

## Saint Joan of Arc



In [French](#) *Jeanne d'Arc*; by her contemporaries commonly known as *la Pucelle* (the Maid).

Born at Domremy in Champagne, probably on 6 January, 1412; died at [Rouen](#), 30 May, 1431. The village of Domremy lay upon the confines of territory which recognized the suzerainty of the Duke of [Burgundy](#), but in the protracted conflict between the Armagnacs (the party of Charles VII, King of [France](#)), on the one hand, and the [Burgundians](#) in alliance

with the [English](#), on the other, Domremy had always remained loyal to Charles.

Jacques d'Arc, Joan's father, was a small peasant farmer, [poor](#) but not needy. Joan seems to have been the youngest of a [family](#) of five. She never learned to read or write but was skilled in sewing and spinning, and the popular [idea](#) that she spent the days of her childhood in the pastures, alone with the sheep and cattle, is quite unfounded. All the [witnesses](#) in the process of rehabilitation spoke of her as a singularly pious child, grave beyond her years, who often [knelt](#) in the [church](#) absorbed in [prayer](#), and [loved](#) the [poor](#) tenderly. Great attempts were made at Joan's trial to connect her with some [superstitious](#) practices supposed to have been performed round a certain tree, popularly known as the "Fairy Tree" (*J'Arbre des Dames*), but the sincerity of her answers baffled her judges. She had sung and [danced](#) there with the other children, and had woven wreaths for [Our Lady's statue](#), but since she was twelve years old she had held aloof from such diversions.

It was at the age of thirteen and a half, in the summer of 1425, that Joan first became [conscious](#) of that [manifestation](#), whose [supernatural](#) character it would now be rash to question, which she afterwards came to call her "voices" or her "counsel." It was at first simply a voice, as if someone had spoken quite close to her, but it seems also clear that a blaze of light accompanied it, and that later on she clearly discerned in some way the appearance of those who spoke to her, recognizing them individually

as [St. Michael](#) (who was accompanied by other [angels](#)), [St. Margaret](#), [St. Catherine](#), and others. Joan was always reluctant to speak of her voices. She said nothing about them to her confessor, and constantly refused, at her trial, to be inveigled into descriptions of the appearance of the [saints](#) and to explain how she recognized them. None the less, she told her judges: "I saw them with these very eyes, as well as I see you."

Great efforts have been made by [rationalistic](#) historians, such as M. Anatole France, to explain these voices as the result of a [condition](#) of [religious](#) and hysterical exaltation which had been fostered in Joan by [priestly](#) influence, combined with certain [prophecies](#) current in the countryside of a maiden from the *bois chesnu* (oak wood), near which the Fairy Tree was situated, who was to save [France](#) by a [miracle](#). But the baselessness of this [analysis](#) of the phenomena has been fully exposed by many non-Catholic writers. There is not a shadow of evidence to support this theory of [priestly](#) advisers coaching Joan in a part, but much which contradicts it. Moreover, unless we accuse the Maid of [deliberate falsehood](#), which no one is prepared to do, it was the voices which created the state of [patriotic](#) exaltation, and not the exaltation which preceded the voices. Her evidence on these points is clear.

Although Joan never made any statement as to the date at which the voices revealed her mission, it seems [certain](#) that the call of God was only made known to her gradually. But by May, 1428, she no longer [doubted](#) that she was bidden to go to the help of the king, and the voices became insistent, urging her to present herself to Robert Baudricourt, who commanded for Charles VII in the neighbouring town of Vaucouleurs. This journey she eventually accomplished a month later, but Baudricourt, a rude and dissolute soldier, treated her and her mission with scant respect, saying to the cousin who accompanied her: "Take her home to her [father](#) and give her a good whipping."

Meanwhile the military situation of King Charles and his supporters was growing more desperate. [Orléans](#) was invested (12 October, 1428), and by the close of the year complete defeat seemed imminent. Joan's voices became urgent, and even threatening. It was in vain that she resisted, saying to them: "I am a [poor](#) girl; I do not [know](#) how to ride or fight." The voices only reiterated: "It is [God](#) who commands it." Yielding at last, she left Domremy in January, 1429, and again visited Vaucouleurs.

Baudricourt was still skeptical, but, as she stayed on in the town, her persistence gradually made an impression on him. On 17 February she announced a great defeat which had befallen the French arms outside Orléans (the Battle of the Herrings). As this statement was officially confirmed a few days later, her cause gained ground. Finally she was suffered to seek the king at Chinon, and she made her way there with a slender escort of three men-at-arms, she being attired, at her own request, in male costume — undoubtedly as a protection to her modesty in the rough life of the camp. She always slept fully dressed, and all those who were intimate with her declared that there was something about her which repressed every unseemly thought in her regard.

She reached Chinon on 6 March, and two days later was admitted into the presence of Charles VII. To test her, the king had disguised himself, but she at once saluted him without hesitation amidst a group of attendants. From the beginning a strong party at the court — La Trémoille, the royal favourite, foremost among them — opposed her as a crazy visionary, but a secret sign, communicated to her by her voices, which she made known to Charles, led the king, somewhat half-heartedly, to believe in her mission. What this sign was, Joan never revealed, but it is now most commonly believed that this "secret of the king" was a doubt Charles had conceived of the legitimacy of his birth, and which Joan had been supernaturally authorized to set at rest.

Still, before Joan could be employed in military operations she was sent to Poitiers to be examined by a numerous committee of learned bishops and doctors. The examination was of the most searching and formal character. It is regrettable in the extreme that the minutes of the proceedings, to which Joan frequently appealed later on at her trial, have altogether perished. All that we know is that her ardent faith, simplicity, and honesty made a favourable impression. The theologians found nothing heretical in her claims to supernatural guidance, and, without pronouncing upon the reality of her mission, they thought that she might be safely employed and further tested.

Returning to Chinon, Joan made her preparations for the campaign. Instead of the sword the king offered her, she begged that search might be made for an ancient sword buried, as she averred, behind the altar in the chapel of Ste-Catherine-de-Fierbois. It was found in the very spot her voices indicated. There was made for her at the same time a standard bearing the words Jesus, Maria, with a picture of God the Father, and kneeling angels presenting a fleur-de-lis.

But perhaps the most interesting fact connected with this early stage of her mission is a letter of one Sire de Rotslaer written from Lyons on 22 April, 1429, which was delivered at Brussels and duly registered, as the manuscript to this day attests, before any of the events referred to received their fulfilment. The Maid, he reports, said "that she would save Orléans and would compel the English to raise the siege, that she herself in a battle before Orléans would be wounded by a shaft but would not die of it, and that the King, in the course of the coming summer, would be crowned at Reims, together with other things which the King keeps secret."

Before entering upon her campaign, Joan summoned the King of England to withdraw his troops from French soil. The English commanders were furious at the audacity of the demand, but Joan by a rapid movement entered Orléans on 30 April. Her presence there at once worked wonders. By 8 May the English forts which encircled the city had all been captured, and the siege raised, though on the 7th Joan was wounded in the breast by an arrow. So far as the Maid went she wished to follow up these successes with all speed, partly from a sound warlike instinct, partly because her voices had already told her that she had only a year to last. But the king and his advisers, especially La Trémoille and the Archbishop of Reims, were slow to move. However, at Joan's earnest entreaty a short campaign was begun upon the Loire, which, after a series of successes, ended on 18 June with a great victory at Patay, where the English reinforcements sent from Paris under Sir John Fastolf were completely routed. The way to Reims was now practically open, but the Maid had the greatest difficulty in persuading the commanders not to retire before Troyes, which was at first closed against them. They captured the town and then, still reluctantly, followed her to Reims, where, on Sunday, 17 July, 1429, Charles VII was solemnly crowned, the Maid standing by with her standard, for — as she explained — "as it had shared in the toil, it was just that it should share in the victory."

The principal aim of Joan's mission was thus attained, and some authorities assert that it was now her wish to return home, but that she was detained with the army against her will. The evidence is to some extent conflicting, and it is probable that Joan herself did not always speak in the same tone. Probably she saw clearly how much might have been done to bring about the speedy expulsion of the English from French soil, but on the other hand she was constantly oppressed by the apathy of the king and his advisers, and by the suicidal policy which snatched at every diplomatic bait thrown out by the Duke of Burgundy.

An abortive attempt on [Paris](#) was made at the end of August. Though [St-Denis](#) was occupied without opposition, the assault which was made on the city on 8 September was not seriously supported, and Joan, while heroically cheering on her men to fill the moat, was shot through the thigh with a bolt from a crossbow. The Duc d'Alençon removed her almost by force, and the assault was abandoned. The reverse unquestionably impaired Joan's prestige, and shortly afterwards, when, through Charles' political counsellors, a truce was signed with the Duke of [Burgundy](#), she sadly laid down her arms upon the [altar](#) of [St-Denis](#).

The inactivity of the following winter, mostly spent amid the worldliness and the [jealousy](#) of the Court, must have been a miserable experience for Joan. It may have been with the [idea](#) of consoling her that Charles, on 29 December, 1429, ennobled the Maid and all her [family](#), who henceforward, from the lilies on their [coat of arms](#), were known by the name of Du Lis. It was April before Joan was able to take the field again at the conclusion of the truce, and at Melun her voices made [known](#) to her that she would be taken [prisoner](#) before Midsummer Day. Neither was the fulfilment of this [prediction](#) long delayed. It seems that she had thrown herself into Compiègne on 24 May at sunrise to defend the town against [Burgundian](#) attack. In the evening she resolved to attempt a sortie, but her little troop of some five hundred encountered a much superior force. Her followers were driven back and retired desperately fighting. By some mistake or panic of Guillaume de Flavy, who commanded in Compiègne, the drawbridge was raised while still many of those who had made the sortie remained outside, Joan amongst the number. She was pulled down from her horse and became the [prisoner](#) of a follower of John of Luxemburg. Guillaume de Flavy has been accused of deliberate treachery, but there seems no adequate reason to suppose this. He continued to hold Compiègne resolutely for his king, while Joan's constant thought during the early months of her captivity was to escape and come to assist him in this task of defending the town.

No words can adequately describe the disgraceful ingratitude and apathy of Charles and his advisers in leaving the Maid to her [fate](#). If military force had not availed, they had [prisoners](#) like the Earl of Suffolk in their hands, for whom she could have been exchanged. Joan was sold by John of Luxembourg to the [English](#) for a sum which would amount to several hundred thousand dollars in modern money. There can be no [doubt](#) that the [English](#), partly because they [feared](#) their [prisoner](#) with a [superstitious](#) terror, partly because they were ashamed of the dread which she

inspired, were determined at all costs to take her [life](#). They could not [put her to death](#) for having beaten them, but they could get her [sentenced](#) as a [witch](#) and a [heretic](#).

Moreover, they had a tool ready to their hand in Pierre Cauchon, the [Bishop](#) of [Beauvais](#), an unscrupulous and [ambitious](#) man who was the creature of the [Burgundian](#) party. A pretext for invoking his authority was found in the fact that Compiègne, where Joan was captured, lay in the [Diocese of Beauvais](#). Still, as [Beauvais](#) was in the hands of the [French](#), the trial took place at [Rouen](#) — the latter [see](#) being at that [time vacant](#). This raised many points of technical legality which were summarily settled by the parties [interested](#).

The [Vicar](#) of the [Inquisition](#) at first, upon some [scruple](#) of [jurisdiction](#), refused to attend, but this difficulty was overcome before the trial ended. Throughout the trial Cauchon's [assessors](#) consisted almost entirely of [Frenchmen](#), for the most part [theologians](#) and [doctors](#) of the [University of Paris](#). Preliminary meetings of the court took place in January, but it was only on 21 February, 1431, that Joan appeared for the first time before her judges. She was not allowed an advocate, and, though accused in an [ecclesiastical court](#), she was throughout illegally confined in the Castle of Rouen, a secular [prison](#), where she was guarded by dissolute [English](#) soldiers. Joan bitterly complained of this. She asked to be in the [church prison](#), where she would have had [female](#) attendants. It was undoubtedly for the better protection of her modesty under such [conditions](#) that she persisted in retaining her male attire. Before she had been handed over to the [English](#), she had attempted to escape by desperately throwing herself from the window of the tower of Beaurevoir, an act of seeming [presumption](#) for which she was much browbeaten by her judges. This also served as a pretext for the harshness shown regarding her confinement at [Rouen](#), where she was at first kept in an iron cage, chained by the neck, hands, and feet. On the other hand she was allowed no [spiritual privileges](#) — e.g. attendance at [Mass](#) — on account of the charge of [heresy](#) and the monstrous dress (*difformitate habitus*) she was wearing.

As regards the official record of the trial, which, so far as the [Latin](#) version goes, seems to be preserved entire, we may probably trust its accuracy in all that relates to the questions asked and the answers returned by the [prisoner](#). These answers are in every way favourable to Joan. Her simplicity, piety, and good sense appear at every turn, despite the attempts of the judges to confuse her. They pressed her regarding her [visions](#), but upon many points she refused to answer. Her attitude was always



fearless, and, upon 1 March, Joan boldly announced that "within seven years' space the English would have to forfeit a bigger prize than Orléans." In point of fact Paris was lost to Henry VI on 12 November, 1437 — six years and eight months afterwards. It was probably because the Maid's answers perceptibly won sympathizers for her in a large assembly that Cauchon decided to conduct the rest of the inquiry before a small committee of judges in the prison itself. We may remark that the only matter in which any charge of prevarication can be reasonably urged against Joan's replies occurs especially in this stage of the inquiry. Joan, pressed about the secret sign given to the king, declared that an angel brought him a golden crown, but on further questioning she seems to have grown confused and to have contradicted herself. Most authorities (like, e.g., M. Petit de Julleville and Mr. Andrew Lang) are agreed that she was trying to guard the king's secret behind an allegory, she herself being the angel; but others — for instance P. Ayroles and Canon Dunand — insinuate that the accuracy of the *procès-verbal* cannot be trusted. On another point she was prejudiced by her lack of education. The judges asked her to submit herself to "the Church Militant." Joan clearly did not understand the phrase and, though willing and anxious to appeal to the pope, grew puzzled and confused. It was asserted later that Joan's reluctance to pledge herself to a simple acceptance of the Church's decisions was due to some insidious advice treacherously imparted to her to work her ruin. But the accounts of this alleged perfidy are contradictory and improbable.

The examinations terminated on 17 March. Seventy propositions were then drawn up, forming a very disorderly and unfair presentment of Joan's "crimes," but, after she had been permitted to hear and reply to these, another set of twelve were drafted, better arranged and less extravagantly worded. With this summary of her misdeeds before them, a large majority of the twenty-two judges who took part in the deliberations declared Joan's visions and voices to be "false and diabolical," and they decided that if she refused to retract she was to be handed over to the secular arm — which was the same as saying that she was to be burned. Certain formal admonitions, at first private, and then public, were administered to the poor victim (18 April and 2 May), but she refused to make any submission which the judges could have considered satisfactory. On 9 May she was threatened with torture, but she still held firm. Meanwhile, the twelve propositions were submitted to the University of Paris, which, being extravagantly English in sympathy, denounced the Maid in violent terms. Strong in this approval, the judges, forty-seven in number, held a final deliberation, and forty-two reaffirmed that Joan ought to be declared heretical and handed over to the civil power,

if she still refused to retract. Another [admonition](#) followed in the [prison](#) on 22 May, but Joan remained unshaken. The next day a stake was erected in the [cemetery](#) of St-Ouen, and in the presence of a great crowd she was solemnly [admonished](#) for the last time. After a [courageous](#) protest against the preacher's insulting reflections on her king, Charles VII, the accessories of the scene seem at last to have worked upon [mind](#) and body worn out by so many struggles. Her [courage](#) for once failed her. She [consented](#) to sign some sort of retraction, but what the precise terms of that retraction were will never be [known](#). In the official record of the process a form of retraction is inserted which is most humiliating in every particular. It is a long document which would have taken half an hour to read. What was read aloud to Joan and was signed by her must have been something quite different, for five [witnesses](#) at the rehabilitation trial, including Jean Massieu, the official who had himself read it aloud, declared that it was only a matter of a few lines. Even so, the poor victim did not sign unconditionally, but plainly declared that she only retracted in so far as it was [God's will](#). However, in virtue of this concession, Joan was not then burned, but conducted back to [prison](#).

The [English](#) and [Burgundians](#) were furious, but Cauchon, it seems, placated them by saying, "We shall have her yet." Undoubtedly her position would now, in case of a relapse, be worse than before, for no second retractation could save her from the flames. Moreover, as one of the points upon which she had been condemned was the wearing of male apparel, a resumption of that attire would alone constitute a relapse into [heresy](#), and this within a few days happened, owing, it was afterwards alleged, to a trap deliberately laid by her jailers with the connivance of Cauchon. Joan, either to defend her modesty from outrage, or because her [women's](#) garments were taken from her, or, perhaps, simply because she was weary of the struggle and was convinced that her enemies were determined to have her blood upon some pretext, once more put on the man's dress which had been purposely left in her way. The end now came soon. On 29 May a court of thirty-seven judges decided unanimously that the Maid must be treated as a relapsed [heretic](#), and this [sentence](#) was actually carried out the next day (30 May, 1431) amid circumstances of intense pathos. She is said, when the judges visited her early in the morning, first to have charged Cauchon with the responsibility of her death, solemnly appealing from him to [God](#), and afterwards to have declared that "her voices had [deceived](#) her." About this last speech a [doubt](#) must always be felt. We cannot be sure whether such words were ever used, and, even if they were, the meaning is not plain. She was, however, allowed to make her [confession](#) and to receive [Communion](#). Her demeanour at the stake was such as to move even her bitter



enemies to tears. She asked for a [cross](#), which, after she had embraced it, was held up before her while she called continuously upon the [name of Jesus](#). "Until the last," said Manchon, the recorder at the trial, "she declared that her voices came from [God](#) and had not [deceived](#) her." After death her ashes were thrown into the Seine.

Twenty-four years later a revision of her trial, the *procès de réhabilitation*, was opened at [Paris](#) with the [consent](#) of the [Holy See](#). The popular feeling was then very different, and, with but the rarest exceptions, all the [witnesses](#) were eager to render their tribute to the [virtues](#) and [supernatural gifts](#) of the Maid. The first trial had been conducted without reference to the [pope](#); indeed it was carried out in defiance of St. Joan's [appeal](#) to the [head of the Church](#). Now an appellate court constituted by the [pope](#), after long inquiry and [examination](#) of [witnesses](#), reversed and annulled the [sentence](#) pronounced by a local tribunal under Cauchon's presidency. The illegality of the former proceedings was made clear, and it speaks well for the sincerity of this new inquiry that it could not be made without inflicting some degree of reproach upon both the King of [France](#) and the [Church](#) at large, seeing that so great an [injustice](#) had been done and had so long been suffered to continue unredressed. Even before the rehabilitation trial, keen observers, like Eneas Sylvius Piccolomini (afterwards [Pope Pius II](#)), though still in [doubt](#) as to her mission, had discerned something of the [heavenly character](#) of the Maid. In [Shakespeare's](#) day she was still regarded in [England](#) as a [witch](#) in league with the [fiends](#) of [hell](#), but a [juster](#) estimate had begun to prevail even in the pages of Speed's "History of Great Britaine" (1611). By the beginning of the nineteenth century the sympathy for her even in [England](#) was general. Such writers as Southey, Hallam, Sharon Turner, Carlyle, Landor, and, above all, De Quincey greeted the Maid with a tribute of respect which was not surpassed even in her own native land. Among her [Catholic](#) fellow-countrymen she had been regarded, even in her lifetime, as Divinely inspired.

At last the cause of her [beatification](#) was introduced upon occasion of an [appeal](#) addressed to the [Holy See](#), in 1869, by [Mgr Dupanloup](#), [Bishop](#) of [Orléans](#), and, after passing through all its stages and being duly confirmed by the necessary [miracles](#), the process ended in the [decree](#) being published by [Pius X](#) on 11 April, 1909. A [Mass](#) and [Office](#) of St. Joan, taken from the "Commune Virginum," with "proper" [prayers](#), have been approved by the [Holy See](#) for use in the [Diocese of Orléans](#).

**St. Joan was canonized in 1920 by Pope Benedict XV.**

Source: <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08409c.htm>