Effect of the Supernatural

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During the Middle Ages, there was an increase in the amount of people interacting with the supernatural, participating in what the Church considered to be witchcraft. Most of these people were women who utilized their claim of understanding the supernatural to claim places of power in society, giving advice to rulers and popes, which frightened men in seats of power as this upset their hold on society.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the Middle Ages, men had a tight grasp of power in society and believed that they were superior to women, making sure to limit women to the domestic sphere; however, some women overcame their limitations and found themselves challenging the authority of men, like Joan of Arc. Joan of Arc utilized the message of her voices to make herself a place of power amongst French military leaders and those surrounding Charles VII, which frightened men and members of the Church as she managed to very quickly overcome various men in authority and gain public approval without a clear sign her mission was sent by God.

Society in the Middle Ages was driven by men due to the domination of the idea that men were superior to their female counterparts. Biology played a factor in the difference in power between men and women as it was believed that since men controlled the act of sex and reproduction that they were biologically superior to women. It was widely believed that men and women were not only unequal biologically, but also socially due to their functions that were assigned to them by God.[[2]](#footnote-2) It was believed that because men’s creation by God came before women’s creation that men were of higher status as God made them to mediate affairs between God and humans with women having to go to men to talk with God.[[3]](#footnote-3) In addition, men used the fact that in the *Bible* Eve deceived Adam, allowing them to place blame on women and reduce the limits of their power and influence in society. As religion continued to grow in prominence through the years, so did the power and influence of men as they created the expectations of women remaining in the home and as subordinates to men in society.

The Church played a large role in enforcing the divide between the power of men and women as the Church worked to enforce religious doctrine and remove those from society that did not follow their rules. One of the biggest problems facing the Church was those that believed in the supernatural and partook in witchcraft. During the thirteenth century, the Church began to take witchcraft and sorcery much more seriously as knowledge of learned magic, like astronomy, alchemy, and demonic magic, was on the rise in Western Europe.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Church believed that many of these new expanses of study created opportunities for scholars to fall prey to demonic messages and influence, which made the Church very cautious when it came to examining for traces of witchcraft or sorcery. In addition to fearing new types of study and magic, the Church had to also worry about the spells, blessings, potions, and talismans present in Christianity and how easily its own members could fall prey to demonic powers.[[5]](#footnote-5) Whereas the Church was very worried about these aspects where Christianity overlapped with their perceptions of witchcraft, the public gave little attention, instead focusing on the outcome of such common sorcery.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Witches were identified by the Church using three rules for indictment, which were that “1) they did not worship the Christian God; 2) they used magical powers to help or harm people; and 3) they threatened or harmed men sexually.[[7]](#footnote-7)” The third rule shows how the Church was set against women in their efforts against witchcraft, and it shows how the Church was threatened by women who found power through the supernatural. Specifically, the Church would target peasant women who were lay healers that used various charms or spells in their medicine, which the Church saw as too closely overlapping with some aspects of Christianity that utilized blessings and potions.[[8]](#footnote-8) As women were gaining such power due to their belief in the supernatural or use of charms and spells, the Church had to deal with them, usually persecuting them and putting them on trial. From these trials the Church would influence the documents that came from these trials, making sure that the accused was portrayed as a heretic with no special power to commune with God.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Church had to interfere with these documents to ensure that those who looked at the documents or heard about the trials understood that those who tried to claim they had a supernatural connection were nothing more than heretics, which was a way the Church tried to limit the spread of belief in the supernatural.[[10]](#footnote-10) Despite the work of the Church to cut down talk of the supernatural and witchcraft, more and more women came forward claiming they had a connection to God with more and more people believing them and giving them places of power among men.

Before Joan’s rise to power in the late 1420s, there were several women who came before her that challenged the expectations of men, which were Jeanne-Marie de Maillé and Marie Robine in the late 1390s. Jeanne-Marie de Maillé was a woman who was a recluse at Tours who prophesized the end of the Schism in 1396 and managed to converse with the king, Charles VI, on various occasions about visions she had and advice for the future she had for him.[[11]](#footnote-11) She gained a large following in Tours and was protected by the people there, which went against the expectations set by men and the Church as according to them and their rules, such a woman would have never had access to the king, nor been able to exercise authority in her prophecies and messages. Marie Robine was a peasant who went to Avignon on a pilgrimage in 1387 where she was miraculously healed; however, after she was healed, she began to have visions and about the papal schism.[[12]](#footnote-12) Robine managed to make her way to Queen Isabelle who she confided her visions in before returning to Avignon where she had more visions, one of which involved armor for a maiden who would deliver France from the English, which many believe pertains to Joan of Arc.[[13]](#footnote-13) This instance with Robine shows another occasion where a woman managed to use the supernatural to reach higher ranks against the expectations of men and the other limitations present against women. These women were both able to vastly expand their reach outside of their status and over men in places of higher power, but neither had the same impact as Joan who managed to rise from peasant girl to warrior working alongside the king and the top military officers in France.

Joan of Arc’s rise to power came from her mission that she would proudly proclaim to any that would listen. She believed that the voices of Saint Michael, Saint Catherine, and Saint Margaret, told her that she was to deliver France from the English and crown Charles VII as the king. As she began her mission, she took to wearing men’s clothing and cut her hair short, which went against the norm for women and the expectations of men at the time. Once she reached Charles VII and his subordinates, she was heavily questioned by various people and clerics who wanted to understand as to who gave her the authority to march up to the king and demand he follow her. As she was a prophet wearing the clothing of men and rapidly succeeding in the male dominated world, she drew the criticism from members of the Church and the English as she defied their ideals of how society should operate.[[14]](#footnote-14) Despite Joan’s successful rise to power thanks to the authority given to her by her voices, she paid for this success with her capture at Compiègne and trial where men were able to strip her of her authority through intense religious questioning and belittling of her character.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Joan’s trial exemplifies the ways in which both men and members of the Church worked against a woman who had found a way to use the supernatural as means of gaining authority amongst men. The trial was carefully crafted in a way that was procedurally and legally sound, but also slighted Joan. One of the ways that the English slighted Joan to a fair trial was by not including the reports from her home and other places she frequented on her military campaigns in the final transcripts of the trial, which was to make sure that Joan only had her word to protect herself, her word that could easily be twisted against herself.[[16]](#footnote-16) During the trial, Joan would be questioned for hours on end, with some questions being repeated to try and get more information from her, like about the sign with Charles VII. These questioning sessions were carefully crafted to try and get Joan to accidentally contradict her previous statements to prove she was nothing more than a heretic making up lies. In addition to carefully framing questions, those recording the questions and answers of Joan occasionally left out certain questions and answers as they were instructed to only include, “those words that concern the substance of the matter and that seem best to express the truth.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The structure of Joan’s trial showed just how much the members of the Church and the English wanted to catch Joan make one misstep so that they could call her out and remove her power and status amongst the public as the public generally favored her.

To try and bring down Joan’s status and public favor, the members of the Church present tried to focus on a few points in which they believed they could make Joan out to be involved in the supernatural rather than receiving instruction from God, and these points were the appearances of Saint Margaret, Saint Catherine, and Saint Michael, the fairy tree located in her village, and the mandrake she supposedly carried with her at one point. The Church had specific information on how the saints looked and appeared, and they hoped to get Joan to speak on the matter to accuse her of demonic influences if her descriptions differed from theirs, but she was very reluctant to talk about this subject as she wanted to keep her conversations with the saints private. The fairy tree was a beech tree in Joan’s village where Joan and other girls would dance and sing songs, which the clerics present argued was against the Christian faith, but Joan argued that these did not clash with the Christian faith and these songs and dance did not disprove her mission from God.[[18]](#footnote-18) This shows an instance where not only the Church is attempting to rework Joan’s power from her mission, but also an instance where the Church is trying to separate itself from the supernatural to try and eliminate any area of overlap. The mandrake that Joan was questioned about was a plant that at the time was viewed as something used to bring good luck with money, but she replied that she did not have one and there was no evidence she ever had one, which eliminated this supernatural element that the Church tried to accuse Joan of in the trial.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Another issue that men and members of the Church had with Joan was her cross dressing and the length of her hair as it defied the norm for women at the time and went against the expectations of the Church. Joan wore men’s clothing since she started her journey to meet with Charles VII and she refused to take the men’s clothing off as she believed that, “she put on men’s clothing not by counsel of a man of this world. . .nor has she done anything else, but by the command of God and the angels.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Cross dressing was heavily looked down upon as there was such a distinct borderline between the expectations of a man and the expectations of a woman, so Joan easily crossing this boundary without losing the respect of those around her was shocking to certain members of society. Joan found nothing wrong with her cross dressing, unlike the Church and men of society, and said that if God ordered her to dress like a woman, then she would.[[21]](#footnote-21) As she said that she would not change her dress unless God commanded her or to attend to Mass, the court could do nothing but continue to press her on the matter, hoping that pestering her enough might change her attitude about the matter.

As the court could not get Joan to confess that her voices and mission from God were false, they readied her sentence at the end of May. Up to this point the people’s opinion was still positive of Joan despite the work of the Church to condemn her as a heretic due to her various victories from France and her background as a peasant girl. The end of Joan’s trial was a very public matter as when her first sentence was read on May 24, 1431, it was held in a public place with a large crowd gathered, likely done by the Church to try to sway the public’s opinion of Joan.[[22]](#footnote-22) After her sentence was spoken aloud, Joan recanted and claimed that she had sinned and that her visions were false, forcing the Church to reevaluate Joan and put her back in her cell; however, on May 28, Joan took to wearing men’s garb once again and claimed that her visions were true, saying that, “she abjured and recanted to save her life.”[[23]](#footnote-23) This was another moment in Joan’s trial in which she defied the expectations of men and the Church as she went back to believing her mission and voices, knowing that she would likely be killed, rather than recanting and being able to leave.

As Joan refused to recant her voices and mission from God, she was to be burned at the stake on May 30, 1431, but before she was killed, the Church had her paraded through the streets for the public to see, prolonging the time before her imminent death.[[24]](#footnote-24) The Church made her death open to the public to make sure they understood that this woman was a heretic whose behavior and actions were influenced by demonic forces, and that they should not follow her actions. Of the people present, many were mortified by how long Joan’s death was drawn out with one man proclaiming that he wanted to throw Joan into the fire as the Church was taking so long and making the event lengthier than it needed to be.[[25]](#footnote-25) Even after Joan had been killed, the people still remembered Joan in a positive light due to her military skills and the way that she took charge against the English and managed to push them back. The efforts of the Church did not put an end to Joan as they had hoped as people still continued to talk about her and view her in a positive light, despite her being branded as a heretic, maintaining her status amongst men. As there were differing opinions about the status of Joan between the public and those who carried out the trial, another trial, the Trial of Rehabilitation, was held to retry Joan and determine if she was a heretic. In this trial, Joan was found innocent of heresy and the Church acknowledged how she was wrongly accused of demonic influence.

After Joan’s trial, the Church’s fear of the supernatural and the rejection of women to conform to the expectations of men continued to rise, which caused massive witch hunts across Europe, especially after the publishing of the *Malleus Maleficarum* in 1487. The *Malleus Maleficarum* was written by Catholic clergymen and it discussed how to determine if a person was involved in witchcraft and how to legally handle those who participated in witchcraft. The Church believed that if they continued to allow people to dabble with the supernatural and tread the line between what was considered to be apart of Christianity and what was the supernatural that it would limit their authority and bring destruction to the world.[[26]](#footnote-26) This book aimed to curtail those who were defying the norms of society, specifically women who were attempting to work alongside men or on their own. In the *Malleus Maleficarum*, it specifically calls the people to action, telling them that it is better to accuse another of witchcraft rather than to remain ignorant of the witchcraft happening around them.[[27]](#footnote-27) This document caused increased numbers of witchcraft cases across Europe as people accused others that defied expectations and norms of society in the slightest as they did not want to bring the wrath of the Church upon themselves for not reporting something going on around them.

The increase of claims of people dabbling in witchcraft and the supernatural, specifically women, caused for men to feel threatened in their positions of power. Some women who claimed that they had special connections with the world or with God were taken seriously and given statuses of advisory power, which men were not fond of as they did not trust these supernatural abilities or the women claiming to wield these powers. Men in the Middle Ages believed that women with a supernatural workaround threatened the balance of power in society, more specifically their control of society, which led to an increase in witchcraft trials and the use of the Inquisition into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries across Europe. Joan of Arc’s trial reflects the angry attitudes of men and fear of the Church as Joan managed to utilize her voices from God to give herself status amongst Charles VII and his military officers, and she managed to gain the public’s favor without clear indication she had authority from God.

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11. Barstow, "Joan of Arc and Female Mysticism," 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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18. *Ibid.*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
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21. *Ibid.*, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
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