

Olfactory Drama: A Fictional Conversation Between the Corpse of Jeanne d'Arc and the Law

Nicole Zilberszac

Preface

This fictional dialogue is based on a true story. For 140 years the supposed remains of Jeanne d'Arc had been stored in the French town Chinon. They had been found in 1867 in Paris. Through closer inspections by French scientists led by Philippe Charlier, the remains turned out to be fake. The smell of the remains played a crucial role in detecting their true nature. The smell of vanilla and burnt plaster coming from the remains finally convinced the scientists that the remains actually belonged to an Egyptian mummy. The fake relics of Jeanne d'Arc served the purpose of speeding up the process of her sanctification.¹

¹ Declan Butler, 'Joan of Arc's Relics Exposed as Forgery'. *Nature* 446, 593 (2007). <https://doi.org/10.1038/446593a>

Act One

Law: As a legal artefact I ridicule your sense of trust in my tangible emanations but at the same time I allow you access to your self-composed normativities through mediating ontologies into words, words like evidence, existence, error, entity, excuse.

Exit.

I indulge in these words, eat them till they are empty and dry and leave traces of their materiality in your closet. I am quite clingy and I put a layer of sobriety onto the mysteriousness of matter and overshadow it with the need to secure your basic needs for space, air, atmosphere and bodily safety.

I do this by tracing you and asserting what is due. What is due, here and now, are the ways your bodies can manifest, transform, transgress, fade and decompose.

Jeanne d'Arc: So if I understand you correctly the story of my corpse may be of interest to you. I want to talk about olfactory memory and its spatiotemporal ontology.

Law: That is fascinating but it might overcomplicate my overall appearance. A lack of trust in my existence can, in turn extinguish me, people used to say.

Jeanne d'Arc: I have been fighting for your annihilation as well as your rebirth. Of course, this is a story that can't be told in a sober way, like you supposedly want me to. So I let my corpse speak for you, as it is perfectly dead and alive at the same time.

To be more specific I never smelled like vanilla and burnt plaster. I decomposed and traces of my ontology were fading away without notice or worse being falsely noticed. Never would my materiality have become evident if people had not used their sense of smell. The smell of death turns out to be multifaceted. Traces of time and traces of space, all being perfectly noticeable through subtle olfactory hints. To be honest this was quite funny to me. Nevertheless, you should care about these things, namely about your odorous onto-epistemology, shouldn't you? How important is it for you to take notice of yourself?

Law: It's quite compelling to me how I can be so odorous. Noticing me is supposedly the way I exist in the first place, otherwise I would be quite natural, quite godly so to say. This however is already an outdated claim. In the case of your corpse, someone would have to be able to access the process of my decomposition through their sense of smell, for example, in order to tell whether this is actually my body or whether it has been buried too early. Otherwise what you have been telling me is just a story, and stories are narratives that don't matter to me, unless I am called to be the narrator.

Jeanne d'Arc: I can certainly tell you a lot more about this and it would render your calling a very delicate matter. It could actually be quite a humbling experience for you. An experience where being noticed is just being, noticed.

Law: Yes but if you can refer to Karen Barad in my calling, it all depends on legal cultures and jurisdictions. Don't you think?

Jeanne d'Arc: I don't think, I am. Emerging, extracting, invading, transitioning, cocooning.

Law: OK I understand, but how would it make a difference whether smelling or touching, hearing or seeing was involved in the process. In a meta perspective, it is just another aspect of the embodiment of cognition.

Jeanne d'Arc: It is quite clear to me that you have learned about your own potential for reflexivity and I honour that. I simply want to put forward a story about your odour.

Law: The odour of a corpse would reveal its age as well as its history of touch. Sometimes I am numb to the subtle hints of mindfulness that would allow me to orchestrate my doing and undoing in a more sensitive and informed way. This is why I care whether you had a shower and if you were able to get rid of the smell of overindulgence or pain written into your DNA.

Jeanne d'Arc: That is exactly what I was trying to hint at all this time. As you are trying to figure out who you are, I am reminding you that I was a symbol of purity and regression, as well as of (female) progress and power. My body was crucial in my becoming as well as in my decomposition. I was burnt, hidden and reborn. A bit like a historiographical Jesus. You know, this is why smell is so crucial: because my menstruation would not allow me to be near you at times, metaphorically and practically speaking, and all these spices would reveal your history of colonial power. The idea of

the all-encompassing purity of being supernatural is ingrained in your hopes and dreams, thereby your supposed fascist enemy is becoming your father. What is being swept under the rug will first reveal itself through olfactory hints. Whether you have to tolerate the odour or are the one who is being tolerated matters a lot to your becoming doesn't it?

Law: I don't differentiate in such a vulgar way. My position between purity and regression, and (female) power and progress is a delicate one. I am not all encompassing, or am I and if I am not, do I exist at all? That seems to remain the question, so for you to hint at my smell is actually making me sweat out of pores that I am just about to rebuild. Ontology as humility is an idea that smells like sea salt and vinegar. Coming out of the unknown and seeking, into pragmatic daylight.

Jeanne d'Arc: So I actually don't know where you can find traces of my bodily existence. Fertility and mortality are not compatible with purity. My scent was very revealing in this sense. Pragmatic daylight is too sober to reveal any aspects of what we are actually looking for, when we are searching for hidden aspects of substance or personality behind your narcissistic and/or obsessive-compulsive performance. But I slowly want to get to the main point of our conversation. Tell me how do you smell?

Law: Obsessive compulsion is keeping me alive and narcissism is keeping me relevant. I want to tell you a story of my becoming.

From a distance I could smell the rotten fish, they came from the sea of our collective unconsciousness in order to determine my ability to walk through the sand. It was a crippling thought, crippling in that it took any autonomy away from me, as I would not have been able to move within the sand with the smell of rotten fish in my nose. I would need an authority to grant me the option of vomiting into a basket that has been hidden under the ocean. It laid there for so long. As long as it lies there we cannot breathe without a defibrillator. A defibrillator is what I immediately yearned for and they gave it to me. Right there in the sand I noticed the fresh air within my nostrils, the decent and subtle smell of the Unforgiven that laid beneath the new becoming and I became. I became a state, a presence, a warlord, filled with rage and hopeful thinking. I would kill them with kindness, because kindness smells like birth and birth will overshadow fish. Fishes – I was never able to fish or see or hear, only smell. I especially loved the smell of oysters within my nostrils, as they captured the freshness of the air and reminded me of my of birth and death at the same time. Of defecation as a sort of disintegration, because disintegration was everything I longed for, after I grew into a state of being, because a state, is a state of death and death doesn't fit her. It fits me too well.

Jeanne d'Arc: So actually I feel like I have been resurrected by your story. A history of symbiosis and separation, vulnerability, violence and contrafactual transformations. This story however is not defining you in any way. It is a story about the conditions of your

existence. It doesn't say anything specific about you and the pragmatic daylight trickles away on a post-Freudian couch. This is more of a neon light. I have to ask you this in a more pressing and in a more serious manner. How do you smell?

Law: Your nose is unfit for me because it has never encountered a real vacuum and it likes to create flowers out of defecation. So to be nothing is to be everything. I am the original, I am the light. I lighten up your integration, reintegration and disintegration and in doing so I become a guideline to an Italian restaurant. I tell you what to order, I like onions and tomatoes, I like the smell of German money in a Greek bank, I like the smell of greed and envy, I like the sourness on your tongue because it keeps me alive in my nothingness, it keeps me relevant in my endless undoing which has a non-scent in its nonsense. I met you there in a small alley on a winter's day and you waved me goodbye and finally I saw my reflection. Finally I knew why I did not have a scent. I have accepted this faith of being a non-odour, a frightening shadow of a violent past, dwelling on the bodily memories of desired and unwanted touch ingrained in the olfactory memory of the sea. Salt is the result of that trembling tremor and it is oh so salty. We have to put it onto everything we eat in order to decorate its livelihood, in order to hide away from the ghosts of our past. I became the salt. I ceased to be the ghost. I became the law and in its becoming, I became its undoing.

Jeanne d'Arc: Finally I am able to sense your odour. You smell like vanilla and burnt plaster! What a revelation.

Fin.

Reference

Butler, Declan. 'Joan of Arc's Relics Exposed as Forgery.' *Nature* 446, 593 (2007). <https://doi.org/10.1038/446593a>