

Joan of Arc – A Study in Virginal Power and Female Autonomy

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Jean Pichore, *Les vies des femmes celebres*, c.1504, illumination on vellum, Musée Dobrée

This paper examined the life of Joan of Arc, a visionary and military leader from fifteenth-century France, through contemporary records and later post-humous interpretations by admirers and detractors alike to determine if Joan was able to achieve autonomy in her brief career, and if so, by what methods. Using these resources, it argues that Joan was clearly able to achieve an unprecedented level of political and military autonomy for a common woman in fifteenth-century Europe by using the holy notions of virginity and divine connection that has allowed many mystics and visionaries to ascend beyond their stations throughout history. Furthermore, it considers the gendered notions of clothing that were clearly at play, as many considered Joan to be ‘dressing as a man’ and changing her identity to achieve her goals, an argument that this paper disagrees with based on the evidence.

Joan’s insistence that “no one (else) in the world...can recover the kingdom of France” highlights an attitude that clearly drove Joan to push for the military and political autonomy that she was able to achieve. Her subsequent victory in clearing the siege at Orleans, which she had predicted, solidified her divine connection as a female prophet and visionary.

Bibliographic Highlights

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Joan of Arc, 15th century, parchment and pigment, 6.4” x 5.5”, Archives nationales France