

## JOAN OF ARC: THE SHAMAN OF CATHOLIC FRANCE

Jarred James Breaux

In a time when men and the church ruled over Europe, there was one woman who was able to rise above all others and saved her country from the English. She was Joan of Arc. Not only did she fight in battle alongside men, she also claimed that she spoke to St. Margaret, St. Catherine, and St. Michael and they all told her to defend her country and showed her how. The Catholic Church viewed this as a heresy and she was tried and convicted by an ecclesiastical court. She was burned at the stake, like many other "witches" in that day.<sup>1</sup>

Joan of Arc possesses many shamanistic qualities that may not be apparent at first glance. First, and probably most importantly, she was connected to the spiritual world. She was able to transverse the axis mundi and speak to the angels of God directly. From an early age she began to experience visions of the saints. She claimed she was visited by St. Margaret, St. Catherine, and St. Michael. Anne Llewellyn Barstow describes Joan of Arc as "one, that is, who crossed the barrier between this world and the realm of the spirits to become the source of healing strength and saving knowledge, a magical leader in her people's dark hour." While she was not a healer in the traditional sense, she definitely raised patriotism in France. She also cross-dressed in the field and in prison, not only because she took on the role of a man as a warrior but also because it supposedly preserved her chastity. Joan of Arc is also reported to have had psychic abilities, since she knew of the fall of the French at the Battle of the Herrings immediately after the event occurred and long before news traveled to her area.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Joan of Arc: Heretic, Mystic, Shaman* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 44; and Frances Gies, *Joan of Arc: The Legend and the Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 1-5.

<sup>2</sup> Barstow, *Joan or Arc: Heretic, Mystic, Shaman*, 45-47.

Joan of Arc went through an initiation process very similar to that of a shaman. Often what we see with a shaman is an act of being chosen, either by sickness, heredity, or by some divine power around the age of puberty. At the age of thirteen, Joan began receiving messages from the saints. Another defining characteristic of a shaman is the adaptation of his or her identity to fit the role of the shaman. A shaman may exile himself or herself from the community and go on some type of journey to undergo this change. We see this same behavior Joan when she decides to leave home. At the age of seventeen, Joan had convinced Durand Laxart, her cousin, to take her with him to Vaucouleurs. She used a lie that she told her father to convince him to let her go. Then, she convinced Robert de Baudricourt and Jean de Nouillonpont, high ranking military men in Vaucouleurs, that her visions were real. The initiation of the shaman is complete when he or she assumes a new identity and a new name. After she convinced Robert de Baudricourt, she put on traditional male clothing, started wearing armor, cut her hair short, and changed her name to La Pucelle. She chose the name “La Pucelle” because it not only meant “virgin” but it is also a transitional term that referred a female who was no longer a child but not yet a full woman. Basically, she eternally devoted herself to remain in a liminal state.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of this initiation, Joan embarks on a mission of God. In her visions, the saints told Joan to embark on this divine mission to save France. Here you have the instances of Joan having contact with the spiritual world and bringing back divine knowledge to save the war-torn country of France. This is not much different from a shaman who transverses the axis mundi and retrieves information to heal a person who is sick. In this instance, the country is the sick body

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<sup>3</sup> Barston, *Joan of Arc: Heretic, Mystic, Shaman*, 46-48; Daniel Rankin and Claire Quintal, *The First Biography of Joan of Arc* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1964), 17-22; Gies, *Joan of Arc: The Legend*, 9-10, 23-31; and Frances Winwar, *The Saint and the Devil: Joan of Arc and Gilles de Rais* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), 23.

and the English are the foreign agents who have invaded the body.<sup>4</sup>

As she set out on her mission to save the country, she convinced others of her divine mission. One of these people that she convinced was the Count Jean de Dunois. She told him of a vision she had had of King Louis XI and Charlemagne. In the vision they were praying for the victory of the French at this battle. The Count Jean de Dunois rode into battle with her on their first mission. During the fight, the English did not attack obvious weak points in the French army, which allowed her to cross the bridge and enter the city. He wrote that it was obvious she was sent by God. Thus, portraying that Joan of Arc either had the power and strategic intellect to conquer this city or the people around her had so much faith in her and their mission that they were able to push forward no matter what the cost. It is possible that she affected the army on such a deep spiritual level that they were reaffirmed of their goals; thus, boosting their morale to a new high.<sup>5</sup>

There was a French prophecy, which was contributed to Merlin, that a woman would bring France to its knees but a young virgin from the east would save France. Joan, who knew of this prophecy, made subtle hints that she was this virgin. Others often associated her with this same prophecy based on their own experiences. Whether she was that virgin sent by God or not was not the issue, but rather she became a focal point of the greater French community as a symbol of strength and patriotism. This is similar to the spiritual power invested in a shaman of a tribe, who, by the will of the community and his own self-fulfilling prophecies, is able to boost the confidence of either the individual, a family, or the whole community in order to drive out

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<sup>4</sup> Barston, *Joan of Arc: Heretic, Mystic, Shaman*, 47; Rankin and Quintal, *The First Biography*, 21-23; and Gies, *Joan of Arc: The Legend*, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Barston, *Joan of Arc: Heretic, Mystic, Shaman*, 48-49; Rankin and Quintal, *The First Biography*, 24-28; and Gies, *Joan of Arc: The Legend*, 32-37. Count Jean de Dunois is also known as the Bastard of Orléans.

bad spirits.<sup>6</sup>

During the Joan's trial, there was mention of a birch tree near her home as a child in the town of Domremy. Some call it the Fairy Tree while others call it the Ladies' Tree. According to the towns people, the children of the community and their mothers would celebrate the spring and summer festivals under this tree. Some of the older folk, who still followed the older pagan religions, reported that they would see fairies at this tree. However, Joan, who was careful not to testify against herself during her trial, made it clear that she had heard the stories about the fairies but had never saw one herself. A townsman named Jean Morel stated that the fairies had long since gone, ever since they started to preach the gospel of St. John under the tree. Joan supported this claim when she stated that she often went there and hung garlands on the branches in honor of Our Lady of Domremy. Joan also stated that she had engaged in dancing and celebrations around the tree with the other children. A tree such as this one, which is believed to have healing and other spiritual powers, would be a great place to have a spiritual dance. The admission of dancing and celebrating of pagan holidays with locals might lead one to conclude that Joan might have entered an ecstatic state here. The tree, especially a birch tree is a common symbol of the axis mundi, and the fact that there were some sort of celebrations around the tree all contain shamanic elements.<sup>7</sup>

Joan made several prophecies that came true. It is possible that she fabricated these prophecies from knowledge she gained on her travels. For instance, she claimed to have a vision of the archangel St. Michael. In the vision he took her to the chambers of King Charles VII. The

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<sup>6</sup> Barston, *Joan of Arc: Heretic, Mystic, Shaman*, 47-48; and Gies, *Joan of Arc: The Legend*, 35-36; and Winwar, *The Saint and the Devil*, 26-27.

<sup>7</sup> Barston, *Joan of Arc: Heretic, Mystic, Shaman*, 49-54; Gies, *Joan of Arc: The Legend*, 21-22; and Winwar, *The Saint and the Devil*, 25-26.

archangel then took a golden crown and handed it to the Bishop of Rheims to crown the king. Her vision was confirmed by the people of France since the Bishop of Rheims is the one designated to crown the kings of France. However, this is knowledge that Joan could have obtained from her parish church, which was dedicated to St. Remi, the first Bishop of Rheims. Regardless of whether her vision was a lie or not, Joan managed to make this prophecy, and several others for that matter, real to the French people. This is similar to the way a shaman might pretend to go into the body of sick patient and remove a foreign object; however, that foreign object was being hidden in the hand of the shaman all along. The actual “truth” of the prophecy or the healing is not important in either case. What is important the people witnessing either event believe that a solution has been found and that they can move forward.<sup>8</sup>

Time and time again Joan assured herself and others that she had been chosen and she was on a divine mission. She is quoted as saying: “I fear them not, I have a sure road: if the enemy are on my road, I have God with me, who knows how to prepare the way to the Lord Dauphin. I was born to do this.” In this statement, she adheres to the call of the shaman, who has a divine right to become the shaman. Furthermore, evidence of her miracles before the people of France, such as her clairvoyant abilities, fulfilling the prophecy which she herself had identified with, healed the sick (through prayer and in visions but not by her own hand), and continuously referred to the visions and conversations she had had with the divine, are reassurances of her shamanistic qualities.<sup>9</sup>

It is also noted by Joan that she had her visions when near sacred places, such as the birch tree or in a chapel. She claimed that she could not call upon the spirits in a vision, but rather they

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<sup>8</sup> Barston, *Joan of Arc: Heretic, Mystic, Shaman*, 57-59; and Rankin and Quintal, *The First Biography*, 34-39.

<sup>9</sup> Barston, *Joan of Arc: Heretic, Mystic, Shaman*, 60-61; and Gies, *Joan of Arc: The Legend*, 35

came to her spontaneously. Instead of the beat of a drum, Joan acknowledges that a ringing bell often brought about her visions. These visions alone do not make her a shaman though. When Joan has gained some sort of secret knowledge and some type of power, then she becomes a shaman. She gained this knowledge and power through later visions and dreams. Perhaps Eliade said it best when he stated: “seeing spirits, in dream or awake, is the determining sign of the shamanic vocation . . . Seeing them face to face, [the shaman] talks with them, prays to them, implores them.”<sup>10</sup>

Joan of Arc shows many characteristics of a shaman. She even uses many of the techniques of a shaman, such as the dancing under the birch tree or the solitary confinement of a chapel or shrine in the wilderness. She has demonstrated that she has had an ecstatic experience and that her charismatic abilities won over the political leaders and the people of France. In fact, she became such a great shaman that she threatened the kingdom of England and she was sentenced to death. They did not kill a witch, they killed a martyr for political reasons, as Pope Callixtus III stated twenty-four years after her death.

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<sup>10</sup> Barston, *Joan of Arc: Heretic, Mystic, Shaman*, 78-78; Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Trans. W. R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 84, 88; and Gies, *Joan of Arc: The Legend*, 21-22.

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