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Womanhood, Liminality, and Christian Iconography: Augusta Webster's "Jeanne D'Arc"

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Abstract. Joan of Arc has been a figure of contradictions: initially a lowly maid, she remains one of the most significant individuals in French history. In the context of nineteenth-century literature, Joan of Arc attracted much attention from English poets by becoming a character who transcended the boundaries of time, place, and gender. The present article explores how in her dramatic monologue "Jeanne D'Arc" (1866) Augusta Webster (1837–1894) reinterprets the image of Joan of Arc to illustrate a complex interplay between women's submission and emancipation. A close reading of the text, supported by the anthropological notions of liminal space as well as Christian iconography, shows how Webster perceptively addresses women's experiences of isolation, self-assertion, and self-sacrifice. On the whole, her nineteenth-century reinterpretation of Joan of Arc exemplifies the creative use of Christian and, specifically, Catholic motifs to discuss issues relevant to the Victorian audience.

Key words: Victorian poetry, Augusta Webster, Joan of Arc, medievalism, liminality, Christianity

Introduction

The image of Joan of Arc permeated European consciousness and was keenly reinterpreted in British literature and art. Historically, the Maid of Orleans was honoured as a defender of the French nation during the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453), playing a significant role in the siege of Orleans and the coronation of Charles VII of France. Despite her successes as an army leader, in May 1431, she was accused of heresy, found guilty, and burned at the stake. Apart from the depictions of her involvement in historical events, the motif of Joan's double roles (as a woman and military leader) remains eagerly revisited. In present-day culture, Joan of Arc exemplifies a female leader who transcends

the expectations about the established gender roles¹ while in the nineteenth century, she was recognised for the ideals of freedom, courage, and humility, especially in the context of women's emancipation.

In the cultural setting of the Victorian period, the representations of Joan of Arc indicate a complex negotiation between the established delineations such as men/women and submission/agency, which were particularly accentuated by contemporary gender ideology.² Instead of the conventional presentation of the Maid of Orleans as a military hero or a madwoman, nineteenth-century women writers perceived her as a girl at the threshold of a painful experience. In Felicia Hemans' poem "Joan of Arc, in Rheims" (published in *Records of Woman: With Other Poems* in 1828), Joan of Arc is portrayed as the one who strives to reconcile the glory of war with her longing for domesticity. As Hemans writes towards the end of the poem:

She unbound
The helm of many battles from her head,
And, with her bright locks bow'd to sweep the ground,
Lifting her voice up, wept for joy, and said,—
"Bless me, my father, bless me! and with thee,
To the still cabin and the beechen-tree,
Let me return!" (Hemans, ll. 81–87).

Hemans cleverly juxtaposes the idea of an experienced military hero ("she unbound/the helm of many battles") with the image of weariness and the ultimate desire for home ("let me return"), thus showing the aspect of domesticity that is connected with comfort, the closeness of the family, and stillness of everyday life.

Similarly to Hemans who discusses the dilemma between domesticity and desire for glory, Augusta Webster (1837–1894), an English poet, translator, and women's rights advocate, complicates the relationship between power and submission. In her early dramatic monologue "Jeanne D'Arc" (1866), Webster reinterpreted the image of Joan of Arc, addressing women's predicament in the borderline state between independence and submission. Through that reinterpretation, Webster demonstrates that the story of Victorian female self-assertion is not always connected with triumphant empowerment but it involves a complex mediation between fear, fortitude, and quiet heroism.

In the following article, I analyse how Webster represents Joan of Arc through the combination of traditional Christian iconography and the notion of liminal space. In fact, such an approach allows for a more nuanced interpretation which discloses the complexity of the female experience and how the choice between rebellion and humility may be problematic in the light of Victorian women's liberation. Despite the pronounced

¹ The 2022 Globe Theatre's production *I, Joan* (Josephine 2022) stirred major controversy due to the contemporary representation of Joan as a non-binary character who uses pronouns they/them and uses chest binders.

² Admittedly, the Pre-Raphaelites noticed and recurrently emphasised Joan of Arc's ever-changing roles. In Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Joan of Arc Kisses the Sword of Deliverance* (1863), Joan resembles an androgynous knight; in John Everett Millais' *Joan of Arc* (1865), she epitomises the co-existence of maidenhood and chivalry, whereas, in Anne Louise Swynnerton's *Joan of Arc* (the painting also known as *Faith*) (1880 (1907?)), she personifies the spiritual warfare.

uneasiness with Catholicism in the nineteenth century (particularly in terms of the invocation of the saints and the veneration of the Virgin Mary) (Norman 1968, 2), Webster uses numerous images of Mariolatry, female martyrology, and the Christian concept of fortitude to discuss Jeanne's struggle with the differentiation between power and submission. As the close reading of the poem suggests, the negotiation between self-assertion and humbleness occurs in the liminal space which constitutes a powerful platform for women's self-recognition. Moreover, the text exemplifies the idea of the feminised Christ in Victorian poetry which allowed nineteenth-century women to make sense of their unequivocal status in the patriarchal order (Melnik 2003, 131–132). Therefore, such a combination of themes, connected with Protestant Christianity (the feminised Christ) and Catholicism (Mariolatry and the invocations of female martyrs), reveal Webster's skilful application of the religious tropes to address the mid-Victorian issues of female empowerment and self-definition.

My reading of Webster's dramatic monologue is supplemented by the existing literary criticism and comes into dialogue with it. Clare Broome Saunders' collection *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism* and her thesis *Re-reading the Legend: Medievalism as a Discourse of Empowerment in the Work of Women Writers and Artists, circa 1830–1900* provide an overview of Joan's impact on British literature and art in the context of the Victorian discourses on medievalism. The image of Joan of Arc is also discussed in terms of the split between the speaker and auditors and how that divergence constitutes the identity of the speaking persona (Helen Luu's thought-provoking article "A Matter of Life and Death: The Auditor-Function of the Dramatic Monologue"). Nonetheless, despite the general fascination with the image of Joan of Arc, few studies have considered a detailed analysis of the poetic revisions, particularly in the oeuvre of women writers in the Victorian period. My interpretation sees Webster's text as a complex and perplexing narrative of women's empowerment; paradoxically, that empowerment comes not with a rebellion against the patriarchal order but with a quiet acceptance of one's fate. Such reading of the poem substantiates a remarkable variety and diversity of narratives about female experience, including the stories about women whose seeming meekness is a source of strength, not a weakness. Indeed, Webster's Jeanne illustrates a type of woman who appears not to bend under the pressure of social expectations but is willing to accept the consequences of her decisions, even at the cost of death. In Webster's poem, that recognition takes place in the context of liminal space.

Liminality, Women's Narratives, and Joan of Arc

The concept of liminal space constantly reverberates throughout literary history. The term itself derives from the Latin word *limen* (threshold), denoting the transitional aspect of human experience (Thomassen 2014, 4) and, as Thomassen argues, liminality does not only exist "in the in-between of a passage" but it also exposes the dilemma between the "potentially unlimited freedom" and a "peculiar type of unsettling situation in which nothing really matters" (2014, 1–2). As a result, Thomassen claims that the liminal space constitutes both the root of human experience and the rite of passage which he links with the process of "going through something" (2014, 5). In other words, liminality allows for the deep exploration of one's needs and desires, constituting a space in which the individual undergoes a dramatic and, very often, necessary transformation.

The notion of the in-between state resurfaces in nineteenth-century British literature and art, especially in the narratives of transgressive women (Borham-Puyal 2020, 13). In such renditions, the hiatus carries a transformative force for female characters, particularly in the experience of adolescence, marriage, and pregnancy. Contrary to Thomassen, Miriam Borham-Puyal associates liminality with an exclusion, indicating that “women who defy societal norms as they become detached, separated from the community in a preliminal phase, and later develop a liminal subjecthood while dwelling on the threshold, writing new roles and stories for themselves that become visible for their readership, imagining new possibilities that might finally become assimilated into the total society” (2020, 16).

In light of that framework, Joan of Arc fits perfectly into the concept of a liminal figure because of her suspension between the categories. Her roles hover between stereotypically male and female; she is a peasant by birth but is raised into nobility due to her role in the war; she functions primarily as a spiritual leader yet she is physically present on the battlefield. In effect, she cannot be pigeonholed straightforwardly because as a woman in armour and a commoner who rises above her state, she never candidly rejects her needs for security, family, and domesticity. Furthermore, the transitional character of Joan is implied in her name – historically, Joan called herself “Jehanne la Pucelle,” *pucelle*, meaning both the innocence of a young virgin and “a passage of time, a changing state” (Saunders 2009, 82). Given that, such identification stresses Joan’s in-betweenness: being a girl, she is also ready to change her marital status by becoming a wife. As Marina Warner aptly notes, the word *la pucelle* was socially neutral, referring to a girl of every social class. Admittedly, for Joan that meant “cancel[ing] out her background, without denying it” (Warner 2013, 13) which implies Joan’s courage to abandon her place in the established social order: she simultaneously conceals her background but does not disown it, highlighting the ambiguity of her status.

Truly, the theme of continuous suspension between categories is utilised in nineteenth-century women’s poetry and the artistic commentary on the female experience of exclusion, self-definition, and self-recognition. In the case of Webster’s Joan of Arc, these shifts of roles and perspectives do not end with the vision of glorious and easy victory but with moments of anxiety, confusion, and unexpected glimmers of hope.

Women in the Liminal Space: Augusta Webster’s “Jeanne d’Arc”

The incongruous depictions of femininity were of primary importance for nineteenth-century women writers, particularly in the texts by Augusta Webster. Her writings explored various facets of womanhood and women’s social dilemmas, whether concerning family (“Medea in Athens”), middle-class boredom (“Circe”) or poverty (“A Castaway”), giving voice to women regardless of their social background. As the review of *Dramatic Studies* from *The Reader* (June 2, 1866) argues, Webster’s poems were deemed “powerful”, “original”, with “passionate earnestness” as “they possess ... many of the highest attributes of poetry, and have a strong weird beauty” (qtd. in Sutphin 2000, 403). Through her dramatic monologues, Webster communicates the psycho-scapes of her complex protagonists in order to empathise with these characters, not condemn them. In her oeuvre, the poet does not shy away from the difficult topics for her contemporaries; yet, to avoid unnecessary controversies, she mediates them through

historical reinterpretations. As “Jeanne D’Arc” shows, the poet used the Victorian fascination with medievalism, which “coincided with a time of contemporary social, political and religious unrest that, for many, made the Middle Ages preferable to a nineteenth-century present” (Saunders 2009, 3). Therefore, the Victorians perceived the Middle Ages as the Golden Age of simplicity, in contrast to the complicated, industrialised, and chaotic nineteenth century (Saunders 2009, 4). However, as Saunders rightly points out, while the “male” version of medievalism idealises the Middle Ages, the Victorian “female medievalism” aimed to “highlight and critique what they [women writers] viewed as a revival of past errors in the present age” (2009, 6). Webster’s medieval-inspired reinterpretation of Joan of Arc refers to Saunders’ analysis but I would argue that Webster’s text appears more subtle since the narrative in “Jeanne D’Arc” is character-driven, not propelled by lyrical situation. The critique of the past mentioned by Saunders is not conveyed directly in the poem since Webster focuses primarily on the emotional rollercoaster of the protagonist, not the social implications of Jeanne’s trial.

“Jeanne D’Arc” was published in the 1866 collection called *Dramatic Studies* which was inspired by Robert Browning’s *Dramatis Personae* (1864). As Patricia Rigg remarks, Webster admired Browning which is symptomatic in her choice of themes and poetic forms (2015, 1). Moreover, Webster emulated his style, especially in the “recognition of the efficacy of monodrama” which aims at stressing the constant fluctuations of the speaker’s emotional state as they are revealed consciously to the auditors (Rigg 2015, 2). Indeed, she uses dramatic monologue as a tool to articulate opinions and stories that would be otherwise silenced³; however, the revelation of feelings in Webster’s poems is often unintentional and profoundly influenced by the heat of the moment. Following the tradition of dramatic monologue, Webster’s Jeanne is allowed to openly express her anxieties about her being sentenced to death and to come to terms with her predicament. Still, in the case of “Jeanne D’Arc,” it is not an attempt to persuade silent listeners or manipulate them but to acknowledge one’s own dire situation. In the end, Webster’s Joan of Arc calmly recognises the inevitability of death and her sacrifice.

The whole poem heavily relies on the spatial liminality that operates on the opposition between being free and the sense of enclosure. The poem starts with Jeanne being captured by the English in the battle of Compiègne (Webster 1866, l. 9)⁴ and the opening section reflects both a psychological and a physical sense of suspension. In the study on the intersection between imprisonment, women, and emotions, Alison Liebling maintains that “[w]omen import higher levels of vulnerability into prison” as well as they “have stronger links with their pasts and with their lives outside” (2009, 21). In a similar vein, Yvonne Jewkes and Ben Laws make a comparison between the prison system and liminal space, indicating that imprisonment resembles the “middle phase of any ritualised

³ In her comparison between Browning and Webster, Patricia Rigg purports that the ultimate joy of a dramatic monologue lies in uncovering the irony and misinterpretation of the speaking I. As Rigg writes, “Our enjoyment of participating in the monologues ... is dependent on this process of ferreting out through what they say precisely how they are misrepresenting themselves; on the other hand, our enjoyment of participating in the monodrama ... is dependent on our recognition of the inclusive nature of his self-conscious theatricality that plays itself out on an inner stage” (2015, 4).

⁴ All subsequent passages of Webster’s “Jeanne D’Arc,” unless otherwise indicated, come from: Augusta Webster, *Dramatic Studies*.

process, during which the individuals involved are understood to be ‘no longer’ and simultaneously also ‘not yet’ ” (2021, 395).

In the poetical setting created by Webster, situating Jeanne in prison, in the middle of the night, and waiting for the verdict, foreshadows a more complex exploration of a psychological struggle enacted in a liminal space. Accordingly, the solitude of the prison coincides with the appearance of the visions that exercise a pernicious influence over her identity and emotional stability (Webster, ll. 92–109). Yet, what strikes in Jeanne’s utterance is a deep yearning to become a humble servant of God (“show me which is truth” (Webster, l. 92)) as she responds to the divine calling without hesitation (“Oh! my brave glory! yes I beat them back,” (Webster, l. 103)). Paradoxically, Jeanne confesses that her true destination was to fight the Englishmen, not being a home-maker and the guardian of the hearth. Indeed, she struggles to resolve the dilemma between her traditional role as a woman, a wife, and a mother to substitute these roles with accepting her “higher destiny” (Webster, l. 96) as a warrior and leader of the army. Perhaps surprisingly, Jeanne sees that her home is a haven for her – a safe one, but stifling and oppressively quiet (Webster, l. 97). In that sense, the recognition of her dual role mirrors that of Joseph Campbell’s initial stages of the hero’s journey. According to Campbell’s (2020) framework which utilises the concepts of liminal space, at first, the hero is called to experience the unknown; later on, the hero refuses to take part in it. By the same token, Jeanne is convinced by divine visions to take the lead; yet, contrary to the hero’s journey, she immediately agrees to the mission. After the hasty acceptance, she confronts a crucial dilemma of whether to be safe but bored or to embark on the journey of glory but ultimate sacrifice. Jeanne chooses the latter but her decision is not coldly calculated but driven by confusion and uncertainty.

The emotional turmoil is not only represented in terms of narrative tension but is also reflected in the genre and language. In her article “A Matter of Life and Death: The Auditor-Function of the Dramatic Monologue,” Helen Luu convincingly argues that Webster’s use of a dramatic monologue enhances the understanding of Joan’s predicament, claiming that the poem identifies a problem of a silent auditor whose lack of response shatters Jeanne’s confidence in recognising her imprisonment as the justified one. Luu posits that the relationship between the speaking persona (Joan of Arc) and silent auditors is not a matter of persuasive trick from the side of Joan. Rather, it becomes “a matter of life and death” (2016, 21) as it signifies the protagonist’s desperate attempt to connect, feel understood, and create a stable identity at this critical moment. As the text shows, Jeanne’s uneasiness with her roles is conveyed through the extensive use of conversational style and it is loaded with exclamations which reflect the eagerness and overall instability of Jeanne’s perception. Her speech fluctuates constantly – while discussing political or military matters, her language is commanding and decisive (“TO me—to me! Dunois! La Hire! Old Daulon” (Webster, l. 1)), even on the verge of being boastful:

Yes, so I set the crown upon his head
 In sacred Rheims. Oh noble! how the crowd,
 Eager to kiss my vesture, touch me, throngs
 Around me, me a simple peasant girl
 Made first of women and of warriors
 In all our France! (Webster, ll. 104–108).

Nevertheless, Jeanne's more proud stance fades as her visions appear. During the prophecies, her speech changes dramatically into an insecure and hesitant flow of questions (twenty-four questions in the poem). Usually, these questions are left without definite answers, evoking a sense of indecision and second thoughts. Jeanne cries for the saints' responses and begs them to stand by her; however, they remain silent. Thus, the lack of answers from the visions suggests that they govern Jeanne, not the other way around. Although Luu suggests that "the saints, like the soldiers, might merely be the effect of a mad dream" (2016, 06), the core issue with Jeanne's speech is the lack of response from either saints or soldiers; as Luu rightly comments, "While Jeanne's cries to both are interchangeable—"help me," "hear me," "save me," "rescue me," "stay with me" (ll. 11, 31, 32, 14, 54)—their responses are identical: both disappear" (2016, 26). Consequently, because of the silence of the saints, Jeanne cannot constitute her identity and the moment she asks the saints for advice, they disappear which adds to her further confusion about her own perception. In addition, Webster applies numerous enjambments in the most surprising moments within the narrative to show how Joan's speech acts affect the question of her life and death:

I thought I fought before the walls of Paris
 And did not conquer—Oh the agony
 Even to dream of that first shamed defeat!—
 And then the dream was shifted: I was thronged
 By furious enemies before the gate
 Of Compiègne, and taken prisoner! (Webster, ll. 35–40)

Usually, the enjambments serve as a linguistic tool to reveal doubt and the lack of command over language whereas the en-dashes and grammatical pauses cause tension which, in theory, should be released in the next line. Yet, this is not the case in "Jeanne D'Arc." By dividing one meaningful line into two verses, Webster delays the expression of meaning, signifying the process of making sense of the utterance at the moment of speaking. Moreover, the poem contains several repetitions which serve not as the confirmation of her stance but rather as the evidence of a growing sense of incredulity, as if convincing herself that the experience she encounters is genuine. Ultimately, these poetic devices demonstrate how the language applied by Webster neatly reflects Jeanne's ongoing emotional chaos which she tries to navigate.

In addition to the linguistic representation of Jeanne's mental distress, Webster reimagines her character as a liminal woman, oscillating between masculinity and femininity. Some historians link the trope of a woman warrior with cross-dressing in medieval times, done for political purposes.⁵ Even though nineteenth-century British painters drew inspiration in representing Joan of Arc as a woman dressed as a warrior or an androgynous figure,⁶ in Webster's text, Jeanne assumes different roles, both equally significant. Initially, she resembles a general, driven by the fervour to fight – her speech

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the cross-dressing in medieval times see: Judith M. Bennett and Shannon McSheffrey, "Early, Erotic and Alien: Women Dressed as Men in Late Medieval London."

⁶ For the analysis of the images of Joan of Arc see: Claire Saunders, "The End of Chivalry?: Joan of Arc and the Nineteenth-Century Woman Writer" *Women Writers and Medievalism*.

is very abrupt and sudden, with “a colloquial diction, immediacy of speech and action” (Luu 2016, 22):

To me — to me! Dunois! La Hire! Old Daulon,
 Thou at the least shouldst stand by me — Oh haste!
 The soul of France is in me, rescue me! —
 Turn back the flyers — Cowards, have you learned
 These English can be conquered, yet you flee? (Webster, ll. 1–5)

Jeanne’s early response is that of the commanding figure who demands to be freed from prison, calling her brothers in arms “cowards” (Webster, l. 4) who flee the battlefield. Such a beginning of the poem implies the speaking persona’s righteous belief in the mission she needs to fulfil, viewing herself as a saviour of the French nation. Given that, Jeanne’s speech could assert her initial linguistic powers and authority (Luu 2016, 22). However, the vehement calls for action are followed by a sudden sense of vulnerability, both physical (“Oh! I am wounded! (Webster, l. 6)) and psychological (“save me!” (Webster, l. 15)). In what follows, the early linguistic authority is substituted with a “failed speech and failed communication” (Luu 2016, 23):

And I without, alone!
 Open, the foe is on me. Help! Oh now
 I feel I am a woman and ’mong foes!
 Oh save me!— (Webster, ll. 12–15).

Webster captures Jeanne’s conflicting experience already in the opening lines of the monologue, showing that she encompasses the zealous strength of her leadership:

Back, to the fort! This once we needs must fly
 In, in!” (Webster, ll. 10–11)

Yet, there is also fear that is associated with being alone in her mission:

They are closing on us—in!—Oh Christ!
 The gate drops down! And I without, alone!
 Open, the foe is on me. Help! Oh now
 I feel I am a woman and ’mong foes!
 Oh save me!— (Webster, ll. 11–15).

Surprisingly, at the moment when the morale seems low, Jeanne assumes her role as a woman (Webster, l. 14), indicating sudden shifts between stereotypically masculine and feminine roles. Therefore, the opening remarks prove the liminal status of Jeanne whose domestic and military positions constantly intertwine, leaving her suspended between the reality of war and powerlessness. Despite the commands, her authoritative speech does not make any difference because of the lack of response from the auditors (Luu 2016, 24). In the end, Jeanne faces her internal conflict without human company but with the spiritual support of female saints, martyrs, and the Virgin Mary.

“Jeanne D’Arc” between Protestant and Catholic Iconography

Although the key theme in the poem is the protagonist’s internal conflict that is enacted in the liminal space, Webster’s Jeanne connects deeply with Christian iconography. On that account, her depiction neatly corresponds to Julie Melnyk’s argument about the feminisation of Christ in Victorian literature, emphasising a close connection between women’s roles and virtues with Christ’s power and authority (2003, 131). More specifically, nineteenth-century writers⁷ examined complex ways in which women brought up in a Protestant tradition that rejected the cult of Mary could instead identify themselves with the figure of Jesus. Webster’s poem subscribes to the concept proposed by Melnyk; yet, the lyrical Jeanne also identifies herself with the Virgin Mary and female saints. Thus, Webster incorporates two distinctive iconographies: the Protestant one, primarily connected with the figure of Christ, and the Catholic one, with a particular focus on the Virgin Mary and women martyrs.

This dynamic is realised in Webster’s extensive references to the image of the Virgin Mary and female saints. While in prison, Jeanne desperately appeals to Heaven, asking specifically for the saints’ assistance:

Oh save me!—
Oh you blessed saints of Heaven,
Do you come down to me again? You smile
A wondrous holiness, ineffable.
Oh what a brightness stars upon your brows! (Webster, ll. 15–19)

As the later passages of the poem reveal, the protagonist recognises the status of the Virgin Mary as the Mother of God and her position as a “Lady of Heaven” (Webster, l. 88). Significantly, Webster’s prayer-like address to Mary reflects Jeanne’s submission to the ideals of womanhood – she is obedient, patient, and accepting of her fate:

Lady of Heaven, it is thou!
Oh! Mary-Mother, blessed among women (Webster, ll. 88–89).

The image of dutifulness is complemented by the image of Mary as *Mater Dolorosa* (Webster ll. 90–91). The medieval motif of “Stabat Mater Dolorosa,” the Virgin Mary standing under Jesus’s cross, lamenting her son’s death, seems to be modernised in Webster’s poem since the image of the broken Mary does not evoke the image of helplessness. As the poem’s ending tells, it also signifies the possibility of overcoming the fear of death and the sacrifice Jeanne has to make mirrors that of the Virgin Mary who had to give up her son and see him dying. Therefore, what seems to transpire from Webster’s text is a strangely encouraging promise that Jeanne’s sacrifice would not go in vain.

What is more, the image of a beautiful but silent and passive Virgin Mary is contrasted with female saints who sacrificed themselves for the cause. Webster mentions

⁷ As Purton informs in her introduction to “Tennyson and the Figure of Christ,” nineteenth-century writers were interested in the link between the gender anxieties of the period and how the representations of Christ reflect these contemporary uncertainties (2003, 85).

St. Catherine (l. 30), whose martyrdom resembles that of Joan of Arc (both were considered the ideals of virginal purity, and both of them were thrown into prison and subjected to torture). Similarly, Joan appeals to St. Margaret (l. 31) whose Christian faith was the reason for the rejection by her pagan family which, ultimately, led to the martyr's death. While waiting in prison, Margaret was haunted by the devil who manifested in the image of a dragon she defeated with the sign of a cross. By recalling the female saints, Webster's Jeanne seeks soothing and consolation in her dire predicament and searches for an explanation of her situation both in terms of her position as a woman and a martyr. To make sense of her experience, she compares herself to these female saints whose purity and resistance could be treated not as a weakness but as a source of strength.

Oddly enough, the poem does not propose either the vision of optimistic empowerment or impending doom. Instead, Webster frames the entire monologue as Jeanne's tug of war between acceptance of her fate as a martyr, and the rejection of comfort provided by home. Joan calls for heavenly assistance when the visions of destruction frighten her:

Oh help me from myself and these mad dreams.
Oh hear me, I have had most fearful visions (Webster, ll. 33–34).

The passage distinctly indicates the precedence of the material over the impenetrable which makes Jeanne question her senses (Luu 2016, 26). Above all, her recurrent visions serve primarily as the saintly intervention in preparing her to accept her own fate: a premonition of France's downfall, (Webster, ll. 52–56), her being ridiculed and tried by her fellow Frenchmen (Webster, ll. 122–133), and her death as a martyr (Webster, ll. 167–175) as all of them highlight that Jeanne's mystical experience is unwelcomed and distressing, but necessary for developing her mental strength.

At the end of the poem, Webster plays with the mediaeval trope of *psychomachia*, the fight for the soul between the forces of good and evil (Roberts 1998, 525). As Saunders claims, "most striking is Jeanne's humanity, both in her vanity at remembering proudly how she was exulted by the public, and in her subsequent humility in her shame at this "arrogant delight" when she is "a mean her-wench from the fields, what more / But made God's instrument" (l. 34)" (2005, 37). Though horrifying, Jeanne's initial prophecies were not questioned in terms of their heavenly source; yet, the last premonition especially terrifies her since she almost makes a deal with the devil to save her own life. Truly, the episode in Jeanne's experience echoes that of St. Margaret's:

They say
I commune with the Fiend and he has led
My way so high. Yes, if he could do this,
And I, deserted as I am of God,
Might cease to war with him and buy my life,
And greatness—and revenge!— (Webster, ll. 176–181).

Jeanne feels deserted by God at the moment of ultimate trial. The aforementioned section also exhibits another similarity since the situation resembles that of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Like Christ who prays at the moment of despair, Jeanne starts having doubts about the meaning of pain and ponders on the validity of suffering. She

immediately acknowledges the satanic temptation to disobey God because of a deeply rooted fear of death. Instantly, she asks God for forgiveness:

Oh God! forgive
 I sin. Oh deadliest sin of all my life!
 Oh! pardon! pardon! Oh! have I condemned
 My soul to everlasting fire by this?
 My brain whirls—whirls—Forgive! (Webster, ll. 182–186)

Jeanne feels guilty of even thinking about disobeying God's will and she simultaneously makes a distinction between the soul devoted to the mystical, and the brain that belongs to the material. Being haunted by another vision of the Virgin Mary, she admits that she is terrified of death ("They will hold fast my trembling soul in death" (Webster, ll. 191–192)). In this case, mentioning the "trembling soul in death" (l. 192) echoes Victor Turner's claim that the liminal state undergoes shifts and changes; that "[t]here is an instant of pure potentiality when everything trembles in the balance." (1974, 75). Despite these nightmarish visions, she accepts her destiny and sees death as "a better home" (Webster, l. 193). Joan transgresses the boundaries of fear and steps into the realm of acceptance that she will be sacrificed (Webster, l. 195).

Given the whole poem, we may notice a captivating interplay between the images of obedience and transgression, respectively represented by the Virgin Mary and the feminised Christ.⁸ The nineteenth-century recasting of Christ as a figure mediating between the masculine and the feminine (with a strong emphasis on the feminine) follows the medieval tradition, present in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century and Julian of Norwich in the fourteenth. Therefore, the feminised image of Christ signifies the collapse of superficially created gender distinctions (Purton 2003, 104). Webster's text supports these concepts and neatly displays the relationship between Christian tradition and the liminal state. While the prevalence of mariolatrous tropes in the monologue suggests Webster's interest in the Anglo-Catholic tradition of the mid-Victorian period, the presence of these images may be treated as a testament to Webster's fidelity to Jeanne's cultural and historical background. Conversely, Jeanne's recurrent appeal to the Virgin Mary imagery indicates her adherence to the ideals of typically Victorian feminine virtues like submission, modesty or lowliness: as Jeanne claims, she remains "a simple peasant girl" (Webster, l. 107). Nevertheless, Webster also portrays Joan as a warrior and the leader of the army, showing her close affiliation with Muscular Christianity,⁹ driven by patriotism, disciplined mind, self-sacrifice, and moral duty. Webster's Jeanne is depicted as:

made first of women and of warriors
 In all our France! (Webster, ll. 108–109)

⁸ For a detailed discussion of the images of Christ in the nineteenth century, see: Elizabeth Ludlow, *The Figure of Christ in the Long Nineteenth Century* (2020).

⁹ Nineteenth century conception of Muscular Christianity served as a response to the growing effeminacy of religious congregations in the Victorian period. The movement is now associated with Charles Kingsley (1819–1875), a Broad Church pastor who aimed at showing that the physical stamina reflects the commitment to the faith. In that sense, Victorian Muscular Christianity embraced an almost chivalric code of conduct.

By and large, the poet uses both tropes as complementary parts of Jeanne's identity. In the words of Julie Melnyk: "[t]his feminised Christ is not, like Mary, like martyred female saints, merely the meek and mild, suffering and submissive bearer of feminine virtues: He is also conqueror, ruler, teacher, and, ultimately, [the] judge" (2003, 132). Hence, Webster dabbles with both traditions: from a humble girl, Joan transforms into the chivalric hero; from the meek Virgin Mary-like figure, she transforms into a Christ-like image of not only strength, and tenacity but also softness and care.

"Jeanne D'Arc" and Representing Feminine Fortitude

Jeanne's response at the end of the poem appears baffling as it could be read in contradictory ways:

And, since my death was destined with the mission,
Lord of my life, I thank Thee for my death (Webster, ll. 208–209).

Either Jeanne submits to the patriarchal order as a sign of exhaustion, or she exemplifies fortitude, one of the cardinal virtues in the Christian tradition (in addition to prudence, justice, and temperance). Usually translated as courage, fortitude strengthens one's firmness in the face of adversity and, under the influence of the Stoic writings, it also encompasses perseverance, patience, and consistency (Steele 2019, 134). In short, fortitude is the ability to choose what is right despite dire circumstances or fatal consequences.

Aristotle writes that fortitude particularly manifests itself at the moment of death. As Book III of his *Nicomachean Ethics* proposes, it is natural for a courageous person to feel anxiety before dying as it serves as proof that the individual has lived a virtuous life and, thus, life was worth living (Polansky 2014, 96–114). Webster's text works well on that assumption since Joan's final submission to God proves her being the opposite of a heretic (as she was historically accused of); in fact, she becomes the chosen one and a divine messenger (Webster, ll. 196–197). Furthermore, for Thomas Aquinas, fortitude is acquired through the rational efforts of the individual and it "regulate[s] passions of the sensory appetite so that they do not interfere with the judgements of reason about what to do" (McCluskey 2022, 262–263). Consequently, fortitude serves as a rational force within the individual and it strengthens the resolution about doing the right thing, even in the face of pain and death.

The poem's final stanza neatly illustrates the theme of fortitude in a literary text. After the poem's passionate descriptions of Jeanne's struggle with her feelings and the premonitions she had, line 195, "The dawn begins," brings a sense of quiet resolution. As the dawn signals the new beginnings, the narrative seems to slow down at the end:

The dawn begins.
How fast the hours leap on towards the end!—
Will the pain wring me long? Ah me! that fire!
They might have given me a gentler death.
The sound of footsteps! They are coming now.
No, they pass on—No, now they are at the door.

They are coming to pursue me to the last;
 They will mock me once again with promises,
 To buy from me the whiteness of my name
 And have me blast it by my own last lie.
 No matter; now they cannot bait me long.
 My God, I thank Thee who hast chosen me
 To be Thy messenger to drive them forth:
 And, since my death was destined with the mission,
 Lord of my life, I thank Thee for my death (Webster, ll. 195–209).

The majority of the poem's lyrical situation happens in the dead of night, which, symbolically, is the time when the individual questions all decisions and the sensitivity to taunting but insightful visions is further amplified (Ferber 2007, 137). Jeanne admits that she is frightened and every step she hears makes her vigilant like a wild animal:

The sound of footsteps! They are coming now.
 No, they pass on—No, now they are at the door (Webster, ll. 199–200).

Despite the suffering she has been enduring during the war, she confesses that she does not deserve such a painful death through fire (Webster, ll. 197–198) and mockery from her abusers (Webster, l. 202). She resists the temptation to believe that she will be set free if she forsakes her identity:

They will mock me once again with promises,
 To buy from me the whiteness of my name
 And have me blast it by my own last lie (Webster, l. 202–204).

Yet, in the face of death, Jeanne expresses profound gratitude for being chosen by God as the "messenger" (Webster, l. 207) which suggests an intriguing play between her ideologically angelic vision of womanhood (obedient and passive) and her angelic "mission" (Webster, l. 208) to be an active messenger of God. Regardless of the psychological upheaval that manifests itself throughout the majority of the poem, Joan faces her imprisonment, a subsequent trial, and death with a full acceptance of her fate.

Conclusions

Augusta Webster's empathy for tormented, hesitant, and conflicted women shines through her oeuvre. Specifically, "Jeanne D'Arc" is one of the early attempts to explore the grey area between female empowerment and self-sacrifice – the representation of the Maid of Orleans as a figure suspended between the past and the future, the material and the spiritual, the male and the female reveals a Victorian preoccupation with women's duties, responsibilities, and life choices. As Saunders rightly concludes, Joan's liminal presence in the nineteenth-century reworkings dismantled the established order: "[i]n an age dominated by ideas of the correct spheres of behaviour for men and women, the cross-dressing, arms-wielding Joan of Arc exerted an intriguing force, paradoxically inspiring ideas of chivalry and patriotism while at the same time rocking these concepts

to their very core” (2006, 590). We witness Jeanne’s journey when she leaves her home and recognises the call to discard her former life as a peasant girl to become the leader of the nation. Although she wishes to return to her family life, it is not possible as she has passed the point of no return. The rite of passage needs to be completed even though it leads her to the pain of martyrdom. Finally, Jeanne’s acceptance of her tragic fate is an inevitable part of her attaining the status of critical importance.

Significantly, Webster places Jeanne in the liminal space to address a captivating dynamic between traditional and progressive thought. On the one hand, Jeanne transgresses the boundaries of commonly acceptable femininity; on the other hand, her portrayal heavily relies on the extensive use of tropes connected with Christian ethics and iconography, which relate to the poet’s interest in nineteenth-century medievalism. By such an interplay between the conservative and liberal, Webster’s “Jeanne D’Arc” opens new critical perspectives, indicating an intriguing intersection of traditional anthropology, Christian ethics, and women’s revisionist poetry in the Victorian period.

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