

THE POISONERS

Original: *Die Giftmörderinnen* by Elfriede Czurda,
Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1991 ISBN 3 498 00893 5

Translated by Kathleen Thorpe

SUNLIT[®]

The Poisoners

Published by African Sun Media under the SUNLiT imprint

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First edition 2020

ISBN 978-1-928314-69-1

ISBN 978-1-928314-70-7 (e-book)

<https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928314707>

Set in EB Garamond 11.5/14.5

Cover design, typesetting and production by African Sun Media

Cover artwork by Linda Rademan

SUNLiT is an imprint of African Sun Media. Literature and poetry are published under this imprint in print and electronic formats.

This publication can be ordered from:

orders@africansunmedia.co.za

africansunmedia.store.it.si (e-books)

Amazon Kindle: amzn.to/2ktLpkL

Google Books: bit.ly/2k1Uilm

Takealot: bit.ly/2monsfl

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The Poisoners by the Austrian author Elfriede Czurda is a novel that is as fresh and relevant as when it first appeared in German in 1991. Although the crime of poisoning at first glance seems to be the pivotal point of the plot, this is deceptive. This is first and foremost a work about language, the words used to deceive and oppress women in patriarchal society where the man is ultimately the all-powerful “Word”. These words are not necessarily new or even unusual in appearance but they are strung together to create a seemingly naturalised, all-encompassing web of entrapment and subjugation which Elfriede Czurda sets out to expose and dismantle. The surface fabric of false connections is meticulously unpicked to reveal the underlying structure of toxic masculinity underpinning patriarchal patterns of thought and actions which women, too are deceived into buying in to thus deterministically permeating all spheres of life in society. Translating this novel has been a rewarding challenge. Aiding the intention of disrupting the seemingly innocuous connections in language is the reversal of the tendency in German to create composite nouns, thus enabling the connecting of the previously unconnected to create new connections and meanings. Rendering this grammatical feature in English is not always linguistically possible and compromises have had to be made which, I hope, nevertheless permit a glimpse into the original authorial intention.

The contemporary relevance and topicality of *The Poisoners* belies the fact that the novel was inspired by a murder trial that took place almost a century ago, thus perhaps also underscoring the deeply entrenched nature of patriarchy. The case was heard at the Berlin Assize Court in 1922 and the trial lasted almost a year, ending

in 1923 which was significantly co-incidentally also the year of the “Beer Hall Putsch” which failed but drew attention to Adolf Hitler and the rise of National Socialism – an ideology underpinned by and actively promoting fascist-like toxic masculinity and patriarchal behaviour.

Ella Klein was accused of poisoning her husband with arsenic. Her friend, Margarete Nebbe, was accused as an accessory to the murder. On 16 March 1923 Ella Klein was convicted of the lesser charge of manslaughter and sentenced to four years in prison, while the co-accused received a jail term of just eighteen months. The outcome of the case was remarkable for the times as the progressive judge took into account that Ella had suffered abuse at the hands of her alcoholic husband, decades before the term “Battered Woman Syndrome” was coined. The case riveted the attention of Berlin society, with the added titillation of a lesbian relationship between the two women. Following the case closely was the well-known writer and medical doctor Alfred Döblin.

Döblin’s interest in the case subsequently found expression in the publication of a story: *Die beiden Freundinnen und ihr Giftmord* (The two friends and their murder by poisoning) in 1924. His story is a blend of fact and fiction with Döblin engaging with the opinions of psychologists, psycho-sexual scientists and juristic points of view, particularly with regard to contemporary views on female criminality, as well as the difficulties in arriving at appropriate sentences. In the epilogue of his story Döblin came to the conclusion that it was impossible to fully understand the psychological factors influencing the accused. Together with these limits to understanding, Döblin also stated that he was unable to find adequate words to express the many factors motivating the crime. Döblin’s story was filmed by the Austrian filmmaker Axel Corti in 1978.

In her fictional treatment of the case Elfriede Czurda takes up the challenge facing Döblin by innovatively subjecting language to scrutiny in order to gain an understanding of what could have lain in the background of the murder. By unravelling the everyday surface of the “normal” fabric of language she exposes the warp and weft of patriarchy and attendant toxic masculinity supporting the oppression of women. By structuring the plot around the interrelationship of four women, Elfriede Czurda skillfully attacks the silence surrounding abuse leading to the poisoning as a desperate way out of an intolerable situation: Else, the wife of Hans, her possessive girlfriend Erika, Erika’s mother, the enabler and Mrs. Rinx, Else’s grotesquely venomous mother-in-law – “patriarchy in drag” to borrow a term from Marc Lamont Hill. This is no black- and-white story – all are perpetrators and all are victims, even Hans.

Kathleen Thorpe

ABOUT THE COVER

The artwork on the cover formed a component of my solo exhibition in partial fulfilment of my MTech FA, completed in 2017 at UJ. The dissertation was titled *Threads of ambivalence; redressing selected aspects of Afrikaner female identities through art making*. The artwork was titled *In the name of the father*.

In the name of the father

The lower case ‘f’ in father refers to ^L_{SEP} men and not the Lord. The Bible, a book written by men, prescribes that women should be silent and that they should defer to men, as for example in 1 Tim. 2:11-13 (Holy Bible, NIV): “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.” I have addressed this Calvinistic power relation by covering the christening dress in embroidered verses from the Scriptures, denouncing women as individuals in their own right and denying women their own voice.

The verses embroidered (subversive stitching) on the christening dress reinforce what is expected of the girl child, who is symbolically inducted into her place in society, where she is expected to honour, submit to and be subservient to men.

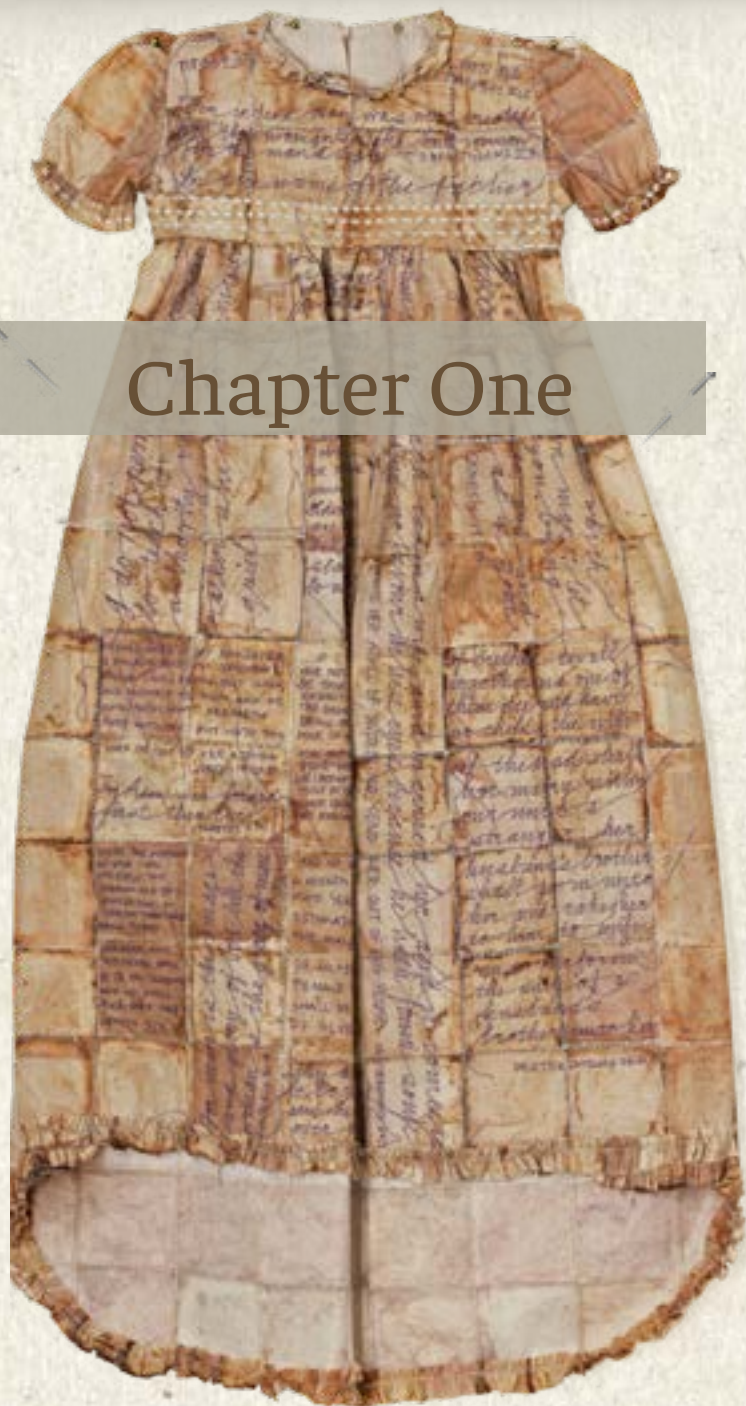
The incorporation of used teabags in conjunction with the act of sewing these teabags together creates an altered state that introduces a conceptual reading where the medium becomes the message. The artwork, being executed in the very medium of women’s oppression, that is, needlework historically executed in the home as part of a woman’s domestic duties, is suggested as a post-modern symbol of women’s defiance.

The christening dress is displayed in an archival cabinet, rather than being placed in a frame. The archival cabinet is used to refer to the out-dated notion of women's silence. As this 'silence' belongs in the past, it is treated as a relic of history and preserved as such, because it is no longer relevant.

Linda Rademan

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to gratefully acknowledge the support of all those who have made the publication of my translation of *The Poisoners* possible. The Österreichische Gesellschaft für Literatur, Vienna, generously supported visits to Vienna. Elfriede Czurda has my sincere gratitude for her enthusiastic support of this project, generosity of spirit, sacrifice of time and patience. I learned so much from her about how meaning is negotiated. My special thanks go to Linda Rademan for graciously permitting her artwork to be used for the cover illustration and to African Sun Media for their care and attention. Thank you, too, to my friends for their support and interest.



Chapter One

1. THE CELL

The small patch cut out of the blue. In this keep coop crouches Else. She sends her gaze: outside! It entices her: follow me follow me! Ever deeper into the blue. Come come we will flash. Come we will flit we will reach its base. We will look past the Dog Star – past Sirius. Stars stars. The border of the Milky Way flickers into focus. But onward. Onward. Here the faraway moves further all the more.

Hans, shouts Else, are you there, Hans?

I am here Hans, says Else, for the next few years. Whenever you return from your travels, says Else, in case. If there is a soul, says Else, in case, and the young craftsmen are not on their way for longer than that either.

Else stares into the square, gawks into the blue. It draws back before her gaze. Continually back. Else moves out on this path. As high as they rise, as high as she propels her glances, they do not advance. *Back. Back.* Over there her lens darts. With her eye Else marks the patch *Heaven*. Patches the *Firmament* together. The *Ether*, Perfect Lover L(over), devours the dick end of her thoughts and her body that dangles from it. This actual keep within the keep. Cause of all ruin.

Hans do not serenade me otherwise the heavens will be full of you!
Hans do not serenade this keep, it is a coffin a coffin.

It is not a little death.

It is the big one.

2. THE BODY

Else has a Body. There is never any way past it. She never grows into it. Never does she put her thoughts into this hideous bag. Never again will anybody reach to lay hold of this butcher's block. Reach for this fish smell centre that is turned inside. To who knows where. Else shudders. Gulps. Never! Now they are all locked out thankgoodness. Hans. And Erika. These voices attached to a body of flowing blood.

They remain behind bars thankgoodness. Here their voices go out and in but otherwise not a filament, not a foot, not a finger. This cowardly Erika! She must not show herself. She can gnaw away at herself with pleasure. She should shiver. Betrayer! Malicious hypocrite. Perjured pig! Every single oath a lie. Every single Word a swindle. Every armpit every yard every arse (Else blushes) an artifice.

Then we'll be free.

Then we'll be independent.

Then there will be evermore only us two in the world.

Unceasingly you and me for ever and ever.

What sort of freedom then Else if not even the eye reaches far enough? What sort of freedom if the escaping gaze loses its direction. If it scatters like a sheaf and wanders around aimlessly in this blue without edges. Without a border. Without focus and fuzziness.

Who is free then? Is Erika free? Tied to her mother's apron strings. Attached to Mamma's navel. Trolling for an escape. No no. Else is free of the others because there is a wall around her. A work of

construction through which no strange hand is conducted. In this destiny no unauthorised person can interfere. No coy pretense. Hans. Could be that Hans is free in his own way. Could be, if Else gazes past the nebula that is called Magellan, could be, over there is Hans. If she sees him, out there in the blue heavens, she will say HansIloveyou. Else knows exactly that then she will love him very much, this thought in heaven that is called Hans. Only the disembodied Hans loves his Else as he should. Without this private parts pillory pole paw prrrr brrrrr! Else burns from blushing. Her head will explode. So that it, unfragmented, has room in the cell. And all the thoughts in it! It is settlement-day. Execution! May Day Dance.