Discord and Consensus in the Low Countries, 1700-2000

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A conflict in words and images, or a conflict between word and image? An intermedial analysis of graphic novel adaptations of Hendrik Conscience’s *The Lion of Flanders* (1838)

Christine Hermann

One of the most famous conflicts in Flemish history was the Battle of the Golden Spurs (1302) which turned into the foundational myth of Flanders and was romanticised by Hendrik Conscience in his novel *The Lion of Flanders* (1838). As legend has it, Conscience was inspired by a painting by Nicaise De Keyser. Conversely, his novel served as inspiration for another pictorial representation: graphic novels. The first such adaptation, by Bob de Moor, was published in 1949; in the German language the ‘Lion’ was also adapted in the 1950s by Wilhelm Knoop as part of the series *Abenteuer der Weltgeschichte*. In 1984, Karel Biddeloo published another graphic novel version in the series *De Rode Ridder*, alluding to the film version by Hugo Claus and at the same time shifting the story into the fantasy genre. Meanwhile, Gejo’s comic version (1983) is characterised by a strong political tendency and full of contemporary allusions. This chapter analyses and compares the ways in which the narrative gets transformed in these adaptations and pays special attention to the representation of ‘conflicts’: aspects of violence, focalisation of the opposing parties, and ‘modernisation’ of the historic conflict.
Introduction: the conflict in history and myth

One of the most famous conflicts in Flemish history was the Battle of the Golden Spurs (1302), in which the rebellious Flemish people fought lion-heartedly against the French oppressor, a conflict which turned into the founding myth of Flanders and was romanticised by Hendrik Conscience in his novel *De leeuw van Vlaanderen* (*The Lion of Flanders*) (1838).

Conscience’s novel has its historical basis in the Middle Ages, when Flanders was occupied by French troops. On 11 July 1302, the army of the Count of Flanders (consisting mainly of town militia and supported by soldiers from Zeeland and Namur) defeated the army of the French king Philip IV near Kortrijk. There were various reasons for the conflict, apart from retaliation for the *Brugse Metten*. Feudal, social, economic and dynastic conflicts were at the basis of the war.

The battlefield (a swampy ground, crossed by numerous streams and ditches) was unfavourable for cavalry, and the Flemish militias (which consisted almost solely of infantry) gained victory. This was the first time since Roman times that an infantry militia had defeated an army of knights, contradicting the conventional military theory of the superiority of cavalry. The large numbers of golden spurs that were collected from the dead French knights gave the battle its name.

The Battle of the Golden Spurs fell into oblivion for several centuries. In the context of the growing national consciousness in the nineteenth century, however, it was rediscovered, turned into a myth and became ‘the’ symbol of the nation. Nowadays it is still one of the most important ‘lieux de mémoire’ of Flanders. In 1973, the date of the battle was chosen as the official holiday of the Flemish community in Belgium.

In the course of myth-building, the significance of the battle was reinterpreted. During French occupation, there was a division among the population between French-oriented and anti-French citizens. The choice of camp was determined by political, economic and social motives, not by any ‘national feelings’ on the part of the Flemish population. After the founding of Belgium in 1830, the new state was in need of historic legitimation, and the Battle of the Golden Spurs was propagated as national symbol and interpreted from a Belgian-national perspective as a fight against French rule and for the independence of the (Belgian) home country. In the *Histoire de Belgique* (Théodore Juste, 1840), the victory over the French occupiers in the Battle of the Golden Spurs was even considered a prefiguration of the September Revolution in 1830.
In the course of time, the dispute was reduced to a conflict between the occupying forces and the oppressed, between the francophone Belgians and the Flemish-speaking. The antagonism ‘French’ vs. ‘Flemish’ was accentuated, and the Battle of the Golden Spurs became the symbol of Flemish identity. It was no longer a victory of the ‘Belgian’ citizens fighting against the foreign (French) oppressor, but of a ‘Flemish’ army against a French(-speaking) army, which found its way into the collective memory of the people. With this shift of interpretation, the war of liberation was no longer fought against an external enemy, but considered a fight between two (linguistic) groups within the same country, and thus became a ‘segregating’ myth, by which the Flemings distinguished themselves from the Belgians. The myth gave the Flemish a national history of their own and the possibility to define themselves as different from the francophone Belgians, and thereby contributed to ‘nation-building’ in Flanders. The commemoration of the Battle of the Golden Spurs became a symbol of the struggle for Flemish recognition in the French-dominated Belgian state.

The conflict turned into images: an intermedial translation

Conscience romanticised the historic event and made an essential contribution to the development of the myth by popularising the Battle of the Golden Spurs. Inspired by the painting by De Keyser and drawing on contemporary historical works (which were not fully reliable sources, though he could not have known this in his time), he wrote his novel which became the Flemish national epic. In the foreword to the first edition (no longer included in the revised version of 1843), which can be read as a political manifesto, he states his intentions: to inspire national consciousness and patriotism. In this foreword he explicitly addresses the Flemings (‘Gij Vlaming…’), whom he exhorts in his famous last sentence not to forget the glorious past of their forefathers. Oddly enough, this novel, inspired by both books and painting (i.e. words and images), served as inspiration for another pictorial representation: comics. This involves a change of medium.

The transposition of the novel into another medium, a form of intermedial translation, requires research situated at the intersection of adaptation studies, intermediality studies and comic studies. An adaptation confirms the status of a canonical text by passing it on to a new readership; at the same time it changes, rewrites the ‘canon’: ‘Adaptation both
appears to require and to perpetuate the existence of a canon, although it may in turn contribute to its ongoing reformulation and expansion. But not only the ‘canon’ is rewritten; the adapted work also might appear in a very different way, changed nearly beyond recognition.

The discourse on adaptation has for a long time centred on the concept of ‘fidelity’ or ‘faithfulness’ to the ‘original’ as the main criterion for evaluating an adaptation. What is meant by ‘faithful’ (to the letter, to the ‘spirit’, or to an alleged ‘essence’ of a work?) has often remained unclear. Other approaches consider adaptation as a kind of intertextual reference, where the primacy of the fidelity concept has lost ground. Adaptation scholar Linda Hutcheon, for instance, questions the privileging of the ‘source text’ and the idea of ‘faithfulness’ to the prior text and defines adaptation rather as ‘an extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work of art’. In a similar vein, John Stephens refers to it as ‘retelling’. Julie Sanders further distinguishes between ‘adaptation’ and ‘appropriation’, the latter being ‘a more decisive journey away from the informing source’. With this in mind, adaptation studies should not deal with value judgements, but rather with ‘analysing [the] process, ideology and methodology’ of adaptation.

When a story is ‘retold’ in a different medium, we have to bear in mind that every medium has its own characteristics and methods for telling a story, its specific narrative potential. Adaptation has to adhere to the narrative conventions of the target medium. This implies both losses and gains in the form of added semantic value. Comics are by definition an intermedial construct which combines two media. Apart from the restrictions and opportunities of a specific medium, any adaptation is at the same time an interpretation of the source text, i.e. one of the many possible interpretations, the view chosen by the adapter, which is of course influenced by the historical and political context of his or her time.

The present chapter deals with a comic adaptation of a literary text. This genre is situated at a point of intersection between the so-called ‘low-brow’ and ‘high-brow’ cultural products and involves a ‘clash’ between comic on the one hand and canonised literature on the other.

Until recently there was not much scholarly attention devoted to comic strips. This is at least partly due to the bad reputation that they have had for quite some time; particularly in the 1950s comics were denigrated as ‘filth and trash’. Academic research into comics started in the 1960s and 1970s and was, therefore, mainly psychologically and sociologically oriented. It was not until the 1990s that comic strips were...
acknowledged as an art form and appreciated as the ninth art, at least in francophone European countries. During the last twenty years, more attention has turned to the narrative potential of the medium (i.e. the way in which the comic strip tells a story). The language of the comic was investigated by Scott McCloud (Understanding Comics, 1994) and Martin Schüwer (Wie Comics erzählen, 2008), to name just two of the most important studies.

Even within the field of comic studies, comic adaptations of literary texts have largely been ignored in academic discourse until the last few years. Apart from several case studies, more systematic research was recently done by Monika Schmitz-Emans and Sandra Boschenhoff.

The different comic adaptations

_De Leeuw van Vlaanderen_, written by a man who has the reputation of having taught his people to read, was turned into a comic strip, an example of genre, which – just to the contrary – was suspected of preventing young people from reading. The novel has been adapted into a comic several times, by

1934: Pink (= Eugeen Hermans)
1949: Bob de Moor (in: Kuifje; Ons Volkske; 1952 as album)
1949: Wik/Durbin (in: Robbedoes)
1955: Buth (= Leo de Budt) (in: De Post)
1950s: W. Knoop (in the series Abenteuer der Weltgeschichte)
1960s: Jef Nys
1983/84: Gejo (in: Vlaams Nationaal Weekblad Wij)
1984: Biddeloo (in the series De Rode Ridder)
1994: Ronny Matton/Christian Verhaeghe

In this chapter, I will only deal with those comic versions that were published as albums. I will discuss in which way the narrative gets transformed when it is adapted into a comic. What happens to the ‘message’ – in particular, the nationalist tendency – of the novel? How do the comic authors make use of the potential of telling a story by visual means?

The adaptations shall be considered as creations in their own right, but with a strong intertextual relation to Conscience’s novel. Each adaptation is situated in its specific (historical, social, medial) context, and these are seen to determine the style of adaptation and the tendency of the story.
In my study, special attention will be devoted to the representation of ‘conflict’: aspects of violence, focalisation and ‘modernisation’ of the conflict. Focalisation reveals how the visual narrator takes sides in the conflict and determines from whose perspective the readers see the story. Modernisation means that the events are linked with the life of the contemporary reader. Conscience himself established such a connection in his foreword to the first edition (omitted in the revised edition from 1843) in which he stresses the internal Belgian antagonism between Flemings and Walloons, considering the Flemings as the descendants of the glorious heroes of 1302. I will particularly focus on aspects that contribute to the evocation of national feelings (use of national symbols, linguistic conflict between Dutch and French) and guide the identification of the reader.

Bob de Moor

Bob de Moor (1925–92) is mainly known as a staff member and assistant of Hergé. In 1949 he started to work for the weekly magazine *Kuifje*. His drawing style is realistic and resembles Hergé’s style of the ‘ligne claire’ (clear line style). After *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen*, De Moor, who as a boy had loved Conscience’s novels, also turned a further novel by Conscience, *De kerels van Vlaanderen*, into a comic (1952). The comic was first published in (monochrome) weekly comic magazines as serials:

- first in *Kuifje weekblad* (Sept. 1949–Dec. 1950),
- republished in *Ons Volkske* (from 1950), and
- in *Het Vendel* (from October 1955);
- 1952 published as album (in colour).

As stated in the subtitle, it is freely adapted from the book with the same title. The strip sticks to the plot of the novel quite strictly, but is of course shortened. It starts with the opening scene of the novel: ‘Op een mooie zomermorgen reed een groepje Franse edellieden op de weg naar het slot Wijnendaal’ (‘On a beautiful summer morning, a group of French nobles was riding to the castle of Wijnendaal’). Conscience’s ‘rode morgenzon’ (‘red morning sun’) can be seen in the panel. The comic ends with the Golden Knight leaving, and the very last panel is formed by a piece of parchment with the famous sentence ‘Gij Vlaming . . .’
In a comic, in the same way as in film, the camera position determines the perspective of the viewer. Both the selection of the objects and the angle of view under which they are presented, are determined by the visual narrator. As Will Eisner argues in his *Comics & Sequential Art*, ‘the viewer’s response to a given scene is influenced by his position as a spectator’. This ‘position’ is frequently very near to the Flemish (Figure 4.1). In a film, we would call this a point-of-view shot. The reader sees what the focalisator sees, even a small piece of his own sword, and thereby gets mentally involved in the action.

The perspective strikes us particularly when looking at the battle scenes. In the panel in Figure 4.2, the French knights are approaching. Because of the low angle of the camera (a so-called worm’s-eye view), they look even more threatening. In the next panel (Figure 4.3), the Flemish hit back – and the viewer stands close to them. As a common feature it can be noted that we see the Frenchmen very frequently from the front and the Flemish from behind (we accompany them, we stand

Fig. 4.2 Worm’s-eye view, Bob de Moor, *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen* (Antwerp: De Dageraad, Magnumcolor No. 1, 1984). © Bob De Moor 2015

Fig. 4.3 Positioning alongside the Flemings, Bob de Moor, *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen* (Antwerp: De Dageraad, Magnumcolor No. 1, 1984). © Bob De Moor 2015
literally ‘at their side’ or stand behind them) – in this way focalisation stimulates the identification of the reader, who is ‘pushed’ to fight together with the Flemings.

Even in battle scenes, violence is rarely depicted directly. It is rather mentioned in the text than shown in the panels. In Figure 4.4, the head of a soldier is just being stabbed, but the victim is withdrawn from sight by his horse.

Interestingly enough, in the text blocks we often find figures of speech, such as metaphors and similes: ‘Ze vechten als razende beren’ (‘They fight like raging bears’), ‘als een stormram’ (‘as a battering ram’), ‘als een moker’ (‘as a sledgehammer’). In accordance with the realistic drawing style, the comparison is not taken literally and ‘depicted’, but is made by verbal means. It seems that the image is unable to speak metaphorically. If a metaphor were shown, it would lose its metaphorical power and not be a metaphor any more. It is thus left to the textual narrator to formulate the comparison (which is supported by the illustration).

Wilhelm Knoop

A German version of The Lion was released in the 1950s as part of the series Abenteuer der Weltgeschichte. The text was written by Wilhelm Knoop and the illustrations were created by Charlie Bood. The comic

Fig. 4.4 Hidden violence, Bob de Moor, *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen* (Antwerp: De Dageraad, Magnumcolor No. 1, 1984). © Bob De Moor 2015
was published by Walter Lehning Verlag (1946–68), who is mainly known for publishing ‘pulp’ magazines. On the cover page we see a knight, fighting against a man with a big axe in his hand, but no trace of a lion anywhere. The subtitle reads: ‘Der Freiheitskampf der Flamen’ (‘the struggle for freedom of the Flemings’). The strip starts with three pages of historical introduction, whereby the first sentence sets the tone: ‘Flanders is a Germanic borderland’ (‘Flandern ist ein germanisches Grenzland’). And the author continues telling us that the Flemish have ‘a strong Germanic character that is still alive today’ (‘einen stark germanischen Charakter, der bis in unsere Tage weiterlebt’), thus linking the past with the present and stressing the kinship of the Flemish with the Germans. In the same way as in the first half of the twentieth century, the Flemish are presented as being of Germanic character; Flanders is considered as ‘Grenzland’, with the connotation of a German area outside the German state boundaries. Most probably, Knoop’s source was not the Flemish original, but one of the German translations in which the ‘Germanic’ character of the Flemish people was claimed as well.

In the last sentence of this introduction the readers are addressed directly: ‘Look back with me, my friends, and project yourselves into the period around 1300’ (‘Blickt nun mit mir, Freunde, zurück und versetzt Euch in die Zeit um 1300’). It is quite striking to note that this comic is written in the present tense which might have been used better to immerse the reader – having projected himself into the past, as the introduction suggested – in the story and to give him or her the impression of actually witnessing the events described.

In his introduction, the author also refers to Conscience, reminding the readers of ‘Charles De Coster, Felix Timmermann [sic] and Stijn Streuvels’, Flemish authors they probably already had heard of, ‘who celebrate their home country in their novels’ (‘in ihren Erzählungen und Romanen besingen sie immer wieder ihre Heimat’). But still, before these authors, there was Conscience, ‘who fought not only with words, but also as a soldier with the weapon for his native country, in the war of 1830–1836, in which Belgium fought for its independence from Holland’. His being a soldier is at least as important as his being a writer. Conscience’s invocation of the Flemish reader is cited in the introduction, omitting, however, the address ‘Gij Vlaming’, and by this, generalising the exhortation to all readers.

The plot was considerably condensed (the comic has only twenty-four pages) and simplified; only the most basic plot elements were selected. It is a text strip: a strip without speech balloons, where the text is placed in blocks beneath the panels. Speech is narrated by the textual
narrator, using quotation marks. The pictures look rather static (even the battle scenes), and the panels show totally different scenes so that the pictures alone no longer tell a coherent story; it is mainly the text that narrates the story. In the terminology of the comic theorist Scott McCloud, the reader is thus unable to bridge the gutter between the frames, and ‘closure’ (by which the reader creates a connection between the panels) is no longer possible. The images are rather illustrations alongside the text, often just repeating what has already been told in the text.

**Biddeloo (De Rode Ridder)**

The Lion appeared also as number 109 (1984) in the popular comic series *De Rode Ridder*, a comic series which takes place in the Middle Ages. The main character is Johan de Rode Ridder, a knight-errant and one of the Knights of the Round Table of King Arthur, roaming all over the country with the only aim of protecting the weak and the oppressed.

The series was first published in 1959, conceived and drawn by Willy Vandersteen. At the end of the 1960s, the comic series was taken over by Karel Biddeloo, who took responsibility for both the drawing and the plot. Biddeloo changes the style of the series: major focus is put on fantasy elements, in particular elements of so-called ‘sword and sorcery fantasy’. The series includes mystical elements as well. Eroticism plays an important part; female characters such as Demoniah (the incarnation of evil) and Galaxa (fairy of the light) make their entry. The battle between good and evil continues throughout the whole series. With Biddeloo, the comic series evolves into pulp literature. The series is ‘pure entertainment’, as he said in an interview. Any explicit reference to Conscience’s novel is missing. Elements of the novel were taken over to serve the larger *Rode Ridder* narrative.

Conscience’s novel about the Battle of the Golden Spurs certainly lends itself to an adaptation in a series of action comics, relying for its effect on an action-driven plot. Structure and drawing style correspond to the superhero genre. In this adaptation, violence is an important element in the panels. In Figure 4.5, Johan is attacked by bandits who look like ninjas. The layout of the page differs from the classical form; the strokes are broken up, characters fly freely across the panels. Frequently there is no background, as the context is apparently not important in the action scenes.

In contrast to Conscience’s rising sun, Biddeloo’s story starts with a sunset. Johan makes the acquaintance of Demoniah, who tells him that the Flemish people are suffering under the French yoke and that a
revolt is looming, whereupon Johan gravely declares: ‘I will never abandon my people!’ (‘Ik laat mijn volk niet in de steek!’), thereby insinuating that he himself is Flemish. Demoniah, however, takes the side of the Frenchmen. The experienced reader—guided in his or her interpretation by the laws of the series—can easily recognise the Flemish as the good guys, and the French as the bad ones.

The Golden Knight is not Robrecht van Béthune (‘de Leeuw van Vlaanderen’); rather it is Johan himself who takes over the part of the hero. Robrecht is already waiting in his golden armour, but unfortunately he falls from his horse, gets injured and therefore has to hand over his arms to Johan, who goes into battle as the golden knight. After the victory Johan disappears, setting off for new adventures.

The story is narrated by an omniscient narrator. The readers are uninvolved onlookers and watch it like a film.

There are even more allusions to film: the comic is full of references to the film version of The Lion of Flanders, made by Hugo Claus in 1984; the main characters bear a striking resemblance to the actors in the film. Breydel looks like Jan Decleir (Figures 4.6 and 4.7), De Coninck resembles Julien Schoenaerts, and Willem van Gullik resembles Herbert Flack. The female characters, too, are modelled on

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**Fig. 4.5** Violence, Karel Biddeloo, *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen*, De Rode Ridder no. 109 (Antwerp/Amsterdam: Standaard Uitgeverij, 1984). © 2016 Standaard Uitgeverij / WPG Uitgevers België nv
Fig. 4.6  Jan Breydel, Karel Biddeloo, *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen*, De Rode Ridder no. 109 (Antwerp/Amsterdam: Standaard Uitgeverij, 1984). © 2016 Standaard Uitgeverij / WPG Uitgevers België nv

Fig. 4.7  Jan Breydel, *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen* (Hugo Claus, after the novel by Hendrik Conscience), Kunst & Kino/Vintage Films, 1984
It is interesting to note that this adaptation does not only bear intertextual references to certain comic genres (fantasy comic, adventure comic), but also refers to a previous adaptation of the same source text into another genre, namely film. This creates a certain relation to the present (it is easily recognisable for the contemporary reader). A different route to modernisation has been taken in the following example.

Gejo

This comic was first published in 1983 in the Vlaams Nationaal Weekblad Wij (the weekly magazine of the Volksunie). Gejo was one of the caricaturists of this journal. The strip was republished as an album with Soethoudt & Co., a publishing house which published many essayistic and historic books on Flanders and the Flemish movement.

At first glance, this comic seems to tell quite a different story, without any relation to Conscience’s plot. Apart from the title and a short sequence in the frame narrative, there is no reference to The Lion of Flanders. However, the reader can find a subtle reference to the Battle of the Golden Spurs in the name ‘The Golden Spur’ written on the signboard of an inn.

The story begins in the zoo (‘waar anders vind je nog leeuwen in Vlaanderen’/‘where else can we nowadays find lions in Flanders’). A poster on the wall reads: ‘Conscience 1983’ (it is the anniversary year). A father explains to his son that Conscience wrote The Lion of Flanders, a book about the battle of the Flemish people against the French oppressor (‘een boek over de strijd van het Vlaamse volk tegen de Franse onderdrukker’), mentioning that the Lion became the symbol of the Flemish rebellion. Behind the family, a lion is listening carefully. The lion falls asleep and begins to dream – a dream in which he himself will be the protagonist. And it is not before the last page that the reader actually sees that the whole story of the strip is the dream of the lion. But there is one indication: in his dream the lion speaks in rhyme. In the embedded narrative, this ‘Lion’ (called ‘our lion’ in some of the text blocks) re-enacts the myth of the Lion of Flanders, in his own very special way.

In this dream, we see a tax collector (Figure 4.8), claiming ‘Iedereen is hier gelijk voor de wet’ (‘everybody is here equal before the law’), with an asterisk referring to a footnote in this panel, reading ‘Hahahaha’.22 If we want to be malicious, we can see in the tax collector the Finance Minister of the time of the strip: Willy de Clercq (Figure 4.9).23
Fig. 4.8  Tax collector, Gejo, *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen* (Antwerp: Soethoudt & Co, 1983). © Gejo/Soethoudt 1983

Fig. 4.9  Willy de Clercq, Express.be, ‘Slechte week voor: Willy De Clercq’ (28 October 2011), http://www.express.be/articles/nl/vipsweek/slechte-week-voor-willy-de-clercq/155231.htm [accessed 30 October 2014]
A poor man explains the situation to the Lion: in this country, two peoples are living in the same territory, the lowlanders and the highlanders, who are on bad terms and speak different languages. The highlanders are constantly in need of money, and therefore a big part of the financial means flows to the highlanders. There is also a king who wants to keep his kingdom together, but among the lowlanders, resistance is growing: ‘we konden er veel beter aan toe zijn als we over onze eigen middelen konden beschikken’ (‘we would be much better off, if we had control of our own financial means’).

The Lion helps the lowlanders (without resort to violence). At the end, he addresses the people: ‘We moeten dit land splitsen’ (‘We have to split up this country’). Everybody agrees, even the King. And then it’s time for a party: a typical Flemish ‘kermis’. After all this excitement, the Lion is tired and falls asleep. When he wakes up, he is back in the zoo, and he thinks ‘het is dus maar een droom geweest, dat valt wel erg tegen’ (‘it was only a dream, what a pity’). But now he feels hungry and, as fate would have it, at the very moment, a cockerel passes by. The lion grabs the cockerel with his paws and eats him up. And that’s how the story ends. No explanation is needed (at least for the Flemish readers).

Some of the lowlanders are not just cartoonish characters, but bear resemblance to living people, more precisely to contemporary politicians: the spokesman of the lowlanders (Figure 4.10) looks like Hugo

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Fig. 4.10  Spokesman of the Lowlanders, Gejo, *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen* (Antwerp: Soethoudt & Co, 1983). © Gejo/Soethoudt 1983
Schiltz (Figure 4.11), President of the Volksunie between 1975 and 1979. The magician (Figure 4.12), to whom the king appeals for help, looks like the former Belgian Prime Minister Wilfried Martens.

Fig. 4.11 Hugo Schiltz, President of the Flemish People’s Union (Volksunie), 1975–9. © BelgaImage

Fig. 4.12 Magician, Gejo, *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen* (Antwerp: Soethoudt & Co, 1983). © Gejo/Soethoudt 1983
The Flemish readers – who recognise ‘their’ politicians, find certain similarities between the problems of the oppressed people in the comic and contemporary Flanders, hear the comic characters pronounce the same slogans as the (nationalist) political party in Flanders, and see them imagining a proposed solution (equally advocated by the Flemish movement) – identify the situation described in the comic with the present situation in Flanders. In this comic version, the subject is thus rather a current conflict. Gejo refers not to an event in (national) history, but to the national present, transposing the conflict into a contemporary perspective. Through the caricatures of contemporary politicians, the images are telling a different story from the text. It is no longer about a conflict between low- and highlanders in an imaginary fairyland, but about a contemporary conflict in the country of the readers, and about a (proposed) solution.

Matton/Verhaeghe

To briefly mention the most recent adaptation: R. (Ronny) Matton (scenario and colouring) and Ch. Verhaeghe (drawing) published the *Kroniek der Guldensporenslag* (in four parts), at Farao-Talent (Kortrijk) in 1994. The plot deviates significantly from Conscience’s novel. As stated in the foreword, the authors wanted to write a ‘different lion of Flanders’.

The adapters decided to choose an unusual perspective: the comic starts with battle scenes from the Battle of the Spurs, but after a few pages it turns out that this is nothing but a nightmare of the French king: we suddenly see the events through the slits of a visor of the helmet of a knight falling down, and on the next page, we see the King waking up in horror. The battle scene is presented from the perspective of the King of France, as a horrible bloodbath in which thousands of knights are killed only to stand up as skeletons, accusing the king of having caused their death. The story is connected with another myth, namely with the Holy Grail and the Sacred Lance\(^2\) – necessary to cure the king from his dreadful dreams.

**National aspects read with a comparatist’s eye**

It was Conscience’s declared objective to inspire national consciousness and boost patriotism among his fellow compatriots. One of his techniques was the ample use of national symbols, such as the ‘Leeuw’.
In Conscience’s novel, the ‘lion’ as leitmotif is omnipresent: as heraldic emblem on coats of arms and on the flag, as byname for Robrecht van Béthune, as rallying cry and welcome for the count, or metaphorically used (the Flemish fight as lions, etc.). How is this leitmotif transferred into the comics?

In the novel, the ‘Lion of Flanders’ is presented as a mythical hero, as the Golden Knight, an almost superhuman character, ‘in een magisch-mythische sfeer gehuld’ (‘surrounded by a magical-mythical sphere’) when appearing as the mysterious Black or Golden Knight.

The mythical aspects of the Golden Knight lend themselves to use for a comic character with strong mythical features, as in the Rode Ridder series. The role of the diabolic woman is taken over by Demoniah. The antagonist of the ‘lion’ is here mystified as well; it is not the malevolent Johanna van Navarra, but evil par excellence.

De Moor’s version has its focus on Breydel; he is by far the most prominently and most frequently depicted character. Though the ‘Lion’ appears as a deus ex machina, he is only rarely the visual centre of attention. In Gejo’s version, the ‘lion’ is taken literally, as an anthropomorphised animal. Acting like a politician at the end, he is the main character and driving force.

The lion on the flag and coat of arms serves as symbol and identification mark for the two conflicting parties, and as symbol for national feelings and affiliation.

The coat of arms can be rarely seen in De Rode Ridder (Johan forms, after all, his own ‘trademark’), in contrast to the comic adaption by De Moor in which the symbol is abundantly depicted. The French flag with the fleur-de-lis is often shown here as well, whereas in the German version by Knoop, the coat of arms is only once clearly visible and the flags are usually blurred and look almost pixellated. For Knoop, it is more important to present the Flemish people as a Germanic people than to stress their own national symbols.

In the comic by Gejo, the lion is no longer symbol, but protagonist. But at the same time, in his role as protagonist he turns into symbol again: as the lowlanders have been searching for a ‘symbol for our struggle’ for quite some time already, they now get the breakthrough idea: ‘Een leeuw op ons blazoen’. And this is where the flag with the lion has its origin. The lion provides inspiration for the flag and thereby provokes his own birth as national symbol. While the myth is taken for granted (otherwise the story would not function for the readership), this very same myth just comes into being on the intradiegetic level of this comic.
Other national symbols are various landmarks of Flanders. All adaptations make use of Flemish landmarks and famous buildings, such as the Belfry of Bruges. Gejo uses another landmark (Figure 4.13) – the ‘Manneken Pis’ is here a character (a little boy pissing right onto the lion’s head).

Language conflict

An important aspect of the (historic) conflict and an important aspect for the novel is the linguistic conflict between the francophone Belgians and the Dutch-speaking population. Characteristic for contemporary Belgium as well as for the historical situation described in the novel is the (co-)existence or the clash of the two languages of the linguistic communities in Belgium. Is this linguistic conflict reflected in the comics?

Language acted as distinguishing mark in the Brugse Metten (Bruges Matins), with the famous shibboleth ‘Schild en vriend’. The
watchword ‘Schild en vriend’ can be found in nearly all comics: In the De Moor version (and almost identical in De Rode Ridder), it reads ‘Schild en vriend?!’ – ‘Skilde en ... aouw!’ (in phonetic spelling). In the Gejo version, the lion secretly visits the house of friends, where he is asked for the password. He replies with a variation of the well-known slogan: ‘Wij voeren wat in ‘t schild, doe open mijn vriend’ (‘We are up to something, open, my friend’) – as usual he speaks in rhymes. Apparently this shibboleth is considered so important that even Gejo includes it in his adaptation.

Considering the importance of the language question, we might expect that both languages would be found in the speech balloons. But this is not the case. De Moor presents us with a rather monolingual comic: everybody speaks Flemish. In the speech balloons we hardly ever see French phrases, apart from the French battle cry ‘Montjoie St. Denis’. Repeatedly we encounter swearwords. It’s mainly the French who swear, but they do it in Dutch: ‘Hel en duivel’, ‘alle duivels’, ‘Doemnis’, only occasionally in French: ‘Tonnerre’. In the Knoop version, the text briefly mentions that the knight speaks French and the Flemish answer ‘in poor French’. Similarly in the Rode Ridder, the reader can only once see a French knight swearing in French: ‘Morbleu’.

The Gejo adaptation, however, is somewhat special and presents a language mix: when we see the people on the street chatting or quarrelling, both the Dutch and French languages are used in the speech balloons, but the speakers differ in language competence. Whereas the lowlanders understand French but answer in Flemish (Figure 4.14), the French-speaking highlanders are unable to read the Flemish pamphlets (Figure 4.15).

Fig. 4.14   Bilingualism, Gejo, De Leeuw van Vlaanderen (Antwerp: Soethoudt & Co, 1983). © Gejo/Soethoudt 1983
The lion, in his dream, decides to speak human language: ‘voor het vlot verloop van dit verhaal, spreek ik voortaan hun taal!’ (‘for the sake of a smooth progress of this story, I will from now on speak their language!’) (and ‘their’ language means Flemish). The lion, however, is not bilingual. He deliberately decides to speak ‘hun taal’ when communicating with the locals, but when he has to appear in court in the highland, he understands, in his own words, ‘geen letter van die taal’ (‘not a word of that language’). And that the Queen sighs in Spanish is a telling detail, alluding to the mother tongue of the Belgian Queen.

But Gejo even comes up with one further language variant: when the lion makes his entry into the town, the people in front of the town gate are looking on in amazement, and one voice speaks clearly in an Antwerp dialect: ‘Mé hiel Aantwaarpe mo ni mè ma’ (Figure 4.16). In this comic, the language conflict is expressed by visual means (it is not ‘told’, but ‘shown’ in a mimetic way).

Conclusion

What happened in the course of the various adaptation processes? Whereas De Moor and Knoop maintain the plot of Conscience’s novel (even if in abridged form), the comic adaptations of Biddeloo, Gejo and Matton take completely new directions. They do not confine themselves...
to the elements of the novel, but insert certain elements into their own story (with Biddeloo, the story had to conform to the style of the *Rode Ridder* series; Gejo used the story for his own nationalist and secessionist objectives; Matton aimed at writing his own, different ‘Lion of Flanders’). Using the terminology of Julie Sanders, the De Moor version could be termed an ‘adaptation’, and the version by Gejo (as well as those by Biddeloo and Matton, to a lesser extent) an ‘appropriation’ of the source text.

The adapters use different methods for guiding the identification of the reader: perspective (‘camera position’), laws of the series on who is the ‘good guy’, and modernisation (reference to contemporary Flanders). National symbols are usually stressed, with the exception of Knoop who rather presents the Flemish as ‘Germans’. Adaptation does not only refer to one ‘source’, but also to other adaptations (Knoop is connected with earlier German translations; *De Rode Ridder* refers to the film version).

Whereas in De Moor’s and Biddeloo’s version, text and image collaborate to communicate the message, in the version by Knoop the images are rather illustrations to the text. This, however, is not to be equated with ‘fidelity’ to the source text, as the Flemish freedom fighters are made German.

The comic adaptation and the adapted literary text stand in a reciprocal relation to each other. The source text is renewed, updated, reactivated; it even owes its status as ‘source text’ to the adaptations.
The story is told again, but differently, and to a new audience. By making it accessible for a new generation of recipients, the adaptations give life to the original, or, as Gérard Genette puts it, ‘constantly relaunch the old works into a new circuit of meaning’.29

The ‘Lion’ keeps changing, and so do the interpretations. This is what keeps him alive. Or, as Hutcheon puts it: adaptation can keep a work in life, ‘giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise’.30