Chapter 11

Choice: Joan of Arc Recants, Then Retracts Her Recanting

This activity corresponds to the “Joan of Arc Recants, Then Retracts Her Recanting” feature in your textbook. The following questions are designed to help you to recollect the story of Joan of Arc. Once you have answered the questions in the Comprehension section, submit your answers and move on to the questions in the Analysis and Outside Sources sections. Each section is designed to build upon the one before it, taking you deeper into the subject you are studying. After you have answered all of the questions, you will have the option of emailing your responses to your instructor.

Introduction

Joan of Arc remains one of the most fascinating figures from the last days of the Middle Ages. Her dates place her in the early period of the Renaissance, but her story of courage, devotion, and mysticism is more redolent of the spirit of the medieval period. How this young maiden, who died before she turned 20, managed to become the icon for the French and inspired a nation to throw off its occupation by the English, is caught up in the mists of legend and mystery. We know about her from contemporary sources and even have fragments from her hand. Yet Joan of Arc remains just beyond our grasp. Was she a peasant and visionary, prisoner and mystic, or soldier and saint? Just who was this young woman?

Comprehension

1. How did Joan of Arc make herself known to French leadership? How did they receive her?

2. Once Joan is allowed to lead her troops, they are spectacularly successful. The dauphin is ultimately led to Rheims, where he is crowned as king. How did Joan manage to lead the troops?

3. Why was Joan captured and executed? What purpose did her execution serve for the English and their allies?

Analysis

1. Was Joan of Arc a “last gasp” by the French, who had been on the defensive prior to Joan’s arrival at the court of the dauphin? To them, was she a warrior or an inspiration?

2. Joan’s “Voices” were at the heart of her mission, and yet they posed a major problem as she placed them above the authority of church leaders. What problem would church leaders have with Joan’s “Voices”?
3. Joan’s conviction and execution was thought to be a trumped-up event. Was she inevitably going to die for her crimes? Did the Church leaders have a choice? If Joan was a heretic, then what other alternative did they have, other than to order her to be executed for her heresy?

Outside Sources

1. The line between madness and the visionary is a fine one. Many writers have commented about the rash of visionaries during the Middle Ages, yet Joan of Arc remains as an exception. Artur Honegger’s oratorio, Joan of Arc at the Stake (Jeanne d’Arc au bûcher), with a text by Paul Claudel, is a good example of portraying the visionary qualities of Joan of Arc. Discuss the qualities that make Joan of Arc a visionary. Compare Joan of Arc to other visionaries of the Middle Ages.

2. George Bernard Shaw (Saint Joan) and Jean Anouilh (The Lark – L’alouette) are both examples of re-evaluating Joan of Arc as a young girl with both human and immortal longing within her. Discuss this re-evaluation of Joan of Arc and compare these two books.

3. For a tremendously powerful example of the impact of filmmaking, Carl Dreyfuss’ silent film, The Passion of Joan of Arc, was recently re-edited and upgraded after a pristine copy was discovered in Denmark. It is available on DVD with an optional soundtrack written for the film, entitled Voices of Light. With or without the soundtrack, the original Dreyfuss film is a powerful psychological—albeit silent with few dialogue cards—portrayal of Joan between her trial and her horrifying execution. It uses excerpts from the original transcript from the 1430 trial and of contemporary accounts, in both the film and in the soundtrack. Discuss the film’s portrayal of Joan and your reactions to the film. Why do you think Dreyfuss chose to make this a silent film? How is the impact of a silent film different from the impact of a film with audio?