

Uses and Places

Puppetry in the Middle Ages

By Nidda Ridarelli



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Uses and Locations Used

Author's Note

Puppetry is one of those ubiquitous elements of culture that most people agree exists and has for centuries. The difficulty is determining to what extent the puppets influenced a culture enough to be recorded. I think that they were common enough that people were not shocked and surprised by them. When we do find mention of them it is as a form of entertainment and not seen as an aberration or some kind of magic or unexplained presence. As is often a research hurdle, people don't often talk about the things that are normal to them. They didn't feel the need create literature about puppetry and puppet making, because doing those things was probably not seen as worth writing about. How many medieval instructions are there for chopping wood? Even where directions do exist, in cooking for example, one is often told to cook something until it "looks right." So if you have never seen the food you are making, how do you know when it looks right?

As I have gone about creating my own interpretations of medieval puppets, I have relied on the art of the time, the literature they were familiar with for puppet scripts, and whatever tools and materials existed in any given region. I was on my own to create my own aesthetic and while this is fun, it is always only ever theoretical and challenging to justify this choice or that. In the end, I just did the best I could with what was available to me.

Definitions

A puppet is defined as an inanimate figure that is made to move by human effort before an audience. (Baird) Three main types of puppets are found in use in the Middle Ages: *shadow puppets*, *glove puppets* and *marionettes*. Sometimes these words are used interchangeably so when the word marionette is used it is often the word that means puppet, not specifically a string puppet.



Terra cotta fertility puppet

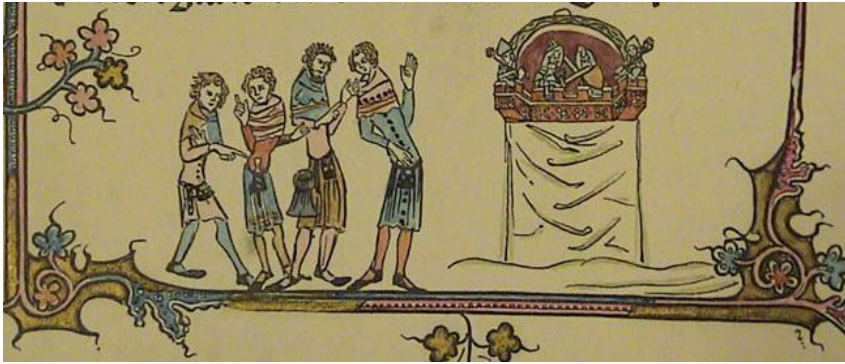


Sicilian rod marionette



Maple and Knotte Hede made by Nidda 2007

Marionettes have been in existence for thousands of years. Early jointed “dolls” have been found in Egypt and India made out of terra cotta, wool, ivory and even bone. (Currell) In ancient times they were used in religious rites and ceremonies. Most period marionettes were made out of wood and had “invisible” strings or wires. They were manipulated from above by a handle, called a controller, by stings or a combination of strings and metal rods as used today in the Sicilian tradition.



14th C. image of glove puppet theater



Modern Punch



Savaric and Dalla puppets by Nidda



Skeggi and Taisiia puppets by Nidda

Glove puppets have had a fabric body and the head and possibly the hands could have been made out of any suitable and available medium. (Currell) Examples of materials that could have been used are wood, wool, leather, papier-mâché, or clay. They fashioned heads to resemble certain characters or people and then sewed or glued the head to the body. Popular figures have been the devil, and toward the end of period, Punch. He was earlier known as Vice in the morality plays. The main difference between the modern Punch and the medieval is that in the morality plays Vice is conquered and carried off by death and the modern Punch is known for defeating Death. The puppets were controlled by sticking a hand in the puppet and moving the head and arms with the thumb and fingers. In some traditions rods are used, instead of a hand, inside the puppet and on one or both of the arms of the puppet. This style of puppet is controlled from below.



Mamluk warship shadow puppet 14th c.



Modern Turkish shadow puppets

Shadow puppets are used by projecting the shadow of an object with a light source onto a screen for an audience. Earliest shadow puppets may have been shapes cut from felt used by nomads on the steppes. Of the shadow puppets that have survived to today, the earliest shadow puppets are made from rawhide. Other puppet traditions have pierced metal. Some types of shadow puppets are held onto the screen from below the screen and others are manipulated perpendicular to the screen.

Puppets were known to enact any popular play or satire of their day. They would often borrow from the live theater any script no longer in use. The live theater had to work diligently to keep the puppeteers from stealing their material, which was protected by guilds. (Joseph)

In India puppetry may have been practiced before human actors because impersonation was forbidden due to religious taboo. (Currell) In Greece and Rome wandering shows and private performances in homes were very common. The subject matter was bold, satirical and parodied popular drama. (Joseph)

Locations

Puppets in period were performers. They are sometimes called *motions* in England, *fantoccini* in Italy, *Puppen* in Germany, and *titeres* in Spain. They brought biblical instruction and entertainment to rural areas. (McIsaac) Their popularity grew and the stories they told became more bawdy and secular rather than sacred. Then they were denounced by the church and kicked out yet never lost popularity with the populace. They would perform great works of art and were full of action and music. Puppet repertoire is all inclusive (Joseph) and always reflects the tastes of the people in the land in which they perform. They were also used for satire and were the first impressionists (one who does impressions of famous people). Traveling puppet players would perform anything of interest and popularity to the populace. They performed in fairs and in theaters. Many puppet troupes played at private parties in wealthy residences. (Joseph)

China. In China marionettes were in use by the eighth century AD. The Burmese (see picture right) puppet theatre had a significant influence on the development of human dance drama, and a dancers skill is still judged on his or her ability to re-create the movements of a puppet. (Currell)



England. “Puppet shows were the most ancient amusement in [England]” (Warton.

Archeological Journal). By the fourteenth century puppets were certainly known. (Currell)

In the sixteenth century wooden actors controlled by wires were a novelty that attracted the populace. Puppet shows appeared at great fairs especially in the vicinity of large cities. Their popularity rivaled that of the classic theater. (Hone) In the early seventeenth century puppet showmen or *motion-men* carried their light stages from one English parish to another performing plays of a biblical origin.

They occasionally performed Robin Hood but not the Robin Hood of today¹. These showmen carried their instruction and entertainment into the rural communities as well. (McIsaac) In 1642 Puritans closed theaters save those devoted to marionette performances. This drew Italian and French puppet showmen to England. They had all the current drama and writers at their disposal. (McIsaac)

Germany. In the eleventh century carving wooden figures was an accomplishment for many of the villages. By the fourteen hundreds Puppenspiel (see picture right) had the favor of the people of Germany. There was an Alpine charm to the plays and they were fraught with heavy humor and gruesome suggestion, much like the children’s stories of the Brothers Grimm. (Urban) This was unique to Germany as were the puppets



¹ The Robin Hood they would have performed had all the same villains and supporting characters, i.e., Friar Tuck, Merry Men, Sheriff of Nottingham, Will Scarlet, and Little John, but the Maid Marion character did not come in until much later.

with “hideous faces and blood curdling jests and jack-pudding fun.” (Urban) They were often as scary as they were silly. In the 13th and 14th centuries there were mostly bible themed stories, *Adam and Eve* and *David and Goliath*, etc. By 14th and 15th centuries more romantic stories come in: *Joan of Arc* and *Genevieve of Brabante*. (Joseph) During the seventeenth century, the sermons and denunciations of Martin Luther put an end to dramatic church ceremonies that had been frequently performed by actors. It went so far that actors could no longer receive sacrament in some churches. Disbanded troupe members came to read for marionettes in the permanent theaters. (Joseph) After the 30 Years War Puppet showmen came to Germany from England, France, Holland, Italy and Spain. To add attractions to the puppet shows, they included jugglers, dancers, and trained bears. Marionettes and puppet showmen lived very happily in Germany until 1731 when the censorship of the theater sent audiences to the puppet theater which then became a target of censure.

Italy is thought to be the source of the puppet epidemic that spread through Europe in the middle ages.

(McIsaac) Their repertory started with marionette performances of bible stories like in other countries. Then the performances moved to fables, comedy and tales of chivalry and satires of Roman decadence. They were often impressionistic of local celebrities, and were elaborately dressed “burlesquing local types.” (Joseph) The puppet performances expressed public opinion and there were many grades of performances, from the box of ugly puppets on the roadside to grand theater performances with beautifully-wrought costumed and manipulated figures. Their audiences included people of all ranks. (Urban) Every village was visited by ambulant shows, every city had its large castle, and noble families had their private puppet theatres and engaged distinguished writers to compose plays. (Joseph) Marionettes were the highest class of actor. People turned to the puppet show for criticism on political and social matters. (Urban) Through various stages of Italian drama the marionettes have trailed happily along picking up and retaining all the styles in their repertoire. (Joseph) Also like in England and Germany, the marionettes served as a shelter for actors when Italy’s *commedia dell’arte* became discredited. (Joseph)

France. In 1443 the church of St. James at Dieppe performed the “Mysteries of Mid-August” entirely with marionettes and moving statuary. (Baird) In Paris, the people reveled in witty epigrams and social sarcasms. (Urban) Ballet performances by marionettes were also very popular. (See right)

Spain. In Spain, Marionettes lived free from government interference. They had many popular performances including mini-bull fighting. (See below) Other puppet performances included legends, traditions and ballads as their staple material. (Urban)



Turkey. Karagoz and Hacivat are shadow play characters popular still today and have been performed since the 17th century. Their origins are believed to stem from the Egyptian Mamluk tradition of shadow play that they absorbed when the Ottomans took over Cairo. (Seen on page 4)

Egypt. The shadow theater tradition in Egypt goes as far back as 900 AD or earlier. There is a clear description of shadow puppets from 965 CE written by ibn al-Haytham in his writing *Kit al-*

Manazir. He was an eye doctor and he described how they were made and what they looked like. “There are holes pierced in the bodies of the shadow play figures so that they can be held against the screen with a stick....The presenter holds another stick in his other hand with this he moves their head, arms, and legs. A light of a candle or lamp placed behind them casts colored shadows of the translucent figures on the white screen.” (Necipoglu)

Going Forward

I continue my search hoping that one day, some archaeologist will find some sort of puppet in a grave or buried trash heap or otherwise preserved somehow. Or that in someone’s attic they might find a diary of a puppet or a sketch in some old archive, or a case of performing puppets or other useful discovery that will help in the creation of a more authentic product. And I have expanded where I look outside of Europe into other locations. I continue to look at the oldest existing puppets and evaluate how much has changed between the Middle Ages and the time that extant pieces exist.



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