. They tell of her leading the French armies to countless victories over the English invaders and their Burgundian allies before she was captured and burned as a witch in the marketplace of Rouen. But in fact, among other things, it seems she wasn't French, she never commanded any army or even fought in battle, and she was not executed for witchcraft. So how did such inaccuracies build to create this iconic character?

She was born in 1412 at Domrémy in Lorraine, an independent duchy not assimilated into France until 1766. Her father was Jacques Darce, his name variously presenting as Darx, Darc and even Tarce but not d'Arc, as the apostrophe was never used in fifteenth-century French names and there was no such place as Arc from which he could have hailed. Her mother was Isabelle de Vouthon, and both she and Jacques elected to be known by the surname of Romée, though it is unclear which of them, if either, had undertaken the pilgrimage to Rome to qualify for such usage. Their daughter was christened Jehannette, not Jeanne/Joan, and it was not until the nineteenth century

that the epithet Jeanne d'Arc or Joan of Arc appeared through a misreading of Darc; during her alleged lifetime she was referred to as *La Pucelle*, 'The Maid'. The Romées were not of simple peasant stock; Jacques was a highly successful farmer and leading citizen who allegedly threatened to 'strangle her [Jehannette] with my own hands if she goes into France'. From that, if nothing else, we may safely assume that the people of Domrémy considered themselves to be anything but French.

Much that is told of Jehannette comes from chronicles discovered in Notre Dame in the nineteenth century, but not everyone is convinced that these documents are genuine. According to Roger Caratini, regarded by some to be one of France's most prestigious historians:

I'm very much afraid that precious little of what we French have been taught in school about Joan of Arc is true ... She was, it seems, almost entirely the creation of France's desperate need for a patriotic mascot in the nineteenth century. The country wanted a hero, the myths of the revolution were altogether too bloody, and France more or less invented the story of its patron saint. The reality is, sadly, a little different ... Joan of Arc played no role, or at best only a very minor one, in the Hundred Years War. She was not the liberator of Orléans for the simple reason that the city was never besieged. And the English had nothing to do with her death. I'm afraid it was the Inquisition and the University of

Paris that tried and sentenced her ... I'm afraid the fact of the matter is that we were the ones who killed our national hero. We may have a problem with the English, but as far as Joan's concerned, we really shouldn't.

IMAGINARY VOICES

Little interest was shown in the shadowy figure of 'Joan' – even in France – until Napoleon decided to resurrect her as a cult figure. But if she really did lead her sub-commanders to such stunning victories in the Hundred Years War, where are all the glowing testimonies from them? All we really have is a vague tale of a young woman who heard voices and 'saw things'. She is said to have claimed that her two main 'voices' were those of St Margaret of Antioch and St Catherine of Alexandria and while in her time the reality of these two was accepted, it has since been established beyond the doubt of even the most fervent hagiophile that neither in fact existed. This leaves us with a likely fictitious heroine allegedly guided by the voices of two other women who did not exist. But none of this prevented her from being canonized in 1920.

Caratini is by no means alone in thinking Joan a nineteenth-century invention or, at best, ‘one of many maids who followed the army, carrying a banner on the same daily pay as an archer’. France at the time was in turmoil. Assisted by their allies, the Burgundians, the English were in control of vast swathes of the country, resulting in the French court relocating to the safety of Chinon in the Loire. If the entire legend is to be accepted at face value, then we are required to believe that an uneducated sixteen-year-old farm girl, who could barely write her own name, simply rode down to Chinon and, having unerringly picked out the Dauphin who was hiding among his own courtiers to test her, told him of her ‘voices’ and repeated a few prophecies before sauntering out as a battle commander. Even if the Dauphin had been daft enough to make such an appointment, is it realistic to believe that the battle-hardened troops assigned to her banner would have meekly followed, given that she knew nothing of tactics and weaponry?

Had the Maid been the stuff of her own legend, it is puzzling that the first biographical work purporting to detail her life was not written until the seventeenth century by Edmond Richer, head of the Faculty of Theology at the Sorbonne in Paris, his manuscript lying unpublished in archives until 1911. After Richer, the next to tackle the subject was Nicolas Lenglet Du Fresnoy in 1753, followed another century later by Jules Quicherat, who beavered away to produce a five-volume work that



most accept as the definitive work on the Maid's life, trial and death. But on what foundations do these three works rely? One from the seventeenth century, a second from the eighteenth century and a final work from the nineteenth century hardly constitute an unbroken chain of observation and assessment leading back to the early fifteenth century.

There are more than a few misconceptions attached to the legend of her trial, which did not result from accusations of witchcraft raised against her by the French Inquisition, a precursor to the more infamous Spanish Inquisition. According to the aforementioned Notre Dame documents, the only representative of that