

Friday essay: Joan of Arc, our one true superhero

Written by Ali Alizadeh, Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies and Creative Writing, Monash University



Joan of Arc depicted on horseback in an illustration from a 1505 manuscript. Wikimedia Commons

One need not be a parent of a young child, as I am, to be conscious of the full-blown resurgence of the superhero in contemporary popular culture. Beyond the dizzying proliferation of fetishised merchandise to do with Marvel and DC protagonists and the frankly obscene sights of middle-aged folk squeezed into uncomplaining lycra and leotards at Comic-Con gatherings, one may sense the spectral presence of the hero, that crucial cultural figure which has beguiled humanity since the epics of Homer and the demigods of ancient mythology. Yet there is more to the hero than a fanciful tale of courage and exceptional strength.

Heroes and heroines are the most explicit and visible manifestations of our aspirations as well as our limitations, poetic accounts of our capacity for transformation within the boundaries of human imagination. What, then, does the ceaseless preoccupation with a particular heroic icon tell us? And why is it that despite all our cynicism and exhaustion, we still find resonance and meaning in the images of those, fictional or factual, who embark on quests for the betterment of their conditions with an unflinching optimism and self-confidence?



A miniature of Joan of Arc, circa 1450 and 1500. Wikimedia Commons

I want to address my own decision to write a novel about one of history's most enduring heroic personae, the medieval Frenchwoman known to us as [Jeanne d'Arc](#) (1412–1431), or [Joan of Arc](#) in English. I also wish to assess her perseverance as a figure of global fascination despite her historical origins in a world that is very different to ours.

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Jeanne's world was one of conflict, tragedy and turmoil. She was born during one of the most brutal phases of history's longest war, [the Hundred Years War](#), which pitted an embattled French Kingdom against the forces of an intrepid England and an even more dynamic and rapacious medieval feudal duchy of Burgundy. Her native village and community were directly affected by the war's ravages, and it was perhaps in response to the miseries of war, and perhaps also due to unique personal and psychological factors, that the young peasant woman, claiming to have been instructed by divine "voices", left her village to end "the pity in the kingdom of France". She was, much to the astonishment of future historians, received by the French king, armed and sent to fight the English as the "chief of war" of French forces. Her unexpected victories turned the tide of the war and made Jeanne into one of the most famous and most heroic figures of her epoch.

Has it been unsophisticated of me, a contemporary writer all too aware of the unheroic realities of our age, to devote so many years to researching and writing a book on the life of a woman who may be seen as an archetypal image of female heroism? Why is it that so many other writers and artists continue to write their own novels and songs and make films and musicals about this enigmatic icon of early European history?

Read more: [Medieval women can teach us how to smash gender rules and the glass ceiling](#)

I've been deeply fascinated with the story of Jeanne d'Arc since early childhood, when I came across an image of her – a horsed knight in an excessively shining armour, with an indisputably feminine face and hairdo – at a bookshop in Tehran in the early 1980s. But fascination alone does not result in an artistic project as complex and all-consuming as writing a modern literary novel.

So it is that I must admit that the tale of the young peasant woman who ran away from her village to become a knight, does not simply interest me. I find it exhilarating. Even though I have spent more than three decades reading and thinking about her, I'm still in awe of some of the basic elements and contradictions of her story.

How could an uneducated teenage girl lead armies to victory? How could a woman as highly

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attuned to the material conditions of her world – the topography of the battlefields, the byzantine milieu of late-medieval French politics – also sincerely believe in the metaphysical and believe that she heard the voices of saints and angels?

And why is it that this woman, so devoted to her political cause and to her vision of a united France, chose to be burnt at the stake at the age of 19 instead of acquiescing to her judges' directives during her infamous trials of condemnation, and not live to see to the completion of her figurative crusade?

Paradoxes and complexities

There are many more paradoxes and complexities one may discern when it comes to the life of the so-called Maid of Orléans. For me, these are not entirely resolvable, nor are they reducible to one or more possible resolutions. In her I've found a potent paragon of the human subject at its most radical, most truthful embodiment.

She is one of the most extreme manifestations of the singularity of humanity, and a testament to our capacity to break with what reduces us to bare life. I will therefore offer this definition of the hero/ine for our time: s/he is one who, against the obsessions of bourgeois individualism and late-capitalist identity politics, fights to eradicate all impositions of individuality and identity to reach universal selfhood. S/he becomes a champion for all of us, and in her we find that most impossible and improbable phenomenon – genuine, irrefutable hope.



Long before Che, Joan of Arc committed to changing the world from the bottom up.

In my view, Jeanne d'Arc, despite living a good 350 years before the advent of the modern revolution, is an exemplary materialisation of the figure of the revolutionary. Long before Robespierre, Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg and Guevara, Jeanne the Maid of Orléans committed herself to the cause of transforming the world from the bottom up.

She fought for justice in the direction of a universal collectivity – a very early, very nascent notion of a unified nation under the rule of one sovereign – and not in the interest of a particular [identitarian](#) or sectarian grouping.

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In the medieval, pre-modern heroine, we find a pre-emptive inversion of the mantras of the “progressive”, reformist, non-revolutionary bourgeois activists of postmodernity. For Jeanne the Maid, the public was the personal, and not merely the other way around. She made the world be the change that she wanted to see in herself. She thought local and acted global.

Revolutionary rupture

If Jeanne the Maid is a heroine, then, she is the heroine of the rare, luminous event of revolutionary rupture. This take is one which I've placed at the heart of my novel, [The Last Days of Jeanne d'Arc](#)

. The novel is not only an articulation of her radical character as I understand her; it is also a story of forbidden amorous love and intense, heretical spirituality. But central to the novel's fictionalised account of a historical figure's life - and my depiction of her sexuality and unique psychology - is my view of her as a woman who was transformed by her drive to transform the world in which she lived.

Read more: [Hearing voices is more common than you might think](#)

Other artists, ideologues and believers have had widely differing configurations of the famous Frenchwoman. For most, however, she too has been a heroine, a woman who, against the limitations and expectations situated in socio-personal contexts, fought, defeated and was martyred by formidable manifestations of those very socio-personal limits. Nevertheless, mine and my other contemporaries' versions of Jeanne the Maid's heroism perhaps dramatically differ in their content, if not in their basic, heroic discourse.

Unlike pop star Madonna – whose recent song, [Joan of Arc](#), depicts the Maid as metaphor for the multi-millionaire entertainer's own discontent with fame and disagreeable pop culture journalists – I don't see Jeanne as a symbol of my personal maladies.

Unlike former pop star David Byrne – in whose recent musical, [Joan of Arc: Into the Fire](#), Jeanne is an anti-Trump (pseudo) riot grrrl enraged by misogyny and binary gendered ideals – I can't, despite my own overt political leanings, bring myself to ascribe to the medieval heroine

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the ethos of a contemporary ideological project.

And unlike the great Bruno Dumont – the maverick French philosopher-filmmaker, whose own musical, [Jeannette: l'enfance de Jeanne d'Arc](#), aspires to gently mock and deconstruct the religio-ideological premise of the cult of the Maid – I have approached her life with seriousness and with fidelity to the truths of her narrative.

Whatever one may conclude from considering the trajectories taken by the heroic image of Jeanne d'Arc since her brutal death in the hands of her Anglo-Burgundian enemies in 1431, one cannot but be stricken by the sheer variety of the Maid's reincarnations. She's been depicted as a national heroine and a nationalist symbol (and also, to my and many a leftists' dismay, a popular mascot by French ultra-nationalists), a rebellious heretic and a goodly saint. A feminist role model and a belligerent military leader, an innocent mystic and a tortured victim.

However one may choose to view her, there can be no denying that she is, and will continue to be, one of the most singular and significant exemplars of our troubled species. Forget Wonder Woman and Batman – Jeanne d'Arc may be our one and only true superhero.

Ali Alizadeh will speak at the Melbourne Writer's Festival on the topic of [Revolutionary Women](#) on Fri 1 Sep at 11.30am.

Ali Alizadeh does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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