



JOAN

THE MYSTERIOUS LIFE OF
THE HERETIC WHO BECAME A SAINT

DONALD SPOTO



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*The Mysterious Life of the Heretic
Who Became a Saint*

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 HarperCollins e-books

for Sue Jett
with love and devotion

Joan: I heard voices telling me what to do. They come from God.

Robert: They come from your imagination.

Joan: Of course. That is how the messages of God come to us.

—George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan* (1923)

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Foreword

In libraries and on Web sites, you can readily count hundreds of biographies of Joan of Arc published in English since the middle of the nineteenth century. You will find books for the general reader of biography and for the political and social historian; volumes for the religious and military specialist; treatments for children and for adolescents; tracts for those who have preconceived notions about what this teenage girl was or might have been or failed to be or ought to have been; tomes for those who admire and revere her; and works written for those convinced that she was a cunning charlatan, a deluded patriot, a sexually confused peasant limited by a culture of fear and superstition, or a pitiable psychotic.

This vast and diverse collection does not include a thousand books in French and other languages; nor does it take into account novels, poems, songs, hymns, essays, operas, plays, and film with her as the subject. Paintings and statues depicting Joan appear all over the world, and hundreds of churches have been named for her. She is so familiar as to have become, for many people, almost a cliché.

So far as the facts of her life are concerned, it is astonishing to learn that we have more detailed evidence about her than anyone else in the history of the world up to her time. We know far more about Joan, for example, than we do about Moses, Plato, Jesus of Nazareth, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Buddha or Muhammad. For the last two and a half years of her life, we can construct almost a day-by-day account of her whereabouts and actions. We also have several letters she dictated, three of them bearing her simple signature; there is scarcely a single contemporaneous French memoir or chronicle that does not mention Joan the Maid.

Since her death at the age of nineteen in 1431, Joan has fascinated people in many lands. An illiterate girl of remarkable and courageous ingenuity, she boldly confronted a weak and ineffectual heir to the French throne, led rude men in ferocious battles, and was abandoned by the king whose coronation she secured. For all that, her brief presence during the Hundred Years' War turned the tide against rapacious English imperialism and enabled France to survive.

Then, in one of history's most egregious miscarriages of justice, Joan was subjected to a bogus trial on an absurd charge of religious heresy. A rigged jury of churchmen turned her over to the English, and she was burned to death as a heretic. Yet her story does not end there. Joan is unique in that she is the only person to be condemned by a Church court for crimes against religion and faith and then later declared a saint of that same Church, worthy of universal reverence.

IT IS TIME for a new book and a fresh take on this extraordinary young woman. Consider, first of all, the curious nature of the historical record. Recent discoveries are begging for a new look at some key original French and Latin documents in light of modern linguistic studies. I have been researching Joan's life and its sources for over thirty years, collecting documents and trying to keep up with the scholarly work of others, and during this period I have had to revise many of my earlier conclusions.

In the book you are holding, however, I did not wish either to engage in scholarly debate or to invite academic hairsplitting over matters of narrow historical or military interest. Instead, I was gripped by the power and relevance of Joan's life and by her sheer, undiluted faith in the God she believed was guiding her. These are some of the issues that are significant for modern readers.

During Joan's trial hundreds of questions were put to her by the Church court. The interrogation of ecclesiastical judges and theological inquisitors, along with her replies, were recorded each day in French by the chief notary, Guillaume Manchon, and by his two assistants, Guillaume Colles (also called Boisguillaume) and Nicholas Taquel. Every evening the three men compared, collated, and corrected their notes. The original of this document is lost to us, but notarized copies have been preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and the Bibliothèque Municipale in Orléans.

The final and official register of the trial, prepared at the order of the chief judge, Bishop Pierre Cauchon, was based on Manchon's minutes but included much more: in fact, Cauchon ordered the record deliberately falsified at crucial points in order to secure Joan's condemnation and execution. This trial document was completed in Latin by Thomas Courcelles, who was himself one of Joan's judges. He added all the letters from so-called experts as well as Cauchon's instructions and those of Jean Le Maître, the deputy inquisitor for France. Also included were the statements of the faculty of the University of Paris and the opinions of other dignitaries. Five copies of this Latin version were made, and three are extant, all of them signed, notarized, and sealed by Cauchon and Le Maître. They are preserved in Paris at the Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée Nationale and the Bibliothèque Nationale.

The Courcelles manuscript and an enormous cache of authenticated and relevant documents were compiled, edited, and published in five volumes between 1841 and 1849 by French scholar Jules Quicherat, who included documents relative to the second (posthumous) procedure a quarter century after Joan's death—the trial that reversed the condemnation. Unfortunately, Quicherat harmonized several versions of both long trials and often provided interpretations rather than precise renderings of fifteenth-century French; he also mistranslated many passages. In 1920 and 1921 Pierre Champion compounded the problems when he brought forth a compact and revised two-volume French version of Quicherat's work. There have been two English versions of the trial based on Courcelles/Quicherat: an abridged text, rendered often roughly, by T. Douglas Murray in 1902, and another by W. P. Barrett in 1931.

In light of more recent scholarship, Quicherat's edition was edited and newly translated into French from 1960 to 1971 by Pierre Tisset and Yvonne Lanhers, whose scholarship included reference to a crucial document at the Bibliothèque Municipale d'Orléans. Its author and precise date are unknown, but its final form probably comes to us from about 1500, and it provides Joan's actual words at the trial. This manuscript (known simply as the "Orléans" text) essentially replaces the trial as replicated by Quicherat and is indispensable for modern study; I cite it here with my own translations. W. S. Scott's abridged and reconstructed version (1956) was the first in English to use the Orléans manuscript, and to it almost all of my predecessors have turned. But the edition of Tisset

and Lanhers deserved far more careful study.

AT THIS POINT serious problems emerge that I tried to remedy in this book. Little recently published material on Joan has taken into account the magisterial work of Pierre Duparc, who from 1977 to 1988 published in five volumes the original Latin and French testimonies and all documentation relevant to the nullification trial of 1455–1456, casting a bright light on the life of Joan before her brief military career and her early death. Only very short passages based on Duparc’s scholarship have so far appeared in English, and those selections are poorly edited and badly translated. I redress this imbalance at least in part by presenting my own translations of representative sections of these documents. These greatly expand our understanding of Joan’s life, mission, purpose and convictions. I was guided, of course, by the work of scholars who preceded me, not only in studying the trials but also in considering the accounts of Joan written during and immediately after her lifetime. I am grateful most of all to the International Joan of Arc Society, a group whose resources are noted at the beginning of my bibliography.

By 2004 I was more than ever convinced that, in addition to providing an unbiased consideration of up-to-the-minute textual evidence, a fresh look at this extraordinary life might show the profound significance of Joan of Arc for our own time. We live in a twenty-first-century climate of international fear and suspicion, and to us this fifteenth-century European girl has something startling and important to say.

Joan fought and died to preserve the identity and particularity of a sovereign place; she dedicated herself to the unique and irreplaceable soul of a country. She did not believe that it was right for her country to be—as it had already become in part and was dangerously close to becoming completely—simply a fiefdom of the kingdom of England.

To use modern terms, she was horrified at the thought that the integrity of her country should be sacrificed to foreign empire-building. Whatever France was not yet and whatever it needed to be, she dedicated herself to its enduring existence. Joan was an unwitting architect of the idea that every nation is inviolable—that no people may be overrun, dominated, suppressed or brought to the brink of annihilation by an outside force. She stands for the injunction, later ratified by declarations, treaties and covenants signed all over the civilized world, that no nation (without direct provocation and an immediate threat to its survival) may invade, much less annihilate, another country in order to turn it into a cog in the machine of mightier people eager for economic exploitation and territorial expansion. In this regard, Joan speaks clearly to the political life of the twenty-first century.

BUT WHAT ABOUT the visions she claimed to see and the voices she heard, all of which she said were “from God”? Despite the problems in her telling and the apparent contradictions that becloud her statements, I believe that her spiritual experiences were profoundly valid and that they convey something of the truth. This assertion needs to be tested and challenged, however, without assuming either that her “visions” and “voices” are to be taken at literal face value or to be discounted because such phenomena do not or cannot “really” occur. The latter is little more than circular reasoning: such

and such cannot happen because it does not happen. More helpful is to ask, “How do we assess the claims that it has indeed happened?”

Those who regard Joan as a saint usually assume both her veracity and the “facts” of the visions and voices. But I believe it is critical to ask what such visions and voices meant in fifteenth-century France. What did they mean to Joan, and how was she forced to adapt her speech to describe spiritual experiences that transcend ordinary language? Can some sort of validity be granted to them—however we understand them—in light of a consistent pattern of character and action in her life? This is a matter neglected by other biographers of Joan; it is a major theme of this book.

In this regard it is important to consider the nature of religious language in general, which is always inadequate, symbolic and metaphorical, never fully communicating spiritual experience. As I have tried to demonstrate, Joan’s “problem,” like that of religious visionaries throughout history, was to report an ineffable experience, to find some sort of expression within the currency of her own religious and cultural forms. Like the great Hebrew visionary prophets of antiquity, the mystics of every faith, and the great poets and lovers of history, Joan struggled with the inadequacy of human speech to express what cannot be fully expressed but that somehow must be expressed.

What about, also, her vowed virginity as a laywoman, which to some modern minds at once suggests a mental aberration or at least sexual dysfunction? We might ask, rather, what did virginity mean to European people six centuries ago? What did it mean for this girl? Answers to these questions should not be prejudicially or casually given.

Only by interpreting Joan’s life in light of her times and her language constructs can we begin to understand her. She was not a seventeenth-century Italian girl, a nineteenth-century English maiden, or a twentieth-century American teenager. The specifics of her time, place, language, religion and economy must be carefully considered if we are to gain something close to a realistic picture of her rather than one that merely reflects our own bias or fantasy or our own (also limited) twenty-first-century experience. Only by interpreting her words and gestures in light of her own time and place—only by giving them context and trying to understand what they meant for her and her contemporaries—can we come close to her. We are looking for a girl who lived in an era and a place vastly different from our own—she is Joan of Arc, not Joan of Arkansas.

Interpretation is a word that alienates many people, as if it means falsifying, fabricating or exaggerating. But to understand, it is essential to interpret. Interpreters are those who try to find the threads of meaning woven through history and in lives—to reveal why certain happenings became events and why certain people of long ago did not vanish into obscurity.

JOAN WAS NOT sophisticated in matters of religion or religious language, nor did she follow a program designed by the Church in general or by a religious community in particular. Her way was not one of pious practices but one of absolute trust, of unwavering faith that God would not abandon her or the people of France. However we interpret her voices and visions, it is clear that to her spiritual sight, this world is not the sum of reality. For Joan, the realm of matter and the world of the spirit were not two hermetically sealed dimensions of reality but rather one continuum: the earth was completely interpenetrated with the things of God. Hence she knew—by intuition, not by learning—the necessary congruence of justice with love.

Neither wife nor nun, neither queen nor noblewoman, neither philosopher nor stateswoman, Joan of Arc represents something that was fresh then and is still pertinent now for anyone, and perhaps most poignantly for women. In the final analysis, her battle was not with English politicians but with the powerful of the Church. Dedicated to her faith, she was betrayed by its earthly institution; abandoned by everyone for whom she fought, she was blithely handed over to a death that was illegally maneuvered and hideously exacted. In her terror, her loneliness, and her agony she remains a figure of starkest simplicity.

This book deals with what might be called the mystery of Joan of Arc, and I offer it within the belief that the world and everything in it belongs to God and matters to God. A mystery is not a puzzle, a problem, or something to be worked out or resolved, and Joan is not an intellectual challenge. In the vocabulary of theology, a mystery is an event, action or person pointing to the presence of the hidden but real God, who enters time and space.

In this regard, and in her passionate insistence unto death that an individual nation matters within the great chain of being, Joan of Arc may be a powerful contemporary sign of the transforming power of faith.

Of War and Occupation

(1412–1423)

The tiny village of Domrémy, in eastern France, seems hardly to have changed in the last six centuries. At the beginning of the fifteenth century it held fewer than two hundred people living in small houses, from which they went out to work as farmers and vintners. Although on the frontier of the duchy of Lorraine, Domrémy was ruled by and loyal to the kingdom of France. Perched on the left bank of the River Meuse, the village had been mostly spared the ravages of the Black Death, but not its widespread economic effects or the depredations of mercenaries on both sides of the Hundred Years' War, that series of skirmishes great and small between England and France. When the royal purse or residual idealism was lacking to encourage soldiers, men outfitted with little more than bow and arrow simply roamed through the countryside, pillaging, raping, purloining livestock and generally terrorizing the locals, who otherwise peacefully herded their flocks and tilled the soil.

The medieval tradition of serfdom had mostly disappeared; instead of owing their labors and lives to a vassal or lord, French peasants in places like the Meuse Valley could become as affluent as aristocrats: they had property to which they paid cash rent to a local *seigneur*, but they enjoyed the benefits of ownership and could increase their landholdings.

In 1400 Jacques d'Arc was an enterprising, respected landowner in Domrémy; by 1423 he was also the local *doyen*, bearing both the honor and responsibility of collecting village taxes and supervising the defense of citizens and livestock in times of assault. He was born about 1375 in Ceffonds, twenty miles west of Domrémy, but some historians theorize that his parents must have lived in Arc-en-Barrois, farther south. Their argument is based on the assumption that this location explains *d'Arc*, indicating the place from which Jacques came—a *nom d'origine*, often given to notable or honored citizens. But if Jacques had indeed hailed from Arc-en-Barrois, the local Latin manuscripts (the first to mention the family) would have identified him as “Jacques de Arco,” in the contemporary style of patronymics. Further complicating matters is the fact that before the invention of printing in 1440 spelling was not standardized, and so the family name appears variously as Darc, Dars, Day, Darx, Dare, Tarc, Tart or Dart.

After living in Domrémy several years, Jacques had what might be called middle-class status. He owned about fifty acres of farmland and pasture on the edge of the village as well as cattle, sheep and

a furnished home. The house was typical, with a slate roof resting on wooden beams, a hard-packed dirt floor inside, and a few rooms, some of them with a small window; year-round, the place tended to be damp and fetid. A single fireplace, in the main room just inside the front door, was used for warmth and cooking; here too the family dined and the parents slept. Water had to be hauled up from the river and of course there was nothing like a bathroom: instead, people found all kinds of uses for the backyard. A wooden staircase led to an attic used for storing grain. At that time the d'Arc house would have been considered almost luxurious.*

The small home was sufficient to accommodate a few pilgrims (without fee) or merchants (for a modest fee) who stopped in the village on their way to more prestigious towns. According to witnesses, visitors were treated with legendary kindness and warmth by Jacques's wife, Isabelle Romée, who had come from Vouthon, four miles from Domrémy; her second name was commonly conferred on those who had completed a religious pilgrimage to Rome. For centuries, such a pious journey had indicated profound devotion: traveling to sacred sites—to Rome, for example, where the apostles Peter and Paul were believed to have been martyred—was difficult, expensive and unsafe in any season. Women, even in the company of clergy, were easy targets of brigands, rapists and highwaymen.

At home, Isabelle's primary task was to raise her children as good Christians and to see that they knew their prayers. She and Jacques had three boys and two girls: Jacques or Jacquemin; Jehan or Jean; Pierre or Pierrelot; Jehanne or Jeanne; and Catherine. Jean and Pierre appear later in the story; Jacques and Catherine almost nothing is known except that the latter married at about the age of sixteen and died soon after.

The name Jehanne is rooted in the late Latin Johanna, the feminine of Johannes, or John; in English the name takes many forms, among them Joan, Jean, Joanne or Jane. Jehanne was often (and eventually always) written as Jeanne, which was how the name was and is pronounced (the *h* being silent). "In my country," she said, referring to her region, "people called me Jeannette [the affectionate diminutive for Jeanne], but they called me Jeanne when I came into France," which meant, at the time, the central part of the kingdom, where the royal court could be found and the monarch resided.

As for her established name in history, chroniclers and poets of her time (and she herself) never referred to "Joan of Arc." The appellation "Johanna Darc" was first used twenty-five years after her death, at the trial striking down the validity of the court that sentenced and condemned her. The first accounts in English simply translated what was considered to be her father's *nom d'origine*, and so she was identified as Joan of Arc. The use of surnames was unusual at the time, but had she assumed or been given one, it would very likely have been, as was the custom, her mother's, Romée. For her part, things were much simpler: Joan referred to herself as simply "the Maid."

IT HAS BEEN customary to fix Joan's birth in 1411 or 1412. Not long before her death in 1431 she was asked her age: "Nineteen or thereabouts," she replied, which was a customary formula: Latin court records during the Middle Ages noted a person's age as *vel circiter, vel circa, vel eocirca*—"thereabouts." People had no care for their precise age, nor did they make any effort to establish it. Our modern concern for specifics such as date, place of birth, and legal status was unknown to medieval society. In Joan's time, as one scholar has noted, "Historiographers and

chroniclers were just beginning to record the birth dates of kings and very great noblemen; at the same period, parish registers were beginning to be kept here and there," but this was rare, and most church registers did not start recording data until the late sixteenth century.

As for the month and day of her birth, that was later put at January 6, for symbolic reasons. The Western Christian liturgical calendar marks the Feast of the Epiphany on that date, the revelation to the world of the heavenly kingship of Jesus Christ. It was natural for Joan's partisans to indicate a parallel between that religious feast and her birth, for it was she who eventually arranged for the formal anointing of Charles VII as earthly king.

Until she was twelve or thirteen, there was nothing remarkable about Joan's life. Those who knew her and her family gave sworn testimony years later as to basic facts. Joan's parents, according to a neighboring farmer named Jean Moreau, were "faithful Catholics and hard workers with a good reputation." As Joan herself told her interrogators, so Moreau testified: she was baptized by the local priest, Jean Minet, in the parish church of Saint-Rémy, for whom Domrémy was named. The name Jeanne honored two of her godmothers and five godfathers named Jean.

The title of godmother or godfather, as today, was honorific and indicated a witness to baptism rather than a spiritual teacher; Joan always insisted that her mother was her sole source of religious instruction. On the first day of her trial, Joan said quite plainly that she had learned only from her mother the words of the Lord's Prayer, the Ave Maria and the Credo. "From childhood," Moreau added, "she was raised in the faith and imbued with good morals."

Like almost everyone at the time—except for men with clerical, university or court jobs in sight—Joan was not taught to read or write, and only later could she sign her name to a document. Apart from what she heard in parish sermons, she had no schooling except from her mother, who taught her the domestic arts of spinning and sewing, at which she became quite adept; as Joan told her accusers in 1431, she did not think any woman in Rouen could teach her anything about these crafts. She also helped her father and her siblings take the livestock out to pasture. As for religious education, she would have learned about the sacraments from the village priest, and she knew Bible episodes through sermons at Mass. Regular and frequent churchgoing also provided a kind of religious education through paintings, statues and church windows, whose images told of events in the life of Christ and the saints.

"Sometimes she went off to church when her parents thought she was in the fields," Moreau continued, "and she went to Mass quite often." In her religious exercises she was both exact and faithful, and her piety was marked by a willing spontaneity. As a neighbor called Béatrice Estellin remembered, there were no airs or attitudes in her conduct, nothing of compulsion or trepidation, nothing merely dutiful. Girlhood friends like Hauviette and Mengette remembered Joan as "good and sweet.... She went devotedly to church, but she kept herself busy, did the housework, and watched over her father's flocks." A local plowman named Simonin Musnier had endured a number of childhood illnesses; as he recalled, "When I was sick, Joan came to comfort me." Isabellette d'Epina added that Joan "willingly gave money to the poor and welcomed them [to the family house]. She preferred to sleep under the mantel so that the poor could have her bed."

As for this evident piety, it was not so rare at a time when faith and its practice were mainstream aspects of medieval life; indeed, to be a European meant to be a citizen of both the temporal and spiritual realms comprising Christendom. The intellectual notions of agnosticism or atheism did not

exist; it was universally accepted that the world belonged to God and was permeated with His presence. Hence the language of faith was like a common country in which all people lived, and this gave them a certain stability and social cohesion, whatever the state of the region or the institutional Church. Joan was diligent regarding prayer and worship, but she had no connection to monasteries or convents, and apparently she never considered becoming a nun.

Until she was about thirteen, there was very little to distinguish her from her peers or her siblings. She was raised, as the saying went, between home and the fields: she spun and sewed; she helped with household tasks; she took her turn guarding her father's flocks and assisted with gardening. She played games with her friends, and she sang and danced in the fields and around festival trees, frequently decorated for religious feasts.

BUT LIFE WAS not usually predictable or secure. The open hostilities of the Hundred Years' War between England and France defined life for everyone. The tensions and clashes, the battles and quarrels, the negotiations, truces and betrayals had always simmered and once again roiled violently and more widely when Joan was a child. There was also civil war, for France was not yet a unified nation but rather a shifting political entity composed of a number of small realms, duchies, counties and petty states.

At the core of the Hundred Years' War lay a long conflict over the relationship between the closely related dynasties of England and France; also at stake was the uncertain rapport between France and its essentially independent feudal princes, the powerful dukes of Aquitaine and Burgundy. Inconveniently, the Duke of Aquitaine was also the king of England, while the Duke of Burgundy controlled that region as well as Flanders, portions of the Low Countries, and areas along the German border.

The war began over the matter of succession to the French throne. In 1328 Charles IV of France, last of the three sons of Philip IV, died without a male heir. The crown was then claimed by two cousins: Philip of Valois, Philip IV's nephew; and by King Edward III of England, Philip IV's grandson by his daughter. But the Valois court invoked the Salic law, which banned royal birthright through the female line. Legal as well as military courts on both sides accumulated arguments in favor of Philip or Edward, but a French high court decided in favor of the Valois line and rejected the claim of the Plantagenet dynasty.

For King Edward, France was not merely a symbolic hereditary ornament for England; it was the wealthiest and most heavily populated country in Christendom. His goal was, therefore, to make the English monarch ruler of both France and England, thereby expanding and confirming bonds that had existed since the Battle of Hastings and continued through Henry II's marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine, which for a time had brought most of southwest France under English rule. And so, as the new Valois dynasty surely expected, Edward did not abandon his imperial aspirations. In 1337 he sent troops to engage Philip, now King Philip VI, in outright combat. Nothing less than the future of a country was at stake.

For the next twenty-five years, the English were consistently victorious in episodic battles, annexing more and more French territories. Charles V of France recovered much of the land gained by England, but this advantage was subsequently lost after his death in 1380, when feudal rivalries

erupted between factions loyal to the Duke of Burgundy (aligned with England) and the Duke of Orléans (loyal to France).

WHEN JOAN WAS a child, her king was the unfortunate Charles VI; aptly called Charles the Mad, he was occasionally lucid but was mostly a lunatic. With the literal and legal breakdown of the French court and the demoralization of French troops, it was comparatively easy for the English to win complete victories in 1415 and 1417, when Joan was still a child. Their successes gave the Anglo-Burgundian alliance control of the Aquitaine and all France north of the Loire except for a few loyal towns, and Paris fell to the English in 1419. Thus Henry V of England became the single most powerful political and diplomatic authority in Europe.

When Jean, Duke of Burgundy, was assassinated in 1419 the partisans of Charles VI and his son the dauphin or rightful heir, were blamed for the murder. For this reason Jean's son Philip, the new Duke of Burgundy, no longer supported the Valois and gave his allegiance to England. He and those on his side were known as Burgundians, while those loyal to the crown of France were known as the Armagnac party, which took its name from Bernard, count of Armagnac.

That same year Burgundians ravaged Armagnac strongholds and even the modest homes of ordinary pro-Valois citizens. Anticipating possible skirmishes and worse near Domrémy, Joan's father and another farmer pooled their resources in order to use the Château de l'Île, a modest fort on an island in the Meuse, where they planned to house local families and livestock in the event of pitched battle in the village.

In 1420 Philip of Burgundy threw his support behind the Treaty of Troyes, which gave Charles VI's daughter to Henry of England to be his wife; the treaty further stipulated that their heir would be king of the single but twofold realm of England and France. This contract effectively annulled the right of Charles's surviving son—the dauphin, or direct heir to the throne, also called Charles. Among those Burgundians who helped negotiate the treaty to the benefit of the English was a clergyman named Pierre Cauchon, who was rewarded with the bishopric of Beauvais.

Both Henry V and Charles VI died within weeks of one another in 1422, but the war was zealously prosecuted on the English side by Henry's brother, John of Lancaster, the Duke of Bedford who was regent for Henry's son, the infant King Henry VI. Cauchon, all the while, labored on behalf of the English government in France, which was headquartered in Rouen, northwest of Paris in Normandy.

The dauphin was now nominally King Charles VII, but he was uncrowned, and in this state of royal limbo he remained for seven years, in residence at the large castle of Chinon, one hundred fifty miles southwest of Paris. Being uncrowned was not a mere technicality: as long as Charles VII did not travel north to the cathedral of Reims (where French kings had been anointed since 1179), his claim to kingship could be—and was—much contested. At the same time, English forces gained astonishing strength and were prepared to deal once and for all with the dauphin, whose war chest was virtually depleted and whose officers and soldiers were exhausted and ill trained. By 1425 French military discipline was all but nonexistent, and the troops themselves were rapacious and unprincipled: the situation had reached critical mass.

Given these conditions, the Duke of Bedford made elaborate plans for a blockade and occupation of Orléans, a vital commercial town sixty miles south of Paris; that strategy would provide him with access to the dauphin's refuge at Chinon. As this news spread, the complete collapse of France seemed imminent.

DOMRÉMY, UNDER THE jurisdiction of the military governor at nearby Vaucouleurs, supported the Valois dynasty of France and was thus staunchly Armagnac, but just across the Meuse—little more than a brook in the countryside—lay the village of Maxey, ardently Burgundian. The larger engagements of the war often had their complement in the petty fights and rivalries of children who were neighbors.

As to Joan's knowledge of the political and military situation, nothing can be said with certainty. She may have learned something from conversations between her parents and among villagers, but what detail was available is impossible to know. The main issue, however, was clear to everyone: there had been a long and bitter struggle to determine if the English and their Burgundian allies would set the crown of France on the offspring of Henry V, or if the partisans of the Valois would emerge triumphant and France would survive. Just when international consciousness was being seeded all over Europe, the existence of France itself was threatened. Precisely at this time, the ordinariness of Joan's life was forever altered.

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