Joan of Arc: Myth and Reality

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Joan of Arc is the most famous woman who lived in the fifteenth century and, perhaps inevitably, her posthumous reputation is based on a bewildering mixture of legend and reality. According to tradition, this obscure French peasant, responding to the instructions of a trio of dead saints (who continually and mysteriously communicated with her), dressed in male attire, talked her way into the French court in February 1429, deeply impressed the neurotic and indecisive French king Charles VII, and so put the wind up an English army besieging Orleans that its commanders abandoned the siege early in May 1429. Thereafter, once she had persuaded Charles VII that he was not a bastard, but rather the true Valois king of France, she supervised his crowning and anointing at Reims in July 1429. Sadly, during the next few months, luck (or, possibly, her angelic voices) deserted her; she was captured by hostile Burgundian troops in May 1430; and their commanders promptly sold her to Burgundy's English allies. The English, alarmed both by her heroic deeds and her already formidable reputation, engineered her trial and condemnation as a witch and a heretic before a rigged Inquisitorial commission. Finally, at the end of May 1431, she was burned at the stake in the Old Market Place of Rouen, thereby ensuring her future place in French history as both a heroine and a martyr.

Contemporary and near-contemporary commentators brought in contrasting verdicts on Joan of Arc and historians have continued to disagree about her ever since. According to an anonymous Burgundian chronicler of the time, Joan (a simple peasant girl) did make a tremendous impact on the court of Charles VII and played a major role both in inspiring the Valois king personally and forcing the English to raise the siege of Orleans:

With the Maid in arms and always near [to help] him with a great number of men under her command, the Dauphin [Charles VII] acquired new courage. He began to conquer fortified places and regions through the exploits and the prowess of the Maid whose fame was spreading everywhere. A mere word or summons from her was sufficient to determine a fortress to surrender. Her marvellous deeds [inspired] the belief and hope that here was something divine. She did astonishing feats of arms with her bodily strength [and] admonished her troops in the name of Jesus.¹

This article has its genesis in a lecture written for a Joan of Arc Evening organised by my former colleague Dr Peter Davies at the University of Huddersfield.

Yet, according to another contemporary Burgundian commentator Enguerrand de Monstrelet, for a long time neither the king nor his counsellors put much faith in this young maiden who ‘dressed just like a man’: indeed, they ‘considered her to be out of her right mind’. Moreover, although he tells us that the English ‘had never been so much afraid of any captain or commander in war as they were of the Maid’, he also warns us not to forget that, at Orleans, Joan ‘had with her all or most of the noble knights and captains who had been in the city throughout the siege’. And, in his description of Charles VII’s coronation at Reims, he makes no mention of Joan of Arc at all.2

Even before Joan’s capture, trial and execution, French writers were beginning to sing her praises, most notably the elderly proto-feminist Christine de Pisan. Within a fortnight of the king’s coronation, she addressed Charles VII with great firmness on the subject of Joan’s contribution to his recent successes:

And you, Charles, King of France ... now see your honour exalted by the Maid, who has laid low your enemies, [for] it was believed quite impossible that you should ever recover your country, which you were on the point of losing. Now it is manifestly yours ... And all this has been brought about by the intelligence of the Maid ...

As for Joan herself, Christine could hardly contain her enthusiasm:

And you, Blessed Maid ... God honoured you so much that you untied the rope which held France tightly bound ... You, Joan, born in a propitious hour, blessed be He who created you! Maiden sent from God, into whom the Holy Spirit poured His great grace.

What Christine de Pisan particularly wished to emphasise, however, was God’s choice of a woman as France’s saviour. Joan, she declared, had been:

... miraculously sent by divine command and conducted by an angel of the Lord to the king, in order to help him ... Oh, how clear this was at the siege of Orleans, where her power was first made manifest! ... Oh, what an honour for the female sex! It is perfectly obvious that God has special regard for it when all these wretched people who destroyed the whole kingdom — now recovered and made safe by a woman, something that 5000 men could not have done — have been exterminated. [And] has she not led the king with her own hand to his coronation? ...3

Clearly, Joan of Arc’s capture, trial and martyrdom (if such it was) have been even more important in establishing her posthumous reputation as the saviour of France. As early as 1435 we hear of the people of Orleans flocking

in procession through the streets of the city in celebration of their deliverance from the English, so inaugurating a tradition still maintained today. In 1435, too, the political/military tide turned sharply in France’s favour when Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy abandoned the long-standing Anglo-Burgundian alliance and gave his powerful backing to Charles VII instead. Even so, it was not until 1449 that the final collapse of the English empire in France really got underway. Crucial here was the English loss of the Norman town of Rouen in October 1449. This was crucial, too, in setting in motion moves to rehabilitate Joan of Arc, for it had been at Rouen that she had suffered death by burning in 1431. Charles VII solemnly entered the city in December 1449 and, soon afterwards, announced the setting up of an enquiry into Joan’s trial and condemnation:

Whereas formerly Joan the Maid was captured and taken prisoner by our ancient enemies and opponents the English; and whereas they set up a case against her by the agency of certain persons nominated and appointed by them; in which case they committed such wrongs and abuses that as a result of this case and of the great hatred that her enemies had for her, they iniquitously, cruelly and in defiance of all justice put her to death: we wish to know the truth of this matter and to learn the manner in which the proceedings were conducted.

It had certainly taken the king long enough to get round to it, although, arguably, given Joan’s role in 1429 (particularly, perhaps, at his coronation), it was inevitable that sooner or later her post-1431 status as a relapsed heretic had to be addressed. Even then several more years were to elapse before, in July 1456, the verdict of 1431 was at last declared to be:

... contaminated with fraud, calumny, wickedness, contradictions and manifest errors of fact and law and, together with the abjuration, the execution and all their consequences, to have been and to be null, without value or effect, and to be quashed...4

Half a century later, by order of the then French king Louis XII, the first of many biographies of Joan of Arc was commissioned and written. Its anonymous author certainly recognised the difficulty of the task confronting him:

At the present time in France princes and nobles, the lords and the people, interest and concern themselves with the deeds and works of Joan who called herself the Maid. But they dispute and argue... Some accept and approve what she said and affirmed, namely, that all the work she did was by command of God. Others speak of her serious errors against faith, how she cast wicked spells and how, when the evil she did was pointed out to her, she was neither penitent nor repentant.

Despite the fact that 'chronicles differ and disagree' no event in French history is 'so remarkable or memorable' as the story of Joan of Arc, and none 'more deserving to be written down and kept as a lasting memory by the French'. As far as this early biographer was concerned, she was condemned and executed 'unjustly and through hatred'. He believed 'good resulted from all the enterprises' Charles VII 'ventured on at the prompting of the Maid' and she should be celebrated as a God-sent heroine who rescued France from the horrors of English oppression.

During the succeeding five centuries Joan of Arc has continued to attract considerable attention, both from admirers and denigrators. For critics, she has tended to be a figure of ridicule: an ignorant peasant girl, probably with transvestite tendencies, who pushed herself into the political sphere (where she had no right to be) and suffered an essentially political trial and execution as a result. William Shakespeare, for instance, in *Henry VI Part 1* (a play strongly flavoured by Elizabethan jingoism) portrayed her, on capture by the English, as an 'ugly witch' and 'enchantress', a 'goodly prize' but only 'fit for the devil's grace', while, in the eighteenth century, Voltaire was scarcely less disparaging. For admirers Joan of Arc has always tended to be the great French heroine of her first biographer. Napoleon Bonaparte, for instance, felt moved to declare in 1803:

> United, the French Nation has never been conquered. The illustriousness of Joan of Arc has proved that there is no miracle that cannot be accomplished by the genius of the French when the National Independence is threatened.

The republican Jules Michelet, in 1833, similarly extolled her virtues as the very embodiment of French nationalism. Even the American novelist Mark Twain could not conceal his admiration, portraying her, indeed, as a veritable American school teacher in armour! For the Roman Catholic Church she long posed difficult problems: after all, one ecclesiastical tribunal had condemned her in 1431, while another had rehabilitated her in 1456. Eventually, her sanctity won the day. In 1869 the then bishop of Orleans petitioned the Vatican to canonize Joan and, for several years thereafter, Rome was bombarded with letters singing her praises as a pious, upright figure whose saintly credentials were well nigh unimpeachable. In 1893 Pope Leo XIII declared Joan to be Venerable; in 1909 Pope Pius X topped that up to Blessed; and, in 1920, Pope Benedict XV finally authorized her canonization. For English people, too, she has not proved easy to handle: after all, she was instrumental in inaugurating the sequence of events that ultimately resulted in English humiliation and defeat in France. Yet she has always had her supporters, strange though they have sometimes been. The suffragettes in the early twentieth century, for instance, soon recognised her potential usefulness: thus, when Emmeline Pankhurst was

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released from Holloway prison in 1908, a victory procession featured a Joan of Arc look-alike dressed in full armour; as for her daughter Christabel, not only did she occasionally quote Joan in her speeches but also approved of being herself known as the Maiden Warrior. The playwright George Bernard Shaw, as an Irishman, obviously found no difficulty in portraying Joan sympathetically and giving his play *Saint Joan* a powerful anti-English flavour: perhaps not surprisingly, when first staged in London in 1924, it flopped (despite an acclaimed performance by Sybil Thorndike as the saint). Even in England, though, romance can sometimes get the better of xenophobia, as in Alice Buchan’s 1948 study of *Joan of Arc and the Recovery of France*. Joan of Arc, she concluded:

... embodied in herself the sturdy self-reliance and the shrewd realism that were to become characteristics of a great nation. She lived her short life intensely and met a terrible death in order that her country’s soul might grow. Her vision endures; her unquenchable gaiety and her obstinate courage have passed into the soil of France and into the blood of Frenchmen.7

Since her canonization, Joan has been courted right across the French political spectrum: the Right has stressed her impeccable nationalist credentials; the Centre has approved her attachment to order; and even the Left has picked up on Joan’s humble origins.

Is it possible to discover the real Joan of Arc? The first essential is to place her firmly into the context of the Hundred Years War. Henry V was probably the greatest English general before Marlborough in the early eighteenth century; his great success at Agincourt in 1415, even if not of the king’s own making, thoroughly humiliated the French; and, as a result, the English gained a reputation for invincibility in the field that was to last until the catastrophic defeat of Henry VI’s forces at Formigny in 1450. Following Agincourt, between 1417 and 1420, Henry V systematically conquered Normandy and, before 1420 was out, he had gained control of a great swathe of northern France. Clearly, the intermittent insanity of France’s king Charles VI helped a good deal, not least in helping give rise to factionalism and civil war: in particular, the assassination of Duke John the Fearless of Burgundy in 1419 so angered the new duke, Philip the Good, that he promptly allied with Henry V. The result of all this was the Treaty of Troyes in 1420, under the terms of which not only did Henry V secure Charles VI’s daughter Catherine of Valois as his wife but it was agreed that, on the French king’s death, the crown of France should pass to Henry V and his heirs (with Henry acting as regent, in the meantime, for the now hopelessly insane Charles VI). Both Henry V and Charles VI died in 1422; the infant Henry VI, Henry V’s son, was declared king of both England and France; and machinery for operating a dual monarchy of the two realms was established. In reality, however, there were now what amounted to three states in France and the Low Countries: a Burgundian state

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(ruled by Philip the Good); a northern Lancastrian Anglo-French state (under the control of John, Duke of Bedford, Henry V's brother, as regent for Henry VI); and a southern Valois French state (ruled by Charles VI’s son, Charles VII, generally styled the dauphin until his coronation at Reims in 1429). In due course Charles VII was to prove the French king who presided over the collapse of the Lancastrian empire in France; however, such an outcome seemed a remote possibility indeed in the 1420s: on the contrary, for several years, Charles was dominated by his advisers, prey to a string of favourites and mistresses, and riddled with doubts about himself, his followers and even his rights. Meanwhile, there was no immediate decline in England’s military fortunes in France. John, Duke of Bedford, in fact, had many of the qualities of his late brother Henry V: an able general and a statesman of some distinction, he was clearly the ideal man to serve as regent in France for his young nephew. Under Bedford’s leadership English expansion across northern France continued and when, in 1424, Charles VII’s generals offered battle at Verneuil, Bedford won a victory in the field almost as impressive as Agincourt. By the autumn of 1428 almost the whole of northern France and the Low Countries was governed by England or Burgundy, so the English now turned south to besiege Orleans, the key to opening up Valois-held territory in southern France. At this point, however, Joan of Arc appeared on the scene.

Historians of Joan of Arc face almost intractable problems when trying to separate fact from legend. For a start, they have to rely to an uncomfortable extent on the clearly tainted records of her trial in 1431: what these records do reveal, however, is a remarkable young woman, notably articulate even when under the most severe pressure, who tells a very human story (in her own words) of how she was transformed (thanks to her voices) from an obscure denizen of Lorraine into a veritable heroine of the resistance to English power in France. Even more problematic are the records of the rehabilitation tribunal of the early 1450s, not least since they contradict all over the place what was said in 1431 (and, of course, by then Joan herself was no longer available to give evidence in person). Chronicles present obvious problems, too. French narrative sources tend to be both highly coloured and too much influenced by the circumstances of Joan’s death. The chronicle of Enguerrand de Monstrelet clearly reflects its Burgundian derivation: thus, significantly, the source says very little about the trial of 1431 (apart from incorporating a letter, highly critical of Joan, purportedly sent to Duke Philip of Burgundy by Henry VI of England) and, in its final assessment of Charles VII (obviously written by a continuator since Monstrelet himself died in 1453), ignores Joan of Arc altogether. Another Burgundian chronicler, Jean de Waurin, actually fought in English ranks against a Joan of Arc-inspired French army at the battle of Patay on 18 June 1429. Yet his portrayal of Joan is circumspect to say the least, as well as heavily dependent on Monstrelet’s earlier narrative (even including, once more, the English letter of 1431):

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[In 1428] there came to King Charles of France, at Chinon, a young girl who described herself as a maid of twenty years of age or thereabouts named Joan, who was clothed and habited in the guise of a man. She requested a suit of armour to arm herself, which was delivered to her; then, with her standard raised, she went to Blois where the muster was being made, and thence to Orleans with the others; and she was always armed in complete armour and, in this same journey, many men-at-arms placed themselves under her. When the maid had come into the city of Orleans, they gave her a good reception, and some greatly rejoiced at seeing her in their company.8

As for English chronicles, they tend to pass over Joan of Arc as quickly as possible. An anonymous London chronicler, for instance, was notably economical when reporting Joan's capture on 23 May 1430:

... before the town of Compiègne, there was a woman taken armed in the field, with many other captains, who was called La Pucelle de Dieu, a false witch, for through her power the dauphin and all our adversaries trusted wholly to have conquered again all France, [for they regarded her] as a prophetess and a worthy goddess.9

Clearly, any assessment of Joan of Arc's character, career and contribution to French history can only be tentative. Born in the small town of Domrémy near the Lorraine/Champagne border, probably about 1412, her origins were not nearly so humble as traditionally supposed: she was, in fact, the daughter of a fairly substantial tenant farmer, not a peasant. Nor, as some of her modern admirers would have us believe, were her early years devoted to tending cattle and sheep: indeed, she herself was always at pains to deny ever engaging in such rural pursuits. Just what her life was actually like until she left Domrémy at the age of about eighteen or nineteen we simply do not know. What does seem unlikely is that she knew much about either the politics of France or the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church, although she may well have heard rumours of the Treaty of Troyes and the disinheriting of Charles VII. Several reasons may lie behind her decision, probably in January 1429, secretly to leave her home. In the summer of 1428 the pro-Burgundian governor of Champagne led a marauding expedition into the region where Domrémy lay and, during the course of it, Joan's own birthplace and its neighbouring villages seem to have been burned. Perhaps this shocked and angered her. A few weeks later, in October 1428, the English laid siege to Orleans and, maybe, news of this dramatic event helped stir up hitherto dormant patriotic sentiments in Joan. And then, of course, there is the vexed question of Joan of Arc's voices and their significance. According to the records of her trial, the first time she heard a voice speaking to her was at the age of thirteen when, she recollected, she was merely scared and had no idea whose voice it was. Only after hearing it three times did she recognise it as 'the voice of an angel' and

it was later still that she identified the voice as belonging to St Michael (who now informed her that, before long, St Catherine and St Margaret would come to her as well and, when they did, she must follow their counsel). Angelic manifestations, whether real or imaginary, are matters for theologians not historians! What does seem beyond question, however, is that Joan’s sense of mission only began to emerge in the autumn of 1428 when, perhaps significantly, the feast days of St Michael, St Margaret and St Catherine are all celebrated. Maybe, too, the live (as well as the voices!) of her three saints made an impact on her. After all, St Michael’s name had long been associated, in French eyes, with the victories of their Frankish ancestors over their enemies; St Catherine had rejected marriage in favour of virginity (as Joan, apparently, had as well); and St Margaret had even fled from her parents’ home dressed as a man in order to preserve her virginity. And could it be that Joan of Arc was acquainted with so-called Merlin prophecies (current at the time) that France would be saved by a woman? Certainly, at her trial, Joan firmly asserted that the voice of St Michael:

... told me, twice or thrice a week, that I, Joan, must go away and that my father must know nothing of my leaving... The voice told me that I should raise the siege laid to the city of Orleans. The voice told me also that I should make my way to Robert de Baudricourt in the fortress of Vaucouleurs.\footnote{R. Pernoud, Joan of Arc by Herself and her Witnesses, London 1969, p. 33.}

Apparently, Joan of Arc arrived at the castle of Vaucouleurs in January 1429, where Robert de Baudricourt (its captain), although initially sceptical, was eventually won over and despatched Joan with an escort to see Charles VII at Chinon. According to Joan herself, moreover, she travelled in men’s clothes, holding a sword in her hand. Arriving at Chinon on 23 February, she made it into Charles’ presence two days later and impressed him sufficiently to order a full examination into what she had divulged. Just how she got into the king’s presence so quickly is a matter of speculation, as is the nature of her audience(s) with him, although we do have her own testimony at her trial that:

... she brought news from God to her king; and that our Lord would restore his kingdom to him, and have him crowned at Reims, and drive out his enemies. And that she was God’s messenger in telling him that he must put her boldly to work, and that she would raise the siege of Orleans.\footnote{Wood, Joan of Arc and Richard III, p. 140.}

It was decided to take Joan to Poitiers, where most of the university theologians of Paris had retreated following the city’s take-over by the English, and there she was examined. A month later the interrogations ended and, although no details of its deliberations have survived, the commission of enquiry did communicate to the king that in Joan they could find ‘no evil, but only good, humility, virginity, devoutness, honesty and simplicity’. Moreover, although the
commissioners did not pronounce definitively on Joan’s divine inspiration (or otherwise), they did inform Charles that there was ‘a favourable presumption’ to be drawn concerning the divine nature of her calling. That was more than enough to convince him, apparently, that she should be allowed to undertake her mission to relieve Orleans.

Now she had won royal approval, Joan of Arc certainly wasted no time. On 22 March 1429 she despatched a letter to the English regent John, Duke of Bedford, and his lieutenants demanding that they ‘render to the Maid here sent by God the keys of all the good towns which you have taken and violated in France’. Then, after specifically calling for the siege of Orleans to be raised, she declared that if this were not done:

I will make them [the besiegers] quit willy nilly. And if they will not obey, I will have them all slain, [for] I am sent here by God, the King of Heaven, [to] drive you out of all France.\(^2\)

Joan turned up at Orleans in person (and, apparently, wearing full armour) on 29 April and, a few days later on 8 May, the English lifted the siege and Joan entered the city in triumph. Just how this outcome was achieved, and how far it was down to Joan or to French commanders such as Jean, Count of Dunois, remains far from clear. The anonymous Burgundian chronicler certainly had no doubts, describing how, on her arrival outside Orleans, Joan:

\(\ldots\) joined and associated herself with the assembly of men-at-arms and raised a standard on which she had inscribed the name JESUS. She continued to claim that she was sent by God to place the Dauphin in possession of the Kingdom of France.

She must have cut a very different figure from the normal crowd of prostitutes touting for custom wherever bored and randy soldiers were gathered! And once the siege was raised, the chronicler added:

The Maid was there and she did begin to work wonders by word and by deed as she had promised. In fact she did so well this was the beginning of her great renown.\(^13\)

The following two months saw a series of further French military successes – most notably, on 18 June, the defeat of a retreating English force at Patay – culminating, early in July 1429, in a triumphant entry into the city of Reims.

For Joan of Arc, her next task was finally to convince Charles VII of his legitimacy and prevail upon him to be formally crowned king in the cathedral at Reims. During the 1420s, seemingly, Charles had entertained considerable doubts about his paternity and, perhaps, not without reason. Born in February

\(^{12}\) Pernoud, *Joan of Arc*, pp. 67, 82.

\(^{13}\) Rankin and Quintal, *First Biography*, p. 114.
1403, he had presumably been conceived some nine months previously: now, at that time, there is evidence that his father (who had suffered intermittent bouts of insanity since 1392) enjoyed a period of lucidity during which he spent several days with his wife, Isabella of Bavaria; however, he then relapsed into insanity and since, at such times, the very sight of his wife was liable to repel him utterly (combined with the fact that Isabella, apparently, never had much difficulty finding sexual solace elsewhere), there was indeed a very real question mark over Charles VII's legitimacy. Consequently, it may well have taken all Joan of Arc's powers of persuasion finally to convince him of his rightful title to the French crown, culminating, on 17 July 1429, in the king's coronation. Moreover, according to a letter written from Reims on the very day of Charles VII's crowning and anointing, 'the Maid was always close to the king, holding her standard in her hand'. There, however, Joan's run of success came to an end.

Although she remained active for several further months, Joan of Arc's hopes that Paris might rapidly fall into Valois hands remained unrealised and, indeed, once the coronation at Reims was behind him, the king may well have found her more and more of an embarrassment. Eventually, on 23 May 1430, she was captured by Burgundian troops at the siege of Compiègne, an event dramatically described by the chronicler Enguerrand de Monstrelet:

[The Burgundians] made a sudden attack on the French rear, at the conclusion of which (as I have been informed) the Maid was dragged from her horse by an archer. To the bastard of Wandomme, who was nearby, she gave her oath of surrender, and he took her at once to Margny, where she was held a prisoner under a strong guard . . . The French went back to Compiègne, wretched and angry at their defeat, and particularly at the loss of the Maid. The Burgundians and the English, however, were more excited than if they had captured five hundred fighting men ...

Within two days of her seizure, moreover, the University of Paris — acting in the name of Henry VI of England — demanded that she be indicted and tried as a heretic. For several months, however, Joan remained a Burgundian captive, even attempting to escape on one occasion, if we are to believe the anonymous Burgundian chronicler. 'By her ingenuity', he tells us:

... she sought to escape through a window. What she used to lower herself broke. From high up she fell to the ground and almost broke her loins and her back. When she recovered she was handed over to the English, the negotiations for this [transfer] involving an agreement about money.15

This was on 21 November 1430 and Joan's Burgundian captors do seem to have sold her to the English. Thereafter, she was taken to Rouen, where it

14 Thompson, Contemporary Chronicles, p. 312.
15 Rankin and Quintal, First Biography, p. 124.
was determined that she should stand trial for heresy. There is precious little evidence that, either during her captivity by the Burgundians or subsequently, Charles VII made any effort to save her; rather, he seems to have maintained a masterly inactivity throughout.

Heresy was a matter for the Inquisition and it thus fell to the Inquisitor of France to set proceedings in motion: he did so with some rapidity, appointing Pierre Cauchon, Bishop of Beauvais, in whose diocese Joan had been captured, and Jean Lemaitre, the local inquisitor in Rouen, to try the case. Preliminary investigations and interrogations of witnesses lasted from 9 January to 26 March 1431. The trial itself then followed, ending with Joan of Arc's abjuration of heresy on 24 May 1431. According to the records of the trial, she finally admitted to having 'feigned lyingly to have had revelations and apparitions from God'; she confessed to having blasphemed God and his saints, to having worn 'clothes dissolute, misshapen and indecent', to having 'despised God and his sacraments', and to being a schismatic who has 'erred from the faith'; and, at the end, she declared that she 'abjures, detests, denies, and entirely renounces and separates herself from [her] crimes and errors'.16 Throughout Pierre Cauchon insisted that it was a normal trial for heresy but, in reality, it was a political process carried out under ecclesiastical rules: indeed, as the rehabilitation tribunal found in the 1450s, there had even been a good deal of bending of those. Joan of Arc was a political prisoner of the English and, under the guise of heresy proceedings, the English objectives were political as well: namely, to destroy the prestige which Joan's personal charisma and remarkable exploits had gained for her and the French and, in the process, discredit Charles VII as well. According to inquisition rules, however, once she had recanted her heresy, death by burning was off the agenda. This was no good to the English and, although the evidence is murky to say the least, it is more than possible that Pierre Cauchon's recurrent stress on Joan's wearing of male attire as a veritable symbol of her fundamental heresy was deliberately designed to ensure a rapid relapse. If so, it was a shrewd calculation for, on 27 May 1431, Joan resumed her male clothing (perhaps because female garments were deliberately kept from her) and, even more fatally, admitted to having heard the voices of St. Margaret and St. Catherine again. Pierre Cauchon certainly wasted no time in bringing Joan to trial for her relapse and, after just two days of further interrogation, she was condemned and handed over to the secular power in Rouen — the English, in fact! — for execution. Just one day after that, on 30 May 1431, as a 'relapsed heretic and excommunicate', she was burned at the stake in the market place of Rouen. Thereafter, so the anonymous Burgundian chronicler tells us:

... the ashes of her body, gathered in a sack, were tossed into the River Seine, [so that] no attempt could be made, nor even a proposal be suggested, to use them for sorcery or any other mysterious evil.17

16 Pernoud, Joan of Arc, p. 258.
17 Rankin and Quintal, First Biography, p. 125.
Where does this leave Joan of Arc and her importance in the history of fifteenth-century France? Clearly, it was Joan's martyrdom (if such it was) more than anything else that ensured her future reputation as a French heroine and saviour of her country. Perhaps she does have at least two major achievements to her name: firstly, she must surely take at least some of the credit for instilling fresh hope into the French army at Orleans, helping secure the lifting of the siege there, and, as a result, putting an end to the English advance southwards; and, secondly, her role in putting a modicum of lead into Charles VII's all too frequently drooping political pencil (enough, at any rate, to secure his coronation at Reims) is not to be sneezed at, even if he did not thank her for it. Certainly, too, after 1429 it is possible to detect a new spirit among the French, even if it took them a further quarter century finally to despatch the English back across the Channel.