

# The Return of Joan of Arc: The Maiden's Adventures in French Comics / Le Retour de Jeanne d'Arc: Les Aventures de la Pucelle dans les BDs

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## REPORT INFO

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## ABSTRACT

*Despite her status as arguably the most represented historical French female figure in French bandes dessinées, Joan of Arc and her depiction in 9<sup>th</sup>-art works has never been the subject of a full-length analysis. My work on Joan of Arc's representation in French bandes dessinées explores the unique function France's most celebrated medieval heroine plays in the country's popular cultures. In addition to a complete survey of the BD corpus and the conventions typically used to depict Joan, I give special attention to cases where she functions as an iconoclastic figure who challenges the enduring culturally gendered limitations placed on women and nationalist mythology as well as the restrictive conventions of 9<sup>th</sup>-art artistic forms related to gender, history, and storytelling.*

## 1- Introduction

Since entering the political stage in spring 1429, Joan of Arc has been a constant figure in the French cultural imagination and, arguably, an internationally recognized icon since at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Critical inquiry into Joan is so substantial that we now speak of “Johannic Studies” and keeping track of artistic creations and scholarship dedicated to the heroine has become its own industry. The most recent bibliography of creative works and historical writings on Joan includes over 1500 entries and between 2012 and 2017, two hefty dictionaries dedicated to Joan of Arc have appeared. Scholarship dedicated to the medieval heroine can be roughly divided into two main categories: historical studies dedicated to her life and reception studies concerned with her remembrance over the centuries. This project contributes to this second category. Unlike much of the reception scholarship that is often attuned to historical inaccuracies and her frequent role as a nostalgic champion of a French Catholic nationalism or as a model of the Christian martyr, this project examines her reinvention

not as an icon but an iconoclastic figure through reference to a corpus of 40 French comics addressed to readers of all ages.

### 1- .Experimental details

My summer stay in Orléans allowed me to take full advantage of the Centre de Jeanne d'Arc library, where I worked with the most extensive collection of Johannic BD. Given that no bibliography nor study of this corpus exists, I drew heavily on their institutional knowledge to begin my work that built on my earlier writing on two recent BD. Moving from the simplest task of producing a bibliography based on their holdings, I began by generating a bibliography and categorizing (according to target audience age) the available corpus. I also produced an extensive archive of photo reproductions for future study since many of the center's holdings are not found elsewhere, especially outside of France. The bulk of my fellowship was dedicated to reading and analyzing this unique and rare corpus so as to generate and then apply a means of categorizing the content. By mid-fellowship, I had identified several axes that

would highlight the different approaches to the subject matter. They included: generic affiliations/influences (historical, alternative fiction, science fiction, pornographic, etc.), ideological (religious, political, nationalistic, feminist, etc.), cross-pollination between creative works (especially among Johannic BD), and the influence of BD character and media conventions dictating representation of girls and women, in terms of visual depiction, character development, and storyline, on the depiction and account of Joan of Arc.

## **2- Results and discussion**

This methodic treatment of the corpus and the categorization rubric adopted revealed a number of interesting points that speak to the diversity that marks this subgenre of Johannic creative production. It also brought to light the important and unacknowledged influence of BD conventions on works dedicated to Joan. On one hand, the corpus represents an extraordinary case study for examining the current interest in comics as a promising medium for pedagogical work on history because the titles span the full spectrum of the field (from the "origins" of comics often linked to turn-of-the-century Epinal broadsheets to the present influence of Japanese manga. It also laid bare the creative limitations placed on her story that range from a genre that is ultimately conservative when engaging with historical topics and especially when imagining the lives of women. Of this corpus, only a handful spoke to innovative treatment of these topics. The conflation of these two matters signals the approach my study will take as I move forward. Whereas I had intended to limit my work on this subject to discussing Joan of Arc in comics, I have since appreciated that the best and most valuable contribution to the field would be to enlarge my scope to look more deeply into how comics that coalesce around the Middle Ages and women have developed over time.

## **3- Conclusion**

What started as a project focused solely on Joan of Arc's representation in the 9th art has turned out to be an entryway into a larger research project centered on the history, generic

limitations, but also promise of comics as a way to rethink our relationship to the past and to the long history of popular cultures restrictive portrayal of women in what is becoming one of the most successful creative genres. To be able to explore this larger topic through the case study of Joan of Arc is of particular importance because she stands alone as a historical girl/woman who is the subject of a larger number of BDs. And yet, the telling of her story is deeply anchored in generic limitations, popular conservative thinking, as well as the general lack of both BD creators and readers interested in the question of the long history of women. Casting a spotlight on these realities will not only bring a new critical perspective to BD scholarship but will highlight through study of a handful of innovative, avant-garde works a counternarrative in which the medium stands as a voice of progressive thinking on gender issues as well as our relationship to the past.

## **4- Perspectives of future collaborations with the host laboratory**

When I initially applied for an extended stay at the host laboratory, I was eager to work with colleagues at the Université d'Orléans and elsewhere in France who are currently involved in the critical study of the intersection of history writing and comics. Unfortunately, given that my sojourn occurred during the summer months, I was not able to take advantage of the ongoing research groups. I would love to have this opportunity in the future. One of the greatest assets provided by Studium concerns the funds and support to organize workshops, conferences, and research groups. Such work speaks directly to my interests. A series of events centered on the representation of women in comics would not only further my own research but advance the field of BD Studies as well.

## **5- Articles published in the framework of the fellowship**

I was in the final stages of writing my forthcoming monograph, *Joan of Arc: A French Cultural Icon* (forthcoming May 2025) at the outset of my fellowship. I was able to incorporate some of the work conducted during

my time into the closing chapter of that work. I plan to continue work on the BD project this summer with the ambition of completing a chapter focused solely on the scholarship undertaken during Summer 2024 while in Orléans. I will use this work to apply for a new round of grants and to seek out a publisher for a book-length study on historical women in French comics.

## 6- Acknowledgements

I am especially grateful to the Centre de Jeanne d'Arc for providing me unlimited access to their resources. The curator, Virginie Chevalot, was especially generous with her knowledge and her willingness to allow me access outside of regular hours.

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