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Iran, War, Displacement and my choice of Joan of Arc

This paper discusses the personal perceptions that have shaped my poetics in writing La Pucelle: an Epic of Joan of Arc *as part of a PhD candidature in the School of Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University.*

The French Woman who Fought the English

My first perception of Joan of Arc was formed around an image on the window of a derelict bookshop. I was four or five; holding my mother's hand, browsing the numerous stationery-outlets scattered along the streets in Teheran's university district.

It was in the immediate aftermath of the Islamic Revolution. The prospect of a democratic left-leaning government in Iran had been abolished, the veil had been reintroduced and the tensions with Iraq were about to reach their inevitable climax. The grown-ups, as I remember, were either anxious about the vibes of war and religious fundamentalism, or adamant to protect themselves and their families against what they hoped to be only an intermittent period of right-wing fanaticism.

I was at the age of being sent to kindergarten and my mother, a maths teacher, was making sure that I was thoroughly prepared for my education. She believed that - in a country traumatised by the conflicts between East and West, in a nation where the most regressive traditions (such as the veil) were being dragged out of the cultural closet for spruiking patriotism and militarism - the only chance a child had of remaining sane and civilised was through receiving a comprehensive education. I therefore had my hand in hers, shopping for notepads, coloured pencils, clothes and a school bag near the University of Tehran.

It was there, in the midst of the city's notorious traffic and pollution, that I was introduced to *her* or, more precisely, to a depiction of her.

Being a little boy preoccupied with comic-book heroes, action figures and toy soldiers, I was instantly entranced by the simple yet vivid painting of a mounted Medieval knight on the window of an abandoned shop. The image, obviously the shop's emblem, was a comic-book style armoured figure on a white horse, upholding a large flag in a theatrically triumphant pose.

The image was distinctly European; the knight wore no helmet and had long, wavy blond hair.

When I asked my mother about it she paused and looked for the signs of the deserted shop's identity before remembering: 'It must be Joan of Arc. This must be

the French bookshop. Yes, this is the Joan of Arc Bookshop.' I asked her who this Joan of Arc was. She curtly answered: 'A French woman who fought the English', before yanking my hand and hurling me into an overcrowded clothes store.

This bookstore, as I learnt later, was one of the outposts of French cultural imperialism and/or cultural exchange in Iran. It had been quickly evacuated at the time of the Islamist victory when the numerous Western residents in Iran had felt the heat of the Ayatollah's fierce anti-Western diatribes. New Iranian owners later revived the bookstore but by then the site's political and historical meanings had long vanished. I returned there years later; by then the heroic image on the window had been erased.

What the new regime could not totally obliterate, however, were the books that had been published before the Revolution and the encyclopaedias written in or translated into Persian from dominantly European sources. Sometime during my first year of primary school, to my great joy, I found an entry about Joan of Arc in one of my father's encyclopaedias. Although I can't remember the exact passage, I can recall the page layout and my reaction upon reading the paragraph-long biography of the 'French woman who fought the English'.

I was exhilarated by Joan of Arc's achievements and horrified by her demise. The prospect of a teenage girl leading an army and defeating a powerful enemy excited me greatly, but the image of the same girl being burnt at the stake only two years after her famous deeds distressed me.

In retrospect, I think it was out of the strong ambivalence of these opposing emotions that my life-long interest in this historical figure, and in history in general, developed. Even now, after having extensively researched the records of Joan's life, having travelled to the sites of her story and having written about her at length, I can't 'make up my mind', that is, reduce my sentiments about this subject to a singular feeling. I find her heroic and pitiful at the same time; brilliant and gloomy, a source for inspiration as well as disappointment.

A Contradictory Character

As I'd realise later, continuing contradiction is not only apparent in the perceived narrative of Joan of Arc's life, but also intrinsic in the records of her personality, her politics and spirituality, and her political and cultural significations. Even on the most immediate and picturesque levels paradoxical characteristics are striking; she was a woman in knight's armour, a peasant who crowned a king, a mystic who was burnt as a heretic, an illiterate adolescent who commanded an army, an iconoclast who changed the course of her nation's history, etc. As Mary Gordon has observed, Joan 'bursts out of categories, crisscrosses our ideas about her, contradicts the images she has presented about herself' (Gordon 2000: 25).

Beyond these images, we may approach her as conundrum on a more historical and informed level. For example, her use of language, as recorded in the transcripts of the Trials of Condemnation (1431) and quoted in the testimonies of the Trials of Rehabilitation (1455-56) are a vivid source of vacillation and unsettlement. As Karen Sullivan has noted:

> Her speech, like her character, contained within it elements from various populations, both aristocratic and plebeian, both masculine and feminine, and both sacred and secular, but in its combination of all of these elements it remained anomalous to all of them. (Sullivan 1999: xxiii)

An example of this could be Joan of Arc's often overlooked words spoken to the clerics in the Rouen prison cell during the morning of her execution on 30 May 1431:

> It was I who brought the message of the crown to my King. I was the angel and there was no other. And the crown was no more than the promise of my King's coronation, which I made to him. (Of Arc 2000: 143)

Here, an emotionally-charged Joan is either making a confession or further defending her innocence. (The passage is based on accounts by three eyewitnesses whose recollections don't make the import of her words clear.) She does, however, seem to decipher her earlier cryptic descriptions of 'the sign' that was supposed to have convinced the Dauphin Charles of Valois to accept her 'message' - i.e. place her at the head of his reinforcement armies - upon their meeting and discussions in the Chateau de Chinon during late February to early March 1429.

By calling Charles her King, Joan subscribes to the codes of medieval fealty which meant even though Charles was technically a Crown Prince at the time of the meeting, he was, by his regal blood, Joan's liege; her King. However, Joan instantly positions herself *above* him by describing the coronation that legitimised the Dauphin's title as King Charles VII as *her own* making; portraying herself as one with the power to make kings and hence denoting the Dauphin as her actual subject.

More paradoxical in her above statement, however, is the interplay between the sacred/secular binaries of the words 'angel' and 'crown'. Here Joan seems to refute the mystical overtones of her earlier statements in which she had described the crown as an actual object. She now says that it was a metaphor for the 'promise of the coronation'. She also repudiates that an external supernatural agent -an angel - had brought the either corporeal or metaphorical crown to Charles; by saying that it was delivered by the speaker herself. Yet all of these negations are themselves negated when Joan says that she *herself* was the angel (note the tense: she is not an angel at the time of making this admission; she had, it seems, *momentarily* become an angel at the time of 'bringing the crown'). This indicates that, indeed, external supernatural agencies were at work, elevating the speaker into the metaphysical state of a heavenly messenger. As Sullivan notes of this passage, the words embody an ideological dilemma:

> Joan portrayed herself both as a human being, unrecognised by the clerics who insisted upon signs of her divine affliction and in need of heavenly assistance, and as an angel, commanding recognition and providing that heavenly assistance. She portrayed herself both as the thing signified by the sign and as the sign that signified that thing. (Sullivan 1999: 75)

Joan's physical appearance further demonstrates her contradictions. She was, on one hand, in the words of her squire Jean d'Aulon, 'a young girl, beautiful and shapely' (Meltzer 2001: 5-6) but, in the words of the same squire, she never moved her soldiers 'to any desire or carnal feelings' (Warner 1991: 17).

Although the latter statement doesn't seem totally accurate - I've found at least two accounts of soldiers making sexual advances during her campaigns and evidence of rape and/or attempts at rape by the English guards during her imprisonment - it can be observed that the sexual tendencies of most of her soldiers (a large number of them being brigands and mercenaries, renowned for their predatory sexual habits) were nullified in Joan's presence despite her youth and beauty. Marguerite

de Touroulde, widow of the Dauphin's counsellor Regnier de Boulingy, at whose house in Bourges Joan stayed during the preparation of the Orleans campaign, has made a similar observation based on a conversation with the knights who had escorted Joan during her journey to the Dauphin's castle:

> [The knights] said that in the beginning they wanted to require [Joan] to lie with them carnally. But when the moment came to speak to her of this they were so much ashamed that they dared not speak of it to her nor say a word of it. (Pernoud 1964: 44)

The confusions caused by Joan of Arc's physical appearance have noticeably overwhelmed a number of writers and commentators. Opting for a simplified 'ugly duckling' gender stereotype and totally ignoring the testimonies to Joan's beauty, Thomas Kenneally's novel *Blood Red, Sister Rose* (1974) depicts her as an exceptionally and conveniently ugly girl whose physical problems - not only ugliness, but also something being 'wrong with her womb' (Kenneally 1984: 40) - compel her to 'give up' on being a woman and pursue life as a man instead. Even the feminist Vita Sackville-West was not able to cope with the paradox of Joan's sexual appeal and decided to distort the facts to justify her perception. She concluded that because '[m]en attempted no rape [which, according to the records and testimonies, they did] nor women were jealous…it is fair to qualify [Joan] as unattractive' (Sackville-West 1990: 6). As Francoise Meltez has noted, this 'unperturbed conclusion' is based on gender clichés that assume an attractive woman could *naturally* provoke sexual violence, mistrust and jealousy (Meltez 2001: 5).

Sackville-West's view demonstrates the difficulties in dealing with the complexities of Joan of Arc. As Marina Warner puts it, Joan simultaneously presents two very different images:

> On the one hand, Joan is all woman, seductive, even beautiful, with all the full complements of sexual characteristics; on the other, she annuls the usual consequences of those characteristics, remaining in the virginal state of pre-pubescence. (Warner 1991: 19)

Joan of Arc's virginity was tested and verified on two occasions - upon arrival at the Dauphin's court in 1429 and during her trials in 1431 - and plays an important part in the formulation of her identity. She titled herself *Jeanne la Pucelle (Joan the Maid)* when she entered the public sphere, and her maidenhood remained a given in all of her future representations including Voltaire's controversial eighteenth-century mock-epic *La Pucelle*, which dismisses almost every other aspect of her myth with crude, lively and unapologetic satire. Yet, although the reality of Joan's chastity has never been questioned, its essence is deeply ambiguous and, like every other aspect of this complex historical figure, embodies quite opposing signifiers.

On the one hand, for the religious mainstream, virginity during the Middle Ages was the sign of highest moral purity and devotion, in likeness to the virtue of the Virgin Mary. It provided Joan and her party with a saintly halo - politically required for her quest in winning public support from the religious populace, the clergy and the papacy for a difficult war against the Anglo-Burgundian enemies of the Dauphin.

In this sense, the hymen moves beyond being a part of the female anatomy and becomes, as Jacques Derrida has noted, a metaphor 'with no life of its own, no proper name' (Meltzer 2001: 104). In the case of Joan of Arc, it becomes a

metaphor for her sacredness and the sacredness of her military cause; even a Miracle because, in the body of the demonically sinful medieval woman, an abstention from intercourse was largely perceived as an act of divine intervention. After all, Joan herself has stated that her decision to remain celibate was, at least in part, an attempt in securing God's satisfaction:

> The first time I heard the voice, I promised to keep my virginity for as long as it should please God. (Pernoud 1964: 26)

I won't delve into the single most controversial area of Johannic studies (the 'voice') for the time being nor will I differentiate between 'being asked to promise' and 'promising voluntarily'. The above admission - made hesitantly upon being intimidated by the Inquisition - may, at any rate, indicate Joan's virginity as a recognition and reinforcement of the socially desirable gender stereotypes of a conservative Christian girlhood; acting in accordance with God's pleasure, further accepting the moral hegemony of Christianity over sexual habits and discourses, remaining a virgin until marriage, etc.

On the other hand, however, we must take into account the fact that Joan of Arc vehemently rejected marriage. In 1428 at the age of 16 and before leaving her family for war and politics, Joan was called before the Court of Toul to respond to a charge of breaching the promise of marriage. She travelled to Toul alone; a journey which, according to Anatole France, 'involved more than twenty leagues on foot, over roads infested with bands of armed men, through a country laid waste by fire and sword' (France 1925: 62). In the Court Joan denied that such a promise had ever been made and was subsequently acquitted. She later recalled:

> I swore before the judge to speak the truth and in the end he roundly said that I had made the man no promise whatsoever. (Pernoud 1964: 25)

Although the identity of 'the man' is not known, such a suit, as Edward Lucie-Smith has noted, 'can only have originated on the part of her parents to marry her off. And the point is that Joan resisted' (Lucie-Smith 2000: 25). This important point has often been brushed over in the particularly Christian versions of Joan of Arc's life. In Pamela Mercantel's 1997 novel *An Army of Angels*, for example, the Catholic author has noticeably dismissed this episode in her fictional account:

> The long, exhausting walk and the resulting legal procedure would thankfully blur in [Joan's] memory and become just an unpleasant matter that was soon finished. (Marcantel 1997: 50)

As seen in Joan's statement, however, this incident did not 'blur' in her memory and was recalled three years later during the Trials. Importantly, however, this episode hints at the private aspects of Joan of Arc's very public virginity (regardless of the ambiguous attributes of 'the voice' to which the promise of keeping virginity was made in the first place) and, as I'll presently demonstrate, it contradicts the conservative significations of her 'pure' chaste body.

It should be kept in mind that, generally speaking, marriage among the medieval peasantry was an economic contract rather than the romantic bond depicted in the era's courtly literature. In an oppressively patriarchal society stricken by war and poverty, it seems to have been to a young woman's very real financial and social advantage to accept a marriage proposal since only a married woman could be provided with property, fiscal entitlements and so on. In Joan's particular case, also, resistance against the Toul marriage proposal would have infuriated her parents who had, it seems, devised the scheme to 'marry her off'. It is worth mentioning here that Joan's father, Jacque Darc, had told her brothers to drown her

in the Meuse River should she disobey the family and that, if they failed to do so, he would drown his disobedient daughter himself (Pernoud 1964: 25-6).

Without having ever 'officially' taken a vow of celibacy - in the presence of clergy - Joan seems vigilantly committed to remaining single and/or virginal. The level of her commitment is demonstrated by the risks undertaken in this episode - legally, financially and, considering her father's reported threats, vitally - as well as the courage and tenacity displayed in undertaking a difficult journey and appearing alone before a potentially hostile, male judiciary. This observation supports Andrea Dworkin's view of Joan of Arc's chastity:

> Her virginity was a self-conscious and militant repudiation of the common lot of the female with its intrinsic low status… Joan wanted to be virtuous in the old sense of the word, before the Christians got hold of it: *virtuous* meant *brave, valiant*. (Dworkin 1997: 85)

In other words, her virginity seems to have been a personal repudiation of the same Christian value system and institutions - such as marriage, family, etc - that it appeared to publicly support. On a personal level, Joan's virginity, as Dworkin further observes, is not a socially acceptable Virtue belonging to organisations such as the Church but 'a rebel virginity harmonious with the deepest values of resistance to any political despotism' (Dworkin 1997: 94). Paradoxically, this 'resistance' has been reinterpreted as a sign of conformity to the Christian married/single paradigms it was likely intended to undermine.

This paradox is not only a case of an individual's passions being exploited and perverted by public obsession - although it certainly *is* that - but also a further demonstration of contradictions that characterise the life of Joan of Arc. She sees herself as the Dauphin's subject and yet subjects him to her own visions; she believes her quest is secular but actualised through the sacred; she is beautiful yet her beauty blocks the beholder's gaze; she is a virgin for God but her virginity is a resistance against the traditions of Christianity. As Barbara Tuchman has noted, Joan of Arc:

> belongs to no category. Perhaps [she] can only be explained as the answer called forth by an exigent historic need. The moment required her and she rose. (Tuchman 1979: 588)

This urgent need was that of an expired era thirsty for renewal; the Middle Ages anticipating the Renaissance and, perhaps, Modernity. More precisely, it was the demand of a defeated and devastated people in need of an end to one of history's longest and most brutal conflicts, the Hundred Years War.

Unlawful Women

Of course, I wasn't aware of the full complexities of Joan of Arc's story at the time of discovering her in Iran of the early 80s. I was an impressionable boy who had been touched by the electricity of her tale; as yet unstruck by the full jolt of her thunderbolt. However, as years went on and Iran disintegrated through the calamities of war with Iraq, UN economic sanctions, home grown extremism, mass-scale capital punishments, unemployment, etc, my interest in the unusual medieval French heroine persevered and developed into a strong sense of affinity.

Sometime in the mid to late 80s I found an unexpected parallel between the public punishments of Iranian women who wore 'indecent' clothes and the execution of Joan of Arc. Despite being very young and almost totally ignorant of gender

issues and the machinations of misogyny, I noted that the first charge made against Joan by the Inquisition of Rouen on 14 July 1430 was very similar to the accusations directed at the 'un-Islamic' Iranian women by the Islamist authorities:

> wholly forgetful of womanly honesty, and having thrown off the bonds of shame, careless of all the modesty of womankind, [the accused has worn] with an astonishing and monstrous brazenness, immodest garments belonging to male sex. (Barret 1931: 19)

In a further public statement, the French court explained why such a deviation was a crime punishable by death:

> putting off the habit and dress of the female sex [for a woman] is contrary to divine law, abominable to God, condemned and prohibited by every law. (Barret 1931: 31)

This view was not simply that of a bribed and hostile judiciary attempting to mask the ulterior-motives for trying, and eventually executing, a dangerous political adversary. A dislike verging on hatred for women who crossed the gender-divides and contradicted the socially determined norms in medieval Europe seems to have been as widespread then as it is in today's fundamentalist right-wing cultures. In a treatise on Joan's choice of clothes and 'masculine' profession (written at some time between 1431 and 1438) the renowned German cleric Johann Nidar concluded: 'I cannot sufficiently marvel how the frail sex can rush to such presumptuous things' (Coulton 1967: 213). Joan's 'presumption' was not only a rejection of the era's sexism but a form of heresy according to the Scripture. As is said in *Deuteronomy* 22:5:

> Women are not to wear men's clothing, and men are not to wear women's clothing; the Lord your God hates people who do such things (United Bible Societies 1987: 192).

In the Iran of my lifetime, also, a rigid adherence to Scripture (Koran) justified and fuelled the oppression and punishment of the more 'presumptuous' members of the 'frail sex'. Showing hair publicly was something that men did, and if a woman dared to let a few strands slip past the fringes of her *hejab* scarf she would be arrested by the *basiji* guards and driven away in a Nissan Patrol to either a prison or a public space where she would be bashed or flogged. The *basijis* were the militant arm of the State and a force above either the police or the army; they were the implementers of the *shariats* ('laws' deduced from Koran's psalms). They were equivalent to the Church Militant - or secular arm - of Joan of Arc's era which carried out her public burning in Rouen's market square.

In the Iran of my childhood, after each public flogging or stoning, the excited audience was further aroused by a mullah's Islamic prayer chants: *Allah-o Akbar (Allah is Great)* and *La Allah-a ella Allah (There's no God but Allah)*. Audience and participants alike would repeat the Arabic words after the mullah until a moment of communal redemption was reached. The punished (assuming he/she hadn't been killed during the sadistic ceremony) would cry in shame and the perpetrators of torture would raise their hands skywards and shout the Scriptural slogans in appreciation of God's bloody benevolence. These scenes could have been lifted straight out of the Middle Ages. As Johan Huizinga has noted of witch burnings of the late-Medieval Europe:

> The gruesome fascination and coarse compassion stirred at the place of execution became an important element in the spiritual nourishment for the people. (Huizinga 1996: 3)

I do not mean to imply that Iran is five hundred years 'behind' France. What I mean to indicate is that wars of invasion, and the resultant patriotic and/or ideological fanaticism among the invaded people, whenever they occur, can produce similar outcomes; War's Companions being misogyny, xenophobia, cruelty, poverty, etc.

Furthermore, there are a number of specific similarities between the Iran of my lifetime and the France of Joan of Arc's. Both countries had enjoyed a period of prosperity and economic and cultural growth immediately before being invaded by an aggressive neighbour's armies. In 1975 Iran had been named the 'Japan of the Middle East', while France, before the particularly gruesome third phase of the Hundred Years War (out of which Joan of Arc rose), had been nicknamed *Belle France - Beautiful France*. Both countries had then become the scorched battlegrounds of the forces of militarily superior, impending 'New World Orders': English Imperialism in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; Saddam's US-backed invasion of oil fields of the Middle East during my lifetime.

The Great Misery

But a more thorough and less subjective discussion of the Hundred Years War is needed here. This particular historic situation was, as Tuchman has noted, the 'exigent need' that prompted the manifestation of Joan of Arc as a phenomenon. As Warner has also noted, the war provided 'the conditions of disruption necessary for the emergence of a saviour' (Warner 1991: 33).

One way of looking at these conditions is to focus on the political: the violent tensions between the country's two most powerful duchies - Burgundy and Orleans; and the international war waged over the French throne left vacant due to King Charles VI's severe mental illness. This perspective primarily sees the conditions of disturbance in terms of the Anglo-Burgundian invasion of northern France and the Valois-Orleanist resistance in the south. We could undertake further analysis by looking at the roots of the hostility between the royal houses of France and England and by depicting either the arrogance of Philippe VI of Valois or the belligerence of Edward III of Plantagenet as the catalyst for the English invasion of 1337. Other correlating factors also come into play: the Great Schism, the farmers' rebellions, the Black Death, the Anglo-Scottish wars and the threat of an Ottoman invasion of Europe. All told, it is an eventful political world that contextualizes the tale of Joan of Arc.

Unlike the nobles who participated in the battles and quarrelled during the signing of treaties, however, Joan had no hereditary interest in the war. She belonged to a self-determined farming community in a remote northeastern region that remained, for most parts, ambivalent towards the warring factions. The Meuse Valley, where Joan was born, nurtured both pro-Burgundian and pro-Valois sentiments. Some of its occupants paid protection taxes to the garrisons of the pro-French Vaucouleurs while others seem to have accepted the protection offered by the dukes of Barr and Burgundy. As Joan herself recalled during her trials, while her own village of Domremy was predominantly Orleanist, the nearby village of Maxey was Burgundian in allegiance. This political demarcation, however, did not prevent the villagers from cohabiting the Valley; according to Joan the children of the different villages often played together, even though at times their games turned into fights (Pernoud 1964: 21).

In other words, it is very unlikely that the factional tensions that fuelled and characterised the Hundred Years War in central and western France could have exerted much direct influence over the formative experiences, personality and passions of Joan of Arc. Seeing Joan in the context of a patriotic struggle against a

foreign invasion would be equally inappropriate since 'national identity' and patriotism as either populist or elitist agendas did not exist during the late-Middle Ages. Joan's particular region - Lorraine - was not even considered to be a part of France and was not governed by the French Crown until 1634 - 200 years after Joan. Although in both left-wing and right-wing mythologies Joan has been depicted as a nationalist, these future images are devoid of historical reality; Joan of Arc was as much a French Nationalist as Julius Caesar was a Roman Catholic or Napoleon a Neo-Liberal Globalist.

Joan of Arc was motivated by neither an allegiance to the House of Valois nor a zeal for a non-existent 'fatherland'. The fact that she was a young woman from a relatively apolitical commoners' class (peasantry) indicates that her wholehearted involvement in the war against the English must have been stirred by reasons other than feudal fealty, political rivalry, factional opposition, etc. Also, while it is true that some farmers joined the wars of the late-Middle Ages for professional reasons - as mercenaries, 'free companies' and camp followers - it is clear that Joan's participation was of a totally different nature. Notwithstanding that she did not remotely resemble an army tramp or a mercenary, it is true to say that she did not *join* the Dauphin's armies but, from the very beginning, insisted on *leading* them. That is, she demanded that the armies join *her*, and not the other way around.

By looking at Joan of Arc's own statements and the conditions of her early life, however, we may surmise the reasons behind her adamant and revolutionary participation in the Hundred Years War. As she would reluctantly admit during the trials, one of the first mystical revelations during her early teens informed her about the War (the italics are mine):

> Before all things [the Angel] told me to be a good child and that God would help me. And, among other things he told me to come to the help of the King of France… And the Angel told me of the *grand pitie [great misery]* that was in the kingdom of France. (Pernoud 1964: 34)

Without discussing 'the Angel' for the time being, it can be noted that Joan's understanding of the War occurred on a distinctly personal level and was expressed within a private vision. In this context, it seems that the reason behind the lay teenage girl's decision to go 'to the help of the King of France' had something to do with a 'great misery'.

That Joan - or her voices - would choose such an emotive and dramatic phrase in describing the War is telling. Joan had experienced the 'great misery' first hand before approaching the Dauphin. At least twice the marauding Anglo-Burgundian battalions had attacked Joan's village before her departure. In the first instance, possibly around the time when she began hearing her voices in1425, the villagers hired a nearby castle for shelter and stayed there with their animals until the soldiers had passed through. In the second assault, however, as W.S. Scott has noted, 'much of the village [was] burned, and the church so badly damaged that it was no longer usable' (Scott 1974: 23). During this 1428 raid Joan and her family left Domremy before the soldiers' arrival and took refuge in the town of Neufchateau for one to two weeks. It was immediately after returning to the demolished village that Joan left her family, once and for all, to go to 'the help of the King of France'.

In the light of the historical documents, Joan's description of the War as a 'great misery' is most appropriate. For the peasantry in particular, the periods of English occupation must have been horrific. As Kelly Devries has noted, during the second and third phases of the War - late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries -

the English armies adopted a new system of warfare, which the French called *chevachee* (possibly derived from *cheval* - horse). It comprised:

> a quick cavalry raid through the countryside with the intention of pillaging unfortified villages and towns, destroying crops and houses, stealing livestock, and generally disturbing and terrorising the rural society. (Devries 1999: 12)

This type of dirty warfare, devoid of the costs and numbers required for besieging fortified cities or engaging the French armies in open-field battles, proved extremely efficient for the English and their allies. It struck France at the core of her medieval economy - agriculture - while providing the invasion armies with victuals and valuables. In a missive directed to the English troops in the 1420s, Sir John Fastolf, one of the highest-ranking English knights in France, chillingly described the methods and objectives of these raids:

> [the English soldiers must march through the enemy territory] burning and destroying all the lands as they pass, both houses, grain, vine, and all the trees that bear fruit for man's sustenance, and all the cattle that may not be driven, [are] to be destroyed… And it seems verily that by these ways and governance, the King [of England] shall conquer his realm of France, and harm and destroy his enemies. (Gies 1981: 19)

The *chavachee* was practiced 'with regularity and proficiency' (Devries 1999: 12) and with devastating consequences for England's enemies. In the words of the contemporary Italian poet Petrarch, in France 'everywhere you see the fatal footprints of the English and the hateful scars still bleeding from their swords' (Tuchman 1979: 198). The widespread destruction - which according to another contemporary source, left the fields '[f]rom Loire to Seine, and from there to Somme' (Warner 1991: 4) empty and uncultivated for the first half of the fifteenth century - was not limited to the obliteration or looting of livestock, harvest and other material possessions. Its most terrifying characteristic, perhaps, was an extraordinary, almost sadistic, brutality towards French civilians. As Tuchman has observed, during the raids the English soldiers

> killed and tortured those who hid their goods or resisted ransom, not sparing the clergy or the aged, violated virgins, nuns, and mothers, [and] abducted women as enforced camp followers. (Tuchman 1979: 164)

While during the Hundred Years War, as Susan Brownmiller has observed, the women of nobility were often treated respectfully, the lower class women - particularly those of the peasant stock - were rarely spared violation and enforced prostitution (Brownmiller 1975: 31). As Carolyn Nordstrom has noted, '[s]exual violence is a mainstay of dirty war practice' (Nordstrom 1994: 9). Seeing as the English invasion of France during the Hundred Years War was facilitated through an extensive application of some of the dirtiest war practices in history, the magnitude and intensity of the accompanying sexual violence probably verged on mass rape.

A number of contemporary sources make explicit references to this aspect of the Hundred Years War. According to Nicholas Wright, the stories of the capture and imprisonment of French women for sexual purposes are mentioned so frequently in the records of the latter part of the Hundred Years War that they become a 'bland formula' (Wright 1998: 73). One example is the Burgundian poet Pierre de Nesson's *Lay de Guerre* (possibly written in 1429, the year that Joan of Arc appeared on the political scene) in which an allegorical figure called 'War' proudly

states: '[T]here will be neither old or young woman who is not taken, raped and dishonoured' (Wright 1998: 73). Wright has further observed:

> Many soldiers admitted to "raping women and deflowering virgins", to the "violation of women", to the "raping of married and unmarried women"… [A]lthough the details of these cases are often obscure, the scale of the problem is clear enough. (Wright 1998: 73)

The raids and the widespread brutal treatment of female civilians by the English soldiers were partly aimed at demoralising the French populace into submission. But, as Frances Gies has observed, they functioned adversely by inducing a strong hatred towards the invaders (Gies 1981: 19). 'It was this aspect of war,' Gies has written 'that brought Joan of Arc onto the stage' (19). This view can further be supported by the fact that the watershed events of her early life - the beginning of the voices and her departure for the Dauphin's court - correlated closely with the dates of the violent English incursions into the isolated Meuse Valley.

I believe it was against this particular English 'weapon of war' - pillage and rapine - that Joan of Arc unsheathed her sword, becoming, in Christine McWebb's words, 'the defender of her sex' (McWebb 1996: 135). Although there is no evidence of Joan having been sexually assaulted by the invaders until her imprisonment, there can be no doubt about the young woman's fears and her acute awareness of the horrors that had engulfed her sex and society. As Lucien Fabre has noted, the stories of 'the violence offered to women [during Joan's life] could not be kept from ears however chaste' (Fabre 1954: 25). I believe it was in reaction to the horrors of the English invasion that Joan, appearing on the political stage, promised to 'raise such a battle-cry as there has not been in France in a thousand years' (Of Arc 2000: 29).

Joan of Arc's ears received not only the tales of the violated and dispossessed, but also the voices that urged her to rally a disheartened prince and his defeated armies against the aggressors. In her 22 March 1429 letter sent to the English powers before the battles of Orleans she states:

> King of England, and you, Duke of Bedford, who call yourself the Regent of the Kingdom of France…: Do justice to the King of Heaven; surrender to the Maid… the keys of all the good towns you have taken and violated in France… She is ready to make peace if you will do justice, relinquishing France and paying for what you have withheld…; and if you do not so, expect to hear the news of the Maid who will shortly come to see you, to your very great damage. (Of Arc 2000: 28)

In these characteristically direct and assertive words, 'the Maid' describes her mission as one of restoration rather than retaliation; but an anger verging on hatred permeates the language. Although it is known that she forbade her soldiers from killing or torturing English prisoners, there can be no doubt about her own rage and ferocity towards her enemies. In the same letter of summons Joan states:

> King of England, if [you] do not [relinquish France], I am chief-of-war and in whatever place I attain your people in France, I will make them quit it willy nilly. And if they do not obey, I will have them all slain. (Pernoud 1964: 82)

This declaration was not an empty threat but a sincere promise. And Joan kept to it. Entire English battalions - about 3,000 soldiers - were put to death during the battles of Orleans, and the English garrisons along the Loire were completely eliminated during the 1429 campaign that culminated in the battle of Patay. There,

on 18 June, Joan's vanguard encountered the retreating English main-body and the resulting situation was more of a massacre than a battle; as the Dauphin's counsellor has reported, the French lost three men in this combat. The English, on the other hand, lost over 2,000 soldiers (Lucie-Smith 2000: 145).

The bloody victory at Patay, according to Regine Pernoud, 'more than counterbalanced the disaster at Agincourt fourteen years earlier' (Pernoud 1996: 292). This battle, more than any other event of the Hundred Years War, dealt a severe, incurable blow to the superiority of the English longbow and resurrected the effectiveness of the armoured French cavalry. It also accommodated the Dauphin's safe journey to the Cathedral of Rheims where he regained and consolidated his title as Charles VII, King of France. In very real historical terms, Joan's 'war-cry' paved the way for an end to the English invasion. David Nicole has observed:

> As a result of [Joan of Arc's victories] the morale of Charles VII and his supporters rose accordingly. The loss of so many soldiers weakened existing English garrisons while Charles's control over the Loire valley was confirmed. The dream of a combined English and French realm had effectively been destroyed. (Nicole 2001: 89)

Bringing about such a counterbalance and reversal was perhaps the Maid's greatest passion. While calling Joan of Arc 'vengeful' would ignore her recorded civility and compassion towards the English prisoners, it can be seen that her actions were influenced by a ferocious desire for justice. She was driven by a determination to hold the aggressors accountable and to end their reign of rapine and pillage.

Her zeal was a response to the violation of women and the destruction of her home. That a young laywoman should have seen herself as the instrument of this justice was unusual, but is not surprising to us today. Joan belonged to the gender and class that suffered most in the hands of the English. It was natural that the fury, determination and courage to bring an end to the suffering should emanate from the ranks of the War's foremost victims. Joan was, as it were, the natural reaction to the English armies' terrifying and loathsome actions.

Writing about the Maid

I too experienced a war. The Iran/Iraq War - sometimes referred to as 'the First Gulf War' - lasted for eight years during which a million lives were lost. The War coincided with the first eight years of my schooling, and two Iraqi missiles hit my school when I was in Grade 4. This happened at night when the school was empty, so no one was killed. The janitor was left shell-shocked, and unfortunately the next day I still had to sit for a dreaded maths exam amidst the rubble. To my mother's disdain, I hated maths and enjoyed nothing more than drawing pictures of knights and gory battle-scenes. But, because of the Islamic ban on representational arts, the only visual art taught in the Iranian schools was calligraphy and my drawings, despite being popular with my classmates, were often confiscated by the principal.

The chance to prove myself scholarly arrived, however, when in Grade 6 our Persian teacher told us to write an essay about a 'martyr'. Although it was taken for granted that we would write a eulogy about a relative or a neighbour killed by the Iraqis, I decided to go with my heart. I managed to track down a second-hand translation of Maurice Maeterlinck's *Jeanne d'Arc* in those streets of Tehran's university district. I used it as the basis for my essay which, from memory, began

with an epistemological analysis of the Persian word for 'martyr'. '*Shahid*,' I wrote, 'comes from *Shahadat (testimony)*, which means a martyr is someone whose life and death are testimonies to their beliefs.' I then said that no one I knew could serve as a better example of martyrdom than Joan of Arc, before relating a short account of her life for the rest of the essay.

As was the case in the Iranian schools, essays and other writing assignments were presented orally in front of the class before being marked by the teacher. I remember anticipating the possible punishment of being caned for writing about 'an enemy' - a Western Christian woman - and later being admonished by mum for provoking the authorities. When my name was called out, I walked up and stood against the blackboard and read out the essay without daring to look into the teacher's eyes. After the last words of my reading, for a few seconds, a strange silence presided over the classroom. Then the teacher said: *'You understand martyrdom. You really understand it.'* To my great surprise I was given the maximum mark, 20 out of 20, on the spot. That afternoon, at home, even Mum seemed impressed.

This unexpected success, perhaps more than any other event in my life, placed me on the path of pursuing writing. I continued to read and write profusely and received my first literary prize in 1990. The competition was held as a tribute to Iran's best-known medieval epic poet, Ferdwosi of Tus. I entered a modernised 'young adult' prose version of one of *Shah Numeh's* episodes, 'Rustum and Sohrad'. The award made me something of a celebrity as I was subsequently interviewed on national television. I began entertaining thoughts of writing a modern version of Joan of Arc's story. I was sure of my future as a writer, and the sky was the limit.

However, this was not to be. In 1991 Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and prompted an American attack on the Middle East. My parents decided that enough was enough. They began visiting Western embassies in Tehran and, quicker than I could look up Australia in the encyclopaedias, my father's application for a visa to Australia was approved. Although I would have preferred migrating to France - for Joan, but also for my other heroes, Voltaire and Napoleon - the choice wasn't mine, and within months I was struggling with the syllables of *'G'day'* in the middle of the playground of a Lismore high school. My difficulties with English and the alienation that followed were, perhaps, my own fault. In Iran I had repeatedly refused to learn the language of 'Joan of Arc's murderers' and had studied Basic French instead. Now, at the age of fourteen, I was staring blankly at the pages of the English school texts, realising that my chances of mastering the language enough to become a writer in my new country were extremely slim. Disheartened with the complications of English, I decided to swallow my pride and abandon writing for the time being. To my mother's delight, I topped my Grade 10 Maths class.

The worst was yet to come. A year after arriving in Australia we moved to Brisbane. In Lismore the other students had generally avoided me, but in the Brisbane state school I got my first taste of xenophobia. I tried to ignore the bullies' name-callings, but there was nothing I could do to impress the others and make friends with them. Their minds were already made up about foreigners with darker skin and funny accents. I tried to prove myself in the class by studying very hard, but the teachers (with one exception) remained unimpressed if not contemptuous. In the playground, seen as a 'camel fucker', 'terrorist', 'Muslim rapist' and the like, I was usually a ready target for other students' frustrations. Unable to defend myself against the overwhelming bullies, and too proud to discuss the situation with my parents; I withdrew, decided to stop reading and writing altogether, and enrolled for an engineering degree after finishing high school.

I have written a fictionalised version of my experiences as a young newcomer to Australia in *Elixir: a story in poetry* (Grendon Press, 2002, [reviewed in this issue]). I have, perhaps, in some minor ways transcended the traumas of alienation, or at least assimilated into the 'Australian way of life' enough to be able to look back and write about my experiences without too much anger. But I could never shake off the loneliness that comes from being different from the majority. And, despite all of that, I could not shake off the passion for creativity either. After a year of yawning and doodling at the Circuits and Measurements and Applied Chemistry classes I decided to save my sanity by pursuing something more creative. At the expense of getting kicked out of home I dropped out of Civil Engineering and enrolled in a Bachelor of Creative Arts at Griffith University Gold Coast to study visual arts. Even though my ambitions for writing had been thoroughly quashed, I still fancied myself to be an artist.

But on the Gold Coast I met an extraordinary creature: a performance poet. I watched him closely and realised that his medium allowed him a direct, vocal expression of unabashed frustrations without the entrapments of 'correct' English. As I started reading other poets my English began to improve and, to my surprise, I received much better marks for my poems, novellas and plays than I did for my paintings and attempts at installation-art. My first poem was published in 1995 and I was offered a place in the university's Honours program on finishing the BA. I felt less anxious then than I did during high school because of having resuscitated my passion for writing. But pursuing the writer's path in Australia has since greatly highlighted my sense of Otherness and isolation. During my Honours year, for example, I was the only student submitting a dissertation in poetry. As a newly-arrived poet I have time and again found myself excluded from, and disappointed by, publishers, literary journals and poetry circles. As a writer of any kind, I have found myself alienated by Australian culture's prioritization of visual communication over written language. I have, in short, found myself at odds with other writers and excluded from the larger society.

On finishing my Honours degree I was offered a place in the postgraduate program of Melbourne's Deakin University. I was asked to submit a proposal for a project with a major creative writing component. The course coordinator advised me to go to the State Library to prepare a proposal with bibliography. In the tram I toyed with various possibilities: a narrative in verse about a lonely Aboriginal warrior fighting the settlers; a magic realist horror story about the evils of capitalist society; a reinterpretation of Voltaire's *Candide* with a Muslim terrorist as its hero; a play about a police watch-house haunted by the vengeful ghosts of suicidal inmates… I couldn't decide. Stepping off the tram and seeing the statue of Joan of Arc outside the State Library in Swanston Street, however, reminded me that my topic had long been chosen.

The Voices

I was surprised that I hadn't thought about her already. Joan of Arc, apart from having been one of my earliest and most formative influences, had also been one of history's best-known outcasts. As Anne Llewellyn Barstow has put it:

> Both by the solitary nature of her visionary experience and by the ecclesiastical condemnation, Joan was an outsider. (Barstow 1986: xvii)

The condemnation fatally expelled Joan of Arc from her society, cutting her off from the branches of the Mother Church and extinguishing her in the flames of the punitive bonfire in a macabre public spectacle at Rouen's Old Market Square. But Joan had long been a solitary outcast prior to her life's horrible end. She does not

seem to have ever established an interpersonal relationship despite having had a huge number of fanatical supporters and loyal warriors, before being captured. Not only did her fail-safe virginity prevent romantic relationships, but she also actively repelled other women's friendships. In September 1429, for example, an obviously star-struck soothsayer, called Catherine de la Rochelle, approached Joan, offering to help with raising the funds for a further campaign against the Burgundians after the aborted attack on Paris. This woman then disclosed her secrets by telling the Maid about the 'white lady' who visited her at nights. Joan recalled the encounter during her trial:

> I told Catherine that she should return to her husband, look after her home, and bring up her children. (Barstow 1986: 65)

Although Joan of Arc's characteristic arrogance and rudeness cannot be denied, her lack of interest and/or inability to engage in interpersonal relationships seems to have stemmed from what Barstow has described as 'the awful loneliness of the mystic' (43). According to Joan's own words, she stopped participating in village dances and other social activities, which she had dismissively refer to as 'games and frolics' (Of Arc 2000: 11) upon hearing her voices for the first time at the age of 13. She did not speak to anyone - her family included - about this intense private experience before secretly departing for war four years later (11).

In the meantime, according to the testimonies of those who knew Joan during her adolescence in Domremy, she busied herself with housework and farm duties, and spent a seemingly unusual amount of time at the village church of Saint Remy and at the nearby hermitage of Notre Dame de Bermont. Hauviette, a Domremy woman who claimed to have known Joan very well, remembered her famous girlhood friend:

> [Joan] went often and of her own will to church and the sacred places and often she was ashamed because of people remarking how she went so devoutly to church. I have heard the priest who was there in her time say that she went so devoutly to church. (Pernoud 1964: 18)

Her anti-social behaviour and extreme piety - or what was perceived by the others as piety - distanced Joan from the youth of the close-knit farming community and aroused suspicion and hostility. One of the villagers, Isabelette d'Epinal, for example, would later recall: '[Joan] did not dance, so that we, the other girls and young men, even talked about it' (Pernoud 1964: 19). Another villager, Colin, would also remember: '[Joan] was very devout towards God and the Blessed Virgin, so much so that I myself, who was young then, and other young men teased her' (18). From these statements it seems that, as Barstow has noted, Joan 'traded the usual social life of a village girl for religious experience' (Barstow 1986: 54).

Labelling Joan of Arc's solitary interactions and conversations with her voices as 'spiritual' or 'religious experience', as Barstow does, is misleading. Indeed, it *was* the representatives of the Church who eventually condemned her to death by fire, but her professional behaviour, her politics and public statements - as we know them now - were rarely aimed at spiritual matters. This observation, I believe, needs further emphasis if we are to investigate the 'reality' of her voices.

As mentioned before, Joan of Arc's masculine outfit was sacrilegious. Leading men into battle and waging war were further repudiations of the 'womanly modesty' praised by the Church. In the context of the Great Schism, her fealty towards the pro-Avignon Valois Dynasty was seen as a possible opposition to the Pope in Rome. And introducing herself publicly as the messenger of 'the King of

Heaven' gave way to charges of Presumption and Idolatry. Her later canonisation and sainthood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were totally Modern political events, concocted by the Vatican and the French Extreme Right to, in Warner's view, 'make a firm stand against the rapid secularisation of France and the spread of unbelief [i.e. Socialism] in the Christian world in general' (Warner 1991: 264). I believe, however, that seeing Joan of Arc's voices as saintly religious signifiers is not only a right-wing invention but also, more importantly, a simplification of history. I also believe that her other spiritualised depictions - as shaman, witch, etc - are latter-day mystifications that have resulted from ignoring Joan's own objectives and her objective reality.

Joan of Arc was, first and foremost, a military leader. Despite her piety, the visions of 'the angel', the voices, her supposedly devotional virginity, her prophecies and the like, she never performed publicly as anything other that the chief-of-war of the Dauphin's armies in 1429 and, later, as an anti-Burgundian renegade leader - until the time of her capture during a battle outside the town of Compiegne. When, during the Poitiers examinations, Brother Seguin Seguin of the Order of Preaching Friars asked her to show him and other monks a sign of being the messenger of 'the King of Heaven', she retorted angrily:

> In God's name, I am not come here to Poitiers to make signs; but take me to Orleans [i.e. let me fight the English at Orleans] and I will show you the signs for which I've been sent. (Pernoud 1964: 64)

In other words, Joan did not see herself as a miracle worker, magician or saint, but as a soldier whose abilities could not be demonstrated by performing audiovisual tricks (miracles). She would prove herself only through winning military combats. In the context of her era, if Joan had fancied herself to be as much a spiritual figure as many others wanted her to be, she would have surely settled for life in an Order, in a convent, as an itinerant fortune-teller or even as an evangelist preacher arousing a crusade against the infidels and heretics. But she was a knight who devoted her life to the very historical and secular task of overturning the tide of the Hundred Years War. Her divine message, as seen at the beginning of this chapter, was to promise the Dauphin the French throne; it had nothing whatsoever to do with protecting the Church, converting Jews and Muslims into Christianity, admonishing the sins of her society, preaching about the Apocalypse, etc. Her spirituality was never for the sake of spirituality, but aimed squarely at ending the English invasion. As Sullivan has also noted:

> Joan did not merely claim to have had mystical experiences as many Medieval women claimed to have had: she claimed to have been sent by God to accomplish a particular goal, such as the relief of the siege of Orleans, the coronation of her king at Rheims, or the expulsion of the English from France. (Sullivan 1996: 93)

That Joan of Arc was spiritually active cannot be denied; that her voices play a crucial part in her story is beyond argument, even if only because, as Gies has observed, the voices 'conferred on [her] a strength of resolution possessed by few, women or men' (Gies 1981: 28). But seeing these voices as supernatural or religious is unnecessary because Joan herself never believed her mission to be either magical or religious. Furthermore, seeing the voices as those of specific Catholic saints or characters of Christian iconography - i.e. Archangel Michael, Saint Catherine of Alexandria and Saint Margaret of Antioch - has been based on seemingly naïve readings of the trials transcripts. I agree with Sullivan's contention that 'Joan did not experience her voices as [the aforementioned saints]

but was merely forced to claim to do so by the pressure of the trial' (Sullivan 1996: 102).

But, if Joan of Arc's voices aren't to be seen as religious, then how are they to be understood? Was she 'mentally ill'? Or is it possible, after all, that faced with the scepticism of a hostile ecclesiastical judiciary, she lied and invented the story of her voices to save her life? I shall answer these questions in the reverse order.

Firstly, although I believe that the supposed identities of the voices were fabricated during the trial and that a number of exaggerated accounts of their attributes were manufactured in defence against the questions put to her, Joan of Arc could not have lied about the actual existence of the voices, which she preferred referring to as her 'counsel'. Her severe detachment from her community during adolescence and the level of her attachment to solitude and praying from that age onward indicate the kind of loneliness that produces self-referential voicing of good advice. Thus, for example, Joan was telling the truth when she said that her counsel first began speaking to her when she was thirteen and that it told her 'to go often to church' (Of Arc 2000: 6).

Furthermore, I believe that there is a definite realism in Joan's description of her conversations with these voices regardless of their identities and attributes. At times, for example, she seems to have been genuinely baffled and even intimidated by their commands. Upon being told to go to the Dauphin and fight the English, for example, Joan had initially rejected her counsel's demand, claiming that she was 'a poor girl who knew nothing of riding and warfare' (Of Arc 2000: 7). Her further arguments and disagreement with the voices are also the characteristics of an authentic relationship. In the case of her attempted escape from prison, for example, she decided to jump out the window even though, in her words, 'my voices forbade me to jump. And at last, for fear of the English, I did jump…and I was hurt' (Of Arc 2000: 88).

Whether Joan of Arc heard the counsel in her mind's ear imaginatively or in her body's ears physically might be pedantic for historical purposes, but it does evoke the sensational issue of her questioned sanity and the assumptions of schizophrenia, epilepsy, etc. As Linda H. Conner has written of Michel Foucault's hypothesis, madness during the Middle Ages was 'a means of access to higher knowledge not available to other mortals' (Conner 1982: 786). Was Joan of Arc mad?

According to the *Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* there is a marked difference between hypnotic perceptions that 'accompany vivid religious experiences' and the auditory hallucinations that are seen 'as a hallmark of various disorders such as schizophrenia' (Reber and Reber 2001: 313). Joan of Arc's voices clearly belong to the first category even though here, as before, I would contest the use of the word 'religious'.

While I basically agree with Will Durant that possibly at the time of first hearing her voices 'some physiological changes mystified [Joan] at [a] most impressionable age'
(Durant 1957: 82) I believe that calling Joan of Arc mentally disordered is unnecessary and inappropriate. As George Bernard Shaw has noted, Joan was not insane but, if anything, 'unusually sane' (Shaw 1953: 18). He went as far as saying that Joan was 'mentally excessive' instead of 'mentally defective' (19). Her extraordinary talents in warfare and military leadership; her ability to argue coherently against judges and scholars; and her personal qualities such as an incredible power to persuade people, maintain composure in the face of fatal danger and her proto-feminist self-reliance could be seen as testimonies to her remarkable, even excessive, sanity.

My Epic Response

If Joan was neither saint nor schizophrenic; if her voices were neither those of Catholic icons nor symptoms of a mental illness; what on earth were they? In what context and with what words could we unravel one of history's most persistent mysteries?

My answer to this question, as proposed in *La Pucelle* (the creative component of my PhD candidature), has been an expansion of the very first testimony of Joan of Arc cited in this paper; the one made to the monks present at her cell on the morning of her execution. Here, I believe, she discloses the identity of the angel whose voice transformed her from a war-stricken farmer's daughter into one of Medieval Europe's most successful military leaders:

> I was the angel and there was no other. (Of Arc 2000: 143)

During the course of my creative writing I used this sentence as what Michael Riffaterre may call a matrix, 'a minimal and literal sentence'; and as Riffaterre would further have it, my entire epic, the representation of a specific assemblage of history, has been produced through exhausting all the possible paradigms of this matrix (Riffaterre 1978: 19). In the light of this literary exercise, I have come to believe that Joan was mistaken to have believed her voices were supernatural and sent by God, 'the King of Heaven'. The voices, in my epic at least, come from her own natural self or ego; from her own survival instincts expanding into a fierce desire for rising above the tragedies of her age, gender and class.

I believe that the angel was Joan herself, guiding her towards a path of personal victory. That this personal quest correlated with an historical movement is fascinating but by no means an abnormality. That she heard these voices so clearly, and listened to them so devotionally, is extraordinary; but neither saintly nor deranged. She believed in the messages of her soul's voices; they told her of the great horrors of her world, and about the ways of the hero who could forestall the terrors of war, pillage and rapine.

Joan of Arc, I believe, was a revolutionary leader whose tragic end is a further affirmation of the fundamentality of the causes she championed. In today's terminology, she fought for equality: a personal as well as a public quest. That is, an end to being an inferior. A French country girl during the Hundred Years War, I believe, was the lowest of humans. Joan fought hard to reverse the tides of oppression by becoming a victorious knight who redeemed femininity, Frenchness and peasantry after almost a hundred years of humiliation and violation. And her personal desires - manifested through the voices - became historic; her victories resurrected the Valois Dynasty and subsequently the English armies were, once and for all, expelled from France.

In the end, I can't claim that that this version of Joan of Arc is anything other than my own epic poet's subjective perspective expounded in the creative component of my PhD candidature. But the documents and records of Joan of Arc's story have strongly shaped my subjective and artistic perceptions. My epic is nothing but an extension of Joan of Arc's history. This is not to say that *La Pucelle* is an historically accurate depiction of the Maid's history - although it is, to my mind, very much so. But because I have felt and absorbed the dominant themes of her story on a very personal level, I can confidently say that there exists a strong connection between myself as an author and the subject matter of the text that I have produced. Whether this connection has resulted in 'good' or 'bad' writing is not for me to say, but I do hope that it has done justice to Joan of Arc's incredible story.

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