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## **“A woman dressed as a man dressed as a woman”: The Non-Binary Gender of Joan of Arc**

### **1. Introduction**

*“She’s only seventeen. A little peasant girl from the boondocks talks to God and aims to start a war. Isn’t that enough of a story? She calls herself the Virgin. That’s her schtick.”*

*- Judy Budnitz, “Joan, Jeanne, La Pucelle, Maid of Orléans”*

When I was in fourth grade, my class did a project on historical figures that was called The Living Wax Museum. We each picked a person from any point in history, wrote and memorized a brief biography of that person, and procured a costume. On the day of the “museum,” we put on our outfits and scattered throughout the library with red, circular stickers on our hands. We were to stand still until someone “pressed” the sticker, at which point we were to “come alive” and recite the speech. I dressed as my favorite woman in all of history, one whose biographies I had devoured ever since I had first learned about her: Joan of Arc. I found that I was a pretty popular attraction, and in particular I remember being noticed by a lot of the boys. (I could hear them, from across the library, exclaiming to their friends, “Woah, she has a sword!”)

In the years of school after, whenever I had to write a report about a historical person, I would always pick Joan. I read everything I could about her, and collected anything that had her face on it. I even started collecting Yu-Gi-Oh cards (a popular trading card game) because there was a “St. Joan” card. My friend showed me his St. Joan card, and I promptly bought a starter pack and gave him whichever card he wanted in exchange for it (another friend told me later that he had cheated me out of a much better card, but I didn’t care).

Even into adulthood, I have remained fascinated by Joan. Her story is certainly captivating. A fifteenth-century peasant girl from France claims to hear the voices of saints telling her to take her country back from the British. She dons male clothing and gains the trust of the Dauphin Charles, the man claiming to be the rightful ruler of France. She successfully commands his army before she is captured, tried, and burned at the stake as a heretic. Centuries after her death, she is canonized as a Catholic saint. As interesting as her story is, I think the things I don't know about her have captivated me even more than the things I do. Growing up, I was surrounded by stories of girls dressing up as boys to accomplish great things, but something about Joan was different. She was a soldier at the same time that she was The Virgin, not just one gender disguising as another, but something else entirely. She troubles the boundaries between the two genders rather than simply moving between them, presenting a layered, nuanced, and complicated identity that doesn't fit neatly into a binary category. In her book *The Interrogation of Joan of Arc*, Karen Sullivan, though not talking about her gender specifically, explores why this destruction of binaries was so dangerous for Joan, as it contradicted the way that her accusers had been trained to think:

The students were schooled, for example, in the *principium contradictionis*, which holds that "it is impossible for something to be at the same time and in the same meaning A and not A." With this maxim in mind, students were encouraged to define the relations between different entities, be they theological doctrines or canonical rules, to uncover apparent contradictions between these entities, and to resolve these contradictions through the scholastic processes of division, distinction, and definition. (Sullivan 6).

Joan, as we will see, was full of contradictions, and sorting her out according to binary gender categories would have been as difficult for her contemporaries as it proved to be for me.

I'm not sure that modern society is, in many ways, too far from the reasoning described above. Recently, I've begun to struggle with my own difficult-to-classify gender identity, playing with androgyny and the boundaries between "male" and "female" presentation more and more. In this journey, Joan has come alive to me. I see her in the girl with cropped hair staring back at me from the mirror, just as I still see the fourth grader who looked to Joan with rapture and awe.

Part of what has kept my interest in Joan so intact is the fact that popular culture has remained interested in her, as well. Joan or Joan-esque characters inhabit contemporary children's literature, fantasy bestsellers, and short stories. She has appeared throughout my reading life, maintaining her constant impact on me. However, I've noticed that the expression of her gender and sexuality varies greatly among these works. Features of her life and personality are often highlighted, exaggerated, elided, omitted, or even invented to preserve the conviction that all people are either "man" or "woman," and are easily definable and homogenous within those categories—an assertion which doesn't seem any more authentic to the true Joan than it does to my own experience.

In this project, I have explored how various interpretations of Joan's gender and sexuality inform the works in which she appears, and I have considered how these works engage with one another to create a dynamic, malleable understanding of how Joan speaks (or doesn't speak) to norms of heterosexual femininity. I examined primary and secondary sources pertaining to the historical Joan to understand how her contemporaries perceived her. I used this foundation to examine three modern works that feature Joan or Joan-like figures, works which have entered my culture and reading life: the popular *A Song of Ice and Fire* series by George R.R. Martin, the young adult series *Protector of the Small* by Tamora Pierce, and the short story "Joan, Jeanne, La

Pucelle, Maid of Orléans” by Judy Budnitz. This thesis could be understood as a sort of Joan-and-gender literacy narrative for me, as well as a critical analysis of the works. In different ways, Martin and Pierce celebrate Joan’s transgressiveness while still endorsing a traditional gender and sexuality binary; their presentations oversimplify what we know of the historical Joan. The characters within these works are celebrated for their ability to occupy the male sphere in universes in which this sphere is still held as distinct and superior; rather than troubling the boundaries that divide gender categories, the way the historical Joan does, these characters seem to move between the categories in a way that still upholds them. By contrast, Budnitz undercuts modern stereotypes of Joan to produce a heroine that is at once avant-garde and authentically medieval, and tackles any preconceptions a reader might have about a singular identity, although even she falls into some of the gender traps that seem to plague portrayals of Joan. Although today many hail Joan as a proto-feminist, my work indicates that we often still pigeonhole her into narrow definitions of womanhood. By re-examining the way we characterize one of our most enduring feminist icons, we can unsettle the boundaries we still place around gender and sexuality.

## 2. Joan's Androgynous Appearance

*"I am a woman dressed as a man dressed as a woman."*

*-Brenda Coultas, "dream life in a case of transvestism"*

One of the most interesting realities of Joan is that there is little concrete evidence about her physical appearance. Marina Warner similarly prefaces her exploration of this enigmatic figure in her book *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism*, saying, "There is no record of what Joan of Arc looked like. The colour of her eyes, the colour of her hair, her weight, her smile, none of it is described until later. The face of the heroine is blank; her physical presence unknown" (Warner 13). The blank slate Joan offers becomes important when tracing the gendered patterns of her traditional portrayals, and the way that these patterns have adjusted with contemporary figures. But as for the historical Joan, the most we know about her centers on two factors that she was able to control: her clothing and her hair.

Most people familiar with the Joan mythos know that Joan wore masculinized, military garments during her time in combat. This itself, while controversial, could possibly have been excusable as a utilitarian move—it's hard to say with certainty what the judges would have thought of Joan if she had only worn male clothing in combat. However, Joan wore male clothing in her everyday life, exceeding the expectations of someone taking on the role of a soldier, both on and off the battlefield. This fact repeats itself throughout the transcript of her trial, condemning her more and more with each knell. The transcript of the preparatory trial notes, "Asked whether she took the sacraments in men's attire, she said yes; but she does not remember taking them in arms" (Hobbins 82). Within this simple note, there is, if not a separation, a nuance between Joan's outward identity as a soldier and her outward identity as masculine. In this note, we see that Joan wore "men's attire" even when she wasn't "in arms,"

telling us that the attire was not strictly a part of her battle uniform. Even more interestingly, though, Joan notes that she did not take the sacrament “in arms,” implying that she might have seen such a thing inappropriate, a judgment she didn’t extend to taking the sacrament in male clothing. The image of the Soldier, then, becomes one component of Joan’s costume, but is not the whole costume itself—a nuance that troubles the simplicity of the male clothing even being a costume at all.

So, how did Joan look in her everyday life? As Karen Sullivan describes in the introduction of her examination of the trial text, our perception is largely filtered through the perspective of her accusers, but the image that they put together can be found in Article 12 of The *Libellus* d’Estivet of the Ordinary Trial. After accusing Joan of asking a man to fashion male clothing for her, “Although he was appalled and resisted doing so,” the article gives great detail about this male costume:

After the clothing and arms were sewn and crafted, Joan cast aside all women’s clothing and had her hair cut round [in a bowl shape], like a young man’s. Then she put on a shirt, breeches, a doublet, and hose fastened together by twenty loops, high-laced shoes, a short, knee-length robe, a close-cut hood, tight-fitting boots [...] (Hobbins 129).

That Joan dressed herself in this outfit was in itself clearly offensive to her accusers, given the note about the man who was “appalled” by the notion. However, as the accusations continue, it becomes clear that what really shocked her accusers was the fact that Joan seemed to enjoy—and perhaps even take a vain sort of pride—in dressing like a man. In the next article against her, her accusers note this deeper scandal:

Joan attributes to God, to his angels, and to his saints orders that are injurious to the honor of women [...] such as wearing short, tight, and immodest men’s clothing,

undergarments and hose as well as other articles. Following their orders, she often wore extravagant and magnificent clothing made of precious fabrics and cloth of gold, with fur lining. She wore not only short tunics, but sleeveless coats and robes slit on the sides. And her crimes were notorious, for she was captured wearing a cape of gold cloth, completely open, a cap, and her hair cut round like a man's. In general, casting aside all feminine modesty, flouting not only womanly decency but even the conduct of virtuous men, she enjoyed all the ornamentation and attire of the most dissipated men [...]

(Hobbins 130).

So, it seems that not only did Joan dress like a man, she dressed like a fashionable man. By doing so, she eschewed the religious modesty that often forgave women for disguising in masculine costumes in other circumstances, a phenomenon we will explore (and contrast with Joan's image) more later. She also gave herself more of a queer masculine presentation, another reality we will touch upon as it pertains to both her identity and vilification. But the lack of "humility" that was part of Joan's male costume played an important role in its perceived sin.

Joan's choice of dress was not necessarily unique to other members of the social class she had entered with her friendship to Charles. As Warner notes, "Joan was not unusual in enjoying rich dress, and besides, she was given it, according to customs of the day [...] Charles himself knew all about finery" (170). Even if Joan's dress wasn't unusual to her new social class, her gender presentation certainly complicated her image. As Warner notes, "Moralists inveighed particularly against the effeminacy of men. The vanity and immodesty of women were bad enough, but women were known to be foolish. The conspicuous luxuries of men were intolerable" (171). In occupying the image of an effeminate, immoral man, Joan seems to traipse

several boundaries and flaunt a tangle of degenerate contradictions, one that was bound to cause discomfort and scorn.

It can be argued that Joan's appearance was one of the most damning parts of her trial. Joan's accusers continuously bring up her "male dress" as one of their most concrete pieces of evidence against her. In the opening of The *Libellus d'Estivet*, the charges against her are summarized and listed. Joan is accused of being "a sorceress, diviner, false prophetess, conjurer of evil spirits [...] sacrilegious, idolatrous, apostate from the faith [...]" (Hobbins 124). The charges continue in this fashion, formally accusing Joan of a number of rather subjective, ambiguous evils. One of few actions to be included in this list of evidence of Joan's guilt is her "wholly forsaking the decency and reserve of her sex, utterly without modesty and shamelessly having taken the disgraceful clothing and state of armed men" (Hobbins 124). Other accusations of the vague actions of "witchcraft" are flatly denied by Joan (Hobbins 133). When her accusations are read formally in her presence, the first four are in regards to the falseness of her voices and mission, claims which are more difficult to prove. The fifth point, the first one truly detectable to anyone besides Joan, is in reference to her appearance, for which "the clerks say that you blaspheme God and scorn him in his sacraments [...] you are prone to idolatry; and you worship yourself and your clothing, according to the rites of the heathen" (Hobbins 185). Other scholars have noted that Joan's transvestism proved to be the crux of the accusations against her. As Susan Schibanoff points out in her essay "True Lies: Transvetism and Idolatry in the Trial of Joan of Arc," "During [the trial], from February to the end of May 1431, Joan's transvestment was relentlessly scrutinized. Valerie R. Hotchkiss counts more than thirty appearances of the charge in the trial text's preliminary lists of accusations and admonishments" (Schibanoff 33).



As the most tactile of Joan's sins, it makes sense that her male costume was used to stand in for her overall guilt. Indeed, Joan herself seemed to rely on it, intentionally or not, as the representation of the righteousness of her purpose; as Warner notes, "Her clothes were connected in her mind with her mission and held there an exalted place, above a mere practical measure" (144). Her relapse, in which she took back her recantation, was marked by her return to male clothing. This change occurred simultaneously with Joan's renewed faith in her voices; as she tells the judges, "she did not deny or intend to deny her visions, that is, that they were Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret; she did everything out of fear of the flames, and her entire recantation was untrue" (Hobbins 197). This moment played into the way Joan's accusers wanted to use her appearance as a physical demonstration of her heresy. As Hobbins noted, "the theological task of demonstrating Joan's claims to be false opened the door to all the other accusations designed to show that Joan was a heretic, such as her clothing, her fighting, and her refusal to submit to the Church" (21). Not only did Joan confirm this connection by using her change back into male clothing as a symbol of her return to the faith of her voices, but she also gave her enemies the ammunition they needed to eliminate her entirely. As scholars Régine Pernoud and Marie-Véronique Clin note in their book *Joan of Arc: Her Story*, "Only those who had relapsed—that is, those who having once abjured their errors returned to them—could be condemned to death [...] Despite his earlier loss of hope that he would find a proper charge, Cauchon had succeeded only in making men's clothes the symbol of Joan's refusal to submit to the church" (132). Schibanoff calls Joan's return to male dress a "fatal action:"

On that Monday, the judges began by interrogating Joan's overt marks of relapse, her return to male dress, and only then moved on to ferret out what to them were the invisible, inaudible signs, the recurrence of her private voices. Joan's male attire and

voices are inextricably linked in the transcript of her final condemnation; her transvestism serves to introduce and manifest her suspect revelations (31).

With Joan's motivations invisible to all but her, her male costume became the symbol for everything her enemies needed to accuse her. Whether or not it was the true source of their scorn and distrust, and ultimately, the true cause of her death, is impossible to know. But in the most tactile, literal way, Joan's male clothing sealed her demise.

With her choice of dress playing such an important role in her persecution and eventual death, it seems natural to wonder why she held so strongly to this decision. Whose direction was she (or did she think she was) acting under when she donned male clothing? During the trial, the question of Joan's clothing is lobbed at her repeatedly. Throughout this interrogation, Joan is uncharacteristically vague about why exactly she "must" wear male clothing, most often referencing an unspecified commandment of God (Hobbins). Schibanoff also notes the ambiguity of who gets blamed for Joan's dress. Referencing the digest of accusations that was produced after Joan's second trial, Schibanoff notes that Article I seems to blame Joan's voices for instructing her to wear male clothing, while in Article V and VIII the blame is shifted to Joan personally, although Article V notes that Joan claims to have acted under God's command (35). Warner also notes the way Joan seems to dodge questions of who instructed her to cross-dress. As she notes, "when Beaupère asked her, several times, why had she put on male dress, she balked. She would not divulge who had advised it; she would not pass the responsibility for it on to anyone else" (143).

Why does it matter upon whose authority Joan was acting when she chose to don male clothing? Although modern misconceptions about the Middle Ages might accept that a woman dressed as a man would be considered sinful enough to warrant execution, medieval opinions on

cross-dressing were actually a bit more nuanced. The reason for cross-dressing played a huge role in how it was perceived and/or accepted. Sullivan provides examples of numerous women who, at one time, cross-dressed for certain reasons. She quotes the theologian Aquinas as forgiving women who dressed like men “in case of necessity, for instance, in order to hide from enemies, or because there are no other clothes, or for some such good reason” (Sullivan 43). The deciding factor came down to the woman’s intentions in cross-dressing; if she had a holy purpose or assignment, she was more likely to be forgiven. With Joan, the ambiguity of her motivation to cross-dress proved to be dangerous. Sullivan details the dichotomy of her choice:

On the one hand, Joan’s opponents, including clerics who participated in her trial at Rouen, depicted her as having donned a tunic and grasped a sword because she desired to do so, and they cite Aquinas’s attack upon women who cross-dress out of desire to justify their criticisms of her [...] On the other hand, Joan and her supporters, including Christine de Pizan [...] the clerics who participated in the inquiry at Poitiers, and the clerics who reviewed her case at the rehabilitation, depicted Joan as having assumed this attire and these mores because she had been compelled to do so by God, and they cited Aquinas’s defense of women who cross-dress out of necessity to defend this stance (45).

The question then becomes whether Joan cross-dressed because she perceived that she *had* to or because she *wanted* to, the answer to which has long been impossible to know with certainty. However, the clue that we have is the same one that was available to Joan’s accusers: the style of clothing that Joan chose. Had Joan worn simple masculine clothing, her motivations might have seemed more utilitarian, simply “more convenient for the masculine tasks she had undertaken” (Sullivan 48). However, Sullivan notes that it was Joan’s sense of style that got her into trouble:

[...] her liking for the styles of hair and attire preferred by fashionable young men, such as the bowl cut, the slashed robes, and the ornate surcoats that she adopted during her later campaigns, indicated to the clerics that she did not take a purely utilitarian approach to her appearance. Joan's tendency to adorn herself "in the manner of fops" and in the manner of "the most dissolute men" suggests that she experienced her coiffeur, her wardrobe, and, by extension, her body not only as a means to an end but as an end in themselves. Because the clerics perceived that Joan took pleasure in her masculine trappings, they concluded that she chose them out of the desire to experience such pleasure (48).

Essentially, Joan's enemies concluded that if a woman has been commanded by God to dress as a man, she shouldn't enjoy it. According to Warner, it also did not help Joan's case that for most of the trial she did not appeal to practicality when defending her choice of dress. As Warner notes, "She never said she had done it to live with greater safety among soldiers, to preserve her chastity, or to ride a horse" (144). Without hearing a direct commandment from God himself, it is difficult to argue that Joan adopted male clothing out of sheer obedience and necessity.

Joan's accusers came to their conclusions about her feelings towards her attire, but Joan's own opinions are harder to parse out. Even the subtext of the statements she made in her trial contradicts itself. As Warner notes about this aspect of the trial, "Joan was at her most recalcitrant" (144). On the surface, she seems to not think her clothing is as significant as her accusers want to make it. Her first response to their questions about who instructed her to wear it is that "the clothing is a small matter, one of the least" (Hobbins 66). Upon being questioned during her relapse, the transcript claims that Joan allowed, "if the judges wish, she will take women's clothes" (Hobbins 198). These two moments in the trial transcript indicate that Joan did

not place much value in her clothing, that it was merely incidental to the causes she did care about. She even frequently claims that if she were acting on her own will, she would change back to female clothing (Sullivan 55).

At other times, however, Joan seems almost stubborn in her desire to wear men's clothing. When she is first offered permission to attend Mass in exchange for changing back into women's clothing, she veers around the question, until finally the transcript notes "she asked further, with greatest urgency, that she be allowed to hear Mass in the clothes she was wearing, without changing" (Hobbins 106). The only time she really entertains the thought of changing is when the promise of Mass is offered, but even then she is insistent that she cannot change. As the trial transcripts note, "She said that dressed as she was, she might be allowed to hear Mass, and she supremely desired it. But she could not change her garb; the decision was not hers" (Hobbins 117). She then more assertively disputes her accusers' insistence that it would be sinful for her to attend Mass in men's clothing, "saying that these clothes did not burden her soul and that wearing them was not against the Church" (Hobbins 117). Warner also finds Joan "obstinate" here, noting, "She continued to plead for her Mass, but proved incapable at making the simple switch of clothing [...] the dress was not, it seems, a trifle" (145). Despite Joan's hemming and hawing at the subject, it is clear that her appearance was, for some reason, important to her.

Sullivan notes that the ambiguity and inconsistency of Joan's responses about her clothing makes it difficult for her accusers to separate it from her other actions. As she notes, "Joan consistently refused to isolate the costume she wore from the feats she performed while wearing this costume" (Sullivan 56), implying that Joan may have viewed her cross-dressing in the utilitarian way of which Aquinas approved. However, a statement transcribed in her trial for relapse complicates this idea. When the judges ask why she has put men's clothing on after

swearing that she wouldn't, the transcript notes, "she said she had taken them of her own will, without being forced, and that she preferred these clothes to women's" (Hobbins 196). It seems that, despite her occasional flippancy on the subject, Joan did place a lot of value in her clothing:

Standing up to authority has cost many a life, but to lose one's life for one's dress, to express one's separateness, one's inalienable self through one's clothes, is unusual. Yet Joan's transvestism was taken very seriously indeed by the assessors of Rouen, who condemned her for it, and also by herself (Warner 140).

Joan's relapse—the fact that she endangered herself to put male clothing back on—is perhaps the best indication we have about how much value she placed upon this clothing.

We can only really speculate on how Joan viewed her appearance based not only on the pieces passed down from her trial, but also on the impact this choice might have had on other aspects of her life. Warner references the clues we have about Joan's family life, a tale darker than often portrayed. She argues that Joan's "refusal to marry is mixed up with the desire to leave on her mission; together they provoke a murderous rage in her father [...] Joan was, in fact, a runaway" (Warner 154). Joan also distances herself from her brothers when they attempt to achieve a higher social status through her fame (Warner 187). With these family dynamics in mind, Warner characterizes Joan's male clothing as a possible mark of rebellion against her own personal patriarchy. As she notes, "the disguise constituted a rejection of parental authority and, more precisely, of male domination [...] the break is characterised by the change of clothes, just as the new life of a nun is marked by the cutting of her hair and the wearing of a veil" (Warner 152-153). Joan might have viewed her changed appearance as a defiant act of independence and self-expression.

Another possibility is that Joan used her appearance to elevate her own status. In a patriarchal world, behaviors that are coded as masculine are also deemed superior. This creates a contradiction in figures like Joan. Warner notes that Joan's "open femaleness" even as she maintains a male costume "attacked men by aping their appearance in order to usurp their function" (155). Warner explains that the result of this action is complicated:

On the personal level, it defied men and declared them useless; on the social level, it affirmed male supremacy, by needing to borrow its appurtenances to assert personal needs and desires. Copycat fashions today, from executive suits to the workers' look [...] are an equivalent. They announce that women can do men's work, are as good as men, are up to men of every station; but men remain the touchstone and equality a process of imitation (155).

Clearly, Joan's male costume created complications within her own life, her perceived image, and the social status this image gave her.

Whatever Joan's motivation, her appearance made her an Imitation Man, which came with a set of implications specific to her time and beyond. In Joan's own time and as her mythos evolved throughout the centuries, those that wanted to exalt her piety were faced with the dilemma of her clothing and their assumption that it would be viewed as unholy. Warner describes Joan's costume as "the problem that troubled Joan's supporters: how was her inversion of the God-given order to be justified?" (139). However, as touched on a bit above, there was an element of cross-dressing that was permissible, and even sometimes exalted, within communities of faith. According to Schibanoff, "transvestism *per se* was regarded but not necessarily treated as transgressive" (39). She continues to note, "one version of transvestism appears to have been both admired and encouraged, albeit indirectly, in the legends of female saints who disguised

themselves as men in order to live as monks” (Schibanoff 39). Schibanoff describes this particular phenomenon as “holy transvestism,” and cites many cases of stories in which it is celebrated. A large part of what makes this form of cross-dressing permissible is that it protects something the church seemed to value even more than outward appearance: virginity. As Schibanoff notes, “The women who dress as men typically do so in order to retain and protect their virginity, even against their spouses” (40).

However, as discussed earlier, assuming the physical identity of a man was also permissible because to mimic masculinity was to strive for higher morality. Schibanoff quotes scholar James Anson as saying, “female cross-dressers have not only been tolerated but even encouraged, if only indirectly, through much of western history, since it was assumed they wanted to become more like men and, therefore, were striving to ‘better’ themselves” (40). Warner confirms this idea; as she notes, “the rejection of femininity is associated with positive action, it assumes the garb of virtue [...] Semantically, virtue is associated with man [...] she borrowed the apparel of men, who held a monopoly on virtue, on reason and courage” (147). Warner explores this phenomenon in regards to popular children’s stories, noting that the reverse of this pattern (boys cross-dressing as girls) is not nearly as celebrated a trope (157). Likewise, a historical case of a man dressing as a woman to achieve a noble purpose does not come to mind, certainly not as readily as the story of Joan.

This concept of holy transvestism refers to the more acceptable, utilitarian cross-dressing that Joan could have been perceived as employing. However, Joan could not fall under this category for an important reason: she never pretended to actually *be* a man. Warner articulates this distinction between appearance and definition, saying, “Joan, lacing herself into doublet and hose, cropping her hair in the pudding-basin style that had just come into fashion, never



proclaimed herself a boy. Indeed she never once pretended that she was male, since she referred to herself in the feminine gender, as La Pucelle, the Maid” (151). Joan’s distinct identification as female disqualifies her from the holy transvestism of other female saints. As Schibanoff clarifies, “What Aquinas refers to, then, is not merely *cross dressing*, partial or episodic transvestment in which the subject’s biological sexual identity remains apparent or known, but *crossover*, or *passing*, the complete and continuous impersonation of the opposite sex” (41). Any functionality of Joan’s costume for holy intentions is nullified because “no one in the trial ever suggested that Joan ‘passed’ as a man” (Schibanoff 43). Joan’s choice to maintain her womanhood actually made her cross-dressing a more transgressive sin; “those who cross-dressed or retained some aspect of their female identity [...] were censured or even, as in the case of Joan of Arc, condemned to the fire” (Schibanoff 42).

Being an acknowledged “fake” man is much more dangerous than passing as one. Schibanoff argues that this identity, one that does not fit as neatly into a binary category, becomes its own sort of idol in the eyes of the church. Schibanoff characterizes the male costume in an attempt to pass as male as a “true lie.” She uses this concept to articulate what made Joan’s acknowledged female-ness so dangerous, saying, “But Joan’s attire occasioned no such transcendental perception; her partial male attire did not mask but drew attention to her materiality, her female body, and thus ‘seduced’ its viewers [...] the cross-dressed Joan had turned her own body into an idol, a ‘false lie’” (Schibanoff 47). The danger of the “false lie” Schibanoff describes comes from its acknowledgement that a woman can adopt a man’s appearance and stay a woman; “the woman who openly wears man’s clothing destabilizes *his* sexual identity, not her own, for her action effeminates him” (Schibanoff 47). If a woman can

wear masculine clothes and still be a woman, what does that say about the assumed superiority, or essentialism, of masculinity? Suddenly, its power does not seem so elite.

Warner does not take the significance of this “false lie,” this ambiguous category that Joan occupies with her costume, lightly:

Through her transvestism, she abrogated the destiny of womankind. She could thereby transcend her sex; she could set herself apart and usurp the privileges of the male and his claims to superiority. At the same time, by never pretending to be other than a woman and a maid, she was usurping a man’s function but shaking off the trammels of his sex altogether to occupy a different, third order, neither male or female, but unearthly, like the angels whose company she loved (Warner 146).

In Warner’s light, this “false lie” of woman-dressed-as-man-but-still-woman becomes its own category, one that lies outside of the traditional gender binary. The importance of this is huge; as she notes, “Transvestism does not just pervert biology; it upsets the social hierarchy” (Warner 147). If women can adopt the guise of men without denying their female identity, then society must re-examine whether power should be assigned to the presentation of gender or the biological absolutist categories of gender, a distinction which suddenly upends the perceived indelible connection between the two (or the need for two distinct categories at all).

Joan’s costume is full of contradictions. By linking her masculine appearance to her noble deeds, she seems to confirm the superiority of maleness, becoming “a tribute to the male principle, a homage to the male sphere of action” (Warner 155). However, her insistence on her female identity ebbs away a bit at this homage. It also complicates the link between gender presentation and gender identity, placing Joan in a role that existed outside the established binary categories. This action is one that modern society is still struggling to understand, a reality which

will have implications on the way Joan-like figures are portrayed in contemporary works. Gender presentation and identity are still in the process of being examined and re-examined. Alongside these issues is another aspect of human life that has also traditionally been understood in binary categories: human sexuality. In this category, as well, Joan seems to upset the established order, placing herself in a realm outside traditional understanding in a way that is less frequently talked about, but perhaps equally important.

### 3. Joan's Ambiguous Sexuality

*"I just want to go back to before,  
before tomboy turned into butch,"*

*-Stacey Waite, "On the Occasion of Being Mistaken for a Man by a Waiter While  
Having Breakfast with My Mother"*

The destructed boundaries around Joan's appearance naturally lead to an examination of the boundaries of her sexuality. Although much less has been written directly about this aspect of Joan's life, the space that she does occupy is available, and even ripe, for modern queer analysis. Indeed, the ambiguities and uncertainties provide the question a nuance and texture that I think is probably as close as we can come to Joan's own inner identity, and the nuanced and textured sexual identity of most people. As I find myself navigating the contradictions of a few different categories in my own life, I find comfort in the chaos of Joan, a chaos that feels very real and familiar and human to me.

In many of the historical sketches and accounts of Joan from those around her, she is almost stripped of any sexuality due to her perception as holy. In her article "A Woman As Leader of Men," Kelly DeVries notes the remarkability of the treatment of Joan by the men she commanded, saying that to them, "Perhaps the most impressive of Joan's 'miracles' and evidence of her sanctity was her virginity, and the fact that they, as soldiers in the field, felt no sexual arousal when around her" (12). In DeVries' summation, Joan's holy un-sexuality (as I will call it) was an asset to her as a commander of men. As she argues, "They seemed to have welcomed the holiness that she represented, and in fact some marveled and even relished the spirituality of their own existence when with her" (DeVries 12). So, in DeVries' assessment, the un-sexual Joan brought out the best in her (assumed) heterosexual comrades by dampening their

sexual desire. They are made better not by being around a woman, but by being around a not-quite-woman; such a statement, while casting Joan's leadership over her men in a good light, seems to have some unpleasant implications about the danger of female sexuality.

Pernoud and Clin confirm this untouchable quality in Joan, although the sources they cite do not claim that it came from a complete lack of sexuality and desire, but rather repressed desire. They quote Gobert Thibault, a contemporary of Joan's, describing the men's perception of her by saying, "I heard many of those closest to her say that they had never had any desire for her; that is to say, they sometimes felt a certain carnal urge but never dared to let themselves go with her, and they believed that it was not possible to desire her" (Pernoud and Clin 35). From this quote, Joan's sexuality seems present but forbidden due to her holiness, at least in the eyes of those who might desire her. Another note to consider is that Joan's mission un-sexes her as it turns her into an instrument of an omnipotent God. Warner explores the writings of Pierre Lemoyne, a Jesuit who published *The Gallery of Strong Women* in 1647, and his approach to Joan treats her gender as unremarkable due to the work of God. Warner summarizes his arguments about the "irrelevance" of Joan's gender:

Her special courage comes from God, independent of her sex; it is the kind of enthusiasm—Lemoyne means this in the exalted Greek sense of divine possession—that transcends questions of gender. He proclaims vehemently the irrelevance of maleness or femaleness in the case of such greatness as Joan possessed and relates her to the Platonic world of absolute ideas, unmodified by questions of sex (225).

In Lemoyne's perception, Joan-as-instrument is exceptional among both men and women, allowing her holiness to transcend these traditional categories and transform her into an "idea."

This quality of her un-gender and un-sexuality (and untouchable nature) comes up a lot from the testimony of the men who served under her, but as Schibanoff notes, this insistence doesn't seem necessary for the sake of Joan's reputation – her virginity was generally agreed upon even by her accusers (52). Instead, Schibanoff argues that this insistence may have had to do with “their own (hetero)sexuality, or apparent lack of it, than about Joan's” (52). In her argument, the force of Joan's un-sexual nature was imposed upon the men who served with her, and as she says, “What hovers just beneath the surface of their admiration for the cross-dressed Joan is the fear that the idol of masculinity she constitutes has rendered them effeminate, sexless, with respect to both her and to other women” (Schibanoff 52). Her argument is that by existing as both a woman and undesirable, Joan threatened the power that men usually hold over women through their ability to consume women. If her men did not desire her, their role within this typical sexual hierarchy was in a sense neutered (which, interestingly, mirrors the reverse of the social hierarchy that Joan caused by commanding men). Of course, the testimony of Joan's contemporary indicates that there was some desire for her, which opens up another possibility. If Joan is a “false lie,” a not-quite-woman, then desiring her is perhaps not quite heterosexuality. This possibility not only queers her, but the men around her who may have felt sexual attraction to her.

Joan's holiness may have rendered her sexless in a way, but there were other ways that her physical female body was subject to destruction, both literally and figuratively. Some of this destruction may have been enacted by Joan herself. Joan's squire, Jean d'Aulon, testified that he didn't think Joan menstruated, and according to Warner, he could have been correct (19-21). Warner details the relationship between the ovarian cycle and mental stress, even going so far as to speculate that Joan may have suffered from an anorexia-like condition as a result of her

abstemious eating habits (Warner 21). Such an aspect of Joan, Warner notes, would not have been understood and would have been considered miraculous. As she notes, “To be a woman, yet, unmarked by woman’s menstrual flow, was to remain in a primordial state, the prelapsarian state of Eve, before sexual knowledge corrupted” (Warner 21-22). Once again, Joan is presented as woman-but-not-quite, and in this case she is all the better for it in the eyes of her contemporaries.

In other ways, though, the sexual treatment of Joan puts her back into the role of the consumable female, subject to the desires of the men around her. Rumors circulated about attempts to violate her while she was imprisoned in Rouen (Warner 27), although the accusations arise during the time between Joan’s recantation and her reversal of it, indicating that the only time she was consumable was when she had lost some of her holy power (Warner 106). In a less literal way, Joan’s female body was consumed by those who attended her execution. According to *The Parisian Journal*, an anonymous journal of a male contemporary of Joan’s (who did not view her favorably), upon her execution, “She was soon dead and her clothes all burned. Then the fire was raked back and her naked body shown to all the people and all the secrets that could or should belong to a woman, to take away any doubts from people’s minds” (Shirley 263). In these moments, the possible un-sexuality of Joan is complicated by her subjugation to, quite literally, the male gaze.

In one case of a common perception of Joan, the idea of Joan as an Amazon, the destruction of the female body and un-sexuality are linked. Christine de Pizan, a contemporary (and fan) of Joan’s, celebrates the mythologized Amazon women as an answer to the question of whether or not women can be strong. Christine writes about the nickname given to the Amazons:

“breastless ones,” because they had a custom whereby the nobles among them, when they were little girls, burned off their left breast through some technique so that it would not hinder them from carrying a shield, and they removed the right breast of commoners to make it easier for them to shoot a bow (41).

In the case of the Amazons, the removal of the breasts is key for battle; to become not-quite-woman is to become admirable and strong, qualities that Christine would also see in Joan.

Warner confirms this dilemma. She connects Joan (or at least, the Joan mythos) to the Amazons and describes the role that both of their masculinization plays:

The Amazon dramatises sexual difference, but gives the palm to the male: for their physical skills, courage, accuracy of aim, speed of foot, endurance in battle, not for their psychic choice, are Hippolyta and Penthesilea praised. Nothing could be a clearer example of how the figure embodies a rejection of the feminine than the severed breast (Warner 215).

The Amazons display a gendered destruction that serves a utilitarian purpose; they reject an element of their female identity in order to be better warriors. This is one way to view Joan’s masculine identity, one that will become important as we examine her fictional portrayals.

Of course, not everyone connects Joan to the Amazons. While scholar Deborah Fraioli notes that the popularity of the Amazons in Joan’s time may have contributed to her own popularity, Joan’s desire to be seen as an instrument of God might more closely align her with biblical heroines (189). Furthermore, she notes that the exclusion of some of these biblical heroines from the popular culture of medieval France in favor of pagan female warriors was because “citing Hebrew women (of whom Esther and Judith were the most popular exemplars) or Christian saints would have meant abandoning respect for the values of prowess and conquest,



which lay at the heart of the topos for the males, in favor of more feminine or more submissive virtues” (Fraioli 192). So, it is important to keep in mind that the society (or at least, the factions of it) that celebrated Joan may have done so because she, like the Amazons, was seen as occupying a like-male space that could be admired without undermining the value of masculine traits.

Of course, this celebration of the masculine qualities of Joan is undercut by the heavy value placed on a traditional feminine virtue: her virginity. Joan went through rigorous exams designed to confirm both her sex and her purity. As Jean Pasquerel, Joan’s confessor, recalled, “I heard it said that Joan, when she came to the king’s court, was examined by women to know what was in her, if she was a man or a woman, and if she was a virgin or corrupted” (Pernoud and Clin 30). Scholars believe these exams were physically invasive. In her article “Joan of Arc and Her Doctors,” Marie-Véronique Clin describes that one of her doctors, Guillaume de la Chambre, “saw Joan almost naked and could declare according to medical science that she was a virgin and intact; as he palpated her lower abdomen, he found that she was *stricta*, that is, narrow in the hips” (299). Joan’s virginity was important to her reputation, especially since she defined herself as the Maid. As Clin notes, “Had she been demonstrated to be nonvirginal, her entire cause would have immediately been discredited” (299). Joan’s virginity was a key component of her identity; it elevated her to a higher stature of womanhood.

Virginity and chastity were prized characteristics in women, especially holy women or warrior women. In her *City of Ladies*, Christine de Pizan praises the queen Zenobia, saying, “This woman was supremely chaste. Not only did she avoid other men, but she also slept with her husband only to have children, and demonstrated this clearly by not sleeping with her husband when she was pregnant” (54). Women who were characterized as strong leaders had to

act as examples of moral superiority, and chastity was a big part of that. In this way, virginity enhanced Joan's value as an exemplar. Her connection to God related her to female saints, for whom virginity was key. As Warner notes, "Living saints did not survive through qualities of honesty, courage, charity or any personal virtue other than chastity, to which enormous importance was attached" (78). Warner continues to note that because Joan never claimed to perform miracles, her virginity becomes even more important to her saintly status (78). Beyond just the question of sainthood, Joan positioned herself as a secular symbol for France. Warner articulates the importance of Joan's virginity in this context:

The concept of virginity which she embodied—literally—had enormous power in her culture. Juxtaposed to the vivisected and dismembered body of the kingdom, her virginity provided an urgent symbol of integrity. By synecdoche, Joan's intact sexuality stood for the whole of her and, in the ambitions of her supporters, for the whole of France (32).

In this quote, Warner articulates exactly how big a role Joan's virginity played. Her chaste, moral sexuality was not just a part of her identity; it became her identity. And because it did, it became the identity of France's hope.

This question of Joan's sexual identity would be made much easier with some testimony on it from her. In this area, she has left us with no easy answers. As explored above, she seems attached to her masculine appearance, but she wavers on whether this appearance is truly her choice or not. In only one place in the trial is Joan asked if she wants to be a man, a question that might have given us a clue about Joan's perception of her gender (albeit an extremely simplified clue), but Joan evades this question, too. In the transcript from the "First Interrogation After the Oath," this moment appears in the midst of questions about Joan's childhood: "Asked whether she had wanted to be a man when she was supposed to come to France, she said she had

answered that already” (Hobbins 61). According to a footnote that Hobbins provides, no such previous answer exists.

According to scholar Steven Weiskopf, this question of Joan’s gender was not exclusive to this moment in the trial. In his article “Readers of the Lost Arc: Secrecy, Specularity, and the Speculation in the Trial of Joan of Arc,” Weiskopf explores the moment when her naked body is revealed to the crowd upon her execution as recorded in *The Parisian Journal* (which we have noted above):

What “doubt” haunts the crowd in the Bourgeois’s description? And what secrets in this quasi-pornographic account are the spectators hoping to discover, or more to the point, uncover? What are they hoping to see? Anne Llewellyn Barstow offers the most literal explanation, linking the Bourgeois’s morbid description to the crowd’s fascination with and confusion over Joan’s sexual identity. Troubled by the notion that a woman could be “a powerful war leader,” both friend and foe “thirsted to know whether she was a man or a woman” (114).

For the crowd, Joan’s sexual identity is called into question by the role that she plays. As Weiskopf notes, in another place in *A Parisian Journal*, “Using neither the feminine nor the masculine pronoun, the Bourgeois writes quizzically of Joan, ‘What *it* was, God only knows” (114). Her contemporaries were troubled by her ambiguous sexual identity, and as the incident at her execution demonstrates, they believed their questions could be answered by her physical body.

However, Joan’s clothing and presentation cannot simply be brushed away to answer the confusion around her sexual identity. Her appearance complicates the binary categories between “man” and “woman,” allowing her to occupy a definition somewhere outside and in-between.

We have established the focus on Joan's appearance that makes itself clear in her trial. Sullivan notes the importance of this focus in demonizing Joan in a way that plays with sexual boundaries:

In comparing Joan's haircut to that of "fops" and her dress to that of "the most dissolute men," the clerics identified the desire expressed in her curiosity not with the sensuality of women, which would customarily show itself in a taste for jewelry, cosmetics, and feminine finery, but with the sensuality of men, and, indeed, of unnatural men who are made effeminate through their concern with personal attractiveness. Unable to accuse her of the sexual misdeeds of wanton women [...] they associated her, instead, with seducers and sodomites, even though she might seem to differ from them in her femaleness. As a woman delighting in doublets, surcoats, and banners rather than gowns and headdresses, Joan incarnated for the clerics a new and monstrous eroticism transgressive of traditional categories (52).

In her own time, then, Joan's appearance is tied to a sexual identity that works to vilify her by queering her. Her body may have confirmed her femaleness to the crowd at her execution, but her fashionable, masculine identity made her something Other to her accusers, something harder to define and, therefore, more dangerous.

It might be surprising to imagine that this line of thinking existed in Joan's time; in fact, opponents to this argument might assume we are forcing modern sensibilities upon a long-dead figure who would understand nothing of them. However, it might be that we have been applying our modern perception of heteronormativity unfairly upon the Middle Ages. In her book *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't*, Karma Lochrie argues for a more nuanced examination of sexuality in the Middle Ages. In her introduction, she notes, "As

[Valeria] Traub argues, the hetero/homosexual divide that continues to structure our understanding of medieval sexuality creates a false medieval binary opposition between a monologic heterosexuality and a minoritized sodomy” (Lochrie xx). Lochrie notes that in our current heteronormative understanding, it is socially acceptable to desire someone of the opposite sex. She points (humorously) to Clinton’s distinctions of what defines “sex” in his impeachment trial, noting that many people do consider vaginal intercourse and penetration by the penis to be “sex,” and all other acts to be deviant and/or outside of that definition (Lochrie). These standards, Lochrie argues, might not apply to the Middle Ages. As she notes, “The medieval category of the natural, of course, does exist, but it is not equivalent to normal in the modern sense of the term [...] the category of the natural never implied the average, the widespread, or the ‘norm,’ but rather the ideal, which is not the same thing” (Lochrie xxii). Anything that fell outside of the category of procreative, marital sex might not have lived up to this ideal, and this reality blurs the lines between hetero- and homo- sex acts as transgressive behavior (Lochrie xxiii). The transgressive nature becomes less dependent on the genders of the participants, and more dependent on the nature of the act—a queer sexual relationship would not have been unheard of, but merely acknowledged as sinful in the same way any sexual act without the aim to conceive would have been. In Lochrie’s revised understanding of the Middle Ages, a Joan that did not fall neatly into a “male” or “female” category certainly might have been possible, despite the scene of her execution.

One clue that we have from Joan herself in regards to her identity comes from the term she used to label herself: *La Pucelle*. Warner explores the nuances of this word as a name for Joan:

*Pucelle* means “virgin,” but in a special way, with distinct shades connoting youth, innocence and, paradoxically, nubility. It is the equivalent of the Hebrew *‘almah*, used of both the Virgin Mary and the dancing girls in Solomon’s harem in the Bible. It denotes a time of passage, not a permanent condition. It is a word that looks forward to a change in state (22).

As her title, then, Joan chose a word that refuses to be boxed into a definition of female sexuality. It embodies an innocent virgin and a nubile harem girl, spanning the spectrum of womanhood rather than settling comfortably into one of its ends. She characterizes herself as a body in flux, a body in change. Warner goes on to outline the “gallant,” economic-class-spanning, and even mystical connotations of the word. Its importance as a layered, contradictory term cannot be overlooked:

[Joan] picked a word for virginity that captured with doubled strength the magic of her state in her culture [...] During the whole course of her brief life Joan of Arc placed herself thus, on the borders, and then attempted to dissolve them and to heal the division they delineated. In the very ambiguity of her body, which had to be shown to the crowd to assure them that she was a woman, in the name that she chose—which means “virgin” and yet simultaneously captures all the risk of loss—she shows herself to span opposites, to contain irreconcilable oppositions (Warner 23).

If we base any assumptions on the name Joan chose for herself, one of the few moments we have of her unfiltered perspective speaking to her identity, we find a woman that embraced an indefinable state of being, a woman dissatisfied with the categories that “either/or” provided, a woman that kept herself open instead to “none” and “all.”

It is impossible, of course, to say with certainty that Joan herself would have identified with any of our modern queer categories, or if any of those categories—asexual, gender-queer (not identifying as male or female), lesbian, transgender—apply. However, the ambiguities and unanswered questions seem to allow Joan to occupy a queer space, one that complicates our understanding of her. Perhaps the ambiguities do not just come from a lack of evidence, but from a lack of a clear-cut sexuality within the real Joan herself. Maybe, like so many of us, she is messy and complicated and impossible to categorize simply because of who she is, and would be so even if we had the whole picture, even if we could ask her ourselves.

It is tempting to want to hold our admiration of Joan as proof that we are more tolerant than her contemporaries. Lochrie acknowledges this temptation in her own work, saying, “My need to believe in medieval heteronormativity is still understandable to me, for if heteronormativity did not exist in the Middle Ages, what happens to deviant sexualities? Do they disappear? How is resistance possible for queer scholars without a heteronormative whipping boy?” (xiv). When we hold our esteem of Joan—our celebration of her female-ness and transgression as she donned a helm to save France—against this heteronormative whipping boy of the past, we un-complicate both Joan and ourselves. There is a certain comfort in un-complication. If this whipping boy disappears, though, then who is Joan triumphant over, and why do we celebrate this triumph? Perhaps the heteronormative shackles that she casts aside are not just from her time, but from our own time. Perhaps they still exist around her even as we celebrate her.

## 4. Joan's Portrayals in Literature

### 4.1 Classical Imagery

*“Love, Mercy, Charity, Fortitude, War, Peace, Poetry, Music—these may be symbolized as any shall prefer: by figures of either sex and of any age; but a slender girl in her first young bloom, with the martyr’s crown upon her head, and in her hand the sword that severed her country’s bonds—shall not this, and no other, stand for PATRIOTISM through all the ages and beyond?”*

*-Mark Twain, Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*

The real Joan may be shrouded in questions, but that hasn't stopped a myriad of Joan mythos' from claiming popularity. Joan has been an icon for centuries, and much of her iconography places her into the understood category of women warriors, women who assume a masculinized role (and often the appearance that comes with it) out of a need, not out of a complex personality and gender identification. Warner outlines the rise of her popularity, marking 16<sup>th</sup> century writer Antoine Dufor's sketch of her as an early contributing factor, one that solidified her appearance as “a warrior after the antique” (Warner 211). Warner goes on to highlight her portrayals in 16<sup>th</sup>-century biographies, saying, “the image of Joan has not just crystallised but petrified; she is always represented, in both the text and the engravings that accompany it, as a classical warrior, wearing various sorts of armour and carrying different weapons” (211). The image of Joan becomes one that fits neatly into an almost fairy-tale ideal of chivalrous knights and brave conquerors. This emphasis on the knightly quality of her appearance diminishes its complications. Warner notes the danger of this portrayal:

Joan's male dress is glossed over. She is armed and cuirassed as a practical measure. No inquiry is made into the disturbing and deep ambivalence of Joan's need to wear male



dress far from the battlefield, in the prison cell, at the communion table. Her transvestism is, in the spirit of uncomprehending chivalry, made light of (211).

When Joan's male dress is reduced to battle armor, made a practical measure instead of a transgressive choice, the complications that come with it can easily be brushed under the rug.

In addition to playing up Joan's male dress as simply utilitarian, the complications of Joan's gender are erased by an insistence on her traditionally feminine beauty. The idea that she's merely wearing armor to fulfill her duty to God is strengthened by her maintenance of classic female characteristics. Recall that Joan's bowl haircut was a large part of her troubling image, one that equated her with fops (men made disreputable by their sexuality). However, as Warner notes of texts written about her in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century, "Joan always has long hair, and the specific description in the trial charge, that her head was shorn like a fashionable boy's, is simply ignored in the texts and the pictures" (Warner 211) Joan is even often depicted wearing a dress underneath her armor. As Warner notes of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century portrayals of her, "The image most often reproduced is the town hall of Orleans's portrait, with its gay plumage and full skirts" (211). With long, flowing hair and a dress underneath her armor, Joan appears more the feminine ideal, donning armor and performing masculine tasks simply because she is brave, certainly, and pious. While these latter associations are admirable, they diminish the transgressions for which Joan most likely suffered the greatest retributions. They dismiss the way she troubles gender, turning her instead into an ideal feminine example.

Warner also notes another troubling trend in the established image of Joan: the tendency to characterize her as a child. Warner notes that firstly, this idea is false—Joan's age was not all that unusual of a high-ranking military officer in her day (266). More dangerously, admiring Joan because of her youth and "innocence" creates a troubling use for her as an instructive icon.

As Warner notes, “When virtue is pictured as innocence and innocence equated with childlikeness, the implication is obviously that knowledge and experience are no longer media of goodness, but have become in themselves contaminating” (266). Emphasizing Joan’s virtue through her innocence works to infantilize women, to rid them of their messy choices for a more “pure” state of existence. Warner acknowledges both the reasons why this is popular and dangerous:

The Saint Joan of recent hagiography, and Saint Thérèse, the Little Flower, both give comfort. They provide for adults a simple image of perfection. They eliminate complications; by remaining childish, they do not present their votaries with moral dilemmas or ambiguities. Such a saint represents a reduction of conflict (Warner 267).

By reducing Joan to a state of childlike naiveté, the idea that she was merely acting in obedience to God is strengthened. Her agency in her actions (and in her dress) is robbed, and with it, the implications of her choices. The “pure” elements of Joan are ripe for establishing a popular, moral figure. She is fascinating and virtuous, her story too good to be believed. By simply tucking away some of the more transgressive choices, transforming them into a more feminized appearance or making them into the actions of an instrument of God, society is free to look up to Joan without troubling their understandings of a gender binary, of what constitutes a “man” and a “woman,” with no shades of grey in between.

This Joan, a lovely, innocent girl who does a remarkable thing, is the one that survives into popular culture. Even Mark Twain, not usually thought of as religious, was enraptured by her. In his novel *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, his “self-proclaimed best work” (Twain iii), Twain draws a portrait of a beautiful, innocent, luminous child. Warner elaborates on this puzzling move, noting, “Mark Twain, another impassioned defender of individual liberties,

created a Joan of Arc who is the epitome of the ‘marvellous child.’ Of all Twain’s books, he claimed to like this the best, although it contradicted in a fundamental way his atheist, determinist and antimonarchist philosophy” (251). Devoted to the details, Twain did emphasize her own choice in donning male attire after her relapse, the decision that would ultimately lead to her death (Twain 305). He also captured, for lack of a more specific term, the certain spark of her personality—the wit and charm—that seems to shine through the trial text. Throughout the novel, told from the perspective of a male comrade, her beauty is constantly referenced, along with the complete lack of sexual desire around her due to her holiness. In his accompanying essay “Saint Joan of Arc,” Twain concludes by chastising artists for painting her unattractively, saying they should instead capture her spirit, that then, “She would rise before us, then, a vision to win us, not repel: a lithe young slender figure, instinct with ‘the unbought grace of youth,’ dear and bonny and lovable, the face beautiful, and transfigured with the light of that lustrous intellect and the fires of that unquenchable spirit” (Twain 329).

The sentiment is one that I believe I agree with: Joan of Arc should be admired for her intellect and spirit. Part of that spirit, though, seems to have been a rejection of some of the traditional markers of youth and beauty that Twain, and many of Joan’s admirers throughout history, seem to want to attach to her. She doesn’t make sense to them otherwise: a woman so admirable and transgressive must also be exemplarily lovely. What else could justify the boundaries she crossed?

## 4.2 Brienne of Tarth

*“Brienne the Beauty, they name her...though not to her face, lest they be called upon to defend those words with their bodies.”*

*-George R.R. Martin, A Clash of Kings*

When George R. R. Martin’s popular fantasy book series *A Song of Ice and Fire* was adapted into an HBO television series in 2011, much of the American public, myself included, was introduced to the world of his books. The show appealed to those who were already fans of the fantasy series as well as newcomers to the genre, in large part because of the compelling characters. This was my first introduction to the enigmatic Brienne of Tarth, who quickly became one of my favorite characters of the show.

It is nearly impossible to boil down the intersecting plotlines of the series into a simple summary, but I will attempt it in terms of Brienne’s story. When we meet Brienne in the second installment of the series, *A Clash of Kings*, she is the standard-bearer to the character Renly, the younger brother of the king Robert, who was killed in the first book. Renly claims that the young boy Joffrey, who took the throne of Westeros after Robert’s death, is not Robert’s son, but a bastard conceived from Robert’s wife Cersei’s incestuous relationship with her brother Jaime (which, by the way, is true). Brienne joins Renly’s highest rank of knights, despite cruel treatment from her comrades, and witnesses his mysterious death. Also present was Catelyn Stark, the wife of Eddard Stark (murdered by Joffrey in the first book), who was seeking Renly’s support in her son’s campaign for revenge against Joffrey and the rescue of her daughters, Sansa and Arya, believed to still be captive in King’s Landing (the capital of Westeros). Upon Renly’s death, Brienne swears her loyalty to Catelyn and returns to the Stark’s army with her. When the army captures Jaime and holds him hostage, Catelyn sees an opportunity to trade him for her

daughters and sends Brienne to return Jaime to King's Landing against her son's wishes. In the third book, *A Storm of Swords*, the reader sees Brienne and Jaime attempt to survive their journey together, and slowly develop a mutual respect for one another, before finally returning to King's Landing. Jaime, having undergone some changes of heart, charges Brienne to find Sansa Stark (who is not in King's Landing after all) and bring her to safety (her family, Catelyn included, having been killed by Jamie's father's army). The fourth book, *A Feast for Crows*, follows Brienne in this mission.

The immediate connection to Joan is phonetic: Brienne of Tarth and Joan of Arc sound remarkably similar. I was surprised to read that George R.R. Martin does not directly attribute the inspiration of his character to Joan. As Jill Pantozzi wrote about in an article for [themarysue.com](http://themarysue.com) (a geek-culture online magazine with a feminist leaning), Martin made some comments about Brienne's origin at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. According to Martin, Brienne is a response to what he saw as an "unrealistic" depiction of a "woman warrior" from *Xena the Warrior Princess* (another pop-culture hit), and as he says, "I was inspired by people like Eleanor of Aquitaine and not so much Joan of Arc, but the queens of Scottish history, from Lady Macbeth on down—strong women who didn't put on chain-mail bikinis to go forth into battle, but exercised immense powers in other ways" (Pantozzi).

I'll be frank: this description initially baffled me. Upon examination, it seems that Martin is speaking to a sort of feminism that many of his fans attribute to him and admire in him. His *Woman Warrior* is an antidote, as he sees it, to the over-sexualized, impractical depictions of strong women seen in other areas of geek lore. Why he dismisses Joan as part of this is puzzling to me, as is the "other ways" that he sees Brienne exercising power. While she's not one for bikinis, pretty much all Brienne does is don chain-mail to go forth into battle. Indeed, as we

continue in this study, it will become clear that the female representation in Martin's world, however well-intentioned, is a bit more complicated than "positive" or "negative." In Brienne, Martin creates a woman hero who still seems stuck in rigid definitions of gender and sexuality by the very boundaries she is purported to transgress. We have a woman who has not risen above the restrictions of gender, but rather fails to live up to them, and in doing so exists in a much more simplified, binary space than the nuanced one occupied by Joan. Brienne is not a "woman dressed as a man dressed as a woman;" Brienne is a woman who seems to want to exist in either one box or the other, in a world that seems to want her to, as well.

Perhaps Martin included his "not so much Joan of Arc" comment because he sees the immense similarities the two share and wants to clarify any confusion. With this in mind, I will go forth knowing that I do so outside of the realm of author-intent. I read Brienne of Tarth as a figure connected to our mythos of Joan, especially in the gender-troubling ways we've highlighted as so complicated. But first, some superficial similarities. When we are first introduced to Brienne in the second book of the series, *A Clash of Kings*, she is the standard-bearer (as noted on page 475 of the book) for Renly Baratheon, who is on a campaign to claim the throne he sees as his rightful birthright. It doesn't get much more parallel to a historical instance than that—Joan was the standard-bearer to Charles, who, although no dead brother was involved, was on a campaign for his rightful throne. Throughout the series, the title most often attributed to Brienne is also strikingly similar to Joan's. In the third book of the series, *A Storm of Swords*, and the fourth book, *A Feast for Crows*, the narrative refers to Brienne as "The Maid of Tarth" in several places, a title immediately evocative of "The Maid of Orleans." (Of course, even without the phonetic similarities, the emphasis on Brienne's "maidenhood" as a significant

feature of her identity is another parallel between her and Joan, but we will discuss that more later).

In addition to these historical parallels, Brienne is characterized in ways that align her with both the popular perception of Joan and the real figure (as best we understand her). One way that she is connected to the Joan we see in the trial text is that she feels more comfortable wearing male clothing, even when she is not in battle. In *A Clash of Kings*, Catelyn Stark watches Brienne at a feast in Renly's honor, noting, "She did not gown herself as a lady, but chose a knight's finery instead, a velvet doublet quartered rose-and-azure, breeches and boots and a fine-tooled swordbelt" (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 347). Brienne's comfort in male clothing comes up again in *A Storm of Swords* after Jaime has rescued her from imprisonment (during which time she was made to wear a dress). As the narrative notes, "They had found men's garb for her along the way; a tunic here, a mantle there, a pair of breeches and a cowled cloak, even an old iron breastplate. She looked more comfortable dressed as a man" (Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 844). Like Joan, Brienne wears not only military garb, but fine male clothing (although not overtly foppish, as Joan's clothing was, which is a distinction that becomes important when examining the ways Brienne exists within a gender binary), and seems more comfortable doing so. The costume is not merely utilitarian for battle purposes.

Brienne also connects to the popular image we hold of Joan, one of an innocent young woman performing her role out of a sense of duty. In *A Clash of Kings*, the narrative (which shifts among different characters' points of view) builds Brienne's character as observed by Catelyn Stark, who views Brienne in a maternal way. At one point, Catelyn says to Brienne, "There is a sweet innocence about you, child" (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 786). Brienne's image as an "innocent child" through Catelyn's narrative plays into the "innocent child"

characterization of Joan as outlined by Marina Warner, a trope that simplifies Joan's complications and robs her of her agency. Likewise, the narrative allows a reading of Brienne as a young girl who wants to return home, but doesn't out of a sense of duty. At the end of *A Storm of Swords*, Jamie has entrusted Brienne with a mission to get the Stark daughters to safety. When we pick up on Brienne's progress in that mission in *A Feast for Crows* (the only book so far in which Brienne has point of view chapters), the narrative finally allows the reader into Brienne's head. As she considers where to find Sansa Stark, Brienne thinks, "*Where would I go?* For her, the answer came easy. She would make her way back to Tarth, to her father" (Martin, *A Feast for Crows*, 81). This moment plays into the popular image of Joan as an innocent child, transgressive not by choice but rather by duty.

Another important thing that Brienne has in common with Joan of Arc is her virginity. The value placed on this quality is particularly important when examining the world that Martin has created for characters like Brienne to inhabit. Throughout the series, the threat of rape is brought up so often that it's practically part of the setting. And indeed, in the books' adaptation to television, naked women are often paraded in the background (most often in a brothel), and one scene in the most recent season *literally* took place while women were raped in the background. As BuzzFeed's Louis Peitzman deftly criticized the television show, "rape became the worst kind of background noise, peppered throughout with no narrative reason other than to justify that TV-MA rating." When describing the above-mentioned scene, Peitzman notes, "That these rapes occurred literally in the background of the scene reinforce [sic] the notion that sexual violence here has become a ghastly form of set dressing." While the television show is not the focus of our criticism, its visual representation of Martin's world seems an appropriate illustration of the mood set by the books.



Women in the novel are under the constant threat of rape; interestingly enough, though, it seems to only happen to the side characters. In *A Clash of Kings*, a barely-mentioned relative of the royal family is the only one to be violated in a peasant revolt; as the narrative notes, “Lady Tanda’s daughter had surrendered her maidenhood to half a hundred shouting men behind a tanner’s shop” (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 600). The opening prologue to the next book, *A Storm of Swords*, introduces the reader to a group of criminals that never appear in the narrative again, one of whom “raped a hundred women in his youth, and liked to boast how none had ever seen nor heard him until he shoved it up inside them” (Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 5). The prologue is told from the perspective of one of the criminals, Chett. His crimes, while perhaps less gratuitous, are similarly sinister:

The only women Chett had ever known were the whores he’d bought in Mole’s Town.

When he’d been younger, the village girls took one look at his face, with its boils and its wen, and turned away sickened. The worst was that slattern Bessa. She’d spread her legs for every boy in Hag’s Mire, so he’d figured why not him too? He even spent a morning picking wildflowers when he heard she liked them, but she’d just laughed in his face and told him she’s crawl in a bed with her father’s leeches before she’d crawl in one with him. She stopped laughing when he put his knife in her (Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 7).

It seems clear that Martin does not expect the readers to sympathize with these characters.

However, the idea that a man felt owed sex—that violent retribution for rejection was justified—is a little too close to an ideology I’ve seen at play in earnest in the real world. However Martin intends this character to come off, I have no trouble imagining some readers feeling more comfortable than myself at this display of violence against this particular woman.

Brienne also encounters this language and culture of violence against women. When she asks around for information about Sansa Stark (or, as she puts it to protect Sansa's identity, a "young maid with auburn hair"), she's met with indifference and casual sexual language. "If she's on the roads these days she won't be no maid for long," said the older man. The younger wanted to know if the girl had that auburn hair between her legs as well" (Martin, *A Feast for Crows*, 81). One man Brienne encounters tells her about the crimes being perpetrated of late, saying, "Septs have been despoiled, maidens and mothers raped by godless men and demon worshippers. Even silent sisters have been molested" (Martin, *A Feast for Crows*, 91). (Note: "silent sisters" are a *Song of Ice and Fire* order a bit like nuns and mystics combined).

Brienne herself is frequently threatened with rape. When she and Jaime are captured by a band of outlaws, she endures constant, gratuitous threats, including one of the men saying to another, "Turn her over and rape her arse, Rorge [...] that way you won't need to look at her" (Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 292). Later in the narrative, Jaime observes Brienne's behavior in the face of the inevitable violations against her, noting, "Brienne was always bound beside him. She lay there in her bonds like a big dead cow, saying not a word. *The wench has built a fortress inside herself. They will rape her soon enough, but behind her walls they cannot touch her*" (Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 416). The bandits do eventually advance (with language as horrible, if not more, than what we've seen), and the threat of rape is such a reality of this world that in this moment, Jaime tries to coach Brienne on how to make the impending crime more bearable by mentally separating herself from her body, saying, "let them have the meat, and you go far away. It will be over quicker, and they'll get less pleasure for it" (Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 417). As her friend, Jaime knows that the only thing he can do is to make this inevitable moment appear to be over a little quicker.

Despite all of this, though, Brienne is never raped. Most of the main female characters aren't, narrowly avoiding these threats at just the right moment. Brienne's virginity is even confirmed when Jaime rescues her from later imprisonment. When he and his comrades arrive in the place where Brienne is about to be killed, his comrade notes to her captors, "We're taking the wench." This comment leads to the following exchange between them:

"Her name is Brienne," Jaime said. "Brienne, the maid of Tarth. You *are* still maiden, I hope?"

Her broad homely face turned red. "Yes."

"Oh, good," Jaime said. "I only rescue maidens" (Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 618).

This comment is meant to be taken in jest, and is in keeping with Jaime's cocky-jerk-with-a-secretly-kind-heart characterization. However, the fact that the narrative felt compelled to establish this fact is not to be taken lightly. Brienne, the Maid of Tarth, gets to keep her maidenhood throughout the narrative, and in a world where such a thing is *clearly* in peril, this becomes more than an inconsequential detail. Instead, it becomes essential to our understanding of the character. In a world where women are constantly under the threat of sexual violence, a world that Martin seems to, on the surface, want to criticize, it's telling that his Warrior Woman keeps her purity. What would the opposite have done for her character, and why is Martin afraid of it? This complication is one the narrative leaves unexplored, which is interesting in terms of its parallels to Joan's story. As explored above, rumors circulated about her possible sexual assault while she was held in prison, a detail which most popular narratives of Joan often exclude. The idea of sexuality, even if forced, brutally, upon a saint, still seems to leave a stain.

Although virginity is important to Brienne's character, her most defining characteristic is easily her "ugliness." Brienne is always described in terms of her appearance. When the reader is

first introduced to her from the point of view of Catelyn Stark, she is mistaken for a male knight. When Catelyn learns she is a woman, she is “horrified” (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 343). After this confusion, Brienne is still characterized by her appearance. Catelyn learns that she is called Brienne the Beauty in her camp, and she realizes the cruel joke instantly:

Beauty, they called her...mocking. The hair beneath the visor was a squirrel’s nest of dirty straw, and her face...Brienne’s eyes were large and very blue, a young girl’s eyes, trusting and guileless, but the rest...her features were broad and coarse, her teeth prominent and crooked, her mouth too wide, her lips so plump they seemed swollen. A thousand freckles speckled her cheeks and brow, and her nose had been broken more than once. Pity filled Catelyn’s heart. *Is there any creature on earth as unfortunate as an ugly woman?* (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 344).

This final sentence (which is italicized in the original text to indicate Catelyn’s direct thought) serves as the theme of Brienne’s plight throughout the series. (It’s interesting to note that the only feature ever noted as pretty are her eyes, which are appealing because they are “trusting and guileless,” which is connected to their youthful innocence). If you’ll revisit the quotes from the books used throughout this section, you’ll note that even when Martin is merely situating her character in a scene, she is surrounded by adjectives describing her ugliness (note her “broad homely face turned red” when Jamie asked about her virginity—the description given is not just “her face”). This pattern is repeated exhaustively throughout the narrative, lightening up only when Brienne finally gets her own point of view chapters in *A Feast for Crows*.

Brienne may be characterized as ugly, but interestingly enough, the book’s description of her actually has her closer to *performing* feminine than Joan in terms of her hair. “It was yellow, the color of dirty straw, and near as brittle. Long and thin, it blew about her shoulders” (Martin,

*A Feast for Crows*, 84). In terms of her hair, Brienne actually fits in with the classic (and false) image of Joan as a more traditionally-feminine presentation, despite the male clothing. Brienne, unlike Joan, seems to allow her body, if not her clothing, to perform feminine in a traditional way; she's just unsuccessful at it due to the physical features over which she has no control. (Of course, to further complicate this, the character in the television show has short hair).

Joan seems to have earned the scorn of her opponents by flouting the traditional boundaries of her gender and sexuality. Brienne is different; the scorn inflicted upon her seems to stem from the idea that she *can't* inhabit the traditional box she's supposed to. The agency that characterizes Joan is robbed from Brienne by the importance Martin places on her appearance. Brienne is unfit to perform feminine, but she is still halted by its boundaries, and because of this she is mocked and derided. When we first meet her in Renly's camp, her fellow soldiers call her "Brienne the Beauty" in cruel jest. Catelyn, thinking Brienne a man, asks her escort, "who is this man, and why do they dislike him so?" He answers, "Because he is no man, my lady" (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 343). The other men in the camp despise Brienne for her gender, for the mockery it makes of their own positions as knights, which is similar to the threat Joan posed to medieval masculinity. But with the nickname "Brienne the Beauty," it's clear that the men also hate her for her appearance. If you have to be a woman in this world, you had better at least be nice to look at. Indeed, Jaime, who would eventually become her friend, initially derides her for her appearance incessantly; it is the center of their relationship for much of *A Storm of Swords*. In fact, Jaime encapsulates the problem of Brienne rather succinctly in their early encounters:

"Lady Brienne?" She looked so uncomfortable that Jaime sensed a weakness. "Or would *Ser* Brienne be more to your taste?" He laughed. "No, I fear not. You can trick out a milk

cow in crupper, crinet, and chamfron, and bard her all in silk, but that doesn't mean you can ride her into battle" (Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 21).

So, Brienne is a failure as a woman, which makes her open to ridicule. The next assumption that Jaime, and the narrative, seems to make is that since Brienne is such an ugly woman, she must wish she were a man so that she could occupy the male space of respect (and the male job of knighthood). But of course, this option is closed to her as well. The biological inflexibility of her gender (as it exists in this universe) makes her nothing more than a "wench," a word which is used not just by other characters, but frequently by the narrator, as well. (The significance of this masculine space of knighthood will become important when examining Brienne as a woman warrior).

The question is, what does Brienne think of her own gender? With few point of view chapters devoted to her, we have less of an idea of this than we do of what other people think of her. But, it seems as though Brienne does think of herself as a woman, even if she finds discomfort in the role. In her first point of view chapter, upon Brienne being called "ser" by a stranger, the narrative notes, "It was not the first time Brienne had been mistaken for a man" (Martin, *A Feast for Crows*, 83). Even though the narration is third person, the point-of-view designation of the chapter implies that this description fits Brienne's internal reaction, that to be considered a man was a "mistake." However, she does have discomforts with her feminine category, as we will explore below. And in some ways, the narrative even entertains the possibility of a non-binary gender for Brienne. In *A Feast for Crows*, her squire, Podrick, stumbles over what to call her, often saying both "Ser" and "M'lady" when addressing her—which, in those moments, makes Brienne "Ser M'Lady." Both and neither.

However, there are also hints that Brienne wishes she could simply fit into one category or the other. Brienne is her father's only child (after her siblings have died), and she reminisces on this fact with self-hatred when someone encourages her to abandon knighthood by saying, "he would sooner have a living daughter than a shattered shield":

"A daughter." Brienne's eyes filled with tears. "He deserves that. A daughter who could sing to him and grace his hall and bear him grandsons. He deserves a son too, a strong and gallant son to bring honor to his name. Galladon drowned when I was four and he was eight, though, and Alysanne and Arianne died still in the cradle. I am the only child the gods let him keep. The freakish one, not fit to be son *or* daughter." (Martin, *A Feast for Crows*, 672).

In this moment, Brienne seems to see herself as the failed woman that her world categorizes her to be. She sees her lack of feminine qualities as a failure at femininity itself, and her masculine qualities as corrupted by what seems to be internalized as her true gender of womanhood.

Brienne certainly straddles a line between the genders, and in portraying such a character in a sympathetic light, Martin has done work that many feminists praise him for, and that I too appreciate and enjoy. But the fact that Brienne's masculinity is so tied to her ugliness is troubling. Brienne gets to be Ser M'Lady, but does she want to be? The answer seems to be no.

Another important piece to this puzzle is Brienne's sexuality. This narrative is similar to that of her gender: Brienne is depicted as unfit for heterosexual love, but that is still the box that the narrative places her in. While the narrative doesn't explicitly deny the possibility of bisexuality in Brienne, it makes no references to indicate that she has ever had feelings for a woman. It does, however, specifically reference feelings for men. Her love for Renly, suspected by those that know her, is confirmed in some ways in her point of view chapters in *A Feast for*

*Crows*. Brienne reminisces about Renly after his death, thinking, “She had loved him since first he came to Tarth on his leisurely lord’s progress, to mark his coming of age” (Martin, *A Feast for Crows*, 87). Brienne’s affection for Renly is tied to her appearance, to the ineptitude she feels at being a woman that we explored above. She remembers the moment she met Renly and the reasons she fell in love with him:

And Renly Baratheon had shown her every courtesy, *as if she were a proper maid, and pretty*. He even danced with her, and in his arms she’d felt graceful, and her feet had floated across the floor. Later others begged a dance of her, because of his example. From that day forth, she wanted only to be close to Lord Renly, to serve him and protect him (Martin, *A Feast for Crows*, 87, emphasis mine).

This passage is revealing for many reasons. Firstly, it becomes clear that Brienne’s love for Renly comes from the fact that he treated her the way she perceived a “proper” woman would be treated. He placed her into the category where she never otherwise felt comfortable, and because of this, she loved him. This indicates a longing in Brienne to be able to perform femininity in the traditional way of her universe. It also gives us a glimpse into Brienne’s motivations. The most gender-transgressing quality about Brienne is her knighthood; if the motivation is love for a man, this becomes a much neater issue. She may have transgressed her category, but she did so for a reason that safely adheres to a narrative about women—not for power, or merely because she liked it, but for love for a man. (Although other flashbacks note that Brienne learned how to fight early in life, the narrative does not provide a more specific motivation than this one. Combined with her inability to perform femininity, Brienne doesn’t seem to have much agency in the choice to be a knight—at least, less agency than Joan).



It should be noted, however, that the type of love described in this passage is not necessarily heteronormative, sexual desire. It's clear that Brienne enjoyed performing femininity, but her feelings for Renly specifically could be a more platonic love, one built on respect and admiration, especially since the way she acts on it is by serving under Renly rather than pursuing him romantically. This nuance is left unspecified and unexplored by the text, but multiple readings are certainly available. With such a limited sampling of Brienne's sexual identity, it is difficult to define these relationships for certain.

Of course, Brienne is cut off from the possibility of heterosexual romance, whether she wanted it or not. Even before his death, any chance for her to be with Renly would have been hopeless. In the television show, Renly's character is explicitly homosexual, in a sexual relationship with one of his male knights. In the books, this is merely implied (largely by the rather clunky symbol of his knights wearing rainbow-colored cloaks), but it complicates Brienne's relationship to him. She fell in love with a man that she could never have had a heterosexual relationship with; she is kept from the possibility of being part of such an equation. Even without this fact, though, Brienne's peers seem certain that Renly could never have loved her. When Catelyn first sees Brienne, Renly is making her a part of his "Rainbow Guard" (his closest, highest-ranking knights). As Catelyn notes, "The way she looked at the king [...] was painful to see" (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 344). This note comes after Catelyn's observations about Brienne's hideous appearance, so the reader has a clear idea of why Brienne's attraction to Renly is "painful to see." Renly could never be attracted to her. Catelyn places Brienne into a traditional role of heterosexuality, but because of Brienne's inability to live up to it, she is to be pitied. Of course, we don't know for certain whether Brienne, or Martin's text itself, placed herself into a traditional heterosexual role here or not.

Despite Brienne's possible unrequited love for Renly, there is an easier heteronormative pairing for her to fit into. In *A Feast for Crows*, it is implied that Brienne is attracted to Jaime. While bathing, Brienne remembers a scene from *A Storm of Swords* in which she and Jaime, having found brief shelter with Jaime's allies at a fortress called Harrenhal, bathed together in a bathhouse:

The bathhouse had been thick with steam rising off the water, and Jaime had come walking through that mist naked as his name day, looking half a corpse and half a god. *He climbed into the tub with me*, she remembered, blushing. She seized a chunk of hard lye soap and scrubbed under her arms, trying to call up Renly's face again (Martin, *A Feast for Crows*, 189).

I believe the context of this scene (the reflection on Jaime's naked body, and Brienne's blush) make it clear that Brienne thinks of Jaime sexually, which again, complicates her motives (in *A Feast for Crows*, Brienne's mission to find the Stark girls is one that Jaime requested of her). The fact that Renly enters her mind here also adds to the reading of her feelings towards him as being romantic (although it's interesting that she seems to want to use his memory to quell her desire). The interesting thing about this development is that, as of the time of writing this thesis, it is impossible to know whether her attraction to Jaime will be unrequited or not. Both characters are still present in the series, and were last seen together. Jaime, though currently only in a sexual relationship with his sister (interestingly, both of Brienne's prospects exhibit transgressive sexualities) has certainly developed a respect and friendship with Brienne. Regardless, whether Jaime and Brienne do end up together romantically or not, Brienne is put into a simple heterosexual role. The only complications seem to stem from her inability to live up to it, not her desire to transgress it.

There is a possibility that Brienne does not want the traditional role of a wife and mother. When she recalls a boy that she had been betrothed to as a child before he died, and wonders what would have happened if he had lived, she thinks, “She would not be here now, dressed in man’s mail and carrying a sword [...] More like she’d be at Nightsong, swaddling a child of her own and nursing another. It was not a new thought for Brienne. It always made her feel a little sad, but a little relieved as well” (288). It is difficult to unpack Brienne’s perception of her gender identity. The idea that she had escaped a few marriages to end up a knight is another parallel to part of Joan’s story—it is believed that Joan rejected a marriage arranged by her parents. Brienne’s version, however, once again robs her of the agency of this decision. Her possible husbands either died or rejected her; she is, in a way, haunted by the man who withdrew his marriage request after taking one look at her. Once again, no matter what Brienne feels about her status as unmarried, it is clear that it was not always her choice. The only man she may have rejected was her final suitor, who threatened to chastise her for practicing as a knight. Brienne challenged him to a knight’s duel over the comment, and after beating him, the narrative simply notes that “he was her third prospective husband, and her last” (Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 202). There is no specification about who ended the engagement.

An important question in understanding Brienne emerges: why does she want to be a knight? As discussed in the exploration of Joan’s gender presentation, assuming a masculine space in a patriarchal world brings an elevated sense of honor (if done correctly, in a way that keeps the two spheres separate and intact). A woman who wants to be knight-like is to be admired, since this masculine position holds such a higher place of honor. Joan troubled this definition by assuming the position of less admirable men when she adopted foppish attire outside of the battlefield. With Brienne, we have seen that the problem her universe takes with

her gender presentation is less that she chooses to trouble it, and more that her ugly appearance keeps her from fitting into the female role comfortably.

In many ways, though (including the way she keeps her hair), Brienne still seems to maintain a feminine identity. Her desire to be a knight seems to stem not from a desire to complicate her gender, but from her belief that it is the most noble profession available to her. In Brienne's first night as a knight in Renly's Rainbow Guard, she tells Catelyn, "Winter will never come for the likes of us. Should we die in battle, they will surely sing of us, and it's always summer in the songs. In the songs the knights are gallant, all maids are beautiful, and the sun is always shining" (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 350). This moment is very telling for the way Brienne sees the world. In her imaginings of the paradise of "summer," everyone seems to fit neatly into a gender binary—gallant knights and beautiful maids. Since Brienne cannot be a beautiful maid, she seems determined to fit into the role of gallant knight as best she can. Brienne keeps a strong faith in the moral righteousness of a "good knight." When confronted with the slain, displayed remains of a group of women, Brienne remarks, "This was not chivalrously done [...] No true knight would condone such wanton butchery" (Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 25).

It is clear that Brienne's aspirations towards knighthood are aspirations to be the most morally noble she can be, especially with the more traditional feminine roles cut off to her by her appearance. By assuming the masculine role simply to better herself, Brienne fits more into the definitions of acceptable transvestism as laid out by Aquinas and other religious scholars. Even though Brienne wears male clothing, even fine male clothing, in her everyday life, the emphasis the narrative places on her appearance makes this choice seem more utilitarian. In the few instances in which Brienne is in women's clothing, the narrative notes how ugly she looks in it.

Even when she is given a well-fitting dress, Jaime notes, “The wench looked as ugly and awkward as ever” (Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 1006). Even if Brienne does feel more comfortable in male clothing, it is implied that this has more to do with her failure to perform feminine than her rejection of femininity. Brienne’s male dress becomes the only way for her to fit in a high moral sphere (that is, knighthood) within a traditional gender binary, and thus becomes more utilitarian as it seeks to elevate her morals; this stands in contrast to Joan’s transvestism, which was interpreted as vain and morally degenerate because of both the type of male clothing she assumed and the way it seemed to define her identity.

So, Brienne is certainly characterized as a “man-ish” woman. She does not live up to the feminine ideal. This, rather than her own free will, is set up as the reason for her gender transgressions, which become more utilitarian than anything. Brienne can’t occupy a traditional female space, so she embodies the morally superior male space of knighthood. Amidst a cast of love-to-hate villains, the fact that Brienne is characterized as noble and kind—one of the few characters a fan can root for in earnest—makes her embodiment of this gender presentation crucial. Brienne is a woman who does not want to usurp the male space by queering it, but who merely wants to emulate it because of its goodness, a choice that is celebrated by the narrative—in this way, she strengthens the power of the patriarchy.

Of course, her character’s ambiguity at this point in the series should be noted. At the end of *A Feast for Crows*, Brienne encounters an undead, almost demonic version of Catelyn Stark, who felt betrayed by Brienne’s newfound loyalty to Jamie (Catelyn asked her to kill him, and she refused). As Brienne (and her young squire) were being hanged by this figure’s comrades, the narrative notes that she cried out “a word” (Martin, *A Feast for Crows*, 916). The only time we see her in the next installment, *A Dance with Dragons*, she has found Jaime (the chapter is from

his point of view) and convinces him to follow her. Was she an undead demonic shell like Catelyn? Did Catelyn spare her life in exchange for a promise to kill Jaime? Is she here to kill Jaime or to warn him? At the point of writing this thesis, Brienne's exact motivations are unknown. Regardless, she is one of the few characters a fan could call "good," and my gut feeling is that if Brienne were revealed to be a demon revenge puppet, it would be a crushing blow to the readers, the sort for which the books (and show) have become famous.

Brienne's adherence to the gender binary and goodness as a character becomes even more significant when juxtaposed with one of the series' female villains, Cersei. In many ways, Cersei is set up as Brienne's antithesis. When Jaime is beginning his journey with Brienne, he immediately contrasts her to Cersei (his lover and sister—more on that later); as the narrative notes, "He amused himself by picturing her in one of Cersei's silken gowns in place of her studded leather jerkin. *As well dress a cow in silk as this one*" (Martin, *A Storm of Swords*, 18). Cersei, often characterized as beautiful, excels at performing femininity in a way that Brienne fails. No one could accuse her of attempting to embody a noble masculine façade for moral gain. However, with her manipulative grabs at power, Cersei does represent a threat to the masculine authorities around her. Perhaps most dangerously, she uses her femininity to do so. When advising Sansa on how to exert influence, she notes "Tears are not a woman's *only* weapon. You've got another one between your legs, and you'd best learn to use it" (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 847).

Even though Cersei performs her gender role well, she's deeply cynical and resentful of the binary of power. As she tells young Sansa, "A woman's life is nine parts mess to one part magic, you'll learn that soon enough...and the parts that look like magic often turn out to be the messiest of all" (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 760). She later remarks, "Tears [...] The woman's

weapon, my lady mother used to call them. The man's weapon is a sword. And that tells us all you need to know, doesn't it?" (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 845). Cersei sarcastically dismisses the regulations put on her by the gender binary, but she also seems earnest in her disappointment by her limitations. She muses on the disparity between the genders to Sansa:

When we were little, Jaime and I were so much alike that even our lord father could not tell us apart. Sometimes as a lark we would dress in each other's clothes and spend a whole day each as the other. Yet even so, when Jaime was given his first sword, there was none for me. "What do *I* get?" I remember asking. We were so much alike, I could never understand why they treated us so *differently* (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 849).

This comment is an interesting one to unpack. By revealing that she and Jaime used to dress up *as each other*, Cersei demonstrates a gender transgressive history that includes Jaime's transvestism as a female, troubling the more often-seen stereotype of a woman moving "up" by imitating a man. Cersei also criticizes the way that genders are treated differently from childhood. She does not express a wish to be male—she expresses a wish for the disintegration of the categories altogether.

Even though Cersei does not seem to want to *become* male, other characters assert this wish upon her based on her attempted grabs at power. Her desire for power is extrapolated into a desire to be masculine; in this universe, such a desire only makes sense with binary categories asserted onto it. In a chapter from Tyrion's (Cersei's other brother) point of view, Tyrion reminds Cersei that she doesn't have a "cock." Internally, he thinks, "*And don't you just hate that, Cersei?*" (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 776). If Cersei wants power, she must also want to be a man, the narrative asserts. And in some ways, Cersei's internal sense of self fits into this, as well. When Cersei considers her own emotional strength in the face of her father's death, she "did not

weep, no more than her father would have. *I am the only true son he ever had*” (Martin, *A Feast for Crows*, 69). In this way, Cersei’s self-perceived gender identity is complicated, perhaps more than Brienne’s. In the equation of power with masculinity, Cersei is still plagued by some of the same binary gender restrictions as Brienne, just at work in reverse; if she is powerful, she must be masculinized, even as she expresses femininity.

Within this framework, Cersei is dangerous for wanting to be powerful *and* expressing feminine, undermining the “noble sphere” of masculine power. She is one of the series’ most infamous villains, both to the readers and to the other characters. Her constituents despise her, at one point revolting against her. One woman’s attack against her is described: “Her slack face twisted in loathing. ‘*Whore!*’ she shrieked. *Kingslayer’s whore! Brotherfucker!*” (Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 593). (“Kingslayer” is Jaime’s nickname). It seems important to note that Cersei is hated for her perverse sexuality, a hatred that Jaime doesn’t often experience for literally the same transgression. Cersei is a woman who transgresses sexual and gender boundaries without shame; for this, she is hated by the other characters and vilified by the narrative.

Of course, I am not condoning incest. Nor am I entirely defending Cersei’s character. As a viewer of the show, it is easy to hate Cersei. She kills good characters for her own gain; she acts out in destructive ways because of her own emotional turmoil; she is cruel and manipulative. She is also, to Martin’s credit, fun to watch *because* she is permitted to be so messy and complicated. She is a woman character the likes of which I have never seen. But her vilification in contrast to Brienne seems telling of an ideology that permits only certain types of gender transgressions. Brienne’s embodiment of the masculine space keeps it intact, her faithfulness to chivalry and her avoidance of queer traits maintaining her gender transgressions as almost, as Warner notes of some interpretations of Joan, a “tribute” to heteronormative masculinity, rather



than a usurpation of it (Warner 155). Cersei spits in the face of heteronormative masculinity, wielding power and sexuality and cynicism about gender roles all at once. It seems troubling that, in doing this, she is also a character that the series convinces its readers and audience needs to be stopped.

Is Martin's world a sexist nightmare? Maybe not. The sheer amount of diverse female characters is, unfortunately, unusual enough to garner praise. These characters are different from each other, interesting in their own ways. They do not all fit into a cookie-cutter mold of beautiful and kind. They make mistakes and power grabs; they survive. I enjoy watching them, and I think it's safe to say that Martin enjoys writing them. But, I have heard the series characterized as "feminist," and Martin's characters praised for defying gender stereotypes. I fear we are holding "feminism" to too low a bar. We compare works like Martin's, set in an imagined fantasy world of yore, with the rampant sexism we perceive to have been much worse in that (highly generalized) time period. We excuse Martin and other fantasy writers for sexism in the name of "accuracy," and we celebrate a series for merely containing a male-to-female ratio closer to 50:50 as "progress." But when we consider the historical views of a figure like Joan, one who flouted so many categories we still adhere to, one has to wonder about the progress of a character like Brienne. Through Brienne, we hold our stereotypes of Joan to a rigid binary similar to the one that got her executed. While we acknowledge that someone can inhabit the category of "masculine" while still maintaining a heteronormative, female identity, we confirm that these are the only two categories that exist; one remains your "true form," and the other becomes a costume.

### 4.3 Keladry

“‘It isn’t right,’ she said quietly, even fiercely. ‘No boys have probation. I’m supposed to be treated the same.’”

- Tamora Pierce, *First Test*

Brienne represents a modern fantasy interpretation of Joan, one that has broken into the pop culture of my daily life. But there were Joans in the literature of my childhood, as well. Young girls donning armor in a defiant “we can do this too!” spirit was practically its own genre of children’s literature as I grew up during the 1990s and early 2000s, one that I consumed voraciously. One such “girl power” knight was Keladry of Tamora Pierce’s *Protector of the Small* series, which began in 1999 and ended in 2002. The four books describe Keladry’s process of training to be a knight, a position that, in her world, has just been opened up to girls. Like *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the *Protector of the Small* series could easily be packaged as a feminist story with just a summary of the plot. But, also like Brienne, Keladry embodies some interestingly contrasting categories. Even as Keladry pushes boundaries, and even as the book pushes many pro-girl agendas, Keladry’s identity seems to set up some rigid binary definitions. She plays within boundaries in a way that doesn’t necessarily trouble them, and in this way she fits into a simpler gender box than we can seem to fit Joan.

Throughout the *Protector of the Small* series, Keladry grows up and undergoes training to be a knight, and is the first woman who has been permitted to do so. The universe in which she lives has fantasy elements, but the majority of Keladry’s existence is based in school and combat training, where she wins the affection of her peers and teachers. After she has undergone all of her training, Keladry and her peers are tested in the Chamber of the Ordeal, a mystical room that puts aspiring knights through a rigorous spiritual test to determine if they are worthy of

knighthood. In Kel's ordeal, the Chamber gives her a specific task: to find and destroy an evil wizard (or mage, as the narrative refers to him) that has been capturing and killing children.

First, how does Keladry operate as a Joan-like figure? In his book *Reading Tamora Pierce, 'The Protector of the Small,'* John Lennard confirms a connection to Joan based on Kel's chivalry and virginity, both of which we'll discuss (37). Kel does have a strong sense of chivalry that becomes a defining point of her personality and her gender presentation. Beyond that, though, Kel has many character traits that seem to mirror Joan. Her hair in particular, unlike Brienne's, is described in a fashion very similar to what we know of Joan's hair. In one scene in which Kel is trying to dress up, she notes, "There was nothing she could do with her mouse-brown hair: she'd had it cropped to her earlobes before she left home" (Pierce, *First Test*, 29). It is possibly noteworthy that Kel changed her hair before beginning page training, possibly out of utility; as she notes a few sentences later, "the first thing a boy grabbed in a fight was hair" (Pierce, *First Test*, 29). Still, Kel does have the foppish hairstyle that Joan sported, complicating her image a bit.

Kel also plays a role in the series that is very similar to Joan's, with the Chamber playing a role reminiscent of Joan's voices. Kel also demonstrates the same skill and fervor for battle as Joan, as well as the same respect of those who serve under her. Her personality is singularly focused on adhering to what's morally "right." While the fantasy world Pierce has created does not have a religious presence of the same size and influence as the one Joan would have known, Kel's adherence to "rightness" could easily be made parallel to Joan's piety. In her righteousness, mission, and knightly virtues, Kel is easily comparable to Joan.

Even if Kel is like Joan, the world that she lives in is very different to both Joan's and ours. As discussed above, Kel's world has only recently accepted female knights. Pierce sets up

an extremely patriarchal, conservative, and even hostile world for Kel to overcome. In a prologue (for which Kel wasn't present), Kel's future training master is shown arguing against allowing women to train as knights:

“Sire, please, think this through,” Wyldon said. “We need the realm's *sons*. Girls are fragile, more emotional, easier to frighten. They are not as strong in their arms and shoulders as men. They tire easily. This girl would get any warriors who serve with her killed on some dark knight” (Pierce, *First Test*, 4).

This kind of obvious sexism sets up a very basic dichotomy, an easy enemy for Kel to overcome. When girls are granted entrance into training with an additional first year of probation, Kel immediately knows her stance on the issue: “‘It isn't right,’ she said quietly, even fiercely. ‘No boys have probation. I'm supposed to be treated the same’” (Pierce, *First Test*, 8). Kel's conclusion is an easy one to come to, making the work of the narrative immediately finished and turning sexism into an almost strawman villain.

This strawman-sexism occurs throughout Kel's journey. Throughout the books, Kel is told, “Girls have no business in the affairs of men” (Pierce, *First Test*, 32); “A woman out of place is a distraction to men!” (Pierce, *First Test*, 145); and “Ladies have no place bearing arms” (Pierce, *Page*, 73). Something about the dialogue is so stilted, so easy to refute, that it seems to erase the real challenges of fighting sexism, an evil whose subtlety and pervasiveness is central to its power. Kel becomes a cardboard-cut-out ideal of a feminist, spouting platitudes without much room for character growth. Where Joan comes off in her trial as fiery, witty, and mysterious, Kel is not given many personality traits, and as a reader, I found her character to be a bit boring. Her internal monologue mostly consists of refuting the obvious sexism around her: “Why won't you treat me like you treat the boys? Why can't you be *fair*?” (Pierce, *First Test*,

25); “You’ll see. I’m as good as any boy. I’m better” (Pierce, *First Test*, 64); “You can laugh and say I’m a silly girl—but when I see anyone pick on someone small, well, there’s going to be a fight” (Pierce, *First Test*, 150). Kel always knows the right answer immediately because the wrongs she’s set up against are so simplified. Kel is an obvious sort of feminist hero, and the simplicity of the forces constructed against her does a disservice to the more complex work that the series could do. It becomes a “girl power” anthem that rings a little false next to the messy complications of Joan’s, and modern, life.

However, some complications are present in Pierce’s world. The culture that Kel was raised in, geographically far from the one she occupies throughout the series, does not have a rigid gender dichotomy, embracing female warriors and teaching all noble women to train and defend themselves. Because of this, Kel trains her female friend, Lalasa, on how to defend herself from hostile male advances. The narrative also takes stances on fantasy equivalents of contemporary social issues. Kel once casually mentions her culture’s acceptance of homosexuality after one of her peers insults another with a homophobic insult, and birth control (in this world, a charm—wouldn’t that be lovely?) is advocated. Kel also does not shy away from her identification as a girl. The male clothing that she wears is set up as a convenience for the job of knighthood she wishes to do. Kel initially considers wearing male clothing everywhere as she trains to be a knight:

She’d thought that if she was to train as a boy, she ought to dress like one. [Tunics and breeches] were also more comfortable. Now she felt differently. She was a girl; she had nothing to be ashamed of, and they had better learn *that* first thing. The best way to remind them was to dress at least part of the time as a girl (Pierce, *First Test*, 29).

By maintaining her identity as a girl as she continues with what she sees as “boys” training, Kel does break the gendered stereotypes that are set up in her world, complicating the boundaries between “male” and “female.” At the very least, the narrative seems (at times) determined to upend the idea that men are *above* women (although, in many ways, the male sphere is still above the female one, which we will touch on later). Even still, the dichotomy in the way Kel thinks of this identity, and the way that it is dependent on her appearance, seems to maintain separate spheres for the two gender identities. Kel may go between these spheres, but she doesn’t disintegrate them in the same way that Joan does.

In a way similar to the characterization of Brienne, Kel is defined as a girl, but does not always live up to the rules of what that means. Her appearance is often cited as an inability to perform feminine. When we are introduced to her in *First Test*, her masculine habits are tied to her appearance:

One thing she knew: convent school, the normal destination for noble girls her age, was not a choice. Kel had no interest whatsoever in ladylike arts, and even less interest in the skills needed to attract a husband or manage a castle. Even if she did, who would have her? Once she’d overheard her sisters-in-law comment that no man would be interested in a girl who was built along the lines of a cow (Pierce, *First Test*, 11).

Like Brienne, the implication made about Kel’s appearance is that she may reject “ladylike” arts simply because she already doesn’t meet the ideal definition of “lady.” You either fit neatly into that box, or you reject it. Kel is described as large, bulking even, and plain-faced throughout the narrative, especially when she is still a child. This idea is confirmed often by the other characters in the series. At one point, upon looking at Kel, one noble woman says to her friend, “Yes, I can see why she isn’t concerning herself with marriage—unless she were to marry an ox” (Pierce,

*Page*, 77). At one point, her bully taunts her, “Why do any of this? [...] It isn’t at all needful. Did someone tell you that you had no chance to marry?” (Pierce, *Page*, 172). Kel herself does not dwell on her appearance much, and the narrative doesn’t seem to imply that she *wishes* she could be more like the noble women of her world. But the emphasis on Kel’s plain appearance throughout the series diminishes her agency in her gender transgressions in the same way that Brienne’s narrative diminishes hers. If a beautiful girl, one who would have no problem living up to the feminine ideal, still chose to queer her gender presentation, that seems to be more troubling.

In a similar vein of her appearance, Kel is also established as clearly heterosexual (or at least, not homosexual, and bisexuality is not mentioned or implied), even as she doesn’t always believe herself to be capable of romantic relationships. When she develops a crush on her friend Neal, she immediately writes herself off as impossible to love, thinking things like, “It’s not like I’m in love with him. Or that he’d ever look at you twice if you were, her sharp-voice self retorted” (Pierce, *Page*, 84); “It’s not as if he’ll ever look at *you*” (Pierce, *Page*, 166); and “He never will, replied her coldly practical self. He falls in love with beauties” (Pierce, *Page*, 173). This constant reinforcement of Kel’s physical failures dull her sexuality in a way similar to Brienne’s. Just as femininity is a very rigid category, heterosexuality becomes one as well, belonging only to people who live up to a certain ideal. When Kel does enter a relationship later in the series, it never leads to sex and is dispensed with easily (as a noble, he is betrothed to another, while Kel has outgrown her feelings for him). Kel’s sexuality is never seen as subverting heterosexual norms, but merely failing to meet them. And the last sentence of the series (in which Kel, having completed her mission, thinks of being reunited with the man she’s

been most attracted to) seems to tell the reader not to worry: she will fit into that box soon enough.

The narrative also does a troubling thing with the idea of “girlhood.” The surface-message seems very pro-girl, and is a message I grew up with a lot: “girls can do anything that boys can do.” The undercurrent of this, of course, is that girls *should* strive to do what boys do, because boy-ish things are superior. In her “I can be as good as the boys” attitude, Kel often dismisses other women or things that she sees as feminine not just as being restrictive to her identity, but as being morally inferior. Kel often mimics the sort of hyper-masculine obsession with avoiding being perceived as weak. At one point, when her mage (magical healer) friend helps ease the pain of a wound, Kel thinks, “She *was* being weak, letting Neal do this. She ought to refuse the help, but she couldn’t. Her foot hurt too much” (Pierce, *First Test*, 85). Kel berates herself for seeking help, for healing wounds even when the means to do so are so readily available. She subscribes to a hyper-masculine notion of “toughness,” which is, of course, the other side of a rigid binary, which puts young boys into one small box as it does young girls into another. Another thread that goes along with this is Kel’s constant suppression of her emotions. In the narrative, this is explained as common practice in the culture where she comes from, but it also plays into the idea of Kel’s avoidance as seeming “weak.” If there’s one thing boys must avoid in this rigidly divided binary, it’s seeming too emotional; emotions are feminized, and therefore inferior.

Kel also often directly dismisses the things she sees as feminine as being inferior. When she hits puberty, she despises her body’s changes, viewing her incoming breasts as “inconvenient badges of womanhood” (Pierce, *Page*, 58). As someone who grew up in this “girls-can-be-boys” tomboy culture, I remember this feeling well. The idea of becoming a visible woman became



humiliating to me, because we had all learned that striving to be like the boys was the better way (at least, if you weren't pretty enough to perform girlhood well). This aspect of the series, from my vantage point as an adult woman, made me a bit angry: I couldn't help but wonder how many messages like this I had received from my childhood heroines, and how much of that contributed to how much I immediately hated my body as it changed.

Kel is also dismissive of other women. When she finds herself developing feelings for another man (after having already had a crush on one of her friends), she thinks, "Was she some kind of fickle monster, that Dom's smile and touch could make her giddier than Neal's had? Was she one of those females who always has to moon over a man?" (Pierce, *Squire*, 59). When Kel finds a trait in herself that she doesn't like, she sees it as both feminine and "monstrous," and this equation creates an extremely damaging binary. Instead of allowing herself to be a complex, nuanced woman, Kel creates a mental divide between her traits: the "bad" column is also the "female" column. She even polices her own actions. In the final book, Kel is made commander of a fort of men. She decides to address them after their first meal together, and, "For a moment she nearly forgot and raised her hands to check her hair but stopped herself in time. It would not do for men whom she was to command to see her do something so feminine when her mind should be on business" (Pierce, *Lady Knight*, 91). In Kel's mind, feminine does not equal business. She needs her masculine brain to accomplish the tasks at hand. The divide is rigid and important.

The narrative itself is dismissive of girlhood in a way that simplifies Kel's gendered transgressions. Instead of allowing Kel's traits to complicate the rigid definition of femininity, and the un-crossable divide between it and masculinity, the narrative simply puts her into the

“masculine” column, despite her identification as a girl. When one of Kel’s friends flirts with her in the friendly, jovial way that he always does, Kel’s friends come to her defense:

“When Cleon talks to us, he doesn’t do that.” Seaver frowned at Cleon. “You don’t call us ‘rose’ or ‘pearl.’ If you don’t talk to us like that, you shouldn’t do it to her.”

“She’s as good as us,” added Owen. “You don’t have to treat her like a *girl*.” (Pierce, *Page*, 156).

To Kel’s friends, being characterized as a “girl” is an insult, even though Kel literally identifies as one. The reason, in their mind, that Kel does not fit this description is that she’s “as good as us.” There isn’t just a rigid divide between the gender spheres, but a rigid hierarchy, as well. If Kel is good, she must be masculine. Her actual identity doesn’t matter as much as her adherence to the hierarchy does. (It should be noted that, although Kel stands up for her friend Cleon, she doesn’t do so because she doesn’t see being treated like a girl as an insult. She does so because she knows he’s “just funning” [Pierce, *Page*, 156]).

With Kel’s dismissal of all things feminine (possibly, the narrative allows, due to her innate inability to live up to feminine), how do we interpret her gender-troubling ambitions? Much like Brienne, the masculine identity becomes almost a utilitarian costume to help Kel achieve what she sees as the morally superior role for herself. The fact that Kel wears dresses to confirm her role as “female” when she’s not in combat or training emphasizes the costume-nature of the transvestism (in contrast to Joan’s case, where it became integral to her identity even as she maintained that identity as female). This costume serves to help Kel achieve the elevated moral status, similarly to Brienne and the strains of transvestism that Joan’s contemporaries found acceptable. For Kel, the masculine costume is tied to the chivalry she aspires towards.

Kel's defining character trait is her adherence to what's "right," a trait that first expresses itself as she stands up to the school bullies who are hazing the new pages. When she considers standing up to them, even if it would break custom, the narrative notes, "But what if the custom is wrong? demanded the part of her that believed in the code of chivalry. A knight must set things right" (Pierce, *First Test*, 93). Kel maintains her faith in the morality of the male role of knighthood, even as the men around her fail to exemplify it (which is remarkably similar to Brienne's role in Martin's universe). It is this sense of chivalry that Kel is aiming for, and assuming the masculine role is the way to achieve it. In this way, hers is a transgression that Aquinas probably would have approved of.

Kel, like Brienne, seems to espouse a girl-power agenda. However, they exist within worlds that create rigid gender binaries, and even as these two characters move between the two categories, they never really seem to trouble them all that much. The Chivalrous Male identity remains intact—even as a woman inhabits it—because of the celebration of male traits, the dismissal of feminine traits, and the inability of the two characters to embrace their female identities enough to usurp the male role they play. Where Joan is Not-Quite-Woman, Not-Quite-Man, Brienne and Kel are, in many ways, not-quite-men in name only. They are Wanna-Be Men without the messiness of being queer, mimicking masculinity without co-opting it for something else entirely. To sum it up, they are less complicated and messy than Joan, and this seems like a disappointment to both our understanding of gender and of her.

#### 4.4 The Avant-Garde Joan

*“I ran into the trees, abandoning the other Jeanne. Let her answer his inane questions for a while.”*

*-Judy Budnitz, “Joan, Jeanne, La Pucelle, Maid of Orléans”*

For an entirely different take on Joan, we turn to Judy Budnitz’s short story, “Joan, Jeanne, La Pucelle, Maid of Orléans.” I encountered this story in an anthology entitled *This Is Not Chick Lit: Original Stories by America’s Best Women Writers*, published in 2006. With its evocative title and a blurb by Gloria Steinem, this anthology is clearly aiming to be a feminist response to the way women’s literature is dismissed as un-serious. I was delightfully surprised to find a short story about Joan in this contemporary feminist anthology, but it also seems inevitable. In a text designed as a response to pop culture presentations (and misrepresentations), whom better to examine than Joan.

Martin and Pierce present more conservative ideas about gender transgression, creating worlds that, while containing fantasy elements, adhere to some rigid understandings about historical gender binaries (much of which is inaccurate). Budnitz’s world, in sharp contrast, goes off the rails. She immediately breaks any established rules about Joan’s narrative, constructing her story around a documentary crew following Joan on her journey. The documentary crew’s presence in Joan’s time is not explained via science-fiction technology or wormholes: it’s just part of the story. Budnitz breaks any rules of “historical accuracy” that so often plague fantasy narratives with patriarchal, colonial ideas. She dismisses the existing framework that so often becomes a crutch; by doing so, she is able to break so many more rules, not only about narrative, but about gender, as well.

The question that immediately comes to mind upon the entrance of the documentary crew is, why? The story is broken up into sections, subtitled to indicate the speaker of the section and the situation. The sections jump between points of view, allowing the male and female characters, the collective observations of Joan's contemporaries, and even Joan herself to speak. The significance of the incorporation of these multiple points of view will be explored later, but the question of the documentary crew remains. Budnitz could have simply switched between the points of view of Joan's historical contemporaries, or even kept modern and medieval points of view separated by time even if they were both present in the piece. But the modern film crew and Joan occupy the same physical and temporal space within the story.

I can't pretend to know exactly why Budnitz chose to do this, but it seems to me to play with many aspects of the Cult of Joan. Joan *is* still largely present in popular culture, making her presence in a documentary seem almost expected. When the director Diane is pitching the idea, she says, "She's only seventeen. A little peasant girl from the boondocks talks to God and aims to start a war. Isn't that enough of a story? She calls herself The Virgin. That's her shtick" (Budnitz 216). The story seems aware of the elements of Joan's mythos that keep her so popular, but it also seems to highlight the weirdness of the way(s) her story is presented. The film crew transforms her from Saint into Celebrity, turning her life into consumable sound-bites, or a "shtick"—perhaps demonstrating the way that her complications are so often overlooked or changed to fit the story about gender that the teller wants to tell. As the producer says when he agrees to the story, "Sometimes the truth needs a little touching up. You can always make the truth a little truer" (Budnitz 216). With this construct, Budnitz seems determined to distinguish between the Real Joan and the Consumable, Pop Culture, Celebrity Joan. She sheds light on the

way that image can be manipulated, that a “true” story can be told in the right way for the right people. This proves useful for our discussion about our understanding of Joan’s gender.

The presence of the documentary crew, as well as the incorporation of Joan’s contemporaries, highlights the way that her appearance has often defined her interpretation while simultaneously highlighting the variety of those interpretations. In the story, we are introduced to Joan from the perspective of her contemporaries (indicated to us by the section’s heading, “Her neighbors in Domrémy”). “How do you know it’s her?” one asks. “See the red dress? See the long black hair?” (Budnitz 214). Immediately, Budnitz acknowledges that Joan is identified by her appearance, specifically her dress and her hair, harking back to the importance these two features played in her trial, by which point they’re very different. Joan’s appearance defines her, and it begins as a fairly traditional feminine definition: a dress and long hair.

As the story goes on, the reader gets various opinions on Joan’s appearance from the different characters. Burt, the cameraman, notes of her, “Prominent cheekbones and those big light-catching eyes—she’s photogenic as hell” (Budnitz 219). When Karleen from makeup cuts her hair (more on that in a moment), she notes, “[...] it’s obvious that her hair was her one true beauty. Now her features stick out bare and cold as a statue’s” (Budnitz 222). The “statue” seems to reference Joan’s iconography (and the hollowness of her character that may be created by her image being used and re-used), but the comment also shows how malleable the concept of “beauty” is, in that Joan’s changes so quickly. “A loose woman,” as the narrative calls her section, notes that “she possesses not one iota of beauty” (Budnitz 228), creating an interesting pattern where the women see her as ugly—a pattern that seems to point to the subjectivity of “beauty” as a definition and a measure of worth, and the way that these observations (and the power behind them) are different based on the gender of the beholder.

The male character of the “intern” falls in love with Joan. He describes accidentally seeing her undress, saying, “I see the flash of skin. Two postage stamps’ worth, at the most. It’s as frightening and amazing as if she’d ripped open her belly to show me her secret jeweled organs” (Budnitz 233). This description of her appearance is fascinating because it is both desirable and grotesque, possibly pointing to the violent sexuality of the male gaze that the intern seems to represent. His perception of her is filtered through a sexual frame; as he notes upon seeing her skin, “Before she can even begin on a second lace my hands are on her, grabbing and groping” (Budnitz 233). As we will explore below, the weird layers of Joan’s sexuality as presented in this story are complicated and interesting.

In terms of her appearance, though, the story seems intent on highlighting the physical presentation of gender as just that—a presentation, a show. Karleen the makeup girl notes of Joan, “I overhear people talking about her new ‘radiance,’ her ‘glow.’ They attribute it to her closeness to God or whatever. You know what I attribute it to? Peachy Keen Klean translucent dusting powder judiciously applied, thank you very much” (Budnitz 220). When the narrative notes that Joan has changed into male clothing, Karleen describes that the director, Diane, “freaks out and is all like, Joan, what are you doing, the red dress is so perfect” (Budnitz 221). When Joan won’t change, Diane asks Karleen, “could you at least pretty her up a bit? If the clothes have to stay, we can at least make her a bit more feminine” (Budnitz 221). This quote demonstrates the malleability of a “feminine” appearance – how easy it is to achieve or fail – but it also shows how important Joan’s gender presentation is to her story, at least for the documentary crew. Diane has a very specific image of Joan in mind to match the story she wants to tell, the one she pitched about a remarkable young girl whose “shtick” is her virginity.

However, Budnitz does do one thing in this narrative that aligns with the other two portrayals of Joan we've explored in a way that surprises, and even disappoints, me. In Budnitz's story, Joan's gender transgressions are not entirely her choice. Joan is the one who decides to wear male clothing, but she didn't come up with the idea. When she first sees Diane (who, remember, is somehow from the future), Joan notes, "It is a woman, in men's clothes. I've never seen such a thing before, though I can see how it could be a good idea in certain circumstances" (Budnitz 218). From this perspective, the male clothing is once again cast as utilitarian, simply practical for battle. The story does not mention any male clothing that Joan wears outside of battle, just for fun.

The hair, also, was Karleen's doing. When she attempts to use make-up to make Joan more feminine, she notes, "she keeps pushing my hands away, saying vanity's a sin" (Budnitz 221). When Joan styled herself as a fop, vanity was the very sin that damned her, giving this moment an interesting weight. But as the scene continues, Karleen decides to cut Joan's hair, noting, "It's not going well" (Budnitz 221). As she continues, the cut morphs into the style Joan is known for: "I tell Burt to quick run get a bowl from the craft table. We stick it on her head [...] Joan watches the bits of hair fall, the last vestiges of her vanity gone" (Budnitz, 221-222). From this moment, it seems that Joan's long, beautiful hair, a marker of femininity, is where she would have derived vanity, implying that she would have taken pride in her female presentation. However, it is important to note that this is how Karleen interprets the situation. We do not know how Joan feels about her new hair (although she refused the make-up for that reason, so it seems telling that she was silent about the hair, implying that she did not worry about deriving vanity from it). Regardless, it strikes me as strange that Joan's agency in this decision is robbed in this narrative. Perhaps Budnitz is purposefully playing with the way that modern interpretations of



Joan as someone who wouldn't have *chosen* her transgressive traits are too powerful to overcome, especially as modern sensibility seems to be embodied in this text in the form of the documentary crew. But then, perhaps this is simply a trap that Budnitz falls into herself. And of course, perhaps in the real Joan's mind, the haircut was not a choice. We can never know for certain, but we do know that it didn't happen because of a makeup girl's mistake, making this choice fascinating and complicated.

The story also uses its multiple personas and strange construct to play with Joan's sexuality. Not all of the moments fit into what I would call "queering," but they are strange within a heteronormative framework. For starters, Joan's interactions with her voices are characterized in a sexual way. The subheading for Joan's first encounter with the voices is "Her first time," a phrase which carries connotations of the loss of virginity (made more interesting by the knowledge that two of Joan's voices are female, although the gender of the voice is interestingly not mentioned in this section). Joan's virginity is constantly used in strange ways. Since it is her "shtick," the thing integral to defining her identity, it is important to the crew. When Diane pitches the story, her boss asks, "A real virgin? I want that verified. Can you do that?" (Budnitz 216). In this story, the documentary crew acts as one of Joan's inquisitors, because verifying her virginity is crucial to the hook of their story about her. The intern character, the one who will eventually fall in love with her, walks in on the group of women that tests Joan's virginity and is horrified by what he sees:

[...] the women reach into the folds of their dresses and pull out metal instruments [...]

Now they are spreading a cloth on the table, now Jeanne is lying down upon it and they are ringing her body with candles, circling her, bending over her with their utensils in

their hands, what are they doing? They're fixing to *eat* her! Without even cooking her first! These people are barbaric! [...]

They kick me out but I can hear their voices through the door. When they're done I go tell Diane, Yup, she's a virgin all right, she passed the test with flying colors.

Diane grabs my shoulders and screams, But did you get it on film? (Budnitz 225).

This passage, like the one in which the intern sees Joan's bare skin, juxtaposes the sexual with the grotesque, highlighting the invasive natures of the virginity examinations. But Diane's concern with "getting it on film" seems to indicate that the crew may not be so different from the "barbaric" people they are filming. Joan's virginity is part of her commodity for them.

The story maintains the un-sexual view of Joan that her comrades claimed to abide by. In a section narrated by La Hire, Joan's real-life captain, he notes, "We love her, I love her, but not in the carnal way" (Budnitz 227). However, this asexual interpretation is made complicated by the intern's romantic and sexual feelings towards Joan. Through him, Joan is cast as a romantic hero, and it is within this narrative that the story leaves us with the image of her death. The intern's perspective is the last one we get. It is subtitled "The intern: synapses":

So I finally got to see Jeanne without her clothes. Without her skin, too. I smelled her burning and it smelled like a red dress. I took her atoms into my lungs and they will travel through my blood and lodge into my brain, making a sooty smudge there, all the signals tangled together but strong as ever. If you were to take off the top of my head and jab an electrode at the spot, I would smell her gray eyes, see her low husky voice like a plume of smoke, taste the texture of her hair (Budnitz 244).

There is so much to unpack in this ending. The note that her burning "smelled like a red dress" seems so complicated. Does the red dress represent her essential femininity, the thing that

remains as she burns? Or does it (and maybe her gender) represent her destruction? Or both? The image of the intern inhaling her atoms is also so complicated. In a way he is consuming her, harking back to the aggressive male gaze, perhaps the aggressive and violent action enacted upon her by all who co-opt and shape her image. It is grotesque and horrifying, but at the same time incredibly intimate. Again, while I'm not sure that "queer" is the right word, in this passage, Joan's sexuality is certainly allowed to be complicated and messy. It does not fit neatly into *any* sort of box.

Of course, possibly the strangest element of this already strange story is the one that also seems to emphasize the impossibility of putting Joan in a box: the "ubiquitous Joan." While her perspective is limited to some odd, musing sections, we do get the point of view of Joan in this narrative. From this perspective, we learn that the first thing the voices tell Joan is to be "good," which she can accomplish through one simple command: "Go to church" (Budnitz 215). Throughout, Joan seems dutiful and determined to obey this command. But at one point, a weird thing happens. As Joan seeks some solace away from the camp, she hears someone call her name and she flees. But as she notes, "When I reached the trees I looked back over my shoulder and saw myself still kneeling by the stream [...] I ran into the trees, abandoning the other Jeanne. Let her answer his inane questions for a while" (Budnitz 234). In this moment, there are multiple Joans, our narrator and another. More interestingly, the narrator lets the (seeming) imposter speak for her. The implication here is that this false Joan is the one that the public will see, which could be an interesting comment on the way perceptions of her have distorted her character. Another interesting thing happens when Joan learns this trick: "I have a feeling the voices will scold me when they find out. We will have to keep it a secret" (Budnitz 234). By allowing an imposter to speak for her, Joan seems to see herself as deviating from her commandment to be a

“good girl.” Having these multiple versions of herself, she seems to think, is more complicated than “good” allows. If we relate this understanding of the multiple Joans to the presence of a “third,” impossible-to-categorize gender, Joan’s perception of it as deviant makes sense.

As the story continues, the multiple Joans become stranger. When Joan is locked in her cell, she “summons” these other Joans for company:

There’s a Jeanne on the bed and a Jeanne in the corner and a Jeanne crawling around on all fours on the floor panting and begging and wiggling her bottom, from which a small tail protrudes, hairless and curled like a pig’s.

Jeanne d’Arc has a *tail*. Who knew? (Budnitz 237).

This moment is so strange, I admit to not knowing entirely what to make of it. It is certainly deviant, and it certainly defies categories of what is expected from a woman. Joan also sees it as deviant, and she finds relief in just that:

It’s easier when there are many of us. There’s less of a struggle. If one of the Jeanne believes, then another can have her doubts. As long as one of the Jeanne can offer her heart unflinchingly to God, the rest of us are allowed to have our own opinions.

I know that what we’re doing is wrong. But I’m so *lonely*, what can it hurt? (Budnitz 238).

Based on this description, it almost seems like the multiple Joans is a way for the narrative to push back against the act of categorizing her. Offering any part of herself “unflinchingly” seems to be the source of Joan’s struggle—she needs the freedom to contain contradictions. She has personified the various identifications that might be placed upon her, and while the focus seems to be on her piety in this section, this idea can be extrapolated into all of the categories that the narrative has introduced, gender and sexuality included.

It is the multiple Joans that creates an almost twist ending, one that literally frees Joan from her execution. One of the final sections, subtitled “Ubiquitous Jeanne,” starts with the sentence “I saw them lead one of the other Jeannes up to the stake” (Budnitz 242). She continues to watch, noting, “When the burning began I saw other Jeannes streaming out of her, leaping down the piles of wood like mountain goats and pushing their way unnoticed through the mesmerized crowd, and I wondered, How will they ever burn us all?” (Budnitz 242). In a way, this moment could be read as triumphant. Joan escapes death, and the personifications of her nuances spread out in a way that makes her impossible to capture, impossible to defeat, impossible to define.

However, there is also a hint of something ominous here, as Joan thinks, “What happens now? I had been so sure that I would be flying straight up to Heaven in a blur of bright light. But now I worry that there will not be room in Heaven for all of us Jeannes. [...] One comes galloping up to stand beside me. Is that really what I look like? Is that Jeanne? Is that *me*?” (Budnitz 243). In this ending, Joan seems to be referencing back to her command to be a “good girl,” a command she struggled to follow. Do deviant girls get into heaven, her questions seem to ask? Can so many different versions of one person be acceptable? It is also interesting and a bit disturbing that Joan does not recognize herself, and that this is the final time we hear from her. Joan’s gender presentation seems so crucial to her identity; as Warner notes, it is so unusual and important that she seems willing to die for it. Here, not only does Joan escape that death, but she doesn’t even recognize herself. This moment could highlight the falseness of gender presentation, the inability of one’s physical appearance to capture all of their nuances. However, if we read some of Joan’s gender transgressions as intentional, as choices that make her so

complex and difficult to categorize, then this moment almost seems to be a slight dismissal of that complexity, as weird and complicated a moment as this is.

Of course, this reading also assumes that there is one single, “authentic” Joan in this moment in the story, which might in itself be a simplification. The very nature of Joan’s contradictions, especially in the trial text, is that there almost seem to be multiple Joans. A Joan who says that her clothing is not important and another Joan who refuses to change her clothing. A Joan who calls herself The Maid and a Joan who dresses as a fop. Perhaps the multiplicity of Joans here, and the ambiguity about what the “real” Joan thinks of seeing them, is an exploration of the multiplicity that exists within the historical figure herself. Perhaps it’s not that the one true Joan doesn’t recognize her imposters, but that there isn’t a One True Joan at all. “Is that me?” proves to be an extremely complex question; how much can we possibly simplify “me” to answer it?

There are some elements of this story for which I do not have straightforward, clear answers. I think that’s why it charms me so. For of course, we do not have straightforward answers about Joan, and that’s what fascinates me about her. While some of the specific choices made in this story seem to rob Joan of a bit of agency, its construct certainly seems to want us to examine Joan’s gender and sexuality presentations more closely than we usually do. Its weirdness allows for more freedom and nuance from Joan as a character. It acknowledges that multiple identities can exist in one person, and that traditional answers don’t always quite fit. In this way, even as it is certainly the strangest, I think it is the fictionalization of Joan that is the closest to the real, complicated, messy woman that I have come to know.

## 5. Conclusion

*“Only by paying attention to her unique experience, and by acknowledging that it is at the same time universal, since the experience of every individual is unique, can the mould of received ideas be broken, and only when that mould is shattered can Joan of Arc escape from the confinement of order handed down from generation to generation into the splendor of the unaccountable, the particular and the anarchical.”*

*- Marina Warner*

That Joan remains such a prevalent figure in pop culture tells me that, as troubled as we seem to be by her ambiguities, we are also captivated by them. The more we learn about gender and sexuality, the more we are realizing that most people’s stories are more complicated than the surface would have us believe. We have lived with cookie-cutter templates of masculinity and femininity for so long, but these rigid guidelines seem to fail so many people. They have certainly failed me.

I admit to feeling a fervent sort of loyalty to Joan. I want to examine her story as almost an act of justice; I want, as close as I can, to allow Joan to speak. Of course, to do so entirely is impossible, and I worry about putting words in her mouth. I can never know exactly who or what Joan’s voices were, or what they told her to do. I cannot know how much agency Joan perceived in herself, or why she dressed the way that she did. But since this is true, I don’t want to leave any stone unturned. I want to bring all of the nuances that we can into our understanding of her. I want to allow her to be full of contradictions rather than a simplified heroine for a cause—even if that cause is mine.

However, I do think examining Joan is about more than telling the story of one person. As Budnitz seems to imply in her story, Joan is Ubiquitous. No matter how much she may have

hated it, we have made her an Icon. She stands for something that we either see or want from ourselves. Despite the traps of our modern gender binary that I perceive in the three fictional portrayals I have examined, I believe that the intentions of all are good. We seem to be a culture that wants to redefine womanhood, and it makes sense that we want to use one of our most enduring iconic women to do so. If we continue, I hope that we can use Joan not to just change the way we see women, but to broaden it. To allow that there are many different ways to be a woman, and to be a person. To understand that, if we really examine it, most people are probably not Either Or. Through the centuries that divide us, Joan speaks to so many nuances about us that mainstream culture is only beginning to understand. She has gotten us this far; perhaps she can teach us even more about what it means to be a woman. Or perhaps, not-quite-Woman, but something else; something more authentic to who we really are.



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