

## ***Modern Representations of Joan of Arc***

### **Joan of Arc meets Supergirl**

The film *G.I. Jane*, though of dubious aesthetic value as a piece of art, certainly provoked a great deal of debate on its release in 1998. This was particularly true in the United States where the military is central to peoples' conceptions of themselves. The debate centred around whether women were suitable for and physically and mentally equipped for highly intensive combat training and actual conflict. The film centres around a test case in the American military system where a woman joins the S.E.A.L.'s combat training, the "toughest, most intensive military training known to man".

In the film, the case of 'G.I. Jane' is reported extensively in the media. At one point an exasperated army officer exclaims, "G.I. Jane! Christ, why don't they just get it over with and call her Joan of Arc". In many ways Jane is indeed Joan by another name and we can see many of the issues that have been considered regarding Joan, resurfacing in this film. In the opening credits of the movie, a bodiless voice claims that women have always been a "vital link in the supply chains of the war effort... but women are not suited to some jobs in the military". Women play the role of the 'virgin' girlfriend or the 'mourning mother' who stay behind awaiting the return of from war of the male warrior. They are inspiring but passive figures whose images helps the soldier survive the horrors of war and return safely.

*G.I. Jane* subverts these traditional gender roles. Jane is going off to 'war' and she asks her lover if he will wait for her. Significantly, however, he does not answer. In this aspect the film fails to live up to its convictions. The man does not just simply wait for the warring female to return. He is also an active figure. He has a career of his own and he is fundamental in Jane's ultimate success.

When Jane arrives at the training camp, she is shunned by the male soldiers. She represents a threat to the fabric of their homosocial world. She is given different living quarters. Joan demands to be treated the same as the men. However, to be treated as one of them, Joan must in effect become a man. She must shed her sexuality. From the start of the film, Joan shows few typically 'feminine' characteristics. In the one even faintly intimate scene between her and her lover, she utters the line "Get your dick back in here (into the bath)". Jane is never at any time shown as weak or in need emotional support. In the military camp, Jane shaves her head and puts off female garments. Once again the 'Woman Warrior' must disguise herself as a man. Jane becomes gradually more and more defeminised. Joan's moment of validation, when she is finally accepted by the men of the company comes when she is almost raped in front of them as part of an interrogation exercise. Jane turns on her assailant and knocks him

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to the ground even though her hands are tied behind her back. It is impossible for her to be raped because she has now rejected her own femininity. "Suck my dick!" she shouts at and the men of her company cheer.

Although Jane is not a virgin in the strict sense of the word, as is Joan, her 'chastity' and virtue are never called into question. She is in a stable relationship and therefore there is barely a hint of sexual feeling towards her among the men of the camp. The moment of female sexual expression is never portrayed in the film. Although we do see her with lover, she speaks to him much as she would to one of her fellow soldiers. Jane is now ready to be a leader. She has all the attributes of a man and she also has the associations of virtues that attract to her because of her femininity. Jane shows that she has been completely assimilated into this male world when she almost single handedly saves the life of the captain who tried to rape her.

After Jane has endured, longer than expected, the rigours of the training camp, one of the commanders bemoans, "She's lasted six weeks. That's wonderful. Joan of Arc meets Supergirl". Jane is 'Supergirl' because she succeeds where Joan fails. Jane is not a young innocent, she is experienced and sophisticated. She is able to play politics and outmaneuvers the (female) politician who tries to have her removed from the camp. Drawing strength from the Joan of Arc story, and combining this with some 'modern American know-how' Jane succeeds against all her enemies. At the end of the film she receives the ultimate tribute from one of her male army comrades, "I'd go to war with you any day".