CHAPTER I

MAID OF FRANCE

What human words can make you realise such a life as this, a life on the borderline between human and celestial nature? That nature should be free of human weakness is more than can be expected from mankind, but these women fell short of the angelic and unmaterial only in so far as they appeared in bodily form, were contained in a human frame, and were dependent on the organs of sense.

SAINT GREGORY OF NYSSA,
De Vita Sanctae Macrinae[1]

When the body of Joan of Arc was burned and her ashes gathered up and scattered into the first reaches of the Seine estuary at Rouen on 30 May 1431, its lineaments were blotted from the collective memory. The very body of Joan of Arc was freed from the bonds tied by information and was released to inhabit that wider universe where the imagination is mistress of knowledge. She passed from the condition of the knowable to the condition of the all-imaginable; since then, her destroyed body in the pyre and her scattered handful of dust have acted as powerful stimulants to that creative faculty of the human mind that finds in historical figures the reflection and confirmation of its best and worst desires and fears.

There is no record of what Joan of Arc looked like. The colour of her eyes, the colour of her hair, her height, her weight, her smile, none of it is described until later. The face of the heroine is blank; her physical presence unknown. From the days when she was alive, all we know of her body is that she was about nineteen in 1431, as she told her examiners at the trial;[2] that she had a light, feminine voice;[3] and that on the day of her death at Rouen, she was shown to the crowd to be a

woman, because many feared she was a demon or a phantom. The Bourgeois de Paris, an anonymous Parisian who kept an invaluable record of life under the Anglo-Burgundian regime, wrote:

> 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. When they had stared long enough at her dead body bound to the stake, the executioner got a big fire going again round her poor carcass, which was soon burned, both flesh and bone reduced to ashes.[4]

The only picture of Joan that survives from her lifetime is a doodle in the margin of the records kept by Clément de Fauquemberghe, clerk to the Parlement of Paris, beside his entry reporting the defeat of the English at Orleans. It is a stiff, unskilled, rather remote sketch of a young girl holding a pennon in her right hand, with her left on the hilt of a sword. Her hair is long, wavy and swept off her forehead and temples to flow over her bared nape down her back. Her dress is scooped above her bust, which the artist has rendered generously. The initials JHS, the medieval monogram for the Holy Name of Jesus, can be seen on the first fold of the banner. She is drawn in profile, with a stern, small mouth and a roman nose (16). But the Parisian recorder had not seen Joan.

We know that Joan was painted from life and that medals were struck with her image to celebrate her victories. Her interrogators at the trial attempted to prove that she had allowed herself to become the object of a cult and encouraged her image to be used to propagate it.[5] No contemporary image done from life survives today, though three carved and helmeted stone heads, now in Orleans, Loudun and Boston, have all been thought at one time to be portraits of Joan of Arc. None is authenticated any longer.[6]

The epoch was concerned with inner significance and its expression in emblematic forms, as in the language of chivalric blazonry. But it was also the great prelude to Renaissance portraiture. As J. H. Huizinga has pointed out, Jan van Eyck, court painter to the duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, was in Arras in the autumn of 1430, at the same time as Joan, and could have painted her with that same intensity of characterisation that has made the face of the merchant Arnolfini one of the most famous faces in Europe. If we knew her with the particularity and the insight that Jan van Eyck would have brought

to the task, prejudice, wishful thinking and prior assumptions would not have played so freely with her figure.[7] As it is, Joan was already, in her lifetime, slipping away into a world of emblems, of personified abstractions. Previous modes of thought tugged on her individual person so powerfully that she could not withstand it; she, the figure of valour and strength, gave way before the assault of combined forces raised through the centuries to deal with the definition of femaleness. When we feel we are approaching what was peculiar to the girl called Joan of Arc, we are very often in a tanglewood of preconception and convention.

The only certain aspect of her physical being that emerges from the trial and the rehabilitation is that Joan of Arc was a virgin. She told her questioners in 1431 that since she first heard her voices at the age of thirteen, she had vowed not to marry, and she had resolved to remain a maid as long as her voices were pleased.[8] She volunteered this information: chastity was the touchstone of female virtue; it was widely believed that the devil could not have commerce with a virgin. She angrily refuted the accusation that she had ever been about to marry and told her judges clearly that the ecclesiastical court in Toul had rightly vindicated her of a charge of breach of promise brought against her. So the examiners at Rouen did not press the subject, but preferred to insinuate that Joan had led a disorderly life, following soldiers like any barrack-room trull.[9]

In the rehabilitation hearings, the issue of Joan's virginity gains much greater definition. Yet most of the witnesses were not specifically asked about it. Only in Lorraine, where Charles's investigators summoned the villagers of Domremy to prompt their memories of events forty-odd years before, did they ask an open question about Joan's conduct as a young girl. The trial lawyers had alleged that Joan had lived like a camp follower with soldiers in an inn at Neufchâteau. The Domremy witnesses were asked if her mother and father had been with her throughout this period.[10] Otherwise, the prepared questionnaires issued to the witnesses were principally concerned with establishing the illegal conduct of the Rouen trial,[11] for the main aim of Joan's rehabilitation was to prove that its condemnation of her as a heretic was invalid, not on her account, but on Charles's, in order to clear him of taint by association.[12] Yet, time and time again, the testimony digresses from this major purpose to tell of Joan's specific virtue of chastity.

The image of Joan's body drawn in the rehabilitation documents is one of an intact, unassailable, unspotted container that, strong through its exceptional purity, was broken only by the exceptional evil applied to it. But, though broken, it was broken only on the material plane, since pollution's victory takes place in this world and has no wings for the next.[13] A pattern familiar from Christian hagiography can be discerned, a pattern that provides the dynamics of the martyrs' stories, of Saints Cecilia, Lucy, Agnes and, naturally, the saints who were Joan's voices, Margaret and Catherine.[14] A vessel filled with pure essences is smashed. In the impact, there is the tragedy; in the shed blood, the sacrifice; in the immolation, the consummation. It is a hagiographical design that echoes the mystery of the Redemption as enacted in the Mass. As this ceremony had been central to European civilisation and had constituted the only universally attended drama for several centuries by the time Joan's case was reopened in 1456, its view of the holy naturally influenced the witnesses.[15] What they chose to express was conventionally admirable, and what they left out was left out because it belonged to no familiar category or pattern.

According to her posthumous acquittal of 1456, Joan of Arc was examined on different occasions by both sides to ascertain if she was a virgin. Each of the struggling parties needed to make sure of this, her physical intactness. A Dominican, Séguin de Séguin, whose evidence is circumstantial and lively, testified that he had been present soon after Joan arrived at court in 1429. She satisfied the churchmen who cross-questioned her and was then "handed over to the Queen of Sicily, the mother of our sovereign lady the queen [thus the mother-in-law of the Dauphin], and to certain ladies with her, by whom the Maid was seen, visited and privately looked at and examined; and after examination made by the matrons, the lady stated to the King that she and the other ladies found most surely that this was indeed a true Maid."[16] In prison at Rouen just over a year later, the duchess of Bedford, wife of the regent ruling in English-occupied France on behalf of the child king Henry VI, visited Joan to examine her or at least ordered some of her attendant women to do so. Afterwards, she gave orders that Joan was not to be abused. One witness claimed Joan, taunted by her gaolers, had herself asked to be put to the test.[17] Even Jean Beaupère, one of the most obdurate of her judges, who persisted in his low opinion of Joan and in 1450 gave the most hostile testimony heard before the first rehabilitation tribunal, declared that Joan had

never given him the impression she had been violated.[18] He affirmed this to defend himself and his party from charges of ill-treating her in gaol; but his words admit her innocence. Thomas de Courcelles, also an ardent prosecutor in 1431, deposed in the course of his vague and disdainful evidence that although he was not sure whether her virginity had been put to the test or not, Cauchon, the leading judge, himself had told him she was a virgin. Besides, he admitted, the trial would certainly have used any unchastity against her.[19]

Numerous stories were told to emphasise Joan's maidenhead, so numerous that the insistence must indicate a deeper need than biographical accuracy. Jean d'Aulon, who had been Joan's squire, avowed:

> Although she was a young girl, beautiful and shapely, and when helping to arm her or otherwise I have often seen her breasts, and although sometimes when I was dressing her wounds I have seen her legs quite bare, and I have gone close to her many times—and I was strong, young and vigorous in those days—never, despite any sight or contact I had with the Maid, was my body moved to any carnal desire for her, nor were any of her soldiers or squires moved in this way.[20]

Jean de Novelompont, who with Bertrand de Poulengy accompanied Joan on the first momentous journey from her native country to Chinon to find the Dauphin, emphasises the same quality: "On the way both Bertrand and I slept each night with her. The Maid slept beside us without taking off her doublet and breeches; and as for me, I was in such awe of her that I would not have dared go near her; and I tell you on my oath that I never had any desire of carnal feelings for her."[21] Another witness said that a tailor, ordered by the English to make a woman's dress for Joan, had tried to caress her breasts. She slapped him.[22] Haimond de Macy, a French knight who saw Joan in the tower of Beaurevoir when she was a prisoner, showed similar preoccupations: "I tried several times playfully to touch her breasts. I tried to slip my hand in, but Joan would not let me. She pushed me off with all her might."[23]

Even witnesses who could not recall such anecdotes volunteered their opinion as to Joan's virginity and often on the slenderest conjecture. Marguerite de la Touroulde, the widow of the king's receiver general in Bourges, with whom Joan had once stayed, described accompanying her to the public baths, which were still the custom in France at that time: "I saw her several times in the bath and in the hot-room,

and so far as I could see, I believe she was a virgin."[24] Another knight, Gobert Thibault, who had known Joan less well but seen her on frequent occasions, corroborated Novelompont, using almost the same words:

> In the field she was always with the soldiers, and I have heard many of Joan's intimates say that they never had any desire for her. That is to say they sometimes had a carnal urge but never dared to give way to it; and they believed that it was impossible to desire her. And often if they were talking among themselves about the sins of the flesh, and using words that might have aroused lecherous thoughts, when they saw her and drew near to her, they could not speak like this any more. Suddenly their sexual feelings were checked. I have questioned several of those who often slept at night close to Joan, and they answered me as I have said, adding that they never felt sensual desire when they saw her.[25]

Joan's beauty, which D'Aulon mentions, adds to the virtuousness of her resistance and becomes a commonplace of the saint's life later. In the seventeenth century, René de Cériziers, a Jesuit at the court of Louis XIII, saw Joan as the prototype not of a heroine or virago, but of "wronged innocence," and he embroidered prettily on the theme of her resolute chastity at Domremy: "There was a certain look in her eye that inclined the hearts of many young men toward her. As soon as anyone saw her, he would pursue her and seek her out." One suitor became ardent and continued to insist, even though Joan made it quite plain she would have none of it: "The courtesies and attentions of this young man began to be importunate to Joan. . . . There is a kind of coolness that is most suitable in young women when they are sought in marriage; but this coolness is blameworthy if it is used for a purpose, and if one knows that they are cool only because they want to fan the flames in the hearts of their swains. Our young innocent girl was incapable of such stratagems."[26] But in the end, as the suitor inveigled the consent of her parents, Joan was forced to leave home to avoid him. Thus Cériziers managed to give Joan a laudable motive for a step that he, as an upholder of filial obedience, would otherwise have found difficult to approve.

Cériziers, in the tradition of the rehabilitation witnesses, also forestalled insinuations about her life among soldiers, declaring that a great miraculous power was hers: "whenever anyone looked upon her with impurity or thought dirty thoughts about her, he was immediately

struck impotent *forever*."[27] This accretion to Joan's legend echoes an earlier story, also told by her supporters. A soldier seeing her in Chinon scoffed at her: "By God, is that the Maid? If I could have her for one night, I'd not return her in the same condition." Joan retorted: "In the name of God, you deny him and you so near your death!" An hour later, the man fell and was drowned in the Vienne.[28]

A story like this belongs to the long medieval tradition of moral exempla used by preachers to press their audience into submission. In the thirteenth century, a Dominican, Jacques de Vitry, collected together dozens of similar cautionary tales about unchaste sinners in a handbook used extensively later.[29] Rooted to the spot, dumb, paralysed, blind or otherwise stricken, they are for the most part forced to repent, usually by the purifying magic of the virgin mother of God. In Joan's case, the magic of her inviolate body, reflecting that of the Virgin Mary's, exercised as wonderfully the minds of her contemporaries.

Jean d'Aulon, her squire, thought that Joan never menstruated: "I've heard it said by many women, who saw the Maid undressed many times and knew her secrets, that she never suffered from the secret illness of women and that no one could ever notice or learn anything of it from her clothes or in any other way."[30] This inference, circumstantial as it is, becomes an accepted aspect of Joan's power and uniqueness. The *Alamanach de Gotha* of 1822, a sober summary of her history, refers to Joan's amenorrhea: "Finally, there is the added, remarkable peculiarity, which makes manifest the plans God entertained for her. Womanly in modesty, but exempt, by a particular design, from the weaknesses of her sex, she was also not subjected to those periodic and inconvenient dues, which, even more than law and custom, prevent women in general fulfilling the functions that men have taken over."[31] Jules Michelet picked up the inference and expanded it in his stirring account of Joan's career which, published in 1844, had an incalculable influence on subsequent thinking about Joan: "She had, body and soul, the divine gift of remaining childlike. She grew up, she became strong and beautiful, but she never ever knew the physical miseries of womankind."[32]

On the one hand, Joan is all woman, seductive, even beautiful, with the full complement of sexual characteristics; on the other, she annuls the usual consequences of those characteristics, remaining in the virginal state of prepubescence.

D'Aulon's remarks are not necessarily untrue: the portrait we

have of Joan need not be false. The examinations of her hymen, the attempted seductions, the absence of menses could have taken place in the dimension of fact. But the evidence should be put in context. The outcome of such tests for virginity depends more on the expectation of the ministers than on the state of the subjects. The medieval ordeal by fire or water, applied by the Church to discover a criminal or a witch, precipitated the crowd's response to the victim so that the dominating common wish was crystallised and expressed in the result. In the case of women who, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were ducked in village ponds to find out whether or not they were witches, the decisive role of the onlookers is clear. The rule was that if the water rejected the woman, if the pure element spewed her forth, then she was a witch. If she remained under, then she was innocent of a league with the devil. It is a physical law that a body will float, even if clothed. Sodden cloth will keep the victim down a little while, as will the impact of her fall. But after a time she will reappear near the surface. That interval is the crucial factor to determine, and it is the crowd that decides whether in the time that has passed—naturally a variable period—their victim has been accepted by the water and therefore needs rescuing. Even ordeals by fire exhibit the same dependence on the onlookers' sympathies. For the question was not whether the fire burned the victim's hand, but how quickly the weal healed. Again, the measure is sympathy, and the sufferer of the ordeal is dependent on the unconscious leanings of the crowd and of the officials applying the test, not on the behaviour of the elements. Yet this human consensus was automatically identified with the will of God. The ordeal was one way, a cruel way, of making a joint decision in ambiguous circumstances.[33]

Joan's tests for virginity are similar, though she, if she requested one herself, as the witness Jean Fabri related, believed in their absolute value as the expression of God's will.[34] It is possible to tell if a hymen has not been penetrated; but it is not easy now, and it was certainly more difficult at the beginning of the fifteenth century, when the physiology of the sexual organs was hardly understood. Besides, if it really were the king's mother-in-law and the duchess of Bedford who examined Joan, their opinion is worthless, since they were not medically trained. Not that doctoring was so well developed in this specialty that it would make a difference if they had been qualified. Medicine was used to support preconceptions, not to remove them. In the sixteenth century, the physician Johannes Wier (d. 1588), campaigning against

witch-hunting, suggested that nuns who confessed to having intercourse with incubi at night should have their hymens examined, in order to show how deluded they were; his pragmatism was so alien that he was not understood.[35]

Joan almost certainly was a virgin, in the sense that she had never made love. Whether her hymen was broken is another matter—after all that riding and wielding of lance and sword it seems likely that it would have been—but the eminent noblewomen who visited her found what they expected to find. There is not one jot of science in the enumerated statements of Joan's virginity. The great weight of arguments in favour can hardly be gainsaid, but they are psychological and cultural, not medical.

Jean d'Aulon's deposition, the only one to survive in the original French, is vivid and touchingly affectionate and shows a certain care for detail in the recapturing of events that had occurred twenty-five years before. He probably spoke the truth when he said Joan did not menstruate. The relationship between the behaviour of hormones, the ovarian cycle and mental disposition is close. With the disorder known as anorexia, for instance, the hypothalamus in the brain ceases to function. It normally controls the endocrine system, which in turn regulates menstruation. The origins of anorexia are not physical, but mental; its symptoms have grave consequences for the body, including the disappearance of the menses. There is evidence that women under stress can stop menstruating. Female troops, patients in mental hospitals and victims of civil strife sometimes suffer from amenorrhea.[36]

Joan of Arc ate abstemiously. Several witnesses commented during her vindication how even after battle she only soaked some bread in a little wine. The lawyer Jean de la Fontaine, cross-examining her about her visions during her trial, asked her if she had been fasting. It was Lent, and she had been.[37] When after Easter she was sent a carp by her chief judge, Pierre Cauchon, bishop of Beauvais, she became ill. Carp is a notoriously rich and greasy fish and, if she was a fastidious eater, might well have upset her stomach. Witnesses at the rehabilitation said she thought she had been poisoned.[38] Fear of food, nausea, horror of outside impurities entering the stronghold of the personal body—all are characteristics of anorexics, who, if they eat rich food, vomit it later.

If indeed Joan never underwent menarche, her contemporaries would hardly have understood the phenomenon as we do now. For them, her condition was magically holy. 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 her. But amenorrhea was not only a sign of innocence. One medieval medical commentary explicitly linked it with outstanding strength: "Such a failing of the menses happens on account of the power and quality of strength, which digests well and converts the nourishment from the limbs until no superfluities remain, as it so happens amongst strong, mannish women who are called viragoes."[39]

In their stress on the pure, strong body of Joan of Arc, the witnesses of the vindication were in concord with the image Joan purposefully claimed as her own. When d'Aulon implied Joan's innocence of adult womanhood, he was in complete sympathy with her own projection of herself. For in the evidence of the trial and in Joan's letters that have survived, written at her dictation with her guided, uncertain signature appended in some cases, there is only one name she used, and that is Jehanne la Pucelle. Asked her name at the beginning of her cross-examination, she said that in her own village she had been called Jhanette, but this diminutive had not been used since she had arrived in "France" to fulfill her mission.[40] Later, under pressure, she insisted that her voices had called her "fille de Dieu";[41] later still she gave her father's name as Jacques Dars and her mother's as Isabelle Romée and added that in her own country it was the custom for a girl to take her mother's name.[42] But the name she always used herself was Jehanne la Pucelle.

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.[43] It denotes a time of passage, not a permanent condition. It is a word that looks forward to a change in state. In Old French, it was the most common word for a young girl; in Middle French, *damoiselle* began taking over. By Joan's day *vierge* was also sometimes added to *pucelle* to clarify the meaning of chastity; this shows the underlying ambiguity of the word. Its etymology is disputed, but both possibilities catch its flavour. It may derive from *pulcra* (beautiful), corrupted into *pulcella*, which in Latin was used humorously and affectionately for young girls, or, even more aptly, from *pulla*, giving *pullicella*, a little animal. The inference of virginity became firmer through the Middle Ages, especially after *despulceler*, meaning "to deflower," was introduced in the twelfth

century.[44] But again the choice reveals the word's underlying sense of promise: *vierge* could have as easily been used as the foundation of the new verb, but it fails to imply a transitional state.

Pucelle was often used in gallant contexts. Eustache Deschamps (d.c. 1406), the prolific poet of the generation before Joan, wrote a *virelai* called "Portrait d'une Pucelle." It is a frankly admiring description of his subject's charms, written in the first person, with the enticing refrain:

Aren't I, aren't I, aren't I beautiful?[45]

The Château des Pucelles, carved on many ivory wedding caskets, was a maiden's castle assaulted by knights; the defenders on the battlements were armed only with roses.[46]

The word implied no rank, and it was current at every level in society. This made it an inspired choice in Joan's case. It cancelled out her background, without denying it, and this, as we shall see, was important to her.[47] As well as forming part of the language of the courtly romances, *pucelle* was a country word and survived, for instance, in a local children's game, Le Jeu de la Pucelle, recorded by Rétif de la Bretonne at the end of the eighteenth century. A group of boys chases a girl; once caught, she is paired off with one of them and told she will be "stripped like a rose, shaken like a plum, eaten like a field rat, wilted like the flower of the pasque anemone." Needless to say, the game was banned when the indulgent parish priest was replaced by a reformer.[48]

With an instinct for seizing a central image of power, which Joan possessed to an extraordinarily developed degree, she picked a word for virginity that captured with doubled strength the magic of her state in her culture. It expressed not only the incorruption of her body, but also the dangerous border into maturity or full womanhood that she had not crossed and would not cross. In this sense she was a tease. During the whole course of her brief life Joan of Arc placed herself thus, on 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 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.

Her virginity was magic: it was up to the witnesses of the rehabilitation to lay claim to her, as a talisman of the rightness of the cause

she had supported. It was magic because of the long Christian tradition that had held since the second century that the inviolate body of a woman was one of the holiest things possible in creation, holier than the chastity of a man, who anatomically cannot achieve the same physical image of spiritual integrity as a woman. The twelfth-century English homily *Hali Meidenhad* extolls in extreme feminist language the liberation of a virginal life and declares: "This [virginity] is yet the virtue that holds our breakable vessel, that is our feeble flesh, in whole holiness. And as that sweet unguent and dearest beyond all others that is called balm protects the dead body that is rubbed therewith from rotting, so also does virginity a virgin's living flesh, maintaining all her limbs without stain."[49] The virginal ideal also flourished under the influence of the cult of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, who, in the early fifteenth century, was seen above all as a powerful and merciful intercessor, who could grant humanity forgiveness through the purity she had preserved, even in childbirth.

In Joan's case, there was a specific reason beyond the purely symbolical for the rise of a *pucelle* as palladium of the country: it was expected to happen. Numerous and confused prophecies circulating in France promised the rise of a virgin saviour, and these were as greedily received by the literate and illiterate alike. In 1456, Jean Barbin, a lawyer and advocate at the Parlement, gave hearsay evidence about the inquiry Joan underwent at Poitiers after her first meeting with the Dauphin Charles at Chinon in 1429. Joan's questioners raised the subject of a recent prophecy made by a visionary called Marie d'Avignon, concerning an armed woman who was to save the kingdom. When Marie became afraid that she herself was being called into battle, she was reassured by her vision and told that it was another maiden, who would come after her. The professor of theology who had recalled this prediction, Master Jean Erault, declared to the Poitiers judges that he was certain Joan was the maid in question.[50]

Marie d'Avignon, or Marie Robine, was Joan's predecessor in other ways, for she was a prophetess politically involved in the crisis of the Great Schism that divided the Western Church between two rival popes. Around 1387 she was miraculously cured after a pilgrimage to the tomb of Pierre de Luxembourg in Avignon, at a healing ceremony in which the anti-Pope Clement VII took part. The cure naturally helped to confirm the latter's shaky position and so Marie stayed on, the recipient of numerous benefits, as a recluse in the church near Pierre's

tomb. She continued in high esteem through the next reign of anti-Pope Benedict XIII, and she published her visions of peace and doom.[51] Yet in all twelve volumes of these visions, there is no prophecy as related by Jean Erault. He either made a mistake and attributed another current expectation to the wrong seer; or the prophecy might have been made orally and he might have heard it circulating in Paris; or, in order to urge approval of Joan, who had engaged his sympathies, he made it up, using a staple method of the Middle Ages, the invocation of the supernatural.

Quoting prophecies in support of Joan became quite commonplace. When the evidence of the rehabilitation of 1456 was summed up by the Inquisitor Jean Bréhal, he cited many others. Some he left anonymous, and their sources are still not known. Others he gave, with suitable amendments to render them apt, to the wizard Merlin, of the Arthurian cycle. But they were appropriate to Joan because they used the word *puella,* always the Latin rendering of *pucelle.* One echoed Marie Robine's message in different cryptic phrases:

> *The young cocks of France will prepare wars for the throne.*
> *Behold, the wars break out, now the Maid carries forward her standards.*[52]

Merlin was then believed to have foreseen and foresuffered all, like Tiresias, and his rigmaroles were greatly feared: they defied sense and were therefore possible of infinite interpretation.[53]

Christine de Pisan (d.c. 1430), Joan's contemporary, historian of chivalry and society, poet and feminist, was so moved at the end of her life by the news of the raising of the siege of Orleans that she broke her self-imposed silence and, from the convent at Poissy to which she had retired in despair at the state of her country, wrote a eulogy of the Pucelle.[54] She had heard the news that, at her examination at Poitiers, Joan had been recognised as the saviour prophesied not only by Merlin but by the Sibyl and the Venerable Bede. Through Joan, she wrote, the sun had begun to shine once again on France: "It was found in the history records that she was destined to accomplish her mission; for more than 500 years ago, Merlin, the Sibyl and Bede foresaw her coming, entered her in their writings as someone who would put an end to France's troubles, made prophecies about her, saying that she would carry the banner in the French wars."[55]

Did Joan know, before she was examined at Poitiers, the predic-

tions that an armed maid would be called to lead France in battle, and did she use them consciously to command belief? At her trial, Joan explained that she had been told yet another, different prophecy, *after* she arrived at Chinon, not before she conceived of her mission. The king, prompted possibly by his confessor, Gerard Machet, asked her if there was an oak wood in her part of the country, because it was prophesied that a maid would come out of such a wood and work miracles. Joan added crisply that she put no faith in that.[56] But from the first, Joan's followers identified this *bois chesnu* with the forest at Domremy where she sometimes heard her voices.

Also, according to the evidence of the rehabilitation, Joan had heard a similar prediction before arriving at court and set more store by it than she admitted at the trial. Two witnesses quoted her. They knew each other and had therefore probably pooled their memories. Durand Laxart, her neighbour and cousin by marriage, was the man who took the crucial initial step of accompanying Joan at the start of her mission when she left her native village of Domremy to see the captain, Robert de Baudricourt, of the nearby fortified town of Vaucouleurs.[57] Laxart told the magistrates of 1456: "I went to fetch her from her father's, and brought her to my house; she told me she wished to go into France, to the Dauphin, to have him crowned: 'Was it not said that France would be ruined through a woman, and afterwards restored by a virgin?' "[58] Catherine Royer, with whom Joan stayed at Vaucouleurs when she was trying to persuade Robert de Baudricourt to give her an escort to the king at Chinon, told the same story, with more particulars. " 'Have you not heard,' she said, 'the prophecy that France was to be ruined by a woman and restored by a virgin from the Marches of Lorraine?' I remembered having heard that, and I was flabbergasted."[59] Joan was the maid from Lorraine, according to her contemporaries' interpretation; Queen Isabella of Bavaria, who in 1420 had made the treaty with England that dispossessed her son Charles of the French crown, was the woman who had destroyed her country.[60]

Joan herself never claimed outside corroboration for her chosen destiny; indeed, her stubbornness and unshakeable commitment to the interior and personal character of her voices are among the features that have most inspired the writers who have attempted her likeness. On the evidence of the trial, she never invoked the prophecies that could have helped her standing with her judges, and they were careful not to produce them in the questioning. Merlin, for instance, was an inter-

nationally accepted source and possibly was consulted even more in England than in France.

Durand Laxart and Catherine Royer may have been using the wisdom of hindsight; also, as we shall see in Chapter 4, the support of external verification from apparently disinterested sources, like Merlin, formed an important feature of every party's struggle in the civil strife of France to claim God firmly for its side. But even if current gossip shaped the stories of Laxart and Royer, their testimony concurs with the portrait drawn by the rehabilitation as a whole, and the prophecies they quote only reinforce the obsession that the evidence betrays with the saviour's literal purity, with Joan's virginity. She had to be uncorrupted, whole, firm, dry, a creature above many of nature's laws and, though assailed on all sides, invincible—until the fire.

A secondary theme also returns again and again to support the physical portrait of Joan drawn by her vindicators: the persecutions she underwent are insistently described. By prevailing against torments and lewdness, her spiritual power seems even more preternatural. In 1456, the witnesses who had seen her imprisoned in Rouen all answered vividly the questions put to them about the conditions in which she was held. She was taunted by her English guards, soldiers "of the lowest sort." "Common torturers," said Jean Massieu, the court usher.[61] It was alleged that she was mocked and derided by her gaolers and by visitors; that she was duped by Nicolas Loiselleur, a canon of Rouen, who posed as a friend and counsellor from her native Lorraine;[62] and, above all, that attempts were made to violate her.

Other participants in the earlier trial talked of the chains loading her body, of an iron cage made on purpose too small for her to lie down in it. No one said they had actually seen it used. Surprisingly the threat of torture, recounted in the trial itself, is not repeated by the witnesses of 1456, except that Thomas de Courcelles, one of the three judges who in 1431 had voted that she should be tortured, smoothly denied that he had ever given an opinion about the punishments she should receive.[63]

Carl Théodor Dreyer, in his 1928 masterpiece, *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, organised the phases of this cinematic poem about Joan's imprisonment and death according to the mysteries of Christ's cross. The face of Joan of Arc, the face of the actress Falconetti, unravished, tear-streaked, filled with inner certitude and sacred simplicity, is framed by the leers and snarls and the ugliness of her gaolers in a sequence that explicitly reinterprets fifteenth-century paintings of the mocking of

Christ, such as Bosch's disturbing evocation of the holy simpleton in the picture now in Washington, D.C.[64]

In Joan's case, because she exists in recorded history and not in hagiography alone, the patterns of saints' lives exert an influence, but cannot altogether metamorphose circumstance into myth. Elements of mimesis, of the attempted representation of reality, cling to the witnesses' accounts of her passsion and her death, while at the same time an accretion of semiosis, the search for inner meaning, covers their story and profoundly alters its character.

Virgin martyrs, like Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret and other heroines in the ranks of the saints, could not have the physical life in them destroyed by physical means until it pleased God to allow nature to take its course. But Joan in death was subject to nature; she died in front of a crowd; she was burned for all to see. Yet because she was the living totem of a just cause for her supporters, the miraculous had to be present. After the crescendo of her innocence and her torments, it was not possible to release her into the banality of mortal law, where death claims the body and cannot give it back. She died calling on her lord, "Jesus, Jesus," until the fire choked her. "And almost everyone wept for pity."[65] This might seem grand enough; but reality is not adequate, and the minds of the witnesses of 1456 used the means available to them to describe her victory. The veil of the temple must be rent; darkness must fall in the afternoon.

For Thomas Marie the word *Jesus* was seen written in the flames.[66] The Dominican who attended her at the end, Isambart de la Pierre, told another story. He said that an Englishman who had helped burn Joan was struck with horror after her death. He realised he had burned a saint: "For it seemed to this Englishman that he had seen a white dove flying from the direction of France at the moment when she was giving up the ghost."[67] G. B. Shaw used the incident as the climax of Joan's death in his famous play of 1923, *Saint Joan*.[68] Dreyer also expanded the image in his film: from the tower of Rouen castle, white birds flock toward heaven, signalling widespread distress and disorder in creation as the flames leap to Joan's face. With intense, almost grotesque forcefulness, Dreyer intercuts these birds, the pyre, the flurry of wings and the tongues of fire with the surging spectators and the mailed soldiers with flails and clubs, laying about the crowd like Herod's henchmen.

For Isambart de la Pierre, the dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit, of

love, of peace, of sanctity, served to exalt Joan at the moment of her death; and the fact that the dove was seen by an Englishman to come "from France"—that is, from the Ile de France, not from English-held Normandy—makes the point that the English had misinterpreted the will of God, who was now identifiably over the border, with the other side. Isambart's image satisfies, poetically and politically; it does not quite suffice for the logic laid deep in the forms of Christian thought, for the religion that uses the body of the Saviour as its lodestar needs to return to the body at every stage of its journey toward holiness. The pattern of the Word made flesh must repeat on all strata of the Christian bedrock. The spiritual victory over death must have an analogue in the physical world. So when Isambart comes to the end of his story of how Joan died, he produces the master image, the equivalent, in Joan's case, of the Eucharist: "Immediately after the execution, the executioner came up to me. . . . He said and affirmed that, notwithstanding the oil, sulphur and charcoal that he had applied to Joan's entrails and heart, he had not found it possible to burn them or reduce them to ashes."[69]

Jean Massieu confirms Isambart. He told the tribunal: "I heard from Jean Fleury, the bailiff's clerk and scribe, how the executioner had told him that when the body was burnt in the flames and reduced to ashes her heart remained intact and full of blood."[70]

The pure vessel cannot, in the last analysis, be smashed; nothing can prevail against it. The image of Joan's unconsumed heart became a new touchstone, of her integrity, her incorruptibility, her charity, her love for God and God's love for her. The Jesuit Fronton-du-Duc, who wrote a play about her for the Jesuit university at Pont-à-Mousson in Lorraine in 1589, apostrophised her heart in the faggots:

> *As one sometimes sees amid a sheaf of brambles*
> *The blush of a red rose's folded petals.*[71]

When Joan was finally beatified in 1894, the papal decree introducing the cause of her full canonisation described the miracles that attended Joan's death:

> With the name of Jesus ever on her lips, she died the precious death of the just, distinguished, as the story runs, by signs from Heaven. . . . Men then began to repent of the deed, and in the very place of execution to venerate the sanctity of the Maid; so that, to prevent the people from possessing themselves of her relics, her

> heart, uninjured by the flames and running with blood, was thrown together with her ashes, into the river.[72]

No witness had claimed personally to have seen Joan's heart. Symbolism had the better of realism.

René Char (b. 1907), the French poet and Resistance fighter who is still writing, published after the war seventy-two copies of a tiny prose poem. It was printed privately on beautiful handmade white-paper squares in large type. He opens with a question about the nature of Joan's holiness, avows that he would have indeed fought beside her, and then, drifting naturally on the incarnational current that makes the body of the holy a dominant question, he describes Joan:

> Waist in a vertical rectangle like a plank of walnut. Long, strong arms. Late romanesque hands. No buttocks. They tightened up as soon as the decision to go to war was made. Her face was the very opposite of thankless. An extraordinary power of emotion. A living mystery made human. No breasts. The chest has overcome them. Two hard ends only. A high, flat stomach. A back like the trunk of an apple tree, smooth, and well defined, wiry, rather than muscly, but hard as the horn of a ram. Her feet! After traipsing in the wake of a well-fed flock, we see them suddenly arise, beat their heels into the flanks of warhorses, kick over the enemy, trace the wandering site of the bivouac, and in the end suffer all the ills suffered by a soul imprisoned in a dungeon and then brought to the stake.
>
> Here is what it gives us in the form of *earth:* "Green earth of Lorraine–Earth clinging to battles and sieges–Holy earth of Rheims–Dead, dread earth of the dungeon–Earth of polluted things –Earth seen *below* under the wood of the pyre–Earth in flames– Earth perhaps all blue in her horrified gaze–Dust."[73]

Char called this illumination *Jeanne qu'on Brûla Verte.* Her body is green wood; at the end it is dust. From that beginning to that end, however detailed and apparently biographical or circumstantial the description of her person by the witnesses of her day and those who came later, the journey's course is prescribed, its rhumbs traced according to the central Christian mystery, the sacrifice of the Lamb, the destruction of the innocent, followed by rebirth and triumph. It is the symbolic body of Joan that matters, that has mattered, to the people who want her for their own. The indelible outline, traced by Christian sacramentalism, makes the colour of her eyes irrelevant; but the inde-

structibility of her heart is all-important. Even when the author evoking Joan's body stands outside the immediate Christian tradition, does not profess faith or claim that a divine spirit truly possessed her frame, the fundamental pattern of the Christian sacrifice is there. She was virgin, she was tormented, she was destroyed, but her triumph was a triumph of her frail flesh, as well as of her redoubtable spirit.