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If Jeanne d'Arc had stuck to embroidery under her mother's petticoats, then Charles VII would have been overthrown and the war would have ended. The Plantagenets would have reigned over England and France, which would have formed one territory, as it did in prehistoric times before the Channel existed, populated by one race.(1)

Thus declares the fictional character Durtal, would-be biographer of the infamous 15th-century child killer Gilles de Rais, to his friend Des Hermies in Joris-Karl Huysmans' 19th-century novel *Là-bas*, set in fin-de-siècle Paris.(2) Durtal, something of an alter-ego for Huysmans, as well as being an expert on the history of the period of Charles VII, also laments that:

France, exhausted by bloodlettings, and ravaged a few years earlier by the plague, was on her knees. Her flesh had been scourged and her bones sucked dry by England which, like that mythological monster the Kraken, had arisen from the sea and cast her tentacles over Brittany, Normandy, parts of Picardy, the Ile de France, the entire north, the interior as far as Orléans, leaving a trail of devastated towns and ravaged countryside in her wake.(3)

Whether or not one fully concurs with the counterfactual speculation contained in Huysmans' *Là-bas*, it can sans doute be said that had Joan of Arc (the Maid or La Pucelle as she is known in France) stuck to embroidery, events would most certainly have turned out differently and the course of the history of 'exhausted' France could have followed an alternative path.(4) In fact, it turns out that Durtal was not entirely off the mark, for one of many details contained within Dr. Helen Castor's illuminating new book is that Joan was, by her own admission, quite skilled at such craft. At her trial for heresy, Joan told the interrogator theologian Jean Beaupère that 'no one could best her at sewing and spinning' (p. 170). In *Joan of Arc: A History* Castor spins out the threads of the story of La Pucelle and weaves them into an intricate pattern, illustrating the precise difference that the arrival (and acceptance) of Joan in March 1429 at the court of the dauphin (the future King Charles VII) made to the course of the history of two warring nations.

Joan of Arc's story is remarkable for its endurance in popular consciousness: the peasant girl from Domrémy (in the Duchy of Lorraine) condemned by the Church as heretic, later reclaimed as saint. Divinely touched, she heard the voices of Saint Margaret, Saint Catherine and the Archangel Michael 'bringing a message of salvation for France' (p. 1). These heavenly missives, along with what one might call the more earthly direction provided by the 'guiding hand' (p. 90) of Yolande of Aragon (Duchess of Anjou and mother-in-law of the dauphin), led Joan to Charles' court at the age of 17 and facilitated her playing a vital role in the events that took the dauphin toward his eventual coronation as King of France at Reims on 17 July 1429, via the legendary raising of the Siege of Orléans and the defeat of the English at Patay.(5) Joan was subsequently captured by the Burgundians at Compiègne, handed over to the English, put on trial (by French theologians), convicted of heresy, and sent to be burned at the stake on 30 May 1431. Quarter of a century later the winds had changed and there was another trial (known as the Nullification Trial) which declared her a martyr and paved the way for her eventual canonization (in 1920). Joan is one of the most well documented people of the medieval period. Even from this précis it is apparent that there is much to untangle.

If Joan had not already existed, one is tempted to say that the Medievals would have had to invent her. She is so resolutely of her time, so much a product of medieval culture and theology and subsequent mythopoeia (like Thomas Becket, Richard the Lionheart, Abelard and Heloise) that it is almost impossible to imagine her emerging at any other time. In case we are in any doubt, we are told that 'in the firmament of history Joan of Arc is a massive star' (p. 1). Castor sets out her approach as follows:

Unsurprisingly, the effect of Joan's gravitational field – the self-defining narrative pull of her mission – is equally apparent in historical accounts of her life. Most begin not with the story of the long and bitter war that had ravaged France since before she was born, but with Joan herself hearing voices in her village of Domrémy in the far east of the kingdom. That means

that we come to the dauphin's court at Chinon with Joan, rather than experiencing the shock of her arrival, and as a result it's not easy to understand the full complexity of the political context into which she walked, or the nature of the responses she received' [author's emphasis] (p. 3).

Castor proceeds, in the space of three hundred absorbing pages, to trace the trajectory of the celestial body that is Joan from her initial formation to her implosion and collapse on the pyre in the market square at Rouen after she was declared guilty of 'schism, idolatry of demons and many other crimes' (p. 194) and burned at the stake, the requisite punishment for those in the heretical category of relapsi.

This new history is presented essentially as a triptych; the narrative is divided (not including prologue and epilogue) into three distinct parts labelled 'Before', 'Joan' and 'After'. By situating Joan's emergence in the middle (of both the historical narrative and the physical book – after the introduction Joan does not really reappear for almost a hundred pages) it is clear that, for Castor, context is everything:

There seems little purpose, for example, in attempting to diagnose in her a physical or psychological disorder that might, to us, explain her voices, if the terms of reference we use are completely alien to the landscape of belief in which she lived (p. 5).

Accordingly, Castor opts to begin not with the appearance of Joan at court in 1429, but 14 years earlier in the 'Field of Blood' that was Agincourt (agrum sanguinis from the Gesta Henrici Quinti). In doing so she neatly weaves together the omnipresent themes of power and religious belief that define the medieval period – as she succinctly puts it 'in medieval minds, war was always interpreted as an expression of divine will' (p. 5). The Prologue is a vivid tapestry set at the battle of Agincourt in October 1415, cinematic in its sweep, graphic in its battlefield descriptions: 'aching feet sank into liquid earth' (p. 9), rain that 'had seeped into bowels as well as baggage' (p. 9) 'the air shifted with a thrum, and all at once the sky was dark' (p. 15). Heady stuff indeed and the defeat at Agincourt was inevitably interpreted by the English as the will of God'; plainly put 'God had spoken' (p. 19).

The first panel proper of Castor's triptych is 'Part one: Before'. Here we meet key political movers deftly drawn, such as John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy a 'distinctly imposing figure, his shrewd brain working behind languorously hooded eyes, the long nose sketching an inimitable profile beneath the rich black folds – piled forward and pinned with a ruby of extraordinary price – of his trademark chaperon hat...' (p. 23) or Charles 'the short scrawny figure of the dauphin, an ungainly adolescent who had not inherited the good looks of either of his royal parents...' (p. 36). John the Fearless (or Jean sans Peur) was assassinated by the Armagnacs at Montereau on 10 September 1419 and this pivotal moment is portrayed in suitably dramatic fashion. It is an act carried out as revenge for the murder of the Duke of Orléans 12 years earlier but also proves to be a key staging post in all that follows in the conflict between the Armagnac and Burgundian forces. Against the background of this faction fighting, Henry V under the terms of the Treaty of Troyes became France's regent and heir, not Charles of Valois who was disinherited from succession. Castor tells us with a dry sense of understatement: 'This was not how it was supposed to be' (p. 41) and that while the Burgundians and Armagnacs fought 'Henry of England slipped through the open door behind them' (p. 30).(6)

The middle section ('Part two: Joan') is the longest section and is concerned with the impact that Joan had upon her arrival at Chinon and her meeting with the dauphin, as she sometimes addressed Charles 'because he was not yet God's anointed' (p. 91). Whatever the case for the 'invention' of Joan as posited above, unquestionably she proved to be a welcome arrival for the Armagnac cause when she turned up at court dressed in men's clothes claiming to be guided by God through angelic and saintly intercession. The temptation to believe Joan must have been overwhelming. After all, how could Joan not be believed when she 'it seemed, had been sent by God not simply to instruct the king, but to help him in the recovery of his kingdom' (p. 91). We are brought efficiently through the process of Joan's validation; she was

presented to theologians, bishops and clerks of the parlement at Poitiers in order to have her orthodoxy verified. There had been precedents for women claiming to have divinely inspired visions and hearing heavenly voices (and Castor provides some relevant examples) but Joan was deemed to be the real thing and this was attested to by no less an authority than the renowned scholar Jean Gerson – or at the very least Gerson did not stand in the way in his own pronouncements on the process of *discretio spirituum* (the discernment of spirits in order to tell whether Joan was speaking for God or for the devil).(7) The stage was set for Joan's initial rise to military prowess and the iconic initial success at the Siege of Orléans:

The miracle had happened. After six months of siege, and with the kingdom of Bourges in disarray, Joan the Maid had freed Orléans in just four days – four days – of fighting. The threat that the English might snatch this key to the Loire was lifted. And even more importantly, God had vindicated the legitimacy of King Charles's cause. A seventeen-year-old peasant girl knew nothing of war: how could she? Yet Joan had known what she would do. The learned doctors at Poitiers had asked for a sign, and it had come, heaven-sent. [author's emphasis] (p. 112)

Castor's depiction of Joan's military career and role as inspirational leader is convincingly sketched in elegant prose, but it is perhaps the chapters that deal with the heresy trial, when Joan has been captured and her star is on the wane, that are the strongest in this book. It is here that Castor's skill in sifting and distilling documentation and record is at its most effective (not surprising, perhaps, from someone who has previously laboured on the Paston letters) and the depth of her research is clearly evident. Her elucidation of complex trial records is a key strength of the book, and the game of cat and mouse that evolves between divinely-inspired Joan and her learned interrogators is presented in such a way as to render dense theological points accessible to a general readership whilst retaining the innate, necessary drama of such set-pieces. Drawing heavily on her research of minutes and transcripts (both Joan's original trial for heresy at Rouen in 1431 as well as the 1456 Nullification Trial at Paris), Castor cautions that because our information comes from statements at the trials made by Joan herself and by friends and family there is, inevitably, a risk of distortion and inconsistency. This is compounded by what Ardis Butterfield has called Joan's 'humble uneducated relation to language' which when 'mediated by an imposing Latin legal and ecclesiastical culture, became a quite different symbol of Frenchness from the vernacular triumphs of law, bureaucracy, and secular fiction'.(8) As Castor acknowledges in her notes 'translation is at the heart of Joan's historical presence' (p. 248) which serves as a reminder that the enduring appeal of Joan and her transmission as cultural phenomenon is a construct of varying interpretations and interests.

The third part concerns itself with the period after the heresy trial, when Joan's star has been cruelly snuffed out and when the real propaganda begins in order to counteract rumour and gossip now that 'taint of the Maid's heresy hung heavy on the false king for whom she had fought' (p. 199). A detailed record of the trial in Latin was compiled and disseminated to 'stand as an open testament to the diligence of the judges and the enormity of the girl's heresy' (p. 199). In 1450, however, Charles VII wrote to the theologian Guillaume Bouillé concerning Joan's trial 'and the manner in which it was carried out' (p. 224). The issue of Joan's heresy still dogged the King; therefore a process was initiated to discredit the proceedings of nineteen years earlier. Castor is continuously alert to the presence of political pragmatism and the desire for self-advancement; she renders effectively the sense that once you start to pull at one thread of any legal process, it is only a matter of time before the entire fabric can be made to come apart and on 7 July 1456 there was a declaration of nullification: 'The Maid had not been a heretic, an apostate or an idolater' (p. 242).

Where this book really succeeds is in Castor's ability to move the modern mindset closer to an approximation of what the medieval worldview might have been. It is perhaps difficult for a modern readership to appreciate fully how the agency of God is prevalent in all things; take, for example, the case of Archbishop Gélou who 'had no doubt that God might well decide to

send help to the King...' (p. 94). A certain 'tuning-in' is necessary in order to grasp how such a sentiment can be uttered and how its ordinariness can be so indelibly part of the medieval model while also appreciating the sense of wonder that any contact with the divine entailed. For the people of the Middle Ages, the pervasive nature of God is absolute and to attempt to understand them it is necessary to accept this. Castor's handling of this chasm across time and culture is so surefooted that by the end the reader is in no doubt as to the role of God in human affairs and Joan's mission is fittingly described as one 'that depended on the divine, not human, agency - except for the inconvenient fact that she needed the faith of politicians and the presence of soldiers to put it into effect' (p. 139).

Castor combines a consummate skill for storytelling with the cogent precision of a trial lawyer, dissecting complex medieval relations and conflicts and rendering them accessible for a general readership. For those who know little or nothing of Joan, Castor's book is a perfect introduction; its linear narrative assumes little on the part of the reader (there are nearly 60 pages of explanatory notes, as well as 8 pages of colour plates) and throughout Castor peppers the narrative with moments of dramatic tension, tautly presented through her evocative use of language and her natural flair for just telling a good story. For those who may be more familiar with this period of medieval history, the book is an elegant and thought-provoking reminder of the manner in which edifices of power behave when threatened with obstruction in the quest for dominance. The book does not attempt to psychoanalyse Joan or further complexify her in terms of her various, mutable, memorial and cultural legacies.⁽⁹⁾ That said, this reader for one, was left wishing for Helen Castor to be the one to tackle these aspects of Joan's impressive afterlife, such is the depth of skill and sympathy that she brings to the telling.

So what, in the end, was Joan – Military leader? Messenger from God? Heretic? Saint? Supremely confident? Self-deluded? Dupe? Pawn? She was, perhaps, all of these things – protean product of her time, apotheosis of theological and military imperatives, ultimately doomed. She was an invention, partly of others, partly of her own making, fully of the Middle Ages. Jacques Le Goff, in an essay entitled 'The Several Middle Ages of Jules Michelet', wrote: 'Yet Joan was more than a popular emanation. She was the end product of the whole Middle Ages, the poetic synthesis of all the miraculous apparitions that Michelet saw in the period'. Le Goff went on to state that 'Joan marks the end of the Middle Ages. Meanwhile another marvellous apparition had occurred: the nation, the fatherland'.⁽¹⁰⁾ Barbara Tuchman once observed that Joan's 'strength came from the fact that in her were combined for the first time the old religious faith and the new force of patriotism'.⁽¹¹⁾ Somewhere between these forces lay not only Joan's strengths but also the array of factors that led to both her invention and her destruction. In her epilogue Castor observes that 'in gaining a saint, however, we have lost a human being' (p. 245) and concludes that:

'She is still there to be found. If we read the remarkable records of a wholly exceptional life in the knowledge of how those documents came to be made, if we immerse ourselves in her cultured, brutal and terrifying uncertain world, assured of nothing but the supreme force of Gods will, then perhaps we can begin to understand Joan herself: what she thought she was doing; why those around her responded as they did; how she took her chance, to miraculous effect; and what happened, in the end, when the miracles stopped.' (pp. 245–6)

When the miracles stopped, of course, Joan was doomed; when those whose interest she served deserted her, when those who had invented her denied her, no matter that they would later re-invent her to their own ends. Helen Castor's vivid, riveting book guides us through that 'terrifying uncertain world', providing a scholarly distillation of its methods, and reminding us of the inspirational role played by a peasant girl from Domrémy in the forging of a nation.

Notes

1. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *The Damned (Là-bas)*, trans. Terry Hale, (London, 2001), p. 40.

2. Gilles was comrade-in-arms to Joan and was present at Orléans. He later turned to demonic occult pursuits and was charged with multiple counts of child murder and sodomy as well as heresy. He was convicted and killed by hanging in October 1440.
3. Huysmans, p. 38. This trope of a bleeding nation was also invoked by Edouard Perroy who wrote of 'the exhaustion of a France bled white' in *The Hundred Years War*, trans. W. B. Wells, (New York, NY, 1965), p. 279. In relation to Huysmans' interest and expertise in medieval culture and history see Elizabeth Emery 'J.-K. Huysmans, Medievalist,' *Modern Language Studies*, 30, 2 (Autumn 2000), 119–31.
4. Anne Curry stated that 'had Joan of Arc not succeeded in raising the Siege of Orléans and defeating the retreating English at Patay (18 June 1429), the outcome of the war could have been very different' in *The Hundred Years War* (London, 1993), p. 111. Perroy wrote of Charles debt to Joan to whom 'he owed the fact that he was King of France' in *The Hundred Years War* (New York, NY, 1965), p. 279.
5. See Nancy Goldstone, *The Maid and the Queen: The Secret History of Joan of Arc and Yolande of Aragon* (London, 2011) for a recent exploration of the relationship between the two women. Castor makes her views on Yolande's goals clear on p. 70 et seq.
6. Famously, the story is told of Francis I being presented with the skull of Jean sans Peur by a monk in 1521 and being told that 'this is the hole through which the English entered France'.
7. Simone Roux wrote that Gerson 'provided a favourable assessment tinged with a prudent reticence regarding these sorts of manifestations in general. Charles VII retained only one point: Joan's mission had no taint of the diabolic, therefore she must be inspired by God' in *Paris in the Middle Ages*, trans. Jo Ann McNamara, (Philadelphia, PA, 2009), p. 109. In what is an indispensable sourcebook (particularly for those working with English language translations) Craig Taylor wrote in relation to the disappearance of the records of Joan's questioning at Poitiers 'if the documents were in fact destroyed, which is unproven, it may simply be that the theologians at Poitiers had disagreed with one another about Joan or expressed real concerns about her that were masked in the narrower Conclusions of the Poitiers Investigation' in *Joan of Arc, La Pucelle* (selected sources translated and annotated) (Manchester, 2006), p. 15.
8. Ardis Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy: Chaucer, Language, and Nation in the Hundred Years War* (Oxford, 2009). For anyone interested in the manner in which language and 'linguistic abrasion' problematises the transmission the legal proceedings see the excellent chapter 'Betrayal and Nation' wherein Butterfield states: 'If it is hard to see straight in Jeanne's story, one reason is that it is told in more than one language. A full comparison of the French and Latin records would no doubt be revealing. Even a brief glance however, gives a sense of the intricate political concerns that were just below the surface of certain linguistic clashes' (p. 365). Butterfield also poses the intriguing question as to 'why Jeanne becomes a national symbol in the face of so much that seems to disqualify her for this role. When we consider that, in becoming a figure of a nation, she was sacrificed to that nation, then she seems not unlikely but impossible. She seems far too unstable a figure to stand, as such, for anything: how could she, of all candidates, become the blessed one who rescued 'toute France' from ruin as Christine de Pizan declared? It could only be possible through a strange, even blind act of faith, or a form of suppression or radical distortion' (p. 354).
9. See for example Francoise Meltzer, *For Fear of the Fire: Joan of Arc and the Limits of Subjectivity*, (London, 2001) which provides a thought-provoking engagement with 'present day' works of critical theory and philosophy and considers Joan as cultural phenomenon.
10. Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, (London, 1980), pp. 12–13.
11. Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror, The Calamitous Fourteenth Century*, (London, 1989) p. 588.

