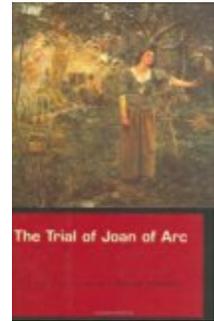


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daniel Hobbins; trans. *The Trial of Joan of Arc*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. 251 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01894-5.

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## Law and Order: Middle Ages

While no portraits of Joan of Arc survive from her lifetime, we are very fortunate to have access to the record of her trial in several languages, including this latest, first-rate edition in English. Daniel Hobbins, an assistant professor of history at the University of Texas, Arlington, does an excellent job not only with his translation of the original texts themselves (in medieval French and Latin), but also with his introduction to the trial, Joan's life and the importance of the trial record as medieval literature.

Hobbins's extensive introduction examines not only the chronology of the trial, but also his methodology and the challenges he faced in translating the contemporary documents. For example, the original text is not a word-for-word record of Joan's trial. It is a summation of the interrogations (done and recorded in French) and the court procedures (in Latin), which the scribes then combined and drafted into text known as the French minute (p. 5). Hobbins asks an extremely important question: "What credit do we give a text that was generated by Joan's opponents?" (p. 7). This critical, yet simple statement is key to any reading of the text. Hobbins argues for the original text and its reliability, and against any notion that it was intentionally falsified, noting that it "is as rich a source as any we possess for the life of a medieval woman, a source which appears strong enough to allow us to hear Joan's voice through the layers of time, custom, language, and legal tradition that separate her from us" (p. 13). Through this book, we can step back in time, put ourselves in the courtroom, and eavesdrop on what was the biggest trial of its day.

The trial record itself is fascinating and will likely appeal to historians and legal professionals alike, not to mention anyone who just likes a great courtroom drama. Hobbins himself notes that "approaching this trial requires an effort of the imagination, informed by an understanding of that legal world" (p. 14), "that world" being half a millennium away. By making this text accessible in such a well-written translation, Hobbins provides the means to allow us to open our imaginations and picture the trial itself—the dimly lit room, the smell of torches burning in the walls, and Joan—likely tired, possibly hungry, maybe afraid, but firm in the belief that her visions, voices, God, and her cause are just and true. Her frustration is apparent, particularly nearing the end of her trial when, having been asked the same series of questions at least three times, her repeated responses are that she has already answered, and that she will speak no further on the matter.

The further one reads into Hobbins's translation, the more one understands the futility of the trial. This is not to say that the trial was not necessarily justified; for a woman of Joan's position and society, the wearing of men's clothing and the claims of visions of saints and angels were matters that required serious examination. However, Joan's persistent acknowledgement of her visions and her unwillingness to recant sealed her fate. Her "status and the simplicity of [her] knowledge" (p. 188) rendered her incapable of anything other than heresy, according to Pierre Maurice, then canon of Rouen Cathedral. Despite her sincerity and the norms of her society, her role in society doomed her to failure, culminating

with her execution on May 30, 1431.

While Daniel Hobbins's translation of *The Trial of Joan of Arc* may not be quite as dramatic as a today's Hollywood-produced crime shows, it is an engrossing read, regardless of one's academic background. In a his-

toric twist, years later Joan was granted a posthumous retrial. In 1456, a copy of the original trial was destroyed "to symbolize the nullification of the original trial's verdict" (p. 7). No one was punished for the original trial, but Joan was vindicated.

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