

She who feared nothing

by [Sally Cunneen](#) in the [May 24, 2000](#) issue

Joan of Arc, by Mary Gordon

The choice of Mary Gordon to tell the story of the 15th-century soldier-saint Joan of Arc for its Penguin Lives series was an editorial inspiration. This accomplished novelist has the scholarly expertise, psychological sympathy and imaginative skill to make the narrative lively and credible. Though the series' brevity forces Gordon to select both scenes and characters economically, she never oversimplifies. She makes clear that this cocky, pure, maddening, unwise girl forgot herself in a cause greater than herself. Joan was talky and self-contradictory. To describe Joan in words is an impossible project, sure to be partial, sure to fail in some way. One of Gordon's strengths is that she recognizes this.

Gordon calls her work a "biographical meditation," a series of snapshots. Within that framework she provides a first-rate historical narrative: general background first, important scenes and characters in Joan's short public life next. It is astonishing to realize how young the maid of Orleans was--an illiterate peasant girl of 17 when she left her village home at Domremy to ask the local lord for armor and men. Only two years later, after an incredible series of accomplishments, she was burned at the stake in Rouen when an ecclesiastical court declared her a heretic.

Gordon conjures up the mind-set of the period in a way that makes this legendary tale credible to us today. The late medieval church was in great need of reform. Joan's death occurred not long after the burning of Jon Hus and was in many ways a mirror image of his. The disorder of the Hundred Years War had encouraged a widespread prophecy that a virgin would come to save France during this time of uncertain leadership. Religious women then had no public voice except as prophets. Joan's bold predictions as well as her virginity encouraged both clergy and the people to believe that she was the fulfillment of this promise.

Gordon brings us into the tale by asking and answering questions we might all raise. Why, for instance, would Joan fight the Burgundians, who were, after all, also French? Because they were allied to the English and had devastated her village. Why were Michael, Catherine and Margaret the saints to advise her--first to protect her virginity and then, after the assault by the Burgundians, to crown the Dauphin and chase the English out of France? Because they were active saints, all pictured with swords.

We follow Joan through her breathtaking series of victories and losses, her capture, trial and degrading death. Gordon's snapshots of the maid of Orleans reveal not only her physical strength, bravery and dedication, but also her incredible lack of prudence. When a high-ranking clerical group interrogated her to determine if the Dauphin should give her an army, they asked her if she believed in God. "'Yes, better than you,' she replied."

Though she was highly successful in her early military endeavors, Joan was no tactician, and her amateur status eventually did her in. She understood, however, the power of symbolism and why the king she crowned had to be anointed with holy oils. To hear her clear voice--in the widely available transcript of her trial for heresy--is to be astonished at the freshness, vitality and down-to-earth simplicity of her language. When asked if she was in the state of grace she replied, "If I am not, may God put me there; if I am, may he keep me there." Alone among the distinguished clerics appointed by the University of Paris to try her, she expressed believable human feeling, natural good sense and simple piety.

Her inquisitors considered her cross-dressing a sign of idolatry. It is hard to understand why they should insist she wear women's clothes in a prison where she was chained to the bed and where such clothes would have made it easier for her English guards to rape her. Yet her inquisitors denied her the Eucharist as long as she refused woman's dress. Joan's rehabilitation came 25 years after her death, in a process equally tainted by political considerations. That she was dead made it safe to champion her. None of those who pushed for the overthrow of her original trial had offered to ransom the live girl from prison.

The book includes a valuable review of some of the most famous writing about Joan, from Shakespeare's put-down to George Bernard Shaw's raves. In none of these, nor in any of the movies about her, is the complexity of this peasant-saint fully captured, though we gain valuable insights from the best, such as Carl Dreyer's silent classic, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*.

Most intriguing are the author's speculations as to why Joan was finally canonized in 1920. By then, it seems, the church needed a loyal daughter as a model for its rapidly secularizing flock. What a great irony, Gordon says, that this woman, who insisted upon the primacy of her individual experience and has therefore been called by some the first Protestant, would be seen as the curb by which the faithful could be brought to heel.

Why does Joan seem a saint to many of us? She bravely followed the will of God as she understood it, Gordon asserts, without regard for fame or gain, "because not to do so would be a betrayal of everything sacred and precious. . . . She stands in our imagination for the single-minded triumph of the she--and it must be a she--who feared nothing, knew herself right and fully able and the chosen of the Lord."

If the book does not paint a fully coherent portrait of its subject, it is because Joan is too large, elusive and contradictory to be contained in any single take. But Gordon's biographical meditation is a readable and substantive introduction to the life and meaning of this medieval heroine.