

FROM HERESY TO SAINTHOOD. JOAN OF ARC'S QUEST
FOR IDENTITY IN BERNARD SHAW'S *SAIN'T JOAN*

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ABSTRACT

Saint Joan by Shaw (1957) has been considered by many critics one of the playwright's finest literary and dramatic achievements. Other scholars point out that the play is a manifestation of the author's lack of historical insight and his inability to create an objective representation of Joan of Arc and her times. It remains astonishing, however, how many identities can this dramatic character be linked with. Dramatic characters, just like human beings in real life, not only possess identity (the self), but may also find themselves in a process of developing it. The context, defined by the group (the social) may eventually be affected by the character and the process is clearly visible in Shaw's play. Here, the phenomenon seems to well overreach the scope of the character's temporal frame. The disintegration within Joan's personality becomes the major drive of her quest. The interpretations of the aim of the pursuit may vary, but what is vital here is to see the way seemingly disparate ideas/identities (like a lunatic/a feminist/a heretic/a saint/a military genius/a virgin/an ignorant/a pioneer Protestant and others) are portrayed in one dramatic character and embodied by a teenage village girl who has become a favourite subject of artists and scholars alike for six centuries now.

Shaw was a writer whose main preoccupation seemed to be a discussion of current social and political issues. When in 1920 the canonisation of Joan of Arc became front-page news, the playwright decided to dramatise the original reports of the heroine's trials with the aim to tell her story as it really happened. The outcome of these attempts, the 1957 play entitled *Saint Joan*, is thought by many critics to be one of Shaw's finest literary and dramatic achievements. Still others, however, believe that the play is a manifestation of the author's lack of historical insight and his inability to create an objective representation of the saint. The aim of this paper is to draw a picture of the main character's quest for identity that takes place within the dramatic text. Putting aside the author's evolutionary theories and the rationalism with which he inevitably endows his hero-

ine, it is intriguing to see how many stages in her search for the self the main character goes through. It is vital to see the way an array of seemingly disparate identities can be portrayed in a dramatic character and embodied by a teenage girl who has become a favourite subject of artists and scholars alike for six centuries now.

Characters, like human beings, develop identity. Two major components of the idea are “self-concept”, a system of beliefs an individual forms about her- or himself, and “social identity” – the category to which people assign themselves or to which they are assigned by others (Kopytko 2002: 93), in this case – the other characters of the dramatic work. The process of the search for identity is connected with both elements because, as O’Dair (1993) claims: “Characters ... develop ... a sense of self, within a context that is defined by the group; thus empowered, the character, like the individual, may affect the context in which he or she finds himself or herself” (O’Dair 1993: 289). Contrary to the notion of the ideological self in which, as Potter and Wetherell (1987) argue “people become fixed in position through the range of linguistic practices available to them” (Potter and Wetherell 1987: 109), the identity of the main heroine of *Saint Joan* is dynamically fluctuating, being constantly in a process of a quest, in order to aspire to an ideal imaginary self, that may seem impossible to be realised, even in the afterlife. To the duality of the notion of identity connected with the ideas of self-concept and the social self in the case of Shaw’s play one should probably also add still another dimension, the author’s own perception of the heroine, as he decided to precede the dramatic work with an extremely elaborate preface lecturing the readers of the play on what the historical as well as dramatic character is to him; that is the identity he ascribes to his heroine. As it will be argued in the present paper, these three images may not always be concordant with each other, which only adds new intriguing aspects to the analysis of the subject.

Indeed, in spite of the fact that Shaw states in the Preface to *Saint Joan* that he writes his play “in full view of the Middle Ages” (Shaw 1957: 48), and that he has “taken care to let the medieval atmosphere blow through ... (his) play freely” (Shaw 1957: 49), his view of Joan is strictly modern. As early as on the very first pages of the Preface he defines Joan of Arc as a Protestant martyr, an apostle of Nationalism and an early feminist. He compares Joan with Napoleon and rationalises her visions, calling them dramatisations of Joan’s imagination (Shaw 1957: 12) if not hallucinations (Shaw 1957: 13) and assigning his heroine the role of a realisation of the Life Force: an evolutionary appetite which uses individuals like her to effect social change. What seems to be even more striking, Shaw excuses Joan’s judges and insists on the comparative fairness of her trial (Shaw 1957: 26). He also expresses the view that her rehabilitation was “a corrupt job” (Shaw 1957: 4). Raknem (1971) states that “Shaw lacked interest in

the Middle Ages, was ignorant of the period as a whole, and its peculiarities were uncongenial to him. ... It looks as if he refuses to accept that the past is different from the present” (Raknem 1971: 180-181). Indeed, Shaw’s “modernised” Joan does not seem to be coherent with the image drawn by her biographers, critics and even the character of his own play, in spite of the fact that the author is sometimes clearly at pains to force his political and social views through his literary creation.

When Joan enters the stage in Shaw’s play her very first words identify her as an uneducated peasant girl when she ungrammatically asks: “Be you captain?” (Shaw 1957: 60). Later on it becomes obvious that she is not even sure as to her surname and her age: “Surname? What is that? My father sometimes calls himself d’Arc; but I know nothing about it” (Shaw 1957: 66). Near the end of the play it becomes clear that she is completely illiterate: “I am a poor girl, and so ignorant that I do not know A from B” (Shaw 1957: 118). According to Sikorska (1996) knowledge as well as education were denied to women and this confined them to the family where the law of the father relegated them to a lower status (Sikorska 1996: 75). In *Saint Joan*, indeed, the majority of Joan’s opponents make every effort not only to silence her, but to remind her of her “proper place” within the family and the country. She is called “some cracked country lass” (Shaw 1957: 75), an “ignorant laborer or dairymaid” (Shaw 1957: 103) and “a shepherd lass” (Shaw 1957: 135).

One of the very first noticeable things about Joan, the fact that she wears men’s clothes, is also one of the very reasons her persecutors practically cannot stand the sight of her. When reciting the accusations against her and therefore, the reasons for her subsequent burning, the Inquisitors enumerate wearing men’s attire as equally dangerous and evil as being possessed by the devil:

D’ESTIVET. ... I must emphasize the gravity of two very horrible and blasphemous crimes which she does not deny. First, she has intercourse with evil spirits, and is therefore a sorceress. Second, she wears men’s clothes, which is indecent, unnatural, and abominable; and in spite of our most earnest remonstrances and entreaties, she will not change them even to receive the sacrament
(Shaw 1957: 138).

Joan herself at times gives practical reasons for wearing such clothes. She points out that they are simply practical both in battle and, later on, in jail. At one point in time, however, another explanation is given: not only does Joan want to be perceived as a woman, but she also does not want to *be* a woman. She says:

I will never take a husband. ... I am a soldier: I do not want to be thought of as a woman. I will not dress as a woman. I do not care for the things women care for. They dream of lovers, and of money. I dream of leading a charge, and of placing the big guns
(Shaw 1957: 91).

Joan's rebellion against her own body may be seen just as Newman (1997) sees the virginity of medieval women, as "the great equalizer that enabled a woman to rise above her sex, giving proof of a virile mind" (Newman 1997: 31).

Joan is certainly a transgressor and her transgression goes far beyond the above mentioned aspect of clothing. She becomes a true "problem" for the Church with its totalitarian institution: the Inquisition and she is a perfect candidate for its "favourite sentence" – burning alive (Scott 1940: 158). She does not only behave and speak as an equal to men, she admonishes them, teaches them and, finally, sees herself as a saviour-figure. She alienates herself from her community (the family and the village), enters the patriarchal public sphere of the state and the Church and constructs her discourse of power ignorant of the consequences. Newman (1997) notices that Catherine and Margaret, the saints whom Joan of Arc identified as the "voices" she heard were the ones the heretical Gugliemites used as a cover for their veneration of Gugliema (1997: 191). The leader of the sect, Maifreda da Pirovano (d. 1300), was the woman who accepted the role of the Woman Pope, celebrated Easter Mass in 1300 and was burnt as a heretic. Gugliema of Milan (1210-1281) in turn, was during her life venerated locally as a saint and identified by the sect of her name as the incarnation of the Holy Spirit. After her death, she was exhumed and burnt by inquisitors in 1300 (Newman 1997: 318). Newman (1997) argues that Joan of Arc inverts the fate of Gugliema.

Although Joan did not make attempts at any priestly actions as such and seemed to revere the representatives of the Church, she committed an unpardonable mistake by her lecturing archbishops and kings alike. In her quest for what might be called an androgynous intellectual identity, she often trespasses not only across gender, but any kind of social hierarchical boundaries. She decides to crown the king and acts accordingly, claiming to be God's messenger. She also uses every possible occasion to teach others on the will of God, as in the following utterance:

JOAN. ...We are all subject to the King of Heaven; and He gave us our countries and our languages, and meant us to keep them. If it were not so, it would be murder to kill an Englishman in battle; and you, squire, would be in great danger of hell fire. You must not think about your duty to your feudal lord, but about your duty to God
(Shaw 1957: 67).

Having escaped from her community and from performing traditional domestic duties Joan constantly instructs others, which stands in stark contrast with what saint Paul advises to women in the passage that became the frequent source of the silencing of women in medieval times (Sikorska 2000: 102). In his letter to Timothy, Paul writes: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent" (1 Timothy 2, 12). Joan not only refuses to be si-

lent, but she also treats others as if they were ignorant in the matters of religion and nation. Indeed, Smith (1995) sees the historical St Joan as a vivid resonance of the myth of ethnic election in which the French are seen as "chosen people with a God-given mission" (Smith 1995: 34).

There are moments in the play, when Joan's quest for identity seems to reach its utmost point, when she starts to understand her role as equal to that of Christ, becoming a female saviour. Addressing the future king Charles, she asks: "Wilt be a poor little Judas, and betray me and Him that sent me?" (Shaw 1957: 86). In the epilogue to the play Cauchon, Joan's main persecutor, seen by Shaw in an extraordinarily favourable light, confirms such identification in a very straightforward manner by asking: "[M]ust then a Christ perish in torment in every age to save those that have no imagination?" (Shaw 1957: 160). Joan's life, indeed, mirrors to an extent the life of Christ, as she herself may be willing to personify this ideal (hence Shaw's supposedly awkward question in the Preface to the play – "Was Joan suicidal?"). She, just as Christ, is mocked and abandoned before her death.

Salih (2001) points out that Christ and the Virgin Mary are the two predominant embodiments of male and female virginity (2001: 30). As it has already been mentioned, Joan's being a virgin gives her additional authority and some degree of power. On one hand, virginity in the Middle Ages was a sign of paternal authority over a daughter, on the other, however, as Sikorska (1996) notices, it was a source of strength (1996: 134). In *Saint Joan* the heroine is most often referred to as the Maid and her virginity as an inextricable element of her identity. Not only can Joan detach herself from the traditional role of a woman, but her chastity certainly adds to her "holiness", as St Paul wrote in Corinthians:

And the unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh upon the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she that is married thinketh upon the things of the world: how she may please her husband
(1 Corinthians 7, 34).

As Salih notices, of all female saints virgin martyrs were the most popular in medieval Europe (Salih 2001: 46) and it seems to be the only state in which anti-social and anti-family attitudes were accepted in a woman. According to medieval beliefs, physical virginity was not only moral but also a quasi-magical property and it could make the woman invincible and prevent her corpse from corruption (Newman 1997: 30-31). Joan not only allows others to stress her chastity, but also often refers to it herself, thus stressing her own innocence.

For the English in the play, Joan of Arc is nothing more than a witch and a sorceress. Under their influence, representatives of the Church begin to see her as an "ignorant laborer or dairymaid whom the devil can puff up with the monstrous self-conceit" (Shaw 1957: 103). She is called conceited, ignorant, head-

strong, presumptuous, impious and sinful (Shaw 1957: 119), devilishly proud, and finally: a heretic. Faced with the threat of being burned alive, Joan for a moment admits to being a blasphemous sinner wearing an "immodest dress", disobedient and proud. However, when she signs her confession she is, as the stage directions specify, "tormented by the rebellion of her soul against her mind and body" (Shaw 1957: 143). When she understands that she is going to be imprisoned for the rest of her life, she finally lets what she believes to be her true identity burst out once again; she tears the documents and regains her position of God's messenger. What is interesting in this scene of Joan's momentary breakdown is that she seems to seriously doubt the righteousness of her voices. For a while, Joan really believes that the voices may have not, after all, come from God, but from the devil: as they said she should not be burnt. Therefore, although it does not last long, Joan's recantation of heresy is undoubtedly a sincere one.

Joan's death does not end the heroine's quest for identity in Shaw's play. The Epilogue deals with Joan as well as other characters in their afterlives. In spite of the fact that Shaw clearly ridicules the idea of Joan's canonisation in his play: "GENTLEMAN. The possibility of your resurrection was not contemplated in the recent proceedings for your canonisation. I must return to Rome for fresh instructions" (Shaw 1957: 165). Joan certainly likes the idea of being openly called a saint and starts to call herself a saint, too. Shaw emphasised in his Preface to the play the comparative justness of Joan's trial. Now, after her death, saint Joan also defends her prosecutors to some degree, stating that they were simply "as honest a lot of poor fools as ever burned their betters" (Shaw 1957: 155). What is more, she adds that it is thanks to her being burned people will remember her better.

Joan's quest for identity seems to end at this stage. A plentitude of proofs is given in order for everyone to understand that Joan was indeed a true saint. An English soldier comes from hell, as he has "a day off" for the one good action in his life: giving Joan a cross for which she asked for before her death. Another man claims to have been redeemed by her and the executioner confesses that her heart would not burn nor drown. Posterity and the Church welcome Joan as their new saint. Shaw sees in her a genius, an embodiment of the Life Force, a herald of Protestantism, Nationalism and of realism in warfare. The polyphony of identities she develops throughout her life portrayed in the play still resounds even if the Church has made its final decision. Joan's alternative mode of life, her transgression, her refusal to be silenced, create a situation in which she inevitably goes through a conflict not only with society, but also within herself, and the disintegration that is observed within Joan's personality becomes the major motor of her creative journey.

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