

THE CAROLINGIAN EPIC IN THE TRADITIONAL LIÈGE MARIONETTE THEATRE: A CASE STUDY OF *HUON DE BORDEAUX AND LES QUATRE FILS AYMON**

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ABSTRACT: Although Carolingian epics are at the heart of the traditional Liège puppet repertoire, they remain a little explored field of research. This essay focuses on two epics, *Les quatre fils Aymon* and *Huon de Bordeaux*, which serve as case studies to examine the transition from narrative to dramatic text and its transposition for the regional puppet stage. Following the stories from the annotated novels to the modern plays, the first part shows how the dramatisation of the prose text gradually developed. The second part examines the creation process of staging the story of the paladins of France from the point of view of regional identification, focusing on the role of Tchanchès, the typical character of the Liège puppet theatre.

KEY-WORDS: Carolingian Epics, Liège puppet theatre, Tchanchès, *Les quatre fils Aymon*, *Huon de Bordeaux*, Children auditory, Popular puppet theatre, Regional identification, Chivalric novel

RIASSUNTO: Nonostante l'epopea carolingia sia al centro del repertorio tradizionale delle marionette di Liegi, rimane un campo di ricerca poco esplorato. Questo saggio tratta due poemi epici, *Les quatre fils Aymon* e *Huon de Bordeaux*, per esaminare la transizione dal testo narrativo a quello drammatico e la sua trasposizione sul palcoscenico regionale delle marionette. Seguendo le storie dai romanzi commentati alle opere teatrali moderne, la prima parte mostra come si è progressivamente sviluppata la drammatizzazione del testo in prosa. La seconda parte esamina il processo di creazione della mise-en-scene della storia dei paladini di Francia dal punto di vista dell'identificazione regionale, particolarmente concentrandosi sul ruolo di Tchanchès, il personaggio tipico del teatro delle marionette di Liegi.

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PAROLE CHIAVE: Epica carolingia, teatro delle marionette di Liegi, Tchanches, *I quattro figli Aymon*, *Huon di Bordeaux*, ascolto dei bambini, teatro popolare delle marionette, identificazione regionale, romanzo cavalleresco

The Carolingian epics established the reputation of the Liège marionette theatre and continue to do so to this day. Plays recounting the story of the paladins of France, such as *Les quatre fils Aymon*, are classics in the traditional repertoire, adapted by puppeteers from the editions of the *Bibliothèque bleue*, especially those by Alfred Delvau, the favourite author of today's puppeteers and of their predecessors. It is generally agreed that the history of the Liège puppets began with a certain Conti who came from Italy to Liège in the middle of the 19th century.¹ According to the testimony of Léopold Vandervelden in 1860, Conti performed plays «in which Emperors are cast down»,² thus probably the Carolingian epics. Dieudonné Salmé (1888) gives more precise information, naming among the great plays performed in the Conti theatre «Les quatre fils Raymond (Les Quatre Fils Aymon)».³ For Joseph Médard (1895) *Les quatre fils Aymon*, as well as *Oger le Danois*, *Huon de Bordeaux*, and *Roland le furieux*, are the old plays of chivalry that are often performed without audiences ever tiring of them.⁴ In 1911, Alexis Deitz divided the Liège puppet repertoire into five categories: the romances of chivalry, religious plays (*La Naissance* and *La Passion*), plays based on popular tales, novels, and the Walloon plays.⁵ After 1931, that is, after the creation of the Museum of Walloon Life puppet theatre, the «classical» repertoire, comprising the first two categories, is the only one that remained. Of the chivalry plays, the Carolingian cycle is the one which has survived the best. Maurice Piron explains:

¹ Cfr. PIRON 1957; NEVEN - HAERTJENS 2001.

² By LEGROS 1954: 126. All the translations are mine, if not otherwise indicated.

³ SALME 1888: 53.

⁴ Joseph Médard, *l'Almanac' des quatre Matis* (LEGROS 1961: 137).

⁵ DEITZ 1911: 387-393. This classification has been revised and supplemented by Legros (LEGROS 1961).

This condensed neo-formation, concentrating on epic themes, that is to say on Carolingian themes, took place in the Liège environment, where schoolchildren were taught that Liège was the cradle of Charlemagne, or, at the very least, that the region of Liège was the homeland of his ancestors.⁶

It is indeed a double approach, preserving tradition and building regional identity, which distinguishes the Liège epic. Its other particularity is to be the result of a double process of rewriting: first, the medieval *chanson de geste* was modified and simplified to make it accessible to the readers of the *Bibliothèque bleue*, then remodeled by the puppeteer to adapt it for marionettes according to his own interpretation. Traditionally, the plays were not written, but the novels were annotated directly for the stage. Over the years, some puppeteers began to write full-length plays based on the romances of chivalry.

For the present essay, I have chosen *Les quatre fils Aymon* and *Huon de Bordeaux* as my main case studies. The themes of revolt and crusade, along with the fantastic element, that distinguish the two epics have seduced puppeteers and their public, ensuring for these epics a place of choice in the repertoire of Liège marionettes.⁷ This essay does not seek to draw up a panorama of the epic repertoire of the Liège puppets, but rather to examine the passage from narrative to dramatic text and its transposition for the regional puppet stage, a process that has been barely examined by specialists till now.⁸

⁶ PIRON 1978: 13. The particular importance of the figure of Charlemagne for the Wallonia, whose political and cultural identity has only recently been established, is also emphasised by John McCormick and Bennie Pratasik: «It allowed the textile workers, poorly paid and living in insalubrious conditions, to feel that there was a glorious and heroic past in which they could participate by going to a puppet show» (McCORMICK - PRATASIK 2004: 199).

⁷ From a thematic point of view, we can classify these epics within the cycle of the revolting barons. Luke Sunderland proposes a sub-classification according to the main narrative axis, revolt for *Les quatre fils Aymon* and the crusade for *Huon de Bordeaux* (SUNDERLAND 2017, see in particular Chapters 2 and 6).

⁸ Among the few works on the subject are: IMPE 2019; GROSS 2001: 143-162. The same can be said of the Liège epics, which despite the richness of their subject, remain a field of research that has been little explored. Cfr. QUÉRUEL 2000b; CAZANAVE 2010; CAZANAVE 2011.

1. THE ANNOTATED NOVELS

Initially, the writing of the Liège epic followed a process of annotation, adaptation, and transformation. Before the play could be staged, it was necessary for the puppeteer to re-appropriate the text by adding his own marks. The edition played an important role in the nature of the annotations added. The text of the *Épinal* edition, printed in two columns, required a lot of work to distinguish direct speech from the descriptive passages because of its sparse use of punctuation. The novels in Delvau's version, by contrast, did not require such intervention, as the characters' lines were clearly apparent. The text, while also printed in two columns, is not as tightly packed on the page, as the format is twice the size of the *Épinal* edition, which makes the reading much easier. Among the 36 annotated novels held in the Museum of Walloon Life collection are the *Épinal* editions of *Huon de Bordeaux* and *Les quatre fils Aymon*, annotated by unidentified puppeteers, which attracted my attention particularly for their complex and abundant annotation system, involving both literal and pictorial stage directions. I therefore propose to examine them first.

1.1 "*Histoire de Huon de Bordeaux*"

Huon de Bordeaux tells the story of the young son of the duke of Bordeaux, Huon, who unwittingly kills the son of Charlemagne Charlot. To earn the emperor's forgiveness, he must go on a penitential journey to Babylon with a message for Charlemagne's enemy, Admiral Gaudisse. The crusade was meant to be Huon's downfall, but it would lead to his triumph. Written in the second half of the thirteenth century by an anonymous author, this poem became at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth century a cycle centered on the adventures of Huon.⁹ The earliest prose version of the poem dates from the fifteenth century.

⁹ The datation is open to discussion. Cfr: CAZANAVE 2008: 32-33; WHITE-LE GOFF 2010.

The *Épinal* copy of *Histoire de Huon de Bordeaux*, probably annotated by Gaston Engels,¹⁰ bears marks in the text as well as inscriptions and small drawings added in the margins [Figure 1]. Examining first additions on the level of the text, we find quite a few underlined words, most of which are the names of people and places. Our puppeteer has also underlined words that are important for the meaning of the story. Thus, for example, if we extract the underlined words from the first two chapters, in which Charlemagne asks his barons for advice and listens to the answers of Count Amaury and Duke of Naimes, we get the following result:

Charlemagne – Naimes – Ganelon – appela le duc Naimes, et lui dit – Rome Dieu – Or, vous – deux fils – Louis – Charlot – nobles – détruit – guerre – Baudoin – Oger le Danois – Amaury de Haute-Feuille – Naimes – barons – Charlot – dont l'empereur – son fils – felon – empereur – terre – servi – sept ans – duc Sevin mourut – nom Huon – Girard – Bordeaux – Aquitaine – Sire – dit l'empereur – trois mille – fils de Sevin – Huon – Girard – Quand le duc Naimes – le duc Sevin – jeunesse – mère – Mais, sire – croire – prince – père – vos chevaliers – enfants – cour – hommage¹¹

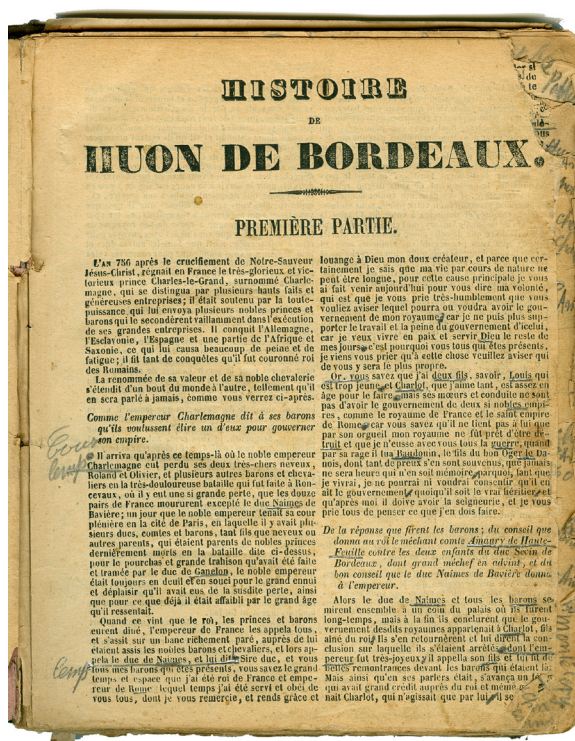


Fig. 1: First page of *Histoire de Huon de Bordeaux pair de France, Duc de Guenne, contenant ses faits et actions héroïques, réunis en un seul volume*, nouvelle édition, ornée de huit gravures, Épinal, Pellerin, n.d., copy annotated by unidentified puppeteer, n. 11644. © Province de Liège – Musée de la Vie wallonne.

¹⁰ The name of Gaston Engels is written on the cover, and the programme of a street performance by the singer Arthur Engels (Gaston's uncle) was used as a page marker and for annotations. Gaston Engels, born in 1905 into a family of puppeteers, was active from the 1920s until the 1970s.

¹¹ *HHB*: 3-4.

Even if we do not know the story (although audiences did know the Carolingian cycle), it is possible to understand that Charlemagne is faced with a dilemma, that the sons of Duke Sevin will play an important role, and that the villain will be opposed to the noble knight. Thus, underlining could have been used by the performer either to indicate the words to be emphasized when reading the text aloud or to improvise on the basis of the written text.

Other types of marks in the text are dots indicating the beginning of a sentence, and slashes showing where breaths should be taken in long sentences. To understand the function of these marks better, one must cross-reference them with the annotations added in the margins. Using the same system, let us try to rewrite the beginning of chapter four in which the Duchess Sevin responds to the king's messengers. With the annotations (in italics) and markings this gives:

Duchesse, la dame entendant [les messagers] / jeunes/ [duc] Sevin leur père – droiturier
[Charlemagne] – aimait [duc Sevin].

Huon, chevaliers

Duchesse, elle regarda [ses enfants en pleurant]: nuit / duc Naines / parents / Sevin

Messagers: Dame – messagers – Naines

*Messagers passe la nuit.*¹²

The beginning of a script is slowly coming together. There are stage directions, characters and lines. The duchess is the only one who acts, hears, and watches. The action of Huon, who in the novel advances towards his mother, is not underlined, but the word “chevaliers”, expressing Huon's desire to become a knight, is important.

Now that we have a better understanding of the system, let us look at how it works in the transposition of the battle scene to the puppet stage. In the novels, the description of the battle is often very long and detailed. How do the annotations help to transform description into action? To answer this question, let us take the example of the judicial duel between Huon and the traitor Amaury, which we can rewrite according to the same method as in the previous passages:

¹² *HHB*: 4. The original spelling has been retained.

Champions. *Amaury parle à Huon.*

Amaury. Huon.

Huon : –

Éclats – [tombèrent] par terre / se relevèrent – *épée* / [trois pas en] arrière – Amaury

Amaury : –

Quand le comte Amaury [eut senti le grand coup]

La hanche – tomba – encore que ledit Amaury [se sentit fort angoisseux et navré]¹³

The dialogue between the characters is not particularly relevant (it was probably improvised), what is important is the opposition of the two. The action is reduced to a few main movements: the two fall and rise again. The battle is represented, not read or illustrated.

The annotations in the margins of this chapter also offer a different type of stage direction: drawings. There are four sketches: two crossed swords, a church, a shield, and a sword. The first is often used by puppeteers to mark a battle. The second is an indication of place, perhaps even of setting, because not every place deserves a pictorial stage direction. We can also assume that the shield and sword are indications of the props used in the scene. The marks therefore offer a global overview of the performance to the showman who is often the only one who plays all the roles and directs the show.

1.2 “*Histoire des quatre fils Aymon*”

The *chanson de geste* of *Renaut de Montauban* was written around 1200. As in the case of *Huon de Bordeaux*, we have no precise information on the author or date of composition. Over the centuries the poem has undergone many variations, with the first prose adaptations appearing in the fifteenth century. The title *Les quatre fils Aymon*, under which it appears in the catalogues of the *Bibliothèque bleue* and enters into the traditional repertoire of Liège marionettes, was attributed to it in the second half of the fourteenth century.¹⁴ The popularity of the story of Aymon’s four sons, Regnault (or Renaud), Al-

¹³ *HHB*: 12.

¹⁴ This medieval narrative has been the subject of multiple studies. Cfr: QUÉRUEL 2000a; BAUELLE-MICHEL 2005; BAUELLE-MICHEL 2006.

lard, Guidard, and Richard, is due to the subject matter, which pits the dominant power of Charlemagne against the four rebellious knights. Initially loyal to the emperor, they become his bitter enemies after a dispute between Berthelot, Charlemagne's nephew, and Regnault, which ends in Barthelot's death. With the help of their cousin Maugis, a powerful enchanter, and the magic horse Bayard, they manage to escape from Charlemagne.

The annotated copy of *Histoire des quatre fils Aymon* is of particular interest because it suggests the intervention of at least two different puppeteers. I would like to look first at some of the marks added by the first puppeteer in pencil. The writing is sloppy, with spelling mistakes, suggesting rapid notes made while reading rather than precise annotations. There are both inscriptions in the margins and marks made within the text. Most of the annotations of the first type designate the character who is speaking, thus giving the prose text the dramatic form of dialogue. The dots added in the text make it easier to distinguish speech, which is not preceded by any punctuation. Sometimes the name of the speaker is also underlined. The system is therefore very similar to the one we have seen in the case of *Huon de Bordeaux*.

The first puppeteer's annotations evoke another important working process: the transformation from description to direct speech. The puppeteer indicates that the passage describing Duke Beuves's castle is a speech of Savari (one of the men of Lohier, the son of Charlemagne). However, our puppeteer did not stop there, because on the previous page he marked "Savari spy" in the margins to indicate that the spy who informs Duke Beuves of Lohier's arrival must be played by the same marionette as the Savari character. This choice is probably dictated by the requirements of a puppet show, in which the number of characters must be reduced to a necessary minimum, but it is not without interest.

The annotations made by the second hand (from chapter XI [the siege of Montauban]) offer an even more advanced approach to dramatisation. Written in black ink, they are more meticulous. Sometimes they complement the pencil annotations in the margins, more often they are superimposed on the text, written on small pieces of paper and glued on. These additions hide the parts that are not to be played and make it easier to add stage directions and speeches rewritten to suit puppets. For example, the detailed description of the treating of Richard's wound by Maugis in chapter XV is replaced by the

following brief stage direction «Maugis leads Richard out, a little later Richard enters».¹⁵ As the puppet is not capable of complicated manipulations such as cleaning and stitching a wound, the “operation” must be done offstage.¹⁶ The scene of Maugis’s liberation by magic in chapter XXII offers another case in point. The original text states:

Le roi lui-même s’endormit si fort, qu’il tomba à l’envers sur son lit. Maugis, voyant que le roi et tous les pairs de France *étaient* bien endormis, fit un autre charme, qui *était* d’une si grande vertu, que les fers qu’il avait aux pieds, le collier et la chaîne de fer, tout tomba par terre, puis il se leva; voyant que Charlemagne dormait la tête de travers, il prit le cuiller et la lui redressa; il lui déceignit *ensuite Joyeuse* sa bonne épée, et la mit à sa ceinture, puis alla vers Roland auquel il *ôta* Durandal, son épée, ensuite à Olivier, Hauteclaire, après à Oger; puis vint au coffre où la couronne et le trésor *étaient*, et prit tout. Dès qu’il eut fait tout cela il prit une herbe, en frotta le nez et la barbe du roi, et le décharma, puis le poussa de doigt, et lui dit: Sire, je vous ai dit hier que...¹⁷

The glued-on paper simplifies the action so that it can be played by puppets:

Maugis passe devant les chevaliers maintenant les voilas tous endormi délivrons nous de nos chaines et désarmons les tous (il passe devant tous) voilas que est fait maintenant *éveillons* le roi (il va près du roi) sire *éveillez* vous.¹⁸

We can thus see how the literary text is transformed into a stage text. The description has become direct speech with the stage directions indicating Maugis’s movements on stage. This time, the solution for replacing what the puppet cannot do is not off-stage action but naming the actions instead of actually performing them.

The working methods of the puppeteers who annotate these novels thus become clearer: they identify the important facts, that is, where the action takes place and who is

¹⁵ HQFA: 46 (glued paper).

¹⁶ The movements of the Liège marionette are even more limited than those of the string puppet. As it is manipulated by a rod, *fi d’acro*, attached at the crown, the impression of life is given only by the movements from right to left of the head and the swinging of the hands and legs.

¹⁷ HQFA: 60.

¹⁸ Ivi: 60 (glued paper).

speaking, and in this way they build the virtual canvas that will facilitate the combination of reading and improvisation. What at first sight appears to be a text to be read is, on closer examination, a truly dramaturgical work of adaptation and interpretation. The puppeteer who added glued pieces of paper advances even further with the annotations which are more distinctly intended for the staging with puppets.

2. THE SCRIPTS

Over time, some puppeteers have created more or less elaborate plays from the *Bibliothèque bleue* chapbooks. However, the literary aspect dominating the dramatic aspect persists, as the plays, referred to rather as “episodes”, are linked together, the story is told over a period of weeks or even months, as was the case with performances based on annotated novels. This division gradually took on the form of established parts. Thus, Christian Deville, successor of Gaston Engels, divides *Huon de Bordeaux* into ten episodes embracing the main events of the story:

1. La Jeunesse de Huon de Bordeaux
2. Huon à la cour de Charlemagne
3. Huon rencontre Oberon
4. Huon fait la conquête de Tourmont
5. Combat de Huon contre Angoulafre
6. Huon à la cour d’Amiral Gaudisse
7. Combat de Huon contre Agrapard
8. La délivrance d’Esclarmonde
9. La Trahison de Girard
10. La Réhabilitation de Huon¹⁹

Without going into a detailed analysis of the episodes, we can see the progress made in interpreting the novel and transposing it to the puppet stage in this list alone: Huon’s

¹⁹ This handwritten list is found on a single page attached to the typed version of Christian Deville, *Huon de Bordeaux, La Délivrance d’Esclarmonde. 8^{ème} épisode*, coll. Denis Fauconnier.

travels have been removed, the plot reduced to its essentials, the number of characters obviously reduced, and clear preference has been given to the magical aspects and battles. Some puppeteers, such as Victor Verrées,²⁰ synthesized the first two episodes into one. Having established the episodes, the puppeteers gradually expanded them into isolated plays that could be performed separately. To resolve the problem of the contextualisation of the events for the audience, some of them, like Deville, added to each of the episodes a short introduction summarising what happened in the preceding episodes.

2.1 *The transition from the annotated novel to the play*

The written play did not have the same importance for all the puppeteers. We can thus only partially consider the transition from the annotated novel to the play as a step in the evolution of the Liège puppet epic. Gaston Engels continued to perform according to the annotated novels, while some of his colleagues, such as Thomas Talbot²¹ or Victor Verrées, already had written plays.²² An examination of the latter allows us to see the development of the techniques of the dramatisation of the epic narrative as well as the evolution of writing for puppets according to the period and the audience.

2.1.1 “*Les Quatre Fils Aymon*” (ca. 1925)

The typed version of *Les quatre fils Aymon* attributed to Thomas Talbot and written around 1925 is a good starting point, as the influence of the literary source, the Épinal edition, was still very much present. Its subtitle, «1^{er} chapitre - Ou les Quatre Fils Aymon sont sacrés chevaliers; ou La mort de Lohier, fils aîné de Charlemagne» already evokes a

²⁰ Born into a family of puppeteers, Victor Verrées (1889-1962) took over the family theatre in 1913. After its closure in 1931, Verrées was recruited by the Museum of Walloon Life where he worked until the end of his artistic career.

²¹ Talbot was active in the first half of the 20th century (his theatre was founded in 1924). In 1929, he published some of his plays in the Bibliothèque de Tchantchès series.

²² GROSS 2001: 148-149.

novel rather than a play. This more literary than theatrical approach to the text is reflected in the plot, which remains largely faithful to the *Bibliothèque bleue* version. Nevertheless, the rewriting is considerable.

First of all, the author has chosen to change the order of the scenes, placing Duke Beuves's council after Lohier's exchange with Savari. This enables him to better integrate this scene, which existed in the novel, with that in which the spy, seeing Charlemagne's men, goes to warn the duke. Another brief scene has also been modified to contribute to the dramatisation of the whole structure. This is the scene of the porter who in the novel first meets Lohier and then goes to warn his master. Our puppeteer has omitted the meeting, leaving just the announcement made in Walloon, as it is "a Tchanchès" who takes on the role. The introduction of the Tchanchès, the marionette representing a popular Liège character, is one of the most important additions made. We shall come back to this later.

Also, the dialogues are developed to give greater prominence to the characters and events. Thus, Duke Beuves's exchange with the anxious duchess is enriched with a few additional lines to highlight the choleric and rebellious character of the duke: «Par le diable, madame mon épouse je vous prierai de ne plus oncques me parler de cette manière ; car en vérité, je ne ferai pour le roi Charlemagne, le sacrifice d'un denier.»²³ These additions serve to gradually build up to the climax of the play, Duke Beuves's battle with Lohier.

As in the annotated novels, the battle scene undergoes the most important dramatization, as the description must be transformed into action. Thus, the great massacre by the duke's men of Lohier's knights is broken down into five battles in which «Lohier's men are killed» on the one hand and «Duke Beuves's men are victorious» on the other. The death scene of Lohier, summarised in the Épinal edition in one sentence, is enriched by dialogue:

COMBAT

Le Duc Beuves contre Lohier tombe

Lohier (droite)

Par Dieu! duc Beuves, de mon coup vous n'en échapperez pas...

²³ *Les Quatre Fils Aymon* [1925]: 4.

Le duc Beuves (se relève)
Je me priserai peu si je ne puis me venger de toi.
COMBAT
Le duc Beuves contre Lohier tué²⁴

The importance of dialogue here must be emphasized. The battle involving the duke and Lohier is not reduced to a few directions indicating the stage action, as with the previous battles. It is a more personal confrontation that needs speech to be dramatic.

2.1.2 *The Verrées versions*²⁵

In the 1930s and 1940s, Victor Verrées adapted Delvau's versions of *Huon de Bordeaux* and *Les quatre fils Aymon* for marionettes. According to Bernard Guidot, the interest of Verrées (and of many other Liège puppeteers) in Delvau can be explained by the latter's «new writing technique, forgetting the epic style and its often incantatory lyrical aspects, and favouring a narrative style closer to the readers and giving pride of place to the more lively, albeit frequently clumsy, stage directions».²⁶ Although Verrées divided the epic into episodes rather than chapters, he did not stray too far from the literary source. He took up the modifications made by Delvau, namely, a synthesis of the action and reduction in the number of characters. In spite of this, his work in transposing the novel onto the stage shows an even more advanced approach to dramatization.

2.1.2.1 “*La Prise de Montfort*”

To better understand Verrées' method, I propose first to examine the episode «La Prise de Montfort» (chapters III and IV of *Les quatre fils Aymon*). It divides the plot into eleven

²⁴ *Les Quatre Fils Aymon* [1925]: 8.

²⁵ The plays analysed in this section as well as the plays by Christian Deville mentioned above and the play by Denis Fauconnier which will be examined later were graciously placed at my disposal by Denis Fauconnier, the director of the Théâtre à Denis, to whom I would like to express my gratitude.

²⁶ GUIDOT 2005. Cfr. MÉNARD 2000.

short scenes, sometimes containing only a stage direction. Even though there are several characters on stage, only two or three speak. Verrées assigns Charlemagne the role of narrator, and it is the emperor who recounts the previous events.

Although Verrées remains faithful to Delvau's plot, he nevertheless makes some changes to its structure. For example, he reduces the battle in defence of the castle to the fight between the brothers and the traitor Hernier. Scene XI, in which the fight takes place, opens with action (a perfect counterbalance, it should be noted, to Charlemagne's council in scene I):

Hernier met le feu au Château, puis sort.

Arrivent les 4 fils Aymon.

Renaud: – Frères nous devons gagner le pont-levis pour barrer la route à nos ennemis. (*Ils sortent*).

Hernier vient avec ses hommes, les fils Aymons également. Grand combat. Hernier reste seul de son groupe avec deux soldats et combat avec Renaud.

Renaud: – Hernier, traître que vous êtes? Est-ce la récompense que vous se deviez pour l'hospitalité que je vous avais donnée. Vous allez mourir de la mort des lâches.

*Renaud tue les deux soldats et à ce moment reviennent du côté contraire Richard, Allard et Guichard avec une armée et font Hernier prisonnier.*²⁷

This agitation is followed by Renaud's announcement of the punishment of the traitor and of his decision to leave Montfort castle. Here Verrées tightens up the original story in which the brothers do not hastily leave the castle because of the flames, but first complete the defeat the emperor's men and punish Hernier. Verrées also adds an emotional moment:

Renaud regarde une dernière fois son château.

Renaud: – Adieu beau château... C'est grand dommage de te voir ainsi détruit... Grand dommage, vraiment...

²⁷ VERRÉES, *La Prise*: 6-7. My italics.

Allard: – Ne vous attristez pas ainsi, mon frère, vous le plus vaillant chevalier que je connaisse.²⁸

This moving separation is not present in Delvau. It is most likely an addition by Verrées to give Renaud's character greater dramatic relief. Verrées, however, omits the emotional scenes that are present in the literary source, such as Renaud's meeting with his father on the battlefield, or the exchange between Duke Naimes and Charlemagne, who is devastated by the loss at the battle of Montfort.²⁹

2.1.2.2 *La Jeunesse de Huon de Bordeaux*

Verrées's version of the first episode of the *Histoire de Huon de Bordeaux*, up to Huon's departure for Jerusalem, sheds important light on the methods used by the puppeteer to transfer the narrative description of a battle to the puppet stage. A comparison of Huon's encounter with Charlot in Delvau's and Verrées' versions gives a clear idea of this:

DELVAU

Charlot, en [apercevant Girard] ainsi seul, sans armes, tout baguenaudent et sans défiance, courut au devant de lui au galop de son cheval et, sans prétexte aucun, lui chercha aussitôt querelle. Girard, étourdi par la brusquerie de l'attaque, allait se décider cependant à répondre, lorsque, d'un coup de lance appliqué en pleine poitrine, Charlot le renversa, blessé, de son cheval.

– A moi, frère, à moi ! cria Girard d'une voix lamentable, en roulant sur l'herbe du sentier.

VERRÉES

Charlot à Girard qui s'avance lentement – Chevalier ! qui t'a donné la permission de chasser dans ce bois. Je ne sais qui me retient que je ne te donne de mon épée dans le corps. (Il frappe Girard)

Girard – A moi, frère, à moi !

²⁸ Ivi: 7.

²⁹ It is worth noting that Alfred Dufour and Christian Deville chose to include in their version of *La Prise de Montfort* (very similar to that of Verrées) the scene of Charlemagne admitting the mistake he had made.

[L'arrivée de Huon]

– Que t'a fait cet enfant, barbare? lui cria Huon, indigné. C'est lâcheté de l'avoir attaqué ainsi sans qu'il pût se défendre...

[Charlot le ment sur son identité. Huon le répond]

Huon avait à peine fini de parler, que Charlot, mettant on continent sa lance en arrêt et serrant les flancs de son cheval, courut sur le fils aîné du duc Sévin qui n'eut que le temps d'envelopper son bras gauche de son manteau, afin de s'en faire un bouclier. Le choc fut violent, mais le manteau de Huon fut seul percé. Huon, alors, se levant sur ses étiers, frappa à plomb un coup si terrible de son épée, sa seule arme en cet instant, que le casque de Charlot en fut brisé et qu'il eut le crâne fendu jusqu'aux yeux. Le fils de Charlemagne tomba mort sur le gazon.³⁰

Huon (accouru) – Que t'a fait cet enfant, barbare. C'est lâcheté de l'avoir attaqué ainsi, sans qu'il put se défendre...

[Charlot le ment sur son identité. Huon le répond]

(Duel entre Charlot et Huon. Charlot tué)³¹

As we can see, Verrées's approach to the literary source is more flexible: he keeps the essential lines and replaces the descriptions with brief stage directions. He invents a line for Charlot to give him the pretext to attack Girard. As the focus is on action, Girard's suffering is effaced. The scene thus becomes more dynamic and gains a livelier rhythm. As the battle is the climax of the show, Verrées doubles it, adding another one that does not appear in Delvau. After the death of Charlot, the abbot and Huon's knights arrive ready to fight. But, says Delvau, «not one of Charlot's men came out of the thickets of the wood to attack them».³² Verrées instead takes advantage of this opportunity to stage a "great battle" from which Huon and his entourage emerge victorious.

³⁰ DELVAU, *Huon*: 148

³¹ VERRÉES, *La Jeunesse*: 6-7.

³² DELVAU, *Huon*: 148

2.2 *The plays for children*

The evolution in audiences, initially mostly adults and increasingly young people over the years, has in turn influenced the rewriting process. Children had to be taken into account: violence had to be avoided. At the end of the 1950s, the educational service of the Walloon Museum published booklets entitled «puppet plays adapted for children».³³ Are these the plays that were performed in the museum's theatre or the plays proposed for children to prolong the experience of the show at home? It is difficult to say. It is also impossible to say exactly who wrote these plays or when. Nevertheless, I think it is essential to mention these versions of our plays here.

The story of Huon de Bordeaux is represented by two texts: the first, *Huon de Bordeaux*, corresponds to Verrées episode «La Jeunesse de Huon de Bordeaux»; the second, *Le Retour de Huon de Bordeaux* – to the tenth episode of Deville, «La Réhabilitation de Huon». But here the similarity ends. The list of characters is reduced. In *Huon de Bordeaux*, Duke Naimes, Girard, the duchess, and the abbot are no longer present. On the other hand, Louis, another son of Charlemagne, is added. Here it is Louis who, according to Amaury and Charles's plan, is to be killed by Huon, but the plan does not work. Nobody is killed (Louis just pretends to be dead). Huon fights Amaury to prove his loyalty, but he does not kill the traitor who, once defeated, flees. His departure for Jerusalem is not a penance but the only way to avoid further battles with Charles and Amaury. *Le Retour de Huon de Bordeaux*, reduced to a canvas of seven episodes, keeps the same thematic orientation, which is the confrontation between Huon and Amaury. It is not clear why only the first and final episodes were published, leaving the central part of the subject, Huon's journey, aside.

Les quatre fils Aymon is also a canvas preceded by an introduction, in which it is explained to children that Charlemagne was very indulgent with his sons and nephews, often intervening to avoid punishing them for their misdeeds, and, on the contrary, intransigent with the innocent, even chastising them without cause. «It was such injustice

³³ The creation of the Walloon Museum's educational service dates back to 1955.

that provoked the great revolt of the Four Sons of Aymon».³⁴ The story opens with the dispute between Renaud and Charlemagne's nephew Ganelon (in the *Bibliothèque bleue* versions this is the name of the traitor who kills Duke Beuves). In contrast to the original story, the nephew does not die but becomes the brothers' worst enemy.

These versions are a far cry from the epics of the blue chapbooks, which here provide almost no frame. For the sake of accuracy, however, it must be said that the publication is followed by the explanation that the plays in the collection «are a free interpretation of the romances of chivalry in the *Bibliothèque bleue*», «specially adapted to be within the reach of children»: «one will therefore not necessarily look for an exact reflection of our old epic legends».³⁵

2.3 Modern versions

The further away the play is from its literary source, the more important the work of rewriting becomes. In modern versions of our epics, the division into episodes does not always take place and, even when it is present, does not correspond to the division followed by previous generations of puppeteers. Thus, the first episode of *Les quatre fils Aymon* as staged by Denis Fauconnier,³⁶ successor of Gaston Engels and Christian Deville, embraces the events represented traditionally in two distinct episodes: «La mort de Lohier» and «La prise de Montfort». The plot of *Huon de Bordeaux* by Jean-Claude Maggi³⁷ focuses on Huon's journey. What was once the subject of the first episode is reduced here to an introduction, and the whole story is told in analeptic form.

Oriented towards young audiences, any hint of violence is avoided. Denis Fauconnier, for example, omits Charlemagne's threats to «hang» the son of Duke Beuves and «burn his wife». It must be said, however, that in contrast to the plays published by the

³⁴ *Les 4 Fils Aymon* [Musée wallon]: 15.

³⁵ *Pièces de marionnettes adaptées pour les enfants : Huon de Bordeaux. Le Retour de Huon de Bordeaux. Les 4 Fils Aymon*, Liège, éditions du Musée wallon, n.d., 16.

³⁶ Fauconnier (1977-) is founder and principal puppeteer of the Théâtre à Denis (Liège), created in 1994.

³⁷ Maggi (1953-2010) was the puppeteer of the Tchanchès Museum (Liège).

Walloon Museum's educational service, Fauconnier does not remove the dead; he takes advantage of the presence of Tchantchès to divert the nature of these scenes: «Quant à moi il ne me reste plus qu'à sonner aux pompiers pour qu'ils viennent avec leur pompe funèbre! On va soigner les morts et enterrer les blessés!». ³⁸

In Maggi's work in particular, the process of transposing puppets onto the stage is complemented by the action of cultural translation. Thus, his Huon and Esclarmonde travel on a TGV (a high-speed train). Fauconnier's adaptation remains more traditional. His rewriting follows the methods of the puppeteers of yesteryear: replacing description with action or dialogue, simplifying the language where necessary while remaining largely faithful to the literary source, and removing the magical aspects, such as the horse Bayard and the necromancer Maugis. Whereas Fauconnier seeks to be part of the long tradition of epic theater drawn from novels, ³⁹ Maggi's approach is more controversial, his «global fidelity and deviations in the detail of the actions are constantly in competition». ⁴⁰

3. TCHANTCHÈS

What makes the Liège epic stand out is the character of Tchantchès. A popular type in the Liège puppet theatre, he represents the voice of the people, in the manner of an ancient chorus, and formulates common sense reflections. There is a certain similarity between Tchantchès and the farcical characters of the Sicilian Opera dei Pupi, the vastasi, who «play the parts of equerries, servitors of the paladins to express, in dialect, the point of view of the people and to make joking comments on the action.» ⁴¹ But Tchantchès, as Maurice Piron rightly points out, is not only «the grotesque peasant who, from time to time, in the manner of a clown, distracts the spectator». ⁴² For Piron, his role in the epics

³⁸ FAUCCONNIER, *Les Quatre Fils*: 19.

³⁹ Although the subtitle claims that the play is an adaptation of Delvau's version, there are parts taken from the Épinal version.

⁴⁰ CAZANAVE 2011: 543. Not having the Maggi play at my disposal, I rely in my analysis on the summary of the play made by Cazanave.

⁴¹ PASQUALINO 1981: 18.

⁴² PIRON 1988 : 31-32.

is indispensable, for without him «the epic would retain too uniform a gravity, capable of weakening the dramatic interest of the play».⁴³ Jacques de Caluwé, on the other hand, believes that in the plays of chivalry Tchantchès is “over-added”: «He comments on the events without playing a determining role, without ever bringing a really indispensable element to the narrative development».⁴⁴

The comedy of Tchantchès often plays on the visual mismatch between him and the knightly character. Faced with a large marionette in shining armour, the little Tchantchès dressed in a smock, patched trousers and large clogs, with a red-checked scarf around his neck, and sometimes with a disproportionately large nose, seems grotesque. His appearance and language – traditionally, Tchantchès speaks a hybrid mixture of Walloon and French – distinguish him from the world of chivalry, marking a line of demarcation between him and the epic plot in which he does not really participate. He always remains outside, and this enables him to move between the fictional world and reality. His role is therefore that of an outside observer; he is a commentator and director rather than an active participant. The words of Tchantchès are the words of the puppeteer himself who «by means of his humble actor’s voice [...] becomes more himself, natural, lively, playful, a people at last».⁴⁵ Tchantchès introduces the action, ensures the transition between scenes, and announces the next show; through him the puppeteer conducts a discourse with the audience and calls the latter to silence if necessary.

In the annotated version of *Les quatre fils Aymon* discussed above, it is the second puppeteer who added a “tchantchet”. His interventions can be divided into two categories. Firstly, the lines in French of servants and valets already present in the text and addressed to the knights. In chapter XVIII, for example, a “tchantchet” replaces the valet who tells the brothers that Richard has been imprisoned by Rolland; in chapter XXI, he is the page in the service of the king who gives Regnault news about Maugis; finally, in

⁴³ Ivi: 32.

⁴⁴ CALUWÉ 1978 :19. This ambiguous approach to the character has accompanied Tchantchès since his first days on the Liège puppet stage. At the end of the 19th century he mainly attracted the new audiences of students, who were less interested in stories of chivalry, and more in current affairs, for which Tchantchès was the spokesperson. Older audiences, on the other hand, often disliked Tchantchès’s interventions, which were considered undesirable because they slowed down the main action.

⁴⁵ PIRON 1988: 31.

chapter XXIII, he takes the place of the guard who was keeping watch on the tower to warn Maugis of the arrival of the king with his army. Clearly, Tchantchè's function here is to help the brothers and not the emperor. The interventions that can be classified in the second category are the comments in Walloon, replacing the narrative passages, intended for the public. For example, the following sentence: «Our Lord, at the prayer of the king, caused a beautiful miracle, for he made a cloud appear so large that one person could not see another» was transformed into: «Y n a li bondiu quelle a oyou ca. Vola qui fait neure comme divai en beur»⁴⁶ ('There was the Good Lord who heard it. Because it is now as dark as in a mineshaft'). This is not a simple translation into Walloon, but an attempt to bring the situation closer to the reality of the audience, which apparently consisted largely of miners. A few pages later the puppeteer uses a "tchantchet" to describe the situation in the besieged town: «I na l'amagni quest rase qu'a vola des meus qui nos estant assieger ossi fâte des magni y n'a les gens qui toumai turto mouer s'ol pavaie»⁴⁷ ('Food is scarce because for months we have been besieged and for lack of food there are people who fall dead on the ground'). A line of "tchantchet" also replaces the episode relating the preparation of Bayard's blood sausage to feed the starving people: «Si sa continue ainsi ji va rote a gno heureusemint qui Renaud vint d'avou in bonne idée y vent d'es prinde des song da Bayard po fe d'el neur trippe»⁴⁸ ('If it goes on like this I'll be walking on my knees, fortunately Renaud had a good idea: he just put Bayard's blood on fire to make black pudding'). These three lines show that Tchantchè's speech serves to lighten the overly serious and uniform tone of the epic and mediate between the epic characters and the popular audience, helping the latter to identify with the epic action. The tone is lighter, but it is not comic. Only rarely can a hint of comedy be discerned, as in the following line of a "tchantchet" that replaces a description of the attack on the city: «les voyou vola qui hinet a grosse est pire asteur les varegn des geu pos no fé dè ma waie J'y vin dé sure une somme tchiesse»⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *HQFA*: 64 (glued papper). I wish to thank Mr. Baptiste Frankinet, in charge of the Walloon Dialect Fund and the Library of the Museum of Walloon Life, for the translation of this sentence and of the other interventions of Tchantches. It should be noted that, according to Mr. Frankinet, these transcriptions do not correspond to the Feller spelling of Walloon.

⁴⁷ *Ivi*: 69.

⁴⁸ *Ivi*: 72.

⁴⁹ *Ivi*: 70.

(‘the ruffians who throw big stones, in the name of God, to do us harm. Aye! I’ve just had one thrown at my head’) [Figure 2]. Obviously, the comedy even here is very ambiguous. The function of the character is not to make us laugh, but to help transform literary narrative into drama, to serve as a means of transposing the story onto the stage.

In the 1925 version of *Les quatre fils Aymon*, Tchantchès is an already established version of the character. He fulfils his traditional function of providing a frame for the play that, in fact, begins with Tchantchès ensuring that everything is ready for Char-

lemagne and the knights to enter. At the conclusion, three Tchantchès close the play: one of them tells another that he must hurry, the third explains that the stage hand must lower the curtain. Here the function of Tchantchès as an agent of comedy is much more present. Thus, announcing Lohier and his knights, he presents them as «ine trulèye di marchands d’inglatis»⁵⁰ (‘a flock of herring merchants’). His advice to Charlemagne is not lacking in humor, either: he suggests that he take out life insurance for his son. In this way, he complements Charlemagne’s noble advisor, Duke Naimes, bringing the action closer to the public.



Fig. 2: Glued paper with a line for Tchantchès from *Histoire des quatre fils Aymon, très-nobles, très-bardis et très-vaillants chevaliers*, nouvelle édition, ornée de huit gravures, Épinal, Pellerin, n.d., copy annotated by unidentified puppeteer, n. 11645. © Province de Liège – Musée de la Vie wallonne

⁵⁰ *Les Quatre Fils Aymon* [1925]: 5.

In the dramatized versions of the Carolingian epics by Verrées that we have examined above, the role of Tchantchès remains episodic: Tchantchès summarises the action or intervenes as a servant. In contrast to the Tchantchès of 1925, he does not communicate easily with everyone. As a servant of the Duchess of Bordeaux in Verrées's version of *La Jeunesse de Huon de Bordeaux*, he is not understood by Charlemagne's messengers. On the other hand, Huon speaks to him without experiencing any difficulty, even though one speaks French and the other Walloon. Charlemagne, on the other hand, does not hear Tchantchès's answer to his question about the noises coming from outside. Tchantchès is thus represented as an Other. The language creates a distance, primarily social, between him and Charlemagne's court. It also identifies him as a Walloon character while the other characters are French. Huon, the only epic character capable of understanding him, is thus designated as a popular and regional hero, alien to Charlemagne's entourage. His short dialogue with Tchantchès therefore predisposes the audience to identify with him.

A Tchantchès who is more present in the battle scenes can be found in the adaptations of the epics for children (the editions of the Walloon Museum). In *Huon de Bordeaux*, his intervention in the battle between Huon and Charlemagne's eldest son Louis ends badly for Tchantchès:

Tchantchès: Hé là ! Ne vous battez pas comme ça. Expliquez-vous un peu d'abord, au lieu de vous doguer tout de suite... Hé là! Arrêtez. (Il court à travers la scène. Mais il reçoit un coup d'épée, alors, il se retire au fond).

Tchantchès: Ils sont terribles, hein, ces chevaliers-là. Il faut se méfier! Ils vous donneraient un mauvais coup comme rien. Après tout, ce ne sont pas mes affaires. Tirez votre plan! ⁵¹

Tchantchès introduces a farcical scene into the epic battle. He does not act much, but his intervention is necessary. It enables the puppeteer to soften the cruelty of the scene: through Tchantchès the danger becomes tangible (he has been hit), without showing the wounded and the dead. When Tchantchès is injured, the battle is over. In *Le Retour de Huon de Bordeaux*, Tchantchès gives Amaury his famous *côp d'tièsse èpwèsoné* ('poisoned

⁵¹ *Huon de Bordeaux* [Musée wallon]: 7.

headbutt'),⁵² but this is the only demonstration of physical violence on the part of Tchantchès reflected in the text (bear in mind that this is only an outline).

The modern versions give a place of honor to Tchantchès' exchanges with the children which are well planned and written into the text, even if during the show they are entirely improvised. Tchantchès takes charge of making the story accessible to the young audience. Thus, in Fauconnier's play, he introduces the preceding events in the following way: «Et le sire empereur Charlemagne nous a surement réunis pour fêter la victoire et distribuer un kilo de médailles en chocolat pour tous les braves qui se sont bien splinquer à la bataille!». ⁵³ Although Tchantchès gradually asserts himself in his functions, his position as an external element added to the epic remains. Even if in the modern versions he is better integrated into the main action (especially in Maggi), Tchantchès retains his liminal status, continuing to fulfil his role as intermediary between the audience and the epic characters.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise the importance of the annotated novels in the development of the Liège epic. My research has revealed the beginnings of a dramaturgical reflection in the annotations regarding the transformation of the novels into puppet plays. We have seen that already at this stage the figure of Tchantchès begins to play an important role, bringing the audience closer to the epic plot through his commentaries in Walloon. However, his role in the process of transferring the epic to the puppet stage is not limited, as Casanave suggests, to helping «to rewrite the old script by giving it certain added territorial marks». ⁵⁴ By enabling the puppeteer to improvise, Tchantchès is one of the tools for dramatizing the Carolingian epic and bringing it to life on the puppet stage. The study of the annotated novels and the scenarios based on them has thus shown that

⁵² The headbutt is Tchantchès' preferred offensive style. For his worst enemies, he reserves a particularly violent "poison headbutt" that sends the opponent into the wings.

⁵³ Ivi: 2.

⁵⁴ CAZANAVE 2011: 541.

we are dealing not so much with an adaptation as with a complex process of transposition of the French chivalric novel on the Liège puppet stage.

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