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*Towards a Poetics for the Epic: the Case of *Ditie de Jehanne d'Arc**

1. The Striking Epic

We can see heroes as mythology's byproducts. The heroes of most epic poems, in particular, can be seen as symbolic and fictitious figures invented and contrived by poets to convey religious and political ideals. For example, it is generally assumed that the mythic Trojan warrior of Virgil's *The Aeneid* is employed as a political model by the Roman poet to justify and publicly celebrate Caesar Augustus's rise to absolute power in Rome. Closer to home, it could be easily argued that the fictional hero of Les Murray's recent *Freddie Neptune* has been written to rationalise the poet's own beliefs and politics; and, specifically, his discriminative reading of Australia's modern history.

There is however at least one striking epic which projects its voice and heroic narration beyond the cloister of mythologies. Christine de Pisan, in her early fifteenth century poem *Ditie de Jehanne d'Arc*, by merging various historical, emotional, personal and political energies in her writing, has lifted the epic idiom above the discourses of dominantly ideological, whimsical and fictional invention.

This epic has the direct and urgent feel of news bulletins and documentaries as its hero, Joan of Arc, was a contemporary historical figure of the poet's era, and the narration is distinctly affected by the reported events and the life of their (then) living protagonist. As the impassioned writer has noticeably and personally invested herself within the sequences of writing, it can be seen that the distance separating fact from fiction has been disarmed, and the epic has been freed from the demands of ideology, religion, culture and mythology.

2. Christine de Pisan: A Brief Biography

Christine de Pisan was born in 1364 AD in Venice. Shortly after her birth her father, a scholar at the University of Bologna, was appointed as the astrologer to the King of France, Charles V, and moved his family to Paris when Christine was three years old. It was in the library of the French court that, against her mother's wish, Christine received education before marrying (at the age of fifteen) a royal secretary, Etienne du Castel, who encouraged his wife to continue her studies.

Judging from the poems which de Pisan wrote immediately after her husband's premature death, this ten-year-long marriage was a particularly happy one. At the time of his death, Christine was 25 years old, and was left with three children and two or three other dependents to support. By this time her father had also passed away.

Her decision to stay in the French court and earn a living from writing has had a profound effect on the cultural and ideological development of western literature, as her works have often been cited as the springboard for the modern feminist movement. De Pisan is also the first woman known to have made her income solely from the writing professions; regardless

of gender, this achievement is one of history's first examples of a professional writer. Whether it was through tutoring, illustrating and copying other writers' works or seeking patronage from western Europe's courtiers and nobility for her own writing, de Pisan managed to live as a writer until her death in 1430 at the age of 66.

3. Her Poetry

As stated, the aim of this paper is speculating Christine de Pisan's final text as an epic poem. It is therefore important to investigate the development of her voice and her ethos towards the composition of this work.

Prolific and hard-working, de Pisan wrote in most of the contemporary forms and genres. Her most widely recognised book, *Le Livre de la Cite des Dames* (1405), is an allegorical prose narrative written against the misogyny of male writers in defence of famous religious, mythic and historical female characters. A few years earlier, with *La Dit de la Rose* (1402) de Pisan attracted considerable attention for her criticism of the popular allegorical epic *La Roman de Rose*. With the feud that ensued from her 'spirited indignation' (Warner 1991:219) at the work's sexism, de Pisan established herself as a major advocate of women's rights and a noticeable figure within the intellectual and literary canon of the late-medieval Europe.

Her earliest known works, however, are lyrical love ballads. The best known of these poems was written while lamenting her husband's death in 1389:

from Seulette suy et seulette vuneil estre

translated from medieval French to English by C.C. Willard

Alone am I, alone I wish to be,
 Alone my gentle love has left me,
 Alone am I, without friend or master,
 Alone am I, in sorrow and in anger,
 Alone am I, ill at ease, in languor,
 Alone am I, more lost than everyone,
 Alone am I, left without a lover.

(Willard 1984:53)

Provocatively honest and almost confessional in the exposition of her personal life, de Pisan's poetry can be distinguished from the overtly musical and dance ballads which, due to the popularity of earlier troubadours, had dominated the poetry of the early to mid-middle ages.

However, during the late middle ages, as Charity Willard has rightly observed, poets were distancing themselves from the music that had long become a fixed element of their art (Willard 1984:84) by embracing more challenging creative techniques and verse structures. As it was, the prominent French poet Eustache Deschamps wrote an essay on writing poetry in which he differentiated 'between artificial music - that played on instruments - and natural music, which is produced by the human voice reciting words in various meters and in different patterns' (Willard 1984:55).

Moving on from her early ballads, de Pisan designated Deschamps as her mentor and began experimenting with forms such as virelay and rondeaux. These forms incorporated patterns more intricate and variable than the simplistic structure of lyric ballads. As form is the extension of content, these innovative structures dealt with more complex and sophisticated themes than those depicted in ballads, enabling de Pisan to express herself with a distinct intelligence and observance. On the topic of her widowhood, for example, she was more insightful and inquisitive than before:

Rondeaux I

translated by Willard

I am a widow lone, in black arrayed,
 With sorrowful countenance, simply clad.
 In great distress and with air so sad
 I bear this sorrow now upon me laid.

It is not right that I should be dismayed,
 Full of hot tears and with a tongue of lead,
 I am a widow lone, in black arrayed.

Since I have lost my love, by Death betrayed
 Grief has set in, and to perdition led
 All my good days, and thus all joy has fled.
 In disarray have all my fortunes strayed -
 I am a widow lone, in black arrayed.

(Willard 1984:58)

Following her works in short verse forms, in 1399 de Pisan turned to writing longer poems. Composing her first sequence, she considered this as 'the beginning of her career as a writer' (Willard 1984:62.) With her shorter poems, it seems, de Pisan had dealt with intensely intimate, emotive and romantic themes - grief, love, sadness and longing. Now, in the search of a more expansive space which would enable her to emerge and engage with cultural, intellectual and political themes of her society, she moved on to character-based narrative poems.

De Pisan drew on classical symbolism for her first long work, *L'Epistre au Dieu d'Amours*, in which she took on the role of the classical god of love Cupid's scribe. In it, confident and immediate, with a coherent and rousing voice, she objects to the degradation of women, the decline of the earlier chivalric values and the greed and arrogance of her contemporaries. The work proved internationally successful and was translated by one of Chaucer's disciples into English.

However, as her output further tapped into the political unconscious of her time, de Pisan was drawn away from poetry towards philosophical and critical prose. One of her last long poems, *Le Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune* (1403) dealt with the issues of gender-classification and sexual stereotypes in a candid and head-on voice. Reflecting on her survival and success since her husband's death fourteen years earlier, a controlled and confident de Pisan writes:

from **Le Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune**

translated by Nadia Margolis

I, a woman, became a man by the flick of Fortune's hand
 How she changed my body's form
 To the perfect masculine norm.
 I'm a man, no truth I'm hiding
 You can tell by how I'm hiding
 And if I was female before -
 It's the truth and nothing more -
 It seems I'll have to re-create
 Just how I did transmutate
 From a woman to a man:
 I think the title of my tale
 Is, if I'm not being importune,
 "The Mutation of Fortune."

(Willard 1994:110-112)

Dealing with depression, working overtime and looking after a family had toughened her perceptions, and her voice overcame the previous rage and melancholy to embody a lucid maturity.

It should come as no great surprise that soon after writing this piece de Pisan changed her focus towards the more solid, sober and intellectual form of writing: prose. Sixteen years later, however, her last piece, finished just before her death, was a poem of exceptional vitality and energy; an ardent and passionate epic written for the young hero of the Hundred Years War, Joan of Arc.

My aim is to read some of the *Ditie de Jehanne d'Arc* by displaying the connections between the verse and its themes; that is, the multiplicity between the poetry and the narration of known facts. I plan to disclose a particular ability of this epic poem: the possibility of engaging with facts instead of devising fictions.

4. Towards Joan of Arc

Unlike many of her contemporaries, de Pisan remained loyal to the same liege for the duration of her life. As she was educated and chiefly employed in the French court during the best part of her career, she was a supporter of the reigning Valois dynasty. This royal family had commissioned a bulk of her work, and as shown in an illustration from the manuscript of one of her books, it was the French queen Isabeau of Bavaria to whom Christine personally presented the completed *Le Livre de la Cite des Dames*.

However her time with the royal French household, which included tutoring the dauphin Louis, came to an end as the Hundred Years War was renewed in 1415. As a result de Pisan was forced into exile and retirement.

In the aftermath of the battle of Agincourt, the powerful Duke of Burgundy joined sides with the successful English, and Paris, where de Pisan and the royal household resided, was in danger of military occupation. In the same year another major blow was delivered to the kingdom when de Pisan's student dauphin Louis died of natural causes. Willard notes:

Christine wrote of the "great worries and failing courage" that had been her lot because of many difficulties which confronted her. It is understandable that neither she nor any other Parisian could have lived comfortably or securely during those turbulent times (Willard 1984:196.)

On the night of 28 May 1418 the city's gates were secretly opened to England's Burgundian allies. According to Edward Lucie-Smith, the assailants put 5000 Parisians to death (Lucie-Smith 2000:44.) Christine de Pisan and the new dauphin, Charles, barely escaped the carnage. De Pisan took refuge in the Abbey of Poissy where her daughter lived and the adolescent dauphin fled to the south of the Loire River and stationed a provincial court in the city of Chinon.

Shortly after the massacre, the English army entered a subdued Paris. Christine de Pisan was fortunate enough to have had a prominent English knight (Sir John Fastolf) and the Duke of Burgundy as admirers of her writing. Hence, despite her political allegiance, she was never persecuted or harmed by these victors.

The rest of the country, however, wasn't as favoured. The English soldiers, the unpaid mercenaries and local bandits who took advantage of the country's chaotic climate, regularly raided the defenceless villages and farms. As a chronicler would later recall:

From Loire to Seine, and from there to the Somme, nearly all the fields were left for many years, not merely untended but without people capable

of cultivating them, except for rare patches of soil, for the peasants had been [either] killed or put to flight. (Warner 1991:4)

For Christine de Pisan, who had promoted peace and harmony in her book *Livre de la Paix* (1414), this violent episode of France's history was a period of mourning and humiliation, personally reminiscent of the years after her husband's death.

Exiled from Paris and prone to depression, she drew away from society and, for the last eleven years of her life, kept to a cell in the convent of Poissy. After her last son's death, she immersed herself in prayer and worship, retiring from writing soon after. Whether mourning the miseries of war, praying for divine help or preparing herself for death, it seemed as if her life as a writer was at its end.

5. Epic Narrator: Personal as Public

But this was not to be. Christine de Pisan picked up her quill once more in 1429 to write a sequence of 61 stanzas titled *Ditie de Jehanne d'Arc* (*Tale of Joan of Arc*). Needless to say, the reason and the inspiration for this creative resurgence was the rapid, unexpected and sensational victories of the visionary female knight Joan of Arc (1412-1431) whose life and death would completely alter the course of the Hundred Years War in de Pisan's favour.

Christine McWebb has noted Joan of Arc's famous exploits helped de Pisan in overcoming 'the life of self-imprisonment that she had led for eleven years' (McWebb 1996:133.) The act of writing an epic itself must have provided de Pisan with catharsis and psychological remedy. C.M. Bowra has observed the reason behind epic poetry's considerable continuity and endurance is that this form 'answers a real need of the human spirit' (Bowra 1961:3); this quality functions for both the epic's reader and its writer.

In the poet's medieval French, the verse displays intricate internal rhymes and numerous alliterations. In this paper's versions (or imitations) I've attempted to sustain the fixed measure and rhyme pattern of the original form but I have disregarded the syntactical complexity of de Pisan's verse. In the first *huitain* (an octet that rhymes *ababbcbc*) de Pisan declares her personal voice as the narrator:

1

I, Christine, who have been weeping
 Eleven years in the locked convent
 Where I've been reluctantly living
 Since Charles, it's recalled in regret
 How unnatural, king's descendant
 Fled from Paris in haste and grief
 Forced to reclusion since this event
 Now is the first time I begin to laugh.

(translated by Ali Alizadeh)

Her internal/personal actions - weeping, laughing - have been fused with extroverted reactions - expressions of dismay over the dauphin's plight of 1418 - to symbolise the poem's theme through facial imagery. The clause of the first line is gradually clouded as the narrator moves to the theme of the dauphin's escape from Paris. But in the last line it is retrieved - the grimace has turned into a grin on the narrator's face. This fluid perception is immediately followed up in the next stanza, and expands the reason behind the poet's personal transformation:

2

A hearty laugh in rejoicing
 I rise as the winter's old age
 Leaves the place I've been dwelling
 Sad and imprisoned in a cold cage
 But now changing my language
 Of tears to song, it's recovered
 The springtime stage;
 So good to see that I've survived.

(trans. Alizedeh)

On one level, de Pisan's celebration is a personal event and the poem projects self-congratulation and bravado. After all, as McWebb has noted, 'the autobiographical "I" had just broken out of a time of sadness and solitude' (McWebb 1996:137.) However, on a historical level, the poem casts a much wider field of restoration; manifesting and recording the renewal of the poet's nation.

It should be noted that Christine de Pisan - according to the poem's last huitain - finished this work at her abbey on 31 July 1429. This was fifteen days after dauphin Charles of Valois, with a triumphant and armoured Joan of Arc standing behind him, was legitimately crowned as King Charles VII of France in Rheims cathedral. This coronation consolidated Joan's surprise military victories, and the French throne was restored to the Valois family. With the French kingdom recovered, and a bulk of the English army routed and expelled, the Duke of Burgundy felt intimidated and signed a truce with his strengthened rivals. War seemed to have ended.

In de Pisan's poetry this peace and restoration takes the symbol of a dawning sun as she brings history and lyrical images together:

from 3

Year fourteen hundred and twenty-nine
 Sun revives and its radiant song
 Heralds the good seasons, so fine
 A sunshine hasn't been for so long...

(trans. Alizedeh)

Through the image of the sun, de Pisan communicates and transports the energies of this historical episode to the reader. She diffuses her personal happiness with the collective emotions, and amplifies her exhilaration to project the rapture of her people or, as Ezra Pound would have it, the tale of her tribe (Bernstein 1980:7). As McWebb has also observed:

Leaving the walls of the abbey behind is a kind of a renaissance for the narrator, a rebirth that extends her to the whole nation... Christine, in her position as narrator, assumes the role of a speaker for the collective community. (McWebb 1996:137)

De Pisan's narration bears the feature which T.S. Eliot has witnessed in Dante's *La Divina Commedia* as 'width of emotional range' (Eliot 1963:95.) This is the same property which Charles Olson has observed to be lacking in Pound's *Cantos*: 'an emotional system...capable of extensions & comprehensions' (Olson 1966:82).

De Pisan's emotional range or system operates as she consistently multiplies the conditions of her personal experience - life in the convent, depression, her senses, etc - with unspecific images of collective living or nature - seasons, sunshine, etc - with such specific and public details as the massacre of the year 1418 or the coronation of 1429. This mechanism is a fluid interaction between these opposing yet equally invested elements.

As a poetess for the epic, the ever-widening field of this multiplication demonstrates an adamant and consistent willingness by which de Pisan has blurred the separations between the private and the public, literary and historical; between fiction and fact. By including and blending the oppositions within her narration, de Pisan has created an engaging and lively epic of her hero, Joan of Arc.

6. Epic Hero: the Protagonist Spirituality

While the two women never met, it is evident that in the news and stories of Joan of Arc Christine de Pisan found a tribal, personal and spiritual hero. As a tribal or political hero, Joan had championed de Pisan's liege, the Valois dynasty. More resonantly, Joan, due to her chastity, courage, chivalry, piety and intelligence, personified an exceptional female figurehead. Furthermore, as another celebrated woman challenging the presiding misogynist paradigms, de Pisan was moved by the evident parallels between the younger woman's passions and her own. McWebb observes:

The pen and the sword are allied instruments as Christine shares her fate with her hero in the *De la Vie de Jehanne d'Arc*. Both women remain exceptional for their time: Christine as a female writer and defender of her sex with her pen and Joan as a female fighter and defender of her sex and her country with her sword. (McWebb 1996:135)

Joan of Arc was, after all, another woman who had 'become a man by the flick of Fortune's hand'. Her physical transformation, far more political and controversial than that of Christine de Pisan's writing, was manifested through her refusal of marriage, cross-dressing, fighting as a knight and, importantly, her virginity. De Pisan, it seems, had found the perfect subject for reviving her writing and her poetry after the long period of inactivity. Through the triumphant image of Joan of Arc, de Pisan found inspiration and reasons to rejoice all women:

34

translated by Willard

What honour this for womankind,
Well-loved of God it would appear,
When that sad crowd to loss resigned
Fled from the kingdom in great fear
Now by a woman rescued here
(Which 5,000 men could not do)
Who made the traitors disappear.
One should scarcely believe it true.

(Willard 1984:206)

It seems, for the writer who had found solace in an abbey amongst the nuns, the mystical Joan's political rise signified the divine order at work. De Pisan wasn't alone in calling Joan's accomplishments miracles, as most of the contemporaries also attributed supernatural tones to the unusual and unexpected circumstances of Joan's brief, yet bright, political life. To the supporter of the Valois dynasty and a majority of the French, Joan was the promised messenger of God, the sacred *pucelle* (maid or virgin) of a number of early medieval prophecies. The poet Alain Chartier, for example, in 1429 wrote to a foreign prince:

Here is she who seems not to issue from any place on earth, but rather sent by Heaven to sustain with head and shoulders a France fallen to the ground. O astonishing virgin! worthy of all fame, of all praise, worthy of all the divine honours! (Pernoud 1969:115)

One of her most renowned comrades, the future Count of Dunois, John the Bastard of Orleans who had fought alongside her at Orleans, seemed to believe that Joan had the power to affect the weather. After recounting how, due to a sudden favourable shift in the wind, they had quickly crossed the Loire River on boats without being shot at by the English, he claimed:

[I]t seems to me that Joan and what she did in warfare and in battle was rather of God than men; the change which suddenly happened in the wind, after she had spoken gave hope of succour...despite the English who were in much greater strength than [our] army. (Pernoud 1964:96)

To the English and their allies on the other hand, Joan was an unnatural and diabolical girl: a witch to be burnt at the stake. In a missive of 1429, the defeated English regent John Bedford described her as a 'superstitious and depraved individual...that disorderly and deformed travesty of a woman, who dresses like a man, whose life is dissolute' (Warner 1991:104).

De Pisan's essentially French and positive perceptions of Joan should come as no surprise to a reader of *Ditie de Jehanne d'Arc* as, obviously, the poet's own political sympathies have mixed with the affairs of history. But the result is not essentially an author's manipulation of history since, through the poem's spirituality, de Pisan comes close to evoking her hero beyond the biases of a subjective representation.

In the huitains which detail Joan's quest, her characteristics and powers, de Pisan has consistently included and repeated the motif of God's omnipresence. For example, having rejoiced at the shift of France's fortunes from 'evil to such great good' in the previous huitain, she introduces Joan to her readers in reference to God:

from 11

...It's a thing well worth remembrance
That God, by a young maid's doing
Has indeed bestowed upon France
A glorious and divine blessing

(trans. Alizadeh)

It should be noted that Joan of Arc was herself convinced that she was God's messenger. In the trial of 1431, after days of hesitation, she told the inquisitors:

When I was thirteen years old, I had a voice from God to help me govern my conduct. And the first time I was very fearful. And came this voice, about the hour of noon, in the summer-time, in my father's garden; I had not fasted on the eve preceding that day. I heard the voice on the right-hand side, towards the church; and rarely do I hear it without a brightness. (Pernoud 1964:33)

It can be observed that Joan of Arc was a religious and distinctly reverent girl; as testified by her childhood peers such as Isabelette d'Epinal, during her childhood and early adolescence in the village of Domremy:

[Joan] was not to be seen loitering about the streets, but was much in church at prayer. She did not dance, so that we, the other girls and young men, even talked about it. (Pernoud 1964:19)

A farmer called Colin also testified to Joan's particularly intense religious devotion:

She went readily to church, as I saw myself, for almost every Saturday afternoon Joan...went to the hermitage of Notre Dame de Bermont, bearing candles. She 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. (Pernoud 1964:18)

Joan, whose most persistent complaints during her long imprisonment by the English soldiers came from not being allowed to hear Mass, mentioned God's name frequently, and her favourite phrase was *en nom Dieu* (in God's name).

Christine de Pisan's poem engages the poet's own spiritual and religious inclinations with those of her hero, and displays an instinctual ability and an active willingness to interact with Joan of Arc's spirituality.

Hence, as the living protagonist of de Pisan's epic poem includes God in her language, so does the poem itself. For this writer, a devout hero has demanded a devotional epic since, as Olson has observed, in poetry form is an extension of content (Olson 1966:16).

However, within the poem's cosmology, the divine is not a dogmatic and repressive paradigm, but an added source of strong supernatural energy. De Pisan does not praise Joan as God's humble and owned inferior, but an individualised and independent warrior:

37

Driving the enemies from France
Recovering every city and region
Never the likes of her brilliance
Was seen amongst a thousand men.
To our brave and competent men,
Stronger than Achilles or Hector
She's our army's supreme captain
But it's all God's doing; He's her leader.

(trans Alizadeh)

The heroism manifested by this segment is primarily profane and its cause is Joan's competence as a military leader. This quality has been included with the protagonist for the duration of the stanza until God's personal guidance resurfaces. By mentioning God in the last line, Christine acknowledges, and pays a final tribute to, the spiritual beliefs of her hero.

In other words, Joan has not been portrayed as a Homeric human-god or a mythic creature of any kind carrying out some deity's desires, but a profane girl ('young maid' of huitain 11) whose deeds were, with or without a divine intervention, authentic and factual.

7. Epic and History

In Homer's, and to a lesser degree Virgil's, 'primary epic', heroes are subject to various gods' and goddesses' decisions, and more often than not, they are conceived, eliminated or at least severely altered by the whims of mythic immortal entities. In *The Odyssey* the curse of the vengeful wounded one-eyed monster Cyclops determines the course of the epic's story; the monster's plea rouses his father Poseidon the God of Seas to impose numerous obstacles over the rest of Odysseus's journey. In *The Aeneid*, the hero is son of Venus the Goddess of Love, and he's greatly assisted by his sacred mother in seducing the Carthagian queen Dido; or by his grandfather Jupiter, the God of Gods, in fighting the Latin amazon Camilla.

During the middle ages, however, earthly historical humans took the place of classical Greco-Roman human-gods. As Jan de Vries has observed, the Old French epics in particular, were noticeably based on the accounts of history:

Whereas, properly speaking, we know of the history of the fall of Troy from *The Iliad* only - for the archaeological finds merely confirm that about 1200 BC a war was fought for this town - a poem like *Chanson de Roland* deals with a fight about which medieval documents give us some information. (De Vries 1963:22)

Christine de Pisan's *Ditie de Jehanne d'Arc* is an advanced example of this historical tradition.

As an example, the dramatic lines 'Driving the enemy from France/Recovering every city and region' (huitain 37) correspond with recorded history. During the Loire Campaign from 11 to 17 June 1429, Joan of Arc and her troops chased the retreating English along the Loire River whilst recapturing the towns of Jargeau, Meung-sur-Loire and Beaugency which had long been conquered by the English. Finally on 18 June the French cavalry caught up with their enemy and the resulting battle at Patay saw the extermination of the bulk of the English army. Of this resounding French victory Lucie-Smith writes:

Probably just over 2000 English were killed and 200 were taken prisoner. French casualties were remarkably light - Perceval de Boulainvillers [a royal counselor] asserts that only three Frenchmen were killed (Lucie-Smith 2000:145.)

Regine Pernoud believes that this battle 'more than counterbalanced the disaster at Agincourt fourteen years earlier' (Pernoud 1996:292). It's possible that with the lines 'Never the likes of her brilliance/Was seen amongst a thousand men' de Pisan is making a similar observation, prevailing Joan's efficiency at Patay over the incompetence of thousands of French knights at Agincourt.

As another example of this poem's method, by including history as a prominent and consistent component within her verse, de Pisan animates Joan of Arc's first decisive and bloody victory at Orleans on 8 May 1429 in huitain 33.

The confident English had besieged the city of Orleans in central France for eight months prior to the arrival of Joan's relief-forces on 29 April. By this time, they had gained control over all the bastions, strongholds and fortifications surrounding the city. The city's fate seemed sealed as its strained and weakened inhabitants were expected to surrender at any moment by opening the gates to the assailants. They even sent an embassy to England's ally, the Duke of Burgundy, and implored him to protect them.

However, with an eighteen-year-old Joan of Arc carrying the banner of the relief-forces and charging the counter-attacks, after eight days of fierce and relentless fighting, the siege was completely lifted. As the witnesses present at the siege would later claim, Joan performed a rousing and miraculous affect on her soldiers. On the last day of battle and before the fall of the strongest English fortification, according to the Bastard of Orleans:

[After being wounded, Joan] mounted her horse and retired alone into a vineyard, some distance from the crowd of men. And in this vineyard she remained at prayer during one half of a quarter of an hour. Then she came back from that place, at once seized her standard in hand and placed herself on the parapet of a trench, and the moment she was there the English trembled and were terrified. And [our] soldiers regained courage and began to go up, charging against the boulevard without meeting the least resistance. (Pernoud 1964:107)

600 English soldiers were either killed or taken prisoner. Amongst the dead were the English siege captain William Glasdale and about thirty of his best men who were drowned in the Loire River as the drawbridge beneath their feet collapsed in fire.

De Pisan's version, voicing an exhilarated first line, becomes suitably violent and inevitably callous towards the end. Despite naming the English 'our foes' and 'dead dogs', the impartial thread of this stanza is the actual battle, i.e. the situation resulting from various factors assembled at the historic site:

33

O, how Joan's power was apparent
At the siege of Orleans where
For the first time it grew evident.
No other miracle I proffer
Has been this visible and clear.
Our foes were abandoned by God;
Since dead dogs can't save each-other
Entrapped and captured, they were killed.

(trans. Alizadeh)

With the real-life protagonist at the centre of the epic's cosmology, leading the narrative and its tension through the poet's emotional range, fact and perception produce a balanced mixture of the two.

The poem as a whole is more than an expression of the poet's opinions; it's a lively inclusion of the historical within the literary and, as it is, de Pisan's portrait of her hero correlates closely with what we know of Joan of Arc.

Christine de Pisan's interactions with the facts of Joan of Arc's life have enabled her to raise the epic above mythology and initiate a more expansive dialogue. This point doesn't escape the poet herself who positions the real-life Joan of Arc above the religious heroines of the Old Testament:

28

Of Judith, Deborah and Esther
Who are the ladies of heaven
By whom God could deliver
His people from oppression,
And of all those of high renown
Miracles, divinely chosen
More than them in comparison
This Maid's victories have done.

(trans. Alizadeh)

De Pisan's poem was completed within days after Charles VII's coronation when Joan's decision to retake the capital was made public in a letter addressed to the people of Rheims. As Angus Kennedy and Kenneth Varity have written in their introduction to one of the more recent editions of *Ditie de Jehanne d'Arc*:

With the brilliant victory at Orleans and the coronation at Rheims now behind them, Joan and Charles VII were expected to enter Paris at any moment, defeat the Anglo-Burgundian forces and thus bring to an end the long years of foreign occupation and civil strife. (Kennedy & Varty 1977:1)

It has been observed by Anne Lutkus and Julia Walker that 'the conflict over the taking of Paris is the historical and political paradigm to which Christine de Pisan's poem speaks' (Lutkus & Walker 1996:149). Whether or not it's wise to reduce any text to a singular

paradigm, de Pisan's epic draws to its end by urging the Burgundian factions in Paris to surrender to Joan, and implores the city's inhabitants to accept the returning royal family:

55

translated by Willard

O Paris, city ill-advised,
Foolish people undone by fear,
Would you now rather be despised
Than your own royal prince revere?
In truth, you so perverse appear
You'll be destroyed, are you aware?
Unless with contrite hearts sincere
Mercy you beg. If not, beware.

(Willard 1984:206)

Through engagement with recent history, de Pisan has inevitably and intentionally begun a direct discourse with her society's politics, and in the poem's last huitain, she seems aware of the controversial nature of her writing:

61

This tale was finished by Christine
On July's last day in the said year
Of fourteen hundred and twenty-nine.
But many will be upset to hear
My poem's contents, to me it's clear
Enslaved people with submissive heads
Whose eyes are closed by weighty fear
Can't see the light when it descends.

(trans. Alizadeh)

8. The End of an Epic

It is not known if the poet lived long enough after finishing *Ditie de Jehanne d'Arc* to witness Joan of Arc's aborted attack on Paris on 8 September, or to hear about her hero's subsequent imprisonment, trial and execution in Rouen. Willard believes:

One can not avoid hoping that [de Pisan] did not survive long enough to learn of [Joan's demise]... Both Joan's defeat and knowing that the trial was undoubtedly devised to discredit by association Charles VII would have caused [Christine] profound sorrow and disillusionment. (Willard 1984:207)

Either way, Christine de Pisan's last work was the first written about Joan of Arc. Since then, 'the Maid of Orleans', whose cult, history and mythology proved timeless, has been the subject of numerous other poems, plays and novels by the likes of Shakespeare, Voltaire, Schiller, Mark Twain, George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Keneally and Dorothy Hewett.

Amongst these works, as Kennedy and Varty have suggested, *Ditie de Jehanne d'Arc* possesses 'a unique "documentary" value' (Kennedy & Varty 1977:1). But beyond its historic value, this work can be seen as a vital, multi-dimensional and genuine epic poem.

9. My Epic of Joan of Arc

The poetics can benefit writers and the students of writing. In his *TEXT* article of April 1999 Martin Harrison has emphasised the practicality of studying the poetics:

[I]f contemporary humanities is a topos or place of writing, poetics is the heart of its contemporary teaching practice... Poetics is both speculative and practical: it is both a study of the way in which knowing is represented and a doing of that knowledge. (Harrison 1999)

Ditie de Jehanne d'Arc bears the poetics of authenticity and actuality. These poetics define the text as a sequenced body of poetry where personal and public, factual and spiritual, and literary and historical merge and multiply with notable intensity and consistency. The produced body is fluid and sweeping, and includes an expansive and versatile voice of narration, a projection of the hero's psyche, and an acute knowledge of specific real events.

The poetics of *Ditie de Jehanne d'Arc* can be of particular use for my PhD project in studying previous epics as well composing my own. As it is, I also aim to produce an epic about Joan of Arc. Although I don't aim to write a work as versified or constructed as de Pisan's, her version of The Maid's quest provides me with more than historical documentation. It shows another poet's interaction with this specific historical persona, and although her relationship with Joan - as a contemporary, a Christian, an elder and a woman - is vastly different to mine, I too have found a creative inspiration in the tale of Joan of Arc.

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Letters and Debate

Ali Alizadeh *Iran, War, Displacement and my choice of Joan of Arc* Vol 7 No 2 October 2003

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