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# The Maid of the Highlands: Joan of Arc Reflected in West Point Iconography

*Dr. John Pendergast*



Detail, *Panorama of Military History Cadet Mess*.  
All photos by the author unless otherwise noted

Over 600 years ago, in 1412, Joan of Arc was born. Nineteen years later, she was put to death at the age at which most cadets at the United States Military Academy (USMA) begin to study a foreign language in the Department of Foreign Languages. This is far from the only connection Joan of Arc has with West Point. In fact, cadets, staff, and faculty are surrounded daily by imagery which, in one way or another, is associated with her, sometimes quite obviously—as in the Panorama of Military History in the Cadet mess, and the Saint Joan window in the Catholic Chapel—and sometimes not so obviously. The image of greatest significance linking Joan and West Point is the USMA crest, whose most prominent detail is the helmet of Athena (page 45). A closer look at the connections between West Point and the Maid of Orleans permits us to learn some perhaps surprising details about the literary career of Joan and to consider in a new light the mission

of the USMA, to which one old cadet song raises a toast with the words: “To our kind old Alma Mater, our rockbound Highland home.” The three connections between Joan of Arc and West Point to be considered here concern: 1) her skills as a military leader; 2) the West Point crest, especially the helmet of Athena; and 3) the Black Knights mascot. If one grants credence to these connections, one may be emboldened to name Joan “the Maid of the Highlands.”

Why is Joan called the Maid of Orleans? The answer to this question may be found by considering page 45. We call this young woman Saint Joan today, which may produce

the image of a pious recluse in a meadow, tending sheep and praying. In Joan's case, this is rather far from the truth. Once she had convinced her feudal lord, Robert de Baudricourt, to allow her to serve future king of France Charles VII, she began a year of military deployment, which saw her in charge of thousands of soldiers and crossing hundreds of miles on horseback, often through enemy territory. She fought in at least half a dozen battles, but she is best known for the first, at the walled city of Orleans.<sup>1</sup> By the time Joan arrived there with Count Dunois in April 1429, the city had been under siege by the English for six months. Edward Creasy writes: "Seldom has the extinction of a nation's independence appeared more inevitable than was the case in France when the English invaders completed their lines around Orleans."<sup>2</sup> In a series of military victories and diplomatic intrigues, the English had, toward the end of the Hundred Years War, taken control of nearly all of the northern half of what we today call France. Had they succeeded in taking Orleans, no barrier would have remained to impede them from taking the rest of the country. Joan of Arc directed the innovative placement of artillery and the daring movement of troops to conduct a direct assault on the walls and towers of the citadel.<sup>3</sup> In the course of a single day, the English were defeated and driven out of the city. Eventually, they would leave the country, and the course of history would be changed. How Joan came to know military tactics is still a matter of speculation. She attributed her knowledge to counsel she gained from the voices of three saints, Michael, Margaret, and Catherine. Those not inclined to accept this possibility surmise that she simply had an abundance of common sense and a knack for military maneuvers.<sup>4</sup> She herself summarized her abilities quite plainly in her advice to other officers: "I used to say to them, 'Go boldly among the English,' and then I used to go boldly among them myself."<sup>5</sup> Army officers will recognize this approach as a fundamental aspect of leadership: ask of your soldiers only that which you are willing to do yourself. It seems safe to say that Joan epitomizes the mission statement of the USMA: "To educate, train, and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character committed to the values of Duty, Honor, Country and prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation."<sup>6</sup>

The image of Joan in the Cadet Mess itself has a rather interesting history, tied closely to the mission of educating, training, and inspiring cadets. Thomas Loften Johnson

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1 Pernoud, Regine. *Joan of Arc: Her Story*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999, 268-269.

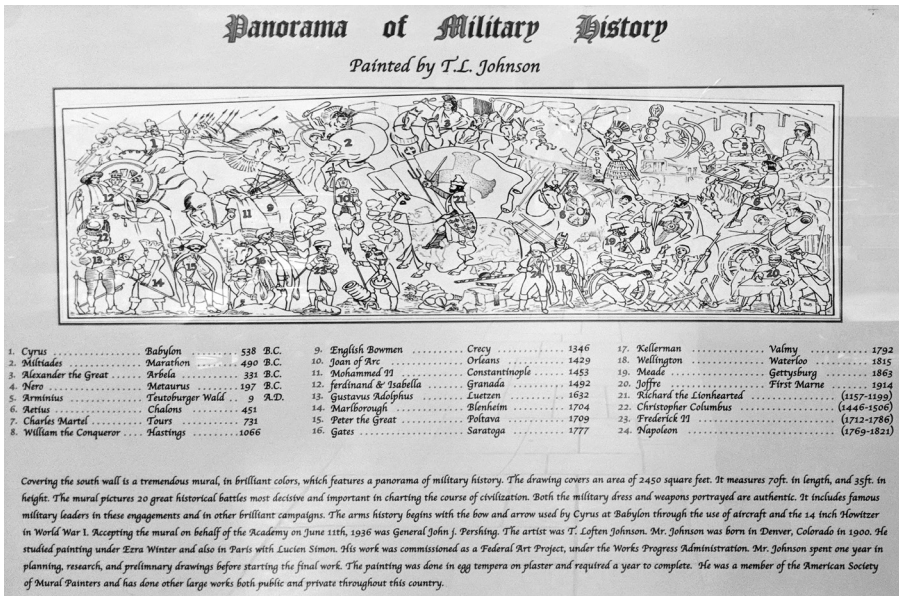
2 Creasy, Edward. *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*. New York: Thomas Crowell and Company, 1902 [Orig. published 1851], 243.

3 Ibid. 246.

4 Given the remarkable exploits attributed to this extraordinary young woman, some readers might reasonably expect this article to address Joan's place in feminist history, but as the intent here is to focus on West Point iconography, that is not the case. To explore that topic further, the reader is referred to the following works: Victoria Sackville-West, *Saint Joan of Arc*, Doubleday, 1936; Bonnie Wheeler, and C.T. Wood (eds.) *Fresh Verdicts on Joan of Arc*, Psychology Press, 1996; Regine Pernoud and Marie-Veronique Clin, *Joan of Arc: Her Story*, Trans. Jeremy DuQuesnay Adams, St. Martin's Press, 1999; Kathryn Harrison, *Joan of Arc: A Life Transfigured*, Doubleday, 2014; Helen Castor, *Joan of Arc: A History*, HarperCollins, 2015.

5 Ibid. 254.

6 *United States Military Academy homepage* <<https://www.usma.edu/about/SitePages/Mission.aspx>> accessed 5 November 2017.



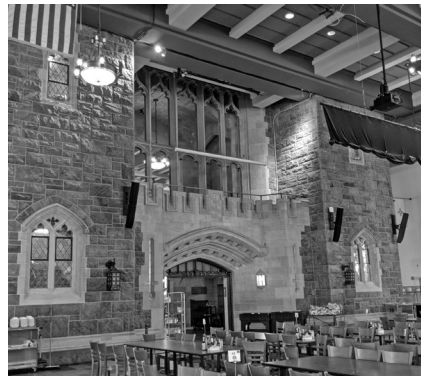
Panorama mural diagram

Painted the mural in 1936 as part of a Depression-era Works Progress Administration project.<sup>7</sup> Called the Panorama of Military History, it depicts twenty-four military leaders (twenty-five, if one counts Isabella and Ferdinand separately) and their most famous battles. Many are drawn from Edward Creasy's *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*, first published in 1851. How Johnson came to choose the nine individuals not found in Creasy's book is unclear, but he shows unusual breadth of cultural understanding by adding both Richard the Lionheart and Mohammed II (Ottoman Sultan and conqueror of Constantinople in 1453).

It would be fair to ask how great a role this image plays in the hearts and minds of cadets: today, perhaps less great than when the image first appeared. The room in



Cadet Mess with Panorama



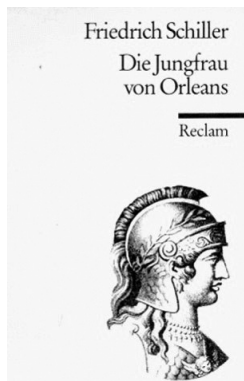
Cadet Mess, "poop deck"

7 Miller, Rod. *West Point U.S. Military Academy: An Architectural Tour*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002, 71.



Washington Hall, “fish bowl”

1936 to 1949, at least half of the Corps of Cadets saw the mural every time they ate. Creasy’s book has been available in the library since at least 1902. When Army Lieutenant Colonel Joseph B. Mitchell published an update with five modern battles in 1964, he reproduced Creasy’s first fifteen chapters verbatim, including the account of Joan lifting the siege of Orleans. There are nine copies of Creasy’s book on the shelves in the library and four of Mitchell’s. They have a borrowing history that most authors would envy.



Cover detail of Schiller’s  
*Maid of Orleans*

The second connection to be examined here is: How is the West Point crest related to Joan of Arc? This requires a bit more background, most of it tied to the helmet of Athena at the center of the image. Friedrich Schiller, the German Romantic Idealist poet and playwright, wrote a play in 1801 called *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, usually rendered in English as *The Maid of Orleans*. The edition published by Reclam reproduces the cover that Schiller himself requested when he originally published the play.<sup>9</sup>

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, people tended to refer to this figure as Minerva, the Roman name for the Greek goddess Athena. In both cases, she is the goddess of wisdom, which explains her selection as an image by artists and designers at West Point.

She can be seen in a frieze at the top of the old library, as well as in the rafters of the Officers’ Club.

The building housing the club was originally constructed in 1890, thus it is possible that the architects’ neoclassically inspired decisions influenced the committee that designed the crest, which the West Point website says was first used

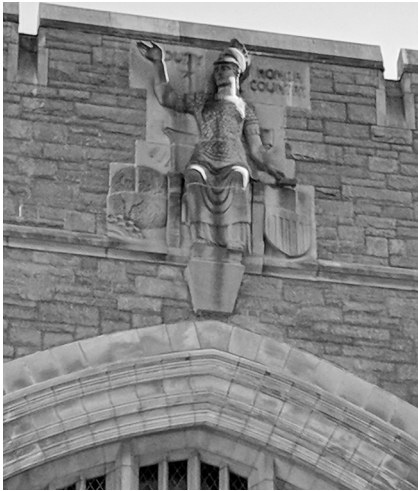


West Point Crest

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 68-71.

<sup>9</sup> Schiller, Friedrich. *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1997. [Orig. pub. 1801]

in 1898.<sup>10</sup> When the library was built in the 1960s, the architects incorporated symbolism already of long standing. West Point’s reasons for appropriating the image of Athena as a symbol seem fairly obvious. The bust on the cover of Schiller’s work, on the other hand, may not be.



Exterior Detail: Cadet Library,  
now Bartlett Hall



Interior Detail: West Point Club

Schiller was inspired to select Joan of Arc as a subject for a play partly out of a sense of indignation. At the end of the eighteenth century, the two best-known literary works dealing with Joan’s life were Shakespeare’s *Henry the Sixth, Part One* and Voltaire’s *La Pucelle d’Orleans*. Shakespeare’s depiction of Joan borrows from Holinshed’s chronicles, and his characters describe her variously as a sorceress, a hag, a witch, an enchantress, and a “foul, accursed minister of hell.”<sup>11</sup> In Voltaire, she is depicted as an ignorant illegitimate stable girl who rides around on a flying donkey and is constantly in danger of being sexually assaulted. Shakespeare was writing a history play doused with anti-Gallic patriotism, while Voltaire was intent on poking fun at the aristocracy and clergy. Joan merely got in the way of these two great minds on their way to saying something that had very little to do with her. Schiller wanted very much to rescue Joan from this ignominy. Although the transcripts of her heresy trial would not be published for another three decades, he had access to considerable historical material about the Hundred Years War. Nonetheless, he made the decision to depart rather broadly from history early on in his writing process. In Schiller, there is no Inquisition, no trial, and no stake at which Joan is to be burned. Instead, Johanna—as he calls her—dies in battle in a kind of apotheosis while experiencing an ecstatic vision of the Blessed Virgin. In the course of the play, Schiller turns her historical

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<sup>10</sup> Miller, 58.

<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare, William. *Henry VI, Part One. The Works of Shakespeare in Ten Volumes*. Vol.V. Ed. C.H. Herford. New York: MacMillan, 1902. (Act V.Sc iv.92-93)

capture by the Burgundian officer Lionel Wandomme into a romantic infatuation. Lionel seizes her attention and causes her to experience a fleeting romantic attachment, which catches her by surprise because she had mistakenly assumed that her vow of chastity would save her from temptation. Following Charles VII's anointing as king in Rheims Cathedral, she is denounced as a sorceress by her own father. She accepts this denunciation because she feels that her infatuation with Lionel has made her unworthy. Schiller makes all of these striking departures from history quite intentionally. He had decided that Joan's story needed to be made more legendary, to be mythologized, in order for it to capture the public's imagination. The myth that he decided to use was that of Iphigenia.

Today, Iphigenia may seem to be an obscure minor character in Greek mythology, but in Schiller's day, admiration for her was commonplace. She is known from two plays by Euripides: *Iphigenia among the Taurians* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*. Gluck wrote two operas based on Euripides' plays, one of which Schiller produced in Weimar the year that he wrote *The Maid of Orleans*. Schiller also admired Goethe's play, *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, also based on Euripides. Because the action in *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, which Euripides wrote first, takes place after the events in *Iphigenia in Aulis*, the chronology of the plots can seem a bit convoluted. Starting with the earliest action—i.e., with *Iphigenia in Aulis*—the main episodes follow this sequence: Agamemnon and the Greeks want to sail to Troy to wage war and avenge the abduction of Helen, who in addition to being the most beautiful woman in the world is the wife of Agamemnon's brother. The gods, however, have stilled the winds, making it impossible to sail. A priest tells Agamemnon that the goddess Artemis demands that he sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia in order to restore the winds. Agamemnon lures Iphigenia to Aulis under the ruse of a betrothal to Achilles. The ruse is discovered, Achilles tries to save Iphigenia, but in the last moments of the play, Iphigenia decides that she is willing to be sacrificed for the greater glory of Greece. She experiences an ecstatic vision of Artemis, who rewards Iphigenia's bravery and piety by transporting her to Tauris and causing a deer to appear in her place on the sacrificial altar. In Tauris, years after the Trojan War, she experiences a reunion with her brother, but to her great distress, her priestly duty in that realm is to sacrifice all foreigners to Artemis. When she and her brother try to escape, they are caught by the king, who intends to have them killed. At the last moment, they are rescued and returned to their homeland—*deus ex machina*—by the goddess Athena. Iphigenia's willingness to give her life for the glory of her homeland explains the admiration that her story provoked in Schiller's time. The looming sacrifice, the fleeting love interest, the paternal betrayal, and the final ecstatic vision all explain Schiller's unusual departures from history in his Joan of Arc play. The rescue by the virgin goddess Athena explains his decision to use her image on his play's frontispiece, and it provides the connection to West Point's symbolic use of Athena's helmet. The cultural prominence of the image of Iphigenia under the protection of Athena in the nineteenth century was enormous, appearing in countless works of art. Schiller's plays were extremely popular, receiving the most performances (1,926) of any playwright's work

at the Berlin Royal Theater between 1786 and 1885. (Second place went to Shakespeare, with 1,720 performances.) The most performed of Schiller's plays was *The Maid of Orleans*, accounting for twenty percent of the total number of performances.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, it seems unsurprising that when President Jefferson signed the order establishing the USMA in 1802, the founders would have turned to images of Athena and Joan of Arc, then among the most potent and popular of the day.<sup>13</sup>

Having considered the significance of Schiller's play, now is an opportune moment to note another point, concerning the resemblance of the final scene of *The Maid of Orleans* to Johnson's image of Joan in the cadet mess panorama. In the painting, the soldiers are shown kneeling around her, and she herself seems to be lying prone upon a crimson banner embroidered with silver *fleur-de-lis*. This impression is reinforced by the downward turn of the toes of her armored footwear and the foreshortening of her legs as though bent at the knee, a pose that would be impossible for someone standing. She grasps her helmet by the visor. This unusual scene is unlike any of the accounts of Joan's appearances in Orleans, where she is usually depicted astride her steed. On the other hand, it bears a striking resemblance to Schiller's stage directions for the final scene of his play: "The banner falls from her hand; she sinks in death upon it. All stand around in speechless emotion."<sup>14</sup> The helmet is not a trivial detail. In the prologue of the play, Schiller's Johanna is fascinated by a helmet purchased from a mysterious woman at the market in Vaucouleurs. She seizes it and claims it for her own, after which she begins to prophesy France's victory over the English and her role in that victory. It is likely that Schiller had this scene in mind when he requested that the cover of his play be adorned with Athena in her helmet. Likewise, when the founders of the USMA sought an emblem to represent the wisdom that inspires West Point's future leaders to martial victory, they found a ready-made symbol in the helmet of Athena. Similarly, when the leadership of the USMA decided to admit women to the Corps of Cadets in 1976, the researchers assigned to examine the efficacy of the policy seized on the potency of this female image in naming the study Project Athena.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, when that first cohort of women convened at West Point four decades later for a symposium to share their experiences and consider their legacy, the April 2016 conference was entitled "Athena's Arena."

It remains to explain what the connection might be between Joan of Arc and West Point's mascot, the Black Knight. For this, we must turn once again to Schiller and his use of the dramatic methods of ancient Greek tragedy in his *Maid of Orleans*. The revelation of the moment of *hamartia*—commonly translated (somewhat unsatisfactorily) as "the fatal flaw"—is often preceded in tragedy by the appearance of an *eidolon*. The

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12 Ludwig, Albert. *Schiller und die deutsche Nachwelt*. Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1909, 490.

13 Miller, 5.

14 Schiller, Friedrich. *The Maid of Orleans: A Romantic Tragedy*. Trans. Lewis Filmore. London: Charles Griffin and Co. 1882, 124.

15 Vitters, Alan G. and Nora Scott Kinzer. *Report of the Admission of Women to the U.S. Military Academy: Project Athena*. West Point, 1977. This was the first of four such reports.





The Black Knight mascot

eidolon is a kind of alter ego, something like the German concept of *Doppelgänger*, which is also associated with the inexorable power of fate. In the scene preceding Johanna's fateful encounter with Lionel in Schiller's play, she comes upon a figure who appears rather mysteriously and warns her that she should stop fighting. Not knowing that her next opponent in battle will be Lionel, nor that the encounter will lead to her denunciation by her father and her subsequent downfall, she assumes that this phantom is merely an enemy trying to

frighten her from fulfilling her mission to save France. There is considerable evidence to assume that this figure is supposed to represent the ghost of Talbot, whom Johanna has slain in an earlier scene. However, Schiller does not assign this eidolon the name Talbot, nor does he call him a ghost. He calls him the Black Knight, which is the mascot that has been associated with West Point's sports teams since the mid-twentieth century.

Joan committed herself to a cause that provoked the wrath of her enemies, who handed her over to the Inquisition to be tried as a heretic. They convicted her and burned her at the stake. Their reasons are not of concern in this discussion; on the other hand, her cause is. She committed herself to ridding her country of English invaders so that her people could come together as a nation and live freely. George Washington—the man after whom West Point's central academic building is named—and Thomas Jefferson—who decreed that the USMA should exist—would surely have agreed that Joan's was a cause worth fighting and dying for. The founders and leaders of the USMA have enshrined that opinion in images of the Maid that continue to surround cadets, faculty, staff, and visitors to the Highlands of West Point to this day.

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