

Notes: Lecture 1 on Saint Joan

Introduction: *Saint Joan* is a play by penned by G.B. Shaw about 15th-century French military figure [Joan of Arc](#). Premiering in 1923, three years after her [beatification](#) by the [Roman Catholic Church](#), the play reflects Shaw's belief that the people involved in Joan's trial acted according to what they thought was right. According to Shaw, there are no villains in the work. Crime, like disease, is not interesting: it is something to be done away with by general consent, and that is all [there is] about it. It is what men do at their best, with good intentions, and what normal men and women find that they must and will do in spite of their intentions, that really concern us. *Saint Joan*, chronicle play in six scenes and an epilogue by George Bernard Shaw, performed in 1923 and published in 1924. It was inspired by the canonization of Joan of Arc in 1920, nearly five centuries after her death in 1431. The **Epilogue** dramatizes St. Joan's triumph over the forces of death and her glory of canonization. Twenty - five years after her death, on the occasion of her rehabilitation by the church in 1456, Joan meets again the men who were involved in her career. The fall of Joan is tragic in itself, but the focus of the play is often on the social significance of the conflict between the established order of the Church and the feudal system on the one hand, and society's disruptor, the heretical saint, on the other. It is equally a historical play.

It is a dramatization of the life of 15th-century French military icon and religious martyr Joan of Arc, based on the historical records of her trial in 1431. Shaw was inspired in writing the play by the Catholic church's 1920 decision to canonize Joan of Arc, an event which occurred several years after the premiere of his most famous play, *Pygmalion*; at the time, Shaw's career was in decline and his work was being poorly received by critics. *Saint Joan* has since become one of Shaw's most popular plays; a film adaptation starring Jean Seberg was produced in 1957, and the play continues to be staged today. It was the recipient of a 1993 Tony Award for Best Revival.

Summary

The play is set between 1429 and 1431, with an epilogue set in 1456. During this time, the 100 Years War was raging between England and France, and English forces had occupied a number of French cities and towns. The play begins with Joan asking , Robert de Baudricourt, a French nobleman, to provide her with armour, a horse, and soldiers. Joan is an adolescent girl from a small country village, but she has had visions of saints telling her that it is her destiny to lead French forces to victory and ensure that the Dauphin (heir to the throne) is officially crowned as King. Joan claims that the voices were angels and saints, through whom God was addressing her. She identified the saints as Saint Michael, Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret, all crucial French saints of whom Joan had learned through statuary in the church she attended and through her mother's careful religious instruction.

Robert is hesitant to support Joan, but he gives in when he understands that she is capable of inspiring men to fight for her. Joan travels to Chinon, where the Dauphin (the prince) has set up an informal court. Despite an attempt to trick her, she easily identifies the Dauphin, which further encourages others to see her as guided by God. Joan persuades the Dauphin that she is going to free the city of Orleans (held under siege by English forces) and have him crowned at Rheims Cathedral. Leading troops, Joan goes to Orleans, where the French forces are frustrated. They need the winds to change so that they can sail up-river and attack the English from behind. Joan prays, and the wind immediately changes, allowing the French forces to win a triumphant victory. The French victory at Orleans changes the tide of the war, which worries English leaders. Earlier in the war, the English had formed an alliance with the Burgundians, a French faction who opposed the royal house to which Charles belonged. Warwick, an English nobleman, meets with Cauchon, a Burgundian Bishop. Both men agree that Joan is dangerous and must be eliminated. Meanwhile, Charles has been

crowned at Rheims Cathedral. Joan is worried because she seems to be becoming unpopular, and several people accuse her of being proud, stubborn, and reckless. With Charles crowned, Joan wants to lead forces to try to take back Paris, but no one supports this plan. Nonetheless, Joan insists that she has to follow God's orders. The action of the play then jumps ahead 2 years, to 1431. In the interim, Joan has been captured by Burgundian forces and sold to the English. She is now on trial on charges of heresy, with a number of Church officials questioning her. Undaunted, Joan defends her decision to wear men's clothes, and she insists that her voices are truly the voices of divine messengers. She only wavers when she is threatened with execution, at which time Joan signs a confession and recantation. However, she is horrified to realize that even though her life will be spared, she is still going to be imprisoned for life. Faced with this fate, Joan tears up her confession. She is immediately taken out to be executed. Other characters report that she showed great strength and courage during her painful execution. The epilogue to the play is set 25 years later. An inquiry has been held into Joan's trial, and the charges have been reversed: Joan is now declared innocent. Her spirit appears in a vision to Charles, who is now successfully ruling as a strong French king. The pair are joined by many other characters, showing that Joan has now been vindicated and that her enemies have been proven wrong. Eventually, a man dressed in 1920s-style clothing appears and announces that Joan has been declared a saint. Excited by all of the seeming praise and recognition, Joan suggests that maybe she should return to life. However, all of her seeming allies immediately abandon her, making excuses for why this is not a good idea. At the end of the play, Joan is left alone, wondering when the world will be ready to fully embrace her.

Scene-wise Summary:

Scene 1 : Captain Robert de Baudricourt sits at a table and berates his steward for the fact that there are no eggs. Robert de Baudricourt complains about the inability of the hens on his farm to produce eggs. Joan claims that her voices are telling her to lift the siege of Orléans, and to allow her several of his men for this purpose. Joan also says that she will crown the Dauphin in Reims Cathedral. Baudricourt ridicules Joan, but his Steward feels inspired by her words. The steward is convinced that the hens won't lay eggs until De Baudricourt agrees to see "The Maid" who called on De Baudricourt two days ago and is still outside, speaking with soldiers and praying as she waits to be seen. Baudricourt eventually begins to feel the same sense of inspiration, and gives his consent to Joan. The Steward enters at the end of the scene to exclaim that the hens have begun to lay eggs again. Baudricourt interprets this as a sign from God of Joan's divine inspiration.

[Saint Joan begins in 1429 at the castle of Vaucouleurs. Reluctantly, De Baudricourt sends for her: she is Joan of Arc, a simple country girl of 17 or 18 years, dressed in men's clothing and with a persuasive confidence about her. She informs De Baudricourt that he must give her a horse, armor, soldiers, and send her to the Dauphin: she is on a mission to raise the siege of Orleans, acting on the word of God as it is conveyed to her through the voices of saints she hears in her head. De Baudricourt balks at being ordered around by a young girl, but Joan won't be refused. She tells him that two soldiers, Bertrand de Poulengy and Monsieur John of Metz, have promised to support and accompany her in her journey. Reluctantly, De Baudricourt yields to Joan's demands. Joan and her soldiers depart for Chinon to meet with the Dauphin. After they leave, the steward rushes in to inform de Baudricourt that the hens have begun to lay eggs again, which de Baudricourt sees as proof that Joan really was sent by God.]

Scene 2 : Joan reaches the Dauphin at his castle in Chinon, in Touraine. She informs him that she has been sent by God to drive the English out of France and crown him king. Joan talks her way into being received at the court of the weak and vain Dauphin. There, she tells him that her voices have

commanded her to help him become a true king by rallying his troops to drive out the English occupiers and restore France to greatness. Joan succeeds in doing this through her excellent powers of flattery, negotiation, leadership, and skill on the battlefield. The Dauphin is sceptical, having little interest in warfare and knowing that the English are more adept at fighting than the French, but things are so dire that France really has nothing to lose, and Joan eventually convinces him to let her command his army.

Scene 3 : Joan and her army reach Orleans on April 29, 1429. On the river Loire, she meets Dunois, the Bastard of Orleans. Joan is impatient to begin fighting, which Dunois regards as overconfident and foolish. Dunois tells her the English are across the river, but he is hesitant to strike before the wind changes directions, as they must travel up the river and attack the English from the rear. Dunois and his page are waiting for the wind to turn so that he and his forces can lay siege to Orléans. Joan and Dunois commiserate/sympathize, and Dunois attempts to explain to her more pragmatic realities of an attack, without the wind at their back. Her replies eventually inspire Dunois to gather the forces. Dunois has prayed incessantly for a west wind, but to no avail. Joan joins Dunois in praying. Shortly after this, Dunois's page announces, with awe, that the wind has changed. Dunois sees this as evidence that Joan is sent from God, and they prepare to fight the English.

Scene 4 : At a tent at an English camp, John de Stogumber (the Chaplain) and the Earl of Warwick discuss Joan's stunning series of victories. Joined by the Bishop of Beauvais, they are at a loss to explain her success. Stogumber decides Joan is a witch. Beauvais sees Joan as a threat to the Church, as she claims to receive instructions from God directly. He fears she wants to instill national pride in the people, which would undermine the Church's universal rule. Warwick thinks she wants to create a system in which the king is responsible to God only, ultimately stripping him and other feudal lords of their power. All agree that she must die. They believe she must be witch, as there is no other way to explain the French's sudden rush of military victories.

Scene 5 : It takes place in the cathedral at Rheims. After numerous military victories, Joan has finally crowned Dauphin king: he is finally King Charles VII. The Dauphin/prince is crowned Charles VII at Reims Cathedral. A perplexed Joan asks Dunois why she is so unpopular at court. He explains that she has exposed very important people as incompetent and irrelevant. She talks to Dunois, Bluebeard, and La Hire about returning home. Charles, who complains about the weight of his coronation robes and smell of the holy oil, is pleased to hear this. Having fulfilled her promises to God, Joan plans to return home to the country, but she suddenly asks Dunois if they can continue to fight and drive the English out of Paris before she leaves. This idea horrifies Charles, who wants to negotiate a peace immediately. Dunois has doubts that the French will be able to keep their victory streak going, and the Archbishop accuses Joan of obstinacy, arrogance, overconfidence, and the sin of pride. Charles VII, too, believes Joan is taking things too far. It's also revealed that Joan's actions and confidence have earned her many enemies. The crown, the military, and the Church all tell Joan that if her enemies capture her, she's on her own: none of them will step in to rescue her from whatever gruesome fate is in store for her. The Archbishop berates her for her "sin of pride". Now realizing that she is "alone on earth", Joan declares that she will gain the strength to do what she must from the people and from God. She leaves, leaving the men dumbfounded. Peter Cauchon (the Bishop of Beauvais) enters. Cauchon and Warwick discuss the problems Joan presents for their respective institutions. Cauchon believes Joan is guilty of heresy and, as a churchman, he believes he has an obligation to make sure she recants and saves her soul from damnation. At the same time, he

acknowledges the danger Joan and her ideas pose for the Church: Joan's relationship to God is unmediated by the Church—she believes she can talk to and understand God's word without help from the Church—and this threatens the power the Church holds over its people. Warwick is less concerned with the problem Joan poses to the Church but fears the threat Joan's political ideologies pose to the existing feudal structure and society: acting on God's orders, Joan wants the common people to be answerable to the king alone which would result in noblemen like Warwick being ripped of their power. Cauchon's concerns are spiritual, and Warwick's are temporal—but the two men can agree that they share Joan as a common threat to their respective institutions' hold on power. They agree that Joan must be stopped.

Scene 6: By May 30, 1431, Joan has been captured by the English and is on trial for heresy. Cauchon sincerely tries to give Joan a fair trial. He provides her with ample opportunities to recant and save her soul and body from destruction, but she refuses to reject the validity of her voices and place the authority of the Church before the direct word of God. The Inquisitor, the Bishop of Beauvais, and the Church officials on both sides of the trial have a long discussion on the nature of her heresy. Joan is brought to the court, and continues to assert that her voices speak to her directly from God and that she has no need of the Church's officials. This outrages Stogumber who is adamant that she be executed at once. Joan learns that she will be burned at the stake immediately because she refuses to recant. She acquiesces to the pressure of torture at the hands of her oppressors and in a panic, she hurriedly signs a document/ confession rejecting her previous statements, thus relinquishing the truth behind her voices under the assumption that she will be allowed to go free. But, when she learns from Cauchon that she will be imprisoned for life without hope of parole, she rips the recantation to pieces and accepts her fate.

She is immediately burned, except for her heart, which the Executioner reveals couldn't be destroyed. The Chaplain rushes into the courtroom in a deranged panic: witnessing the cruelty and gruesomeness of Joan's execution has had a profound effect on him, and he now regards his earlier enthusiasm to see her burned for witchcraft with shame and moral reprehension. He informs Warwick and Cauchon that a soldier offered Joan a makeshift cross in her final moments and regrets that he did nothing to prevent her burning.

Ladvenu, a Dominican monk who is sympathetic toward Joan, reveals that he, too, offered Joan a cross. When the flames grew so high that they threatened to enrobe Ladvenu as well as Joan, however, she told him to get down and save himself. Ladvenu believes the selflessness Joan demonstrated in her final hours is proof that she was sent from God, not from the devil, and that her death was not the end for her, but only the beginning of her redemption.

EPILOGUE: Twenty-five years after Joan's death, Ladvenu comes to King Charles VII to announce that the charges brought against Joan have been reversed: the Church has cleared her name and smeared the reputations of her accusers. Charles VII is pleased to hear this, as it means he wasn't crowned by a witch or heretic, and his title is therefore legitimate. Joan then appears to Charles VII in a dream. He tells her the good news. Those who condemned or abandoned Joan appear one by one. Finally, a gentleman in 1920s clothing appears and informs the room that the Church has canonized Joan 500 years after her execution. Everybody praises her and apologizes for doubting her. When Joan asks whether she should come back to life and join them, however, they reject her,

make excuses, and disappear. Joan cries out in despair: "O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?"

Symbols:

A symbol is anything that stands for, or represents, something else. In a story, a character, an action, an object, or any entity or situation can be symbolic. Often these symbols epitomize something abstract, like a force of nature, a condition of the world, or an idea.

The hens laying eggs: In the first scene of the play, Robert Baudricourt is frustrated that his hens stop laying eggs. After he agrees to provide Joan with arms and a horse, the hens begin laying eggs again. The laying of the eggs symbolizes rebirth and renewal for the French military forces. Before Joan comes onto the scene, the French are in a state of stagnation. They are losing more and more territory, and they lack leadership because of the Dauphin's precarious position. The lack of eggs (a staple food in cold countries) symbolizes potential hunger and scarcity which threatens the French as the English overrun the country. The hens laying eggs again symbolizes the hope that Joan brings with her; the particular symbolism is linked to both Joan's humble status as a farmgirl and to her femininity. Nicole Coonradt also observes that "The egg is the traditional symbol of Easter that celebrates Christ's resurrection and triumph over death", which further extends the potential symbolism.

The cross made of sticks: As Joan is being burnt alive, an English soldier makes a simple cross out of sticks and hands it to her. The cross symbolizes compassion and universal humanity. Although the English should be considered Joan's enemies and she has fought to drive them out of her country, an English soldier still wants to offer her a small amount of comfort in her final moments. This gesture symbolizes the idea that people have a shared bond that transcends language, religion, and national loyalty.

Bluebeard's beard: As his nickname would suggest, Bluebeard has a carefully styled beard which he dyes. His beard symbolizes how the aristocrats at the French court care a great deal about maintaining appearances. The world of a court is a world where Joan is mocked for having short hair, and where it is hard for the Dauphin to gain respect because he dresses in shabby clothes. At a time when the fate of their country is at stake, the French nobles still think about superficial qualities, appearances, and impressing one another. The blue beard symbolizes shallowness, hollowness, ostentatiousness, superficiality, veneer of elegance and artificiality, a world that Joan finds it hard to fit in.

Joan's armor: A suit of armor is one of the first things Joan asks for, and she continues to wear this traditionally male attire throughout the play. Joan's armor symbolizes both her bravery and her vulnerability. Wearing armor is a reminder that Joan is actively engaging in battle, risking injury or death on the battlefield. The armor also symbolizes Joan's bravery—not just in physical risks, but also in the risks to her reputation. She is doing something shocking, but she feels compelled to follow God's plan. However, the armor further symbolizes that Joan is not the same as a man. Men only have to wear armor to protect themselves in battle, whereas Joan also needs the armor to protect herself from sexual violence.

The statues of Joan: In the epilogue, visions appear of statues of Joan. These statues symbolize how Joan will eventually achieve fame and glory. When she is executed, the English and the Church hope that they can wipe out her memory and that she will quickly be forgotten. However, Joan's fame lives on for hundreds of years. Ironically, she is persecuted by the Church and the government during her lifetime, but after her death, she becomes praised and celebrated. The statues symbolize how it is important to know the history of celebrated figures: they may have lived very different experiences than what their reputation suggests.

Nature: Shaw evokes elements of the natural world to symbolize freedom from institutional bonds. While most characters in *Saint Joan* subscribe to ideologies espoused by institutions like the Church or the monarchy and justify their actions and worldviews in light of these institutions, Joan exists outside of institutional influence, choosing to operate in accordance with her personal, internal beliefs. As such, Shaw frequently connects Joan to the natural world. One example of this appears in Scene III, when Joan's arrival at Orleans coincides with Dunois and his page observing kingfishers fly over the Loire river. By paralleling Joan's arrival with the presence of kingfishers, Shaw emphasizes Joan's ties to nature and her rejection of institutional power. More explicitly, in Scene VII, when Joan decides she would rather burn at the stake than spend the rest of her days in prison, she explains that while she can give up her military pursuits, armor, and renown, it is impossible for her to live without nature and freedom. Joan would rather suffer an excruciating death than spend the rest of her days cut off from nature, personal freedom, imprisoned in a literal institutional structure.

Tables: Tables, which Shaw writes very purposely into *Saint Joan's* stage directions, represent institutional order. Tables appear throughout the play to symbolize the power and influence of the social institutions actively at play in any given scene. People who sit around tables usually have close ties to powerful institutions like the Church or the government, so whenever a table is present in *Saint Joan*, it's Shaw's way of reinforcing to the reader how heavily institutions influence characters' worldviews and actions and how the need to assert institutional power and maintain the status quo can corrupt their otherwise morally sound intentions. Shaw's decision to have this moment of moral compromise around a table emphasizes its significance to *Saint Joan's* exploration of corruption within institutions of power.

THEMES

Self-Assuredness: Joan is repeatedly cautioned that she may be guilty of the sin of pride. It was shocking for a young woman from a humble background to show so much confidence, and to see herself as worthy of being God's messenger. While Joan does not seem to think she is better than anyone else, she also does not question that she has the right to serve in God's plan. In a time when both gender and class norms would have suggested that she consider herself far below the powerful men she interacts with, Joan is not afraid to stand up for herself and ask to be taken seriously. She even sees herself as capable of giving advice to the Dauphin. What other characters misinterpret as pride is actually Joan's self-assuredness and her devout faith in God's plan.

Power: The whole play presents the struggle for power in the fight between the French and the Englishmen. Power also plays out in other ways: for example, Warwick and Cauchon spar over the powers of the Church and feudal lords. Both men are fearful of Joan because she has the potential to

disrupt their hold on power, but they strive for power in different ways. As a whole, the play depicts power as a force that motivates people to do whatever is necessary. Joan dies because she ends up caught in the middle of power struggles, and many people are willing to let her burn even though they know she is innocent. The conflict in *Saint Joan* is built around some major power clashes. The Catholic Church, The French Nobles and the English feudal lords get threatened by Joan's rise. Her allies renounce her for fear of losing the power she has helped them gain. In the end she is crushed by all these forces. *Saint Joan* could be viewed as a case study on the disturbing lengths people will go to in order to maintain and gain power.

Gender: Joan is a woman, yet she acts like she is a soldier and refuses to do the things that are expected of her, such as getting married and listening to what men say to her. Instead, she rebels against the conventions of her time and chooses to pick her own path and do what she thinks is right. Joan sees her gender as irrelevant to her mission: God chose her, and she will follow Him no matter what he asks. It may be significant that two of the three saints who communicate with Joan are also women: she has models of what it means for women to be holy and carry out God's will. But for the men around her, Joan's gender is a huge negative: her refusal to conform to gender norms and dress like a woman represents one more way in which Joan threatens to disrupt the delicate power balance of medieval power.

Women and Femininity: Joan was an early pioneer of women's equality. In a time where it was completely unheard of, she wore men's clothes, became a soldier, and advised the most powerful men of her day. She has inspired generations of women to challenge gender roles.

Holiness: Throughout the play, characters debate whether Joan is a holy figure or a fraud. Interestingly, many of the characters that serve the Church are among the first to accuse Joan of being a fraud and question her ability to perform miracles. They know better than anyone that holiness can be feigned as a way to manipulate people or hold on to power. It is typically the more humble characters, such as common soldiers, that believe most earnestly in Joan's holiness. Joan herself is also surprised whenever characters question her motives because her faith is so integral that it never occurs to her that anyone would use God or holiness as a tool for manipulation.

Religion: *Saint Joan* chronicles the life of a Catholic saint. We also confront the earliest clashes of Protestantism and Catholicism. There's also much discussion of popular religious topics such as faith, heresy, martyrdom, and repentance.

Justice: Justice is a major theme in the play, especially since Joan's trial plays such a prominent part. Most people would like to assume that a lengthy court trial carried out by educated people would result in a just verdict, but Shaw shows that this is not always the case. Many of the people involved in Joan's trial are determined to see her executed whether she is guilty or not. The play also shows that integrity and good deeds are not always rewarded justly. Joan lives according to her principles and never does anything wrong. In a just world, she would be celebrated and respected. Yet in a flawed world of scheming and manipulation, she suffers a terrible death which she does not deserve.

Nationalism: Shaw very explicitly introduces the theme of nationalism into the play. Many historians argue that the 100 Years' War was important in defining both French and English identities since years of warfare created a sense of loyalty and distrust of "the other." Warwick specifically criticizes Joan for the way in which she encourages soldier to think of themselves as primarily loyal to their

ruler and country, rather than to their local feudal lord. Warwick fears that the consequences of this centralized political power will affect the power of himself and other land-owning aristocrats. Joan is less interested in whom people are loyal to because she values loyalty to God above all else. For her, nationalism is connected with the language spoken in a region, and she uses this characteristic to define which territories should be controlled by a given ruler.

Integrity: Throughout the play, the integrity of Joan and other characters is challenged and tested. Many people assume that Joan must have other motives or be seeking to somehow expand her own power and influence. Disbelief about Joan's integrity seems to stem from the fact that most other characters have very little integrity. They are motivated by the desire to secure power and influence, and they will do whatever is necessary to hang on to that power. In fact, even Joan's integrity wavers due to fear of death. Confronted with the prospect of being executed, she signs a confession she does not believe in. However, Joan retracts the confession and goes to her death determined to live and die according to her principles.

Society and Class: Medieval society was rigidly divided into class and position. Among the things examined are the tiers of power within the Church, the political factions of kings and feudal lords, and the lot of common peasants and soldiers. We also see just how severe the punishment was for people who defied this rigid hierarchy.

Warfare: *Saint Joan* is set in medieval France, which was at the time in the throes of the Hundred Years War. There are many different factions vying for power, the main ones being the English, the Burgundians, and the Armagnacs. In the play, Joan sets off on a mission from God, to make war on all those who oppose uniting France under the rule of the Armagnac, and heir to the French throne, Charles VII. *Saint Joan* depicts warfare as everything from a unifier to a divider to a holy right.

Pride: Just about everybody in *Saint Joan* accuses Joan of pride. It is unclear as to whether she's guilty of this or not. Her every decision leads to success for her and those around her. She also believes that she gets her orders directly from God. In her mind, that all adds up to the idea that everyone should just listen to her and do what she says. The rich and powerful, however, view this as insufferable pride, when coming from an upstart teenage girl.

Admiration: Joan is able to inspire such admiration, that she launches a movement which eventually unites a country, shifting its entire power structure in the bargain. Even the men who put her to death can't help but respect her courage and tenacity. Her spirit was so strong that it continued to inspire for hundreds of years after her death. She became a symbol for generation after generation. Eventually, admiration for her grew so much that the Catholic Church made her a saint. *Saint Joan* holds the legacy of an inspirational figure.