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Puppet Plays

Editorial : What to do with the villains?

Dating from the beginning of the 19th century, the earliest surviving glove puppet shows - Punch in England and Polichinelle in France - feature a hero whose first action is to throw the baby he's been entrusted with out of the window, for he can't stand its cries. This is followed by a series of murders with sticks: the baby's mother, a blind man, a doctor, a beadle, police officers and a constable are killed one after the other. Driven by the success of this scenario, puppeteers soon opted to always have the protagonist triumph, hanging the executioner in his place and killing the devil -whereas, in older versions, the devil ended up taking him to Hell.

These shows delight children but often worry parents and educators. In France, Polichinelle was soon dethroned by Guignol, less disturbing and easier to moralize. In Italy, the story of Pulcinella has been stripped of the baby's murder,

Illustration George Cruikshank, engraving for John Payne Collier, *Punch and Judy*, 1828

of which only iconographic traces remain. In Great-Britain, however, where Punch & Judy shows have become a national institution, Punch has remained a villain despite efforts to soften him. Some puppeteers have even made the story more cruel and improbable, by putting baby and policeman through a meat grinder to turn them into sausages.

In the abstract and schematic world of glove puppets, the all-encompassing wickedness of Punch or

Illustration Johann Peter Lyser, *Polichinell*, Stuttgart : Paul Neff, 1857 (front cover)

Polichinelle is powerfully comic: he is pure evil – his actions are unmotivated but reassuring for that very reason. The authors who have tried to justify his crimes have had little success. Johann Peter Lyser (1804-1870), for example, was commissioned in 1838 by a Stuttgart publisher to write a *Polichinell* which would be acceptable as a children's book, but the play was to be illustrated by the engravings made by George Cruikshank for the *Punch & Judy* text published ten years earlier in London. The 'dramatic fairy tale for wise children young and old' imagined by Lyser reverses the roles: Polichinell, here fundamentally good, must defend himself against the traps that the devil had set for him. All the characters he slaughters are embodiments of evil, right down to the little girl Unart (Bad Habit), who accidentally falls out of the window, and her mother Bosheit (Wickedness). After killing the devil and all his accomplices, Polichinell is allowed to marry Princess Miauline, whom he has just freed.
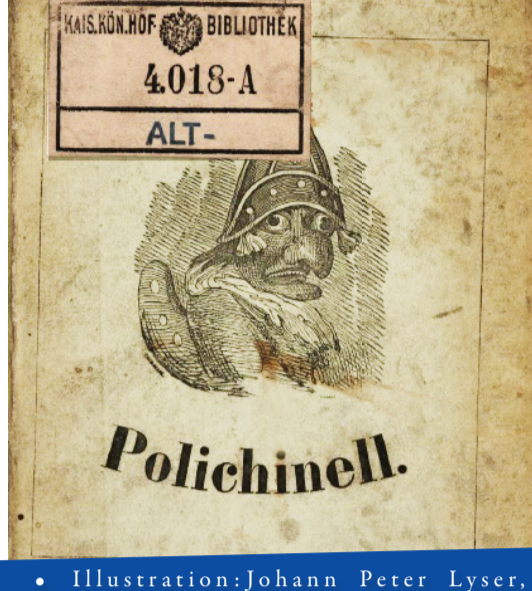
Unlike the original *Punch & Judy*, which has been reprinted many times, Lyser's *Polichinell* has sunk into oblivion. But how can you hope to change the meaning of a story if you reuse its illustrations? And isn't it ultimately a mistake to seek to legitimize crimes?
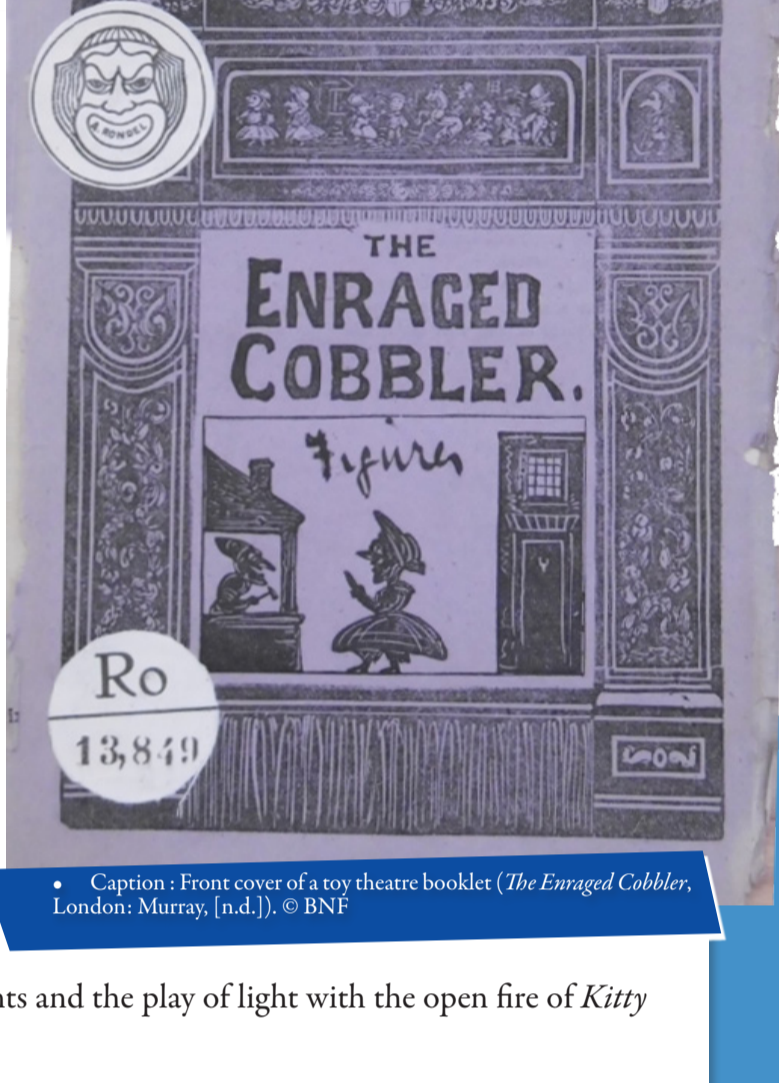
[Prof. Didier Plassard]

Two galanty shows texts?

To date, no pre-20th-century texts for shadow theatre have been found in England (with the exception of booklets published as part of toy theatres). However, there was a real and documented craze for shadow puppetry in London between 1770 and 1790, and the practice continued in the streets and parks of the capital city in the following century. Lists of scenes and titles are given in advertisements, but no handwritten or printed texts have survived.

One single account remains – that of an anonymous street performer, interviewed by journalist Henry Mayhew for his 1851 report, *London Labour and the London Poor*. Among various anecdotes about his work as a performer, subject to the vagaries of the weather and exposed to the heckling of children and drunks, he re-enacts two of his plays for the journalist: the insults and brawls in *The Cobbler Jobson*, interspersed

Caption : Front cover of a toy theatre booklet (*The Enraged Cobbler*, London: Murray, [n.d.]). © BNF

with sung verses; and the puns, the cat's feints and the play of light with the open fire of *Kitty h[o]lting the Pot, or the Woodchopper's Frolic*.

Without the show's material, the man recites the lines and describes the scenery, thereby delivering a dramatic dialogue, its stage directions, and also a few dramaturgical comments such as "that's what we call the aggrivating scene; and next comes the passionate scene...", or "It's a beautiful representation, for you see her working the bellows, and the fire get up, and the sparks fly up the chimney. [...] If it was only done on a large scale would be wonderful..."

[Sophie Courtade]

Thematic descriptors for a smooth navigation on *PuppetPlays*

No major changes have been made recently on the development of the puppetplays.eu platform, but those with a keen eye may have noticed the disappearance of a few keywords from the database. In fact, an essential cleansing of the play indexing is currently underway.

Indexing implies using content-words to describe a document (or a set of documents) in order to enrich its description (Circular AD 94-8, 1994). For the *PuppetPlays* project, these content-words have not been freed beforehand, as they must be able to give information on the concepts of the plays as they are described. The keywords entered by the database contributors reveal the main themes. "Love", "Death" and "Money" describe 110, 56 and 54 records in the database respectively.

Caption: Tag cloud of the keywords extracted from the database. Size varies according to the number of occurrences; colours are not representative.

The function of the keywords is not limited to a simple description of the records – they above all offer a new access path to each play. Entries are linked by their keywords, creating a network of semantic groups and making it possible to cross-reference authors and genres, periods and geographical regions. At the end of the *PuppetPlays* project, it would be interesting to study the affinities and antagonisms within the corpus in the database through the keywords, and to extract a visualisation of its main themes. You can already use the filters in the search bar or simply browse by clicking on the keywords of the records you are consulting.

[Maxine Schochuys-Kreiss]

Actualités

- From 22 to 26 April 2024, *PuppetPlays* welcomed Dr. Catarina Firmo, researcher at the University of Lisbon's Center for Theatrical Studies. Catarina helped us enrich the database with several production descriptions by contemporary Portuguese companies, including works by João Paulo Seara Cardoso and Isabel Barros (*Teatro de Marionetas do Porto*), Rute Ribeiro (*A Tarumba*), José Gil (*S.A. Marionetas*) and Igor Gandra (*Teatro do Ferro*). She also gave a lecture in French, "*Où est passé mon corps? Retrouvailles entre corps et matières au sein du théâtre de formes animées au Portugal*" (Where has my body gone? The reunion of body and matter in Portuguese animated form theatre) on Thursday 25 April, on the St-Charles campus. The video recording of this lecture will soon be available online.

- The filmed recording of Alissa Mello's conference, "The Judy Project - A Critical and Historical Investigation of Women and Puppets from the 17th to the 21st Century" (8 April 2024, St Charles campus), jointly organized by the EMMA research unit and *PuppetPlays*, has been posted online. You can view it here: https://doi.org/10.34847/nkl.3822b25i