

## INTRODUCTION

This issue of «AOQU. Achilles Orlando Quixote Ulysses» stems from my project entitled *World Epics in Puppet Theater: India, Iran, Japan, Italy*, co-sponsored by the Humanities War and Peace Initiative, through the Division of Humanities in the Arts & Sciences, Columbia University. The initiative aimed to foster «the study of war and peace from the perspective of scholars in the Humanities, in conversation with colleagues from around Columbia and the world [...] with an ultimate goal of perpetuating a more peaceful world».

The first event of the project was an online mini-symposium dedicated to the theme of exile, held on November 12, 2021, hosted and co-sponsored by the International Puppet Museum Antonio Pasqualino of Palermo, and moderated by Rosario Pericone, the Museum's director and professor of cultural anthropology at the Academy of Fine Arts of Palermo. The mini-symposium, part of the Museum's annual *Festival di Morgana* (edition XLVI), was followed by a performance of *Rinaldo, imperatore di Trebisonda* staged by the Marionettistica dei Fratelli Napoli. Three essays in the current issue, by Anna Carocci, Alessandro Napoli, and Elizabeth Oyler, were developed from papers presented at this event.<sup>1</sup>

The subsequent three events comprising the project were online screenings of puppet plays adapting Iranian, Japanese, and Indian epics, all hosted and co-sponsored

<sup>1</sup> Video recordings of the mini-symposium and the puppet play are available on the *World Epics* website <<https://edblogs.columbia.edu/worldepics/worldepicsinpuppettheaterindiairanjapanitaly/#mini-symposium>>.

by the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry, University of Connecticut, in May of 2022. Each screening was followed by a conversation with the master puppeteer and one or more scholars in the respective tradition, moderated by John Bell, the Museum's director and professor of dramatic arts at the University of Connecticut. The final contribution in this issue is developed from the May 25, 2022, conversation between the puppeteer Anurupa Roy and professor emerita Paula Richman.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this volume was to extend out from the Indian, Iranian, Japanese, and Italian epic traditions to explore epic narratives in popular oral performance, particularly puppet theater, worldwide. The twelve contributions thus explore this subject matter as manifested in several countries across three continents, beginning with Europe, where the «AOQU» journal is based, and then shifting attention to Africa and Asia.

The section dedicated to Western Europe opens with two essays on Italy's Opera dei Pupi tradition by the aforementioned scholars Anna Carocci and Alessandro Napoli. Carocci's essay first explores both continuity and originality in stories of exile in the Italian chivalric literary canon, and then goes on to focus more specifically on the trajectory of Malaguerra, Rinaldo's adopted son in Giusto Lodico's nineteenth-century *Storia dei paladini di Francia* and subsequently a popular character in the Opera dei Pupi repertory. Napoli investigates the vicissitudes of Rinaldo – most notably, his persecution by Charlemagne leading to his exile from France and his rise as the emperor of Trebisonda (Trabzon) – in the fifteenth-century poem *Trabisonda*, in Lodico's *Storia dei Paladini di Francia*, and in the Opera dei Pupi tradition. The third essay, by Yanna Kor, examines Carolingian epic in the lesser-studied puppet theater tradition of Liège, Belgium, analyzing in particular textual and dramatic adaptations of the medieval French *Huon de Bordeaux* and *Quatre fils Aymon*. Flora Mele concludes the section with an analysis of the vaudeville puppet play *Don Quichotte Polichinelle*, a parodic treatment of Charles-Simon Favart's comedy-ballet *Don Quichotte chez la duchesse* that may provide insights into both societal attitudes and theatrical aesthetics in eighteenth-century France.

<sup>2</sup> All three conversations and videoclips from the plays, as well as further information about the *World Epics in Puppet Theater: India, Iran, Japan, Italy* project, such as bibliographical resources, links to documentaries and videoclips of puppet plays staging epic narratives, and a list of additional co-sponsors, can be found on the *World Epics* site through the homepage <<https://edblogs.columbia.edu/worldepics>> and the project's webpage <<https://edblogs.columbia.edu/worldepics/worldepicsinpuppettheaterindiairanjapanitaly>>.

The issue next turns to the epic narratives of sub-Saharan Africa. Decades of field research have brought to an international public an ongoing oral tradition of relating imperialist struggles among the African empires predating European colonialism.<sup>3</sup> This section features the epic of Bamana Segu from Mali and the Mubila epic from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, examined by Elisabeth den Otter and Brunhilde Biebuyck, respectively. Den Otter's contribution calls attention to Bamana farmers and Bozo fishermen who use puppets and masks to reimagine an episode from the Bamana Segu cycle in which the historical king Biton (Bitòn Coulibaly) acquires power thanks to the water spirit and creator god Faaro. Biebuyck's essay focuses on the boastful protagonist Mubila and his enterprising wife Kabulungu in the version of the epic recounted, sung, and dramatized by Kambala Mubila over several days and recorded in writing by Daniel P. Biebuyck in 1953.

In the subsequent section, Yassaman Khajehi uncovers the epic dimension of puppet theater in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). After historical and theoretical considerations linking past and present puppetry in the region, Khajehi draws on recent examples from Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Palestine, and Egypt, to envision the puppet as a contemporary hero who can go beyond the limits imposed on the rest of society by speaking truth to power.

The two essays dealing with East Asia are both devoted to episodes based on the *Heike Monogatari* (*Tale of the Heike*) in Japanese puppet theater. Claudia Orenstein first offers an overview of traditional puppetry in Japan and then discusses the results of her fieldwork with two companies that despite substantial obstacles continue their unique centuries-old traditions of *bun'ya ningyōn* (puppetry combined with the *bun'ya* style of chanting) in the Hakusan area of Japan's Ishikawa Prefecture. Elizabeth Oyler analyzes the episode of Shunkan on Devil Island from Chikamatsu Monzaemon's early modern puppet play *The Heike on the Island of Women*, finding it to be a critique of the Tokuga-

<sup>3</sup> For recent scholarship, see the chapters by Frederick Turner, John William Johnson, and Thomas A. Hale on the epics of Mwindo, Sun-Jata, and Askia Mohammed, respectively, in *Teaching World Epics*, edited by Jo Ann Cavallo (New York, Modern Language Association, 2023). For further bibliography, see my "African epics" section in the Resources chapter of the same volume.

wa shogunate's increasing regulation of social and commercial life in the early eighteenth century.

The two essays in the subsequent section address the changing landscape of performing the Ramayana in Southeast Asia. Matthew Cohen reflects on the traditionally animistic qualities and shifting theatrical styles of the Ramayana narrative performed in *wayang* puppetry in Indonesia and concludes with the account of a 2023 Ramayana production at the University of Connecticut in which the epic is retold from the perspective of the trees and forest in a format combining *wayang* with the *tholpavakoothu* shadow puppet tradition of Kerala, India. Kathy Foley reflects on how transnational religious and political forces, including the Hindu revival in India and the Islamic revival in the Muslim world, have rendered Indonesian and Malaysian puppet adaptations of the Ramayana narrative problematic in different ways since the 1990s.

The final contribution, under the South Asia section, is the aforementioned conversation in which Anurupa Roy, director of a troupe of puppeteers in Delhi, India, discusses with Paula Richman, emerita professor at Oberlin College (USA), her creative and interpretative choices in designing and preparing the multimedial *About Ram* (2006). Roy sought to convey the regional diversity of the Ramayana tradition as she developed an embodied language for contemporary puppet practice in India.

The epic genre characteristically consists of long-cherished stories of memorable deeds by larger-than-life characters whose actions have significant and wide-ranging consequences. Although such narratives span the centuries, encompass different religions, and originate in cultures thousands of miles apart, all with their own multifaceted political, social, linguistic and literary histories, they nevertheless contain many parallel features that invite comparative analysis and critical thinking on a number of themes related to the human condition that remain utterly relevant today. Epic stories remained at the forefront of many societies through oral retellings and dramatic performances, most notably, puppet theater, until the advent of mass media entertainment. Indeed, even today we can find puppeteers from across the globe who continue to refashion heroes and heroines from canonical epic narratives – or who invent new ones – amidst myriad challenges. As in the past, this latest generation of puppeteers may use the platform to question collective confrontations, resist political repression, articulate regional identity, critique con-

ventional societal attitudes, or, more generally, probe human nature. As the contributors to this issue make evident, the dramatization of epic stories in puppetry arts is both a genuinely local and quintessentially global art form that merits closer attention.

I would like to thank the «AOQU» Editorial Board for their support, in particular, Guglielmo Barucci and Michele Comelli for the attentiveness with which they undertook the peer review and publication process, respectively, as well as Barbara Tanzi Imbri (University of Milan), Claudia Antonini (Columbia University), and Angelica Modabber (Columbia University) for their editorial assistance.

Jo Ann Cavallo (Columbia University)