

Spring 2021

From Sword Lesbian to Shield Sapphic: The Quest to Relate the Very Queer Legacy of Joan of Arc to a Modern Incarnation of the Warrior Woman

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Recommended Citation

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From Sword Lesbian to Shield Sapphic: The Quest to Relate the Very Queer Legacy of Joan of
Arc to a Modern Incarnation of the Warrior Woman

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
And
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Angela P. Woodack

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2021

Dedication

To the warrior women of the past for lighting my way towards this project,

To the creators of ambitiously queer art projects for allowing me to believe a senior project like this might be possible,

And to the LGBTQ+ people of the future, who hopefully will not have to struggle with representation as much as I had in the years prior to writing this thesis.

Acknowledgements

A Hero's Journey would not have been possible without the help of the wonderful cast and crew I worked with to develop this play into a fully realized film production. This team included Isa Cava (who originated the role of Vera), Julia Spenser (who originated the role of Sophia), Julie Reed (Cinematographer & Editor), Akiva Hirsch (Fight Choreography), Perry Zhang (Costumes), Ari Ray Agnew (Sound Effects), Maggie McFarland (Props), Janey Hecht (Assistant to the Director), Noah Arrell (Assistant to the Cinematographer), and Emma Kisselev (Transportation). I am so lucky that I not only got to work with such a talented and creative group of artists, but that I have been able to call many of these people friends throughout my years at Bard College.

I am also grateful from the help I received from The Fisher Center for Performing Arts, especially from Sarah Jick, Moe Schell, Rick Reiser, and Sharon Greene, as well as from The Old Gym at Bard College. I am so honored that they trusted me with costumes and props from their expansive warehouses. I would also like to thank Charlie Smith, who ensured our production had access to a sewing machine, as well as Susannah Armbruster and Amy Parella who gave us the opportunity to shoot *A Hero's Journey* at Blithewood.

As for the creation of this thesis, I appreciate the encouragement, feedback, and support expressed by my former academic advisor, Miriam Felton-Dansky, as well as my two senior project advisors, Jean Wagner and Roger Berkowitz. I additionally have Jane Smith, Jeremy Hall, and Alexa Murphy from the Steveson Library to thank for ensuring that I was able to convey my ideas as cohesively as possible.

Ultimately, this senior project would not have been possible without the encouragement of my sister, Lindsay Woodack, my parents, Joanne and Henry Woodack, my girlfriend Sherry Choudhury, and my relatives Ruben Ginel and Barbara Kellner. You are all my heroes.

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Introduction

From a young age, my upbringing within the Catholic school system of northern New Jersey constantly tried to reinforce a belief in binary genders and the inferiority of queer relationships to gender and sexuality. Whenever time was devoted to discussing the feats of saints and the virtues that inspired them, one figure remained equally lauded, but cursory in description: Joan of Arc, whose real name was most likely Jeanne Rommée, followed God's call to unite the French armies against invading British forces during the Hundred Year's War. She was executed for being dubbed a heretic by the same church she fought for, but eventually she became a saint, so all was forgiven...eventually. Perhaps in the 21st century my classmates and I were not given to question the nature of her dress because the women in our lives wore pants all the time, but as I came to realize that I was a lesbian it dawned on me that this element of gender performance that was so essential to Joan of Arc was far from a practical coincidence. The break from female sexuality Joan of Arc partook in was equally as revolutionary as her victory at the Siege of Orleans, if not more so given the hypocritical, transphobic scripture it seemed to protest.

Joan of Arc's choice to transform her appearance to fit the masculine ideals of her time leaves the possibility that she may have not been the cisgender, heterosexual icon the modern Catholic Church would like her to be. Her defiance of traditional expectations of women within French society and politics in the 15th century has inspired contemporary LGBTQ+ scholars and artists to reimagine her identity as a skilled strategist who succeed not despite her traditionally male attire, but because of it. (I think it is worth noting that although the only openly LGBTQ+ writers referenced here appear to be Leslie Feinberg and Carolyn Gage, I have conducted research with consciousness to the possibility that other scholars cited here might not have wanted to disclose their relationship to their own sexuality or gender to the public.)

Despite confirmation from several sources that she was never called Joan of Arc in her own lifetime and never chose this name for herself, I will unfortunately yield to referring to her as such instead of by her birth name (Jeanne Rommée) or any other moniker (such as the “Maid of Orleans”) for the sake of consistency with the sources I am citing, who always refer to her as Joan. I will also be limiting the labeling of her sexuality in favor of discussion of her gender—meaning that while I do not believe Joan of Arc could not be a “Sword Lesbian”, she could be seen as a “Shield Sapphic” due to the nature of her gender performance coinciding with what we could consider today to be “butch”. This fluidity of her gender is what inspired me to combine a study into her military strategies and practices with my play, as I find that Vera—the warrior woman whose eventual status as a revolutionary takes form in the latter half of *A Hero’s Journey*—ultimately pays homage to Joan of Arc’s break from gender norms.

There will also be a shift of perspective as I finish my analysis on Joan of Arc and begin reviewing the process of producing my play, *A Hero’s Journey*. This chapter (“Applying the ‘Sword Lesbian’ Archetype to Theater”) will be in the first person like this introduction since it concerns my process as the writer and director of the play I wrote for this senior project. The rest of my paper will be in the third person to accommodate the academic nature of my research into Joan of Arc’s life and behaviors.

Chapter 1: Joan of Arc as “Warrior Woman”

Marina Warner’s *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* is quick to justify Joan of Arc’s rise to prominence by underscoring how “She was noticed and understood and recognized because the conditions of disruption necessary for the emergence of a savior existed” (Warner 33). The emphasis on the need for a savior will only increase in importance to Joan as she crusaded for the establishment of Charles VII on the French throne not only because of how much her strategy depended on the faith of others in her voices, but because fulfilling this role was the crux of her devotion to her androgynous persona.

Gender Performance as a Political Strategy

Joan of Arc was most likely influenced by the concept known as the divine right of kings, since her choice to solidify Charles VII’s claim to the throne was primarily driven by the belief that he was the Christian God’s choice to inherit the French throne. This theory, also known as the mandate of heaven, involves the belief that “God gives the victory to the most deserving” (Warner 53), thereby correlating strength with one’s inheritable birthrights within feudal society. For the feudal period, her choice to invoke the divine right might have been a reaction towards the constant shifting of alliances between members of French court as more and more Burgundians supported the English. The idea of one king to rule all French people is idealistic, but not uncommon for the time for Catholics, whose belief in unity under one God is based on the idea that “newly proclaimed dogmas are not novelties; they are rediscoveries of ancient but hitherto obscured truths” (Warner 50). It is possible she also invoked the divine right to counter Henry V’s claim to the French throne, which he believed was his following his win of the battle of Agincourt (Warner 53).

Joan's institution of the divine right in her strategy is most evident in her argument during her trial that if the Burgundians did not accept Charles VII as their ruler, the king would eventually compel them to do so. To Joan, God would have the kingdom restored under Charles VII's rule (Trial of Joan of Arc 135), so to threaten enemies that if they did not surrender, they eventually would do so under his rule was more practicality than decree. By instituting Charles VII as the official vessel for God's will, it allowed her to be seen as a messenger of divine will instead of its executor, which prevented her from being seen as an individual looking to claim the throne for herself. This was, perhaps, the biggest initial risk for Joan, given that her connection to divine intervention would only gain traction if she won a significant battle.

This is where her voices—whom she believed were the apparitions of Saint Michael, Saint Margaret, and Saint Catherine— (Trial of Joan of Arc 158) became essential to her success as a strategist. Regardless of whether one chooses to believe Joan of Arc actually heard decrees straight from the Saints who patronized her hometown, her ability to recall them for her predictions about Charles VII's legitimacy was enough to convince Robert de Baudricourt to give her an army to lead on behalf of Charles VII. It might have helped that French kings relying on the wisdom of female saints became a precedent starting with the relationship between Charles VI and Marie d'Avignon (Warner 84). Her loyalty to the voices almost exceeds her devotion to her king and her God, rendering her prophesies realistic and grounded despite their lack of factual proof.

The other "strategies" utilized by Joan chiefly concern the transformation of her body into a sexless, virtuous vessel for the carrying out of her voice's wills. One can attribute this to her own hesitation to be seen as a master strategist, but it could also be argued that this distance from a commanding position was to avoid drawing attention to her outsider status among the

other soldiers. Her androgynous appearance ultimately serves as the bridge to her voices in that they both prioritize spiritual guidance over sensual fulfillment.

Her lack of menstruation was most likely not an intentional strategy, but a product of her own self-imposed malnutrition. Joan most likely used this to support her own vision as the one who was destined to lead Charles VII's France to victory, as it meant that even as she reached the age of discernment her lack of a period meant liberation from marriage and childbirth. Her desire to not get married is significant, as it is traced back to a man in Toul who cited her for marriage; once she successfully proved she had made no promise to him, she heard her voices for the first time (Trial of Joan of Arc 104). Joan most likely would have argued that the distance from the sacrament of marriage allowed her to pursue the voices more clearly, as there would be no one else in her life she would need to take care of besides herself.

Although her sexual virginity was not proven, it was a fact Joan freely offered about herself as a means of underscoring her chastity (Warner 15). Joan's swearing of her virginity to her voices belies the importance of this pure state as a means of distinguishing herself from other individuals born female. If she could prove her virginity was not only physically but spiritually supported by God, then her detractors would continue to run out of reasons to call her a whore. There is no scientific evidence proving her body was inspected by the judges of the trial, leading this information about her life to be crucial due to its social currency instead of any basis on medical fact (Warner 21). When one discusses the virginity of Joan of Arc, they are not talking so much about the physical condition of her body but instead the likelihood that she remained chaste in order to focus on her great mission of establishing Charles as ruler. The only difference between her and a nun at this point would be that her vow of virginity was her choice instead of an edict imposed on her by the Catholic Church.

Joan's donning of traditionally male clothing could likewise be interpreted as an attempt at austerity in a society where prophets were expected to be otherworldly. Her typical outfit consisted of a short robe, doublet, hose, and hair cut *en rond* above her ears (Trial of Joan of Arc 156). Leslie Feinberg, author of *Transgender Warriors: From Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*, attests that Joan's crossdressing is not completely exceptional within early Catholic literature, wherein "while the early Church fathers denounced all cross-gender behavior, they demonstrated their hypocrisy by canonizing some twenty to twenty-five female saints who cross-dressed, lived as men, or wore full beards" (Feinberg 68). These transgender individuals, known as the bearded women saints, appeared to grow beards as a means of renunciation of sex (Delcourt 92). Leslie Feinberg associates this kind of sacrifice of the physical body to a masculine ideal with what we now call passing (Feinberg 70), and she was right to do so: The legends of these transmasculine individuals gave Joan of Arc a rubric for what was required for her to become a soldier. She not only had to eschew womanhood, but the concepts associated with being a woman at that time—namely, marriage and childbirth. Marie Delcourt of *Hermaphrodite: Myths and Rites of the Bisexual Figure in Classical Antiquity* posits that not only is the transformation of the bearded women akin to Joan of Arc's garb in its "rejection of sexual life [...] as an aspiration to an androgyny transcending sin" (Delcourt 93), the lack of physical characteristics seen as female by both parties also serves as a kind of asexuality, where "spiritual man is completely freed from the bonds of flesh" (Delcourt 101). Joan may have traded the hair dress for traditionally male apparel, but her decision to adopt the outfit of the common man following her choice to not marry bears a striking resemblance to the bearded women saints, whose primary reason for transitioning was to avoid marriage.

Despite living in a time where clothing dictated gender, Joan did not explicitly don male attire to disguise herself as a man. This is what sets her apart from the bearded saints, who used traditionally “male” attributes that God gave them in their hour of need to save themselves. Since she still used the pronouns “She” and “Her” and did not adopt a more traditionally masculine name, it can be concluded attire was therefore used by Joan to enhance, not hide, her appearance. This also implies, however, that scholars such as Meltzer who believe Joan wore male clothing “because she was a soldier and had to dress accordingly” (Meltzer 97) are neglecting a key element of the reason Joan cross-dressed. Like the divine right for Charles VII to inherit the throne of France, her clothing was an extension of God’s will. If the assumption of male clothing on a body assigned female at birth “denotes breaking with a former existence” (Delcourt 90), then Joan would not only be renouncing her womanhood; she would most likely be casting aside any pagan traditions she had grown up with. During her trials, Joan would later admit if God had ordered her “to take a different dress, she would have done so” (Trial of Joan of Arc 80).

Curiously, neither I Corinthians II—which shames women who shave their heads—nor Deuteronomy 22—which claims that crossdressing by men and women is an abomination—(qtd. in Delcourt 88-89) were referenced during Joan’s trial. Perhaps they had fallen out of theological discourse, as Delcourt cites these passages in reference to the Synod of Gangra in 340, while Feinberg attributes their use to condemn transgender people to the Synod of Ver during the 9th century. Yolande of Anjou’s condemnation of the “Old Covenant” in support of Joan, while not significant to the outcome of her trial, proves that there were more women open to a future of fluid gender expression than those seeking spiritual enlightenment. Fortunately for the Church patriarchs, Joan of Arc does not seem to identify with any gender; her clothes are “masculine”, her pronouns are “feminine”, and her behavior is neither.

Presence in Battle & The Trial

Joan of Arc's vision for herself as a virgin in the literal and metaphorical sense extended to the battlefield, as she would later claim during her trial that she had never killed anyone in battle. In context, one could interpret this to mean Joan was simply a standard bearer during the siege of Orleans (Warner 68), but Cam Rea, author of the article *The Maiden of France: A Brief Overview of Joan of Arc and the Siege of Orléans* claims that Joan, "helped many of the wounded before she was herself wounded above the breast by an arrow at Les Tourelles" (Rea 25). Assuming this occurred, the carrying of Joan's standard was not mere pageantry. Even if she barely wielded the sword Baudricourt gave her, the standard still represents the active presence she aspired to maintain both on and off of the battlefield.

Joan of Arc by Herself and Her Witnesses by Regine Pernoud confirms Joan's refusal to be seen as a chief strategist: "She was not really 'War Chief' [...] she herself denied or depreciated the epithet which was probably added by the clerk whom she dictated the letter" (Pernoud 66). Two possibilities arise from this admission from Joan: the boastful side of Joan which appears in many of the letters sent to the English was a fabrication of what Joan intended her opponents to hear. It is more likely, however, that this brashness was meant to distract enemy forces from the more conservative front she expressed in front of her men or the more passionate moments she reserved for coronation at Rheims to come. Her refusal to be seen as a strategist and more like a comrade, like her devotion to the divine right of kings, becomes a consistent occurrence when one considers her behavior insistence that the coronation at Rheims would legitimize Charles VII's claim to the French throne (Pernoud 110). Carrying her standard at the coronation at Rheims, was a source of great pride for Joan, to the point she cried "now is done God's pleasure" (Pernoud 125) once her plan was carried to fruition. Warner concurs with Pernoud in the belief

that Joan found ceremony to hold exceptional power; it is likely that despite using her emotions to emphasize Charles's claim to the throne that her fervor for the coronation was genuine. This selfless and devoted persona is perhaps the strategy that worked in her favor the most: by reserving her emotions about the coronation until the very moment Charles was crowned, her connection to the voices of the saints attains an almost evangelical fervor. With the dawn of this new kingdom, so it seems, Joan is reborn as an even more valiant knight than before.

Her primary weakness as a strategist is her seemingly contradictory nature towards the voices, as there were two moments during the trial where she did not claim to take God's word to take action: When she went with her men to the attack on Paris at the request of the noblemen in search of a skirmish instead of because of her voices (Pernoud 134), and the assault on La Charité, which she claimed to enter on account of the men of war's advice (Pernoud 145). The latter attack on Paris proved to be particularly damaging to the reliability of her voices since it coincided with the feast of Our Lady's Nativity on September 8th (Warner 180). This callousness towards the observation of the saint's own holidays would betray her later in the trials, where the coyness of her voices no longer seemed to justify her behavior on the battlefield. In a society where prophets were expected to have visions of the afterlife, Joan maintained fixated on her previous military blunders, causing these instances where her voices are absolved from blame to appear more as if Joan is lying to cover untold crimes instead of protecting her God from the auspices of a corrupt church.

Joan of Arc's stubbornness towards not disclosing the intentions of her voices then allowed the Inquisition Court to examine her gender expression more closely, to the point where it was the primary cause of her death.

At first, they also sought to accuse her of lesbianism. During the Preparatory Investigation on March 3rd, she was able to successfully rebuff the judge's questions regarding her interactions with other women with the admission that when they touched her hands and rings, she did not know their intentions for her (Trial of Joan of Arc 95). In a similar fashion, she assured that the sharing of a bed with Catherine de la Rochelle was purely to investigate whether Catherine's apparition of a lady clothed in gold were as fictitious as Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret assured her (Trial of Joan of Arc 97). Although she was vague about whether or not the apparition ever appeared, one thing became certain: the fact that Joan was not a threat to the women around her would be enough to convict her as a sinner. Not to be outdone, the final test to see if Joan had any sexual proclivities took the form of her relationship to her own voices:

La Fontaine: In what part of this Saint Catherine did you touch her?

Joan: You will have nothing else on that. (qtd. in Pernoud pg. 178)

Ever the asexual figure her comrades described her as, Joan continued to rebuff La Fontaine's questions on the scent and touch of Saint Margaret and Saint Catherine. Instead of giving the descriptions of intimacy he seemed to crave, she repeated many of the exact words La Fontaine asked of her verbatim instead of incriminating herself with descriptive interactions between her and the Saints. Though she was this verbose while sparring with the other judges, this interaction stands out as one that would be prodding a Joan's virginity; had she answered any other way, it is likely the judges could have accused her of committing sins that would have damaged her virginity that did not involve penetrative sex, such as masturbating.

The persecution of Joan's crossdressing in particular, however, successfully became part of an ongoing attempt by the Catholic Church to break away from its appeasement of pagan

cultures in favor of a stricter enforcement of gender roles and class structures. It probably did not help Joan's case that witches were believed to be capable of changing sex (Feinberg 71), but one group they could not accuse of witchcraft was the saints themselves. In choosing to describe Saint Michael as "the shape of a very true and upright man" (Trial of Joan of Arc 121), Joan called into attention the hypocrisy of the Church's stance on cross dressing by describing the saint using adjectives of character instead of descriptions concerning his physical apparition. The transition from anchorite culture to the establishment of monasteries made the change of sex previously allowed to the bearded saints impossible because it left the decision of who "passes" as male up to the community (Delcourt 100), and it is possible that similar discrimination of gender fluidity existed during Saint Michael's existence. Perhaps this is why despite being tried by a religious court, Joan was imprisoned by English jailers instead of the archbishopric prison the Inquisitional Tribunals, which were guarded by women (Pernoud 169): Had she been placed in a nonsecular prison, perhaps the rules for passing would not apply. She might have been free to only take up women's dress according to her voice's will instead of when the Church demanded.

The success of Joan's evasion in describing the Saint's bodies was, however, short lived, as her insistence on receiving Eucharist haunted her throughout the trial. Only the separation from the "Body of Christ", and not the various tortures devices shown to her throughout her imprisonment, forced her to abandon her wit and abjure her traditionally male attire. One must consider the possibility she was tricked into signing a document contrary to her prior testimony, as Feinberg did when alluding to the likelihood she was illiterate: "did she know the exact details of what she was signing? [...] cross-dressing was not a capital offense at that time" (Feinberg 36). Perhaps this is also why she eventually recanted her abjuration; there is no confirmation in

the trial manuscript that she was “tricked” back into male clothing as scholars such as Pernoud have hinted at being the case. If Joan had the agency to defend her choice of clothing in front of the jury the first ten times they asked her why she wore men’s apparel, it seems unlikely that same jury could keep her from the right to wear those clothes—even onto her death.

Her parroting of what the judges, in conjunction with this determination to maintain control over her gender expression, would ultimately cost Joan her life. Her choice to prioritize God’s will over man’s was not only an upset to the Catholic organization: it was an affront to the way the medieval church she fought so valiantly for was organized. When asked if she still pledged allegiance to the Church Militant, she prioritized the Church Triumphant, stating that “as for my sayings and deeds, I place them and refer them in all to God who has made me do all that I have done” (qtd. in Pernoud pg. 204). Unlike her refusal to say the Pater Noster or Ave Maria outside of the council of a clergyman (Trial of Joan of Arc 65), this flagrant denial of the Church’s power on Earth was heretical due to Joan’s choice to follow her voices instead of the edicts of her superiors. With this final statement, Joan was, “forced outside the conventional family of God, king, and subjects, to prey on the very body politic they were groomed to save” (Warner 179), rendering her a pagan other in the eyes of the Catholic Church despite the fact that she prayed to the same God as them. The same strategy of championing the king who would unite France failed her not so much due to her miscalculations in combat, but because her outpouring of emotion was pitiful enough for the same people who championed her in Rheims.

Chapter 2: The Queer Afterlife of Joan of Arc

Although Joan of Arc can be viewed as an example of the warrior woman as modern queer icon due to her subversion of traditional gender norms, it would take several incarnations of her character before the idea of her being anything besides cisgender was discussed.

In the years after her death, a rich tradition where the men crossdressing for battle became a common phenomenon became increasingly common as peasants sought better conditions than the constant misuse of their labor under feudalism. Despite the mention of a few cross-dressing women warriors—including La Branlaire and Liberte (Angelique Brulon), the latter of whom was considered by the French to be the anti-royalist antidote to the monarchist Joan (Feinberg 87)—the decades following Joan’s death have a more pronounced tradition of men donning “women’s clothes” or adopting traditionally feminine names in times of protest. It is not impossible, however, to imagine that many soldiers and strategists who we perceive as cisgender men had complicated relationships with gender, and that their particular androgyny has been lost to time due to poor documentation:

“Does that mean there were no cross-gendered female leaders? As a social science, history, like anthropology, is subject to all the prejudices of the society in which it is based, so historians' sexism may well have skewed their observations, resulting in under-documenting the role of female-to-male leadership.”

(Feinberg 77)

Joan’s posthumous impact on the way we perceive her gender and sexuality can therefore be more immediately witnessed in the way she herself was portrayed in the years after her death. The constant erasure of her male attire in her visual representation is proof that until pieces such

as Carolyn Gage's *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc* were performed, it was only the printed word of the trial and historians like Delcourt, Warner, and Feinberg that saved Joan's gender expression from total erasure.

The Catholic Church & Visual Artwork

It is unlikely that the choice of the Catholic Church to canonize Joan of Arc in 1920 was a coincidence. By choosing the year most white women were given the right to vote, there appears to be a decisive choice on the Vatican's part to use her sainthood as the first step in a long line of attempts to modernize their institution for the twentieth century. If Joan of Arc's canonization was placed before the Vatican in 1869, why did it take 51 years to recognize her efforts? And once her sacrifice for the Catholic Church was acknowledged, why has Johannic scholarship in the years since her canonization dismissed her choice to don traditionally male coded attire as a mere practically?

Since canonization, most discussion of Joan of Arc underscores her nature as a patriot of France who fought against "tyranny" without further discussion as to what her motivations were, or why she chose to fight in men's armor. Ann Midgley in particular attributes a lot of the fervor leading up to Joan's canonization to republicans like Jules Michelet and monarchists including Jules Quicherat proposing that Joan was a symbol worthy of uniting the divided France. This, in addition to the increasing body of artwork which she served as muse for, could have inspired priests like Félix Dupanloup to view her as worthy of sainthood (Midgley 33).

It seems that Joan's inspiration to artists of all backgrounds seems to have played a larger role in invigorating interest in her, however, since artistic renderings of her likeness are the primary channel through which she maintained relevance in society prior to the 19th century.



Figures, Left to Right: “Jeanne is driven in front of her judges” from *Vigiles du Roi Charles VII*; *Jeanne d’Arc at the Siege of Orléans* & *Jeanne at the Stake in Rouen* by Jules Eugène Lenepveu.

A series of illuminations entitled *Les Vigiles du Charles VII Roi*, in addition to portraying the accomplishments of Charles VII, had its own set of illuminations devoted to the exploits of Joan of Arc. Not only do all of these illustrations feature Joan with long, golden hair, but they make a point of featuring her in women’s dresses instead of the traditional masculine dress she became known for in all but two illuminations. This particular depiction of Joan is supposed to depict her capture in Chinon, meaning it could be portraying the moment in which she abjured from her male attire. Given that she is shown outside of castle fortifications, however, it is most likely this is meant to portray Joan before her trial or following her sentencing. The lack of an *en rond* haircut or any sort of supplies for battle ultimately makes Joan more compliant to the requests of the guards that flock her instead of defiant towards their inquisition. One can conclude from this series dating back to only fifty-three years since her execution that distant contemporaries of Joan seemed quick to erase her gender expression in favor of a heteronormative, feminine figure that would make Charles VII appear stronger. By solidifying her appearance as similar to the other women in the illuminations, it becomes easier to

sympathize with Charles VII for the casual audience because in addition to being stripped of her identity, there is no inscription to call into question the king's choice to not pay her ransom.

Revisionism of Joan of Arc's life is also evident in Jules Eugène Lenepveu's *Jeanne d'Arc at the Siege of Orléans* and *Jeanne at the Stake in Rouen*. Part of a four-panel tapestry at the Panthéon de Paris, these renderings of Joan's life, trial, and death are a continuation of the romanticization of her life in the years following her death, but with a neoclassical twist. The *Siege of Orléans* allows her to maintain some semblance of her *en rond* haircut, but it is still tucked under a historically inaccurate plate metal suit of armor which Joan never would have worn. The same dissonance in Joan's appearance occurs with *at the Stake in Rouen*, wherein Lenepveu took liberties with Joan's brief abjuration of dress towards the end of her trial in order to outfit her in a pure white dress. The greater sense of irony comes from Joan's clutching of a golden cross, as the person holding the pole which it is fixed could be Pierre Cauchon, the chief judge in her trial (Peters 357), or any of the other myriad judges who interrogated her at her trial. Whereas Joan's pushing of the cross towards her face allows her to finally stand out, it is the wielding of the cross to the back of the audience which causes the priest condemning her anonymous. Both pieces of this series ultimately demonstrate the neoclassical longing to view Joan of Arc's sacrifices as heroic without the conflict of abandoning the Christian faith. The implication that her suffering can coexist alongside the growth of the Catholic Church seems appalling now but becomes increasingly popular the more artwork inspired by Joan comes into creation. In articulating her suffering, artists such as Lenepveu attempt to continue the crusade to make her more feminine while adding a touch of relatability; unlike the figure of Jesus Christ, her suffering is believed to be fully human, and there is no way to "resurrect" her other than through memories of her actions.



Figures, Left to Right: *Joan of Arc saved France—Women of America, save your country—Buy War Savings Stamps* by Haskell Coffin; *Cover Art for Saint Joan* by Charles de Sousy Ricketts.

Joan of Arc continued to serve as a muse for visual artists throughout the Bourbon Restoration (Midgely 36), where she continued to serve as a defender of monarchy, but it is Joan's influence on World War I advertisements which seems to have had the greatest impact on her legacy in modern times. Advertisements such as *Joan of Arc saved France—Women of America, save your country—Buy War Savings Stamps* played on her recent prominence in the media with her beatification in 1909 to inspire women of the Western world to follow in Joan's stead, albeit in a much more capitalistic sense. This caused her to become a symbol of the World War I war effort (Peters 356) long before Rosie the Riveter came into creation, as her use as a symbol for females to fight with their wallets extended to Great Britain as well. Historically inaccurate plate armor is again combined with rosy cheeks to paint Joan of Arc as cheerful regardless of endeavor. With the mention that any American woman could be like her, Joan's battle is now secularized, emphasizing a battle of good versus evil in a sense that does not immediately recall Catholic colonization. Even her choice of king is not exempt from commodification, as the political nature behind purchasing war stamps implies Joan's money is good anywhere within the purview of the United States military—no monarch necessary. The

Joan of this advertisement, with her crusade for justice removed from her believe in the divine right of kings, is officially a modern woman—at the cost Joan of Arc’s authentic body and soul.

The need to paint Joan of Arc as an explicitly feminine soldier of God, regardless of art style, becomes attached to the goal of perceiving her as a model for cisgender women seeking a place in the conservative Catholic Church. One could conclude that these artworks also served as a precursor of Joan of Arc’s future as a symbol for the right wing politics, with fascist sympathizers Maurice Barrès, Léon Bloy, and Robert Brasillach all using her as an example of a good role model for women due to her patriotism towards her country (Meltzer 93). The problem with reconstructing Joan’s legacy to fit fascist ideals is that her particular brand of monarchism did not discriminate individuals by race or class so much as it placed an emphasis on the king as a unifier of all people. This sentiment is captured well by Françoise Meltzer’s conclusion in her article *Joan of Arc in America* that, “she belongs to France by way of her military victories and patriotic convictions; but she belongs to the Church by way of her faith, for which, ironically enough, the same Church murdered her” (Meltzer 94). It is not enough to view her as a tool for her religion or her country: to accurately discuss Joan of Arc in contemporary times, it is important to understand not only relationship to her gender performance, but how it was a product of the feudal system of medieval, Catholic France.

Joan in the Theater

Joan of Arc similarly served as a muse in the theatrical world, with the first play about her life, *Mystère du Siège d'Orléans*, premiering as late as 1435—four years after her execution (Margolis 269). Despite the many plays that would follow in the centuries to come, however, the theatrical treatments typically associated with Joan in contemporary times are usually either *Saint Joan* by George Bernard Shaw or one of the three plays Bertolt Brecht wrote with her life

and trial as an influence. Fortunately for Joan, these stories do get closer to what she stood for in her own time, but at the cost of minimizing the importance of her gender expression.

Though Shaw and Brecht chose to dramatize the villainy of Pierre Cauchon, this is where the similarity between their respective treatments of Joan end. Shaw ultimately preferred a more literal interpretation of historical facts, choosing to use the actual trial manuscripts as the basis of his play. Brecht, conversely, was more interested in Joan-as-symbol, and the Joan of his plays is always a working class hero instead of a monarchist soldier of God. Important to the reading of *Saint Joan* is the argument that “trials [...] serve merely as window dressing for political expediency, and this determines their outcomes” (Peters 360); his direct confrontation of feudalism is a stark contrast to the thinly veiled allegories found in Brecht not in spite of a desire for a more just world, but because justice is impossible without rebelling against intolerance. By playing off of Joan’s wit and Cauchon’s horror at her legacy, Shaw is asking the audience to consider the dangers of liberal passiveness in light of World War I atrocities. This is most evident in the pose Joan assumes on the *Cover Art for Saint Joan*: her arms stretched out, like Jesus on his crucifix, would serve as an immediate symbol of sacrifice to war-beleaguered Christian audience seeking to reconnect with their religion. Despite having a closer rendering to what Joan might have worn in battle, the tiara hanging from her bowed head is most likely in reference to the fact that the performances of *Saint Joan* this cover are associated with occurred four years after her canonization. It is this elevation to sainthood which Joan might have disliked the most; despite her encounter with a stillborn whom she was able to stir so it could receive its final rites—and thus be buried in a consecrated ground— (Trial of Joan of Arc 96), Joan saw herself as only human. Joan did theoretically fight for injustice as Shaw intends her to; she was just more discreet about how she chose to do so outside of her affiliation with Charles VII. An

emphasis on her saintliness, like the use of her image to sell war stamps, meant to capitalize on people's pre-existing notions about her life. The fact that her costuming is closer to what she would have worn seems to be a coincidence in hindsight, as the tabard dress here is closer than previous attempts to convey her androgyny, if only to add more crosses to the design of her garb.

The meaning of Brecht's Joan of Arc plays, rather than having a consistent theme or conclusion, prefer to replace Joan with a different plucky girl—be it Johanna (*Joan of the Stockyards*), Joan in the eyes of her jurors (*The Trial of Joan of Arc at Rouen, 1431*), or Simone (*The Visions of Simone Machard*) in order to produce a longer, ongoing protest against the nature of totalitarianism. He might have written with the atrocities of World War I in mind like Shaw, but it is more immediately evident that his disdain is directed towards the World War that would occur in the years following. *The Trial of Joan of Arc at Rouen, 1431*'s jurors in particular were written as an allegory for the dangers the Third Reich posed in their rise to power, a concern which he already began to hint at with his disdain for the capitalist war machine in *Joan of the Stockyards*. Julie Stone Peters, author of the article *Joan of Arc Internationale: Shaw, Brecht, and the Law of Nations*, acutely diagnoses the political ills which haunt the symbolic Joans due to Brecht's conflict with the more liberal-minded philosophizing of Shaw:

“Precisely what was wrong with international law was that it finally implicitly sanctioned wars between states (by acknowledging them and reinforcing the will of the victors through treaties), and so implicitly sanctioned the capitalist war machine whose purpose was to trade human lives for the propping up of the economy” (Peters 370)

Although this quote is in reference to how Brecht's anti-war sentiment influenced *The Visions of Simone Machard*, one could argue it applies to the Joan plays in collective due to the

nature of each version of Joan attempting to become a humanitarian through whatever working class channels are available to her. For Johanna Dark, this involves serving soup at a Salvation Army kitchen; for Simone Machard, it is stealing food for refugees. The Joan most historically in line with the actual Joan of Arc, the titular Joan of *The Trial of Joan of Arc at Rouen, 1431*, speaks the least, being silenced when attempting to call into question the policy of the courtroom towards those questioning corruption. These differing personas allow Brecht to condemn the image of Joan as the peasant hero who doubled as a tool for invigorating France's Vichy government (Peters 372). This comes at the cost, however, of discussing the complications regarding Joan's faith and gender expression. This triad of Joan tragedies might be masterworks of anti-fascist drama, but it takes Joan of Arc and uses her again as a sacrifice for a cisgender, heteronormative world without further introspection as to how those systems of gender regulation might have affected her motivations. Although Brecht's reclamation of Joan from fascists is significant in its ability to clarify her dedication to a more just society, the way she fights for justice is on his terms; the individual empowerment of his socialist Joans fight more for the masses of her people than for her king and his people. This is not inherently bad; it just misappropriates her interest in a society with divine leadership.

The Second Coming

The Second Coming of Joan of Arc by Carolyn Gage is ultimately the strongest departure from the attempt to make Joan palatable to the Christian audience. One could argue that instead of being a tool for a particular movement in this one-woman play, Gage's agenda is to analyze the behaviors which inspired Joan's actions during the trial. It is ultimately more fictitious than the Shaw's and Brecht's plays in its blatant argument that Joan of Arc was a lesbian, but this Joan's use of the terms "butch" and "dyke" is no different than the use of her legacy to espouse

capitalistic, liberal, or socialist ideals. With curt statements such as “No, the real problem for civilization comes when a woman decides to invent her own voices and then believe in them. See, that's almost like thinking for yourself” (Gage 98), Joan is no longer a tool for anyone’s government, but rather a person in charge of her own destiny. Her voices still serve as her primary channel of inspiration, but instead of serving as a monolithic carrier of divine decrees, they demonstrate internal conflict with French politics and Catholic society in a way the real Joan of Arc might have struggled. This is not to say this Joan is devoid of religion: she asks the audience, “Is there some happy ending for us that doesn't call for our total spiritual annihilation?” (Gage 100), as if to parallel the spiritual justice Joan claims to have seen in Saint Michael. These intimate moments of critique allow her to maintain a core element of the real Joan of Arc’s gender performance: the pursuit of validation in the eyes of God. In *Second Coming*, this validation may no longer be sought from the God of Christianity—which she swears off later in the play—but a broader connection to the higher power of spirituality as a philosophical entity.

While discussing her eating “strategies”—a thinly veiled homage to the possible eating disorder which Maria Warner credits her lack of menstruation to—Joan addresses further addresses her gender with a validation that echoes the Joan of the actual trials:

“I love my body. My lean body, somewhere between men and women,
somewhere where nobody can catch me. I'm a freak. There's a lot of pain in being
a freak, but there's a lot of respect. People have to deal with you on your own
terms. They can't project their fantasies onto you.” (Gage 102)

The self-love language here is yet another instance of the modernizing Joan of Arc’s speech to fit a more progressive view of body positivity, but this Joan’s belief in the right to avoid having

assumptions made about her appearance does echo the real Joan's belief that only God could judge her mode of dress. If one considers the concept of men and women to be a social construct as the bearded saints and Joan of Arc did in their lifetimes, the opaqueness to Joan of *Second Coming* describing her body using mostly allegorical terms is not totally distant from how Joan might have described her own body. This allows her later belief later that, "But suddenly when I put on my old clothes again, my men's clothes - my human clothes - I came back to myself" (Gage 117), to feel like a spiritual return as well as a moment of emotional validation. Gage's choice to have Joan come to this conclusion following her choice to recant her abjuration instead of when she discusses her actual body allows the distinction of the clothes as not mere for people who identify as male to seem in line with her philosophical approach towards religion.

Between Shaw, Brecht, and Gage, there is no such thing as a correct adaptation of Joan of Arc's life. Each has their strengths in terms of reclaiming her for the political left, but it is *Second Coming* which distinguishes itself as the most vulnerable and humane treatment. Perhaps, by treating Joan as more of a human with emotion than a political figure with more weapons than intentions, Gage has ushered in a new era of the Johannic drama that allows Joan to repossess her body from the Catholic Church.

Chapter 3: The “Sword Lesbian” Archetype in Theater

Talking about Joan of Arc is easy compared to trying to understand my relationship with the “warrior woman” archetype. Why does the idea of writing about the politics of women at war fascinate me so much if I generally consider myself to be a pacifist and would not last two minutes in a combat zone? Blaming the romanticization of war seems almost too easy, but I cannot say I was deluded by the promise that writing about women warriors would be tantamount to “girl power”. My time in the political studies department had introduced me to socialist policies in addition to historical anomalies, and I knew much of what I personally believed would be tested with the introduction of ancient but real female war criminals.

I do recognize that the women warriors and “sword lesbians” are different entities, but for my senior project it felt essential to unpack the synergy the two seem to share in my mind. For the sake of clarity, I define the sword lesbian as an individual—usually a cisgender woman, but it could also be a nonbinary person assigned woman at birth or a transgender woman—who uses her skills with weaponry and charisma to undergo a character arc not unlike the hero’s journey, but with the usual addition of a queer coded or canonical relationship with another woman/ “female” identity-aligned individual. Examples of the sword lesbian whom I had encountered prior to the creation of this senior project included Xena from *Xena: Warrior Princess*, Oscar de la Roca from *The Rose of Versailles*, Utena Tenjou from *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, and Adora from *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*.

I devoted all of my in-class playwriting projects to creating historical dramas with lesbians as the protagonists, and I had figured trying to finally devote time to writing a romance between a princess and a warrior woman would not be much different. Obviously, I was wrong—to write about a castle of my own imagination has proven trickier than analyzing the

conflicts of a real kingdom—but I do still believe that much like Carolyn Gage, my increased knowledge of Joan of Arc inspired me to write a play that allows the warrior woman to no longer be put on a pedestal.

Sword Lesbians: A History?

Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Warriors* hints at the use of cross-dressing up until the 15th century during theatrical productions sponsored by the church at the Feast of Fools (Feinberg 70). In a similar fashion, the works of playwrights featured in *The Female Wits: Women Playwrights of the Restoration* indicate that just as quickly as the Feast of Fools was banned for its condoning of crossdressing, there were plenty of women willing to switch out the conversion of men into women found in those church-sponsored follies with women dressing up as men. This, of course, gets complicated if one adds that in several western countries, women were not allowed to perform on the stage during the Restoration period—the women in plays then became men or boys performing as women who cross-dressed as men. These convoluted plotlines where a woman disguising as a boy or young man is essential to her success and survival mostly hinged on her doing so to find love or reunite with a male relative. This, in conjunction with the evolution of opera to include “trouser roles” for women with lower voice ranges, was about all I could find regarding the opportunities for women who deviated from the norms of daughter, wife, or mother.

Few, if any, of the plays seemed to point to the serious discussion of warrior women; if they appear as principal characters, they usually became the butt of a male soldier's joke or are meant to be the object of a man's affection. *Saint Joan*, the Joan of Arc plays by Bertold Brecht, and *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc* appeared to be the only exception.

Not feeling inspired by the exploits of the talented but very stereotypical women featured in *The Female Wits*, I decided to try and see what the world of film and television had to offer in terms of representation for warrior women. My two choices, if I did not want to immediately refer back to the animations which introduced me to the concept of the sword lesbian, were either poorly received biopics or exploitation films. Although *Xena: Warrior Princess* held promising—albeit historically inaccurate and campy—glimmers of queerness in its titular protagonist and her relationship with her travel partner, Gabrielle, they were eventually killed off in later seasons. I had been deterred from watching this show prior to the creation of this senior project because I had heard of Xena and Gabrielle being victims of the “bury your gays” troupe, and I had been proven right. “Bury your gays”, the phenomenon wherein a LGBTQ+ character dies after even just an episode of happiness or character development (LGBT Fans Deserve Better), was all too familiar to me in my experience of watching *The Rose of Versailles* and *Revolutionary Girl Utena* in my teenage years. Despite the copious amount of literature, I found on how Xena had impacted LGBTQ+ representation and fandom networking, I eventually moved on from the show in search of more positive references.

Meanwhile in the political studies department, I was overwhelmed. After discovering just how many “warrior women” had been erased from common history textbooks, I desperately wanted to view gender as *a* factor, rather than *the* factor, in determining what causes a warrior woman to be deemed heroic or politically significant. The truth, however, is that I wanted to imagine what it would look like to see the impact of war and politics from an explicitly “feminine” background. Ideally, I also wanted to focus on a woman whose fight appeared to be against oppression. This turned out to be the more difficult task, as the queens and noblewomen

who acted on the behalf of their deceased husbands or young sons were usually as bloodthirsty as the men whose throne they had inherited.

It was at this juncture I chose to focus on Joan of Arc. Although she supported her country's monarchy, her dedication her own definition of spiritual justice, her working class background, and the numerous interpretations of her life made me wonder if there was more to her legacy than twelve years of Catholic school trauma helped bury. Her choice of traditionally male attire particularly fascinated me, as the only other examples of women using men's clothing to distinguish themselves were more focused on ruling their kingdoms than battle. Since my definition of the sword lesbian expands to people assigned female at birth who might not necessarily identify with traditional womanhood, it made sense to incorporate a warrior woman who did not adhere to strict gender roles as my research topic and theatrical muse.

Points of Contention

Before I abandoned the idea of studying specific film and theater movements in favor of creating my own quasi-canon of sword lesbians, I had read Andrea Wright's article *A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing? The Problematic Representation of Women and the Female Body in 1980s Sword and Sorcery Cinema*. Still in search of an answer for why sword lesbians did not seem to exist outside the pop culture bubble I had plucked them from, I came up with a list of characteristics the warrior women of Wright's film topics seemed to possess:

- 1) A "good" swordswoman does not seek power for herself, but to restore "peace" to society.
- 2) Once social order has been restored, she returns to "normal" life as daughter/wife/mother
- 3) Heterosexuality or chastity is essential; if she's interested in women, she's a villain.

- 4) Austerity in all things is essential; if she experiences any desire, she's a villain.
- 5) She's always the best person for the job, unless there's a more capable man in the room.

One thing is common in *The Rose of Versailles*, *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*: In order for the “sword lesbian” to find freedom and do what they consider to be justice, they have to remove themselves from the state system entirely. Oscar does this by removing herself from Marie Antoinette’s royal guard, then the French military entirely, only to die shortly before the storming of the Bastille. Utena does this by “revolutionizing the world”, a heavily allegorical process wherein she was attacked by swords from all angles in order to free her girlfriend Anthy from the suffering imposed on her by the abusive men in her life. Adora seems to be the only sword lesbian to conquer “bury your gays”; after confessing her love to Catra, her enemy-turned-love-interest, she is able to summon the persona of She-Ra and save their home planet from total apocalypse. Each of these endings is virtuous in its own fashion, but none of them avoid all five characteristics their warrior women counterparts were subject to within American exploitation films.

There was also a moment of profound romance in *The Second Coming* which I sought to subvert in my own work:

“Sometimes we would pretend we were on a very small boat in the ocean and I had rescued her, and I would hold her in my arms and my heart would be so full of tenderness it made me feel lightheaded. Or sometimes we would pretend that she had found me wounded in the forest and had taken me to her cottage, where she would bandage my wounds and cover me with kisses. Hauviette and I were more than best friends. We were one soul.” (Gage 116)

I wondered what it would be like to ultimately have two sapphic characters disagree, separate, then reunite, only to clash once more until a literal calamity forced them to realize the parts of each other they loved. From Gage's Joan, who denies her sexuality, came the tribulation—but ultimate happiness—of two sapphic individuals. Hauviette did testify at Joan's trial (Pernoud 17), but because of the romantic thoughts imposed here. She seems to have been credible enough to support Joan's virtuous character as a young woman, but this is the only time she appears within Joan's life and trial.

Without misconstruing the legacy of Joan, I began to write a world in which class struggle was still a serious conflict, but it did not sap the life of the individuals who sought to disrupt the social hierarchy. Instead of imaging the risk of rape on the battlefield, as Gage's Joan of Arc is subject to later in the play, I wanted to see what love would look like in the court room. It was optimistic—cliché, even—but at this point I could see my script leaning towards melodrama and I wanted to embrace it with open arms.

Developing the Script

I chose not to directly include Joan of Arc in my play because doing so would have come at the cost of authenticity (like *Second Coming*). If my goal with this piece was to imagine a world where queer individuals did not fall prey to “bury your gays”, Joan would have almost certainly become a historically inaccurate caricature of herself. If I chose a “happy” ending—such as Joan escaping execution by replacing herself with a decoy—I most likely would have chosen historical inaccuracy (Warner and Pernoud are certain that Joan did, in fact burn at the stake) or ethical dilemma: what makes Joan immune to execution, but not her decoy?

I quickly realized that if I was fascinated by Joan of Arc's story because she was—to my knowledge—one of the only “working class” warrior woman—why not imagine another woman in a similar circumstance as her? I do think trying to give a swordswoman with desire primary billing in her own story allows her ambitions to become clearer without taking away from the larger story. Rather, she adds to the story by becoming an actual participant instead of a plot device. And thus, Vera was born: a chaotic neutral mercenary turned vulnerable by the kindness of another woman. Vera originally used exclusively she/her pronouns, but after I cast Isa I switched their pronouns in the script to they/them for two reasons: first, because I wanted to reflect the unique opportunity of working with a member of the nonbinary portion of the lesbian community; and second, because the more research I accrued on the nature of Joan's attire, I wanted to explore the possibility of cultivating a nonbinary sword lesbian character in a non-fantasy setting.

Sophia was a trickier character to develop due to her social status as a princess. Although I attempted to tread the line between sympathetic and selfish, with her naivete serving as the crux of her character arc, I still worry that perhaps I made her too demanding or not engaged within the story's conflict. Julia truly became an ideal person to collaborate on this character with because her history major, combined with her interest in concentrating on women's history, allowed us to compare notes on how to keep Sophia authentic to her time and station while giving her opportunities for rebellion.

Making the land Sophia and Vera inhabit a matriarchy was important to me because I believed it would help underscore that power corrupts regardless of gender. So much marketing towards women frames “girl boss” capitalism as the solution to a rapidly spiraling economy and increasingly divisive society. I am of the opinion that this only hinders the needs of intersectional

feminism, which is the only kind of feminism which is truly inclusive towards lesbians and other queer women. True equality, in both Sophia and Vera's world and the reality I choose to live in, means holding people accountable for their faults regardless of gender. Matriarchy therefore does not become so much of a solution, but a reminder of the contention within states that rely on oligarchies. It also allows Sophia and Vera to conflict more authentically because the inequalities of their world are largely driven by class.

Again, it was important for me not to engage in historical revisionism for the sake of artistic cohesion, so I do not regret my decision to make the dramaturgical background vaguely medieval instead of explicitly setting the play in France or some other European country. The goal of *A Hero's Journey* was not to make a story that was anti-Catholic, but rather deviate from Catholic hypocrisies towards gender and sexuality. A true deviation from Catholic hypocrisies might have benefitted from the introduction of assigned male at birth or transmasculine characters, but I wanted to make sure the romance between the two characters was uninterrupted by a heterosexual love triangle imposed by the casual audience member.

Rehearsals & Filming

Although the blocking for the theatrical rehearsals ended up changing during filming to accommodate COVID-19 guidelines, I still believe it was important to create gestures with the actors that would allow Sophia and Vera to express chemistry beyond standard dialogue. The chance to rehearse with them prior to filming gave Isa, Julia, and I not only the opportunity to test reactions the characters would have to each other, but for us to exchange questions about each plot point and why it was significant.

For fight choreography, we had the advantage that Akiva and Isa were previously involved with Bard's Fight Club. After they improvised for a few minutes, we filled in details about motivations of the fight choreography for the first scene, as well as the assailants Vera and Sophia would face in the second scene. For the first scene, most of the motivation for Sophia concerned her curiosity with the unknown, or "other", while Vera's motivation was deciding whether or not Sophia was a threat to the group of rebels they would later lead in the second scene. As for the second scene, the invisible assailants became the castle guards seeking to overthrow Sophia.

I was profoundly grateful for a chance to mix devised theater practices which I had learned while working on Mad Forest and in Directing Seminar with the interest Isa, Julia, and I shared in trying to bring a queer love story to life on camera. The use of film, though fitting due to the nature of my inspirations all being digital media, was a practicality to ensure people who did not live on Bard campus or were not attending the Senior Project Festival had an opportunity to witness the play in action.

Chapter 4: Copy of "A Hero's Journey" Script

SCENE I - SUNSET

VERA enters by crossing into the center of the garden, stopping to meet the curtain in front of them. Their eyes move left and right in a cautious search for possible agitators. Right before they can comfortably enter behind the curtain, VERA begins to practice their fighting skills. Their exceptional fighting skills are practically drilled into their body. SOPHIA walks into the view of the curtain. She pulls the curtain back for a moment, giggles, then retreats behind it once more when she sees VERA abruptly stops their fighting.

SOPHIA

Are you enjoying the party?

VERA turns to look at the curtain but does not touch it. They turn their back to the curtain, shuffle into a kind of "at ease" stance and sheath their sword-but does not let go of its hilt.

VERA

I just got here, actually.

SOPHIA

Perhaps I could show you around then?

VERA does not move, so it is up to SOPHIA to leave the comfort behind the curtain and tap VERA on the shoulder. VERA, surprised by SOPHIA's gentle finger, points their sword at the mystery woman. SOPHIA takes a deep breath in, then steps in front of the sword. VERA lowers the sword and begins to trail behind SOPHIA. They begin walking around the garden but remain within the perimeter of the curtain.

SOPHIA

So what is it that you do?

VERA

I fight where the price-or the cause-is right.

SOPHIA

Where are my manners? I don't even know your name.

VERA

I'm Vera.

SOPHIA

Of...?

VERA

Wherever the next job takes me.

SOPHIA

Clever.

VERA

And you are?

SOPHIA

Just Sophia is fine.

VERA

Well played.

SOPHIA

How do I know you're not here to murder me?

VERA

I guess it depends on if you're typically this charitable to every woman who arrives at-what I imagine is your very luxurious home-with a sword.

SOPHIA

I'm not. But then again, none of them are as cocky-or as beautiful-as you.

VERA

(She blushes?)

So you've had attempts made on your life before.

SOPHIA

Yes, but usually I don't have to worry about them for long.

VERA

So you have other people take care of those pesky assassins for you?

SOPHIA

I'd fight back if I knew how. If I needed to.

VERA

So in other words, you're a princess?

SOPHIA

In title, yes. But I doubt I'm the first princess you've met.

VERA

Well, you are the first princess in a while that seems willing to talk to me.

SOPHIA

So no contact? With any other princesses at all?

VERA

I wouldn't say no contact.

SOPHIA

Show me how to fight, then.

VERA improvises some sparring exercises, which SOPHIA struggles to replicate. Eventually VERA drops her sword and moves behind SOPHIA to help her replicate the steps.

SOPHIA

I can't believe you're able to remember all these motions.

VERA

It becomes routine.

SOPHIA and VERA resume walking and eventually pause to sit under a tree. The two quietly look up at the sky. It's nice, but the pause is palpable.

SOPHIA

Does it hurt? When you kill someone?

VERA

I spend a lot of time trying to forget the people I've hurt had lives before I fought them. The first time I killed someone, I did feel sick for a couple days. I couldn't eat or sleep, but I didn't really indulge in either that much to begin with. I constantly feel like there's a hole in my stomach, even when I'm not wounded.

(pause)

So yeah, it does sting sometimes. Sometimes I'm lucky enough to forget the fact that the person I'm battling is, well, a person. But when I have to wash the blood off my clothes it's hard to pretend I didn't just stab someone's mother or daughter.

SOPHIA

Can I show you something?

VERA

Oh, sure.

SOPHIA offers VERA her hand; they take it. They both walk over to a corner of the garden where a patch of violets is tightly clustered together. SOPHIA gently brushes the flower stems downward with one hand, then wriggles a tile out of the wall with her other hand. As she does this, VERA takes a cursory look behind them to make sure no one has been following them.

SOPHIA

Sometimes I'll send letters out of the castle from here.

VERA

You don't strike me as someone who would want-or need-to keep secrets.

SOPHIA

It's not like I enjoy hiding things from people. It's just nice to have a channel where I know the person taking the papers won't share them with other people.

VERA

And who receives these papers?

SOPHIA

Depends on who I'm corresponding with at the time. Maybe I could even send you a letter from time to time?

VERA

If you can find me, then sure.
(Their facade breaks just a bit)
But why would you trust me?

SOPHIA

I'm sure I'll find a reason to understand my judgement someday.

VERA

Why bother with all this secrecy? You might as well leave everything behind.

SOPHIA

I can't abandon my family. Don't you have one of your own?

VERA

No.

SOPHIA

Oh...

VERA

It's much simpler that way.

SOPHIA

You don't miss having company?

VERA

I find company where I can. Like right now.

SOPHIA

Somehow I doubt that's enough.

VERA

I've never had "enough" of anything my entire life.

SOPHIA

Well, I guess it's not all cracked up to be. I would love to do something impulsive for once in my life.

VERA throws SOPHIA their sword. SOPHIA winces, but manages to catch it.

VERA

Fight me!

SOPHIA

Are you crazy?

VERA

Yes.

SOPHIA

You saw me try to copy your practices earlier, and I couldn't even do that!

VERA

That's because I've been training for years. But you're only distracting yourself. Try attacking me!

SOPHIA and VERA "spar", with VERA deflecting SOPHIA's movements easily. When the sword eventually falls out of SOPHIA's hands, she tries to "attack" VERA with her hands, but VERA tackles her.

VERA

You're...too trusting.

SOPHIA

You haven't done anything to hurt me yet. Why should I worry?

They kiss as the curtain drops.

SCENE II - NIGHT

Several months following Scene I. SOPHIA walks down the garden path. A rustling in the bushes is heard. She stops, hears nothing, and passes the bush. The rustling gets louder, until we realize it was VERA trying to cut through the forest.

VERA

Sophia!

VERA goes to embrace SOPHIA, but she rebuffs their advance.

Don't you remember me?

SOPHIA

Don't be ridiculous. I just needed to make sure it was you.

VERA

I suppose that makes sense.

SOPHIA tries to take VERA's hand into their as they walk towards the tree, but their hands drift apart. An awkward silence persists. SOPHIA sits down under the tree; VERA paces in a circle next to her.

SOPHIA

So...

VERA

How have you been?

SOPHIA

Not great.

VERA

Same. So about the letters you sent-

SOPHIA

You got them?

VERA

Of course I did!

SOPHIA

But you stopped responding. Why?

VERA

I...was busy.

SOPHIA

So was I. You couldn't find time to write back?

VERA

I figured it would be easier if I confronted you in person.
Thankfully the castle's layout hasn't changed too much.

SOPHIA

It's a miracle you were able to get inside with the
reinforcements I've been sending out front.

VERA stops pacing and faces SOPHIA.

VERA

That was your doing?

SOPHIA

I had to protect my people.

VERA

Your "people" are starving.

SOPHIA

Not all of them-

VERA

So is it true then? That you've been withholding food from the
peasants?

SOPHIA

I would never intentionally starve any of my people. I didn't
find out food was becoming scarce until they stopped delivering
goods here a few days ago. People started to flee the castle,
but no one would tell me why whenever I asked. Perhaps I should

have asked my mother more questions. But I've had to start acting on her-our-behalf.
An awkward pause; SOPHIA tries to move closer to VERA.
How did you get past the guards?

VERA
It doesn't really matter now. I had to kill most of them to get to you.

SOPHIA takes a step back.

SOPHIA
You killed them even though there was a chance they could be protecting me?

VERA
Let's get back to you thinking you could be acting on the people's behalf. Have you even left the castle lately?

SOPHIA
I've been consumed by trying to establish some sort of contact with you. When I heard there was a woman uniting some of the rebels in town...

VERA
...You thought I'd abandoned you.

SOPHIA
More or less. I thought you might as well have been dead with the way people have been fighting to avoid this famine. That, or you thought I was a monster for not saving more people.

VERA
I'm sorry.

SOPHIA
What?

VERA
I'm not used to caring for someone else besides myself. I figured maybe if I didn't respond to your letters you would stop

caring and I'd stop feeling like the hole in my body was widened
by your absence. I knew I couldn't defend you.

SOPHIA

Mourning you became easier than looking around to see who was
alive. So I chose to write letters instead of going outside. I
thought maybe it would keep me from noticing the world around me
was crumbling beyond my control.

VERA

Come with me.

SOPHIA

What?

VERA

There's an encampment on the outskirts of this capital but
ultimately we're headed towards the forest so we can gather more
supplies-

SOPHIA

But you don't know where you're going after that, do you?

VERA

I'll know as soon as I hear back from my comrade later tonight.

VERA gets down on one knee.

VERA

Please. The crew could use you. We...I could be your family.

SOPHIA

No.

VERA stands up.

VERA

Why?

SOPHIA

It's not that simple. I have responsibilities.

VERA

And you think I don't? I abandoned everyone-and everything-I've organized to come rescue you!

SOPHIA

Maybe I don't need to be rescued. Perhaps everything I need is already here.

VERA

Your responsibilities have left you alone and defenseless in a near-empty fortress. If you have anything you need, it'll most likely disappear very soon.

SOPHIA

Why are you in such a rush anyway?

VERA

Why aren't you? You have more at stake. If you don't come with me, you'll probably be killed by the onslaught of hungry peasants looking for food.

SOPHIA

I don't know what to do. I just know leaving isn't the answer.

VERA

You want to help your people right?

SOPHIA

Of course.

VERA

You can't do that here. Not anymore.

SOPHIA

Do you expect me to leave my poor mother here?

VERA

Is she even still alive?

SOPHIA

She's been bedridden for weeks.

VERA

You don't have to bear the weight of her failure to contain the
famine alone.

SOPHIA

I'm not. She'll be fine. This is just a hiccup.

VERA

I know you're not this much of a coward.

SOPHIA

And I know you're not this selfish.

VERA begins to walk away from SOPHIA.

I want to be with you, Vera. But I'm not a skilled fighter. All
I have is my mind.

VERA

Nobody is expecting you to pick up a sword and slash your way
through these problems.

SOPHIA

But isn't that all you know?

VERA

Just because I didn't respond to your letters doesn't mean I
didn't cherish them.

VERA produces SOPHIA'S letters from her bag. SOPHIA looks at the
letters with a brief glance, then crosses her arms.

SOPHIA

So you took all the information I sent you, and thought your
best decision was to hack and slash your way through my castle?

VERA

I didn't bring anyone else with me to talk to you. I had to
defend myself.

SOPHIA

Why couldn't you have written ahead? You wouldn't have had to
kill the guards. I wouldn't have been worried sick about if I

would ever see you again! And we probably wouldn't be fighting right now. We could have come up with a plan.

VERA throws the letters on the ground in front of SOPHIA.

VERA

Because people are already dying! To try and sit down for hours, knowing that I could never match the prose and poetry of your letters was terrifying. Even if I tried, I never would have been able. But these letters felt like a key to getting back to you far quicker.

SOPHIA picks up one of the letters off the ground. She studies it for a moment and becomes progressively heartbroken rereading it. It looks like she is about to rip the letter until VERA notices some patterns on the back of the paper. She rips it out of SOPHIA's hand.

SOPHIA

What are you doing?

VERA

I'm trying to see something.

VERA turns the paper around and notices some sketches on the corner-perhaps a body of water. VERA then kneels down and begins to try and arrange the letters on the floor. SOPHIA crosses her arms and looks on in confusion.

Can you help me arrange these letters by the date you sent them to me?

SOPHIA

I can try.

SOPHIA tries to assist VERA in arranging the letters. SOPHIA eventually pauses, however, out of disgruntled frustration, and studies VERA's movements. VERA only speeds up in their attempt to put the pieces together.

VERA

Something's missing.

SOPHIA

What are you talking about? I wrote to you every other week after I noticed my letters were not going through.

VERA

Were there any letters that you did not have a chance to send yet?

SOPHIA

Let me see.

VERA continues to rearrange the letters while SOPHIA looks behind the tiled wall. SOPHIA retrieves some letters from the wall and begins to help VERA arrange the papers on the floor. VERA and SOPHIA finish and take a moment to admire their handiwork.

VERA

What is this?

SOPHIA

It looks like a rendering of the capital city.

VERA

Did you know you were sending this when you were writing me?

SOPHIA

Not really. I ran out of paper and was just trying to scribble on whatever I could get my hands on.

VERA

For a woman with your intellect, you didn't realize you were sending me an entire map?

She points to the river.

SOPHIA

It's somewhat outdated; this river has been occupied by the peasants for a few weeks now-

VERA

Why do you keep assuming the peasants are the ones doing everything?

SOPHIA

What, you think your band of rebels has a monopoly on attacking me?

VERA

Not really, but I haven't seen any roving bands of pitchfork wielders storming these areas that you're worried about.

SOPHIA

If you come with me to the study I can show you where we think they've been organizing.

VERA

Those could be my people for all you know.

SOPHIA

What difference does it make? I have to get it back.

VERA

For you, or your "people"?

SOPHIA

Well, both of course.

VERA

So it doesn't really matter who's there, does it?

SOPHIA

Of course it does. They're probably withholding access to water from the peasants.

VERA

So now you don't think the peasants are involved?

SOPHIA sighs.

SOPHIA

I just want to restore peace and balance like everyone expects me to do. Who cares if it's the peasants or your rebels occupying the space?

VERA

Because they're doing something right now that your mother-and you-couldn't: connect.

SOPHIA

It's not that I don't want to, it's just-

VERA

I think trying to confront people scares you-

SOPHIA

I DON'T KNOW!

SOPHIA starts crying.

I was taught theory but not practice. How am I supposed to go out of the castle and contend prices with someone in a market if I only understand how the numbers work on paper? The books I read as a child no longer work in adulthood. If I even look outside these garden walls, there's sure to be a world vastly separate from the one I used to believe in-

VERA hugs SOPHIA. SOPHIA puts her hands on VERA's shoulders.

VERA

Take me to the study anyway. As long as we're looking at a recent map, surely we'll be able to think of something, right?

As VERA bends to pick up the "map pieces", SOPHIA gasps. Actual intruders-invisible to the audience, but very much real for VERA and SOPHIA-have appeared.

VERA unsheathes their sword and begins to fight back. SOPHIA attempts to duck and cower from the assailants, and trips over VERA's shield. She's able to quickly roll over and grab the shield. SOPHIA is then able to put up a good fight until one on the invisible assailants slashes her arm.

She yelps from the pain but continues to defend herself until she collapses. VERA executes the last of the assailants and runs to her aid.

VERA
Are you alright?

SOPHIA
Yes, but-

SOPHIA shows VERA her arm. VERA carries her to the tree so she can rest.

VERA
Are you hurt anywhere else?

SOPHIA
No, if you just-

VERA
Wait here. I'll get help.

SOPHIA
Please don't go. I can tell you how to wrap it if you can rip off a piece of cloth from my dress.

VERA rips a modest piece of cloth off the bottom of SOPHIA's dress.

VERA
Ok...what next?

SOPHIA
Tie it around my arm.
VERA ties the cloth around the upper half of her arm.

SOPHIA
Again.

VERA ties the cloth around a second time, but ties it tighter.

SOPHIA

Agh-

VERA

Sorry!

SOPHIA

Again.

VERA

Am I doing something wrong?

SOPHIA

No-

SOPHIA almost faints, but VERA holds SOPHIA in their arms. They tie the tourniquet around a final time. They sigh.

SOPHIA

I'm fine, I'm fine!

SOPHIA stands up and goes to pick up VERA's sword. Shocked, VERA jumps up and tries to steady her, but SOPHIA waves her away with her good arm. SOPHIA recoils after failing to wield the sword properly but continues to try and spar with it. She falls on her knees.

SOPHIA

This is ridiculous. If I can't even heal myself, how am I going to heal you, or this country-

VERA

I'll help you.

SOPHIA

You've done enough.

Pause. VERA sheaths their sword and gathers their shield.

SOPHIA

Wait!

VERA turns around.

SOPHIA

I didn't mean it like that.

SOPHIA struggles-but succeeds-to get up.

What do you think will happen if I leave?

VERA

We probably won't be in the same place for too long, but you would be able to pass on all this information you've given me better than I could.

SOPHIA

Really?

VERA

Why not? I did just save you from dying right now, didn't I?

SOPHIA

I don't know if I'm as smart as you think I am.

VERA gives SOPHIA their shield. SOPHIA holds the shield with her wounded arm.

VERA

If you come with me, you'll have plenty of time to prove me wrong. But here's why I think I'm right: You're stubborn, but you know when to deliver a message. You have a cautiousness that outweighs any callous decisions I might make. Most important: you still believe the world we live on is capable of saving.

A pause.

SOPHIA

Ok, so where do we start?

END OF PLAY

Conclusion

As much as I would love to think Joan of Arc was a socialist lesbian who successfully manipulated the French court using her wits and gender fluidity, this would be an inaccurate and reductive portrayal of her legacy. The life she led was far more expansive than any gender or sexuality label could contain not only because of her choice of apparel, but because her gender expression took the tradition of bearded women saints and repurposed it to suit her quest for divine justice.

An essential part of this paper is not claiming that Joan of Arc was neither lesbian, nor transgender, nor non-binary; rather, it is essential to underscore her lack of heteronormative characteristics as their own sort of identity because of how they have been erased by scholars, artists, and theologians. The reason why we should not make claims about Joan of Arc's sexuality or gender is not because she fits into prescribed gender norms, but rather because she destroys them. Both as a warrior and as an individual she deliberately deviated from what we now claim as heterosexuality and cisgender identity to underscore her connection to God regardless of the Catholic Church's opinion. To label her as anything other than a woman who wore traditionally male attire would be to contribute to a long history of adding personalities to Joan which she did not actually claim.

She was neither royalty, nor a strategist based in theory or academics, but her ability to invert Catholic expectations for androgyny is a political tool worthy of its own commendation. She was also not a traditional Catholic saint or French martyr; her personal connection to God was akin to the practice of divine right. All these qualities, when combined with her disconnect with traditional medieval womanhood, are essential to consider when one feels compelled to create art inspired by her life and legacy.

Rather than try to imagine a fictitious world where her identity suited my theatrical goal to increase representation of lesbians in historical drama, however, I created my own play wherein the warrior woman was influenced by Joan's androgyny and courage. I think this, instead of an attempt to repurpose Joan of Arc to fit my intended goal of bringing the "sword lesbian" archetype to the stage, was the more artistically fulfilling choice for the performance piece.

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