

# JOAN OF ARC

*During the 15<sup>th</sup> century, France was in a state of political turmoil, and the English king, Henry V, took advantage of the situation by crossing the English Channel and invading France. The French Dauphin (a term for the heir to the throne) was powerless to stop the English troops, and it seemed that the English would, in fact, conquer France.*

**I**n the village of Domremy dwelt a farmer, Jacques of Arc. The village of Domremy had a fairy tree [a tree where fairies lived] and fountain and a certain reputation for witchcraft. Jacques' daughter Joan worked in the harvest fields, guarded the beasts at pasture, and did women's work. "For spinning and weaving," she said proudly at her trial, "put me up against any woman in Rouen." She was illiterate, though in time she learned to sign her name. She was very good girl and very pious. She insisted on taking communion every month. At thirteen she began to hear voices and see visions of Saint Michael (the Biblical archangel), Saint Catherine, and Saint Margaret (two Christian martyrs). Saint Michael [the angel] told her of the great pity that was on the land of France. Aware of prophecy that France in its greatest extremity would be restored by a virgin from the Lorraine territory, she vowed to preserve her virginity forever. (Virginity was regarded with superstitious awe, perhaps because there was so little of it.) The voices told her that she must come to the aid of the king of France, assure him of his legitimacy, and push the British invaders from the shores of France.

In May 1428, when she was sixteen or seventeen, Joan visited the captain of the nearby fortress of Vaucouleurs and told her story. The skeptical captain sent her home, but in the following February she returned and so impressed him that he detailed six men to conduct her to the dauphin [heir to the throne] in Chinon. The journey across France, through hostile country, took eleven days. The party moved often by night and slept side by side in the woods by day. For security and convenience Joan wore men's clothes. "I would never have dared make advances to her," testified one of her companions, "and I say upon oath that neither did I have for her desire nor carnal notion."

On her presentation at Chinon, the dauphin, forewarned about her coming, hid himself in the thronch, but Joan recognized him and curtsied to him. The dauphin was delighted, but suspected witchcraft. He sent her to Poitiers, where she was examined by a group of churchmen. They found in her "no evil, but only good, humility, virginity, piety, honesty, simplicity." Her virginity was attested by two noble ladies. The dauphin was completely won over.

He presented her with a suit of armor, and his kinsman, the duke of Alencon, gave her a horse. She went out to the meadows and galloped a-tilt, lance under arm, spearing imaginary enemies. This is about the only playful moment recorded of her grim life.

Joan assured the dauphin of his legitimacy, that he was true king of France, and she insisted that she should lead the royal army to the relief of Orléans. The city had been under siege by the English since the previous October. They had built a ring of small forts around it and were waiting comfortably for starvation to do their work for them, with no fear of the dauphin's demoralized troops. Joan was



therefore able to enter the city with a convoy of supplies, without much opposition. She sat her white charger with ease and grace. Before her was borne her white standard, pictured with two angels, each holding a lily of France. Leading the revived citizens, she issued forth to attack the English forts one by one. "I was the first to place a scaling ladder on the bastion of the bridge," she testified at her trial. The English, decisively defeated, raised the siege and marched away.

The capture of Orléans was not only an evidence of Joan's brilliant, instinctive generalship, it was the greatest possible morale-builder for the French. The news spread through the countryside that supernatural aid had come to rescue them. Once more they were animated by the will to fight.

Joan now followed the second command of her voices. She must make the dauphin lawful king by having him anointed in Reims in accordance with French custom. Her army fought its way through Auxerre, Troyes, and Chalons-sur-Marne to the holy city, and there, on July 17, 1429, the dauphin was duly consecrated.

The war died down during the winter, following normal military practice. No one likes to fight in cold weather. On May 23, 1430, Joan, coming to the relief of Compiègne, was captured by the political rivals of the dauphin, and after a time, sold to the English. The dauphin made no effort to save her.

In January 1431, she was brought to trial in Rouen before an ecclesiastical court, dominated by the English, on charges of witchcraft, magic, impurity, wearing men's clothes, and rebellion against the church. The judge was a tool of the English, who hoped to get the archbishopric of Rouen as his reward. The purpose of the trial, apparently, was not to discover truth and administer justice but to sway public opinion by condemning Joan as a witch and crediting her victories to the devil. She was allowed no advocate or defender; the rest of the trial record was condensed and falsified. Nevertheless, Joan's honesty, her sharp wit, her courage in facing the vindictive accusers in their awesome robes, shine through the moving record. At length, after nearly five months of relentless questioning, though without judicial torture, she was broken down.

The judge pronounced her guilty, but instead of giving her to a civil court—for the church courts cannot condemn to death—he handed her over to the English army. The English brought her to the Old Marketplace of Rouen to be burned. She asked for a cross; and English soldier made one of two sticks and handed it to her. She received it devoutly, kissed it, and clasped it to her bosom. A well-wisher brought a cross from St. Sauveur's Church and held it before her eyes as she died. Her last word was "Jesus," which she uttered more than six times. No one could fail to be reminded of the Crucifixion. The spectators, including the soldiers, wept. A secretary of the English king said: "We are all lost, for we have burned a good and holy person." Her ashes were thrown into the Seine river to avoid their use in sorcery.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. What is impressive or inspirational about the life of Joan of Arc? Explain.
2. A victim is someone who does not deserve his or her fate? Was Joan of Arc a victim? Use examples from the passage to back up your answer.
3. Women in the Medieval time period were typically meek, submissive, and easily overpowered. How was Joan of Arc ahead of her time?
4. Joan of Arc was a very effective leader. Why do you think she was so inspirational to others?