GILLES DE RAIS: HERO, SPENDTHRIFT, AND PSYCHOPATHIC CHILD MURDERER OF THE LATER HUNDRED YEARS WAR

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It is well known that France emerged victorious from the Hundred Years’ War, due in large part to Joan of Arc who joined the fray during the siege of Orléans in 1429.¹ Ten days after her arrival on the scene, the English retreated and within two months, under her guidance, the dauphin journeyed to Reims for his coronation as Charles VII (r. 1422-1461). A quarter century later, the king she had helped put on the throne would expel the English from Normandy and Gascony, leaving England with only the port city of Calais of its once vast continental holdings and effectively ending the Hundred Years War.

What is less well-known is that Charles had assigned a seasoned warrior to accompany Joan when he gave her command of his troops. Her “shadow” at Orléans and devoted supporter until her capture and eventual execution was a member of the noted Laval family of Brittany—Baron Gilles de Rais (1404-1441).² But while de Rais is best remembered for his association with the Maid of Orleans, the rest of his life was fraught with “shadowy” episodes of a very different nature, episodes that ended in the complete reversal of his fortunes.

On October 26, 1440, Gilles de Rais, hero of Orléans, comrade of Joan of Arc, once one of the wealthiest and most powerful Breton nobles, was

² The great interest in Gilles de Rais has not waned in the last few decades as is demonstrated by this far from complete list of recent titles: Matei Cazacu, Gilles de Rais (Paris, 2005); Pierre Combescot, Pour ma plaisir et ma délectation charnelle (Paris, 2008); Aleister Crowley, The Banned Lecture: Gilles de Rais (London, 1993); Tennille Dix, The Black Baron: The Strange Life of Gilles de Rais (Indianapolis, 1930); Emile Gabory, Alias Bluebeard; the Life and Death of Gilles de Rais, trans. Alvah C. Bessie (New York, 1930); Jacques Heers, Gilles de Rais (Paris, 1994); Michel Hérubel, Gilles de Rais, ou, La fin d’un monde (Paris, 1993); Alain Jost, Gilles de Rais (Paris, 1995); Robert Nye, The Life and Death of My Lord, Gilles de Rais (London, 1990); Gilbert Prouteau, Gilles de Rais, ou, La queue du loup (Monaco, 1992); Philippe Reliquet, Le Moyen Âge: Gilles de Rais (Paris, 1982); Michel Tournier, Gilles et Jeanne: récit (Paris, 1983).
hanged by the neck at Nantes for a plethora of crimes, both civil and ecclesiastical, that included heresy, sodomy, kidnapping, and murder. Only a last minute reprieve from the chief judge of the civil court set aside the part of his sentence that called for his body to be burnt to ashes immediately following the hanging; the reprieve provided that it merely to be “singed” and afterwards afforded burial in a sanctuary of his choosing.

In examining the career of this once revered warrior whose name later became infamous, the present article will first consider the events of his youth, then trace his middle years that made him a heroic figure throughout France, and finally focus in on the tragic closing decade of his life. For it was during the period that followed Joan of Arc’s death in 1431 that the always excessive Sieur de Rais, outdid himself, committing acts of profligacy that would dissipate much of his family estate and committing crimes that would make his name legendary.

I. The Early Life of Gilles de Rais

Born in 1404 at the family estate of Champtocé, situated about twelve miles west of Angers on the Loire river, the real Gilles de Rais learned at an early age to live with loss. At the age of eleven, Gilles lost both his mother and his father, the latter in a gory hunting accident he may well have witnessed. Finally, on October 25, 1415, his uncle, Amaury de Craon, numbered among the thousands of French dead on the field of Agincourt. As a result,

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3 He was born in a section of the fortress that bore the foreboding name of “Black Tower” (Tour noire). Michel Bataille, Gilles de Rais: Suivi d’une étude de Jean de Pesel sur Gilles de Rais, Jeanne d’Arc et ses campagnions (Paris, 1976), 50. For the genealogy of Gilles de Rais extended family, see “Genéalogie de Gilles de Rais,” Cahiers Gilles de Rais 4 (Nov. 1993): 148-49.

4 Georges Bataille was a French scholar, archivist, and literary critic who published extensively in the mid-twentieth century, both under his own name and several pseudonyms. During his lifetime, some of his works were considered controversial enough to be banned. Although largely overlooked by the French literati of his day, following his death, Bataille became something of a cult figure whose work influenced such later writers as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. It was undoubtedly a fascination with human sacrifice that led to his study of Gilles de Rais. In 1965, Bataille published a book on Gilles entitled Le Procès de Gilles de Rais: Les documents which included a lengthy appendix reproducing among other documents the extensive trial records which had been translated from the original Latin into French by Pierre Klossowski. In 1991, both the text and documents were translated into English by Richard Robinson and published under the title The Trial of Gilles de Rais, Documents presented by Georges Bataille (Los Angeles, 1991). When the author of this article first embarked upon the study of Gilles de Rais, the 1991 English translation had not yet appeared. Hence, all footnote references throughout the essay are