

Milosz Biedrzycki

## Jan Kochanowski: Across the Languages, Beyond the Boundaries

### Intro

I took my cue from the “...or an author you admire” part of today’s panel topic. The author is Jan Kochanowski; a 16<sup>th</sup> century poet who wrote across languages, mainly Polish and Latin, and in the process laid out the blueprint for Polish verse for several centuries to come. His presence in Polish poetry is a towering one and extends up to this day.

### The Man and His Work

Jan Kochanowski was born in 1530. He was educated in the universities of Krakow, Poland, and of Padua, Italy, at the time one of the hubs of Renaissance Humanism. Not very much is known about his life. As a young man he might or might not have traveled extensively throughout Europe, including a visit to Paris, where he might or might not have met Pierre Ronsard, his French contemporary and, in a way, a counterpart in the effort of transforming the vernacular into a fully developed literary language. After returning from his studies abroad, Kochanowski spent almost twenty years as a courtier in service of various dignitaries, including a stint as secretary of King of Poland. Aged forty, he retired from public life to his estate in central Poland and directed most of his energies into writing. He died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-four.

As an author, Kochanowski was bilingual in Polish and Latin. He composed his earliest verse in Latin and continued to write in this language, in parallel to working in Polish, until the end of his life. It is estimated that approximately one third of Kochanowski’s output is verse in Latin. In addition to original poems in both languages, he successfully tried his hand in translation. In fact, his first published collection was *David’s Psalter*, (*Psalterz Dawidów*, 1576), an adaptation in verse of the Psalms, probably modeled on a renowned Latin translation by the Scottish Humanist, George Buchanan. Kochanowski was also a lifelong admirer of Horace and over a course of twenty years wrote a collection of *Songs* (*Pieśni*, published posthumously in 1586), which may be thought of as a creative adaptation to Polish realities of the themes and patterns found in Horace’s *Carmina*.

In all fairness, Kochanowski was not the only outstanding author writing in Polish in 16<sup>th</sup> century. At the time, literary Europe resembled a bubbling cauldron, where local vernaculars were extensively worked in and in effect their status was elevated to a range reserved previously only for Latin; that is, the status of language fit for high-brow artistic works. This happened a little earlier for some languages (such as Italian) and a little later for some others (such as Polish), but the process was in many ways similar. An important part of it was adapting themes and patterns from Classical works into newly established national literatures. So in Renaissance Poland as well, a small crowd was busy metaphrasing, paraphrasing and imitating, to borrow the terms proposed a century later by John Dryden. As a point of interest, it might be mentioned that two of Jan Kochanowski’s own brothers were active in this field; one of them translating Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the other, Plutarch. Furthermore, Jan’s nephew, Piotr Kochanowski, distinguished himself with an excellent translation of Torquato Tasso’s *Jerusalem Delivered*. There were obviously also numerous writers not related to the Kochanowski clan. However, the impact of Jan Kochanowski’s work is perhaps the most significant and enduring of them all. My feeling is that this was in big part due to his combining creative adaptations from other literatures—i.e. writing across languages—with

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innovative work in his native Polish—i.e. expanding the boundaries of this language’s literary diction.

By way of illustration, I would like to present two Polish poems, one of them from the century preceding Kochanowski, the other by the man himself. My intention is to show a kind of “before and after” effect that his efforts had on Polish verse. Again, this quantum leap, which I hope will be evident from the comparison, was not the work of Kochanowski alone; but it can be argued that his personal input did shift the gears of Polish poetry and transported it to a different plane.

- “Before”: Anonymous (15<sup>th</sup> century), *From earthly decay*; from *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry*, p. 3, transl. by J. Pieterkiewicz & B. Singer
- “After”: Jan Kochanowski, *Lament 13*; from *Laments*, p. 27, transl. by S. Heaney & S. Barańczak

### *Revenons à nos moutons*

Let us touch briefly on two other major Kochanowski’s literary achievements, looking at them from the perspective of our two themes: writing across languages and expanding the boundaries of Polish literature.

*The Dismissal of the Grecian Envoys (Odprawa posłów greckich, 1578)* is a short play written on commission from a high-ranking royal official and is the only dramatic work by Kochanowski. Its subject matter, an episode from the Trojan war, was drawn from the Classics—mainly, of course, from Homer’s *Iliad*—but also with references to later European texts, such as a contemporary French romance entitled *The History of the Destruction of the City of Troy* and a few others. Apparently Kochanowski’s first idea for fulfilling the commission was to translate from Greek a tragedy by Euripides, but he changed his mind and instead wrote an original work, which is sometimes considered to be the first tragedy ever written in Polish. In the drama, Kochanowski adhered to the construction principles codified in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and recommended by Horace, and later recapitulated in the influential *Poetics* by Scaliger (1561). In that respect, Kochanowski’s tragedy could be considered as written across languages and across literatures, stemming from a common European tradition. At the same time, nothing of the kind was ever attempted in Polish language, at least as far as we know. From the formal point of view, *Dismissal...* is an example of a Renaissance Humanist „rhetorical drama” on par with contemporary Italian or French efforts, but it has been also argued that because of its outstanding poetic qualities it is the first occurrence of the genre of “poetic drama”, which saw some creative peaks in Polish theater of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Further, Kochanowski used a theme from the antiquity to deal with some crucial contemporary issues: Poland, similar to Troy in the play, was about to enter a war that could potentially wreck it and wise decisions had to be made promptly. Such dealing with current political and social issues by means of allusion and analogy became later something of a specialty of Polish theater, for instance in the works of Witkiewicz or Mrożek.

The next major text by Kochanowski, the *Laments (Treny, 1580)*, is widely considered to be the crowning moment of his work as a whole. The collection was written after the death of Kochanowski’s thirty-month-old daughter, Ursula (Orszulka). Since we have no other record of her existence apart from the *Laments* themselves, some scholars have even speculated that she was the author’s poetic invention, a literary character. Most others, however, accept the mourning father’s statements in good faith, sometimes reacting to the above speculations with indignation. The *Laments* consist of nineteen poems, ranging from concise to rather long, dealing with the topics of loss, despair, questioning the existing order

of things, exploring possibilities for consolation etc. As was customary for Kochanowski, they are also characterized by remarkably rich language and vivid imagery. The genre known as funeral elegy, lament, threnody or *neniae* was well established in European literatures since antiquity. It can be said that Kochanowski yet again drew from his creative sources which transcended the boundaries of a single language or single literature. At the same time, he introduced some important innovations. The rules of *decorum*, or artistic propriety, dictated that threnodies be written for rulers, generals, famous philosophers and the like. By eulogizing a small insignificant child, and his own child to that, Kochanowski significantly broke those rules, even provoking a small outrage when the collection was published. It can be safely said that the *Laments* are valued much higher in our time of more individualistic poetry and art in general than in the author's own time. Stanisław Barańczak summarized this quite elegantly in his foreword to the edition of the *Laments*, which he translated in collaboration with Seamus Heaney:

[T]he very thing that has appealed most powerfully to the sensitivities of later generations of readers, including our own, was the thing that caused the most problems for his contemporary audience.

The *Laments* were of course much studied, admired, referenced and imitated by later generations. One instance worth mentioning in the cycle of poems by a 20<sup>th</sup> century poet, Władysław Broniewski, written after the death of his daughter Anna and showing unusual tenderness and sensibility for this otherwise revolutionary and socialist-realist author.

To wrap up this little chapter, I would venture to say that in the cases of both *Dismissal...* and the *Laments* we can see a recurring pattern. Kochanowski wrote in close connection with literatures in other languages, both contemporary and Classical, and at the same time accomplished things not attempted in Polish language before, thus laying the ground for future works in the centuries to come.

### Across and Beyond

Please allow me to finish on a personal note. I do not actually believe in a possibility of translating poetry. (Although I have been known to occasionally translate a poem or hundred.) Any translation of poetry is at best an approximation. To fully appreciate the beauty of Cavafy, one really needs to acquire Greek; to fully appreciate the beauty of Kochanowski, one really needs to acquire Polish. However, in the process of this approximation and of writing across languages that is translating poetry, something important can be accomplished given enough luck, talent and diligence. The boundaries of the target language, of our language, might get expanded. And by that, to recall the oft-quoted remark by Ludwig Wittgenstein—we may expand the boundaries of our world.

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