

Abstract

In *Henry VI Part 1*, Shakespeare portrays Joan of Arc as “devil’s dam . . . a witch.” This paper will investigate the low tradition of Joan’s beliefs that English and university-trained churchmen in general condemned.

Medieval low tradition—exemplified by folk beliefs and practices, often dating to pre-Christian and even pre-Roman times—stood in contrast and, sometimes, open conflict with the high tradition, bastioned in the university and the Roman Church. Because of greater access to written records, high tradition is better, often exclusively, known to our present age. Important exceptions to this tendency are the two trials of Joan of Arc, whose deeds forced high tradition, for once, to take note and record, albeit in a construct that suited their understanding, the low culture in which the medieval world bathed and upon which it, in fact, depended. The Maid may be said to have been a holy warrior for the low tradition against her university and high church judges.

This paper seeks to elucidate many things mentioned by Joan and her accusers in the light of what is known from folk culture, including the Fairy Tree, Voices of the Well, the assembly of her troops on the Plain of Lendit, the Wild Hunt, holy rings and banners, and her refusal to say the Lord’s Prayer.

The Folk Tradition of Joan of Arc’s Spirituality

By Ann Chamberlin

Talbot, in Act 1 of *Henry VI Part 1*, calls Joan of Arc, La “Pucelle or puzzle . . . Devil or devil’s dam . . . thou art a witch” (1.5.6–7)¹. Witchcraft and heresy were two of the counts upon which she was tried, convicted, and executed by the English at Rouen. There may be more at play here than the politics and demonizing of ancient enemies, the French by the English. What some scholars have called “low” tradition—though I’d prefer a less demeaning term—was often stigmatized and persecuted as “witchcraft” by Frenchmen in their own country.

Medieval “low” tradition—exemplified by folk beliefs and practices often dating to pre-Christian and even pre-Roman times—stood in contrast and, sometimes, open conflict with the “high” tradition, bastioned in the university and the Roman Church. Because of greater access to written records, high tradition is better, often exclusively, known to our present age.

The two trials of Joan of Arc present important exceptions to this high cultural exclusivity. Joan’s deeds forced high tradition, for once, to take note and record, albeit in a construct that suited their understanding, the low culture in which the medieval world bathed and upon which it, in fact, depended. The Maid may be said to have been a holy warrior for the low tradition against her university and high church judges. This paper seeks to elucidate many things mentioned by Joan and her accusers in the light of what is known from folk culture.

Joan was illiterate. Joan was a peasant. She had great faith in the age of great

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faith. But her faith was not the same as that of her accusers, and she expressed it in different forms. Anne Llewellyn Barstow has even distinguished what high culture found in Joan by a name that harks back to ancient religion indeed: shamanism. "Joan," Barstow says, "experienced the typical folk religion of Lorraine, dusted with Christian symbolism but based on its own sources of power. . . . Joan's spirituality was formed in the countryside, in the world of nature. It is not surprising that the Bourgeois of Paris believed that she had control over nature, that wild birds came to eat out of her hand . . . a feat attributed to shamans from ancient times."²

JOAN OF ARC, THE MAID OF LORRAINE

Let us consider first the dukedom in which Joan was born and raised. Lorraine was not termed "the Marches" for nothing, falling in the crack between high French culture and the high points of the German Empire.

Joan's native village, Domrémy, lies between two larger towns: Nancy, seat of the dukes of Lorraine, and Dijon, capitol of the dukes of Burgundy. Nancy, the closest of these towns which might be considered a source for the dissemination of high culture, would take a peasant on foot two days to reach. University towns are even further removed.

The Rheinland, closer to Domrémy, certainly, than Paris, was the notorious focus of heresies for centuries before Joan. I don't, however, mean to suggest that the Maid was heretical in this sense. Beguines and anabaptists presume a knowledge of "orthodox" Catholicism, and a rebellion against it, and it was precisely in a lack of this knowledge that Joan was "heretical."

Nothing "knowingly pagan," no "secret knowledge" of which she was guardian, should be presumed in Joan's "mixture of animist and Christian belief."³ As Robin Briggs describes for some later witches, Joan was "deviant" only "because others identified [her] as such, not through any conscious intent."⁴ She could not be driven to abandon these aspects from the deeper substrata of "Christianity," however, even in the face of death.

Chronological as opposed to geographical brackets exist around Joan's fifteenth century belief. At the earlier end, Gregory of Tours (sixth century) confesses that the early missionaries to Gaul swallowed whole much traditional practice they encountered in order to make the new faith more palatable to the heathen. By the eleventh century, Burchard of Worms's canonical and secular law found little progress in the high culture eradication of such things: it stumbled over tree worship and witches' flight.

The nearer end of the chronological brackets consists of the early modern witch hunts. On maps delineating the ferocity of witch hunts in both Robin Briggs's *Witches and Neighbors* and Carlo Ginzburg's studies of the witches' sabbath, the region where Joan was born receives the heaviest crosshatching: high culture had suddenly become aware of these backwaters and did not like what it saw. Ginzburg is right on the mark when he suggests that high had to teach low the difference between their cultures by trial and the pyre. Less than half a century after Joan's death, twenty-five to thirty people were involved in a witch trial in nearby Metz⁵

when "A wide range of local folklore was caught up in the judicial machinery, through whose distorting lens it has been preserved."⁶

This is not to suggest that Lorraine had strains of folk belief any more virulent than those in, say, Spain or Italy, where witch hunts were in notoriously short supply. Complicated interactions of politics, reformation and, yes, "enlightenment" are required to drive a good witch hunt. My point is merely that, in Lorraine, this clash of high and low culture leaves important spoor before arriving at nineteenth and twentieth century folklore studies.

RELIGIOUS TRAINING

Joan was long a martyr by the time of her rehabilitation trial in 1456. This trial was overseen by Charles VII, whose orthodoxy would have been on very shaky ground, indeed, if it could be shown that he owed his throne to a witch. So although this trial returned a verdict more favorable to the heroine, it was nonetheless another exercise in high culture, the first attempt, perhaps, by high culture to transform and claim her low culture as their own.

Many witnesses at this trial speak with the oral history voices of lower culture—"often have I heard it said . . . the priest told me . . . I heard those who took her to the King speak of it . . . I heard the Maid several times say."⁷ We must assume that their stories have been improved with much retelling—and probably altered with a mind to their high-culture audience.

The best these witnesses can say is "as far as I know, she was baptized" by a Père Jean Minet. Joan certainly had a bevy of godparents—one of whom claimed to have seen fairies. The curé Minet appears to have died shortly after performing this initiatory service. In any case, witnesses credit another priest, Père Guillaume Frontey or Front, with her religious upbringing.

Joan herself says nothing of this man. She credits her mother with teaching her her prayers. Exactly what prayers Joan learned at her mother's knee are in doubt. Although we are told frequently that Joan prayed, we are rarely told her words. When we are, they are French and improvised. At her trial, she was either unable or unwilling to recite a *Pater Noster*. Inability might well have been her excuse. Balking at such requests as this would send many more than Joan to the pyre in years to come—probably for no more than this same ignorance.

Henry V's prohibition against the sacking of churches, punishable by hanging as commemorated by Shakespeare, seems to have taken his men by surprise. It certainly is remarkably at odds with the usual way free companies paid themselves for their work throughout the Hundred Years' War: a general policy of *écorchier* held sway, and establishments of the high church were usually the first to attract attention. Whatever temporal or eternal ramifications of these deeds for the perpetrators, churches sacked and burned meant "the loss of spiritual and temporal ministrations" in the neighborhood, and "there was lacking a positive desire to repair and rebuild after destruction, since the same might soon occur again."⁸

The church of St. Rémy next door to Joan's father's house was not spared. Indeed, the destruction it suffered during her childhood in 1428 at the hands of marauding Burgundians was so severe as to cause the entire structure to be turned

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from its original north-south axis to a more usual east-west axis once peace returned. This was not, however, until after Joan's death. She could not benefit from renewed ministrations.

We do have a letter purporting to be from Joan calling the Hussites to repentance before she comes to punish them herself. Most commentators have noted it is nothing like her usual tone and was probably the brainchild of her confessor, Jean Pasquerel, perhaps in a desperate attempt to bring his charge into some sort of compliance with high cultural values.

Pasquerel is also responsible for the testimony of how, when wounded before Les Tourelles at Orléans, Joan refused the charms her comrades offered her to stanch the blood, saying, "I would prefer to die rather than to do something I know to be a sin." It is just possible that Joan herself had a very different take on the power of such things than this late apologist's telling gives.

In any case, such charms are well known from the period and the war environment. Chaucer describes "battle-weary knights":⁹ "To othere woundes and to broken armes / Somme hadden salves, and somme hadden charmes."¹⁰

"As early as the days of Philip the Fair ordinances . . . were promulgated forbidding" the use of charms among his troops. "A soldier," runs one, "is to have no such pieces of stone or magical herbs or invocations on him, he is to rely only on God, His Right, his body, his horse and his arms."¹¹

We have a further "instance . . . in the case of one of two champions in a judicial duel in the reign of Edward III" assembled to try griefs between the Bishop and the Earl of Salisbury, each of whom selected a knight to represent him. "Before it began, [officials] . . . examined each champion to see [he] only had legitimate arms about [him]. They found the Bishop's man had several scripts . . . with prayers and magical spells sewn in his clothes. . . . The Bishop was disqualified and the Earl won his case."¹²

Joan's Pierre Cauchon was a bishop of a different stripe.

Amulets are preserved that are copies of copies with no clear notion of which way was up for the letters concerned. A horse wounded at the same battle of Les Tourelles might have had a charm hastily applied with the following symbols scratched upon it: "fac. pe. n. m. x. a. s. & .Y. n. m." These "abbreviations" dating to a manuscript of around 1400 are "unintelligible" but were "considered powerful in themselves."¹³

Sometimes modern apologists speak of the heroine as if she must have spent her Wednesdays in scripture study class. She herself said she knew not "A from B," and among the three scratchy signatures we have in her hand are two different ways of spelling "Jehanne." The Bible could only be an authority to folk of the high culture with Latin under their belts.

When her judges called upon the Bible to make her see the error of her ways, was Joan's the passive catechumen's reply, "Oh, yes. If it's in the Bible, it must be so"? No. She didn't even repeat a Hussite's plea to be able to read the great authority in the vernacular. I give you Joan's words: "My Lord has a better book than yours. One that no one in this world has read." That is no recommendation for Biblical authority.

Let's look now at that other high cultural touchstone for orthodoxy: deference to the pope. Joan did plead that her case be taken to Rome. Yes, after having been prompted to do so by Friar Isambert de la Pierre—who also had the good sense to tell her “There are members of your party there, with the pope.” Was her willingness to go along with this plea more to do with his holiness or with “those of her party”?

Remember, the Great Schism was just coming to a ragged end at this time. For close to forty years, all of Joan's short life, people who cared about such things had had at least two choices for Holy Father. The French side in the Hundred Years War tended to support the Avignonese popes, eventually to be declared antipopes, but you couldn't tell that to a good Frenchman in those days. The English supported the Romans, hence Pierre Cauchon's faith in the power of councils—a council of university men, naturally.

When Joan arrived in Compiègne (the first time), people were fighting in the streets over who had the best claim to the throne of Peter. The Count of Armagnac wrote to Joan there asking which of the three popes he should follow. Did Joan say, “I defer to His Holiness in such matters”? No. Did she even defer to a council convened of educated churchmen? No. She said, “Give me time to think about it and consult with my counsel. I have English to chase right now. But I will tell you.”

At the trial when questioned, “Do you have no judge on this earth? Is not our holy father the Pope your judge?” Joan replied in these condemning words: “I will not answer further to that. I have a good master—that is, our Lord—to whom only I look, and to none other.”¹⁴

The pope clearly didn't loom large in Joan of Arc's construct of faith. More than that, she thought her opinion higher than any others in the matter. That does not make a good high-culture Catholic.

TREE AND WELL

Of the seventy articles drawn up against Joan by the court at Rouen, article 56 says, in part: “Joan . . . proclaimed that she had two counselors whom she calls ‘Counselors of the Well’, who have come to her since she had been taken captive. . . .”

“What have you to say on this article?” the promoter asked the prisoner.

“I hold by what I have already said,” replied Joan, “and as to the ‘Counselors of the Well,’ I do not know what they are. I certainly believe that I overheard St. Catherine and St. Margaret there.”¹⁵

We assume the well spoken of here is that, known to cure fevers, which stood near the Fairy Tree, the great beech near Joan's village. The configuration of well and tree—sometimes a stone is added—is known throughout the Celtic substratum.

Wells are decorated to this day in many parts of Europe, as Joan's playmates admitted doing at certain seasons of the year. Rites such as these must have appeared to most low culture minds as indistinguishable from the other tasks of the agricultural year. We spread manure, we plow, we propitiate the well, we have sex in the fields to give the crops the idea. Where does one necessary task end and the quaint superstitions begin?

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More "prominent" in the lore of wells than "healing properties" is their "role as the repository or medium of a kind of spiritual power. . . . The well," in Joan's case, as in many others, "was an appropriate place to contact the Deity,"¹⁶ a doorway to the otherworld, going downward to an earthly source of power rather than skyward as in orthodox Catholicism. Well and tree hark back to the old Celtic myth, preserved in Ireland, of the otherworld Well of Segais. In the archetype of the Well of Segais, the tree bending over the water is a hazel. Its red fruits drop into the water and are washed out into the real world or else eaten by spotted salmon who then swim into the world of men. Humans who eat either nuts or fish gain wisdom, as do those who drink of effervescent bubbles in a holy well, also emblems of inspiration. Well and tree are the spot where Joan's godmother, hence spiritual advisor, and namesake said she saw fairies. And here, Joan "overheard" her counselors.

The identity of Joan's tree as a beech is curious. Studies of well-and-tree configurations in Ireland reveal not a single beech among the many hazels, thorns, and oaks. Beeches, like hazels, are emblematic of chieftains, however, and speak of new experiences and information coming.¹⁷ Beeches bare nuts—little brains, in folk imagery—to bring inspiration when eaten.

I think it no coincidence that a well of ancient worship in Dijon, so close to Joan's Domrémy, when taken over by the dukes of Burgundy for their family burial place, received stone carvings by the famous Flemish sculptor Claus Sluter—in a fresh style but with echoes of ancient meaning. The figures are of inspired biblical prophets.

James Rattue gives us a brief history of the relationship of high church with peasantry surrounding holy wells and focused on France: "At first," he writes,

the attitude of the Church . . . was a completely non-co-operative and uncompromising one. Well-worship was paganism, occult superstition. It was to be stamped out.

c. A.D. 452 The Second Council of Arles declares that "if in the territory of a bishop infidels . . . venerate trees, fountains or stones and he neglects to abolish this usage, he must know that he is guilty of sacrilege."

A.D. 561 The Third Canon of the Council of Auxerre [says]: "it is forbidden to discharge vows among woods, or at sacred trees or springs."

c. A.D. 640 St. Eloi, preaching at Noyon, thunders "Nor should diabolical phylacteria be used at trees, or springs."¹⁸

Over time, the Church gained confidence, and such tirades seem to have died out, not because sacred wells and trees had been done away with—Joan's story shows us they had not—but because most of the fear was gone. Still, "about 1250, the Inquisitor for the Lyons area, Stephen of Bourbon, was summoned to investigate an unofficial shrine in a wood. . . . He was stunned to discover that the saint [of the well] was in fact a dog."¹⁹

This is the St. Guinefort whose story is told in the French film *Sorceress*. Stephen of Bourbon found a "sinister old woman" (not the beautiful actress of the

film) administering "healing rites at [the] well where Guinefort was supposed to have been crowned. The horrified Inquisitor ordered that the shrine be destroyed and the wood . . . cut down." But spiritual descendants of the woman and the well were still around in the 1930s.²⁰

Karen Sullivan in her *Interrogation of Joan of Arc* performs a very careful study of the order in which Joan's replies concerning the identification of her voices come. Sullivan discovers that it is only after threats, day-in-and-day-out hammering at Joan's low culture interpretation of what she heard, that the young heroine christened them Saints Catherine, Margaret, and Michael. Up until that point, and to any witness to her career before the church court got hold of her, the voices are just that, "Voices." Or "my Counsel."

Further, I think it no coincidence that Sts. Catherine and Margaret are the saints she set at the well. Catherine and Margaret are among the top ten dedications of wells in an English study.²¹ I would love to see a parallel French study. Of course, were a similar top-ten list made of all-round medieval saints, I would expect Catherine there at least. But, *nota bene*, Joan doesn't set Michael, her third counselor, at the well. The archangel belongs more to the battlefield. Michael is not among the top ten saints to receive well dedication in England, either. Michael is fourth among church dedications, however, and here neither Catherine nor Margaret even place.

THE WILD HUNT

On March 18, 1430, Joan was asked about the Wild Hunt. Does the defendant know anything of those who "went or travelled through the air with the fairies"?²² Joan denied that she ever rode with such a troop and calls it a spell, *une sorcerie*.

Yet, the Wild Hunt requires closer examination. This wide-spread tradition—restricted, in Europe, to places with a Celtic substratum—says that troops of the dead or spirits of hell or some such ride through the skies on stormy nights. In some places the legend persists that mortals can join the cavalcade, either freely as part of a fertility ritual or without choice as part of a curse.

Carlo Ginzburg goes far to show that in many places, and late towards the end of the Middle Ages, these were actual gatherings, sometimes associated in high culture minds with the witches' sabbath. He gives evidence for their very strong existence in Lorraine. When pressed, Joan says she had heard these gatherings took place on Thursday. She knows more than she is telling, and what she knows is a very real and physical phenomenon. Thursdays, particularly during the Ember Days around Christmas time, were prime times for such Wild Hunts to take place.

RING AND BANNER

The judges of Rouen were very suspicious of both Joan's ring and of her banner. They had good cause, for high culture knew that such things could be used for magic.

"Charlemagne's mistress enchanted him with a ring which, as long as she had about her, he could not suffer her dead body to be carried out of his chamber to be buried. A bishop took this ring out of her mouth and threw it into a pond. . . . Alas for the Emperor his chiefest pleasure after that was . . . walking round and round the lake which held the enchanted ring."²³

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Bishop Pierre Cauchon, like Charlemagne's spiritual guide, took care to remove Joan's ring from her person and refused to give it back though she begged for it. High tradition didn't deny that low tradition had power; their belief was that that power was diabolical.

Perhaps the most famous banner of medieval France was the Oriflamme. This tailed battle dragon, hungry for blood on the battlefield, appears as early as the *Song of Roland*, something that leads the kings of France to unquestioned victory and never fails to make their enemies quake. In Joan's time, the ensign was kept before the altar in the basilica of St. Denis just north of Paris, where a replica still hangs today.

There is no mention of this standard in the tales of the Maid; no attempt seems to have been made to get this standard to add it to her power. She had ample opportunity when the Benedictines of St. Denis opened their gates to her as she gathered her troops on the Plain of Lendit in preparation for her attack on Paris. Perhaps the silence is due to the fact that, once she withdrew from the area of Paris after an unsuccessful attack on the city, the English forces chose to vent their wrath on the waffling monastics. The abbey was completely looted and the sacred banner destroyed. I think it is no coincidence that before Joan, St. Denis was the patron saint *par excellence* of France. After her failure, it was St. Michel, for St. Denis had failed them.

This leads to further consideration of the site Joan chose to gather her forces for the attempt on Paris: the Plain of Lendit that stretches between St. Denis and the dual heights of Montmartre and Belleville north of Paris. Perhaps she meant nothing by the choice of this site. She was marching from the north, after all, her previous halt being Compiègne. And the Plain offered easy encampment.

I am persuaded, however, that her choice was not mere chance. In a fascinating trilogy of books, Anne Lombard-Jourdan has traced the history of this Plain from earliest Celtic and Roman sources. Always, from the days of Posthumous to Constantine to Chariemagne, it was a holy place where the men of Gaul gathered to protect their homeland. Perhaps Joan had not heard of the place in distant Lorraine, but certainly she was prepared to use this bit of folklore to best effect.

CONCLUSION

I have to conclude that Joan of Arc came from a fifteenth century tradition heavily folk-inspired and, in her own mind, interpreted what she saw and heard accordingly. Others ever since have interpreted what she said she saw according to their own tradition. For me, this answers the question of why it took the Catholic Church five hundred years to claim the poor girl. Certainly they wanted to claim Joan's powerful faith for themselves. But they had to wait because she wasn't safe to incorporate until folk culture, especially witchcraft, had been wiped from people's minds.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, Henry VI Part 1, Howard Staunton, ed., *The Complete Illustrated Shakespeare* (New York: Park Lane, 1858-61), 295.

2. Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Joan of Arc: Heretic, Mystic, Shaman. Studies in Women and Religion*, vol 17 (Lewiston/Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 53.
3. Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd, 1996), 5.
4. Briggs, 5–6.
5. Briggs, 33.
6. Briggs, 56.
7. Régine Pernoud, *Joan of Arc by Herself and Her Witnesses* (New York/London: Scarborough House, 1982), 19, 37, 39.
8. C. T. Allmand, "The War and the Non-combatant" in *The Hundred Years War*, ed. by Kenneth Fowler (London: Macmillan Press, 1971), 172.
9. Suzanne Eastman Sheldon, "Middle English and Latin Charms, Amulets, and Talismans from Vernacular Manuscripts" (Ph. D. Dissertation, Tulane University, 1978), ix.
10. Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Canterbury Tales," *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed., ed. F. N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), I, 2711–2.
11. Walter Clifford Meller, *Old Times: Relics, Talismans, Forgotten Customs & Beliefs of the Past* (London: T. Werner Laurie, Ltd, 1925) 75.
12. Meller, 77.
13. See Sheldon, esp. 176, 192.
14. Willard Trask, trans and ed. *Joan of Arc In Her Own Words* (New York: Turtle Point, 1996), 131.
15. Jules Quicherat, ed., *Procès de condamnation et de réhabilitation de Jeanne d'Arc dite La Pucelle* (Paris: Jules Renouard, 1841) 295–6.
16. James Rattue, *The Living Stream: Holy Wells in Historical Context* (Woodbridge and Rochester: Boydell Press, 1995), 10.
17. D. J. Conway, *Celtic Magic* (St. Paul: Llewellyn, 1996).
18. Rattue, 78.
19. Rattue, 87.
20. J. Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
21. Rattue, op. cit.
22. Tissot, 178, quoted in Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), 97.
23. Meller, 73.

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