

Die Jungfrau von Orleans

F.Schiller

February 16–21, 2013

Mit der Dummheit kämpfen Götter selbst vergebens. This might be the most memorable quote in the whole play, at least the one most often referred to, and that is hardly surprising. How many of us have not had occasion to invoke those sentiments while encountering the inevitable frustrations inherent in our daily lives. In the play, however, it plays no particular important role, being casually uttered by the dying English general Talbot.

Schiller takes great liberties as to historical accuracy when he writes his play¹. There is little to be said against artistic license, but one wonders why the author eschews the dramatic ending of Joanne d'Arc being tried as a witch and being burned at the stake. It can hardly be because of the technical difficulties such an ending would present to a producer? As an Opera, such an ending would be great. A real fire on the stage, and with the dying Joanne, singing at the top of the voice her final aria. Would that not be something the major opera singers would vye for, and few people would forget?

The story the author presents in five acts, most of them containing up to a dozen different scenes (Aufzüge und Auftritte), introduced by a prolog where we meet her father, her sisters, and the various suitors, is basically the story of the despair of the French King and his consort, as the English appear invincible, and after a series of decisive victories are about to conquer Orleans. A despair that is turned into triumph as the mysterious virgins rally the French troops, and the English advances are rolled back. Not only is Orleans saved, but Rheims is liberated, and the French King can be formally crowned there. Not only does the Virgin triumph on the battlefield, she brings about a crucial reconciliation between the King and the Duke of Burgundy, whose alliance with the English has been pivotal in their military success. She is the object of adulation and admiration, as well as love and desire, to be wooed by some of the Kings generals. She is not interested, she wants to bring the French to a concluding victory. All talk about returning to her female station she dismisses. She becomes more and more aloof, and her aloofness peaks during the coronation. She is observed by her sisters from afar, to them she has become an object beyond reach, but when she catches sight of them her heart is filled with remorse for the simple and innocent life she once led. But her father appears on the scene, and he accuses her of witchcraft, and she does not defend herself, and one by one her supporters desert her. When heaven itself seems to respond by thunder and lightening, the matter seems to be clinched. She flees the city, and her faithful suitor follows her to protect her. They seek sanctuary at a small cottage in the forest, but the English find her and she is brought to captivity. After a night of sleeping on matters the French realize that they have overreacted and look for her. Her suitor tells them that she is in captivity, and they decide

¹ As he notes "immer nur die allgemeine Situation, die Zeit und die Personen aus der Geschichte zu nehmen und alles übrige poetisch frei zu erfinden".

to release her. The action that follows is seen from the perspective of her window in a castle, where she is fettered with the Kings mother as her guard. (While the French Kings mother is allying herself with the English against her son is never made too clear. Could it just be the case of unbridled vengefulness.) The English seem to have the edge, but then suddenly Joan breaks free and joins in the fry, and is finally seen as dying from her wounds in combat. But she rallies, only to die again? But not on the stake. In addition to the main flow of events, some notable man-to-man combats take place, where Joan invariably triumphs. One she kills without pardon, one the black knight is something of a mystery, and finally as she removes the visor of her opponent she falls in love with the vanquished English general Lionel, whom she lets escape, although he pleads with her to kill him.

As noted before, like others of Schiller's plays, it would make for excellent Opera. And in fact it was turned into one by Verdi - *Giovanna d'Arco*, in 1845². The play itself had its first performance in Leipzig on September 11 1801 (on the day two hundred years before the Twin towers), and has since then been frequently performed in German speaking countries, in fact in the 19th century it was the one most often performed in Berlin..

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² Mis en scene by Herzog for German television in 1989 and supposedly available on DVD)