

Weeping Widows and Warrior Women: A Feminist Reading of Shakespeare's First Tetralogy

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I dedicate this work entirely to the love of my life,

Geoffrey Taylor Street,

who died the day it was finished.

Without his unending love, patience, and support, this thesis would never have been completed. Believing I would have him to go home to kept me going. I would have been the luckiest woman in the world to have had him forever, but am thankful to have had him at all.

I love you, my Geoff, and I always will.

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Introduction

Many modern critics assume that “of all the dramatic genres that were popular on the Elizabethan stage, the English history play was the least hospitable to women” since “the places where history is made—the royal court and the field of battle—are exclusively male preserves, and the business of the main historical plots is conducted entirely by men” (Rackin 2002:73). English history is primarily seen by these critics as a patriarchal, homosocial project from which women essentially have been excluded. Within the traditional canon this appears more or less true, since Shakespeare’s female characters are largely contained within marriage, mourning, and domesticity; beyond it, women occupy a vast array of emotional and political spaces, including a much greater variety of female experience. However, critics have yet to noticeably divert their attention from the traditional canon. In a Literature Online search for the years 2000-2010, the subject *Hamlet* returned 1,664 entries, with 115 for the added keyword “women” and 73 for “gender.” The same search for *Henry VI*, which would include all three parts, resulted in 205 entries, with 26 for the added keyword “women” and 12 for “gender.” Why have these plays not been appropriated by feminist critics and included in an updated canon?

One possible answer seems to be a difference in focus. At its root, “feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression” (hooks 1984:26), so “‘feminist criticism’, then, is a specific combination of political discourse and activism: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature” (Moi 1986:204). Moi explains that “the task of feminist critics and theorists is to expose the way in which male dominance over females...constitutes

‘perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture’” (1986:205). In viewing “femininity as marginality, as a *position* in relation to what at any given time is considered central to the ruling order” (Moi 1986:219), many feminist critics have devoted themselves to bringing attention to the ways in which authors create female characters within a context of patriarchal oppression.

This has been especially true in the (limited) feminist criticism on Shakespeare’s histories. Rather than examining the plurality of texts and histories available in the plays, most critics have taken Shakespeare’s dominant patriarchal voice as the final say in interpretation: Joan *is* a whore, Margaret *is* a manipulative Amazon, Eleanor *is* an ambitious witch. These critics look at aspects of characters that reveal them to be victims of patriarchy, which is helpful in exposing a system so pervasive it often goes unnoticed. Alan Sinfield insightfully concludes that “a character is not a character when she or he¹ is needed to shore up a patriarchal representation” (54). Citing Desdemona, Olivia, and Lady Macbeth as prime examples, he exposes Shakespeare’s inability (or perhaps unwillingness) to include “the indicators of subjectivity...sufficiently connected for the audience to regard the [female] character as a single person throughout” (62), resulting in some critics “supplying characters with feasible thoughts and motives to smooth over the difficulty” (74). Although he created many memorable female characters, most of them “collapse back into stereotypical notions of woman” (Sinfield 63). Women being defined by their husbands’ positions, rejecting or embracing female

¹ There are certainly male characters that are not characters as well, but for the purpose of this thesis, I will focus on female characters.

companionship, being demonized for asserting power and sexuality, and the extent to which they conform to or defy the early modern notion of “normal femininity” have all been discussed by feminist critics. However, this trend operates within the author’s patriarchal project of masculine English history-making, restricting feminist criticism, as Kathleen McLuskie understood, “to exposing its own exclusion from the text” (97).²

Previous feminist criticism of the English histories has largely focused on how Shakespeare alternately marginalizes, contains, and demonizes women. I choose to look past the dominant discourse Shakespeare promotes in order to examine alternate character histories. As Roland Barthes argues in “The Death of the Author,” “we know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.”³ He continues:

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’—victory to the critic.

James Shapiro’s work on the Shakespearean authorship controversy promotes a similar assessment. He warns against collapsing “the very real distinction between the elusive persona of the speaker and Shakespeare himself (for we have no idea to what extent

² This is the position of Dymphna Callaghan’s book *Shakespeare Without Women*. Notably, she does not include reference to the English histories.

³ As this reference was consulted online, there are no page numbers.

Shakespeare is writing out of his own experience or simply imagining a situation)” (45). Considering how little is known about Shakespeare himself and that modern ideas of “literature as both an expression and an exploration of the self” (297) originated in the eighteenth century, it seems counterproductive that feminist criticism on the English histories has so far restricted itself to exposing the author’s patriarchal intimations rather than discovering and promoting alternative female voices available in the texts. This limitation of critical discourse is an unfortunate oversight that should be rectified.

Gabriele Jackson and Carol Chillington Rutter come closest to my understanding of the possibilities available in the histories. Studying Joan la Pucelle in *1 Henry VI*, Jackson writes:

From the very beginning, then, Joan’s ideological function is complicated to the point of self-contradiction: she seems both French and English, both a type of Penthesilea who helps her countrymen in battle and an unspecified Amazon who may embody threats to men – in fact, a representative of the full complexity of late-Elizabethan perception of the strong woman. (151)

Jackson grasps Joan’s depth, but does not allow the possibility of the character defining herself. The text gives two options for Joan, the French and the English perspectives, until the English victory in the final act supposedly decides the correct interpretation of her character. We have the third option of refusing both external definitions. Jackson falls into the patriarchal trap of allowing the dominant discourse to inscribe itself on the character, rather than carving a place for Joan’s personal narrative, left open by Shakespeare’s ambiguities.

In a similar attempt to flesh out Shakespeare's female characters, Carol Chillington Rutter astutely explicates the psychological crescendo leading to Margaret's taunting of York in *3 Henry VI*:

By the time Margaret in each of these productions arrived on the molehill to face York, she was a woman looking for revenge, a wife who had divorced herself from her irresolute husband's bed, a mother who had taken responsibility for ensuring her disinherited son's birthright, a militant in armour who led the Lancastrian troops from the front. Humiliated, mocked, betrayed, enraged, ignored, Margaret wanted a redistribution of power, and she got it. But the sexual equality she achieved with York was an equality of savagery. (188)

Although she creates a more sympathetic understanding of Margaret by following her entrapment in patriarchal culture, it is dangerous to make sympathetic portrayal an end in itself. Explaining the misguided ideology of liberal feminism, hooks notes that understanding men as "all-powerful, misogynist, oppressor—the enemy" and women as "the oppressed—the victims...[reinforces] sexist ideology by positing in an inverted form the notion of a basic conflict between the sexes, the implication being that the empowerment of women would necessarily be at the expense of men" (68). Certainly, there must be some back-tracking from Shakespeare's demonization of assertive women, but we cannot go too far in the opposite direction, either.

Rather than explaining Shakespeare's perception of women and the patriarchal structures and beliefs that oppress his characters, I have chosen to appropriate the English histories for a decidedly feminist agenda. Reviewing Shakespeare's first tetralogy, I aim to find space for real women among the plays' multiple possible texts.

This means avoiding both myths of an essential female nature and casting women as solely victims to patriarchal authority in order to find self-actualizing characters and giving credence to the personal narratives opened within the plurality and ambiguity of the text. Moi argues that “given the feminist insistence on the dominant and all-pervasive nature of patriarchal power so far in history, feminists have to be pluralists: there is no pure feminist or female space from which we can speak” (1986:205). The official histories of the patriarchal bard are an opportune space to conduct an excavation of alternative feminist voices and the possibilities for individuated, psychologically coherent female characters.

Joan la Pucelle

A prime example of a female character that could turn a little-studied play into a feminist triumph is Joan la Pucelle in *1 Henry VI*. Although named after an English king, Shakespeare's first history play⁴ focuses on the ongoing battle between the forces of the English Talbot and the French⁵ Joan la Pucelle. Throughout the play, Joan uses her cunning and military prowess to secure victories for the otherwise feeble French while entertaining the audience with her quick and often bawdy wit. Phyllis Rackin asserts that "in the scripted performance on stage, she is the most memorable and vividly conceived of all the characters in the play" (2002:71) and argues:

...it is Margaret and Joan, rather than any of the male characters in the earlier plays, who anticipate Richard [III]'s demonic energy, his transgressive, irreverent wit, and his vivid theatrical presence. The fact that all three play villainous roles in the represented action in no way diminishes the powerful appeal they possess in performance. (2002:77)

⁴ There is some debate as to whether Shakespeare wrote *1 Henry VI* or *2 Henry VI* first. Regardless, it is the first play of the first tetralogy in Shakespeare's historical timeline and is an early example of his English histories.

⁵ Critics have noted that Joan's nationality has much to do with Shakespeare's demonization of her. However, I am looking at minimizing the author's imprisonment of his female characters in sexist stereotypes, not questioning why he did so or what effect his jingoism had on it. It is an important point, but not the subject of this particular paper.

Earlier Shakespearean critics may not have been ready for a female Richard III when they decided which works to include in the regular canon: it is high time to let Joan la Pucelle storm the gates of tradition.

Rather than using “the perceived dominance of patrilineal and patriarchal ideology in Shakespeare’s era and in the play’s action” (Jackson 146) as the basis of my interpretation, I will look at both the nuances and omissions of Shakespeare’s text which produce an alternative reading that will not reduce Joan la Pucelle to a scapegoat for masculine anxiety over women’s military, political, and sexual power.

The easiest part of Joan’s character to include in a feminist interpretation is her ability as a military figure. This would perhaps be a controversial statement within feminist circles, so I will explain my reasoning before continuing. I believe that any form of gender stereotyping, including liberal feminist revisionist stereotyping, is a form of biological determinism, the idea that “biology grounds and justifies social norms” (Moi 1999:20). In an effort to dislodge traditional patriarchal feminine ideals, many feminists have embraced essentialism, arguing that women would wield power differently from men because we are naturally “relational, caring, and nurturing” (Moi 1999:109); if only we could strip away the oppressive patriarchal establishment, all women would revert to their female essence of life-giving peacemakers. Moi highlights this method of thinking as a threat to women:

There is...a danger of turning a positive, feminist definition of femininity into a definition of femaleness, and thereby falling back into another patriarchal trap. Gratifying though it is to be told that women really are strong, integrated, peace-loving, nurturing and creative beings, this plethora of new virtues is no

less essentialist than the old ones, and no less oppressive to all those women who do not want to play the role of Earth Mother. (1986:210)

Joan la Pucelle does not fit into the idea some feminists have of ideal womanhood, but I do not personally ascribe to these ideas, nor is my goal to show that Joan is really feminist. What is important for a feminist reading of her character is to look at her speech and actions and to separate them from the patriarchal lens of the other characters. Rather than holding Joan up to either traditional patriarchal or liberal feminist standards of femininity and femaleness, I choose to look at her as an entity unto herself. My version of radical feminism accepts women as fully individuated people rather than making irrational assumptions about the nature of women and judging them by their deviations.

From this point of view, Joan's success should be measured without regard to sex or gender; surprisingly, Shakespeare appears to follow this rationale. The patriarchal bard does not allow his character to appear mentally incapable or inferior as she successfully leads the French into battle multiple times. According to Theodora Jankowski:

The historical Jeanne d'Arc was a military genius whose successful campaigns allowed Charles VII to reclaim large portions of his land from the English and their Burgundian allies and to be crowned King of France. Without her help, Charles certainly would not have been as successful in battle and he might not have achieved sufficient power to repulse the Anglo-Burgundian alliance. (79)

Although "various means, including rewriting history, have been used to contain the threat these characters represent" (Jankowski 112), including fabricating her pregnancy

and licentiousness, Joan's military efficacy remains intact. Whether or not Shakespeare believes women should have the power he demonstrates Joan to possess (as indeed he seems to oppose by her anti-English use of it), he does show that women are capable of having such intelligence and influence and of wielding it effectively for their own aims. Joan creates unease in the patriarchal system *because* she is so capable.

When Talbot first encounters Joan at the beginning of Act I scene v, he immediately remarks: "Where is my strength, my valour, and my force? / Our English troops retire; I cannot stay them. / A woman clad in armour chaseth them" (I.v.1-3). Soon after he cries that Joan "drives back our troops and conquers as she lists" (I.v.22) and moans that "Pucelle is enter'd into Orleans / in spite of us or aught that we could do" (I.v.36-7). For the French-hating English hero to ascribe the victory to Joan la Pucelle's leadership is a mark of her genuine ability, since she has two strikes against her as a French woman. When Charles the Dauphin announces "'tis Joan, not we, by whom the day is won" (I.vi.17), he reflects the general acknowledgement of her military prowess.

Shakespeare's audience would have associated Joan's virago image with that of Elizabeth I at Tilbury in 1588⁶. In the speech to her troops, the English queen, dressed in armor, claimed to have the 'heart and stomach of a king' despite being a woman. Schwarz argues that her statement "enacts a masculinist appropriation...not only to protect homosocial exclusivity, but simultaneously to incite and to sanitize violence: the feminine is not that with or against which one fights, but that for which one fights" (89).

⁶ Elizabeth I's speech at Tilbury is taken from the full text in "Queen Elizabeth in Her Speeches" by Frances Teague.

As she did throughout her reign, Elizabeth I walked the fine line between “masculine” kingship and “feminine” submission by only using words, the woman’s weapon. Banks reminds us that “the battlefield was not for this Queen; she even tried to keep her aristocratic men out of the line of fire” (173). Joan takes Elizabeth’s appearance on the battlefield a step further by participating and leading in the masculine prerogative of war-mongering, but she follows the Queen’s linguistic model by shrouding her power in masculine terms. As she seeks to prove herself to the Dauphin, she says: “My courage try by combat, if thou dar’st, / And thou shalt find that I exceed my sex” (I.ii.89-90). Her ability to “[bewitch]...with her words” (III.iii.58) alternately casts her influence in a distinctly female light. Joan may act in a traditionally male role, but she expresses her agency through the patriarchal lens of gender transgression and adherence rather than gender-neutral action, attempting as the Queen did to demonstrate a certain level of awareness and respect for social norms.

Joan also plays with Elizabeth’s model by claiming the Virgin Mary as the source of her strength. Frances Yates and Roy Strong “have shown how the cult of Queen Elizabeth replaced that of the Virgin Mary” (Teague 64) and Hackett notes that “the idea has developed that Elizabeth became a sort of Protestant substitute for the Virgin Mary, filling a post-Reformation gap in the psyche of the masses, who craved a symbolic virgin-mother figure” (7). However, she argues that “this is to assume that the English nation under Elizabeth was unified in thought and belief” and points out that “many parts of England remained Catholic for many years after Elizabeth’s accession” (Hackett 8-9). Rather, Elizabeth I’s association with Marion iconography “may be not

so much an effusion of enthusiasm for the Queen as an attempt to enhance her potentially precarious authority” (Hackett 10).

Any connection between Elizabeth I and the Virgin Mary unites her with Joan la Pucelle, but Hackett’s interpretation strengthens the bond between the English Queen and Shakespeare’s character. As the prejudice of the Englishmen shows, Joan’s abilities in prophesying and developing military strategy would not readily be ascribed to a woman without attributing them to divine intervention. Joan must prove that she “[exceeds her] sex” (I.ii.90) for the Dauphin, expecting female weakness, “[fears] no woman” (I.ii.102). Joan’s claim to aid from the Virgin Mary ties her into a divine source of strength while appropriately containing her power within patriarchal feminine values. Though Mary is a woman, she is a model of traditional femininity; Joan’s assertion is more an extreme appropriation of the favor of the woman’s patron saint than a declaration of female power. Like Elizabeth I, Joan’s association with the Divine Virgin lends her credibility in a patriarchal society inclined to neglect her skills while assuaging fears of female power, working around assumptions about the nature of women for her advantage.

However, the image of the virgin is fraught with difficulties. It both casts Joan as pure and innocent and as powerful and independent. Jankowski argues:

The character Joan la Pucelle is a threatening figure as much because of her declared virginity—her refusal to be controlled by a man—as because of her manlike, virago image. That Joan is often read as an icon of Elizabeth I reinforces the threatening nature of this virginity. (89)

Elizabeth I's virginity was powerful, but her use of it was beneficial to England. She used her sexual status as a bargaining chip between nations by forming alliances under the pretence of marriage arrangements. Joan uses her (supposed) virginity for her country, as well. The reason she "must not yield to any rites of love" is because her "profession's sacred from above" (I.ii.113-114) since the Holy Mother "in a vision, full of majesty, / Will'd [her] to leave [her] base vocation / And free [her] country from calamity" (I.ii.79-81).

The play's focus on Joan's sexuality at all, from her assertion of virginity to her denunciation as a whore in Act V, liken her to the Queen. Marcus pursues sexual defamation as a point of contact between the two women:

Most obviously, perhaps, the play's vision of an outwardly immaculate virgin 'ruler' who turns out to be a slut underneath brings common gossip about Elizabeth to pungent dramatic life. Rumors about the sexual appetites of her 'mortal body' had plagued the queen throughout her reign, but became particularly rife in the 1580s and early 1590s. One Henry Hawkins claimed in 1581 that Elizabeth had had five illegitimate children by Dudley – all of them delivered while the queen was on one of her summer progresses, for 'she never goethe in progress but to be delivered. (163)

Perhaps even the suggestion of illegitimate children links the women, since Joan may or may not be pregnant by the end of the play. Marcus further suggests that the men Joan claims as potential fathers for her possible child are "precisely the two French noblemen Elizabeth had come closest to marrying in the decades before" (162), which she proposes "looks suspiciously like political sacrilege" (163).

These parallels make Joan la Pucelle appear strangely similar to Queen Elizabeth

I. Jackson uses Shakespeare's associations of Joan with Deborah, Minerva, and Astraea to explore this interpretation:

One could simplify the situation by seeing Joan as a sarcastic version of such a figure, an anti-Elizabeth, a parodic non-virgin whose soldiership (finally) fails.

Perhaps that was the point, or one of the points. But such close mirroring is hard to control. It is difficult to keep doubles separate. An obviously parodic presentation of a figure so suggestive might slide over into parody (dare one breathe it?) of the queen herself. (153)

The play even seems to mention Elizabeth when, upon the death of Talbot and his son, Sir William Lucy proclaims that "from their ashes shall be reared / A phoenix that shall make all France afeard" (IV.vii.92-3). Elizabeth spurred considerable male anxiety about women in power, but Shakespeare's imagery of the phoenix, another symbol of the Queen, appears to support her reign. Jackson explains that this particular reference "explicitly links Talbot to the current effort" in 1591/2, "when English troops under Essex had been sent to France for the particular purpose of besieging Rouen" (145), an effort at which the nationalistic Shakespeare would hardly snub his nose. And as mentioned earlier, it would be damning to condemn the Queen of England openly as the English characters later condemn Joan. The chief difference appears to be their nationality; had Joan *not* been French, had she been using her gender transgression *for* the English rather than against them, she would be acceptable, albeit uneasily so.

There is a distinct difference in class between Joan and Elizabeth, but even this seemingly vast gap between Joan and the Queen can be bridged. Joan may be "by birth a

shepherd's daughter" (I.iii.51), but many considered Elizabeth a bastard since there was wide support for Queen Katherine of Aragon, Henry's first wife, and no royal precedent of his divorce from her. There is also discrepancy about Joan's birth. When the shepherd sees "that sorceress condemned to burn" (V.iv.1), he moans:

Ah, Joan, this kills thy father's heart outright.

Have I sought every country far and near,

And now it is my chance to find thee out

Must I behold thy timeless cruel death?

Ah Joan, sweet daughter Joan, I'll die with thee.

(V.iv.2-6)

She moodily replies: "Decrepit miser, base ignoble wretch, / I am descended of a gentler blood. / Thou art no father nor no friend of mine" (V.iv.7-9). Abhorrent though it appears, it is possible she rejects her father to save him from grief. He admits that "for [her] sake [has he] shed many a tear" (V.iv.19), but when she refuses to acknowledge him, his sorrow turns to anger: "O burn her, burn her! Hanging is too good" (V.iv.33). There are two other options, however. She could be lying to aggrandize herself, or she could actually be "issued from the progeny of kings" (V.iv.38). This would bring her in line with the pastoral ideal in medieval romance⁷, in which a royal child is raised by low-born parents, only for his or her true parentage to be dramatically revealed later. Joan is no mild-mannered Perdita, but the ambiguity in the text does open this possibility.

Perhaps Shakespeare transferred characteristics of the Queen to a French woman to express safely male anxiety about authoritative women. Either way, Joan's royal

⁷ The romance tradition will be discussed in more depth in the section on Margaret of Anjou.

connection should permit her to be treated not as a laughably whorish virago, but as a formidable opponent, the French version of Queen Elizabeth I. I do not claim that Shakespeare intended for her to be an alter ego of the Queen, but considering their similarities he included in the text, there is plenty of support for casting her as such, giving her the benefit of the doubt as a competent leader worthy of respect, or at least allowing her individuation, to be “[entertained]...as an equal, as a mixture of good and bad as men are” (Mann 13).

The sexist assumptions of other characters do not give her the benefit of the doubt on any aspect of her character. Talbot associates Joan’s military talent with other forms of gender transgression. Holderness explains:

...a woman who crosses the prescribed gender and sexual boundaries at any one point is automatically declared guilty of transgression on all possible grounds: it follows from Joan’s assumption of masculine rather than feminine activities that she must needs be sexually dissolute rather than chaste, corrupt rather than morally respectable, unruly and ‘railing’ rather than obedient and submissive; even ugly rather than beautiful. (118)

Yes, the English even deny her beauty. Joan tells the Dauphin: “whereas I was black and swart before, / with those clear rays which she infus’d on me / that beauty am I blest with you may see” (I.ii.84-86). None of the French argue with her statement, which suggests that they agree with her assessment of her current looks, but York calls her “the ugly witch” (V.iii.34) when he finally captures her. It seems none of the English are beneath baseless attacks. Upon hearing of Joan for the first time, Talbot makes a tasteless pun, “puzzel or pucelle” (I.iv.106), showing his doubt of the French virgin by

juxtaposing it with the English slang term for slut. At their first encounter he calls her “devil or devil’s dam” (I.v.5), “witch” (v.6), and “high-minded strumpet” (v.12).

Burgundy also calls her sexual practices in question when he responds to Talbot and Bedford: “If underneath the standard of the French / she carry armour as she hath begun—” (II.i.23-4). The Norton Shakespeare indicates that ‘standard’ indicates both French ensign and penis and that ‘carry armour’ means both to wear armor and to “bear the weight of an armed man (in intercourse)” (491).

By their bawdy talk, the English forces appear to know quite a bit about the state of Joan’s underwear, but as far as the text informs us, they have no information in regard to her sexual status. Rutter analyzes the English response to Joan as an example of demonizing women by subjecting them to patriarchal assumptions:

In Talbot’s brand of essentialism, mobilised here to over-compensate for England’s martial failure, politics is always sexual politics. There is no way for a woman to act (as patriot or freedom fighter, for example,) except sexually, and, by definition, any action marks her as sexual transgressor, therefore impudent and demonised, a monster. Thus, power in a woman has one single source, darkness, with two names, sexuality and witchcraft. (191)

They certainly have no proof of her consorting with demons at this point, either, since she tells the French that “Christ’s mother helps [her], else [she] were too weak” (I.ii.106) and says nothing to the English about her spirituality.

The basic assumptions of the patriarchal English version of Joan’s history cannot and need not be trusted. Shakespeare gives no concrete evidence for the English point of view until Act V; until then, English slander comes across as cheap, unfounded shots at a

threateningly transgressive woman. Graham Holderness explains how Joan's degradation is critical to the maintenance of patriarchy:

Although subject to military defeat by Joan, Talbot is thus able to preserve the dignity of his code by circumstantial explanations: a woman should not in any event be 'clad in armour' (1.5.3); a woman with masculine physical strength must needs derive it from unnatural sources such as witchcraft or diabolical power. (118)

Talbot's decision to justify his defeat by defaming his opponent and attempting to rob her of her agency are less than admirable, but there is no denying that she consorts with demons in Act V scene iii when she calls for her "speedy helpers, that are substitutes / Under the lordly monarch of the north" (V.iii.5-6) and her "familiar spirits that are cull'd / Out of the powerful regions under earth" to "help [her] this once, that France may get the field" (V.iii.10-12).

Despite this incriminating evidence, Joan does not necessarily have to be portrayed as purely evil in contrast with the pure goodness of the English: that would fit into the patriarchal project of dichotomizing "female nature." Joan's actions do not have to be justified or correct, but understanding her possible motives could help round out her character. For instance, her actions could fit into an extreme, desperate form of patriotism. Joan cries: "Cannot my body nor blood-sacrifice / Entreat you to your wonted furtherance? / Then take my soul—my body, soul, and all-- / Before that England give the French the foil" (V.iii.20-23). She takes self-sacrifice to an inappropriate level, but it is still more a heroic flaw than an evil nature.

Another option is to scrutinize the actions of her English captors. Jackson argues that “although England executed witches, it did not burn or torture them, and one wonders what an English audience made...of Warwick’s call for plenty of faggots and extra barrels of pitch for Joan’s stake (V.iv.56-7)” (157). She also believes “it is unlikely that York and Warwick come off unscathed by the negative associations of their total violation of English custom” to delay a witch’s execution if she were pregnant (Jackson 158). Either way, looking past the traditional interpretation of this scene reveals that the characters and their proceedings cannot be judged as stark contrasts of each other; in Shakespeare’s text, there is no black and white.

Unlike her mingling with demons, Joan’s supposed sexual promiscuity is never proven on stage, nor does she admit to it except under duress. All previous comments on her sexuality were apparently unjustified accusations until she cries: “Will nothing turn your unrelenting hearts? / Then Joan, discover thine infirmity, / That warranteth by law to be thy privilege: / I am with child, ye bloody homicides. / Murder not then the fruit within my womb, / Although ye hale me to a violent death” (V.iv.59-64). Since “it was absolutely standard practice in both England and Scotland to put off a witch’s execution if she was pregnant” (Jackson 157), this would mean that the English heroes are either unacceptably (and illegally) cruel for not following protocol, or they do not believe in Joan’s pregnancy. Considering Shakespeare’s nationalistic agenda throughout the play, it is unlikely that he meant for Joan to actually be thought pregnant, and most critics take her pregnancy to be a sham.

However, this passage has been used by critics to prove Joan’s licentiousness since she names Alençon and then René King of Naples the father after denying it was

Charles the Dauphin. Calling her a whore based on this follows Richard Duke of York's reasoning that "she knows not well— / There so were so many—whom she may accuse" (V.iv.80-1) and the Earl of Warwick's belief that "it's a sign she hath been liberal and free" (V.iv.82). Her testimony has been used to fulfill patriarchal English expectations within the play, proof that Joan is a whore, but not that she is actually pregnant, which would be in her favor. As Rutter so aptly put it, "so the 'holy maid' was Satan's whore, after all! How convenient for English historiography" (12).

Both traditional and feminist critics have taken the patriarchal English version of history, in this case Richard and Warwick's interpretation of Joan's confession, without question. If we do not take their word for it, or indeed we read their remarks as sarcasm, there are two new possibilities: her sexual liaisons are as fictitious as her pregnancy or her sexual exploits and her pregnancy are equally real. Joan lists multiple men because each time she names one, the English condemn his baby to death with her. Alençon's child should die "and if it had a thousand lives" (V.iv.75), René King of Naples is "a married man?—That's most intolerable" (V.iv.79) so "[her] words condemn [her] brat and [her]," and Warwick rules out Charles before she speaks, saying "we will let no bastards live, / Especially since Charles must father it" (V.iv.70-1). If we accept this as proof of her promiscuity, we should also believe her claim to pregnancy. They have equal plausibility under the circumstances, since in both cases the only evidence is her testimony. Logically, if we believe one, we must believe the other, which is not convenient for patriarchy. Either Joan is pregnant and the English are unnaturally vindictive, or she is not the whore the English accused her of being.