



## The Maiden and the Monster: Joan of Arc and Gilles de Rais

*"You think then . . . that the Maid of Orléans was really responsible for his career of evil?" To a certain point. Consider. She roused an impetuous soul, ready for anything, as well for orgies of saintliness as for ecstasies of crime . . . There was no transition between the two phases of his being."*

-- Des Hermies and Durtal, *Là-Bas* by J.K. Huysmans

The Maid of Orléans, sainted peasant symbol of purity, idealism, and the visible workings of God - and the legendary Bluebeard, pedophile and serial killer embodying the demonic and corrupt whims of aristocracy. They were contemporaries, allies, probably friends -- warriors fighting for France's alabaster banner in her hour of greatest need. But the threads forming the warp of this tapestry connect Joan of Arc and Gilles de Rais to other colors as well; the green of witchcraft, the gold of magick, the black of conspiracy. And untangling them, despite difficulties, will certainly lead us somewhere even more interesting than the court of a prince driven from his kingdom, which is where beauty first met the beast.

*"First, let me tell you whom you have condemn'd:  
Not me begotten of a shepherd swain,  
But issued from the progeny of kings;  
Virtuous and holy; chosen from above . . .  
No, misconceived! Joan of Arc hath been  
A virgin from her tender infancy,  
Chaste and immaculate in very thought;  
Whose maiden blood, thus rigorously effused,  
Will cry for vengeance at the gates of heaven."*  
-- William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part One* V, v, 36-53

It was, in fact, at the court of the Dauphin Charles (the future Charles VII) that Joan of Arc (technically, Jeanneton Darc, or possibly Jeanne d'Arc) revealed her mission, picking Charles out of a concealing crowd of courtiers and whispering a secret in his ear that convinced him to give her a hearing. God, she said, had sent her to save France, defeat the English, and see Charles crowned at Rheims. One of the generals witnessing this astounding performance from an unknown girl from the back of beyond was Gilles de Rais (or de Retz, or de Rays), the richest lord in France. Gilles was, at 25, only a year younger than Charles, and eight years older than Joan. Joan passed a series of tests, both theological and medical, which determined that she was neither heretical nor unchaste, and Gilles was made captain of her guard. Gilles and Joan between them broke the English siege of Orléans, witnessed the coronation of Charles VII, and restored French momentum in the Hundred Years' War. Then, somehow, Joan was captured by the Burgundians in the woods at Compiègne, tried for heresy, and burnt at the stake. And Gilles, Marshal of France, went back to his home in Brittany, never again to raise his sword in Charles' defense.

*"I never had to do with wicked spirits:  
But you, that are polluted with your lusts,  
Stain'd with the guiltless blood of innocents,  
Corrupt and tainted with a thousand vices,  
Because you want the grace that others have,  
You judge it straight a thing impossible  
To compass wonders but by help of devils."*

-- William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part One* V, v, 42-48

Because he was too busy raping, mutilating, and murdering young boys. Starting in 1432, Gilles used his large fortune, certain trusted servants, and the unquestioned powers of a medieval lord to abduct youths from the cities and villages he owned. Deep in the recesses of his castles at Machecoul, Malemort, Champocé, and elsewhere, Gilles tortured children to death by the scores. He confessed to 140 such murders at his trial; the true number is almost certainly higher. The trial itself came about only because he overstepped even his own extravagant bounds. Gilles' profligate lifestyle began draining his fortune, which led him to sell his property. His heirs, panicked at the thought of losing their chance at his fortune, began filing lawsuits and writs in court; driven to rage at such obstructionism, Gilles made the mistake of beating and imprisoning a priest, Jean le Ferron, who had come to collect the title deed to such a disputed holding. This action violated clerical privilege, and the bishop of Nantes, investigating the case, discovered the local rumors of Gilles' ogreish appetites. Threatened with torture, Gilles made a full and detailed confession, one so horrific that the judges covered a nearby painting of Christ rather than expose it to such blasphemy. Thanks to his confession, he was granted the privilege of death by strangulation rather than burning; on October 26, 1440, four "ladies of noble character" collected his body from the pyre before it was set alight.

It wasn't solely for murder, or even abuse of clerical immunity, that the Breton lords tried Gilles de Rais. He also confessed to practicing devil-worship, witchcraft, necromancy, and alchemy in a desperate bid to restore his flagging fortunes by discovering the Philosopher's Stone. Starting in 1426, Gilles had begun to dabble in alchemy after his rabid book-collecting led him to a grimoire. He patronized a series of magi (one of whom conjured up Satan in the shape of a leopard), but it was an Italian alchemist and defrocked priest, Francesco Prelati, who trained him in blood sacrifice to demons. (Prelati's lurid confession earned him a stay of execution, and he vanished shortly after Gilles' death.) Anticipating the classical Black Mass in perversion of Catholicism, Gilles founded a charitable order dedicated to the Holy Innocents -- the children murdered by Herod searching for Jesus -- and used its priests and choirboys as recruiting agents to find more victims to feed to Satan and Belial.

*"It was deep into his fiery heart  
He took the dust of Joan of Arc  
And high above the wedding guests  
He hung the ashes of her lovely wedding dress"*  
-- Leonard Cohen, *Joan of Arc*

In his excellent psychohistory of Gilles de Rais, *Bluebeard*, Leonard Wolf describes the extravagant mystery plays Gilles wrote and sponsored, spending millions on sets, costumes, actors, provisions, and so forth. The culmination of these dramaturgies was the 20,529-line verse play *The Mystery of the Siege of Orléans*, starring 140 actors and 600 extras, on sets and scaffolds multiple city blocks long. For five continuous months, from May to September 1435, Gilles presented the play gratis, feeding not only the actors but the audiences for free. Every costume was authentic, made of the most expensive materials, and could be worn only once. Wolf points out that, in medieval grimoires, all magickal garments and equipment should be "virgin," used only for the magic and only one time. Was the play a dramaturgical attempt to rewrite history with Gilles as resplendent hero? Was it a powerful invocation of the spirit of the martyred Joan, an attempt at a magickal resurrection?

That's not the sole ritual connection we can draw. The excitable Margaret Murray, in *The God of the Witches*, suggests that both Joan and Gilles were followers of the ancient witch-cult, and intentionally sacrificed themselves as substitutes ensuring success for their Sacred King. Joan's selection of Gilles as her guardian secretly names him as her successor in the Old Religion. Joan's nickname *Pucelle*, or "Maid," was a traditional title for members of witch covens (from whence one draws such imputations about the French import Maid Marian and her consort Robin Hood), which were most common in Lorraine (her home duchy) in the next century. To really make this argument work, ironically, Murray must maintain that although Gilles was a pagan, his trial was a farce of trumped-up charges much as Joan's was; Gilles was framed and railroaded so that his heirs (and the Bishop of Nantes) could accede to his estates.

*"Great attempts were made at Joan's trial to connect her with some superstitious practices supposed to have been performed round a certain tree, popularly known as the "Fairy Tree" (l'Arbre des Dames), but the sincerity of her answers baffled her judges. She had sung and danced there with the other children, and had woven wreaths for Our Lady's statue, but since she was twelve years old she had held aloof from such diversions."*

-- *Catholic Encyclopedia*

Murray's argument that Joan was railroaded for witchcraft while simultaneously actually being a witch is a delight to watch, certainly. (Certainly both of Joan's trials, her condemnation and her rehabilitation, were purely political matters.) Murray emphasizes, thus, the same elements of Joan's past that the Inquisition did -- her youthful cavortings around the Fairy Tree, where she first heard her three mysterious "voices." Perhaps the fear of Joan's faerie allies explains why the Burgundians displayed her only in a specially-built iron cage. Joan's execution date, May 30, was the date of the Roman Feast of the Queen of the Underworld -- and Joan's inspiration in battle recalls the Celtic death-goddess Morrigan rather more than the Virgin Mary.

*"If King Charles VII, on the entrance of Jeanne d'Arc into the great hall of his castle at Chinon, hid himself among the throng of his courtiers, it was not for the sake of a frivolous joke -- where was the humor in it? -- but because he already knew of whom she was the ambassadress. And that, before her, he was scarcely one courtier among the others. The secret she delivered to him in private was contained in these words: 'Gentle lord, I come on behalf of the King.'"*

-- excerpt from the *Dossiers Secrets* of the Prieuré de Sion

Joan's capture might not have been stage-managed by the witch-cults, of course. It might have been part of a grand charade beginning when Queen Isabeau of France gave birth to an illegitimate daughter in 1407. Isabeau's lady-in-waiting was the sister of the mayor of Domremy, Joan's home town. Could little Joan have been placed in faraway Lorraine to keep her safe -- and her recognition of Charles, skilled horsemanship, passing of the tests, and easy acceptance by the French nobility, have been evidence of coaching and assistance? Such aid may have come from from Isabeau's sister-in-law, Yolande d'Anjou, mother of the lord of Domremy (and all of Lorraine), the deeply Rosicrucian, Grail-questioning René d'Anjou. René (a secret head of the Prieuré de Sion) served with Joan at Orléans -- and Gilles waylaid, robbed, and kidnapped Yolande in a mysterious ambush in 1431, following which she used him to arrange her marriage to the son of the Duke of Brittany. When Charles became suspicious of the Prieuré's machinations, of course, he arranged for Gilles' exile and disgrace -- and Joan's capture and execution.

*"Nicole Louve, a knight, gave her a horse whose price was thirty francs and a pair of hose, and the lord Aubert de Boullay a hooded cape, and sire Nicole Grognot a sword. And the said Maid leapt upon the horse very skillfully and told sire Nicole Louve several things by which he understood well that she it was who had been in France."*

-- from the journal of the dean of St-Thiébauld of Metz (1436)

Unless he didn't. Unless, after a secret agreement to withdraw from politics, Joan was ransomed, and another witch burned in her place leaving Joan to slip down a trap-door (which still exists in Rouen's Place de la Pucelle) and away to anonymity. In 1436 (nine months after Gilles' mysterious

dramaturgies ended) a mysterious figure named Claude des Armoises claimed to be Joan -- and was recognized as the Maid by the city of Orléans, by Joan's former landlords, and by Joan's two younger brothers. In 1439, the "Dame des Armoises" met Gilles de Rais -- who also apparently believed her genuine. Maid (if it was her) and monster (if such he was) met for the last time. In 1440, Gilles was tried and executed, and King Charles declared the Dame des Armoises an impostor. She retired to the country and died in 1450. That year, Charles began the Trial of Rehabilitation of Joan of Arc.

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