

Reimagining *King Lear* – and Capitalism

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REVIEW:

Tom Lanoye, *Koningin Lear*, translated by Antjie Krog (Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis, 2019).

Staged to great acclaim in 2019 – first at the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (KKNK) in Oudtshoorn and then at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town – Antjie Krog’s Afrikaans translation of Tom Lanoye’s *Koningin Lear* has perhaps not had the reviews it deserves. Largely, one suspects, this neglect is the result of timing: the text was published just before Covid-19 lockdowns and economic meltdowns took hold of our collective attention. This irony cannot be lost on anyone reading the play, which provides insight into the structure of (world) power, the ‘just’ way of allocating capital and the ‘right’ way to live in a capitalist world.

The text has multiple contributors. First of course is Shakespeare, whose *King Lear* (written around 1606) forms the foundation with the well-worn story of an ageing parent handing over their wealth and power to their offspring. But Shakespeare has been pared down significantly in *Koningin Lear*, with many characters omitted or conflated. Dare one suggest that Shakespeare’s text is ‘too much’ after four centuries, and that nothing is lost in this reduction? Or, rather, that in getting to the core of what Shakespeare was wanting to explore, Tom Lanoye (contributor number two) is able to expose more by showing less?

Lanoye wrote his Flemish *Koningin Lear* in 2015. The prodigious and versatile Belgian writer, actor and theatre maker – no stranger to ruthlessly cutting away Shakespearean layers to reveal the real – has collaborated with South African Antjie Krog (contributor number three) over many years. Lanoye’s ability to create richness and density through his less-is-more usage of the base Shakespeare text is enhanced by Krog’s skillful, often idiomatic translation. One example among many is Lear’s “Hou op met broodjies bak, jou arme skaap.”¹

Krog and Lanoye’s last most significant collaboration was *Mamma Medea*, written by Lanoye in 2001 and translated by Krog in 2002 (published by NB imprint Queillerie). In that collaboration, Lanoye’s reduction of two versions of the Greek myth is even more severe, allowing him to use the tale of infanticide to insert direct and aggressive commentary on the subjugation of women, minorities and the vulnerable in society. In *Koningin Lear*, again via a taut and fast-paced text, the reader is forced to engage with questions around capitalism – flagged at the start of the published text with a quote from Paul Krugman’s review of Thomas Piketty’s *Le Capital au XXI^e Siècle*: “We haven’t just gone back to nineteenth-century levels of income inequality, we’re also on a path back to ‘patrimonial capitalism’, in which the commanding heights of the economy are controlled not by talented individuals but by family dynasties”.²

The fourth collaborator is director Marthinus Basson who, since arriving with force in the early 1980s with his staging of *Titus Andronicus*, has often worked with Shakespeare texts, Lanoye and Krog.

1 Tom Lanoye, *Koningin Lear*, trans. Antjie Krog (Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis, 2019), p.68.

2 *Ibid.*, p.5

Like the other contributors to this work, Basson is neither shy nor apologetic in forcing us to deal with our disquiet in a text filled with harsh language. The stage production of *Koningin Lear* boasted a set which powerfully unleashed a massive storm, both real and metaphorical, familial and political. The discomfort of audiences and readers is a tool to explore a world beyond the storm, the world as it could be – and, I think the contributors suggest, should be. Here is Lear, reconciled to Cornald [Cordelia] towards the end of the play:

Lear: En so verslaan vanuit 'n krotbuurt jy
 En ek die ponzi schemers, the old boys,
 The Stellenbosch élite en die Sjinese,
 Almal in eb en vloed net aan die maan
 Gehoorsaam ... Hulle het geen waarde meer:
 Ek het jou terug!³

Adding the reader, audience and actors such as Antoinette Kellermann (who portrayed *Koningin Lear* in the stage production), interpretations of this collaboration spanning four centuries add rich layers of meaning.

In acknowledging the multiple contributors to this deceptively slim text, one is also able to explore the numerous linguistic elements present. There is Shakespeare's English, first and most obviously, but although this is the basis for the story Lanoye and Krog make minimal use of it in terms of direct translation. The first epigraph, "Our wisdom is lesse wise then our folly" – taken from Florio's 1603 translation of Montaigne's *Essays* – is perhaps the most explicit nod to early modern English. And a warning to enter the text with more humble discourse than our polarised capitalist world often allows. Then there is Lanoye's Flemish which, while not directly evident in the Afrikaans text, is the key driver of his appropriation of Shakespeare's work – along with the political and historical intertwining of Flemish, French, Dutch and English (not to mention the headquartered European Union) in his native Belgium.

Krog's Afrikaans is, naturally, the dominant language in the text; her own prominence in South Africa's literary landscape and her political claiming of Afrikaans as a valid language for beauty and discourse, despite being the language of Apartheid and the oppressor, is well known. The at times crude lexical choices are fascinating – "ysterpiele" and "ryk poesfokkers" are among the most vivid examples – in that the crassness is so shocking that it makes one laugh. And it draws the reader back four centuries to when Shakespeare used insults and crude jibes to great effect (including in *King Lear*: recall Kent's "Thou whoreson zed, thou unnecessary letter!", 2.2.58).

At the 2022 Skrywersfees at the Stellenbosch Woordfees, Krog, in discussing her new collection of poems titled *Plunder* (Human & Rousseau), gave an off-hand answer referring to how an old "poes" can still bring light to someone. The audience reacted with merriment and the exchange reminded me of how *Lear* herself makes no apology for her sex, sexuality, power or right to embrace her chosen vocabulary. In a sexist world, women aren't supposed to swear. Nor to be successful CEOs. But then again, is business meant to be only about profit? In making *Lear* so crude, so successful, as a woman – and making her daughters-in-law the driving force of power with her sons – Lanoye and Krog render it impossible not to question our prejudices about gender, power and the economy. Most notably: that which we have broken, that which the storm has destroyed, how will it be rebuilt? And by whom?

Krog uses Afrikaans and English for the bilingual character of Oleg (*Lear's Fool*), one of the most accessible characters – and the most honest: "Sy is mad en powerless, en jy is blind."⁴ And an additional language is in the background of the text: French. The third epigraph is taken from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, but is given in the original French (it is often overlooked or forgotten that the play was written in French). Beckett chose to write *Godot* in French because he "wanted to get away from his mother tongue"; in making it harder, he had to be more conscious, more focused.⁵ Reading *Lear* in

3 *Ibid.*, p.131.

4 *Ibid.*, p.42.

5 Herbert Mitgang, "Book Ends; Beckett in Paris; Paris". *New York Times*, 25 January 1981: 35.

Afrikaans perhaps makes it harder to gloss over well-worn English Shakespearean themes. Or it simply makes the reading more interesting and focused?

All these languages and interpretations “vry” na Shakespeare, as suggested by this arrangement on the book’s title page: “*Koningin Lear* / Tom Lanoye / Vry na Shakespeare”. The “vry” can be taken to mean “love”, “admiration” or “acknowledgement” of Shakespeare, but also being “free” from Shakespeare – and in doing so, creating a new exploration of his themes. While some may take these definitions as contrary, I think Lanoye and Krog hold the balance well. There is no escaping what inspired this text. But there is also no mistaking that each of the contributors who followed has made the text their own.

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