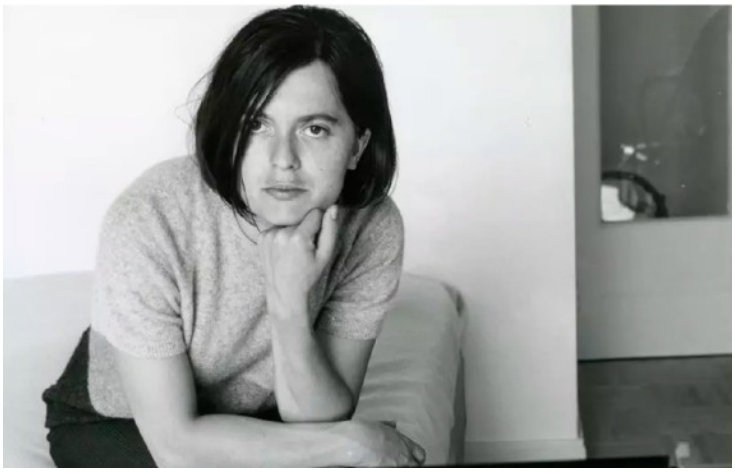
Les Inrockuptibles

Joan of Arc, a queer and feminist figure under the pen of Monique Wittig

By Marie Kirschen Published on November 5, 2025,



Monique Wittig © Les Éditions de Minuit

A queer and feminist reinterpretation of Joan of Arc

In the 1980s, Monique Wittig embarked on a cycle of reinterpretations of major texts. Dante's *Divine Comedy* inspired her *Virgil, No* (Minuit, 1985). Cervantes' *Don Quixote* was transformed into a "guerrilla" and lesbian figure, staged in the theater production *Le Voyage sans fin* the same year. Then came this third attempt, which had remained unpublished until now and is now being released by Les Éditions de Minuit: a screenplay based on the life of Joan of Arc, for a film with the lengthy title *Joan of Arc, or rather Joan Rommée, because in my country girls take their mother's name*.
Wittig as an aspiring filmmaker? Her interest in cinema should not surprise us, explains Théo Mantion, a literature PhD candidate at Harvard who wrote the introduction to the work. "She confided that she had been influenced by cinema in all her writings, having been interested early on in the research conducted by New Wave filmmakers and dreaming as early as 1964 of one day venturing into the seventh art," recalls Mantion, who also compiled the collection of unpublished Wittig texts with researcher Sara Garbagnoli, *Dans l'arène ennemie* (Minuit, 2024).

A model of feminist emancipation

For her *Joan of Arc*, Wittig envisioned her partner, Sande Zeig, in the lead role, with Delphine Seyrig and Julie Christie playing the roles of Saints Catherine and Margaret, the two voices that "speak" to the warrior, here depicted as flesh-and-blood women. In her statement of intent, the author mentions the tracking shots in Jim Jarmusch's *Down by Law*, the style of Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*, references work sessions with André Téchiné, and imagines an "unusual film," not a narrative of ordered events but a "superimposition of hypotheses."

The feminist theorist focuses her story on the clandestine training undergone by Joan of Arc, who is shown being trained in military practices by these voices embodied as women. The goal is, of course, to challenge the imagery of the simple shepherdess, captured and appropriated by the Church and by the extreme right. Wittig emphasizes this point, aiming to free Joan from the confinement of a "becoming woman" narrative.

A subversive crypto-lesbian icon

Throughout the text, the female knight is depicted in sessions led by her saintly protectors, riding horses, wielding swords, donning armor, and scaling ladders. The author weaves an almost carnal connection between these three female characters, evoking "glances, touches, embraces, approaches" that "must maintain a constant tension of desire." In short, Joan is reimagined as a subversive crypto-lesbian icon. To stay as close as possible to the voice of her heroine, Monique Wittig borrows most of her dialogues (starting with the title) from the words spoken by Joan during her trial in 1431.

Although the film was in pre-production in the second half of the 1980s, it was ultimately abandoned due to lack of funding. However, the writer never completely gave up on the idea of revisiting the subject in another form. As for cinema, she eventually contributed as a screenwriter to the fiction film directed by her partner, *The Girl*, released in 2000, three years before her death.

Jeanne d’Arc, ou plutôt Jeanne Rommée, car dans mon pays les filles prennent le nom de leur mère de Monique Wittig (Éditions de Minuit), 112 p., 13,50 **€**.