

*H-France Review* Vol. 1 (June 2001), No. 15

**Régine Pernoud and Marie-Véronique Clin.** *Joan of Arc: Her Story*. Trans. and rev. Jeremy duQuesnay Adams. Ed. Bonnie Wheeler. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999. xxii + 304 pp. Appendices, maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$14.95 US (pb). ISBN 0-312-22730-2.

Review by Rene S. Marion, Ball State University.

Régine Pernoud and Marie-Véronique Clin's *Joan of Arc: Her Story* is a fascinating book. A multi-sectioned work, it offers several approaches to the study of this appealing historical figure. A collaborative work, *Her Story* offers tantalizing glimpses into a community of Johannine scholars and highlights their admiration for Pernoud—to whom this edition is dedicated.

The heart of the book is a tight, beautifully written, and engaging portrait of Joan of Arc. The authors eschew the convention of a birth-to-death biography for a structure and chronology that privileges the production of written evidence. The bulk of the text follows the roughly two years from 1429 to 1431 when Joan's life as a military leader and a prisoner made her a public figure and the subject of considerable discussion. Pernoud and Clin, therefore, begin their account with the first recorded rumors announcing Joan's travels from the village of Domrémy in Lorraine to see the dauphin Charles in Chinon and end with an analysis of the testimony collected for the 1456 trial that overturned her conviction of heresy. This biography then begins when Joan was a young adult and ends, twenty-five years after her death, with a discussion of her childhood.

We follow Joan as if on pilgrimage (in more ways than one: the authors' descriptions of the current state of landmarks in Joan's history, such as the Castle of Beaulieu near Noyon and the Castle of Beaufort in Rouen where Joan was held as prisoner, suggests that they have retraced her travels) through a narrative rich with detail. *Her Story* sets the scene with Joan's appearance in the written record and with her claims that she will free Orléans, a city under siege by the English and on the verge of collapse. It follows the hurdles she must jump to gain access to and support of the dauphin Charles—including examinations by clergy at Chinon and Poitiers; her transformation to military commander with troops and supplies; her victory at Orléans; the coronation of Charles VII at Rheims; Joan's demotion to minor command as Charles' government sought a diplomatic end to the Hundred Years' War; and her capture by the Burgundian allies of the English at Compiègne. Pernoud and Clin then recount her treatment as a prisoner and her trial and execution as a heretic. Finally, they discuss the nullification trial and provide an analysis of her early life as it emerges through the testimony gathered for this second trial. The authors have minimal interest in using Joan as a prism through which to address broader themes of the period, such as the politics of the Hundred Years War, religious principles and rivalries dividing "French" territory, or even conceptions of gender in the fifteenth century. (A helpful overview of the Hundred Years' War and the Great Schism is provided by the translator Jeremy duQuesnay Adams.)

Each of these issues emerges at least implicitly in the text, but as the book's subtitle states--a subtitle added, for emphasis I presume, in the English addition--it is Joan in and of herself that interests the authors. Their intent is to mine the written record in order to provide the fullest and richest possible portrait of Joan. To this end, Joan certainly presents a unique opportunity to the historian. As translator Adams points out in his preface, "we know more details about her short life than we do of any other human being before her time (including Plato, or Alexander of Macedon, or Julius Caesar, or Jesus Christ) and for several centuries thereafter" (p. xvi). Published sources have long been available, since the trial transcripts, first edited by Jules Quicherat, were published between 1841 and 1849.

Despite this relative wealth of documentation about Joan of Arc's life, *Her Story* suggests that we understand her less well than we ought. In part, this situation exists because of the difficulties that historians face in disentangling the person, Joan, from the myths that quickly arose about her. Contemporaries must have found Joan of Arc rather difficult to understand, so it is not so hard to imagine why her advocates and enemies alike resorted to mythic characterizations of her. One early example comes from the young Guy de Laval, shortly after his first encounter with Joan of Arc in 1429: "I see her dressed entirely in white except for her head, a little ax in her hand, mount her horse, a great black charger, which reared up so fiercely at the gate of her lodging and would not allow her to mount; and so she said, 'Take him to the cross' before the church down the street. There she mounted him without any resistance, as though he had been tied" (p. 58). White conquers black; faith and purity trumps savagery! [1] Over time, our understanding of Joan of Arc has also been obscured by the individuals and groups whose causes she has served--from the personal ambitions of the women who pretended to be Joan of Arc (saved from death at the stake) to the nationalist claims of far-right political movements in twentieth-century France. [2] Pernoud and Clin attempt to separate these stories from *her story* by ascertaining "what is known with relative certainty about the inexhaustibly fascinating Joan of Arc" (xi). [3]

By working from the sources generated between 1429 and the end of the nullification trial, Pernoud and Clin present a vibrant and admiring portrait of Joan of Arc. The latter emerges as strong, stubborn, directed, devoted, courageous, and compassionate. The authors highlight her wit--even in the face of her judges--and her "limpid skills as an orator" (p. 224). The Joan of Arc portrayed here was a woman who adapted quickly to new circumstances, favored action over diplomacy, and, except in the lowest moments of her captivity, never doubted her cause or her course of action. The narrative offers a view of Joan's life from close range, using the perceptions and actions of both her friends and enemies--from the loyal Duke of Alençon to the waffling support of Charles VII and the bitter hostility of the ambitious, immoral Pierre Cauchon, who directed her trial in Rouen--to make sense of Joan and her fate. The authors use these personal relations--the loyalty and respect offered by her troops and the protection offered by both supporters and detractors of Charles' government alike, for example--to gauge her character and her talents and to illustrate the effect of her presence on those around her. The trial testimony of Jean de Metz and Bertrand de Poulengy provides just one example of the powerful impact Joan of Arc had on those she encountered. Young men chosen to accompany Joan on her eleven-day voyage from Vaucouleurs to meet Charles in Chinon in late February and early March of 1429, Metz and Poulengy would testify that although they slept beside her during their travels, they never felt any sexual attraction towards her. Rather, "[h]er words put me on fire, inspiring in me a love for her that was, I believe, divine" (pp. 20-1)!

This engaging portrait of Joan is enhanced considerably by the authors' masterful storytelling and also by their ample and skillful use of excerpts from trial testimony, letters, and other contemporary sources, evoking crucial moments in battle, crowd scenes, popular rumor, and exchanges between Joan and her entourage or her judges. The authors grant primacy of place to these archival sources, sources with which they have an extraordinary familiarity. In doing so, Pernoud and Clin attempt to recover Joan of Arc through the written record. Their emphasis on primary material is so strong that one-half of the bibliography included in the book consists of primary sources, and the other half—secondary literature—is given the gracious but clearly secondary characterization of “useful modern scholarship.” In fact, in her forward, Régine Pernoud writes that she and Clin “chose to write the documented life of Joan as it unfolds in time” (p. xii). This choice determines the book's structure, including the authors' choice to discuss Joan of Arc's childhood in the narrative's last chapter, since systematic interviews in Joan's village of Domrémy were done in preparation for the nullification trial.

As Adams points out in his preface, the resulting text does not strictly adhere to this principle of using sources, chronologically, as they are generated. While the text does focus on the period in which documentary evidence about Joan was produced, Pernoud and Clin freely draw from evidence produced at any time during this period to support their claims. They make especially frequent use of evidence from the 1456 nullification trial. As a result, the players in this “drama”—as the central narrative is characterized in this work—“would later explain,” “would later remember,” and “would later recount.” The authors' recovery of Joan from the sources is, as a result, certainly a reconstruction. This strategy enables Pernoud and Clin to present a portrait of a strong and activist Joan—a portrait that would not have been possible with a strict adherence to the chronology of their sources (the “movement of recorded history” p. xii). Such a text, instead, would have been impossibly weighted toward Joan's imprisonment, conviction, and rehabilitation (that is, to a period characterized by the authors as one of twisted facts and questionable legality, on the one hand, and to a moment long after her death, on the other). The authors do not wish to portray Joan as a victim—although they do concede that she was victimized by Charles VII, first, and then by the Burgundians and English. Rather, they emphasize her courage, her resolve, and her intelligence in the face of a less than determined contender to the throne, on the battlefield, and before her judges and accusers. In fact, the authors' conclusions in chapter nine that Joan had been an ordinary person—a willing product of village life, popular religion, and medieval ideas of chivalry—stands in tension with the rest of their narrative, in which both Joan and her circumstances appear to have been clearly extraordinary!

Mining contemporary sources permits Pernoud and Clin to offer their readers a compelling portrait of Joan of Arc. At the same time, the authors place perhaps too much stock in the written word to divulge the historical figure of Joan of Arc. To answer the question, “Who was Joan of Arc?,” Pernoud asks, “What was the historical record of Joan?” (p. xii). Their faith in the written record gives the authors confidence to reveal not only “her message” (bold and grand), but also “her person” (modest and simple) (p. 22). From time to time, the authors even speculate on her unspoken thoughts.[4] But how closely can these contemporary observations take us to the person of Joan of Arc? It is, first, worth remembering that the Joan(s) of these documents is mediated by a variety of individuals, including those anonymous individuals to whom she dictated letters, by her more lettered friends and observers, and by court witnesses, recorders, and compilers. I would, as a result, have enjoyed some discussion (most probably in Section III, see below) about how the creation of documents such as court testimony may have shaped their contents.[5] In addition, I confess that I find refreshing Nina Gelbart's recent consideration of whether a biographer can ever *know* her subject. At the end of her splendid biography

of the eighteenth-century royal midwife Madame du Coudray, she writes, "I am glad to be left with questions to probe, with the lively awareness that parts are always missing, and that the past is never over." For Gelbart, the story remains incomplete not only because the historical record is incomplete but also because the historical record can never completely quite divulge the person. As a result, biographers face "the tentativeness of answers, the impossibility of closure, and the opportunity for useful storytelling anyway." [6]

*Her Story* casts the story of Joan of Arc as a drama, with "program notes" (contained principally in two major sections of the text) supplied both by the authors and translator. The book's second section provides a sweeping introduction to the "cast" through a series of biographical sketches of the persons with whom Joan came into contact and about whom some written evidence remains. These sketches provide the background, allegiances, and actions of each of these individuals and specifies their connection to Joan. This section includes short biographies of those closest to Joan, such as the faithful "La Hire" (Etienne de Vignolles), captain in the service of Charles VII, but gives equal emphasis to her enemies. The "cast" even includes Bertrand du Guesclin, a Breton knight and "one of [Joan's] heros" (p. 179). Although he died four decades before Joan of Arc's birth, she may have seen his tomb at Saint Denis in 1429. These biographical sketches, in short, include both many of the best known figures of the period and men and women who played "bit parts" in Joan of Arc's saga. Some of these biographies are gems, and will be heartily appreciated by any reader curious to know more about any of these "Three Noble Princes," "Their subjects," or "Her Judges at Rouen." Together, they amply illustrate the attention to detail that makes this account of Joan's life so rich and appealing.

Part III, "Issues and Images," contains a series of short, encyclopedia-style articles on themes that have preoccupied Johannine scholars. Pernoud, in her preface, describes this section as addressing "current historiographic questions and disputes" (p. xii). The first of these entries, for example, offers a helpful discussion of the names by which Joan of Arc (who called herself Jeanne la Pucelle or Joan the Maid) has been known and the meanings scholars have attached to those names. The texts raise a variety of themes—from an accounting of the swords that came into Joan of Arc's possession to the images of Joan in theater and opera. Overall, these entries tend to focus on interpretive disagreements and inconsistencies or gaps in the historical record.

The three-part structure of Pernoud and Clin's text has its pleasures. It encourages a variety of reading practices—cross references in the narrative make slipping to the relevant passages in sections II and III easy and effective, but the reader can just as easily respect the divisions of these sections and read them serially. In addition, this organizational structure allows the authors to retain just the right level of explanation and detail in the narrative, which therefore remains accessible to a variety of readers. At the same time, these latter sections, particularly that of "Issues and Images," left this reader somewhat less satisfied than had the book's central narrative. Here I had hoped to find entries sketching out such concerns as the composition and idiosyncrasies of the available primary evidence and the gender issues implicit in Joan's public role and trial (since she was, after all, a young woman who lost her life for wearing men's clothes). Instead, the "issues and images" taken up in this section remain true to the authors' unfailingly careful concern in interpreting primary sources and their emphasis on the personal history of Joan of Arc. The entries here also suggest that a high degree of historical consensus exists among scholars working on Joan of Arc. The entries tend toward description and focus on rather narrow questions, such as the validity of claims that Joan of Arc was of illegitimate but royal origins and the components of Joan's armor. As a result, the entry on Joan's swords, for example, identifies those

weapons that came into her possession but says nothing about the state of medieval military technology or the relationship between arms and medieval conceptions of womanhood. Some of the entries, in fact, are simply lists--such as a selected filmography and a recounting of the events that led to Joan's beatification.

While the authors' promise to provide the reader with a sketch of recent historiographical concerns fell short of my expectations, the text does--and perhaps this is a greater achievement--encourage the reader to explore the varied representations of Joan of Arc and the avenues available to understand her story. It reminds the reader just how often Joan of Arc has captured the attention and imagination of individuals and groups since 1429--from those individuals who first rallied to her cause to those who attend the annual festival hosted by the city of Orléans in her honor. As such, this book forms part of--and indeed invites--a broad discussion about Joan of Arc. While the three sections of the book form a definable whole, the book also points the reader outwards--to other means of approaching her story and to other conversations about her life and her place in a French past. This effect is achieved not only by the inclusion, in Section III, of primary sources, films, and theatrical works examining the life of Joan of Arc (that prompted me to check the film holdings of my local university library), but also by the miscellaneous documents and images slipped between the sections of the book and into its various appendices. The authors have included, for example, the letters dictated by Joan of Arc, in French and English, as well as references to letters now lost. The book also provides a fascinating sampling of images of Joan of Arc that include the first known (though imagined) portrait dating from 10 May 1429 by Clément de Fauquembergue, secretary of the Parlement of Paris, and a 1916 postcard of Joan urging on troops (some looking terrified, others determined or stunned) fighting in World War I. Finally, the authors (or perhaps the translator) repeatedly invites the reader to undertake further exploration beyond this text by directing the reader to a recent collection of articles, *Fresh Verdicts on Joan of Arc*.<sup>[7]</sup> The effect is to create a volume with pleasingly permeable borders, and an apparent goal to inspire its readers to learn more.

A collaborative effort by scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, the American edition of *Her Story* gives special attention to Régine Pernoud, to whom this volume is dedicated. With obvious affection, translator Adams recounts Pernoud's conversion, from her self-avowed disinterest in Joan of Arc (p. i), "perched high on the ladder in the stacks" in the Archives Nationales on a Christmas Eve day in 1952, reading the Quicherat edition of the trial records. Her analysis of court testimony from the nullification trial, published at the end of 1953, launched a forty-year career dedicated to the memory of Joan of Arc. Later in the text, Pernoud, as a graduate of the prestigious Ecole des Chartes, also becomes the target of some good-natured ribbing (or self-deprecating humor, it is hard to know exactly) for her strong defense of written evidence in the face of (even learned) speculation (p. 236). These quiet exchanges at the margins of the text suggest, at least to this reader, that a tradition of engaged, cajoling discussion lie behind this edition of Pernoud and Clin's *Her Story*. Pernoud comes to appear--a little Joan-like--as the impassioned but solidly opinionated *doyenne* of an international team of scholars dedicated to the study of Joan of Arc. This image of lively engagement permeates the text, reflected by the richness of the text itself and by its invitation to move beyond the text. It is infectious and key, I think, to the success of *Her Story*.

## NOTES

[1] Surprisingly, this passage receives no mention by the authors who present it simply as one of many early admiring portraits of Joan of Arc.

[2] Joan's appeal has not lessened with time. Rather it is surprising how commonplace references to her actually are. My favorite is at the grocery store, where the canned beans bearing the "Joan of Arc" brand name promise not only protein and iron, but strength and, perhaps, courage!

[3] A multi-sectioned work, the authors' discussion of many of the myths surrounding Joan of Arc is separated from the central narrative and relegated to a later section of the work.

[4] When Joan meets the dauphin Charles for the first time, for example, Pernoud and Clin write, "Joan did not allow herself to be disconcerted by the intimidating spectacle of the great hall rusting with whispers of high society and ablaze with a brightness to which she was unaccustomed" (p. 23).

[5] The authors do include an interesting discussion about the cedula of adjuration, a document drawn up by a trial notary and signed by Joan promising that she would no longer wear men's clothing, which seems to have grown considerably in length between the trial and the completion of the trial transcript (pp. 131 and 233), evidence of the abusive process by which Pierre Cauchon succeeded in condemning the young woman. So although they appear to accept their documents as transparent, the authors are not at all unaware of the constructed nature of historical sources.

[6] Nina Rattner Gelbart, *The King's Midwife: The History and Mystery of Madame du Coudray* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 11 and 281.

[7] Eds., Bonnie Wheeler and Charles Wood (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996). If the purpose here is to recruit readers to this collection, the strategy worked beautifully with me. Convinced that it would hold the key to understanding historiographical debate about Joan of Arc, I went straight to it. I found there a variety of historical approaches, but most appreciated the fine gender analysis of the strategies of Joan's judges, "True Lies: Transvestism and Idolatry in the Trial of Joan of Arc" by Susan Schibanoff.

Rene S. Marion  
Ball State University  
rmarion@gw.bsu.edu

Copyright © 2001 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of

H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172