Massacre à Paris, directed by Jean-Francois Auguste, performed at Comédie de Reims, Reims, and Oratoire du Louvre, Paris, 16–21 May 2022

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Christopher Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris* is not remembered as one of the playwright's finest works. It survives only in a single edition and, as Paul Menzer puts it, "reads like it was written on the back of a cocktail napkin."[1] The text is often thought to be corrupt—what Julia Briggs calls a "garbled and confused memory of the play"—although the nature of its corruption is disputed.[2] A lack of scholarly and literary interest has likely led to a lack of dramatic interest. Performances of *The Massacre* are few and far between, even in its original English. Attending a foreign language production of the play is even more rare. Viewing a new translation that attempts to adapt Marlowe's voice across linguistic and cultural boundaries is, then, an anomaly. However, this was exactly what audiences at Comédie de Reims and the Oratoire du Louvre sat down to experience in May 2022.

So, how does a foreign language translation venture to give voice to Marlowe's "mighty line"? Anne-Marie Miller-Blaise, Christine Sukic, and Elen Riot provide an answer to this question in their new *Massacre à Paris*, which premiered in the midst of renewed scholarly interest, both in the events that inspired the original play and in its author. *Massacre à Paris*'s two performances took place during The Marlowe Festival, which marked the ongoing work of The Oxford Marlowe Project while also commemorating the 450th anniversary of the infamous Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Designed in close collaboration with director Jean-François Auguste for this initial performance, *Massacre à Paris* offers a new take on the translation of early modern English drama.

The ingenuity of *Massacre à Paris* lies in the translators' decision to adhere to the structure of the English verse, providing a strictly line-by-line translation, while adapting Marlowe's iambic pentameter—which dominates the surviving playtext—into French decameter. This is a refreshing divergence from past French translations of *The Massacre* which tended to reformat the play into prose. *Massacre à Paris* offers a different solution, not

[1] Paul Menzer, "Marlowe Now," in *Christopher Marlowe in Context*, ed. Emily C. Bartels and Emma Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 363.
[2] Julia Briggs, "Marlowe's *Massacre at Paris*: A Reconsideration," *The Review of English Studies* 34, no. 135 (1983): 258.

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only translating Marlowe's words, but their very rhythm into a French context. Sukic stated that the translators wanted to "recreate in French the effect that Marlowe's text has in English." While this decision will certainly alter the appearance of the new translation in print, potentially making it more comparable to English editions, the true test of its success can only be revealed upon the stage.

In his production of *Massacre à Paris*, Auguste showcased the new translation by immediately departing from it. His actors began in English, using the text of the surviving octavo to open the play. This decision was made, according to Riot, because Auguste found that the decasyllabic meter was more audible in the original English. Yet, the decision to begin each production in Marlowe's words also helped to establish the value of the new translation onstage. The actors' initial shift from English to French happened smoothly, almost imperceptibly. Marlowe's formidable blank verse moved fluidly into the French decameter, as if the new translation was itself an extension of the early modern script. Immediately, each performance did the work of persuading its audience of the dramatic viability of the French translation by placing it alongside the original English.

Auguste's changes to the new translation did not end with this insertion of English. He cut lines, moved scenes, and added characters. In adapting *Massacre à Paris* for performance, Auguste took creative liberties which reflected the shift of the play from the page to the stage. What might have been a simple project of directly placing the text of a new translation of a classic English play into performance became an act of translation in itself. Auguste's creative decisions in adapting *Massacre* brought the translation of this oft maligned text to the modern stage in a novel yet accessible way, especially considering the transnational audience of the Marlowe Festival.

Massacre à Paris premiered in two performances, one in Reims and one in Paris, within the same week, bookending The Marlowe Festival held at universities in these two cities (16–21 May). Each had a different cast of actors, different costuming, and different sets. The performance at the Comédie de Reims occurred on a proscenium stage with minimal stage design. Actors rarely left the playing space, rather staying on stage throughout the performance, often seated at a long row of tables when waiting to return as a character. Always visible, performers stayed attentive at all times, guiding the eyes of the audience with their own directed focus. In what was billed as a "staged reading," actors were on and off book and dressed in costumes made up of a mix of street clothes and various period pieces. The actors both played and took witness, as if the performance was yet another attempt to

untangle the memory not just of Marlowe's play but of the historical massacre of the Huguenots itself.

The presence of the historical massacre was even more potent in the sold-out Paris performance, which took place in the Oratoire du Louvre where a large statue of Gaspard de Coligny now stands outside. The assassination of Coligny in the early hours of the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre is represented in Marlowe's play, in which he is dubbed the Admiral. The significance of performing Coligny's murder in a space now dedicated to him was not lost on the cast of the Paris performance of *Massacre à Paris*, and the Admiral's death—which took place in a choral loft above the audience—was solemn and brutal. These two words—solemn and brutal—may be used to describe the larger tone of the Paris performance, especially in how it differed from the one in Reims. Actors were specifically costumed, with Protestants clad in reds and Catholics in whites, which were dyed crimson with the blood of those they slaughtered during the massacre. Royalty often also wore golden articles to denote their status and black was used all around.

Staged in a church, the Paris performance tended towards use of religious imagery and spectacle. Characters often spoke to each other and the audience from a literal pulpit. This stretched into the inclusion of supernatural elements, particularly demonic entities that communed with and encouraged the Duke of Guise in his violent intentions against the Huguenots. While cheerily villainous in the Reims performance, Guise became outright frightening in the Paris performance, with a passion for destruction that seemed itself to be a religion.

Auguste's decision to recast his recurring characters at specific points within each performance highlighted the malleability of identity in his production of *Massacre à Paris*. Notably, the actors assigned to play a single role were dramatically different, both within each production and between the two performances. This allowed for each performance to play with questions of identity, character, gender, and sexuality. For instance, in both productions the actor playing Anjou was recast when he was crowned Henry III, denoting a great change in the character's identity. However, while in the Reims performance Henry was played by a man, the Paris performance had him played by a woman. This difference is of interest as Auguste immediately portrayed Henry as a queer man who engages in physical relationships with both men and women onstage. Between the two productions, a question seemed to be asked concerning the relationship between an actor's gender and that of their character. Notably, both Henries participated in kisses between characters of the same sex portrayed by actors of the opposite sex. This was taken further in the Paris performance in

which Epernoun, a female character played by a woman, shared an onstage kiss with Henry, who was also played by a woman at this point in the production. A question seemed to hang in the air that speaks to our current moment concerning the performativity of gender and sexuality.

The choice to introduce a new translation of *The Massacre* through two highly adaptive performances departs from the norm. This is especially the case considering that the translators hope to publish their text for scholarly and creative use in the future. However, modern productions of Shakespeare and Marlowe are often highly adaptive to the material printed in surviving playtexts. A large part of the strength of Auguste's production of *Massacre à Paris* was that it offered proof that this new academic translation is as performatively viable as its source material, if not more so. Hopefully, the success of these initial performances—both followed by standing ovations—will also be found by the translation when it comes into print.

Bibliography

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