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Introduction: Performing Shakespeare with puppets

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William Shakespeare is almost certainly the playwright whose works have been the most often performed by Western European puppeteers for centuries. Similar to the stories of Faustus, Don Juan, Genevieve of Brabant, or Charles Perrault's and the Brother Grimms' fairy tales, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Romeo and Juliet* became living realities, for diverse audiences, by means of lifeless performers.

Notably in German-speaking countries, in Italy, and in France, puppeteers have performed Shakespeare's works in theatres, fairground booths and in the streets, in cafés and in country inns, for literary and artistic circles, middle-class spectators, workers, servants, and craftsmen. While the Shakespearean canon has entered the common grounding of Western culture for several centuries, puppeteers have largely contributed to this integration by broadening the audiences reached and the variety of reinterpretations.

The point of departure of this history may lay in the beginning of the seventeenth century, with a London performance of *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* by 'mammets', if a few allusions to it in comedies are to be believed.¹ But it certainly took off a few decades later in Germany, where travelling troupes, first English and then German, alternated between acting and puppetry: perhaps as soon as 1626, if *Der bestrafte Brudermord, oder Prinz Hamlet von Dänemark* was really the *Hamlet* performed that year in Dresden and in other towns, and if this play was truly intended for puppets,² as Nino Amico maintains.³ Undoubtedly, Shakespearean puppet shows were staged in the second half of the seventeenth century, at any rate: the puppeteer and troupe leader Michael Daniel Treu, when arriving in Lüneburg, had *Titus Andronicus* and *Konnich Liar auss Engelandt* in his repertoire, and in 1719 a German troupe mounted *Titus Andronicus* with puppets in Copenhagen.

But what were the actual playtexts performed by these puppeteers? The oldest surviving texts – manuscripts dating from the mid-nineteenth century and Carl Engel's

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transcriptions,⁴ disclose radical transformations: Möbius's *Hamlet* (1851) ends with the Ghost reappearing to thank Hamlet for avenging it, to cheers from the public.⁵ In Italy, where Shakespeare's works began to be performed with puppets in the first half of the nineteenth century, the numerous *copioni* [handwritten playtexts] they inspired rarely involved a direct confrontation with the plays: *burattinai* [glove-puppeteers] and *marionettisti* [string-puppeteers] took instead their inspiration from the *libretti* written for Rossini's, Bellini's, Mercadante's, Faccio's, and Verdi's operas.⁶ Anxious to appeal to a popular audience, they often modified the plots to make them more in line with the local value systems. In his 1912 version of *Giulietta e Romeo* for the Palermitan *pupi* [rod-marionettes], for example, the *puparo* [puppeteer] Giovanni Pernice turned Romeo into the avenger of his murdered mother, victim of the Capuleti, while Giulietta twice refused to follow him, arguing that honour should always be stronger than love.

Yet the encounter between Shakespeare's works and puppet theatre was not confined to popular shows. It could take the form of literary satire, just as in Johann Friedrich Schink's *Prinz Hamlet von Dänemark* (1799), or even that of theatre for the youth. The French author of the first collection of plays for children's theatre,⁷ Laure Bernard, included in it her rewriting of *King Lear*, which was slightly moralised, cleared of its most cruel scenes, and ending, like Nahum Tate's version, with the old king being brought back on his throne. In Symbolist and Modernist literary circles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, puppetry was celebrated for being the only type of performance complying with the poetical dimension of Shakespeare's works. At the Petit Théâtre de la Galerie Vivienne, Henri Signoret and Maurice Bouchor, with their keyboard-puppets inspired by the Provençal Nativity plays, staged in 1888 the first French performance of *The Tempest*, accompanied by Ernest Chausson's music.⁸ In Rome, Vittorio Podrecca's 1921 production of *La Tempesta* at his Teatro dei Piccoli was also, in a reduced version, the first Italian performance of a Shakespeare play.⁹ From an entirely different perspective, Edward Gordon Craig, in his gigantic cycle of puppet-plays *The Drama for Fools* (1916–1918), included two parodies of Shakespeare's tragedies: *Romeo and Juliet ... 300 years later* and *Once upon a Time or Hackle Cackle to Lam* (a variation on *King Lear*).¹⁰ Upon entering the twentieth century, puppetry was victim to the decline of traditional popular theatres, and had to reposition itself, for several decades, in the form of children's theatre. But it was also taken over by artists, poets, and stage directors who, acknowledging its high expressive potential, began using it as a contemporary scenic language. Shakespeare's work today has taken its rightful place here, as living material that is constantly being revisited and questioned.

The contribution of puppetry to the reception of Shakespeare's plays, however, remains poorly researched today because of the prejudices surrounding puppet theatre, which is still reputed to be nothing more than comic entertainment for children, but also because of the difficulties in gathering reliable information and documentary sources. Ezio Antonelli, in an exhibition held in Ravenna in 1983, *Shakespeare e il teatro di figura in Europa*,¹¹ carried out an initial survey. In 2020, Jungmin Song, in the 'Shakespeare and Puppetry' exhibition for the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry at the University of Connecticut, focused on

recent productions from the UK, the USA, and Israel.¹² Susan Young, in her pioneering book *Shakespeare Manipulated*,¹³ revealed the long tradition and the diversity of Italian productions with *marionette*, *burattini*, or *pupi*. A few dissertations, book chapters, and articles have analysed the relationship between Shakespeare and the puppet theatre of his time,¹⁴ or some productions of his works where puppets have been used.¹⁵ *Cahiers Élisabéthains* has published reviews of performances with puppets,¹⁶ and included them in research articles.¹⁷ But deeper investigations, like the ones assembled in this issue, are still too rare.

Prepared under the umbrella of the European Research Commission project *PuppetPlays* (Grant Agreement 835193), which is dedicated to the dramaturgy of puppet theatre in Western Europe, from the seventeenth century to date,¹⁸ this special issue seeks to introduce to the richness of the questions raised by the use of Shakespeare's works in this branch of the performing arts.

For a broader understanding, though, it is important to distinguish between 'puppet theatre' and 'theatre with puppets',¹⁹ especially when staging Shakespeare's plays is at stake. Puppet theatre traditionally involved hidden puppeteers. However, since the second half of the twentieth century, the manipulation of puppets in full view of the public gradually became the norm. As a result, the variety of relationships between the animated form (puppet or object) and the puppeteer has opened up puppet theatre to new aesthetics and new dramaturgical approaches. Similarly, the mixing of manipulation techniques within the same show, the variations in scale between the animated forms, the experiments with new materials or other media (such as the video projections in João Paulo Serea Cardoso's staging of *Macbeth*, for example), the abandonment of the puppet booth for theatre stages or large outdoor spaces, and collaborations with artists from other fields, have even renewed 'traditional' puppet theatre, exemplified by the Teatro di Gianni e Cosetta Colla's collaboration with painter Luigi Veronesi for a staging of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Alongside this evolution, 'theatre with puppets' has emerged, favouring the hybridisation of artistic forms where animated figures share the stage with actors or other performers. While in traditional puppet theatre, the puppet remains the primary medium, theatre with puppets results from a unique collaboration between directors, actors, and puppeteers on a specific artistic project. This theatre with puppets is now in the spotlight, whether the puppet is used for a single scene, a character, a category of characters, or is present throughout the show. Shakespeare's plays seem to lend themselves particularly well to this form, as evidenced by productions such as *As You Like It* directed by Kimberley Sykes in collaboration with Mervyn Millar, or *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by the Compagnie Point Zéro, which you can discover in this issue through interviews with the artists.

Whether one adopts the perspective of 'puppet theatre' or that of 'theatre with puppets', questions arise as to the translation of the Shakespearean text into the performance codes for puppets. In a note that remained unpublished for a lengthy period, Edward Gordon Craig, a visionary of staging with intimate knowledge of the world of puppets, considered the feasibility of this transposition in these terms:

They say that SHAKESPEARE can be well performed by marionettes.
 Swift – France – Maillol – Dr Johnson – Goethe? and others say so.
 I think *Hamlet* could be so performed if we saw

THE PRINCE as a fine figure of a man: *The Rest* as demi-animals, insects etc.
 Half-pigs – cats – rats – crocodiles – snakes – wasps – pelicans – vultures –
 owls –

When not speaking their lines we should hear their hissing – barking – mewing –
 gruntings –
 buzzings – and hootings.²⁰

For Craig, this translation into puppets therefore relies on a dramatic reconfiguration that distinguishes the title role (the only anthropomorphic figure) from the other characters who are subjected to or designated as having undergone animal metamorphosis. This reconfiguration sets up two regimes of presence onstage through the human/non-human duality, which may serve to stimulate the creation of new aesthetics and offer rich possibilities for new interpretations of the play. As for the playtext itself, Craig apparently does not plan here to reduce or adapt it, but rather to supplement the ‘lines’ with a hybrid language of animal sounds for Hamlet’s surrounding cast. There is no effect of dubbing intended, but rather a second language is introduced, which conveys an imagined physical construct and mirrors the visual appearance of puppets.

We wish to highlight reconfigurations such as these in this special issue, which is dedicated to showcasing the art of puppetry as well as exposing current practice. Today, choosing the puppet as a theatrical instrument does not mean replacing living actors with their artificial substitutes; rather, it means completely reconsidering the staging by orienting it more towards poetic suggestion rather than dramatic action.

The puppets in Shakespeare depicted in this issue offer a tantalising sampler of what can be found on British and European stages, past and present. This appropriately sets the stage for deeper dives into Shakespeare’s puppet-plays throughout Europe. The article section begins with an overview of puppet theatre in Western Europe, with Jean Boutan’s look at eighteenth-century Germany to uncover how *Prinz Hamlet von Dänemark* satirised intellectual and literary circles of the day. We then head over to France, where Yanna Kor shares how the famous Guignol puppet took Romeo’s place alongside Juliet and parodied Hamlet during the second half of the nineteenth century, in Pierre Rousset’s adaptations for the Guignol Theatre (Lyon) that involved transposing Shakespeare’s work to opera libretto and then from libretto to puppet-play. Next, we skip over to Italy, where Francesca Di Fazio invites us to discover two turn-of-the-century glove puppet adaptations – *Amlèto, ovvero Arclecchino principe de Danimarca* (1898) and *Macbeth all'improvviso* (2001) – that introduce comic characters from *Commedia dell'arte* alongside Shakespearean protagonists who disrupt their plays’ respective frameworks yet maintain their core narratives.

Travelling over to present-day England, Janice Valls-Russell considers how the use of puppets in Footsbarn Travelling Theatre’s *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Tempest* are

informed by the company's nomadic history in service of the texts and their diverse spectators, such as at the 2024 York Shakespeare Festival. Cécile Decaix then demonstrates how British puppet companies Blind Summit (London) and Forced Entertainment (Sheffield) used bunraku-style puppets and object theatre to offer fresh interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest*, and the *Henriad*. Finally, Hélène Beauchamp explores how French puppet company Pupella-Noguès adapted Tim Crouch's *I, Caliban* into *La Tempête de Caliban* (2023), with an actor, a foley artist, and objects.

Carole Guidicelli's look at Shakespeare productions from different corners (Germany, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom) rounds up this section. She demonstrates how the use of puppets, performing objects, and mental images allows for a deeper exploration of the different layers of meaning in Shakespeare's works.

The next two sections offer an occasion to meet some of the artists involved in the creation and direction of puppets. In his theatre essay, 'On the staging of *Macbeth*', João Paulo Serea Cardoso, the late founder and artistic director of the Teatro de Marionetas do Porto, recounts how his abridged puppet adaptation, inspired by the vestiges of the Balkan War, offers a reflection on the emerging new forms of violent power and how the puppets evolved into a form that offered a striking and surprising emotional connection to Shakespeare's characters through mixing puppet theatre with modern techniques such as voice distortion by microphones and video projections.

Vincenzo Pernice then introduces us to Cosetta Colla and Stefania Mannacio Colla, who explain how a 'traditional' string-puppet company targeting young audience can meet abstract painting, especially with *Il Sogno di una notte di mezza estate* (1991). We also meet Bruno Leone, a leading figure in Italian glove puppet shows, and more specifically in the Neopolitan street tradition of the *teatro delle guarattelle* with Pulcinella. Leone kindly took the time to meet with *Cahiers Elisabéthains* during the international *PuppetPlays* conference in May 2023, where he also performed his show, *Pulchi Shake & Speare*.

Next, we move to Belgium and meet Jean-Michel d'Hoop from Compagnie Point Zéro, who shares how the company used innovative bunraku-inspired puppets (performers partly wear them) in their *Songe d'une nuit d'été* – a queer adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This is followed by complementary interviews conducted by Daniel Yabut with two artists who worked together on the Royal Shakespeare Company's *As You Like It* (2019). First, Mervyn Millar, known best for taking part in the astonishing conception and manipulation of puppets in *War Horse* (Handspring Theatre Company at the National Theatre), shares his thought and creative process in constructing a giant *deux ex machina* in Act 5. Second, director Kimberley Sykes offers her insight into why she chose to have a larger-than-life Hymen grace the Forest of Arden, as well as the delights and challenges in staging this memorable production.

The issue concludes with Sandrine Le Pors's review of *Baby Macbeth*, directed and performed by Agnès Limbos for Compagnie Gare Centrale in Belgium. Limbos conceived of this 25-minute light-hearted adaptation with toys and objects for an audience of 12 months and older (25 babies were present at Le Pors's viewing), who were together delighted and astonished by this innovative and unusual medley based on Shakespeare's plays. To cap it off, Tiffany Stern kindly agreed to write an afterword that explores Shakespeare's

references to puppets and how they may have been used in his plays, as well as how his plays have been treated by puppets and puppeteers.

While it is not quite an ‘undiscovered country’, the editors of this special issue invite you to discover how the puppetry arts have interacted and continue to interact with Shakespeare’s plays to this day.

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Notes

1. See for example, Anonymous, *Euerie vvoman in her humor* (London: E[dward] A[l]lde for Thomas Archer, 1609), sig. H1^r. STC 25948; Henry Chettle and John Day, *The blind-beggar of Bednall-Green* [...] (London: printed for Robert Pollard and Thomas Dring, 1659), sigs G1^v–G2^f. Wing D464. See also Martin Wiggins with Catherine Richardson, *British Drama: A Catalogue, vol. IV (1598–1602)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 220.
2. See Tiffany Stern, “‘If I could see the Puppets Dallying’”: *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* and Hamlet’s encounters with the puppets’, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 31(3), 2013, pp. 337–52; June Schlueter, ‘No puppets dallying: Green’s 1626 production of *Hamlet*’, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 32(4), 2014, pp. 613–28.
3. Nino Amico, ‘Shakespeare coi pupi’, *Quaderni di teatro*, 1(3), 1981, pp. 96–105.
4. Carl Engel (ed.), *Deutsche Puppenkomödien*, 12 vols (Oldenburg: C. Berndt and A. Schwartz), 1874–1892.
5. Johannes Bolte, ‘Hamlet im deutschen Puppenspiel’, *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Shakespeare-Gesellschaft*, 28, 1893, pp. 157–76.
6. John McCormick, Alfonso Cipolla, and Alessandro Napoli, *The Italian Puppet Theatre: A History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2010), pp. 144–6.
7. Laure Bernard, *Théâtre de marionnettes. Ouvrage à l’usage de la jeunesse* (Paris: Didier, 1837).

8. Didier Plassard, *L'Acteur en effigie. Figures de l'homme artificiel dans le théâtre des avant-gardes (Allemagne, France, Italie, 1909–1929)* (Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, 1992), pp. 30–3.
9. Alfonso Cipolla (ed.), *Le note dei sogni. I compositori del Teatro dei Piccoli di Vittorio Podrecca* (Corazzano: Titivillus, 2014), pp. 44, 62–3.
10. See Edward Gordon Craig, *The Drama for Fools / Le Théâtre des fous*, ed. Didier Plassard, Marion Chénétier-Alev, and Marc Duveillier (Montpellier: L'Entretiens, 2012). See also Didier Plassard, 'Edward Gordon Craig's *Drama for Fools* and Shakespeare', *Puppet Notebook*, 27, 2016, pp. 5–7.
11. Ezio Antonelli (ed.), *Shakespeare e il teatro di figura in Europa. Prima indagine su un repertorio* (Mezzano: Compagnia Drammatico Vegetale), 1983.
12. See the 'Shakespeare and Puppetry' virtual exhibition, Ballard Institute and Museum, <https://bimp.uconn.edu/explore/virtual-experiences/shakespeare-and-puppetry/> (accessed 4 April 2025).
13. Susan Young, *Shakespeare Manipulated: The Use of the Dramatic Works of Shakespeare in teatro di figura in Italy* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Presses, 1996).
14. Frances K. Barasch, 'Shakespeare and the puppet sphere', *English Literary Renaissance*, 34(2), 2004, pp. 157–75.
15. Stanleigh H. Jones, 'Hamlet on the Japanese puppet stage', *The Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese*, 11(1), 1976, pp. 15–36; James Shapiro, 'Hamlet in Tokyo', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 37(4), 1986, pp. 489–91; Martin Six, *Hamlet im sächsischen Marionettentheater, Am Beispiel von zwei Stücken der Truppen Albin Richter und Friedrich Beier* (Diplomarbeit, Graz: Karl-Franzens-Universität, 2015); Mascha Erbeling, 'Hamlet im Figurentheater: Eine Bestandsaufnahme', in Peter W. Marx (ed.), *Hamlet-Handbuch, Stoffe, Aneignungen, Deutungen* (Heidelberg: J. B. Metzler, 2014), pp. 247–56; Ewa Tomaszewska, 'A *Midsummer Night's Dream* in Polish puppet theatres in Silesia, mise-en-scène by Jan Dorman, Josef Krofta and Marián Pecko', *Theatralia*, 21(2), 2018, pp. 95–111.
16. See for example, Michael Jones and Peter J. Smith's review of *Venus and Adonis* (dir. Gregory Doran, Royal Shakespeare Company and Little Angel Theatre), 'Complete Works Festival', *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 71(1), 2007, pp. 29–89; Nicoleta Cinpoes and Janice Valls-Russell's review of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (dir. Christina Pepino, Teatrul Tândărică), *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 100(1), 2019, pp. 79–81.
17. See for example, Rena Endo, 'How can we make Shakespeare more accessible in Japan?', *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 111(1), 2023, pp. 58–71.
18. *PuppetPlays – Reappraising Western European repertoires for puppet and marionette theatres (17th–21st centuries)* is a project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (G. A. 835193), <https://puppetplays.eu/en> (accessed 4 April 2025).
19. On that distinction, see for example, Penny Francis, *Puppetry: A Reader in Theatre Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 10–13.
20. E. G. Craig, '[Shakespeare performed by marionettes]', in Plassard, Chénétier-Alev, and Duveillier (eds), *Le Théâtre des fous / The Drama for Fools*, p. 413.

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Didier Plassard is Full Professor in Theatre Studies at the Université de Montpellier Paul-Valéry. He has published *L'Acteur en effigie* (L'Age d'homme, 1992, Georges-Jamati Award), *Les Mains de lumière* (Institut International de la Marionnette, 1996, 2004), Edward Gordon Craig's *Drama for Fools* (L'Entretemps, 2012), *Mises en scène d'Allemagne(s)* (CNRS Éditions, 2014), and several research articles in journals and collective publications. His research fields include contemporary theatre, avant-garde theatre, puppet theatre, and multimedia. Since October 2019, he has served as Principal Investigator of the ERC project *PuppetPlays* (G. A. 835193).

Cécile Decaix (Université de Montpellier Paul-Valéry) is a Teaching Fellow in English and a former post-doctoral researcher for the ERC *PuppetPlays* project (G. A. 835193), where she worked on a pre-eighteenth-century puppet-plays corpus. She earned a PhD in English Literature in 2019, and her dissertation, 'William Caxton's *Eneydos* (1490): Tracing the steps of a translator of Virgil in early modern England' (under the supervision of Prof. Jean-Christophe Mayer, Université de Montpellier Paul-Valéry) consisted of a critical, semi-diplomatic edition of William Caxton's *Eneydos*, the first printed English translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*.