
From Girl Power to Trans Folk Saint: An Autoethnographic Retrospective of One Artist in Collaboration with Joan of Arc

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Abstract

I do not know when Joan of Arc first began to haunt me. For as long as I can remember she lived in my heart, a mythic, unapproachable, inhuman figure. All that would change when I encountered her in an unexpected place—as an antagonist in Shakespeare’s *Henry VI Part 1*. There she was flawed, and foolish, and occasionally cruel. Human. This representation would spark *The Joan Project*, an interdisciplinary theatrical investigation into the life of the real Joan of Arc fueled by one question: how did Joan perceive herself? 2023 will mark one decade since *The Joan Project’s* inception. In that time, I have found few answers and far more questions about Joan, and myself. She has been both folk saint and witch, maid and martyr, butch lesbian and beloved trancerstor, prisoner and prophet. This autoethnographic retrospective performance features two Joans: one, Shakespeare’s villain re-imagined as a flawed human being drawing power from femininity; the other a trans person willing to die rather than betray self—and God—to live in a prison both literal and figurative. In a conversation with a single voice, I will again ask Joan, “Who are you really?”

Content Warnings

Mentions of imprisonment, sexual violence (no details)

Keywords

Joan of Arc, theatre, trans, Shakespeare, poetry, folklore

Introduction

For those unfamiliar with Joan's story, here is a simplified, brief-ish version: Joan was a French peasant living in the 1400's, a time of great tumult and an ongoing war for French independence from British imperialism. From the age of 13, she experienced visions of saints sent to her by G-d telling her to join the fight. At seventeen she left home to stay briefly with an uncle who taught her to ride a horse and fitted her with armour. During this time, following her visions, she unearthed a sword buried in a church. She made her way to the court of the would-be King of France, Charles VII, and convinced him to let her lead his armies.

Her first great victory was lifting the siege at Orleans, where she established herself as a brilliant tactician and fierce warrior. She was looked on as a saviour, she openly critiqued the monarchy, and was very much a hero to the rest of the peasantry. During the rest of her military career, Joan would continue to be guided by her visions, including predicting battles and injuries. She was staunch and steadfast in what she believed was right, and unafraid to tell her supposed betters off when they deserved it.

Joan predicted she would only be ensconced in the fighting for a year, and this was sadly true. She was caught and ransomed to the English, and the Catholic church, citing her visions and her manner of dress—being that of a man—put her through a long and arduous trial. Joan was eventually made to sign her name to a document declaring that she would no longer wear men's clothes or take up arms.

It is worth noting that she could not read. Later she would state the terms of the document had not been made clear to her, and that what she had signed was shorter than the document being used to keep her in prison on a life sentence. Her visions continued to tell her that it was good and right for her to dress as a man, and not to deny that she heard them. When she again confirmed her prophetic capabilities to her captors and put on men's clothes, Joan was burned to death, on May 30, 1431, at 19 years old.

Twenty years later, there was a rehabilitation trial for Joan, mostly as a public relations stunt for

the now-unpopular king she helped put on the throne. Joan had not only attended but facilitated the coronation of King Charles VII, yet no effort had been made to rescue her when she was living.

However, following the re-trial, Joan was declared innocent of her crimes. It would be another 400 years before transcripts of Joan's trial would be made widely available. She would be canonized by the Catholic church in 1920, nearly 500 years after her death, though she had been considered a folk saint for centuries by that point. The church could not recognize her as a martyr—they had martyred her, but she is the patron saint of martyrs, as well as France itself, sexual assault victims and survivors, and captives and imprisoned people.

There is so much more I could tell you. About her jumping from a tower after her capture (was it an attempt at escape or at death?), about the people in her life, about the myriad of legends that cropped up about her. I will share one:

Joan of Arc's heart did not burn.

This is my favorite because it is true. The reason is more mundane than magic: the internal organs of those burned at the stake do not, generally speaking, turn to ash. To me, the mundane here *is* magical; the heart of a person is more than just an organ. The heart, the insides, everything raw and bloody that we keep to ourselves, that makes us who we are—our very essence—cannot be burned away. It can only change shape. I could not even begin to detail every shape Joan of Arc has taken. Her short, extraordinary life is one of the most well-documented in human history. Yet her actual personhood remains an enigma, one which stirs up in turns investigation, outrage, kinship, even diagnosis. Was she a genius? Crazy? Divine? Trans? I've been looking for these answers for nearly a decade and have come no closer to any definitive truth.

I do not know when Joan of Arc first began to haunt me. Certainly, I had already encountered her ghost when I first saw her portrayed on the PBS program *Wishbone*, in the show's episode about the novel *Joan of Arc* by Mark Twain. Since that fateful viewing in my childhood, I have found Joan in other novels, in her trial and retrial,

seen her fulfill prophecies. She's been compared to the Fairy Melusine, who transformed from a woman into a monster when one looked too closely. More recently, she's been compared to Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games*. In that vein I have joked, darkly, that Joan of Arc was the original girl on fire.

There's a different Joan in every biography, and yet another in an autobiography of sorts strung together from her own recorded words. She uses magic in a video game and is given the fanservice treatment as a resurrected hero in the anime *Fate Apocrypha*. She's in plays—a lot of them, a musical, picture books, manga. She is a valued transcestor in Les Feinberg's eternally important *Transgender Warriors*, and conversely Etsy shops sell notebooks featuring pre-Raphaelite artworks of Joan with "nasty woman" written over the top. This last one, is admittedly, not my favourite. I don't know that someone who called herself "the maid" insistently would care for it. I myself am the proud curator of an ever-growing playlist of songs that either remind me of Joan or mention her. I remain half convinced that Ellie Goulding's 2012 album "Halcyon" is about Joan.

The following stills are a collection of several different Joans I've met over the years. The first is from my university capstone in 2013, a woman drawing on what I might now call the Divine Feminine, speaking text taken from Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part 1*, and grappling with a fierce lust for her king she had not expected. This Joan gets her power from demons, and has sex because she wants to. She is at times haughty and cruel, and yet her true nature remains fiercely immutable. *JOAN 2013* began to take shape when I first encountered Joan's final monologue in Shakespeare's text:

First, let me tell you whom you have
condemn'd:
Not me begotten of a shepherd swain,
But issued from the progeny of kings;
Virtuous and holy; chosen from above,
By inspiration of celestial grace,
To work exceeding miracles on earth.
I never had to do with wicked spirits:

But you, that are polluted with your lusts,
Stain'd with the guiltless blood of innocents,
Corrupt and tainted with a thousand vices,
Because you want the grace that others have,
You judge it straight a thing impossible
To compass wonders but by help of devils.
No, misconceived! Joan of Arc hath been
A virgin from her tender infancy,
Chaste and immaculate in very thought;
Whose maiden blood, thus rigorously
effused,

Will cry for vengeance at the gates of heaven.
That beginning line, "First, let me tell you whom you have condemn'd..." became definitive in my investigation of Joan, in my seeking out the copious mediums mentioned above she appears in all her forms. Who have we condemned? Who have we exonerated? Who have we worshiped? Which Joan is the real one?

My second theatrical iteration of Joan, performed at Undiscovered Countries' *The Confessing Animal* in 2019, has coloured all of my explorations following it. This Joan brought to fruition an idea from all the way back in 2013: the names Joan has been called, insults and exaltations alike, are written on her body, and she scrubs them away as she fights to tell her *own* story. This Joan is not a woman, and like myself at the time, was liberated by finding permission—from G-d, from who knows where—to live as her true self. My collaborator, Seth Majnoon, began with Shakespeare's text, then dug into other sources to craft something entirely new:

First let me tell you whom you have
condemn'd:

Sweet daughter, strumpet, Amazon, a woman
clad in armor, devil or devil's dame,
witch;

Deceitful dame, sweet virgin, vile fiend and
shameless courtesan, damsel of France
the ugly wench, fell banning hag,
enchantress, a holy maid—

A maid, and be so martial?

Not me begotten of a shepherd swain,
But issued from the progeny of kings;
Virtuous and holy, chosen from above by

Inspiration of celestial grace,
To work exceeding miracles on earth.
I never had to do with wicked spirits.

The swift Seine on some rainy day
Like this, and people standing by,
And laughing, while my weak hands try
To recollect how strong men swim.

Cry give us Joan, throw her down
Give us Joan to burn or drown
Consider which to take of life or death

This is what you neither give me nor ask from
me:

It will be death, death that does not retreat
Or cast a shadow over convulsing flesh.

My way has been made plain to me
My body clean and whole, never corrupted
Must be consumed and burnt to ashes

Joan of Arc hath been
A virgin from her tender infancy,
Chaste and immaculate in very thought,
Whose maiden blood, thus rigorously effus'd
Will cry for vengeance at the gates of heaven.

I come in God's name, I have nothing to do
here
Let me be sent back to God, sent back where
I came from.

Send the cinders still smoldering home
To douse in water from the Seine, or from
some other place.

But you, that are polluted with your lusts,
Stain'd with the guiltless blood of innocents,
Corrupt and tainted with a thousand vices,
Because you want the grace that others have,
You judge it straight a thing impossible
To compass wonders but by help of devils.

I want to kill the only witness who could
testify
To the assassination of my flowers.

The voice said to me: Answer boldly.
I asked advice as to how I should answer.
The voice said to me: Answer boldly.
It said to me several words I could not readily
understand.
After I woke, it said to me: Answer boldly.
This night again I heard it say: Answer
boldly.

I will not tell you everything. You shall not
know yet.

The current incarnation, this very presentation and short film, started as a revisiting of *Joan 2019* but became something else entirely. This Joan was fed up, refused to speak, refused to reveal herself. She both was and was not every name she had ever been called. Two more Joans, not quite the same as the others, emerged as I recorded voiceover for the film. They surprised me, especially the one who spoke gently and sounded as if she almost pitied her captors.

Joan of Arc's life was messy, rough-edged, and imperfect, as all human lives are. Since my presentation at the 2022 Critical Femininities Conference was, in part, a reflection on my own less-than-tidy relationship to Joan, I chose to let that messiness—that humanity—shine through. There were amateur shots taken on a phone camera and posted to Instagram. During the voiceover mentioned above, traffic noise leaked through from outside the window of my best friend's living room turned makeshift recording studio. There were serendipitous moments as well, particularly the accidental square halo my cinematographer noticed on the wall behind me while filming, and the unplanned b-roll shot that ended up becoming the final moment of the film. What I now call *The Joan Project* is unfunded and deeply personal, and I hope no less impactful on others for it.

I often say that the defining question of this project is, "who was Joan of Arc to herself?" But there is another guiding question, quieter, yet no less potent: "who is Joan of Arc to me?" I don't have the answers. I probably never will. But I will never stop asking. While Joan's heart did not

burn, it has lit a fire in me, one I will foster for
years to come.











A note on citational practice: Due to the ongoing nature of this project and the scope of the research, the author has chosen to forgo in-text citations and instead to include a selected bibliography.

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Project Credits

JOAN 2013

Text adapt. by Seren-Rose Sonell from William Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part 1*
 Directed by Veronica Orech
 Photography by Madeline Carey

Joan 2019

Text adapted by Seth Majnoon
 Directed by Olivia Sonell.
 Photography by Christopher Insignares

Joan 2022

Text adapted by Seth Majnoon

Directed by Olivia Sonell

Cinematography by Seth Majnoon

Editing by Seren-Rose Sonell, Olivia Sonell

Author Biography

Based in NYC, Seren-Rose Sonell (she/they) is an autistic lesbian and interdisciplinary theatre artist, storyteller, and researcher. In addition to *The Joan Project*, she has spent 14 years adapting literary works on the page and stage. In academic settings, she disrupts the false binary between artistry and academic writing with film, live performance, and hybrid narrative-research papers. She has appeared in world premiere experimental theatre and film productions and presented at the Critical Femininities Conference and Northeast Modern Language Association Convention. Their fiction has been taught at Stonybrook University. She holds a BA in theatre from Butler University. Learn more about *The Joan Project* @joan_project on Instagram.