

One more year...



The European Research Council has just authorized the PuppetPlays project to continue for an additional year, from October 2024 to September 2025, in order to achieve the publication of its results - complete the digital platform, including the online anthology and teaching contents, publish the proceedings of our two international symposia, as well as the concluding monograph and the second PhD dissertation (the manuscript of the first one, by Francesca Di Fazio, was submitted to the Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée a few weeks ago).

This extra time had become essential. It had been foreseeable for a long time, due to the health crisis and the successive lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented us from carrying out research trips in museums and libraries, and which considerably slowed down our work as a team. Other factors added to this – the difficulty of hiring members of the team and the lack of job security in French universities, a source of incessant turnover, as well as the very heavy administrative and financial management of a project of this scale.

But this extra year is also an opportunity to be seized. Firstly, it is a chance to mature our thinking, because it takes a lot of time to summarise research carried out in a dozen European countries and half a dozen

languages. And secondly, to disseminate our findings: if the performing arts are, by definition, collective arts that share meaning and emotions with an audience gathered here and now, puppet theatre is perhaps even more so, as it spans all ages and social conditions. The year 2024-2025 will therefore see us increasingly share our work and the resources we have gathered outside academic circles. We will keep you informed regularly.

[Prof. Didier Plassard]

The Sabbath of “Rhamsès II”’s Shadows



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Under the pen name Rhamsès II, Raphaël Landoy (1856-1924) wrote several plays for the shadow theatre, which were performed at the Brussels cabaret Le Diable au Corps between 1896 and 1898. Author of various stories and poems, both published in the press and in book form, in a sometimes humorous, sometimes more symbolist vein, Raphaël Landoy actually wrote very little for the theatre. Among his rare attempts at dramatic writing were two plays for a “characterless” theatre of atmosphere and scenery – which he called “theatre of the future” – and his plays for the shadow theatre.

Performed in 1898 at Le Diable au Corps theatre, with sets designed by Henri-Fidèle

Hendrick, *Le Sabbat* (The Sabbath) originally was a poem published in a review called *La Jeune Belgique* (7 November 1897). Comprising eight quatrains, the poem evokes the infernal circle of witches in a highly visual way. *Le Sabbat* begins “in a green light pierced through by red lightning”; the witches spin on their broomsticks, followed by a “procession of toads”, reptiles and aspics, before the frenzied round of “flaming witches” begins. The night ends with the “first rays” of “morning dawn” illuminating the “poor, twisted, tragic, convulsed” bodies of the exhausted witches.

Dedicated to musician Jules Baur (singer at Le Diable au Corps and composer for the shadow theatre) and published just as the cabaret and its theatre were entering their most prolific period, Rhamsès II’s poem was linked to the cabaret and its soirées from the outset. It was probably written, if not for specifically the shadow theatre, at least with it in mind. Rhamsès II’s output during these years conformed to no constraints of genre or medium: his narratives were imbued with orality; his poems were tales in verse or potential songs. His fanciful writing aspired to be read as well as performed, and recited as well as transposed into figures, images or song.

[M.A. Sophie Courtade]

Faithful transcription, or modernisation?

Transcribing a manuscript involves more than just faithfully copying the text. A transcription is a set of choices – implicit, or explicit ones – which reshape the text for the digital age. Today, digitizing texts does not only mean opening up old, fragile sources to the general public. It is first and foremost about preserving cultural heritage.

Transcribing, therefore, initiates a much stronger act. Choosing to correct a grammatical mistake for better legibility sometimes means erasing the specificities of local or older French usage. For example, work on the Guignol repertoire (a pure product of the Lyon dialect, which is less frequently used today) needs to be precise and not too modernized, as it bears witness to a regional language, and thus to a heritage which needs to be preserved.

If a whole range of factors have to be taken into account (historical period, localization, legibility, circulation, etc.), this encourages us to reassess our transcription methods and to decide on each choice according to its consequences, as well as to the use we wish to make of it. Transcription, within the PuppetPlays project, is not intended to be diplomatic, i.e. a transcription that fully respects the specificities of the original document, including, for example, the layout on the page of a manuscript. Its aim is to make this theatrical genre accessible to as many people as possible. This implies choices in terms of readability, spelling correction and modernization. However, these choices must not encroach on the distinctive nature of the text. Transcription, through its intended later use, must not sanitize the text, but make it accessible. To achieve this, a process that applies to every transcription needs to be put in place, to reach a certain level of consistency.

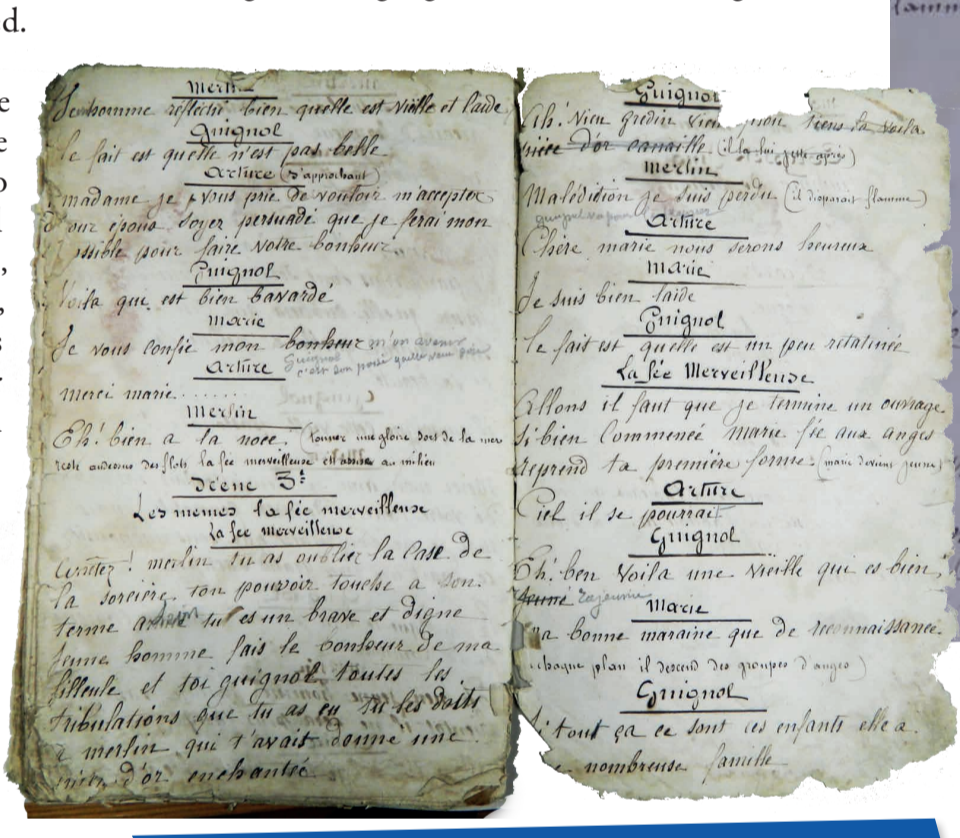
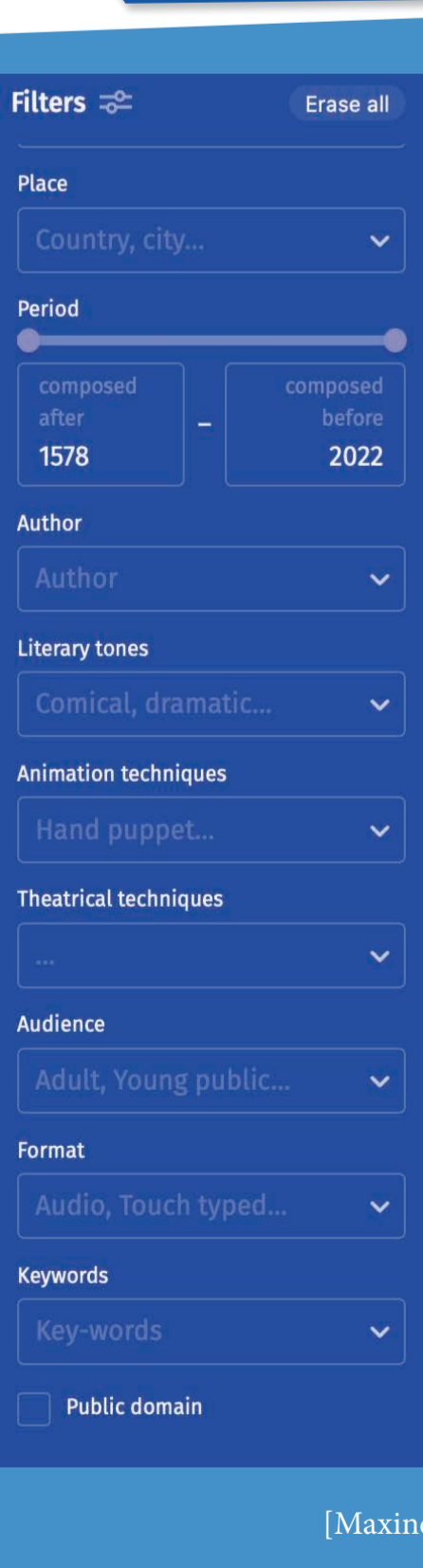


Image : La Case de la sorcière, Musée des Arts de la Marionnette, Acquis Durafour (B86/R), D136, Lyon, France.

Some manuscripts are most certainly doomed to disappear for three major reasons: the impossibility of preserving everything, the quality of the ink, and the quality of the paper. Only “scans” (which are difficult to access and to read for non-specialists) and their digital transcription will remain. This is perhaps where PuppetPlays’ work comes into its own – between transcription choices aimed at preserving some of the texts’ rough edges and editing choices aimed at improving its readability. From then on, the dilemma between faithful transcription and modernization is nothing more than the search for a happy medium.

[Pierre Massinon]

The effectiveness of keywords



Last month, we explored what keywords brought to the database. Describing the database entries is its most visible function for the user, while broadening the scope of searches is another, and a less-used one too. The main obstacle to searching by keyword is the need to identify the one that corresponds exactly to what you want to find. In a way, there are two sides to a keyword: the signifier, or image, and the signified, or concept. Using Ferdinand de Saussure’s example, the keyword “tree” associates its written form with the concept of “tree”, and is thus different from all other keywords.

However, it is now possible to make this search for a signifier/ meaning correspondence more flexible, with the help of automatic language processing techniques. Keywords are reduced to the keyword, “tree” refers to two forms: “tree” and “trees”. Had it existed in our database, the keyword “aimer” (the verb to love) would have referred to all declensions of the verb. To preserve the meaning of the concepts which the keywords refer to, we as a team have chosen to prefer noun forms to verbs.

To take this signifier/ meaning flexibility a step further, some databases use a process called stemming. The word, and in this specific case, the keyword, is reduced until only one form remains – a form common to all its morphological variations. Thus, the keyword “aimer” is reduced to become “aim”, which includes all the declined forms of the verb; the keyword “amour” (the noun ‘love’) becomes “am-” and thus includes “amourette” (a love story), the noun “lover” or “désamour” (lovelessness). These two forms, “aim-” and “am-” are filed under the same keyword “amour”. In this way, the database engine uses the root form of the word entered in the search bar and returns all the forms associated with it. This technique ensures the user that their search will be included in the results, but has the disadvantage of also bringing up all the other forms associated with the keyword.

[Maxine Schoehuyts-Kreiss]

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