Joan of Arc in Combat by Monique Wittig

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Monique Wittig in 1985. Photo Colette Goeffrey

Jeanne d'Arc au combat (*Joan of Arc in Battle*) by Monique Wittig is the publication of a screenplay for a film that was never made. In it, the novelist and essayist draws on the myth of the "Maid of Orléans" to create a figure of the warrior. *Voyage sans fin* is not only feminized but transformed into the figure of a lesbian "alone against all," a knight ready to fight, in a staging that plays on displacement to enact a reversal of political, narrative, and linguistic systems.

It is easy to understand what Wittig, as a materialist feminist, sought in Joan of Arc: a figure both historical and symbolic, embodying resistance at a moment when Jean-Marie Le Pen was beginning to reclaim her image by initiating the May 1 gathering at the foot of her equestrian statue in the Place des Pyramides in Paris. Wittig completed the script in 1988, an election year marked by the high score of the far-right candidate.

In her note of intention, Wittig writes that, "in addition to making an unusual film," she hoped to "destroy the imagery that has been built around Joan of Arc since her rehabilitation (little shepherdess, sheep, red dress, voices, saint)," retaining only the warrior from the canon.

Rather than rewriting history in a conventional sense, the project belongs to that long lineage of unfinished cinematic dreams. Let us imagine, then, what a film by Monique Wittig (1935–2003) might have been like: Joan of Arc as heroine, titled not *Jeanne d'Arc* but *Jeanne Rommée*—"because in my country girls take their mother's name"—with Delphine Seyrig and Julie Christie, and in the role of Joan, Wittig's partner, Sande Zeig.

In her statement of intent from the late 1980s, Wittig evokes long tracking shots for training sequences, inspired by Jim Jarmusch's *Down by Law*, some filmed on a moving horse. She cites Cocteau and Rossellini, speaks of "surreality," and envisions a film "disturbing like a nightmare": combative, desiring, far removed from the chirpy imagery that usually surrounds the Maid of Orléans.

For financial reasons, the film never came to fruition. Yet Wittig remained attached to the project for many years, still expressing in the 1990s her desire to transform it into a book "in the manner of Marguerite Duras," who revisited the same texts across writing, cinema, and theater. Too busy with other publications—*Chantier littéraire* and later *La Pensée straight*—she never returned to it, leaving *Jeanne d'Arc* at the stage not of a draft, but of a completed screenplay.

Preserved in the Monique Wittig collection at Yale University and long unpublished, the text now appears with an introduction by Théo Mantion, who emphasizes from the outset that "the influence of cinema" on Wittig "cannot be underestimated," particularly at this moment in her career. In 1985, Wittig published *Virgile, non* and *Le Voyage sans fin*, two radical reinterpretations of Western classics—Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. The writing of *Jeanne d'Arc*, or rather *Jeanne Rommée*, forms part of a project already evident in *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (1976), co-written with Sande Zeig: to rewrite history from its founding myths, which Wittig sought to "de-heterosexualize" in substance and revolutionize in form.

Rather than recounting Joan's story from birth to the stake, Wittig makes the striking choice to focus on her years of combat training, taught jointly by the apparitions of Saint Catherine (Delphine Seyrig) and Saint Margaret (Julie Christie). As in a kung-fu film—and Sande Zeig was indeed a martial arts teacher—the young girl hardens before our eyes, while each sequence affirms the "society of women" to which Wittig aspired.

Joan of Arc, or rather Jeanne Rommée… can thus be read as a projection of future struggles: the ordeal of every lesbian, or the more intimate image of radicalization at work.

Monique Wittig, Jeanne d'Arc, ou plutôt Jeanne Rommée, parce que dans mon pays les filles prennent le nom de leur mère, presentation by Théo Mantion, Éditions de Minuit, 108 pages.