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### Joan of Arc: Inspired or Insane?

Joan of Arc is a controversial figure who has remained largely undefined regarding the most important aspect of her life: her faith in the voices and visions she heard and saw. Scholars have debated Joan's mental instability or divine inspiration since before her death. Despite this, a clear explanation of her voices and visions has never been obtained, and the question of what caused them and if Joan was truly a messenger of God remains an unsolved and somewhat convoluted mystery that is shrouded in religious superstition, doubt, and misunderstanding. Scientific inquiry has contributed to this conundrum significantly, and explaining Joan's revelations using different kinds of epilepsy is considered a standard and completely unobjectionable answer for many. Nonetheless, there are flaws in this model that are often not discussed or understood. Similarly, considering Joan divinely inspired is regularly dismissed, even though there is significant evidence to back this assertion. The claims of both mental affliction and of divine inspiration are not fully understood by many, as there are sides to each that remain unexamined; still, neither opinion is conclusive and, moreover, never will be.

Before actually examining the claims scientists make in order to prove that Joan had epilepsy, it is important to understand what epilepsy is. Rebecca Gilbertson, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at Lycoming College, explains that epilepsy is a mental disease occurring with seizures and that epileptic seizures are caused by an "electrical

storm in the brain” when the neurons in the brain all move in symmetry, triggering seizures (Gilbertson). Epilepsy “is associated with a poor quality of life” (Langfitt 101). Langfitt explains that this is the case because epileptics experience “fear of physical injuries or social embarrassment [due to the appearance of seizures], [and] cognitive impairment (due to underlying brain dysfunction and/or anti-convulsant medication). [...] Anxiety, depression, anger, low self-esteem, social isolation and withdrawal, familial maladjustment, low marriage rates and under-employment are common” (101). Although many of these issues pertain to recent times and problems, the underlying themes would still be valid for someone in Joan’s position and could still cause social issues. However, these issues would obviously be expressed and dealt with differently; medication, for example, would be absent. Clearly, epilepsy is more than simply hallucinating or creating stories – it has long-lasting effects on the psyche and physical body of the person experiencing the disease that can be debilitating and difficult to overcome. The analysis of just how closely Joan’s behavior adhered to this outline is pivotal in understanding Joan’s mental instability or soundness.

In order to follow the reasoning of scientists that argue for Joan’s mental instability, it is imperative that a brief overview of Joan’s voices, visions, and actions are outlined. Joan grew up in the small town of Domremy in France, where she had a normal childhood; the only factor that could possibly have distinguished her was that she was more pious than most (d’Orsi and Tinuper 153; Foote-Smithe and Bayne 810). At the age of thirteen, Joan heard a voice that she attributed to God which urged her to raise the siege of Orleans (Barrett 157). She continued to hear these voices with varying frequencies and for differing lengths of time until her death. These voices, she insisted, guided her and gave her the authority to lead the French army against the English and eventually crown the Dauphin, making him King of France (Taylor xi). The

details that are known about Joan's life come directly from the trial manuscripts orchestrated by her arch-enemies, the English, who captured her as a prisoner-of-war, rigged an extremely biased trial, and eventually executed her for heresy at the age of eighteen or nineteen. Years later, however, she was officially pardoned and canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church (d'Orsi and Tinuper 153). The debate about the origin of her voices – demonic, divine, or insane – has been ongoing since Joan first began her mission.

A main argument that scientists use to pinpoint Joan of Arc as epileptic is that certain patterns occurred when Joan heard her voices and saw her visions. Joan's words, recorded in her trial manuscript, explain: "she had heard it [the voice] three times: once in the morning, once at vespers, and once when the Ave Maria was rung in the evening" (Barrett 49). Matins, Vespers, and the Ave Maria are all times of prayer throughout the day when church bells would ring. Furthermore, Joan claimed that "she seldom heard it [the voices] without a light. [...] generally there was a great light" (Barrett 156). This illumination is a standard happening for those who have certain kinds of epilepsy (Gilbertson). From these sources, Foote-Smith and Bayne contend that Joan may have had musicogenic epilepsy, "a form of reflex epilepsy in which seizures are precipitated [brought about] by specific stereotyped sensory stimulus" (811). Church bells, a meaningful part of Joan's life and a common sound across France, may have triggered seizures (Foote-Smith and Bayne 811; d'Orsi and Tinuper 155) in which Joan had 'visions from God.' Similarly, d'Orsi and Tinuper claim Joan may have suffered from IPEAF, a form of epilepsy different from ecstatic epilepsy, as her religious experience, though extraordinary, was marked more by regularity than by sudden spells of blissful illumination, as would characterize ecstatic auras (155). Gilbertson suggests yet another type of epilepsy, called temporal lobe epilepsy, which is associated with more reports of paranormal experiences than other kinds of epilepsy.

(Gilbertson). Although these scientists believe Joan had different kinds of epilepsy, their basic hypotheses and assumptions are very similar. Through scrutinizing Joan's life and trial, scientists have found parallels to epileptic symptoms and behavior in Joan's life.

Although this case seems sound, a major part of the hypothesis (seizures being caused by bells) is problematic. Ringing church bells were such a common occurrence that if they were epileptic triggers, Joan would be seeing visions several times a day every day. Although Gilbertson does explain that seizures cannot be predicted one hundred percent of the time even if triggers are present, the presence of triggers on such a regular basis would surely cause routine epileptic seizures. As Joan herself said, "the voice told her, two or three times a week" (Barrett 156) and "there is not a day when she does not hear this voice" (Barrett 46). Clearly, she heard the voices with varying frequencies during different periods in her life, not at a level consistent with the ringing of bells. Moreover, Joan admitted that "if she was in a wood she heard the voices well" (Barrett 156) and that the noise of her prison and trial often drowned out the voices (Taylor ix). If church bells were the stimulus causing Joan's visions, they would be seriously impeded by either of these places, making the fact that Joan heard her voices in both areas a strange occurrence. Church bells did ring often, but the very regularity of their sound makes their use as a stimulus for Joan's visions inapplicable since Joan's visions did not occur with the same regularity.

Gilbertson explains a far more fundamental issue with the church bells being used as triggers. Triggers, as she stated, are typically "startling," and the "ringing of a bell is not startling enough to trigger a seizure." Examples she offered of other triggers include strobe lights, fireworks, and loud noises. Obviously, this is a major issue that undermines the entire argument of many scientists. Furthermore, Gilbertson attests that seizures can exist without physical

manifestation (called partial seizures) but they only last momentarily and are brief lapses. Conversely, “Her [Joan’s] seizures were not partial – they would be noticeable [because they lasted for an extended period of time]” (Gilbertson). Joan was constantly surrounded by people once her mission began; not only would the bells cause constant seizures (if they were a trigger), but such seizures would be clear to others. The lack of documentation regarding these issues, therefore, is surprising.

Another issue of the epileptic hypothesis involves the guidance Joan’s voices offered. Foote-Smith and Bayne suggest that Joan “may have been indulging in the behavior of some persons with reflex epilepsy to self-stimulate her own pleasurable desires” because of her regular church attendance, in which the bells would ring (811). Although this seems plausible, it is important to scrutinize the nature of Joan’s voices. Although they were often comforting or pleasurable, the voices did not always adhere to this criterion; in fact, they sometimes commanded her to do things that she did not want to do (Barrett 43). Although Joan revered her voices and loved their presence (Barrett 157-58), she did occasionally protest their commands on the grounds of her inability; when the voices first ordered her to begin her mission, she tried to refuse it, saying, “that she was a poor maid, knowing nothing of riding or fighting.” (Barrett 43). Why would Joan self-stimulate hearing the voices if she knew that they could demand action she may not be comfortable with? Still, Gilbertson does point out that the type of direction Joan received is characteristic of temporal lobe epileptics. Joan’s voices and visions did not necessarily tell her what she wanted to hear; depending on the kind of epilepsy being proposed, this could be a significant factor.

The light that Joan often associated with her voices can also present unique issues. Joan explained that “she seldom heard it [the voice] without a light.” (Barrett 156). By definition,

‘seldom’ implies that there were times when Joan heard the voice *without* any light. For temporal lobe epileptics, either kind of vision or a combination of the two is not an uncommon occurrence; for other kinds of epilepsy, however, auditory and visual stimulus occurring together (or at all) is unusual (Gilbertson). Depending on the kind of epilepsy being suggested, the presence or absence of light (visual stimulus) can provide a variable that scientists fail to address. Although using certain phrases from Joan’s trial can make it seem as though Joan followed a known pattern of epilepsy, such careful phrasing leaves some of the more questionable aspects of the theory carefully unmentioned.

Finally, Foote-Smith and Bayne compiled a list of traits that epileptic patients with symptoms similar to Joan sometimes exhibit (812-14). The categories listed and the evidences supplied are lacking, although they seem substantial at first glance. “Emotionality” and “elation, euphoria” are used to illustrate Joan’s reactions to her voices and also her exhilaration during her mission as proof of epileptic tendencies (812-13). Joan’s ‘extreme’ reactions to her voices were not extreme at all when put into context – her happiness in their presence makes sense if they were actually heavenly apparitions. Real manifestations of extreme religiosity (such as fasting too strictly or causing bodily harm to self) were absent in Joan. Similarly, the enthusiasm she exhibited during her campaign is not unusual. Any soldier can attest that the adrenaline rush caused by an event as climactic as a battle can inspire great courage and bravery. Contradictorily, Foote-Smith and Bayne also list “Humorlessness, sobriety” (813) as a trait – just after they have finished expounding on Joan’s unbridled fervor! Another claim is “altered sexual interest,” citing Joan’s chastity, male attire, and repulsion of men’s attentions (Foote-Smith and Bayne 813). When understood in the context of the time-period that Joan lived in, this claim becomes ludicrous. Joan’s aversion to sexual interests and obsession with virginity were expressions of

the seriousness of her mission. Consecrating oneself to God and denying carnal pleasures through vowing to remain virginal was a common theme in Joan's era. The men in her company would have understood her motive and, consequently, not necessarily have seen Joan as sexually available, making their comments about the absence of sexual feelings they had toward her (Foote-Smith and Bayne 813) plausible. Although this represents only about half of the claims made, it is clear that evidence was manipulated in order to fit the criteria needed to characterize Joan as epileptic.

There are significant issues with the epileptic theory that are usually unmentioned, although many would claim that there are at least as many concerns with the other suggestion for Joan's revelations: divine inspiration. Admittedly, proving Joan's divine inspiration would require proving the existence of the God that inspired her. To attempt this is beyond the scope of this paper and may be impossible, as God Himself (presumably) cannot be tangibly observed. With the limitations of this theory understood, it is important to note that there are many legitimate points that could pinpoint Joan as a divine messenger. Although most assume that there is little proof for such a statement, there is evidence available that is just as thought-provoking and plausible as the proof for the epileptic theory appears to be at first glance.

Before looking at the proofs for Joan's divine inspiration, it is necessary to explain some of the basic thought processes behind defining such messengers. George Adams, a Religion professor at Lycoming College specializing in World Religions, explained that the interpretation of religious experience is determined by environment and culture and depends on "your concept of a higher being" (Adams). As an analogy, he described the ocean as the vast spiritual world that humanity cannot fully comprehend in its entirety. People sailing on it in boats would land on different parts of the shore, but since the people could see only a limited view, this would affect

their perception greatly and create unique views of the ocean (God) itself (Adams). Defining criteria that could encompass all of religious experience and making a checklist of what constitutes a true divine messenger is clearly quite difficult to define if people can only see a part of the entire system! Obviously, specific religious systems will have their own criterion for judging spirituality; for instance, as Adams explains, a Christian priest would follow the outline in the Bible. As Adams states, however, “from a scholarly point of view, there is really no way to make a distinction [between madness or inspiration] other than by what kinds of actions they produce” (Adams). Although Adams acknowledges that this alludes to biblical texts, Berman also agrees that the “their fruits” is the best way to judge the possibility of divine inspiration (365). Spirituality is not ignored by secular scholars; rather, the difficulty in its definition prevents it from being fully comprehended.

Jean Gerson, a contemporary of Joan of Arc, was a Catholic theologian whose “writings on the subject [of spiritual discernment] are not only the most prolix but also the most influential” (Elliott 265). He is of special interest in Joan’s case because he wrote the “recommendation of the *Poitiers Conclusions* that the king believe Joan [...]” (Fraoli 152), despite the fact that he was very condemning toward other female mystics during the same time period (Fraoli 147-59; Elliott 264-84). Coming from such an influential individual, this was high praise indeed! Although the critics are not agreed on whether or not Gerson supported women or demeaned them (Elliott 264-84; Fraoli 149), the fact remains that his support of Joan was extraordinary and adds much credence to her case; his guidelines for true divine inspiration are strict and exacting, and he showed throughout his writing that he was unafraid to apply them to those he was evaluating. His criteria, structured from the Bible, will be scrutinized in order to evaluate Joan’s spirituality.



Medieval scholars were not without understanding of the issues behind spiritual enlightenment. Jean Gerson considered the fact that women who claimed to be mystics could have been epileptic or otherwise mentally ill (Elliott 269). Joan's assessors at her trial would have been sure to rule such a factor out in their final decision. In fact, Berman explains that the Medieval period included a "puzzling category [in mental illness], which became largely impossible after the Enlightenment, of non-pathological, good madness" (368). In other words, learned men from this period included a 'gray area' in mental illness encompassing spirituality that modern doctors do not view as acceptable, as our understanding has degenerated to the black-and-white category of insane or not insane. Berman goes even further and states that "deciding whether a putative patient is mad or divinely inspired is not something that can be done by manual, or by objective criteria [...] There is a subjective element" (367). Adams, in answering whether or not spirituality is beyond the concept of scientific or normal experience, agrees that spirituality "cannot be judged by scientific standards because it is all internal – there is no public experience or data." Spirituality, beyond being something completely private, is also too broad to understand fully. Wrestling with the definition of what constitutes a mentally insane individual and what encompasses a divinely inspired individual is not new, and the only true consensus maintained is that spirituality must be judged, but by a criteria different from objective scientific standards.

Although establishing generic criteria to judge spirituality is difficult to formulate, there are three basic points – rationality, motives, and consistency – that both secular scholars and biblical scholars (like Gerson) agree that truly inspired people will exhibit, the first of which is rationality. As Adams explained: "Do they [divinely inspired individuals] act psychotic? Or do they act in a logical, purposeful way in normal circumstances?" (Adams). Gerson, too, calls for

humility, which produces the lack of extreme religiosity that leads to irrational behavior such as unnatural eating habits or causing oneself personal injury (McGuire 339-44). Insane people will act as such when they are not receiving ‘revelations.’ Truly inspired individuals, however, are marked not by their illogical behavior but rather by their rationality. Joan exemplified this throughout her short life; even Foote-Smith and Bayne, advocates of the epilepsy theory, concur: “her testimony was marked by caution, modesty, and clarity of thought” (810). Joan’s unusually coherent and consistent remarks at her trial are not the only marks of her sanity. She also led an entire army and convinced already established and decorated military leaders to follow her (DeVries 111-22), demonstrating her lucidity and competence. Clearly, Joan exemplified rationality when not having supernatural experiences.

Motives, the second basic point, are important in establishing true spirituality, as the prospect of personal benefit could cause a person to simulate divine inspiration. Adams uses Moses, Abraham, and Muhammed as examples – they all did not seek revelations, and the commands given to them were often things that “on their own, they would not have chosen to do.” Throughout Gerson’s *On Distinguishing True from False Revelations*, he expounds upon the fact that a truly inspired individual will not be receiving revelations in order to increase his own standing or status; rather, the sole focus should be on giving glory to God (McGuire 334-64): “It must be seen whether it [the spirituality being questioned] has the weight of humility without the vanity of curiosity and pride” (McGuire 363). Curiosity and pride can both result in self-centered reasons for continuing to receive ‘divine’ revelations. Joan reacted in a typical manner when her voices gave her the instructions for the first step of her mission. “Jeanne answered that she was a poor maid, knowing nothing of riding or fighting” (Barrett 43). Instead of accepting the command and feeling special for being chosen, Joan felt unworthy and even

tried to escape her mission. This humility persisted throughout her life and campaign; although there were ample opportunities for Joan to become proud and haughty of her rapidly growing status, she was exemplary in that “no one else approaches her conjunction of total devotion to God” (Tavard 143). Joan had very little reason to pretend to hear voices from God; as it was, her revelations cost her life, her family, and her virtue (before her canonization). Joan demonstrates a sincere devotion to God that was without outside motives, a necessary aspect of true spirituality.

The final point that both secular and biblical scholars agree mark a truly inspired individual is that of consistency; as Adams states, “Consistency in message” is key (Adams). Gerson also states that “holy angels and true prophets do not preach or order anything that is contrary to good morals or sincere faith” (McGuire 350). It is at this point that secular and biblical scholars disagree. Gerson claims that someone truly inspired will not advocate anything that contradicts the already established knowledge of God; Adams, however, suggests that a new truth could be postulated. Either way, both theologians agree that consistency in whatever the message is must be maintained – an impure message sends a clear signal of mental delusion. As Foote-Smith and Bayne state, the “clarity of her [Joan’s] self-defense and the reasonableness and equanimity in dealing with her contemporaries [at her trial] argue against a psychosis” (812). The unbelievable lucidity and certainty of Joan’s message remains undeniable; even after months of physically and emotionally draining imprisonment (Taylor x), Joan was still able to articulate her thoughts and beliefs clearly. Joan exemplified the three main points (rationality, pure motives, and consistency) deemed necessary by both secular and biblical scholars in order to distinguish her from a truly insane individual.

If Joan was so clearly a sane individual, why did some of the most learned scholars of her time condemn her so vigorously? The answer lies in retaining the status quo already present. As

Adams explained: “[Inspired individuals are] a threat to the power of the church hierarchy. [...] It challenges the notion that the established sacred text is definitive, especially if what is said is different from the religious book” (Adams). Elliott concurs, explaining that the mere fact that Joan was a woman and was instructing men would cause great consternation (264-84). Furthermore, most of the common people were illiterate; as Adams further clarified, they were therefore more receptive to people like Joan, as they “were not locked into the written text” (Adams). Joan’s popularity among common people, however, further undermined the monopoly the church held on religious thinking, taking away more of their power. Joan’s trial was carefully constructed to find her guilty, and the reasons were not so much concerned with her status as divinely inspired as much as caused by the social issues that would have resulted by her acceptance.

Joan of Arc is a confusing but fascinating person whose life is the stuff of legends. Because of her incredible accomplishments, she has been carefully scrutinized and analyzed in an effort to determine if her claims of being divinely inspired were true or caused by some sort of mental instability. Both claims have evidence backing them, but each claim also has a side that is often carefully unmentioned. Although the epileptic theory is frequently touted as sound, irrefutable science, there are some significant issues with the scientific claims involved. At the same time, Joan’s divine spirituality is regularly refuted without a real consideration of the proofs available for such a position, of which there are many. If Joan was not divine, the only other plausible explanation for her visions and voices is a mental condition, of which epilepsy is most illustrative of her symptoms. A definitive answer as to the origin of Joan’s voices and visions can never be obtained, as a claim of divine spirituality requires faith in a spiritual system, whereas belief in the epileptic theory requires an equal amount of faith in the scientific method.

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