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Larissa Juliet Taylor, *The Virgin Warrior: The Life and Death of Joan of Arc*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009. 280 pp. \$21.90 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978 0 300 11458 4.

Review by Anne Curry, University of Southampton.

Is there anything new to say about Joan of Arc? Across the world today, she is probably the best known female figure of the middle ages. She has been the subject of many scholarly and popular works since the late nineteenth century, stimulated by the preparatory stages of her canonisation which was finally achieved in 1920. But interest in her is much older than that. The excellent study by Deborah Fraoli has demonstrated how much was written about Joan in her lifetime and shortly afterwards.[1] We also have records of the trial of condemnation in 1431 surviving as minutes in French and as a Latin translation and compilation made shortly after her death. In these records Joan's own words are recorded. The *procès en nullité*, often called the Rehabilitation, also generated copious materials both in its preparation and its procedure. All these records have been edited. Most are translated into English and are easily accessible.

There is a lot out there already. Yet it is the very copiousness of contemporary and later materials on Joan, as well as her standing as a Catholic saint, which makes it difficult for historians to study her. She has been invented and reinvented across the centuries in a multiplicity of genres, and remains both controversial and enigmatic. There is, as Hobbins (the translator and editor of a recent English version of the French minute of the trial of condemnation)[2] has noted "no standard critical biography of Joan of Arc." The work of Regine Pernoud went some way towards this but was much influenced by the religious and social mores of France in the early and mid-twentieth century. The opening sentence of Professor Taylor's acknowledgments sets out her intentions. "I came to the study of Joan late, without the fascination or adoration so many authors mention." Her overriding aim is to consider Joan as a historical figure but she is fully aware of the complexities "that are too often masked by the desires of screenwriters and biographers to dramatize the story." In this task she thanks her students for the inspiration they have given her. This is an element of our research which we often forget and yet I would agree that they often ask the telling question that can make us rethink something we thought we had already cracked.

The result is an attractively written, interesting and eminently readable book. Everything is clearly laid out with useful appendices on the sources and key players mentioned in the text. It begins with a sound premise – that we should compare Joan's testimony with that of the proceedings of 1450–6. This works well for the pre-mission sections in particular. Despite the fact that her fellow villagers who gave testimony in the 1450s were quizzed through a template, they provided incidental comments which were sometimes contradictory and which did not always prove wholly sycophantic towards Joan. Taylor also shows that Joan herself was inconsistent on her voices, and improved on her stories, for instance in the relatively late mention by her at her trial of her saints.

The main shortcoming of the book is that it fails to situate Joan in the historical context in which she operated. The historical background offered is rather unsophisticated. To understand Joan we need to understand those who accepted, exploited, condemned and "redeemed" her. She did not operate alone yet this approach places her centre stage and makes it feel as though she was the single most important player in absolutely every respect.

This is largely due to the sources of the trials on which Taylor bases her biography. The Rehabilitation focused solely on Joan, and everyone who gave testimony was asked to do precisely that. As a result there is an inbuilt heightening of her importance and a diminishing of everyone else's, including the military leaders whose role was surely paramount in the French revival. There is not even evidence that Joan was present at the battle of Patay, for instance (and certainly not from her own testimony).

Explaining why Joan was taken up by political leaders is always problematic. Here we need also to understand for the sake of context the religiosity of the period, not least belief in female visionaries, as well as a competitive element of those trying to influence affairs by claiming divine inspiration. More attention might have been paid by Taylor to what was happening in French politics and society before Joan went to Chinon, and whether it was solely her headstrong qualities which took her there. Taylor and I share the view that once Charles had decided to use her she had to be given some basic military training to make her credible as a virgin warrior. I would suggest, however, that does serve to diminish her agency and emphasise how she was controlled by others. In the immediate aftermath of the disasters of the summer of 1429 the English spoke of Brother Richard with as much concern as they did about Joan. In fact, what is striking is how little mention there is in English sources about Joan. Bedford may have come to recognize the significance of Orleans (p. 73) but the comments he made date to 1434 (a point overlooked by Taylor) and are centred on those who had accepted the treaty of Troyes but had broken their oath. Joan is not the sole reason in his mind why the English cause had foundered.

We can be certain that once Charles was crowned king at the traditional crowning place of Reims on 16 July 1429 the tide had turned in favour of the French. We can also be certain that this was a turning point in Joan's fortunes since Charles was now God's chosen one. Taylor assumes that it was Joan who chose to write to the duke of Burgundy. In fact there is evidence that the approach was official royal policy and that Joan was used as before (as in the letter to the English) to add a religious dimension. The whole issue of Joan's independence of action needs very careful assessment against what other contemporary sources tell us if she is to be considered as "a historical figure." In this respect it is annoying that Taylor does not cite non-trial sources directly but through the compilation drawn up by Ayroles in the nineteenth century. His volumes are available on-line through Google books but we might have expected standard critical editions to have been used, not least because all other modern scholarly writers do so.

The various stages of Joan's career are well elucidated by Taylor but, in common with Pernoud, she becomes increasingly enthralled with her subject as the book proceeds. The critical eye of the first few chapters disappears. Joan even starts to have sympathisers amongst the Dominicans. There is little firm evidence for this (we have to be exceptionally careful of the evidence of the clergy in the Rehabilitation since their reputation was at stake as much as Joan's). The fact that Joan admitted her faults and placed herself in the hands of the Church is most oddly handled by Taylor. Are we seriously to believe that the previously intelligent and clever Joan was, in her act of recantation in the churchyard of Saint-Ouen 24 May, simply showing herself off to the people of Rouen and intending to show up her judges? This was an exceptionally serious moment for her faith. This was no joke. To write that "she did not grasp the fact that she had just signed her death sentence" is wholly misleading. Joan had accepted the church's authority, willingly, since she was intelligent and pious enough to know that was the duty of a Christian. Oddly, Taylor spends very little time discussing her relapse but claims that "one thing alone is certain. The bundle of clothes was put in her cell deliberately."

But whether this is so or not, it was Joan who *chose* to go against the church by putting them on. She did not *have* to put the clothes on. She had accepted the renunciation of wearing men's clothes in the ceremony on 24 May. According to the trial record when asked why she had done so, she said that "she had taken them of her own will, without being forced, and that she preferred these clothes to women's" (Hobbins, p. 196). She deliberately forced the

Church to find her guilty and to hand her over to the civil authorities. In this context she was a conscious virgin martyr yet Taylor is reluctant to put forward that conclusion, suggesting instead that “back in her cell, intimidated and fearing physical assault, she jumped at the chance to go back to the way things had been even if it meant certain death” (p. 162). Surely this is not the intelligent, strong, articulate and inspirational teenager with a strong religious faith and sense of mission we have met in the rest of the book? Taylor is not the first to want the English to have tricked Joan and to insist that she was a victim of their cruelty and not of the intolerance of the Church or of her own presumption. It was the impression that those involved in the *procès en nullité* wanted to give too, since no one wanted to be associated with the English occupation. If the trial of condemnation was politicised, that of the rehabilitation was doubly so. That is why writing a biography of Joan is so challenging and perhaps at the end of the day impossible.

NOTES

[1] *Joan of Arc. The Early Debate*, (Aldershot: The Boydell Press, 2000).

[2] *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), trans. and intro., Daniel Hobbins, p. 241.

Anne Curry
University of Southampton
A.E.Curry@soton.ac.uk

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