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Taking a look back (not in anger) on databases in theater studies.

Marine Roussillon and Christophe Schuwey

A first version of this article was published in French, as an introduction to the 5th issue of the *Revue d'historiographie du théâtre*, "[Writing the history of performances with databases](#)"¹. We reproduce it here as a useful reflection and a summary of the challenges posed by the digital humanities in 2020.

“Digital Humanities”. The expression is now so frequent in calls for projects, funding applications and job descriptions that it is almost a cliché. Yet its definition remains controversial. The diversity of the practices it encompasses (digital editions, databases, text mining...) as well as its deeply transformative effects for the humanities (accessing works online, full-text search in massive corpora, cross-referencing of criteria and data...) are often occluded by the fantasies and anxieties raised by new technologies. Indeed, abstract theorizations, financial issues, dreams of *big data*, fears of technicity overtaking the Humanities, promises of revolutionary tools and contempt for gimmicks, all of these obfuscate the actual, measurable contributions and challenges of computation applied to literature. This situation is a consequence of a tension well described by Pierre Mounier² between, on the one hand, the values of the Humanities and their critical tradition – now marginalized in society – and, on the other hand, science and technology, promoted as ideologies and used in order to control human behaviour and industrialize cultural practices. However, the outcome of this new chapter for the humanities depends less on debates that tend to essentialize the Digital Humanities, as in the *Chronicles of Higher Education*'s “War on Digital Humanities” series of articles with sensationalistic titles³, than on their concrete usage and articulation for scholarly practices. Indeed, a computer is above all a *tool*, which creates new interfaces between researchers

¹ M ; Roussillon and C. Schuwey (dir.), *Écrire l'histoire des spectacles avec des bases de données*, *Revue d'historiographie du théâtre*, n°5, 2020. Online : <https://sht.asso.fr/revue/ecrire-lhistoire-des-spectacles-avec-des-bases-de-donnees/>

² Pierre Mounier, *Les Humanités numériques : une histoire critique*, Paris, Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2018.

³ See, in *Chronicles of Higher Education*, articles by Ted Underwood (“[Dear Humanists: Fear Not the Digital Revolution](#)”), Timothy Brennan (“The Digital-Humanities Bust”), Kathryn Conrad (“What the Digital Humanities Can't Do”), Emma Uprichard (“Big-Data Doubts”), Kathleen Fitzpatrick (“The Humanities, Done Digitally”).

and their objects. Digital Humanities are therefore nothing more than what the scientific community, research agencies and state policies do with them.

What do we do when we do digital humanities?

Digital Humanities are often perceived as the result of an injunction: funding agencies require the use of digital tools in order to “modernize” research in the Humanities. However, we, as researchers, can reclaim our traditional practices by questioning the scope and relevance of Digital Humanities accomplishments over the last two decades, in order to re-motivate the link between the Humanities and the digital world. This is what we intended to do when we decided to ask scholars to share their experiences with building, publishing and using databases⁴. Neither celebrating nor condemning; neither theorizing nor simply describing; we wanted to bring together researchers around concrete questions and experiences: what do we do when we do Digital Humanities? Do our practices have anything in common? To what extent do they transform literary and cultural history, in terms of the accessibility and availability of resources, the way we handle them and the questions they raise. There is no sense debating Digital Humanities without first articulating them through the meaning, methods and objectives of our research.

We chose Early Modern databases on performances as a case study. Our perspective thus comes both from current work – the preparation of a research project on court entertainment⁵, which involved an inventory of existing practices – and from a broader history. The *CÉSAR* database (*Calendrier électronique des spectacles d'Ancien Régime*⁶) was one of the first databases in the Digital Humanities, and one of the most widely used, both in the field of theatre studies and literary history. Almost twenty years after the creation of *CÉSAR*, and in a period of intense reflection about its future, this study is also a way of indirectly revisiting this pioneering experience and its legacy.

⁴ We are following here in particular *Revue d'Historiographie du Théâtre*, No. 4, *Études théâtrales et humanités numériques*, Ioana Galleron (dir.), 2018, online at <https://sht.asso.fr/revue/etudes-theatrales-et-humanites-numeriques/>, and *Bien symboliques / Symbolic Goods*, No. 2, *Arpenter la vie littéraire / Surveying literary life*, Claire Ducournau and Anthony Glinoeur (dir.), 2018, online at <https://www.biens-symboliques.net/207>.

⁵ The “Merveilles de la cour” project focuses on 17th-century court entertainment. See : <https://merveilles17.huma-num.fr>

⁶ *CÉSAR*, online at <https://cesar.huma-num.fr/cesar2/>.

We submitted a questionnaire to five teams involved in building and publishing databases on early-modern theater: *Molière21*, *Perform'Art*, *Naissance de la critique dramatique*, *Théaville* and *Mercure galant*. Their responses reveal the fundamental contribution of digital technology to research in theater history, but also highlights the variety of challenges encountered, the plurality of solutions used, and the diversity of approaches to writing the history of performances with databases. Furthermore, these responses bring to light the major questions that digital technologies pose for our research, our disciplines, and more broadly for society itself.

Something's rotten in the kingdom of databases

To understand the essence of the above opportunities and challenges, the story of *CÉSAR* is enlightening. In 1988, as the first digital resources in performance history began to emerge, David Trott started building a database of eighteenth-century theaters and performances. At the same time, Barry Russell was also building databases, and in 1995 he inaugurated a site dedicated to the "théâtre de la Foire"⁷. At the end of the 1990s, the two men joined forces with Jeffrey Ravel (MIT). When their "Electronic Calendar of Ancien Régime Shows" eventually appeared online in 2002, it was an immediate success. *CÉSAR* demonstrated the benefits of digital technology for the Humanities: easy to use and practical, it centralized and organized available data on performances, transforming access to this information for research. Its immediate adoption by the scholarly community indicated something more important: in the field of theater studies, a digital database was less a break than an evolution. Like literary history and the history of the book⁸, the discipline long relied on paper repertoires, whose logic is similar to that of databases. Indeed, in a lecture given at Dartmouth in 2016, Jeffrey Ravel highlighted the many similarities between the work of

⁷ *Le Théâtre de la foire in Paris*, online at <http://www.foires.univ-nantes.fr>. The site is hosted since 2005 by the University of Nantes and maintained by the team of the Centre d'études des théâtres de la foire.

⁸ See Claire Ducournau and Anthony Glinoe, *op. cit.* 2018. For literary history, they refer in particular to Alain Viala, *Naissance de l'écrivain*, Paris, Minuit, 1985, and to Christophe Charle, *La Crise littéraire à l'époque du naturalisme, roman, théâtre, politique*, Paris, Presses de l'ENS, 1979. For the history of the book, they refer to the work of Roger Chartier and Robert Darnton (e.g., Roger Chartier, and Henri-Jean Martin, *Histoire de l'édition française*, Paris, Promodis, 1983-1986, and Robert Darnton, *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future*, New York, PublicAffairs, 2009).

the first histories of theater in the eighteenth century and the database model. The need to cross-reference numerous and diverse sources to document each performance, as well as the growing influence of the social sciences on the discipline, led researchers to build their own databases, in the form of “fiches” or tables.

The digital tool opened up new perspectives on these well-established practices. First of all, it offered a new mode of publication and a new means of exploration, more adapted to the object of research than the printed book. Indeed, information technology makes it possible to multiply the links between documents, to browse them *via* several entries and to update them regularly. A comparison between *CÉSAR* and Pierre Mélése's *Répertoire analytique sur le théâtre à Paris au XVII^e siècle*⁹, a famous repertory of documents and performance in seventeenth-century Paris, is telling: as useful as the *Répertoire* is, each of its page reminds of the limitations of the paper book. The excerpts are truncated, the indexes, as numerous as they are, are still insufficient, and the content is fixed in time since, in the absence of enlarged reprints, new documents discovered since the publication in 1934 could not be included.

Finally, digital publishing also encourages collective work: a group of researchers quickly formed around *CÉSAR*, placing the site at the center of an international exchange of information whose density and extension was rare for literary studies. In 2003, the site even opened a public interface allowing users to suggest improvements and enrich the database.

Sharing, collaboration, knowledge enrichment and dissemination... Although *CÉSAR* makes the promises of digital technology a reality, it also illustrates the main issues Digital Humanities are constantly facing. As we write these lines, it just takes a visit on the site's home page to understand that something is rotten in the realm of databases. A message from 2017 states that “the database is no longer maintained but remains perfectly usable [...]. Some features, especially in the ‘Books’ section, may be unavailable. Access to personal accounts and the collaborative space is also disabled”. Luckily, *CÉSAR* is not dead, and the renovation of the site, supervised by Marc Douguet,

⁹ Pierre Mélése, *Répertoire analytique des documents contemporains d'information et de critique concernant le théâtre à Paris sous Louis XIV*, 1659-1715, Paris, Droz, 1934.

is underway. But this long interruption is indicative of the precariousness that characterizes digital research tools. Indeed, the story of *CÉSAR* is not merely the idyllic tale of a community of researchers exchanging knowledge across the globe. It is also one of an unending fundraising effort, from the first AHRB grant (£273,000 awarded in 2001 for three years) to the current funding of its renovation by the CNRS, the *Institut Universitaire de France* and *IDEX Université Grenoble Alpes*. As the survival of the site and its maintenance were constantly threatened by the end of the grants, the *CÉSAR* consortium was continually looking for new collaborations and funding from various institutions. Not only is the creation of such a tool expensive – much more expensive than the publication of a printed book or the organization of a colloquium – but, unlike a printed book, website is never published once and for all. To remain accessible, the database must be regularly maintained. In spite of its obvious usefulness for theatre studies, *CÉSAR* had gradually fallen into decay, to the point of becoming barely usable for a long period of time; a situation that fortunately should soon come to an end with the current renovation.

During a recent session entitled “Print and digital interface” at the MLA annual conference¹⁰, the first question from the audience was precisely about the long-term sustainability of such digital resources. In a world where the viability of economic and ecological models is being urgently brought into question, this related issue is central. It brings to the fore the disastrous carbon footprint of digital technologies, as well as their human and political costs. Without a sustainable solution for energy production, and as long as the conditions for extracting precious metals remain unseemly, the Digital Humanities will be part of the problem. The issue also highlights the contradiction between the project-based, time-limited research funding model and digital logistics. The sustainability of digital tools and publications requires long-term personnel while the academic world is turning increasingly to precarious and instable hiring models. Upstream, this precariousness discourages researchers from investing a significant amount of time in research and

¹⁰ "Print and Digital Interfaces in Early Modern Literature", panel led by Christophe Schuwey and Geoffrey Turnovsky, MLA, Seattle, 2020.

the digitization of data. Downstream, the impossibility of guaranteeing the longevity of data continues to overvalue paper publication at the expense of digital ones, although the latter often contains infinitely more information, of equivalent or even higher quality, and can be constantly updated. How can the sustainability of digital projects be guaranteed when positions and funding are scarce? Most of the solutions envisaged so far, including major government initiatives, are insufficient and unsuitable.

After CÉSAR: some databases in theater in studies

Despite its eventful history, *CÉSAR* has been emulated by many. For years, the presence of a digital humanities component in a research project has made it easier to obtain funding. As a result, many researchers with often limited technical backgrounds have courageously rethought their approach to include a digital component. The situation has led to an uncontrolled multiplication of new products. It thus offers new and precious resources to the scientific community, but it also brings with it its share of unfinished projects, which quickly disappear or are difficult to use, and leads to a lack of interoperability, coordination and sharing between projects that are often very similar. While the last few years have enabled a certain number of safeguards to be put in place, notably concerning data management and long-term storage, these are insufficient (see below) and the need for consistency between achievements and common practice remains an issue¹¹.

This article owes much to this observation: while designing a new research project on entertainment at the court of Louis XIV, it became necessary to understand how others had already extracted and organized data to study seventeenth-century entertainment practices¹². Informal exchanges with a few colleagues involved in this field convinced us of the value of gathering first-hand experiences that we hope will be of use to others. We have therefore solicited the principal investigators of six

¹¹ As Clarisse Bardiot points out in her article: "Performing arts and culture analytics", in Ioana Galleron (ed.), *op. cit.* online at <https://sht.asso.fr/arts-de-la-scene-et-culture-analytics/>.

¹² For a first, incomplete census, see Marine Roussillon, "Ressources en ligne sur les fêtes de cour (1) : bases de données" and "Ressources en ligne sur les fêtes de cour (2) : catalogues", 2016, online on *Politiques du Grand-siècle*, <https://pogs.hypotheses.org/292> and <https://pogs.hypotheses.org/312>

projects covering the same period – the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – but whose diversity of objectives and sources, disparity of funding methods and differences in the organization of research seemed to us significant.

All of the databases presented here are based on digitized texts, with the notable exception of the *PerformArt database*¹³ that catalogs in depth the artistic practices and patronage of families of the Roman aristocracy. The documents included in this database are extremely diverse, and not all of them are texts - there are even ancient musical instruments. They are precisely described and only some of them are fully transcribed. The *Recital*¹⁴ project is based on a corpus of archives: the registers of the Italian Comedy. It offers transcription and collaborative online editing before extracting the data. The *Mercure galant*¹⁵ and *Théaville*¹⁶ projects are based on the digital edition of a printed corpus (the issues of a 17th-century periodical, *Le Mercure galant*, or 18th-century opera parodies) to allow exploration. Finally, the last two projects presented constitute digital anthologies: a collection of text excerpts reporting on the reception of theater plays in seventeenth-century France (*Naissance de la critique dramatique*¹⁷) and a collection of seventeenth-century texts linked to Molière (*Molière21*¹⁸). The characteristic gesture of these latter projects is not so much the constitution of a corpus as the bringing together of texts within the same ensemble. These databases thus articulate in varying ways three main gestures: they bring together various objects in the same set (the corpus); extract information from it (the data); and make it widely accessible and searchable (publication¹⁹).

In order to avoid digressions and to allow for the comparison of shared experiences, we proposed a single questionnaire to all of the contributors, an approach inspired by a recent issue of the *Symbolic Goods* journal²⁰. The questionnaire²¹ was structured in three parts. First, we asked about the

¹³ *PerformArt*, online at <https://performart-roma.eu/en/>.

¹⁴ *Recital*, online at <http://recital.univ-nantes.fr/>

¹⁵ *Mercure galant*, online at <http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.site/corpus/mercure-galant/>

¹⁶ *Théaville*, online at <http://www.theaville.org/>.

¹⁷ *The birth of dramatic criticism*, online at <https://www2.unil.ch/ncd17/>

¹⁸ *Molière21*, online at <http://moliere.huma-num.fr/>

¹⁹ On the necessary biases linked to the act of publication, see Christian Jouhaud and Alain Viala (eds.), *De la publication : entre Renaissance et Lumières*, Paris, Fayard, 2002.

²⁰ Claire Ducournau and Anthony Glinoe (eds.), *op. cit.*

construction of the corpus and the production of data. Many studies have already pointed out that gathering data is a process neither neutral nor transparent, and that digital technology tends to essentialize data, hiding both their materiality and their production processes²². In this regard, it appears that digital technology is apt at revealing biases already inherent in our research practices. Pierre Mélése's *Répertoire analytique*, to take up this example again, already essentialized its data. By gathering discourses on performances from various media on white pages with standardized typography, he de-emphasized the contextual differences of these extracts and the reasons that presided over their existence. As such, three operations require particular methodological vigilance: the constitution of a corpus, its transformation into automatically searchable data, and the passage that this transformation implies from an historical materiality (most often that of paper) to a new materiality, the digital. Our questions aim at understanding how the different projects performed these operations, but also how they were able to explain their approach within the database, or on the contrary were obliged to conceal it.

Second, we asked about the elaboration of the interface and the relationship it builds with users – in other words, the modalities and stakes of publishing the data. Digital interfaces condition the way in which data is apprehended and decide which operations can be carried out: by translating digital data to human users, interfaces model research practices and the relationship of researchers to their objects of study. We asked contributors how their interfaces had been designed (or not) before gathering data, and if they could observe gaps between their objectives for designing their database and the way it was ultimately used, in order to highlight the effects of *design* on research practices.

Finally, we asked the teams about their funding, the structures and temporality of their research. The aim here was to gain a better understanding of the relationship that researchers had with the technologies they mobilized: who discusses the technical choices? Are they undertaken or collectively constructed, despite the difficulties of interdisciplinary exchange? What effects do they

²¹ M. Roussillon and C. Schuwey, "Écrire l'histoire des spectacles avec des bases de données : questionnaire", *Revue d'Historiographie du Théâtre*, n°5, 2020 : <https://sht.asso.fr/ecrire-lhistoire-des-spectacles-avec-des-bases-de-donnees/>

²² See Matteo Treleani, *Qu'est-ce que le patrimoine numérique ? Une sémiologie de la circulation des archives*, Lormont, Le Bord de l'eau, 2017, especially pp. 84-88.

have on research practices, on the composition of teams, on the relationships between their members? To what extent does the specific cost of these technologies – which is out of all proportion to the usual cost of humanities research – lead to funding methods that modify our research practices? In particular, how do the different projects reconcile the importance of budgetary concerns and the recourse to project-based funding which is often required, with the need to ensure the sustainability of databases?

The answers we received were published in a special issue of the *Revue d'Historiographie du Théâtre*. These contributions do not provide ready-made, directly reproducible answers to the above questions. The methodological reflections developed here and the accounts of the experiences on which they are based are not intended to provide best practice guidelines, but rather to nourish reflection on – and understanding of – what we do; to make explicit the issues of a practice that is growing, and to contribute to a collective reflection on its stakes. At the end of this necessarily partial and incomplete journey, and without anticipating the conclusions that each of us will be able to draw from it, we can formulate two observations and identify two major challenges.

First remark: a change of scale

Digital technologies significantly increase the amount of information available for research. The consequences are particularly striking in the case of the *Molière21* site: the use of an intertextual database opens up Molière's work to the whole of contemporary written production, radically transforming our understanding of it. It shows how works considered as minor by literary history have largely contributed to major comedies. It makes clear that Molière did not so much invent new forms and topics than turn the latest books, trends and news stories into comedy; that he was not at all revolutionary or dissident, but that he espoused the consensual positions of the court, even when he appeared to criticize it. The *PerformArt* project also dramatically broadens the field. While research on the artistic practices of Roman aristocratic families had hitherto focused on the specific

patronage of a particular pope or great lord, the database moves away from a fragmentary approach to produce a comprehensive view of the history of performances within aristocratic families in Rome between 1644 and 1740. These projects build on the logic of the library: the digital collection functions like a real library, only more accessible and organized in more ways, multiplying the links between documents, possible groupings, and reading paths. It then becomes possible to obtain in a few seconds information that would have required weeks of research a few years earlier.

This change in scale thus undoes a former conception of cultural history as the transmission of a canon²³. Since the quantitative approach introduced by the databases deconstructs the ideology of great texts and great authors, the Digital Humanities contribute to the reintegration of entertainment into a broader set of cultural practices. The *Théaville* database demonstrates the vitality and circulation of tunes familiar to the public, taken up, rewritten, sung along with new words. The *Molière21* site puts on the same level Molière's plays and contemporaneous writings long overlooked by literary history, *Le Malade imaginaire* echoing a novel by Marie-Catherine Desjardins, or a poem by Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin²⁴. The availability of the *Mercure galant* in full-text mode and its digitization on Gallica and Google Books not only makes it more convenient and faster to consult; it also encourages historians and literary specialists to consider such essential resources and, thanks to the digitized images, it restores the object's sophisticated materiality²⁵. Taking into account material life, audiences, stage music, advertising techniques or the media explosion of the early modern period blurs the boundaries artificially set by literary studies. By inserting texts and plays into larger sets of writings, databases in general contribute to the

²³ Claire Ducournau and Anthony Glinoe (eds.), *op. cit.* §15.

²⁴ *Molière 21* was originally conceived to accompany the new edition of Molière's *Œuvres complètes* in the prestigious *Pléiade* collection. But this equalizing approach contradicts the ideological foundation of the *Pléiade* collection. This contradiction may partly explain Gallimard's refusal to link back to the site from the print edition. See Claude Bourqui, « Le site Molière21 : Présentation », in M. Roussillon and C. Schuwey, *Écrire l'histoire des spectacles avec des bases de données*, *op. cit.* : <https://sht.asso.fr/le-site-moliere21-presentation/> .

²⁵ See Christophe Schuwey, *Un entrepreneur des lettres au XVIIe siècle: Donneau de Visé, de Molière au " Mercure galant "*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2020.

establishment of a history that considers literature and the arts as social practices among others, and brings into question the construction of literature, theater or art in the broadest sense as institutions²⁶. The second consequence of this broadening of the field of investigation is to restore a more global vision of performance, one that encompasses the many arts and techniques it mobilizes, as well as the social interactions it produces. The *Théaville* database compares the texts of dramatic operatic parodies with the arias that serve as a support for these parodies, in the form of scores and recorded music. Only such an overall view allows one to identify and interpret the parodies. The *PerformArt* database, on the other hand, seeks to account for all aspects of performance, from production to reception. The range of disciplines and knowledge mobilized is revealing: its team brings together specialists in the performing arts, history, but also economic history. The practice of databases thus coincides with an “extension of the field of performance” on which the academic field of theater studies is based²⁷. The use of databases thus appear as particularly relevant for this still young academic field, in search of scientific tools capable of consolidating its disciplinary status and conferring on it a form of legitimacy²⁸.

Second remark: the collection as a form of argumentation

Corpus construction is the main methodological challenge of databases. In the cases of the registers of the Comédie Italienne (*Recital*) or the Comédie-Française, the database is based on a coherent and previously constituted archive²⁹. But most of the time, the documents gathered in the database are the result of a hermeneutic operation that the interface tends to hide, thus naturalizing the corpus.

The presentation of the *Mercuré galant* project testifies to this difficulty and the methodological

26 See Alain Viala, *op. cit.* ; Déborah Blocker, *Instituer un " art " : politiques du théâtre dans la France du premier XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, Champion, 2009 ; Judith Lyon-Caen and Dinah Ribard, *L'historien et la littérature*, Paris, La Découverte, 2010.

27 This project is notably stated by Christian Biet in "Pour une extension du domaine de la performance (XVIIe-XXIe siècle). Événement théâtral, séance, comparution des instances ", *Communications*, n°92, 2013, p. 21-35.

28 This is what Anne-Madeleine Goulet's contribution proposes : A.-M. Goulet, "Un outil pour étudier les spectacles de l'Ancien Régime: la base de données *PerformArt*", in M. Roussillon and C. Schuwey (dir), *Écrire l'histoire des spectacles avec des bases de données*, *op. cit.* : <https://sht.asso.fr/un-outil-pour-etudier-les-spectacles-de-lancien-regime-la-base-de-donnees-performart-2/>.

29 *Le Projet des registres de la Comédie-Française*, online at <https://www.cfregisters.org/fr/>.

caution it imposes. The project seems to be based on a pre-existing corpus: the complete collection of the *Mercure galant* by Donneau de Visé (1672-1710), in its Parisian edition. However, this object does not exist: no such collection is available in material form. Even collections that seem to be complete, such as those of the BNF, are in fact incomplete, since music scores and prints have been taken from some of the issues. This essential element of the collection, which reveals practices of reading and collection of the *Mercure Galant*, disappears in this digital reconstruction of a complete, “ideal” collection formed by disparate copies. Dividing the *Mercure*’s issues into articles, as well as the process of selecting extracts concerning literary and artistic life are strong hermeneutic interventions that the presentation of the corpus in the database does not make visible, nor allow to discuss. By focusing on songs and arias in its corpus of “opera parodies”, *Théaville* reminds us of the cultural and scientific importance of an element often ignored by critics and directors alike; it thus constitutes the operatic parody into a literary genre and declares its value. The act of publication is by no means neutral: it is a way of asserting the dignity of an object. Like any library, the database orders, builds hierarchies, distributes value: in other words, it builds up an argument. Such an argumentative function is the main goal of certain databases. *Molière 21* and *Naissance de la critique dramatique* are explicitly built in order to support such a thesis. In these cases, the database is presented as a collection of evidence. *Naissance de la critique dramatique* welcomes the visitor with a list of the literary genres in which performance reviews can be found, while each single page of *Molière21* demonstrates that Molière's theater deals above all with current events, that its sources are to be found in seventeenth-century literature, and also, that the literary canon does not accurately reflect the intellectual and cultural landscape of the times. In both cases, the corpus is constituted according to such a demonstrative purpose: Molière's sources support a certain interpretation of the texts; the excerpts on *Naissance de la critique dramatique* demonstrate the elevation of performance reviews. In both cases also, the database is backed by a paper publication (the edition of Molière's *Complete Works* and the issue of the *Littératures classiques* journal entitled

*Naissance de la critique dramatique*³⁰) that makes the argument explicit. The same approach was adopted by the *AGON* database, that listed early modern disputes and quarrels in relationship to creation in France and England³¹. In this latter database, each presentation of a quarrel was signed by its author. This editorial choice defined the presentations as the result of research and interpretation.

These latter cases highlight the fact that the database is not only a tool for research. It is indeed a form of historiography, just like a critical work. It is a proposal that takes advantage of digital resources to support a demonstration, by “playing cards on the table,³²” as Claude Bourqui writes, and at the same time by claiming a form of scientific approach, according to Anne-Madeleine Goulet³³.

First challenge: the interface

In its contribution on *Molière21*, Claude Bourqui highlights how difficult it is for the database perceived as a critical output. It is almost as if the digital support made the argument unreadable. This underscores the fundamental issue of the interface. There is no possible perception of data without an interface translating the electro-digital reality of the data for humans³⁴. Nothing surprising here. Since the interface defines the way in which data are perceived, and therefore interpreted, then the interface is, ultimately, an argument. Furthermore, only an interface can make visible the way a corpus was constructed. After being neglected for a long time, interfaces have today become a central issue in the reflection on Digital Humanities³⁵. From our perspective, they

³⁰ *Littératures classiques*, n°89, *Naissance de la critique dramatique*, Lise Michel and Claude Bourqui (dir.), 2016.

³¹ *Agon Project. Dispute: Cases, quarrels, controversies and creation in the modern age*, online at <http://www.agon.paris-sorbonne.fr/fr>. See also *Littératures classiques*, No. 81, *Le Temps des querelles*, Jeanne-Marie Houstiou and Alain Viala (eds.), 2013.

³² C. Bourqui, "Le projet Molière21. Présentation", op. cit.

³³ A.-M. Goulet, "Un outil pour étudier les spectacles de l'Ancien Régime: la base de données *PerformArt*", in M. Roussillon and C. Schuway (dir), *Écrire l'histoire des spectacles avec des bases de données*, op. cit. : <https://sht.asso.fr/un-outil-pour-etudier-les-spectacles-de-lancien-regime-la-base-de-donnees-performart-2/>

³⁴ Stéphane Vial, *L'Être et l'écran : comment le numérique change la perception*, Paris, PUF, 2013, chap. 6.

³⁵ See in particular Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, MIT Press, 2001, in particular the chapter 'Database as Symbolic Form'; Ed Folsom, 'Database as Genre: The Epic Transformation of Archives', *PMLA*, v. 122, no. 5, 2007 and

appear as a strong response to the methodological problems raised by databases, and as an essential element in the new form of historiography that databases are inventing.

Once again, there is no major break here: literary studies did not have to wait for computer science to essentialize texts and hide their materiality and contexts. History, theater studies and literary history approached Festival books, for example, as documents providing information regarding the event, even though they are also autonomous objects bound up in particular performative practices³⁶.

In his *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Michel Foucault transformed verses of comedies into philosophical positions, without taking much into account their context, their representativity, or their circulation³⁷. A critical edition or a paper repertory necessarily separates a text from its original materiality, inciting those who consult them to ignore the medium and form of the original message.

The Digital Humanities thus inherit these biases rather than create them. On the other hand, new tools are available to address these concerns. The interconnection between documents, references to images of the work, discursive contextualization, the layout of the text or the multiplication of finding aids are all means of re-inscribing documents in their context, of making visible the construction of knowledge and the work of interpretation, and of providing researchers with the tools they need to criticize the presented extracts.

By displaying a list of media on its home page, *Naissance de la critique dramatique* not only illustrates the diversity of its sources, it also invites one to consider the medium and intentions of the original text. However, this dimension disappears when searching for something in full-text mode, and readers are reminded of the original medium only when they are looking at an excerpt.

Théaville gives at least as much importance to the songs as to the texts. It also breaks the unity of

Alexander Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, Polity Press, 2012. And in French : Anthony Masure, *Design et humanités numériques*, Paris, B42, 2017; Christophe Schuwey, *Interfaces : L'apport des humanités numériques à la littérature*, Neuchâtel, Livreo-Alphil, 2019; Nicolas Thély, " Rôle et enjeux du design graphique ", THATCamp Paris, Non-actes des non-conférences des humanités numériques, Paris, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2012; Stéphane Vial, *L'Être et l'écran*, Paris, PUF, 2013 and " Le tournant design des humanités numériques ", *Revue française des sciences de l'information et de la communication*, n°8, 2016.

³⁶ See Benoit Bolduc, *La Fête imprimée*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2016 and Marine Roussillon, " Raconter les fêtes de cour : publier, archiver, agir ", Bulletin du Centre de recherche du château de Versailles, 2 en ligne sur <https://journals.openedition.org/crcv/>, and " Introduction : Récits et imaginaires des fêtes de cour ", *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre*, n°282, 2019, p. 5-28.

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1972, especially p. 104 and p. 260-261.

the work by insisting on the circulation of the tunes, their reuse and popularity. Let us also mention the practice of many critical digital editions: by referring to the photographic version of the work, they partially compensate for the essentialization of the data.

However, this fundamental function of the interface remains largely underestimated in French practice³⁸. Reflection on them is often absent from projects, condemning some of them to remain inoperable³⁹. There are many reasons for these dismissals, ranging from the illusion of objectivity produced by minimalist or standardized interfaces to Plato-inspired mistrust of representations and images. The main problem, however, remains that government policies and research agencies set the primary focus on data, both when they evaluate the design of projects and when they work on their sustainability. They regularly require a multi-year data retention plan, but never require the interface to be professionally designed. State initiatives for the preservation of digital projects (HumaNum in France, DaSCH in Switzerland) take care of the data, but never the interface.

Second challenge: financing and sustainability

Unsurprisingly, the second challenge that emerges from this study is that of the sustainability of databases, that is to say their survival beyond the time of their inauguration. This problem has two converging causes. The first is inherent to the digital format: digital publications are more vulnerable than print publications and their preservation requires regular maintenance. The other is related to political choices for research funding: in the current situation, the costs associated with the development of a database are too high to be covered by the perennial funding of laboratories. Most databases are set up in the framework of projects funded by agencies for a limited period of time. This short timespan contradicts the planned long-term usage of a scholarly work, and the maintenance it requires. In addition, it often implies that the technical part of database development

³⁸ In the United States, the work of Johanna Drucker (notably *Graphesis*), initiatives such as the Design Lab at Stanford, and scholarships to encourage digital humanities projects for the general public are evidence of a different culture and practices. In the French-speaking world, there are many researchers on the subject (see note 36), but the fact that they are attached to foreign universities is a clear indication of France's moderate interest in these issues.

³⁹ Christophe Schuwey, *op. cit.* in the chapter "Making it pretty", pp. 17-27.

is entrusted to precarious staff or to service providers under contract: the end of the contract marks the end of the collaboration, whereas a real control of the database's future would require a long-term cooperation. To overcome these difficulties, projects like the *Mercure galant* and *Récital* have been able to establish themselves in public service institutions (the CNRS IREMUS team for the former; the University of Nantes and the Nantes Digital Sciences Laboratory for the latter) and have thus been able to rely on permanent staff. However, the lack of means in these institutions forces the projects to seek additional funding very regularly to be able to continue their development.

In this way, the problem of sustainability arises at different levels. It is not enough to ensure the conservation of data. It is as essential to ensure its availability, by guaranteeing the continuity of hosting, and the maintenance of the interface designed for it, whose essential role has been highlighted. The use of standard formats, often presented as the solution to such issue, mostly solves the problem of data retention. A digital edition may well be developed in compliance with TEI standards, but it will always require a host institution and updates to function other than as an archive. As we can see, the issue cannot be resolved on a project-by-project basis through the adoption of shared standards and standardized practices alone. In fact, the contributions collected here all indicate that the obstacle lies primarily in the structuring of funding and the distribution of institutional responsibilities.

On this thorny issue, institutions are passing the buck. In France as in Switzerland, research funding agencies (ANR, FNSF..) have decided to delegate the maintenance of digital creations to universities. However, the limited computer resources of the latter render them unable to carry out this task, despite best intentions. Intended primarily to ensure the smooth running of infrastructures, they were not designed to maintain the growing number of projects. To avoid relying on university funds, *CÉSAR* has turned to the Very Large Research Infrastructure (TGIR) HumaNum, which promotes software like Omeka. This is also the choice that the *Perform'Art* project plans to make once the ERC funding ends. However, one may wonder about HumaNum's capacity to absorb the growing number of projects, in a context marked by a concerning lack of staff.

In order to achieve this, HumaNum, as well as the DaSCH in Switzerland, has chosen a standard technical solution to cover all needs and all cases. While it could be a good option for data retention, it standardizes the exploitation, visualization and manipulation of the data. From then on, either the standard solution is used in its original form, with standardization canceling many of the digital possibilities mentioned above; or it is configured according to the needs of the project, which implies developing specific modules and again poses the problem of updating and maintenance. Faced with this alternative, most digital projects choose a solution developed by a member of the project, which requires regular interventions of a computer specialist. The team may either rely on his or her good will or hunt for funding to be able to pay for his or her services.

The project-based funding model is thus clearly unsuited to the realities of the digital world. While promoting new technologies, major research organizations are sticking to a time-limited model that does not correspond at all to the constraints of the digital world. The start-up costs of an online project may be lower than the printing of a book, but it requires regular maintenance and therefore regular funding. If the maintenance is carried out at the right time, its cost remains low. On the other hand, the prolonged lack of revisions ultimately leads to catastrophic situations in which the entire site must be redesigned. To overcome this situation, some projects multiply the requests for funding and thus the number of partner institutions: projects in this way manage to be sustainable, but at what cost? The time spent setting up projects and taking stock is time wasted on research, and the human cost of the precarious situations that this type of funding engenders has still to be measured.

There is, however, an alternative that none of the major European initiatives seem to have retained. Historically, libraries are in charge of conservation and access to resources. Some of them fulfil this mission for digital resources, but only partially. The *Bibliothèque nationale de France* thus ensures the archiving of digital and web projects, as well as the OpenLibrary project. However, this is considered in terms of archiving and history of the web, and not as the maintenance of active resources for research. Digital projects need a new kind of librarian. There is a new profession to be invented: people with advanced computer skills, and who could take care of maintaining and

updating the digital outputs hosted by the library. With such a model, each of the projects presented in this issue of the *Revue d'historiographie du théâtre* could easily be maintained for many years at the cost of a few hours a year. Perhaps one day, it will be as natural to sustain digital projects as it is to take care of books...